ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	EXPLORIGN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS' ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING AT WORK: A WHOLE-PERSON, PROCESSUAL, AND CONTEXTUAL LENS
	Jiankun Guo, Doctoral of Philosophy, 2019
Dissertation directed by:	Assistant Professor, Lindsey B. Anderson, Ph.D., Department of Communication

The topic of ethics is gaining importance and urgency, particularly for public relations, a field responsible for communicating and building relationships between organizations and publics. While normative ethical theories abound in this discipline, tensions exist between traditional theories privileging rationality, autonomy, universality, and professional ethics, and emerging theories that value emotions, relationships, contexts, and personal ethics. Furthermore, practitioners' ethical decision making process in their embedded organizational, industry, and sociopolitical environments has not been fully addressed. This dissertation fills in these research gaps by exploring public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics and thereby reconciliating tensions between traditional and emerging ethical theories (RQ1), detailing practitioners' ethical decision making (EDM) process from a whole-person perspective (RQ2), and assessing how micro, meso, and macro level ethicality interact from a participants' point of view (RQ3). 37 semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with current or past U.S. public relations practitioners who represent a variety of work settings, industries, specializations, and sectors. Interviews were transcribed and data were coded thematically and analyzed abductively. Findings suggested that practitioners constructed the meaning of ethics primarily via their concerns for work and organizational-public relationships, contextual particulars, and an alignment of personal and professional ethics. They utilized a variety of cognitive, emotional, intuitive, imaginative, and discursive skills during their ethical decision making (EDM) process exhibiting a whole-person based approach to EDM. Additionally, practitioners' ethicality was both a result of contextual influences as well as a contributor to higher levels of ethical standards for their environment—on organizational, industry, and societal levels. Theoretical and methodological implications were drawn from the findings, so were practical implications provided in terms of ethics training programs.

EXPLORIGN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS' ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING AT WORK: A WHOLE-PERSON, PROCESSUAL, AND CONTEXTUAL LENS

by

Jiankun Guo

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Advisory Committee:
Assistant Professor, Lindsey B. Anderson, Chair
Professor, Elizabeth L. Toth
Associate Professor, Erich Sommerfeldt
Associate Professor, Brooke Liu
Professor, Debra L. Shapiro

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I see the role of ethics in everything, I think it was defined for me, a true public relations practitioner.

— Emma[1]

I think that ethics is in everyday event when you are working. When you're writing your pieces, you want to be as honest as possible, at the same time you're often having pressure from whoever you're reporting to, that has their particular needs, and you want to represent things honestly and yet still effectively.

— Chloe

Every day we're faced with ethical dilemmas, because we are always faced with something against our value systems. So, I have a self-developed value system. That system is always going to be questioned in regard to business because of where the company's moving.

— James

The quotations selected from the dissertation interviews illustrated the crucial role of ethics in the public relations field and common ethical dilemmas that practitioners encounter. Not surprisingly, ethics as a research domain and a practical issue has garnered attention from both public relations scholars and professional associations. Due to the nature of public relations as a boundary-spanning, communication and messaging, and relationship building function (Botan & Hazelton, 2010; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2010; Toth, 2009), ethics is particularly

[1] All names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

important. Combined with the industry's unglamorous past, gaps in scholarship, societal impact of public relations as well as a broader social environment that increasingly puts ethics under the spotlight, there is an urgent need to continue exploring and distilling models, theories, and strategies that enhance public relations practitioner's ethical agency and decision-making as situated in their organizational, industry, and societal milieu. This dissertation project takes up this challenge and seeks to understand public relations ethics from a participant-oriented, behavioral, and contextualized perspective. Before detailing rationale and potential contributions of this dissertation project, I define key terms that will be used in this project.

Key Definitions and Background

In this section, I define the following terms: public relations, public relations practitioners, ethics, and ethical decision making. Defining these terms provide clarity, focus, and background for the dissertation study.

First, public relations as a discipline, a practice, and an industry has been defined variously. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)—the most prominent professional association for public relations in the U.S.—defined the practice as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2012). This definition emphasized two primary responsibilities—*communication* and *relationship building*—for individuals working in public relations. Elsewhere, the practice was defined as "the management function that entails planning, research, publicity, promotion, and collaborative decision making to help any organization's ability to listen to, appreciate, and respond appropriately to those persons and groups whose mutually beneficial relationships the organization needs to foster as it strives to achieve its mission and vision" (Heath & Coombs, 2006, p. 7). This definition illuminated the everyday tasks for contemporary public relations. Overall, both definitions implied the *boundary-spanning* role played by public relations—the function connects organizations and their environment.

Additionally, according to Wilcox and colleagues (Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2014), authors for the public relations textbook, *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics*, public relations is used as an umbrella term that encompasses many specializations, activities, and subcategories, such as counseling, research, publicity, employee relations, public affairs, issues management, financial relations, fundraising, marketing communications, social media, and crisis management. Furthermore, individual companies and other groups may use other terms to describe the public relations function—these terms include corporate communications, public affairs/information, or simply, communication. Or, organizations may use a term that describes the primary activity of the department, for example, community relations, media relations, or marketing communications (Wilcox et al., 2014).

Public relations practitioners, simply defined, are individuals working in the public relations field. Because whether public relations counts as a profession and how practitioners reach the status of professionalism are debatable (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006), this dissertation project uses *practitioner* instead of *professional* to broadly refer to all people practicing certain types of public relations. Similar to the various terms of public relations, practitioners can hold a variety of titles and positions; their responsibilities may cross over to include aspects of other types of communication specialties such as marketing, but generally speaking, public relations practitioners have a communication and relationship-building focus in their daily job tasks.

Third, ethics is defined as “a systematic attempt to make sense of our individual and social moral experience, to determine the rules that ought to govern human conduct, the values worth pursuing, and the character traits deserving development in life” (DeGeorge, 2009, p. 13). There are generally two approaches to the study of ethics: a normative one grounded in moral philosophies and a behavioral one based on research in sociology, psychology, and so forth (Drumwright, Prentice, & Biasucci, 2015; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño et al., 2006). The normative approach prescribes how individuals should think and behave (Bowen, 2004). The behavioral approach focuses on how and why individuals actually make ethical decisions in particular social and organizational contexts (Drumwright et al., 2015). Currently, there is a growing need to integrate these two approaches (Simola, 2011). As will be discussed later, public relations ethics literature is primarily grounded in moral philosophies and normative practitioner roles. A behavioral approach is lacking.

Furthermore, there are tensions between traditional theories and emerging theories in ethics scholarship (Thiel et al, 2012; Drumwright et al., 2015) in terms of the role of rationality versus emotionality, autonomy versus relationship, professionalism versus personal ethics. These tensions have recently emerged in public relations literature as well, mostly among critical and postmodern scholars (Berg & Gibson, 2011; Fawkes, 2010, 2012; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2012) and to a smaller degree, agent-based ethics scholars (Baker, 2008; Harrison & Galloway, 2005). As will be introduced later, care ethics (Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984, 1988, 1992, 2002; Slote, 2007)—an ethical theory that emphasizes caring relationships, emotions, contextual particulars—has only recently been applied to public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018, Guo, 2017).

Finally, ethical decision making can simply be understood as how individuals make ethics-related decisions. That being said, ethicist James Rest (1986, 1994) has developed an ethical decision making (EDM) model that included four components—awareness, judgment, intent, and action—that went beyond the mere analytical process of decision-making. EDM (Rest, 1986) is truly process-oriented and takes into consideration individual and organizational factors that shape an individuals' EDM. It has not been fully used in public relations ethics. In contrast, ethical decision-making in public relations has been oversimplified, and researchers (Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Kang & Berger, 2010; Place, 2010) have called for studies that explore strategies, tools, processes that aid in practitioners' ethical decision making. Next, I present a more detailed explanation of project rationale.

Project Purpose

As mentioned previously, the purpose of this dissertation project is to explore public relations ethics from a participant-oriented, behavioral, processual, and contextualized perspective. It has three interrelated aims: (1) to resolve tensions between ethical theories that privilege rationality, autonomy, and professionalism and those value personal ethics, emotions, intuition, and relationships, (2) to explore additional tools, processes, strategies, and philosophies that aid in practitioners' ethical decision making process, and (3) to reveal meso (organizational) and macro (societal) level contextual influence on practitioners' ethical decision making while illustrating how practitioners may conversely influence the ethicality of their environments. Ultimately, this dissertation study aims at cultivating public relations practitioners' ethical competence and agency by exploring their meaning making of ethics, outlining their decision making process, uncovering contextual influence, and understanding practitioners' ethical influence. These aims took shape for the following reasons.

Project Rationale and Significance

There are multiple impetuses for this dissertation study, due to the importance of ethics in public relations, the industry's unglamorous past and current scandals, scholarly research gaps that need to be filled, and current sociopolitical environment that calls attention to ethics. These will be explained in more detail as follows.

First, as mentioned, public relations practitioners take on important roles including boundary spanning, relationship management, and discourse/communication strategizing. These roles suggest the critical role of ethics in this discipline, which warrants scholarly attention. Specifically, as boundary spanners, public relations practitioners connect organizations with their publics, balance their needs and interests, and detect issues within organizations' environment (Grunig et al., 2006). As relationship managers, public relations practitioners help organizations identify strategically important publics, and build mutually beneficial relationships with them through two-way communication (Ledingham, 2006;

Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2005, 2007). As communication strategists and tacticians, public relations practitioners not only rely information between organizations and publics, they also facilitate the free flow of information in society (Wilcox et al., 2014). In fact, public relations plays a societal role because organization discourse can be circulated in society, influence public opinions, and potentially becomes meta-narratives that either empower or diminish certain groups (Coombs & Holladay, 2013). Therefore, ethics is crucial for the public relations industry, as it ensures organizations receive important feedback from the publics, treat publics with respect and fairness, adapt behavior to serve public needs, change course upon public criticism, and circulate prosocial and positive public discourse in society. Due to the central role of ethics in public relations, there is a need to continually explore theories, models, and guidelines that elevate public relations ethics.

Second, the need to study ethics in public relations is intensified by the industry's tainted history and continued ethical lapses in modern times. At its earliest, public relations involved hype, spin, propaganda, manipulation, and deception to attract public attention—the "press agentry" model (Wilcox et al., 2014) had created misconceptions of what modern public relations is. Though the discipline has evolved into a strategic managerial function that serves not only power corporations but also nonprofits and activist groups, the stereotypes seemed to linger. Additionally, despite efforts from professional associations such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association for Business Communication (IABC), Public Relations Council, and Arthur W. Page Society, in terms of creating professional codes of ethics, promoting both ethics training programs, and educating publics and members on what public relations is about, there are continued ethical lapses within the field that grabbed media headlines. For example, a public relations firm, Bell Pottinger, was recently accused of exploiting racial divisions when working for the Gupta family associated with the controversial President Jacob Zumba of South Africa (Ihlen, van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009). Indeed, since public relations practitioners deal with multiple values, interests, and needs among multiple groups (clients, stakeholders, employers), ethical issues and controversies tend to occur more frequently than professions that are relatively value-neutral. Not surprisingly, public relations scholars have been obsessed with ethics (Martin & Wright, 2015) and developed various models and theories to improve ethical conduct of public relations practitioners (see, for example, Bowen, 2004, 2006; Fawkes, 2007, 2010; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001).

Third, albeit recent expansion in public relations ethics literature, tensions and gaps still remain, calling for continued scholarly research. Specifically, this dissertation project was sparked by three themes in extant public relations ethics literature: (1) a tension between traditional ethical theories that emphasized rationality, universality, autonomy and professional ethics, and emerging theories that highlighted the crucial roles of emotions, intuition, sensemaking, relationship, contextualized understanding of ethics, and personal ethics; (2) a lack of process-oriented ethical decision making framework that describes and explains how and why public relations practitioners become aware of ethical issues in their workplaces, make judgments and act on their decisions in situated workplace; (3) insufficient understanding of how individual ethicality interact with their meso and macro environment. Furthermore, public relations ethics literature is dominated by normative, prescriptive theories, with descriptive studies lagging behind. Nevertheless, descriptive, empirical studies have already uncovered gaps between theory and practice (see, for example, Bowen, 2008; Place, 2010, 2015a, 2015b), possibly due to traditional ethical theories' over-emphasis on rationality, universality, and autonomy, a lack of considerations for contexts and process, and lack of practitioners' voice in ethics literature. Therefore, to enrich public relations ethics literature and truly elevate practitioners' ethical conduct, it is important to (1) resolve tensions between traditional and emerging theories, preferably from a practitioners' point of view, (2) develop theoretical models of and insights into the real process of practitioners' ethical decision making in their situated work contexts by inquiring about their own experiences, and (3) understand how practitioners' ethicality may be shaped by their environments and how conversely, they can impact their environments. The last point also aligns with an increasingly important research agenda in public relations that focuses on its societal impact (Coombs & Holladay, 2013) as well as its ethical conscience role in organizations (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). This dissertation project addresses these important questions and privileges practitioners' voice and experiences so as to continue to build ethics scholarship in public relations.

Summary and Dissertation Outline

Based on the preceding overview, I completed a study that have three interrelated goals: (1) to explore how practitioners make meaning of ethics and thereby explore the tensions between traditional and emerging ethical theories, (2) to examine practitioners' EDM process in situated workplaces by having them recall past ethical challenges and how they tackled the issue from recognizing the ethical implications to taking actions, and (3) to explore how micro (individual practitioner), meso (organization), and macro (society) levels of ethicality interact from a practitioners' perspective. Answers to these questions are important, as they will not only enrich ethics scholarship but also help cultivate individual practitioners' ethical agency, competencies, and impact in the public relations workplace. To this end, I conducted 37 in-depth interviews with current and past public relations practitioners in the field to capture their meaning making of ethics, EDM process, and perceptions of multi-level ethics interactions.

The following chapter provides a review of pertinent literature related to public relations ethics, EDM, and a multi-level perspective. Research questions will be asked following relevant literature. The third chapter describes data collection and analysis procedures. Based on the collected data, chapter four presents findings organized by research questions. This section will introduce various ways that participants constructed the term ethics, their decision-making and action processes, and their perceptions of contextual influence and their own impact as an ethical agent. Finally, chapter five situates the findings into the existing literature while highlighting theoretical contributions and practical implications. This chapter explains the merits and adequacies of traditional and emerging theories and how they complement, how practitioners can maximize their ethical agency throughout EDM, and offers recommendations for public relations ethics emphasis and trainings. Directions for future research will be offered at the end.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This dissertation research project examined U.S. public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics and their ethical decision making (EDM) process from a multi-level interactionist perspective. As such, it integrated several bodies of literature including public relations ethics, ethical decision making, and care ethics. This chapter begins by briefly reviewing the conceptualizations of and approaches to ethics, followed by a discussion of tensions and inconsistencies in public relations ethics literature. These tensions led to the need to explore practitioners' understanding of ethics (RQ1). Then, normative models and descriptive studies on ethical decision making in public relations will be discussed, which led to the rationale for developing a behaviorally, process, and practically oriented framework that can guide practitioners' actual decision making in situated workplace (RQ2). Simola's (2011) propositions that combined traditional EDM and care ethics will be introduced, which complemented this research goal. Last, literature on contextual factors for individual EDM will be presented, and a multi-level (micro, meso, macro) interactionist view of ethics will be introduced, which led to the need to further explore contextual influences as well as practitioners' ethical leadership (RQ3). This section will end with a summary and reiteration of three research questions.

Ethics Definitions and Approaches

As defined previously, ethics is “a systematic attempt to make sense of our individual and social moral experience, to determine the rules that ought to govern human conduct, the values worth pursuing, and the character traits deserving development in life” (DeGeorge, 2009, p. 13). The definition demonstrates the constructivist nature of the term ethics, as well as an emphasis on rules, values, and individual characteristics. Correspondingly, ethics in public relations upholds values and traits including honesty, openness, loyalty, fairness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication (Bowen, 2007).

Concepts commonly conflated with ethics are morals (morality) and law. Ethicists Johanessen, Valde, and Whedbee (2008) made a distinction between ethics and morals, stating “ethics denotes the general and systematic study of what ought to be the grounds and principles for right and wrong human behavior. Morals (or morality) denote the practical, specific, generally agreed-upon, culturally transmitted standards of right and wrong” (p. 1). The definition again reflects the interpretive nature of ethics. Albeit the conceptual difference, scholars tended to use ethics and morality interchangeably (Drumwright et al., 2015; Rest, 1986).

By comparison, many ethicists stressed the differences between law and ethics (Drumwright, 2007; Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Martin & Wright, 2015). Laws reflect the “floor” of ethics, the moral minimum (Drumwright, 2007). Law can also be unethical, illustrated by examples of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Law is also reactive and takes time to go into effect, whereas ethics can be proactive and innate. With that said, Fitzpatrick (2006) stated that recent irresponsible behavior in public relations had incurred intensified public scrutiny and invited more stringent legal restrictions on practice, hence "the fragility of the line between law and ethics" (p. 17).

The approaches to ethics research and scholarship are usually divided into a normative one grounded in moral philosophies (for example, Kant's deontology) and a behavioral one based on research in sociology, psychology, and so forth (Drumwright, et al., 2015; Jones, 1991; Rest, 1986; Treviño et al., 2006). The normative approach is prescriptive, focusing on how individuals ought to think and behave (Bowen, 2004). The behavioral approach is descriptive and explanatory, exploring how and why individuals actually make ethical decisions in particular social and organizational context (Drumwright et al., 2015). Traditionally, the two approaches were studied separately, but scholars are starting to integrate them (Simola, 2011). Public relations ethics literature, as will be discussed later, has a relatively developed normative base but limited behavioral studies.

Public Relations Ethics: Theoretical Tensions and Practical Gaps

In this section, several theoretical tensions surrounding public relations ethics will be discussed, followed by descriptive studies illuminating gaps between theoretical conceptualizations and practitioners' ethical role perceptions. These tensions and gaps have led to the first research question that explored practitioners' meaning-making of ethics. To that end, this section of the literature review will be organized into three parts: (1) traditional ethics literature's emphasis on rationality, autonomy, and professional ethics, (2) emerging ethical theories' focus on emotionality, relationships, and personal ethics, and (3) gaps between public relations practitioners' role conceptions and scholars' theoretical conceptualizations.

Traditional foci of ethics literature

Rationality, autonomy, universality, and professionalism have characterized traditional theorizing of public relations ethics. These are reflected by the predominance of the deontological theory of public relations ethics (Bowen, 2004, 2005), professional codes of ethics, and other moral philosophies (consequentialism, virtue ethics) that implied rational analysis.

Deontological Theory of Public Relations Ethics. Philosopher and ethicist Immanuel Kant (1964, 1978) created deontology, which put human reason at the center of ethical behavior. Central to Kantian deontology were tenets including rationality, autonomy, universality, the categorical imperative, dignity and respect, duty, intention, and a morally good will (Bowen, 2004; Martin & Wright, 2015; Place, 2010). Bowen (2004) is well-known for developing a deontological theory of ethical public relations and issues management, which was based on Kantian deontology, two-way symmetrical communication, and issues management. Under this approach, practitioners should identify the issue, analyze and debate the issue at hand, carry out decision-making without fear of negative repercussions, test their decisions against Kant's (1964, 1978) categorical imperative, and then consider duty, respect, and intention, and engage in a two-way symmetrical communication throughout the process (see also, Place, 2015). Later, Bowen (2005) developed a Kantian deontological consideration triangle that emphasized duty, dignity and respect, and a morally goodwill for all parties involved in the ethical situation—

including self, organizations, stakeholders, publics, society. While Bowen (2005) called the consideration triangle a practical Kantian model, its practicality is dubious (Bivins, 2006; Place, 2010) as deontology suffers from several shortcomings.

First, deontology has been criticized as being too absolute and rigid (Martin & Wright, 2015; Place, 2010), placing too much attention on external rules rather than individual agency (Fawkes, 2012). Achieving complete autonomy is challenging (Bowen, 2004), and the supremacy of rationality is debatable (Girard, 2007). Furthermore, in a descriptive study, Place (2010) researched public relations practitioners' view of deontology in actual workplace via in-depth interviews. Participants confirmed the difficulty of applying universal, consistent, and therefore rigid ethical principles in the public relations workplace, characterized by a wide variety of clients, crises, and businesses holding diverse values. Participants admitted not having the level of autonomy prescribed in deontology, given their primary duty to serve and represent their employing organizations/clients. Therefore, despite its prevalence, deontology in general and Bowen's (2004) deontological theory of public relations ethics in particular, appeared limited in real-world workplaces.

Professional codes of ethics. A number of public relations professional associations, such as PRSA, IABC, the Arthur W. Page Center, PR Council, have created professional code of ethics for their members. Among them, the PRSA's code of ethics, divided into Professional Values and Provisions of Conduct, is both well-known and taught in major textbooks. The PRSA Member Statement of *Professional Values* include advocacy, honesty, expertise, loyalty, fairness; the PRSA Code *Provisions of Conduct* include free flow of information, competition, disclosure of information, safeguarding confidences, conflicts of interest, and enhancing the profession. Other professional codes have slight differences, but share the basic ethical foundations such as truthfulness, transparency, fairness, and integrity.

The usefulness of professional codes of ethics was debated. Scholars (Bowen, 2004; Lee & Cheng, 2011; Martin & Wright, 2015; Wright, 1993; 2006) have summarized a number of weaknesses of codes, including (1) being too general to provide specific guidance in a given dilemma, (2) suffering from internal logical contradictions, (3) having challenges in terms of enforcement and how to report/punish infractions. Members violating the codes will be dispelled from the corresponding association, but they can still practice public relations since membership is not mandatory for practicing public relations. Bowen (2004) considered professional codes as “a simple declaration of goodwill rather than guidelines for in-depth ethical analysis the profession demands” (p. 68). From a critical perspective, Fawkes (2015) argued that professional codes exist to validate the profession rather than to regulate practitioners’ behavior. These concerns were echoed by empirical research that found practitioners perceived codes as “unenforceable” and “too general to be useful” (Lee & Cheng, 2011). That being said, researchers (Lee & Cheng, 2011) suggested that codes can still be valuable—if well-crafted and well-deliberated—for practitioners, especially for young and entry-level practitioners who may be inexperienced with ethical situations.

Notwithstanding critique mounted on professional codes of ethics (Bowen, 2004; Wright, 1993, 2006), a few studies examined how public relations agencies crafted their codes of ethics. Ki and Kim (2010) investigated 1,562 public relations agencies in the U.S. and found 605 provided an ethical statement. Among those statements, values most frequently emphasized were respect to clients, service, strategic, and results, and values least likely to be included were, balance, fairness, honor, social responsibility, and independence. Also, none of the sampled agencies addressed enforcement and sanctions. Ki and Kim (2010) concluded that agencies reflected a service culture and advocacy function of public relations, with less concern for publics or society. Ethical statements were used almost as advertisements for service.

Additionally, Taylor and Yang (2015) researched codes of ethics of professional communication associations on a global level, and uncovered six dominant themes: professionalism, advocacy, moral standards, clients' interests, expertise, and relationships. Taylor and Yang (2015) contended that "advocacy and relationship building allow public relations practitioners to bridge diverse interests and promote the exchange of opinions and information" (p. 553). Nevertheless, the themes seemed to reflect practitioners' primary loyalty to clients/organizations. Combined with Ki and Kim's (2010) research, professional codes of ethics do seem to suffer from internal tensions and lack real concerns for society or publics.

Other Moral Philosophies Privileging Rationality. Though not explicitly stated, two other moral philosophies besides deontology—consequentialism and virtue ethics—also implied rational analysis.

Consequentialism. A theory within the teleological branch of moral philosophy, consequentialism contents that ethics is about producing the right consequences (Martin & Wright, 2015). Mill and Bentham's utilitarianism— an influential theory within consequentialism—deems the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people as the ultimate criterion for morality. Though not stated explicitly, considerations of consequences and calculation of the greatest happiness imply rational reasoning. Critics listed several shortcomings (Bowen, 2004; Martin & Wright, 2015) of consequentialism, which reflected disadvantages of rationality in general. For example, consequentialism tends to favor the majority over the minority. Furthermore, it is difficult to predict all consequences ensuing an action; there are unquantifiable consequences such as emotional repercussions; finally, it can take forever to measure the potential consequence on everyone affected by the behavior. That being said, consequentialism has been widely applied to public relations, based on the argument that an organization's operations and goals have consequences on groups of publics and that ethical public relations must address these consequences (Grunig et al., 2006; Hon, 2006). Hon (2006) contended that "responsible and effective advocacy becomes impossible" (p. 56) if public relations fails to address the consequences the organization has had on publics and change courses when needed.

Virtue ethics. Virtue ethics shifted attention from rules and consequences to moral agents (Fawkes, 2012; Harrison & Galloway, 2005; Martin & Wright, 2015; Pojman, 2006). Created by the Greek philosophers Aristotle, virtue was the golden mean between extremes. Macintyre (1998) interpreted virtue ethics as exhibiting character and qualities required to sustain a social role and achieve excellence in certain social practices (see, Martin & Wright, 2015). Therefore, virtue ethicists within public relations (Baker, 2008; Harrison & Galloway, 2005) urged individuals to ponder on exemplary character, their ethical identity, and the innate goods of a social practice whenever possible. These considerations, similarly, reflected emphasis on rational reasoning. However, critics (Martin & Wright, 2015) have questioned—who is to decide what virtues to be prioritized in certain situations, and what are the internal goods of a role/practice and why (Harrison & Galloway, 2005)? That being said, another aspect of virtue ethics—though much less discussed—argued that individuals are driven to make decisions that produce pride, happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment (Harrison & Galloway, 2005). This dimension suggests the role of emotionality in ethical decisions and behavior, which is one of the emerging themes of recent ethical theories.

Emerging emphases of ethics theories

Emerging ethical theories in public relations disputed the privileged status of rationality and autonomy, while illuminating the intertwining of personal and professional ethics. Additionally, ethical agents' responsibilities and competencies rather than external rules and codes are placed at the center of ethical decisions (Fawkes, 2012; Harrison & Galloway, 2005; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). These contentions were represented by the emotional aspects of virtue ethics (Harrison & Galloway, 2005), critical/postmodern perspectives (Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) especially Fawkes' (2012) hermeneutical analysis, role morality perspective (Berg & Gibson, 2011), and finally, care ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984; Slote, 2007; Tronto, 1993) that has received limited attention in public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018).

Emotional/motivational aspect of virtue ethics. Harrison and Galloway (2005) recast Aristotle's virtue ethics by placing emotions and motivation at the center of this moral philosophy. They suggested virtues "lie not in action … but rather in the feelings an individual or agent associates with this action" (p. 5). Therefore, according to Harrison and Galloway (2005), both a virtuous person and one without virtue can behave virtuously, but the former would experience the action with pleasure, joy, and pride, whereas the latter may experience it as unpleasant and even painful. Furthermore, Harrison and Galloway (2005) contended that while "action-based ethics asks whether a particular action is ethical … agent-based ethics focuses on the individual agent's character and motivations and asks whether they are virtuous" (p. 5). Though not stated explicitly, Harrison and Galloway (2005) seemed to suggest that positive emotions provide fuel for ethical motivations and ensuing decisions, and this has been confirmed by recent empirical studies (see, for example, Gaudine & Thorne, 2001; Zhong, 2011). In short, Harrison and Galloway (2005) concluded,

> … when virtue is located in such apposite feelings, discussing virtue in Aristotelian terms requires attention to desire, passion, pleasure, and pain just as much (if not more) as to reason and rational calculus … individual public relations practitioners cannot escape attending to their motivations as well as their moves, their passions as well as their purpose (p. 6).

Critical/postmodern perspectives. Critical/postmodern scholars (see, for example, Curtin & Gaither, Fawkes, L'Etang, Holtzhausen) commonly advocated more reflexivity in the field, more moral/ethical responsibility placed on practitioners rather than on external codes, rejection of one universal ethics while situating ethics in organizational, culture and societal contexts. In particular, Holtzhausen (2000,

2013) adopted a postmodern lens and conceptualized an activist role for public relations practitioners. In this role, practitioners relied on personal characteristics, relationship building, expertise, and opportunity to gain power, while resisting dominant organizational power structures and advocating on behalf of others—particularly employees and external publics whose voices may be submerged. Additionally, the postmodern approach emphasized situational and localized decision making in real-world contexts, which stood in sharp contrast to the universalized approach of deontology.

Fawkes (2012) criticized rationally based normative frameworks as being incomplete and inadequate, and instead approached ethics from a hermeneutic perspective, which emphasized individual practitioner's "inner processes to assess ethical implications of practice" (p. 117) or the "inner dynamics of ethics" (p. 125). Fawkes (2012) further argued,

> Yet, surely, it is the physical, social even spiritual experience of discomfort that prompts many of us to consider the ethical nature of our acts. There is not space here to consider ethics as an embodied experience, but hermeneutics does ask us to consider something more than reason in constructing our ethical frameworks, not rejecting rationality but placing it in a wider, deeper context (p. 125).

Therefore, Fawkes (2012) preferred a hermeneutic approach, which "admits the whole human being into the discourse, rather than just our brains" (p. 127). The approach "supports the move away from reason as a sole arbiter of either right or good, encouraging greater self-awareness" (p. 135). The argument for higher levels of reflexivity and a whole-person perspective segued to the next two approaches to ethics: role morality (Berg & Gibson, 2011) and care ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011; Hawk, 2011; Simola, 2011).

Role morality and personal ethics. The role morality perspective (Berg & Gibson, 2011) articulated the impossibility for public relations practitioners to solely rely on professional ethics and to leave their private selves at home when making ethics-related decisions at work. Specifically, Berg and Gibson (2011) contended that practitioners operate under three sources of moral guidance: personal morality, a professional code, and the corporate/institutional code of conduct, which may conflict sometimes. At the same time, practitioners take on different roles in interacting with various relational partners on and off work; they are obligated to various groups despite the artificially created life-work boundaries. It is through negotiating various roles and sometimes conflicting obligations that ethical dilemmas arise. Therefore, Berg and Gibson (2011) argued that moral compartmentalization is untenable, and that operating with one set of values in the workplace and another in one's personal life "defies evidence and goes against the very notion of personal integrity—i.e., wholeness" (p. 9).

Research in ethical knowledge (Lee & Cheng, 2010, Lee, 2012) bolstered Berg and Gibson's (2011) argument by revealing that public relations practitioners' ethical knowledge is implicit, personal, intuitive, emotional, and intangible, usually grounded in family upbringing, religious values and personal experiences. Their ethical knowledge only becomes explicit when practitioners communicate and share that knowledge in the workplace. In other words, professional ethics was found to be an extension of personal ethics (Lee & Cheng, 2010, Lee, 2012) and hence, Lee and Cheng (2010) contended that "there is no unique ethics for public relations that is separate from the ethics of ordinary human beings in a moral society" and that "the notion that public relations ethics is merely an occupational construct shaped by tacit rules and the peculiar demands of public relations practice" is untenable (p. 69). They recommended a generalized approach to ethics in public relations that "prevents practitioners from seeking refuge in a narrow, in-group set of values that are less likely to appeal to the publics and stakeholders" (p. 69).

Related, ethical leadership in public relations was found to be leading by example, which is grounded in personal rather than professional characteristics (Lee & Cheng, 2010). Through in-depth interviews with public relations executives and leaders, Lee and Cheng (2010) identified personal ethics, interpersonal behaviors, and articulation of ethical standards as three salient characteristics of an ideal leader in facilitating knowledge transfer of ethics in public relations organizations. These findings stood in stark contrast with traditional admonitions that tended to reject individual subjectivities and intuitions, while advising systematic, deliberate, unbiased, and rational analysis (see, Bowen, 2004, 2005; Place, 2015b).

Care ethics and crisis communication. An ethic of care, or care ethics, was first created by psychologist Carol Gilligan (1977, 1982), in her critique of Kohlberg's (1969, 1981) model of moral development that studied only male participants. Over the past 30 years, care ethics has progressed from its feminist root into a comprehensive, gender-neutral ethical framework, with major contributions from Noddings (1984, 2002), Tronto (1993), Held (2006), and Slote (2007).

Specifically, Noddings (1984) provided the first in-depth elaboration of care ethics: it is not based in abstract principles, universals, or rules leading to the ideal of individual autonomy through cognitive rationality; instead, it recognizes the primacy of building healthy relationships in concrete moral situations, and that all of one's capabilities are used to arrive at ethical decisions that enhance both the relationship and relational partners.

Tronto (1993) expanded care ethics—historically limited to private spheres—to the public and political domains. Similar to Noddings (1984), Tronto (1993) stated caring as an ongoing process with four distinctive characteristics: *attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness*, and that care ethics "requires a deep and thoughtful knowledge of the situation, and all of the actors' situations, needs, and competencies" (p. 136).

Slote (2007) was among the first care ethicists who upheld care ethics as a comprehensive ethical framework. Slote (2007) built his argument on the idea of *empathic caring*, which involves "feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves, as when we see another person in pain, it is as if the pain invades us" (Slote, 2007, p. 13). Additionally, Slote (2007) addressed issues related to relational distance, autonomy, and rationality. First, Slote advocated for caring beyond those who are temporally and/or spatially proximate, with the aid of moral imagination (Kekes, 2006). Second, Slote (2007) redefined autonomy as "the developed and exercised capacity to think and act for oneself" (Slote, 2007, p. 62), instead of the atomistic view of independent selves devoid of relationships in most ethical frameworks (e.g., deontology). Third, Slote (2007) differentiated between theoretical/epistemic rationality and practical rationality—the former is cognitive only and advocated by deontology, teleology, and justice ethics; the latter characterizes care ethics, which uses one's all capabilities, including affective, intuitional, and imaginative, to arrive at a reasonable assessment of the unique situation and a reasonable action that promotes the caring relationship and partners' growth. In short, Slote's (2007) rendition of care ethics both revealed tensions between care ethics and other moral philosophies, as well as implying care ethics' advantages by redefining key terms such as autonomy and rationality. It reflects Fawkes' (2012) whole-person approach to ethics.

Finally, care ethicist Held (2006) offered a comprehensive analysis of care ethics by defining it as both a value and a practice. According to Held (2006), caring is simultaneously an orientation, an attitude, and concrete efforts to meet needs in particular ethical contexts. To practice care, one needs to use care as a value to select appropriate ethical considerations, such as sensitivity, trust, mutual concerns, justice, honesty, and/or consequences, and to assess practice in a given situation (see also, Hawk, 2011). Therefore, care ethics provides a wider, more fundamental concept than other moral frameworks (Held, 2006).

Though rooted in a feminist paradigm and was historically confined to the private sphere of homes and care-centered fields such as nursing and education (Noddings, 2002), care ethics is now applied to public spheres and domains not typically care-oriented, such as social policy, politics and law, business and management (Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011; Hawk, 2011), thanks to the aforementioned contributors (Held, 2006; Slote, 2007; Tronto, 1993). Despite diverse theorizing of care ethics, Simola (2011) summarized its defining characteristics including (1) recognition of human interdependence and maintenance of relationships as central to people's orientation to ethics, (2) attention to the particular and concrete needs of individuals within given situations, and responsive engagement with them, (3) use of emotion in understanding and responding to ethical dilemmas, and (4) creative efforts to simultaneously fulfill seemingly conflicting responsibilities to more than one individual (Simola, 2011, pp. 128-129). Implied in these tenets is the supremacy given to emotionality, situational particulars, creative problem-solving and responsiveness, and maintenance of relationships. These principles seemed diametrically different from deontology, consequentialism, and partially virtue ethics, which privilege instead autonomy, rationality, and universality.

Compared with other moral philosophies, care ethics has not been widely applied to public relations, except for crisis communication (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018; Simola, 2003). In particular, Coombs and Holladay (2013) discussed public relations from a societal rather than organizational perspective; they suggested that "the ethic of care's focus on interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity mirrors our perspective on public relations" (p. 40) without an in-depth explication. Building upon Coombs and Holladay (2013), Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) argued that public relations and crisis scholarship "might benefit from theoretically and practically considering situational variables based on traditionally feminine values, such as interdependent relationships, relational contexts, and emotionality" (p. 19). They developed the Applied Model of Care Consideration (AMCC) that prioritized ethical concerns surrounding issues of relationship, interdependence, vulnerability, and reciprocity, while mapping out four landscapes of care—physical, cultural, political/economic, and human—that should be considered when practicing crisis communication. Although AMCC was proposed and tentatively tested in crisis contexts, Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) frequently implied that care ethics may benefit public relations and organizational communication in general. However, there has been limited knowledge of how practitioners conceptualized their ethical role or public relations ethics. Extant descriptive studies revealed some gaps between theory and practice.

Ethical role conceptions

Whereas theorists have conceptualized public relations practitioners' ethical roles in various ways, with most tensions centering around conscience versus advocates (Bowen, 2008; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001), how public relations practitioners perceived ethics in their public relations roles has received limited attention, except for a few descriptive studies (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Place, 2010). The following section discusses in more detail theoretical and descriptive literature concerning public relations practitioners' ethical roles and stances.

Theorizing of Practitioner Ethical Roles. In this section, two primary public relations ethical roles conceptualized by scholars are introduced. First, *organizational conscience* , also termed as ethical guardian or ethical counselor, is defined as "a professional who raises concerns when his or her organization's actions might bring about potential ethical problems leading to troubling consequences for various parties, who may be individuals, groups, organizations … both within and outside the organization” (Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p. 221). Second, scholars upholding a *responsible advocacy* model (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001) contended that it is more appropriate and realistic for practitioners to take on an *advocate* role, defined as someone “who pleads another’s cause or who speaks or writes in support of something” (p. 203), while balancing their obligations to clients and employers with their obligations to operate in the public interest (p. 205), hence being responsible. In short, the two theoretical ethical roles differed in terms of practitioners’ primary allegiance, with the former placing a heavier emphasis on public interest and the latter recognizing practitioners’ realistic, primary obligations to clients/employers.

Practitioner Ethical Stances. Descriptive studies of public relations practitioners in the field revealed gaps between practitioners’ ethical stances and scholarly conceptualizations.

First, practitioners seemed hesitant about the “organizational conscience” role (Bowen, 2008), and many were not ready to offer ethical counsel (Neill, 2016a, Neill & Weaver, 2017). Via in-depth interviews, Bowen (2008) found practitioners polarized between pro-ethics and anti-ethics roles. Rationalizations that prevented practitioners from assuming the social/organizational conscience role included a legal rationale that equated ethics with law, a conviction that public relations practitioners should advocate for their clients without second-guessing their decisions, a perception that public relations practitioners did not have the expertise to provide ethical advice, a lack of access to the senior management, and an unwillingness to confront the top decision makers. Those who embraced the social conscience role considered it key to sustaining organizational reputation; most of them did not uphold ethics for altruistic reasons but linked ethics with business results (e.g., profitability) in the long run.

Second, even when practitioners value professional ethics, their actions may diverge. Place (2015a) in fact noted a value-action gap: interviewing practitioners specialized in program evaluation prioritized certain principles (duty, truthfulness, and precision) prescribed by professional codes of ethics, but they continued to use tainted data to sustain client relationships or corporate image. Similarly, Kang (2010) reported that practitioners recognized the hope to resolve ethical issues at work, but they tended to simply leave their companies as a preferred way to tackle the challenge. Finally, research (Place, 2010, 2015a) has shown practitioners favoring the advocacy model despite considering the societal impact of organizational practices (Place, 2015b). In short, descriptive studies seemed to suggest a hesitancy among practitioners to embrace the organizational/ethical conscience role; most preferred the advocacy model with varying degrees of considering public interests.

In summary, the first section of the literature review revealed tensions between traditional and emerging ethical theories and gaps between ethical role conceptualizations and practitioners' ethical stance. Also, there is limited understanding of how practitioners make meaning of ethics in their public relations workplace, which may or may not conform to theories. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of practitioners' meaning-making of ethics in their public relations role is needed, so as to assess the adequacy and practicality of extant and emerging ethical theories and role conceptions. This is the focus for the first research question.

RQ1: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of ethics in their public relations workplace?

Next, practitioners' ethical decision making process at work will be discussed, which further illustrates the tensions among ethical theories that emphasize (1) rationality, autonomy, universality, and professional ethics, and (2) emotionality, relationships, contextual particulars, and personal ethics. Review of extant normative and descriptive literature indicates an oversimplification of practitioners' ethical decision making, which provides rationale for utilizing a process-oriented model, such as Rest's (1986) ethical decision making (EDM) to explore each stage of practitioners' decisions in their public relations workplace. To that end, this section will be divided into the following sub-sections: (1) normative and descriptive ethical decision making research in public relations, (2) Rest's (1986, 1994) EDM, and (3) Simola's (2011) propositions of care based EDM that combined traditional EDM (Rest, 1986) and care ethics. The second research question that emerged from this section of the literature review will be raised toward the end of this section. To distinguish Rest's (1986) EDM and extant ethical decision making related literature in public relations, EDM is only used when referring to Rest's model and studies spawned from Rest's (1986, 1994) model.

Ethical Decision Making in Public Relations

This section focuses on extant ethical decision making literature in public relations. Normative framework will be introduced, followed by descriptive studies, which are very limited in number. Then, researchers' calls to continually search for practical models of ethical decision making in public relations will be articulated, which led to the selection of Rest's (1986, 1994) EDM model.

Normative frameworks

A number of normative theories offered step-by-step or multifaceted frameworks in order to guide public relations practitioners' ethical decision making in the field. These include deontological theory of ethical issues management (Bowen, 2004), responsible advocacy (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001), virtue ethics (Baker, 2008), Tilley's (2005) ethical pyramid, the TARES test (Baker & Martinson, 2002), ethical persuasion (Edgett, 2002), and so forth. However, as will be argued later, these frameworks either were limited to only ethical judgment, to the exclusion of other important steps such as recognizing and acting on ethical issues, or their philosophical roots prevented them from addressing actual problems in practitioners' decision making process.

Deontological theory and consideration triangle. As mentioned previously, Bowen (2004) developed a normative model of ethical issues management that explicated an ideal process of ethical decision making in the public relations workplace. In this model, Bowen (2004) asked practitioners to first clarify their values as "these values will influence the identification, prioritization, and handling of issues throughout the process" (p. 80). Then, practitioners should identify issues through environmental scanning, symmetrical communication, media inquiries, complaints, or lawsuits. This should be followed the issue decision making phase, during which Bowen (2008) suggested issue managers analyze issues through a deontological perspective, or "to do what is ethically right as based on his or her duty to universal moral norms" (p. 80). The next phase involves an engagement of the law of autonomy, during which issues managers or the public relations function should "feel free to act according to their moral duty without fear of harmful repercussions" (p. 81). Bowen (2004) explained the law of autonomy was an extension of Kant's belief in rationality, and therefore moral impartiality and rational analysis were highly valued in this model.

Next, Bowen (2004) asked issues managers to test their decisions against Kant's categorical imperative, which "transcends cultural bias, religion, socioeconomic status, and paucity of philosophical training in that it allows all rational decision makers the freedom to make universally acceptable decisions of moral worth and validity" (p. 82). Its universality, according to Bowen (2004), allows issues managers to be more thoughtful and thorough with their decisions. Next, issues managers should consider the three iterations of Kant's categorical imperative, including respect, duty, and intention. The final phase of the model asked issues managers to conduct symmetrical models of public relations to communicate with publics, which "involves change and understanding on the part of both the publics and the organization" (p. 83) (see also, Grunig, 2001).

Bowen (2004) suggested that this model is cyclical in nature and is not without limitations. She recognized practical challenges surrounding autonomy and divided loyalties, emphasizing that the "overriding loyalty—above clients, employer, and prudential self-interest—must be to uphold the moral law, to do one's duty by making the right ethical choice" (p. 85). That being said, as will be shown later, the advantages and likelihood of rationality and universality are highly controversial.

Furthermore, as this model was developed for a particular area of public relations—issues management, the decision making model is limited in its application to other public relations practices.

Responsible advocacy and persuasive ethics. As mentioned previously, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) developed a responsible advocacy model that comprised three recommendations for practitioners when making ethics related decisions. The first principle entailed a comparison of harms and benefits—practitioners should avoid or minimize harms and promote benefits at the least possible cost in terms of harms. The second principle involved treating people with respect and dignity. Finally, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) recommended distribute justice, that is, "the benefits and burdens of any action or policy should be distributed as fairly as possible" (p. 207). Again, this model affirms practitioners' primary obligations to their clients/organizations, as well as responsible and ethical persuasion as a legitimate public relations practice.

Other scholars following the advocacy paradigm offered suggestions surrounding ethical decisions in persuasion, messaging, and campaigns. For example, Baker and Martinson (2002) suggested a TARES test that included five principles—truthfulness (of the message), authenticity (of the persuader), respect (for the persuadee), equity (of the persuasive appeal), and social responsibility (for the common good)—that should be applied to persuasive messages and campaigns. Later, the TARES model was tested by Lieber (2005) via an online exploratory survey, who found TARES better suited for a three-factor configuration including credibility, integrity, and civility, which seemed to focus more on practitioners (persuaders) than messages. Edgett (2002) reviewed literature in public relations, professional ethics, advocacy, rhetoric, and persuasion, and proposed ten principles for ethically desirable advocacy, which included evaluation of issue-client-organization fitness, priority given to clients/organizations once assuming the role of advocates, sensitivity in terms of balancing client priority with social responsibility, confidentiality, veracity, reversibility, validity, visibility or clear identification of communication on behalf of clients, respect for audiences, and consent from organizations/clients.

In all, these advocacy-based decisional frameworks provided useful guidelines for ethical decision making in the public relations context, but similar to professional codes of ethics and deontology, they are mostly rules-based and do not account for decisional contexts or practitioners' psychological processes when making ethics related decisions; therefore, they have limited practicality.

Virtue ethics. Virtue ethics focused on ethical agents and attended to the motivational and identity aspects of decision-making (Baker, 2008; Harrison & Galloway, 2005). Within virtue ethics, Baker (2008) developed a model of the principled advocate and the pathological partisan, which represents "diametrically opposed archetypes of public relations and advertising practitioners" (p. 235). According to Baker (2008), the principled advocate embodies advocacy virtues of humility, truth, transparency, respect, care, authenticity, equity, and social responsibility, whereas the pathological partisan represents vices of arrogance, deceit, secrecy, manipulation, disregard, artifice, injustice, and raw self-interest (p. 235). Following this model, Baker (2008) recommended a series of guiding questions for public relations and advertising practitioners when making virtue-based ethical decisions. These questions included (1) virtues that should be enacted and vices avoided in the decisional situation, (2) potential actions of a principled advocate in this situation, (3) how one's actions in this situation would affect and reflect his/her character and integrity, and finally, (4) what kind of person one would become if he/she acts in certain ways. Baker (2008) suggested that these questions make the ethical decisions quite personal, and therefore, have a higher stake. That being said, answers are still open-ended and subject to practitioners' interpretations of both the situation and the virtues.

Integrated framework. Finally, Tilley (2005) developed an ethical pyramid that incorporated proactive ethical reasoning into every stage of the public relations process, particularly surrounding a campaign. Additionally, instead of advocating for certain moral philosophical approaches, Tilley (2005) argued that practitioners should consider virtues, rules, and outcomes simultaneously—they are complementary rather than competitive. Specifically, Tilley (2005) divided the campaign process into three stages: ethical intent, ethical means, and ethical outcomes. During ethical intent stage, practitioners should decide on campaign objectives that reflect ethical virtues, rules, and outcomes, as well as their personal objectives for their own ethical behavior. During the ethical means stage, practitioners need to assess the ethical characteristics of each of the communication materials, in addition to other attributes such as readability, cost per view, and exposure. Lastly, during the ethical outcomes stage, Tilley (2005) recommended practitioners test the overall ethical performance of the campaign by measuring it against the strategic objectives set in the first stage. Overall, Tilley's (2005) ethical pyramid offered an integrated framework that not only encouraged practitioners to consider multiple moral philosophical approaches, but also weaved ethics into every step of a public relations campaign process. That being said, as an organizing framework of campaigns, Tilley's (2005) ethical pyramid was rather ambiguous about specific values that should be prioritized; it was also silent on the relational negotiations, dual loyalties, and contextual constraints confronting practitioners, which was revealed by descriptive studies on public relations practitioners' actual ethical decision-making in their public relations workplaces.

Descriptive ethical decision making in public relations

Place (2010) explored practitioners' ethical decision making via in-depth interviews, and found participants drew upon personal philosophies, workplace experiences, and protocol in their ethical decision making at work. Specifically, participants made ethical decisions by "respecting individuals, communicating honestly, and incorporating the assistance of decision-making rubrics" (Place, 2010, pp. 234-235). Furthermore, they considered the rule-based, step-by-step deontological theory of ethical public relations (Bowen, 2004) as "difficult to uphold due to the often situational, rushed, and constrained nature of public relations work" (p. 242). In a subsequent study, Place (2015) found practitioners specialized in research and measurement implicitly invoking a combination of moral philosophical tenets—particularly deontology and consequentialism—when making judgments (Place, 2015a). In light of these results suggesting the inadequacy of one single moral philosophical framework, Place (2010) called further investigation into "how practitioners make ethical decisions and what tools, models, individuals, and philosophies can empower, guide, and educate them throughout their careers" (p. 242).

Neill and Drumwright (2012) investigated how and why practitioners assumed the organizational conscience role through in-depth interviews with senior-level public relations practitioners. They found those who played this role embodied several characteristics: (1) they had a broadened role conception that recognized practitioners' dual loyalty, centered on trust, truth, credibility, and emphasized consultation, problem-solving, and independent voice; (2) they displayed a variety of persuasive methods including using resourceful, experiential approaches, and raising alternatives, while showing extraordinary courage to live in sync with their values; (3) they had artful access to informal coalitions by developing relationships with all senior executives and demonstrating broader business knowledge, while continuing to build goodwill with the dominant coalition and legal department; (4) they pursued lifelong learning that included not only public relations but also knowledge of business and specific industries—these have helped them spot ethical issues (Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Though not focused on decision making specifically, these findings indicated practical and soft skills (e.g., relationship-building, persuasion, business acumen) that were needed in practitioners' ethical decision making process, in order to make sound, prosocial ethical judgments and to translate those judgments into actual actions. Neill and Drumwright (2012) called for future research to continue exploring how practitioners maximize their ethical agency, problem-solving, and persuasion abilities when faced with ethical challenges.

Similarly, a number of power/dissent studies (Berger, 2005; Kang &. Berger, 2010; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Reber & Berger, 2006) did not research ethical decision making per se but offered insights into necessary confrontational skills that help practitioners to raise ethical concerns to more powerful clients/organizational leaders. Specifically, Kang and Berger (2010) found practitioners already holding a seat at the decision table were most likely to dissent, and assertive confrontations were mostly adopted, compared with other resistance tactics (e.g., sabotage, leaking). By comparison, Bowen (2008) found practitioners who did not embrace an organizational conscience role shunned confrontation. Neill and Drumwright (2012) reported subtle, resourceful, and experiential approaches used by highly ethical practitioners to persuade leadership. These findings suggested that practitioners varied in their persuasive and dissent behaviors, potentially due to different ethical role perceptions and/or confrontational skills. Therefore, scholars (Berger, 2005; Kang & Berger, 2010; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) issued calls to further explore practitioners' role as political players in organizations (Berger, 2005), and their confrontation and negotiation strategies "in terms of speech and argument style, and language selection, among other aspects" (Kang & Berger, 2010, p. 382). These strategies are key in light of a process-oriented ethical decision making model (Rest, 1986, 1994) in which actions are an integral component, no less crucial than ethical judgment.

In summary, both normative frameworks and descriptive studies on public relations practitioners' ethical decision making have enriched public relations ethics literature in, offered evidence and provided guidance for decisions in the field. That being said, they were mostly grounded in the moral philosophical approach to ethics, focused primarily on the judgment stage, and oversimplified the psychological, communicative, and relational processes involved in actual decision making in concrete workplaces. In contrast, a behavioral approach to ethics, as exemplified by ethicist James Rest's (1986, 1994) ethical decision making (EDM) model, spells out the various components of EDM beginning with recognizing an ethical issue and ending with ethical actions. This model (Rest, 1986) has not been widely discussed among public relations scholars, educators, or practitioners. Nevertheless, it could answer public relations ethics scholars' (Kang & Berger, 2010; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Place, 2010, 2015) call to further understand the process, tools, and strategies that aid practitioners' EDM and ensuing action.

Rest's Ethical Decision Making (EDM) Model

Overview of Rest's EDM

Ethicist James Rest's (1986, 1994) four-component ethical decision making (EDM) model is indisputably one of the most ground-breaking ethical theories that have generated numerous subsequent studies. According to Rest (1986, 1994), individuals go through four processes when making ethical decisions: First, people must perceive the ethical dimensions of a situation they face (*awareness*). Second, they must have the ability to make sound judgment and decide on a course of action that is ethical (*judgment*). Third, they must prioritize certain values over others (*intent*). Finally, they must have the courage and commitment to act ethically despite possible repercussions (*action*). To date, four meta-analyses (Craft, 2013; Ford &

Richardson, 1994; Loe, Ferrell, & Mansfield, 2000; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) have already been conducted on EDM research, and have identified a variety of personal, organizational, and issue factors that shaped the EDM process. Compared with ethical decision making literature in public relations, Rest's (1986) EDM model treated judgment as only one component of the entire EDM process, and therefore offers a more comprehensive view. Furthermore, it originated from individuals' actual behaviors in diverse contexts and is grounded in psychological and sociological principles. Therefore, it more precisely resembles real-world EDM than prescriptive step-by-step frameworks such as Bowen's (2004) deontological theory of ethical public relations.

Meta-analysis of Rest's EDM

The two most recent meta-analyses of Rest's EDM (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) offered a comprehensive review of EDM studies as well as their limitations and future directions.

First, O'Fallon & Butterfield (2005) reviewed EDM literature from 1996 to 2003 (174 articles in total), and summarized most frequently researched individual, organizational, and issue-related factors that drive the four stages of EDM (Rest, 1986, 1994). Among *individual* factors, direct effects of gender, ethical philosophies (i.e., idealism and relativism), cognitive moral development, locus of control, Machiavellianism, and religion were consistently reported as influencing the EDM process, but education level, work experience, nationality, and age produced mixed results. Among *organizational* level factors, ethical climate/culture, codes of ethics, and rewards and sanctions exerted consistent influence on EDM, whereas industry type and organizational size produced mixed effects. Among *issue*-related factors (Jones, 1991), magnitude of consequences and social consensus presented the most consistent findings (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). In conclusion, O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) advised future research to critically evaluate Rest's framework—whether it truly captures individuals' ethical decision making process, or additional steps that "precede, follow, or intervene between the other steps" (p. 399) may be present in real-world EDM. Furthermore, O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) urged researchers to consider sensemaking in EDM because individuals are "continuously bombarded by ambiguous environmental and organizational information that must be somehow noticed, interpreted, and acted upon" (p. 399) (Weick, 1979).

Most recently, Craft (2013) reviewed EDM literature from 2004 to 2011 (84 articles in total) in actual or simulated business settings. Similar to O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005), he summarized individual, organizational, and issue-related factors that appeared in these studies. Craft (2013) concluded that *individual* factors were the most often studied elements of ethical decision-making, comprising 77% of the overall findings, with a few newer variables such as mindfulness and implicit attitudes contributing to EDM. By comparison, *organizational* factors were studied much less often, comprising only 17% of findings. The impact of established corporate processes on individual EDM appeared vague, and hence Craft (2013) urged future studies to explore how ethical culture can be developed that positively shapes employees' ethical awareness and perceptions (p. 254). As for limitations, Craft (2013) cautioned against using student samples, and called for more investigations of the impact of individual's emotions, creativity, and locus of control in EDM, as well as organizational factors that may enhance or diminish ethical reasoning/actions. Craft (2013) also urged researchers to examine macro-level factors such as cultural orientations and societal context. These context-related questions will be discussed later and addressed by the third research question.

Criticism of Rest's EDM

Despite its popularity and utility, Rest's (1986, 1994) EDM and subsequent works (Craft, 2013; Ford & Richardson, 1994; Loe et al., 2000; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) were criticized for privileging cognitive rationality and treating individuals as sole decision makers. The criticism came largely from ethicists upholding a sensemaking approach (Caughron et al., 2011; Mumford et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007; Thiel et al., 2012), who believed the uncertainties, novelties, and complexities embedded in ethical situations would necessitate a sensemaking process that is facilitated by emotions and intuition as well as cognitive, rational faculties. Defined as a complex process by which an individual develops an understanding of a perplexing set of circumstances, to figure out the likely causes and outcomes of the emergent situation, as well as how they could influence the situation (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), sensemaking is an inherent response to ambiguous, complex, unusual, and high-risk situations (Weick, 1995) and seems particularly suitable for ethical dilemmas.

Therefore, sensemaking ethicists (Caughron et al., 2011; Mumford et al., 2008; Thiel et al., 2012) have developed a number of strategies to enhance individuals' ability to interpret ethical situation and act wisely during EDM. Since appraisal can arouse strong emotional responses and is subject to personal biases and situational variables, many of the recommended strategies went beyond the reasoning realm. For example, Mumford et al. (2008) prescribed recognizing personal circumstances, anticipating consequences, considering others' perspectives, seeking help, questioning one's own judgment, dealing with emotions, and examining personal values. Thiel et al. (2012) proposed four strategies—emotion regulation, self-reflection, forecasting, and information integration—to aid in leader sensemaking in complex and ambiguous ethical situations. Furthermore, intuition (Haidt, 2001, 2003; Sonenshein, 2007) is valued in sensemaking, though its role in decision making is debated among scholars (Bowen, 2004; Place, 2010).

In all, these criticisms have led to the selection of care based ethical decision making (EDM), proposed by Simola (2011), as a theoretical framework for research question two that explores public relations practitioners' EDM in their workplaces. This is because care ethics—as reviewed previously—values emotionality, intuition and relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011; Hawk, 2011; Noddings, 1984; Slote, 2007; Tronto, 1993), recasts cognitive rationality as practical rationality (Slote, 2007), and emphasizes ethical values, attitudes, as well as efforts and competencies (Held, 2006). Combined with Rest's (1986) EDM that traditionally privileged cognitive reasoning and deliberation, care based EDM (Simola, 2011) seems to offer a well-rounded, whole-person, process-oriented, and practical framework to guide individuals' EDM.

Care Based Ethical Decision Making

Simola (2011) argued tenets of care ethics can enhance individuals' performance across the four components of Rest's (1986) EDM. To begin with, care ethics may enhance ethical awareness—the first stage of EDM—with its emphasis on (1) attentiveness to the particular, (2) subjective experience of others, and (3) epistemic value of emotions (Simola, 2011, pp. 129-130). Citing Little (1995), Simola (2011) argued that individuals emotionally attuned to the subjective experiences and needs of others will be more sensitized to subtle emotional cues that signal impending harm or risks, and therefore will be more primed to recognize the ethical aspects of the situation (Simola, 2011). In contrast, Simola (2011) contended that individuals who are detached, dispassionate, rational, objective, and distant may be less sensitive to the feelings of those around—feelings that could indicate ethical lapses or moral violations (see also, Tronto, 1993).

Next, Simola (2011) articulated the role of mature empathy in ethical judgment—the second stage of EDM. Citing Slote (2007) and Hoffman (2000), Simola (2011) considered empathy—the underlying mechanism that individuals activate and maintain relationships—as a primary criterion against which moral/ethical decisions are made. Importantly, as individuals develop their cognitive and socio-emotional skills, they may intensify their imaginative capabilities in relation to the plight of others, and "it is through the facilitation, exercise, and encouragement of this inductive imagination of experience of a range of others (including those who are distant, unrelated, and at risk of future versus current suffering) that empathically driven morality become infused in individuals" (Simola, 2011, p. 132).

Third, empirical research has shown the power of emotions in forming ethical motivations that drive action, far stronger than rational reasoning (Hardy, 2006;

Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Therefore, care ethics—with its emphasis on emotions—is advantageous in explaining moral motivation or intent (Simola, 2011). Specifically, care ethics may enhance individuals' ethical intent with a preferred discourse of "desire/do" rather than that of "restraint/don't." The former is more proactive, based on instinctive movements towards feelings that lead to more authentical and healthy relationships; the latter is most reactive, based on socially accepted conventions that give individuals a set of rules to abide by or actions to avoid. In short, care ethics promotes proactive, desire-based, and relationship-driven ethical intention (Simola, 2011).

Last but not least, most moral philosophical frameworks focus primarily on ethical judgment with limited attention to ensuing actions. However, ethical decisions do not always lead to desired behavior (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Rest, 1986), especially when actions are taken in the context of social pressure, power dynamics, and relational conflicts. Care ethicists (Reiter, 1996; Simola, 2011), however, offered insights with care ethics' focus on "simultaneously and creatively fulfilling seemingly conflicting responsibilities to more than one person" (Simola, 2011, p. 135). Specially, care ethics (Simola, 2011) encourages individuals to attend to and identify the underlying interests, needs, and values of different groups of stakeholders, so as to find creative solutions that address hidden concerns masked by either unethical or impractical requests. This integrative, or non-zero-sum, win-win approach promotes ingenious solutions, relational health, and ethical agents' career security and development. Of course, win-win, non-zero-sum solutions may not always be possible in organizational settings, but an awareness of such possibilities may enhance individuals' ethical efficacy and encourage a problem-solving mentality (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Simola, 2011).

In short, a care-based EDM (Simola, 2011) integrated the groundbreaking, process-oriented EDM model (Rest, 1986, 1994) and a moral philosophical approach—care ethics—that embraces non-rational, relationship-centered, and contextualized decision-making. A summary of Simola's (2011) propositions is shown in Figure 1.

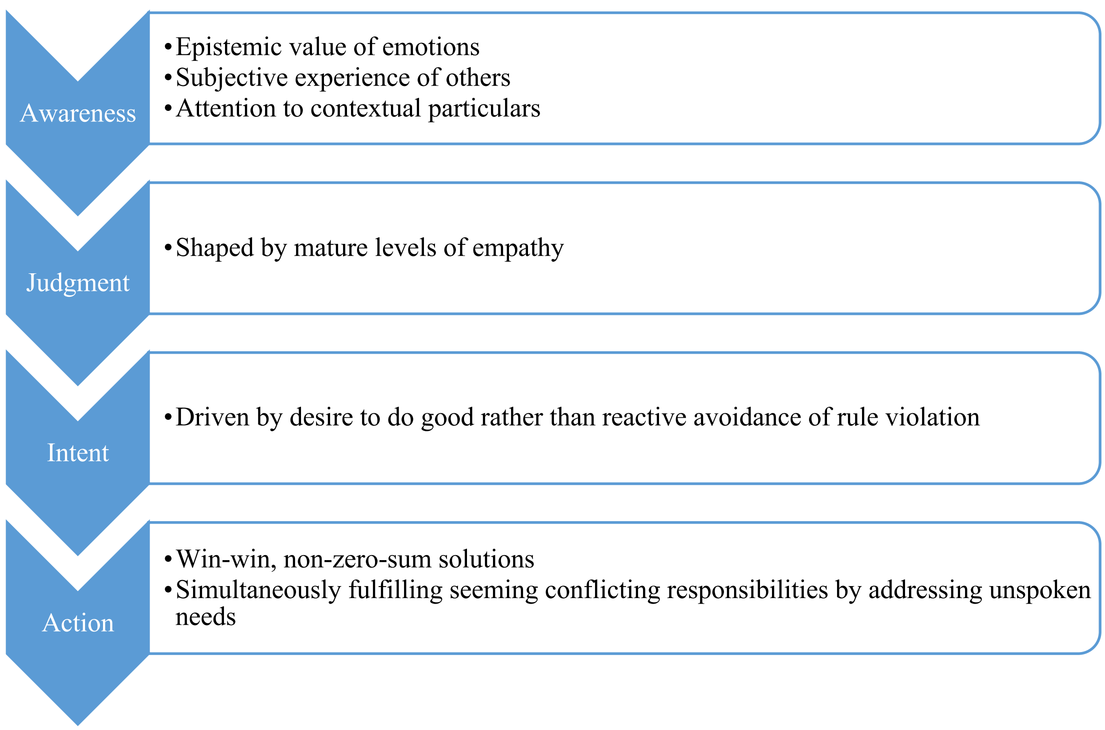

Figure 1: Simola's (2011) Care Ethic Based EDM Model

In short, normative and descriptive literature of public relations ethical decision making exhibited limitations. Whereas normative frameworks have limited practicality, descriptive studies oversimplified the decision making process. On the other hand, Rest's (1986) EDM model portrayed the entire process of ethical decision making, comprising awareness, judgment, intent, and action components. Despite its groundbreaking nature, Rest's (1986) model was criticized for its overreliance on rationality and reasoning. Simola (2011) compensated the lack by combining EDM with care ethics, thereby infusing in the model elements of emotionality, relational concerns, and situational considerations. The propositions await application and refining. That being said, the care based EDM theoretical framework is appropriate for the current dissertation study, which tackles the tensions between rationality and emotionality, autonomy and relationship. Hence, the second research question addresses the process of public relations practitioners' ethical decision making, while simultaneously assessing Simola's (2011) care based EDM. It asks:

RQ2: To what extent does the care-based ethical decision making model reflect public relations practitioners' EDM?

Having discussed tensions within public relations ethics theories, as well as offering rationale to explore practitioners' understanding of ethics and their ethical decision making process from a care-based EDM perspective, the next section addresses contextual influences from both meso (organizational) and macro (societal) levels.

Contextual Considerations in Ethics Research

Though certain moral philosophies (e.g., deontology) treats autonomy as a desired state for ethical agents to make decisions (Bowen, 2004), in reality individuals are seldom unaffected by relational, contextual, and power differential concerns psychologically and/or behaviorally (Berger, 2005; Bivins, 2006; Drumwright et al., 2015; Holtzhausen, 2000; Place, 2010; Reber & Berger, 2006). In fact, care ethics promotes considerations of contextual particulars, relational characteristics, and situational factors when making ethical decisions.

Whereas behavioral ethics research, including EDM studies following Rest's (1986) model, has revealed a number of organizational factors shaping individuals' decisions and actions within the four components (awareness, judgment, intent, action), only limited ethics studies in public relations addressed organizational-level factors. This creates a gap that needs to be filled so as to better understand how and why public relations practitioners may be affected by organizational and industry-level factors. Furthermore, there have been limited understanding of how macro (societal) level factors may influence individuals' EDM process, both within public relations and behavioral ethics in general. However, the current sociopolitical landscape seems to suggest both a need and urgency to explore such influences, as ethics has been put under the spotlight on a societal level.

On the other hand, individuals may exert influence on their meso and macro environment—the potential impact is reflected from the term *organizational/ethical conscience* (Bowen, 2004; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) and *ethical leadership* (Lee & Cheng, 2010), used frequently by public relations scholars to refer to practitioners. Despite the common usage, there has only been limited in-depth investigation of what these roles involve (Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Furthermore, extant studies on these roles focused mostly on micro-meso level interactions, or, how public relations practitioners positively contribute to organizational effectiveness and ethicality, with limited attention to micro-macro analysis, or, how public relations practitioners may enhance societal ethicality, if at all. This is important to explore, however, with increasingly deteriorating public trust due to societal-level ethical and moral lapses.

Therefore, the third overarching goal of the current dissertation research is to understand how public relations practitioners' ethicality may be shaped by meso and macro level influences, and how they conversely exert ethical influence on their environment. To that end, the next section will be organized into three sub-sections: (1) organizational factors studied in behavioral ethics and public relations ethics literature, (2) public relations literature on ethical conscience and leadership, and (3) the multi-level ethical framework (Drumwright, 2007) that serves as a heuristic for the third research question.

Meso-level contextual factors

As discussed previously, studies following Rest's (1986, 1994) traditional EDM have uncovered a number of organizational level factors that consistently shape individuals' EDM process, including organizations' ethical climate and culture, rewards and sanctions, and codes of ethics (O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Industry type and organizational size have shown mixed effects on individuals' EDM. A more recent meta-analysis (Craft, 2013) emphasized ethical culture as key in shaping employees' ethical awareness and perceptions (Craft, 2013), but the impact of established organizational process and ethics programs on individual EDM "appeared vague" (p. 254). Therefore, Craft (2013) called for more exploration of how organizational ethical culture can be developed to positively influence employee EDM. In short, despite large number of EDM studies investigating organizational level variables, gaps exist concerning industry-specific culture and the process of fostering pro-ethical organizational cultures.

Meso-level analysis of public relations ethics. Within the realm of public relations ethics, research has focused on organizational environment that supported or detracted from practitioner ethics in general (Bowen, 2004; Han, Park, & Jeong, 2013; Kang, 2010; Lee & Cheng, 2012; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) and dissent in particular (Berger, 2005; Kang & Berger, 2009, 2010; Reber & Berger, 2006); organizations' ethics management (Lee & Cheng, 2012); the nature of dominant coalition (Berger, 2005; Reber & Berger, 2006); ethics in public relations agencies (Schauster & Neill, 2017) and their ethical statements (Ki & Kim, 2010; Taylor & Yang, 2015). On an industry level, studies have been conducted concerning the status quo of education (Austin & Toth, 2011; Neill, 2017), trainings and programs (Bowen, 2006), accreditation's influence on ethics (Neill, 2016a), and professional environment's general influence (Lee & Cheng, 2012) on practitioner ethicality, usually via mentorship programs and professional socialization. Next, I summarize the most important themes within this body of literature.

Organizational Environment. Research overall supports the positive impact of a participatory culture, open communication, decentralized management worldview, and high professional standards in fostering employees—in this case public relations practitioners' ethics (Bowen, 2004; Kang, 2010; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) and in encouraging dissent (Kang & Berger, 2010). Kang and Berger (2009) also identified top management's ethics as the most important factor to sustain organizational ethics, and public relations practitioners are more likely to offer ethics-related advice to the dominant coalition that supports ethics.

Furthermore, Lee and Cheng (2012) examined practitioners' perceptions of organizational ethics management via an online survey with 350 PRSA members. Results supported influence of organizational environments on practitioners' ethics. Specifically, an ethical organizational culture, access to a good mentor, a work environment that encourages questions and reflection, positive professional and personal conduct of managers, and clients' reputation and willingness to be counseled positively shaped those participants' ethicality. Furthermore, survey data suggested practitioners' employing organizations tended to use a rules-based rather than value-based system of ethics management, but participants were divided about their relative usefulness. Therefore, Lee and Cheng (2012) urged future research to explore whether a values-based system alongside mentorship program would be particularly beneficial as the complexity of ethical situations may not be fully captured by abstract and standardized rules such as codes of ethics.

The power structure within an organization—and public relations' formal and informal power—also play critical roles in practitioners' ethical judgment and actions. While excellence theory (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) strongly suggested practitioners being included in organizations' dominant coalition so as to participate in top decision-making, subsequent research showed the messy nature of dominant coalition (Berger, 2005; Reber & Berger, 2006) and the importance of accessing informal coalitions in the workplace (Neill, 2015; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Specifically, via interviews with 21 public relations executives, Berger (2005) revealed the complex power relationships and a matrix of constraints within organizations that would undermine and limit the public relations function. These made it hard for practitioners to do the right thing, even if they wanted to. Neill and colleague (Neill, 2015; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) found practitioners who formed informal coalitions that they resort to during ethical challenges had a better chance to act ethically. In all, researchers (Berger, 2005; Place, 2010; Neill & Drumwright, 2012; Reber & Berger, 2006) called for continued research on ways practitioners maximize power/influence and overcome constraints so as to increase their ethical agency.

Industry Environment. The public relations workplace is special with stringent client expectations, rushed pace, and tight deadlines (Place, 2010, 2015a), which may have contributed to practitioners' unethical conducts such as inflating evaluation results (Place, 2015a). Being a line function that supports organizational top decision-makers, the public relations department/unit has limited influence. Research (Neill, 2015) has shown that practitioners are more likely to be included in ethical decisions when the issues are perceived as falling within the domain of communication, when the public relations function has direct support from CEO, and when practitioners work in industries with frequent crises (Neill, 2015, p. 118).

A relatively large body of literature focused on the status quo of public relations education (Austin & Toth, 2011; DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009; Erzikova, 2010; Gale & Bunton, 2005; Neill, 2017; Ragas, Uysal, & Culp, 2015; Silverman, Gower, & Nekmat, 2014) and training programs (Bowen, 2006; Lee & Cheng, 2012). The most recent survey (Neill, 2016a) with 305 PRSA members found 67% having completed an ethics course in college, compared with 52.3% in a previous study (Lee & Cheng, 2012). Also, practitioners who had completed an ethics course felt significantly more prepared to offer ethics counsel (M = 4.02), compared with those who had not taken an ethics course (M = 3.72) (Neill, 2016a).

As for trainings provided by the workplaces, Bowen's (2006) surveyed 1,827 IABC members and other professional communicators worldwide, and the results seemed bleak. Respondents reported little on-the-job ethics training, professional seminars, or continuing education workshops at their workplaces. This finding was exacerbated by the fact that 70% of respondents reported little if any study of ethics, even among practitioners with a university education (Bowen, 2006). Lee and Cheng (2012) followed up with another survey study, and found organizational management of ethics limited, unstructured, and poorly communicated. More than half (52%) of their respondents reported their organizations did not provide ethics trainings, while 5.7% were unsure. Among the organizations that conducted ethics training, 82.4% held only one session a year. (Lee & Cheng, 2012). In short, research seemed to suggest a need to either increase ethics trainings in schools and workplaces or find alternative ways to compensate for the lack.

On the other hand, professional associations have made tremendous efforts in boosting public relations practitioners' ethicality. Several studies have reported their positive impact via offering codes of ethics, mentor programs (Lee & Cheng, 2010; Neill & Weaver, 2017), chances for professional socialization (Neill, 2016a; Neill & Weaver; 2017), and accreditation (Neill, 2016a). Neill (2016a) surveyed more than 400 educators and practitioners; results showed accredited practitioners were more likely to feel prepared to provide ethics counsel and to believe that such ethics counsel is a part of their job (Neill, 2016a). At the same time, both accredited and non-accredited PRSA members were more likely than millennials to feel prepared to offer ethics counsel, and more likely to offer ethics counsel (Neill, 2016a). Neill (2016a) attributed the variance to levels of experience and socialization into the industry.

(Absence of) macro-level contextual factors

Through EDM research placed great emphasis on organizational factors that influence individuals' EDM, very limited attention was paid to macro-level, sociopolitical factors (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Within public relations, similarly, limited research has been conducted to understand the impact of societal contexts on public relations practitioners' ethics, except for studies using non-U.S. samples. For example, Han and colleagues (2013) studied the effects of individual ethical values and organizational factors on the professional ethics of public relations practitioners in Korea. Toledano and Avidar (2006) investigated how varying levels of democracy may influence practitioners' attitudes to specific ethical issues in social media, using a comparative research design composed of samples from two countries—New Zealand and Israel. Yet, as some critical cultural scholars (Curtin & Gaither, 2007) have argued, various dimensions of political, cultural, and social contexts within a national culture can exert influence on individuals' ethicality, which has rarely been the focus of descriptive studies. Researchers have called for exploring social, cultural, and political contexts' influence on the implementation of codes of ethics (Taylor & Yang, 2015), on practitioners' value-action gap (Place, 2015a), and on public relations values and ethical leadership (Lee & Cheng, 2010). Therefore, this dissertation study addressed these calls and sought to understand how macro-level environment—with its various dimensions and components—may contribute to individual practitioners' ethics.

Public relations practitioners as ethical leaders

Conversely, public relations practitioners may influence the ethicality of their environment by utilizing their ethical agency (Neill, 2016b; Sison, 2010), or, playing the role of ethical leadership. So far, research of such agency and leadership only focused on positional leaders (Lee & Cheng, 2010), and their impact was confined to an organizational level via the role of organizational/ethical conscience (Neill & Drumwright, 2012) and internal communication (Neill, 2016b).

Neill (2016b) researched internal communicators' contribution to employee branding, and found practitioners enhanced organizations' ethicality by (1) creating or distributing information to employees regarding company values and (2) creating talking points for supervisors related to core values. Yet, Neill (2016b) urged scholars to explore other aspects of influential ethical leadership that public relations practitioners can embody. The notion of public relations as organizational conscience (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) implied practitioners' ethicality may translate into organization-level ethics. As ethics is shifting from a compliance perspective to value-based system (Lee & Cheng, 2012), public relations practitioners may play a special role in elevating organizational ethics by facilitating culturally relevant discussions surrounding appropriate conduct, in forms of dialogue, employee testimonials, and historical anecdotes (Neill, 2016b). Yet, this culturally relevant ethical role has not been fully examined by public relations scholars.

Furthermore, studies of both ethical leadership and ethical/organizational conscience have been limited to an organizational level. Yet, an increasing number of public relations scholars are theorizing and researching public relations' general societal roles and benefits (Heath, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2013). For ethics in particular, postmodern scholars (Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) argued that practitioners can serve as change agents when they assume an activist role, resist organizational unethical conducts, and advocate for employees and powerless stakeholders. That being said, how practitioners can contribute to societal level ethicality through other means and approaches—without alienating organizational leadership is worth exploring. Since public relations practitioners are boundary spanners (Grunig et al., 2006) who detect conflicts and issues, and discourse technologists (Motion & Weaver, 2005) who create societal-level narratives, their ethical behavior may ripple across a societal level. Therefore, public relations practitioners' ethical leadership and conscience roles may operate on societal levels as well. In short, an in-depth exploration of the impact of practitioners' ethicality on their meso and macro environment not only advances scholarly conceptualization of ethical leadership and ethical conscience, but also further our understanding of public relations' societal functions. This leads to the discussion of a multi-level ethical framework (Drumwright, 2007).

Multi-level ethical framework

Drumwright (2007) proposed a multilevel ethical framework that incorporated the study of micro, meso, and macro levels of advertising practice. The purpose of the multilevel framework, according to Drumwright (2007), was not to categorize ethical issues at different levels or to examine every possible ethical issue on three levels simultaneously. Rather, the framework advocates for a consideration of "issues at different levels" (Drumwright, 2007, p. 400), as well as how the three levels interact, interrelate, and reinforce one another (Drumwright, 2007, Neill, 2016a).

Public relations—though a slightly different context and industry—can benefit from this multi-level and interactionist perspective (Neill, 2016a). Currently, both normative and descriptive research within public relations ethics has investigated ethicality on an individual level (e.g., moral philosophical orientations, ethical knowledge, decision-making, campaign, persuasive ethics), or organizational level (culture, ethics management, reward and punishment, etc.), or industry level (accreditation, professional socialization, ethics training, membership, higher education, codes of ethics), or a societal level (public relations' societal impact, culture's influence on the public relations practice), with limited understanding of how the three levels may interact (Neill, 2016a; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Furthermore, as discussed previously, macro level analysis remains mostly conceptual—usually comprising critical scholars' and popular trade books/journals' broad conceptualizations of public relations' positive and negative social impact (see, for example, Coombs & Holladay, 2013). The similar pattern exists for EDM studies in general—there are limited insights into societal influence on individuals' EDM process.

While it is impossible to address all ethical issues on all three levels within one research study, Drumwright (2007) urged researchers to "incorporate an awareness of all three levels—the micro, meso, and macro" (p. 411). Therefore, the third goal of this dissertation study is to explore how, if at all, public relations practitioners' ethicality—is both an expression of meso/macro level contextual influence as well as a contributor to meso/macro level ethics/values. Practitioners' perception of such interactions was explored, in keeping with the research design that adopted an individual level of analysis. Preliminary findings from this study, however, may be tested and built on by subsequent research. Therefore, the third research question asks,

RQ3: How do public relations practitioners perceive the interactions among micro, meso, and macro level ethicality?

In summary, three research questions emerged from the preceding literature review. To reiterate, they explore public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics (RQ1), assess the extent to which Simola's (2011) care based EDM reflect practitioners' EDM process (RQ3), and explore contextual influences as well as practitioners' ethical leadership (RQ3). Next chapter details method that was employed to answer these research questions.

Chapter 3: Method

In order to understand public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics and their ethical decision making process from a multi-level interactionist perspective, I employed a qualitative methodology. This chapter begins with an overview of qualitative approach to data collection and then explains why respondent interview was selected. This is followed by descriptions of the participants, the recruitment, and interview procedures. Then, I explain my approach to data analysis. After that, I address limitations of the method employed. Finally, this chapter concludes with my reflexivity as an ethics researcher.

A Qualitative Approach to Data Collection

There are several reasons why I employed a qualitative approach to data collection. Because this dissertation study examined public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics, tested an existing care based ethical decision making model (Simola, 2011), and explored how micro, meso, and macro level ethics may interact (Drumwright, 2007), a qualitative method is most appropriate for its ability to produce extensive amounts of thick descriptive data that reveal complexities and nuances of individuals' lived experiences while bringing context and meaning to such experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Tracy, 2013). Additionally, qualitative research is advantageous in terms of testing and refining existing theories by revealing nuances surrounding the variables (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, it suits the purpose of the current dissertation study in terms of evaluating Simola's (2011) model. Moreover, previous ethical decision-making

(EDM) research has relied on quantitative forms of data collection, such as survey and experimental design, to examine one or two particular component(s) within EDM (e.g., judgment) with pre-designed scenarios, and calls (Craft, 2013) have been issued to explore nuances throughout the EDM process during lived events with qualitative methods. Qualitative research is particularly fit for detailing processes and addressing the how and why questions. While there are many data collection tools with the qualitative methodological umbrella, respondent interviews (Tracy, 2013) were selected for this study. The following section will detail the interview process.

Respondent Interviews

One way to accomplish the qualitative goal of understanding is through in-depth interviews, which are simply defined, as a purposeful and structured conversation in which both the interviewer and interviewee discuss a specific topic in-depth (Tracy, 2013). As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) articulated, the process is a meaning-making endeavor embarked on by both parties to yield exploratory and descriptive data that lead to co-constructed forms of knowledge. This knowledge is usually “contextual, linguistic, narrative, and pragmatic” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 18).

I relied on a respondent forms of interviews in which a group of people holding similar subject positions (public relations practitioners) discuss their own motivation, experiences, behaviors, and emotions (Tracy, 2013). This form of interview is useful to understand similarities and differences within a certain group (Tracy, 2013). In the context of the dissertation study, the purpose of using respondent interviews was to learn how participants would understand ethics, contextual influences, as well as their lived experience dealing with ethical challenges or dilemmas. Similarities and differences that emerged from interview data will be used to better understand tensions between traditional and emerging ethical theories, effective strategies that aid in EDM process, and contextual factors shaping individual EDM.

While there are many benefits to in-depth interviews, including providing opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation via an organic, adaptive, and energizing path (Tracy, 2013), a few advantages are especially meaningful for the proposed project. First, the topic of ethics may be sensitive for some practitioners, especially if they had been in situations where they had to follow an unethical request, or they fear speaking about such topic would unintentionally reveal clients'/employer organizations' information. Respondent interviews, however, will provide a relatively safe space for participants to discuss sensitive topics (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Additionally, the process of interviewing can provide "information and background on issues that cannot be observed or efficiently accessed" (p. 132). This is arguably true for ethical events that may not happen on a regular basis, as well as emotional/intuitive experiences that cannot be directly observed. Third, interviews allow researchers to stumble upon and explore complex phenomena that may be otherwise hidden (Tracy, 2013). This fits with the explorative nature of the dissertation project. Also, during the interviews, participants can provide rationales, explanations, and justifications for their actions and opinions (Tracy, 2013); this is beneficial for the dissertation project that sought to understand how and why participants were able to act on their ethical judgments, and vice versa. Last, interviews give researchers an opportunity to bring up observations or hearsay and ask interviewees to verify, refute, defend, or expand. In terms of the dissertation research, for example, I was able to challenge participants' perceptions that they had never dealt with ethical challenges, or their perceived powerlessness. Interestingly, inconsistencies indeed emerged for some, when participants initially did not consider something as "unethical" but upon further reflection, revised their perception. I was also able to bring up certain industry- and societal-level ethical concerns and seek participants' points of view.

Participants

I completed respondent interviews with 37 current or past public relations practitioners holding a variety of backgrounds including demographics, work settings, sectors, industries, tenures, specializations. At this point, data have reached theoretical saturation, meaning data collection has reached the "point at which no new insight are obtained, no new themes are identified, and no issues arise regarding a category of data" (Bowen, 2008, p. 140, see also, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The final seven interviews served as member checks to review and refine preliminary findings that started to emerge by the 30th interview. Participant information is summarized in Table 1.

In terms of demographics, 20 of the interviewees were female and the rest 17 were male. 3 participants were past practitioners in the field who served as educators by the time of the interview—they all left practice within two years which was considered appropriate because they could still recall ethical issues they encountered in past workplaces. This is close to the gender composition of the public relations industry in which women make up 72.8% of public relations and fundraising managers, and 65.7% of public relations specialists (2018 Bureau of Labor Statistics). Though age was not asked during interviews, participant's tenure in the public relations field, ranging from three years to 35 years, reflected a wide range of age differences.

Participants also represented a variety of workplaces (e.g., agency, in-house, independent/entrepreneurial), sector (corporate, government, nonprofit, lobbying), industry (healthcare, higher education, financial, food and nutrition, tourism, etc.), specializations (media relations, crisis communication, research and analytics, social media, fundraising, branding, customer relations, etc.), and positions. As mentioned in the beginning of the dissertation, public relations encompasses a large number of specializations, practitioners may have many different titles, and their work tends to overlap with other communication specializations such as integrated communication, marketing communication, and advertising. Therefore, two steps were performed to ensure the adequacy of data: (1) participants self-identified as public relations practitioners and (2) background checks were conducted (via LinkedIn) to ensure they had practiced aspects of public relations in their roles. While the specific tasks that practitioners complete in their jobs vary, they were similar in terms of representing clients/employer organizations to achieve certain communication, reputational, and relationship-related goals.

The length of the respondent interview ranged from 20 minutes to 100 minutes with an average of 60 minutes. These conversations resulted in over 2087 minutes of audio, which were then transcribed into almost 900 pages (double-spaced) of interview data. Unfortunately, three participants' recordings did not capture their voice due to technical issues; however, since substantive notes were taken during all interviews, I was able to preserve their accounts and use them in data analysis.

Table 1

Participant Summary

Pseudonym	Current Workplace Type	Length of PR Career	Specializations (Primary)	Gender	Length of Interview (minutes)
Austin	Independent	22	Health	M	66
Daniel	Independent	35	Public affairs	M	62
Leo	Agency	15	Digital/social media	M	80
Logan	Education	14	Strategic comm	M	30
Chloe	Independent	32	Marketing comm	F	105
Amelia	Independent	9	Research/Measurement	F	62
Isaac	Agency	23	Ethics	M	61
Jade	In-house	9	Public affairs	F	53
Jasmine	Independent	30	Integrated comm	F	69
Andrew	Agency	10	Political advocacy	M	56
Camila	Agency	9	Digital/social media	F	23
Nathan	Agency	24	Research/measurement	M	43
Lily	In-house	7	Copywriting/content	F	34
Anna	Agency	24	Crisis comm/public affairs	F	48
Sadie	Independent	33	Strategic comm	F	65
James	In-house	3	Public relations	M	67
Lydia	In-house	17	Copywriting/content	F	58
Penelope	Independent	12	Media relations	F	71
Naomi	Independent	19	Public relations	F	72
Thomas	Agency	26	Research/Measurement	M	53

Connor	Independent	25	Communication	M	108
Ruby	In-house	11	Copywriting/content	F	54
Hazel	In-house	19	Public affairs	F	53
Emma	Independent	26	Strategic comm	F	54
Emily	Independent	9	Sports, lifestyle	F	57
Evan	In-house	8	Consumer relations	M	49
William	Agency	31	Media relations	M	21
Evelyn	Agency	12	Marketing comm	F	44
Grace	Independent	14	Integrated comm	F	60
Nora	In-house	7	Communication	F	54
Joshua	In-house	30	Public relations	M	61
Allison	In-house	27	Fundraising/nonprofit	F	73
Matthew	In-house	19	Higher education	M	58
Ryan	Education	6	Research/branding	M	56
Alexa	In-house	20	Fundraising/nonprofit	F	50
George	In-house	27	Communication	M	57
Vivian	Independent	12	Digital/Social media	F	45

Table 1 Participant Summary

Recruitment procedures

It is important to determine an appropriate sampling strategy so as to understand participants' expertise, worldview, or characteristics of their work contexts. In the case of the dissertation research, I sought to learn public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics, EDM process, and their perceptions of interaction of multi-level ethicality. Therefore, participants were chosen due to their experiences and ability to articulate their ideas with the topic under investigation. Both purposive and snowball sampling strategies were employed.

First, I used a purposeful sampling strategy, in which individuals need to meet certain criteria to be considered for participation (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Initially, I reached out only to current U.S. public relations practitioners who have encountered ethical issues at work to be qualified for the dissertation study. The selection of U.S. as a boundary allowed me to manage the scope of the study and not introduce other nationality- and cultural related contextual factors. However, after the two pilot interviews, I changed the criterion to past or current U.S. public relations practitioners who either have encountered ethical issues at work or have contemplated on the topic of ethics in their public relations workplace. This change was due to several reasons: (1) past practitioners may leave the public relations workplace precisely due to ethical issues, and they may actually have the expertise over the topic; (2) practitioners may not want to discuss a sensitive topic like ethics; they may not recognize the ethical implications of certain activities or recall a specific event until the interview occurs, during which rapport has been established, the purpose of the research revealed, and more memories were recalled; (3) if participants firmly believe they have not encountered any ethical issue at work, then it may be caused either by their personal characteristics (e.g., mindfulness, sensitivity) or workplace variables (e.g., highly ethical leadership). In this sense, they actually serve as positive examples. The expanded recruitment criterion proved to be wise as more insights were yielded during the interviews, such as the inconsistency between values and actions, moral/ethical disengagement, and authentic/inspirational leadership that instills in meaning.

Second, I supplemented purposeful sampling with snowball sampling, which involves asking participants to spread word and recommend other practitioners who would fit the inclusionary criteria. This helped me gain enough participation to reach theoretical saturation.

The recruitment process started after I received approval from the Institutional Review Board. At that point, I identified several sources where I could access potential participants, including PRSA leaders across all national chapters, my past classmates from master's program at Boston University, my current colleagues at the University of Maryland, and members of public relations/communication groups on LinkedIn that I belonged to. I then started sending emails and posting recruitment scripts on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter). Sample recruitment email and social media post scripts are included in the appendix. I also reached out to my personal contacts to ask if they knew any public relations/communication practitioners who may be interested in participating. As a result of these efforts, I recruited enough participants to reach theoretical saturation in my data, which is when ideas and concepts are already defined (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Interview procedures

Respondent interviews for this dissertation project followed a semi-structured format, which relies on an interview protocol to guide the conversation but allows individual respondents some latitude and freedom to talk about what is of interest or important to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Due to the exploratory nature of the research and emphasis on participant experience, this format allows flexibility for me to add and drop questions as well as the possibility for interviewees to bring up issues I have not thought of in advance. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in-person (four interviews), via Skype (six interviews with a video component), or over the phone (27 interviews), depending on participants' locations and preferences.

I developed an interview protocol that consisted of open-ended interview questions corresponding to the three research questions (see Appendix B). These questions asked participants to reflect back on their work experiences—in current or past public relations/communication workplaces—so as to provide accounts, stories, and examples regarding ethics and ethical decisions at work. Their understanding of organizational and societal environments was also solicited. For example, to understand how public relations practitioners make meaning of ethics and ethical situations at work, I asked questions such as, *How would you define ethics in your own words? How would you define public relations ethics? Have you ever encountered an ethical situation? It could be a conflict, a dilemma, a gray area, etc., or simply a situation where you felt your personal or professional values were being challenged.*

In addition, participants' EDM process was broken into several sections (awareness, judgment, intent, and actions), and multiple questions were posed for each component. For example, for awareness, I asked, *Just now you mentioned ____________ (the ethical situation he/she experienced), please reflect on the moment you first noticed you were in this situation. What made you aware?* For judgment, a sample question may be, *After this initial awareness, how did you decide what you should do?* Then, questions for ethical intent may include, *Having decided* *what you should do in that situation, what motivated you to act on your judgment*? Last, for ethical action/behavior, I asked questions such as, *How did you act once you have made the judgment? Why would you act that way?* Questions addressing perceived multi-level interactions of ethicality might include, *How do you think about the current social environment from an ethical perspective? What do you think public relations practitioners can do to promote ethics on a societal level? What have you done?* Interestingly, conversations regarding the broader environments tended to occur before I had an opportunity to pose these questions.

At the beginning of each interview, I sought participants' consent to participate in the study, and I reassured them that privacy and confidentiality would be protected to the maximum. This step was important due to the sensitive nature of the topic. Before diving into the research questions, I established rapport by asking about their public relations work history, their favorite part of the job, of if they had recently left the field, why they made that choice. This step shortened the psychological distance between interviewees and me and helped me adjust the order of questions and prioritize the most relevant ones. I also assured participants that they were free to reject any questions they felt uncomfortable with. During each respondent interview, I took handwritten notes in order to capture my initial reactions to and observations of the interviewees and their accounts. I digitally recorded the conversations upon their consent, so that I could listen to the recordings during data analysis stage. I then transcribed the recordings, using pseudonyms for participants and deleting any identifying information. When transcription was finished for each interview, I stored both interview data (audiotapes) and transcription in my passwordprotected laptop in my private home. Memos were written during the transcribing process to capture my initial thoughts of the recordings, and this memo writing process continued until the end of data analysis.

The first round of data collection was finished after 30 interviews, when repetitive patterns started to emerge as I analyzed data while transcribing the interviews. With these tentative themes in mind, I completed seven additional interviews that served as member checks. During these seven interviews, participants and I went through the regular questions and discussed my preliminary findings. I took this opportunity to bring the findings back to the members of the group under investigation to see if they accurately reflect their perceptions of ethics, the environment, and their experiences tackling ethical situations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013). This process then informed the next round of data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is "the process of labeling and breaking down raw data and then reconstituting them into categories, patterns, themes, concepts, and propositions" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 243). In other words, existing data are deconstructed and critiqued through this process so as to gain an interpretation and explanation of the phenomenon under the investigation. I analyzed the collected qualitative data (interview notes and interview transcripts) thematically using an abductive approach (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), while writing and reflecting on analytical memos (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Furthermore, data analysis followed an iterative process in which data collection and analysis happened cyclically; tentative findings emerged from early interviews helped adjust interview questions, which aided in the analysis of subsequent interviews. The next section details this process.

Coding techniques

This dissertation project aimed to understand how public relations practitioners constructed the term ethics as compared with existing scholarly conceptualizations. It sought to understand how practitioners go through the EDM process while being subjected to a variety of situational and contextual factors. These research goals emerged as a result of inconsistencies, conflicts, and gaps in current public relations ethics theories. They also informed the selected conceptual frameworks: care based EDM, and the multi-level interactionist perspective. Ultimately, I aimed to refine or develop theoretical models in public relations that are both normative and pragmatic, which account for participants' voice, situational factors, and the practical process of enacting ethics at work. These considerations informed the selection of abduction, which involves "a recursive process of double-fitting data and theories" (Timmermans & Taylor, 2012, p. 179). Instead of following a completely inductive or deductive process, researchers are encouraged to "enter the field with the deepest and broadest theoretical base possible" and to develop new concepts "to account for puzzling empirical materials" (Timmermans & Taylor, 2012, p. 180). Therefore, this approach to data analysis emphasized producing new empirical findings that complement, refine, and develop existing ones (Dubios & Gadde, 2002). The benefits of an abductive approach fit well with the goals of the dissertation project, which was situated in the larger debates within public relations ethics scholarship, EDM research, and moral philosophies.

To begin the abductive approach to data analysis, each interview transcript and interview note was read, reviewed, coded, and discussed with my advisor on an iterative process. Codes were used to assign a "summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" (Saldana, 2013, p. 3) for units of data (e.g., words, lines, sections, narratives, experiences), and the process of coding was an interpretive act, the critical link between data collection and their explanation of meaning (Saldana, 2013). Following Saldana's (2013) instructions, I completed two broad cycles of coding, after reading the transcripts and my interview notes several times and thus familiarizing myself with the data. During the first cycle of coding, I utilized the software NVivo, which allowed me to put tentative codes on selected phrases, words, and paragraphs. These initial codes were refined, developed, and combined throughout the analysis process. I went through the first cycle of coding twice. The first round helped me locate more literature to be familiar with (e.g., moral disengagement, sensemaking, ethical leadership), which deepened my understanding of the phenomenon under study and allowed me to recode some of the materials during the second time. A codebook was developed in the process, in which I defined most of the codes as well as examples (see appendix C). Analytical memos were written throughout the process, for example, in one of the memos, I questioned whether care ethics was adequate to serve as a sole ethical theory for public relations, since almost all participants were concerned about consequences.

During the second cycle of analysis, coding was used to help me "develop a sense of categories, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization" (Saldana, 2013, p. 207) from my first cycle codes. It was a process of sorting codes into “families” or “bins” that represented similar characteristics. In this process, I began to cluster similarly coded passages, for example, putting “I want to be able to sleep at night,” “feel fulfilled at work,” “want my peace of mind” into a category called “anticipated emotions,” which later were assigned to the larger category of “ethical intent/desire.” I also drew preliminary models of relationships between categories after rereading transcripts, memos, and interview notes. For example, categories of “professional roles and responsibilities” as well as “image, credibility, and reputation” seemed to belong to the larger category of a rational approach to ethics meaning making.

Developing categories was an ongoing process. I reread, reflected, and revised my codes and categories as they took shape. While NVivo initially offered the advantages of being able to house large amounts of data/codes with associated codes, I later adopted Excel and manual drawing so as to more freely adjust how the codes/categories can be organized. Through this process, I was able to build categories that captured emergent themes, to identify relationships among ideas, and to develop explanations for the findings. At the same time, I engaged in ongoing discussion with my advisor about the data. These conversations were beneficial to my analysis as she provided an external perspective to the data and the analysis process. During our meetings, we compared and contrasted codes, themes, and categories with each other about participants’ meaning-making of ethics, EDM, and perceptions of situational factors. For example, the variety of ways in which participants constructed ethics emerged as we compared notes. In addition, my advisor helped me clarify findings and verbalize the relationship between various codes and categories, which forced me to further refine my categories. Again, since the research project focused on ethics, used the care based EDM as a tentative framework, and attended to meso and macro contexts, following the tenets of an abductive approach, the application of coding filters (Saldana, 2013) as well as sensitizing concepts (Tracy, 2013) informed the development of codes and categories throughout the data analysis process.

Coding filters

According to Saldana (2013), the same raw data can be analyzed in many different ways depending on the analytical lenses the researcher employs. Coding filters are essentially these lenses that inform analysis. As I coded and categorized data, I selected several coding filters, including process, values, and emotions (Saldana, 2013) that helped me make sense of data.

The first coding filter I applied to the data was process coding, which was appropriate for studies involving "ongoing action/interaction/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 96-7; Saldana, 2013). This filtering was important as I was studying participants' EDM as a process. I made notes of how they recognized the issue, made judgments, and took actions. For example, "seeking support" was noted between awareness and judgment, and "having an honest conversation with clients" and "listening" occurred before participants used stronger persuasive and confrontational strategies during the action step. Another stage—pre-awareness emerged as participants emphasized "selecting the right people" even before ethical awareness. Therefore, this coding filter helped me identify nuances embedded in the EDM process.

Additionally, I employed values coding to reflect “a participant’s “values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” (Saldana, 2013, p. 110). In this case, I coded participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs concerning ethics, as well as their thoughts, feelings, and actions that may reflect their worldview. For example, I noted when participant made meaning of ethics through a deontological perspective (e.g., rules/codes), or relational perspective (e.g., trust, relationships), or consequentialist paradigm (e.g., reputation, results). Furthermore, I captured participants’ attitudes toward the broaden societal level ethics, including those toward media, political climate, and social movements. I also coded participants’ beliefs as to how their organizational environment and the broad sociopolitical and media landscape affected them personally and public relations as a whole.

Emotions were another important component to consider as I coded and interpreted data. This is due to the scholarly debate surrounding the role of emotions and rationality in ethics and the EDM process. As recommended by Saldana (2013), I labeled any emotion that was recalled and/or experienced by participants; these included “a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act” (Goleman, 2006, p. 289). Furthermore, I coded strategies resembling various components of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), including self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and use of emotions for influence. I also paid attention to participants’ tones and facial expressions whenever possible, to detect their feelings surrounding certain topics.

Sensitizing concepts

In addition to the use of coding filters, my data analysis was influenced by sensitizing concepts, which according to abductive analysis, "inform research but do not determine the scope of perceived findings" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 173). Tracy (2013) explained that sensitizing concepts are "issues to which the researcher is most attuned" and help "narrow and focus perception in research scenes that are complex, chaotic, and overflowing with multiple issues" (p. 28). Ultimately, they served as a guide for me to analyze data and sensitized me to meanings embedded in participants' words. There were several sensitizing concepts that informed my data analysis, including various moral philosophical frameworks, EDM components, sensemaking/intuitions, and public relations' ethical roles/models.

Limitations

Like all research projects, the method adopted in this dissertation study had several limitations. First, data collected in interviews relied on participants to recall a past experience in which they encountered ethical challenges at work. participants' memories might not be precise, and their accounts were subject to a social desirability bias. Therefore, future research can incorporate an observation component. Research participants can be asked to engage in EDM in response to an ethically challenging and ambiguous scenario in their workplace settings. In this way, relational and power dynamics, emotional reactions and management, as well as persuasive strategies and confrontation styles can be more accurately captured. Related, this dissertation project primarily relied on phone interviews (27 out of 37 interviews) so I was not able to accurately detect participants' facial expressions while speaking. That being said, I paid ample attention to their tones during phone interviews so as to probe underlying emotions and mental activities.

Second, the dissertation findings relied on participants' perceptions of whether they had effectively engaged in EDM to curtail unethical request either from a client or upper management. This perception again might not be accurate. Future research can incorporate viewpoints from a variety of relational partners that practitioners come into contact with, such as supervisors within the public relations department, executives, clients, media professionals, community members, and so forth, so as to more accurately diagnose whether practitioners have truly made ethical decisions and acted accordingly.

Third, the interactions among multi-level ethicality was based on participants' perceptions. This was by design due to the dissertation's focus on practitioners' perspectives, as well as the selection of individual unit of analysis. That being said, future research could benefit by measuring whether political, social, and media environments—particularly issues identified by the dissertation study—have truly impacted public relations ethics in positive or negative ways. Furthermore, whether practitioners' efforts in elevating organizational ethics or societal ethics can be measured through a quantitative, possibly longitudinal methodology. The cultural role played by participants in enhancing organizational ethical climate—including observation, mediation, building bonds, and communicating ethical standards formally and informally—can be operationalized as part of the ethical leadership role.

Fourth, participants self-identified as public relations practitioners, and their titles reflected a variety of public relations practices and activities. Though this ensured breadth of the study, participants may also perform communication activities outside of the public relations realm, strictly speaking. For example, one participant may practice both social media messaging (can be considered as either public relations or marketing depending on the purpose), media relations (falling under public relations), and integrated communication (comprising both public relations and marketing). However, I checked participants' background to make sure their responsibilities were primarily composed of public relations, and the interviews focused on their public relations roles. However, future research may prioritize depth and focus on ethical issues within on specialization of public relations. Or, future research can follow a different design by categorizing different ethical issues and possibly slightly different EDM process based on specific specializations, industries, and sectors.

Validity and Reliability

Despite the limitations, validity and reliability were optimized for the dissertation study. First, it maintained a rigorous research design and analysis standards, or "craftsmanship" validity (Kvale, 1995). Second, the study's "communicative" validity was ensured by conducting member checks and frequent discussions with my advisor and colleagues who have knowledge in the public relations ethics literature. Third, the research project's "pragmatic" validity can be reflected in findings that provide practical recommendations that enhance public relations practitioners' ethical agency as well as ethical leadership in their meso and macro environments.

To guard against subjectivity and to establish reliability, again, my advisor—who has served as a public relations practitioner in the past and has scholarly knowledge of public relations, emotions, and organizational communication—and I have both read the interview transcripts and have had frequent conversations about how to interpret, code, and categorize data. Definitions of codes as well as themes and categories emerged from data were discussed, debated, and agreed upon. Also, I conducted member checks with participants to ensure findings emerged from interview data accurately represented their realities. Quotations across all interviews are presented in the findings chapter, which further add objectivity and depth of understanding to the research project. These steps ensured reliability of the dissertation study.

Reflexivity

I was led to this dissertation project due to my personal ethical orientations and experiences, research I have conducted (Guo & Anderson, 2018), and the vision I hold for public relations. First, I believe ethics is an important subject—it is a crucial component for individual self-realization, and it ensures organizations' long-term survival with solid public trust and confidence. With that said, as a professional (primarily market research) I was in situations where my personal integrity, professional role, and organizational goals conflicted. Though I have only worked in a public relations research agency for a short period of time and not communication-focused specializations, I have read about ethical situations in various areas of public relations, and am intrigued by how individual practitioners think about ethics, and how to promote their agency in terms of both knowledge and action. Furthermore, some of the studies I have conducted helped me see the complexities of public relations ethics (e.g., competing values such as confidentiality and transparency). Participants from my previous research also reported dealing with ethical dilemmas as one of the most challenging aspects of their work. Finally, I envision public relations as a profession that provides individual practitioners with emotional fulfillment and career satisfaction, while bringing about organizational and societal benefits. Successfully navigating ethical issues is key to realizing these visions.

I recognized my own personal biases and assumptions before and while conducting the fieldwork. First, I had assumed that public relations practitioners would encounter ethical challenges at work and that their autonomy to make independent ethical decision would be constrained. This assumption was based on empirical studies (e.g., Berger & Reber, 2006; Kang, 2010; Place, 2010) and theories (e.g., Bivins, 2006). However, when conducting pilot interviews and talking with my advisor, I found some practitioners did not encounter (big) ethical challenges; they either did not recognize the ethical implications of their work, or they surrounded themselves with ethical colleagues/clients. This discovery led me to modify my recruiting strategy and interview questions (e.g., expanding participants to all U.S. public relations practitioners while asking why they had not encountered any ethical situation).

Second, I had assumed practitioners' emotional experience, identity/roles, cognitive abilities, and persuasive skills may shape their EDM process. This assumption was based on organizational ethics literature (e.g., Thiel et al., 2012). However, practitioners may not be aware of their emotions, implicitly held identities/roles, and cognitive patterns. Therefore, I designed many interview questions that asked about participants' inner world repeatedly, in different words, throughout the interview. I was also attentive to rapport-building, so that participants would be comfortable sharing with me their real thoughts and emotional experiences. In fact, quite a few participants thanked me at the end of the interview for having the opportunity to reflect on their work, perceptions of ethics, and important lessons learned.

Third, among all the normative ethics theories, I was slightly biased toward agent-based theories with a psychological component (virtue theories, Jungian ethics, care ethics, etc.), because they transcend ethical rules and codes, and respect individuals as feeling, thinking, and acting beings, who have and *want* to use ethical agency. They also seem to encourage ethical behaviors beyond the realm of public relations. My bias may not match with my participants' preference. In order not to bias my participants, I designed research questions and corresponding interview questions in a way that asked for participants' meaning making of ethics and EDM broadly, instead of focusing on my preferred ethical theories. I presented definitions of deontology, consequentialism, care ethics, and virtue ethics as accurately as possible, and then probed participants' perspectives.

Additionally, being an Asian, female, relatively young, and lacking sufficient public relations practical experiences, I may hold different ethical principles from my participants' due to differing cultural orientations and professional experiences. That being said, I acknowledged all possible differences and sought to privilege participants' voice and experiences in my research. Finally, I was aware that this would be a sensitive research topic. During the interviews, I did not judge participants' behaviors and beliefs, but showed empathy, curiosity, and compassion. I conveyed my vision to them—to improve not only scholarship but also practitioners' ethical agency at work. I also conveyed willingness to share the executive summary of my dissertation with participants, if they would like to receive a copy. All of the aforementioned strategies and reflections helped me complete the dissertation project to the best of my abilities, while maximizing participants' voice.

Having completed the interview process and data analysis techniques outlined in this chapter, I was able to address the previously posed research questions. Findings will be presented in the next chapter, organized by research questions. These results provide thick descriptions and nuanced understanding of participants' meaning-making of ethics, their situated EDM process, and their perceptions regarding how micro, meso, and macro level ethicality interact.

Chapter 4: Findings

The three research questions that guided this project focused on public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics in their workplace, their ethical decision-making (EDM) process, and their perceptions of the interactions of multi-level ethicality. Overall, data suggested that participants primarily constructed the meanings of ethics surrounding their concerns for relationships, contexts, emotions, and personal ethics. During an ethical challenge, participants employed cognitive, emotional, and discursive strategies when making decisions, while applying a variety of moral philosophies and engaging in a sensemaking process. Care ethics presented merits due to its emphasis on caring attitudes, attentiveness to contextual particulars, responsiveness to needs, and emphasis on using emotions and prioritizing relationships. That being said, other moral philosophies particularly consequentialism played a critical role. Findings also illuminated how micro, meso, and macro level ethicality may interact within the public relations field. Not only were participants' ethics shaped by organizational, industry, and social environments, but they also enhanced meso and macro ethical climate through an ethical leadership role. In particular, the current social, political, and media backdrop suggested the need to incorporate public relations' societal role in conceptualizing ethics. These results will be detailed in this section. Unless otherwise noted, themes reported were common to the 37 interview participants.

RQ1: Public Relations Practitioners' Sensemaking of Ethics

The first research question asked how public relations practitioners make meaning of ethics, so as to address (1) tensions between traditional ethical theories (privileging rationality, autonomy, universality, and professional ethics) and emerging theories (emphasizing emotionality, relationships, context, and personal ethics), and (2) gaps between scholarly conceptualizations of public relations ethics (ethical conscience or responsible advocacy) and practitioners' perceptions of ethics in their situated public relations workplaces. Findings of the first research question revealed nuances and layers in participants' meaning-making of ethics while illuminating tensions between traditional and emerging ethical theories in the following ways: (1) paradoxes between universality and contextualized problem-solving, (2) relationship as an overarching ethical tenet, (3) rational considerations combined with emotions, and (4) alignment of personal and professional ethics. Furthermore, participants' accounts uncovered complex and multifaceted nature of ethics in the public relations workplace. These themes will be detailed in this section.

Paradoxes between universality and contextualized problem-solving

Almost all participants immediately defined ethics in terms of universal values, such as honesty, fairness, and truthfulness. For example, Evan, an in-house practitioner explained, "It just means honesty and integrity and telling the truth in your work, not bending the truth." Andrew, a political advocacy agency leader echoed, "For me, it really comes down to tell the truth." With that said, however, about half of participants' accounts revealed a value-behavior gap as well as ambiguities surrounding truth and framing. Ultimately, most participants endorsed a situational, contextualized, and case-by-case problem-solving approach to real-world ethical issues.

Value-behavior gap. Several participants articulated universal values they would prioritize and abide by, but later in the interview, shared experiences where they had exaggerated data, or felt okay to selectively report information. For example, Daniel defined ethics this way, "Honesty, it's all about honesty. That's what ethics really is. I think I define it as being truthful, accurate, and fair, and with the public in mind." Later, however, he defended exaggeration. He said,

> It's the degree. When I'm dealing with a reporter, I will be as accurate as possible, you know. If a reporter says, can you show me the list of 300 colleges? And I say, I can only show you 50. You know, I don't want to lie to reporter. But if he says, well, you know, you told me you had 100, and you actually only have 75, he's not gonna make a big deal out of that. You know, it's not such a giant distinction. So, the bigger the lie, the more obvious it becomes.

This quotation showed that Daniel may choose to exaggerate when the lie is not obvious to a reporter. This contradicted his definition of ethics.

Ambiguities surrounding truth. Truthfulness emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned ethical standards among participants, but participants diverged on how they understood truth. Most commonly, participants saw truth as subjective and elusive, even though it was built on unalterable facts. For example, Allison shared why the nature of truth has made ethics hard to define. She said,

> It's all subjective. So, it makes it even harder to define what is ethical. Because if you look at the spokespeople for lots of different nonprofit organizations on both sides of the spectrum, it’s not that they make up their facts. They're just really, really, selective about which ones they share … PR people and communications people are advocates. They're advocating for the position their organization holds.

In particular, several participants pointed out how numbers may be manipulated to tell stories that deviate from the original intent and context. Daniel offered an example,

> A college would say, 86% of our students get jobs within two years of their graduation. You know, and they fool around with numbers a little bit, maybe 86% get jobs, but there’re only 86% of people who responded to a survey, which is very different because those who didn’t get jobs probably not answering the survey, so that’s a lie. And then, you know, 86% of jobs in their fields, or 86% get their jobs in McDonald’s, that’s a job, too. You know … those schools do play little games like that.

As a result, several participants emphasized contexts and intentions as key to ethical communication, conveyed by the word authenticity. Austin said, “You can be factual without being authentic. Right? You can create contexts around facts that may not necessarily be authentic or ethical around the goal that you want to achieve.” He expanded,

> I think PR people have great risk of doing this … you can present facts and create context surrounding facts that pick and choose them in a way that you know to be inauthentic for the message that you're trying to do … in a sense that if you ignore certain dots or connect them in ways that they weren't originally created to be, that's potentially being inauthentic to the original intent of how those dots were presented … and I think that's kind of you know, using facts and using stories and using data in ways that get to your goal, but they may not necessarily be presenting reality … that is wholly unethical and very much happening a lot recently.

Ambiguities surrounding framing. Related, though almost all participants expressed strong dislike of the word spinning—a stereotypical portrayal of public relations work, at least several could not articulate the differences between spinning and framing—and they embraced the latter and believed it was legitimate public relations practice. For example, when asked about the differences between spinning and framing, Lydia said,

> You can never tell the entire story, like no one really does. No writer can tell the entire story of what they are writing about. You do pick and choose which portion of it is the call, but I think the word spin has a negative connotation that you're twisting words or you're creating the impression of something that's not what it actually is. And I think that's very different than trying to be consistent in messaging, or sharing the benefits of something, or focusing on maybe the positive, but I think, like, if there is a big negative, you cannot just pretend that it's not there, you have to address it in a certain way, and it

> depends on how you do that, but I think you're right, spin has a very negative connotation, and um, it is kind of a subtle difference, but I think that being honest about the story you're telling is important.

From this quotation, it appeared that Lydia was trying hard to distinguish between framing and spinning, but the only "subtle" difference she was able to articulate was that spinning was negative whereas framing was neutral. Although she emphasized not hiding a big negative and being consistent in messaging, ultimately, she seemed to endorse selectively reporting information and focusing only on the positive.

Another participant, Allison, also struggled differentiating spin, selective reporting, and omission, particularly since she has withheld information for clients' long-term goals. She shared,

> And we are very good in our field, being selective in what we share, because we know that is in the best interest in our clients. But you know, you're spinning things and trying to downplay others, and it's not always the most accurate information that you're putting out there. It's not a lie, you should never ever be lying, but you know, omission, people would argue it's sometimes a lie as well. And there's definitely information I've withheld from the media or the public in various scenarios, because it wasn't helpful to the long-term objective that we were going after.

Contextualized approach to ethical problem-solving. *Despite their tendencies to name universal values when constructing the meaning of ethics,* almost all participants recommended a situational and contextualized approach to resolving ethical problems, due to the complexities embedded in ethical situations. Hazel's account best illustrated this point. She said,

> When presented with two options you always choose what's right. Very, very few times in life you only have two options though. It's more like 72 options with branches. What are your long-term goals? What is the culture of your organization? And you do the best you can every single time.

Echoing Hazel's quotation, a few participants recommended "a case-by-case approach," "no one golden standard," and "no one-size-fits-all solution." Sadie compared ethical dilemmas to a crisis due to the uncertainty and ambivalence embedded. She said, "I will compare a gray area to a crisis, because a gray thing is that you're not sure what's gonna happen." A few participants articulated why a situational approach was preferred over rules—it was because life and events were usually more complicated than abstract codes could address, particularly in light of organizational dynamics. Ruby articulated this point,

> In terms of how I conduct my work professionally, I realized that everything is not black and white. I mean, life is complex, human beings are complex, connections and society and the work that we do is more complicated than following these guidelines and this code of ethics. I mean, I think there are great baselines to start, but I think there are nuances to everything, and I think that, in a case-by-case basis, there are maybe exceptions to the rule, or there are maybe more conversations that need to be had, depending on your organization, because like individuals, organizations operate very differently.

> So, I think it's just being flexible and to embrace the complexity of organizations and individuals working in those organizations.

This quotation segues nicely to the next section, which details participants' preference of constructing ethics in terms of relationships, trust, and impact on people rather than abstract rules and codes.

Relationships as an overarching ethical tenet

A majority of participants explicitly or implicitly suggested relationships is the overarching ethical tenet in which they constructed ethics. Related, they emphasized the ultimate purpose for being ethical was to build and strengthen relationships with various relational partners, and they would prioritize people's needs and impact over rules and codes.

Relationship-centered approach to ethics. Participants mentioned both work and organizational-public relationships as the primary driving forces for them to be ethical. Furthermore, their accounts suggested that a relationship-centered approach to ethics grounded the universal values participants verbalized and contextualized problem-solving they enacted. This may be due to public relations' primary function in relationship management. For example, Lily emphasized, "For me, it's usually like, the long-term relationship building, whether it's with a client, or with a member of the media, that's usually the driving force of why I behave how I behave." While Lily seemed to emphasize work relationships, Emily talked about relationships more broadly and illustrated that values and rules can only be understood in the context of relationships. She said,

> The most part in public relations comes down to managing relationships and as well as managing ethics and honesty within those relationships … And therefore, I always like to take the approach that you can, how can I navigate this and maintain the back task of honesty, transparency and you know ethical standards within these relationships?

Similarly, when the subject of most ethical theories not explicitly addressing relationships came up in the interview, Emma, expressed her disbelief. She said, “I really don't understand your dichotomy between a relationship and this ethics in profession, because they really are the same thing.”

Trust as the ultimate purpose for ethics. Over half of the participants focused on one dimension of relationship-building: trust, which seemed to help participants navigate thorny and ambiguous ethical situations, as building trust with relational partners was the ultimate goal. For example, when questioned about truth and transparency, Sadie articulated the complexities and nuances embedded in these terms. She said,

> I don’t think truth necessarily means you have to reveal everything, especially if revealing means you’re actually doing something illegal … But we are always looking at, what role does that person play? So, if you are, for example, working for a private college or university, and the president of your organization is arrested, okay, you have obligation to reveal that information, because that is public, and you have an obligation to the people who are putting their trust in you. Again, it always comes back to trust.

In fact, Sadie emphasized trust throughout her interview. Austin echoed this idea, and said, "I think ethics is kind of the foundation of trust between any kind of communications we have, right, and that can be either as communicators to our audiences, but also between individuals or organizations." Austin's accounts again illustrated two layers of relationships that participants needed to maintain—work relationships as individual employees, and organizational-public relationships as public relations representatives. Also, it seemed that trust can only be accomplished through ethical communication. Sadie echoed,

> Communication is about trust. And what is ethics about? But trust. And so, from the very early days of communication, from the first printed word to our super technology. The basic principles of ethics have not changed. And I think that's a key thing to remember. Unethical communication, bad communication, misleading communications lead to a lack of trust.

Considerations surrounding relational partners. Related, a majority of participants explicitly or implicitly considered impact on and needs from their relational partners when constructing the meaning of ethics. Allison's quotation illustrated this theme very well. She said,

> If ethics are about dealing with things morally and having standards and adhering to them in some kind of unspoken but shared agreement that is truthful and is not done with any bad intent, then you have to keep the other person in mind. It isn't just enough that you're keeping your own kind of [ethics]. You have to be thinking about the impact on others.

Similarly, Austin used the healthcare industry as an example to illustrate public impact resulting from ethical issues. He said,

> And especially within the healthcare, the stakes are especially high … if somebody in electronic show right now, misrepresented their new gadget does something, the impact isn't necessarily huge, right? But if we misrepresent how the best care should be delivered to people, or, you know, how best to promote health and wellness, that has an impact on potentially hundreds and millions of people.

Furthermore, Ruby emphasized prioritizing people's needs over rules and systems. With pride, she said,

> I've always been one to put other people first, regardless of the system. I think it's more ethical to make sure that people's needs are met, whether it's emotionally, mentally, financially, spiritually, versus blindly following structures and systems that may no longer make sense in the community. So, I think for me, is being flexible. It's having an awareness of all the forces that are happening to the community organization group and being amenable to that.

These aforementioned participants' accounts seemed to address publics in particular. This concurs with one of public relations' primary concerns—to ensure publics are not negatively impacted by organizational goals. Additionally, responding to relational needs is emphasized by care ethics.

In short, the relationship-centered construction of ethics was an important finding. It not only connected ethics with public relations' relationship-building function, but also grounded universal values such as truth, good intention, and honesty in the larger context of relationships, trust, and considerations surrounding relational partners. Importantly, participants valued work relationships as much as organizational-public relationships in approaching ethics.

Rational considerations combined with emotions

Across the interviews, participants seemed to adopt a combination of rational and emotional-based approaches to construct ethics. Rationally speaking, participants referred to their professional roles and responsibilities, as well as image and reputational concerns. Some also linked strong ethics with good business. That being said, dealing with ethical situations seemed to be an inherently emotional experiences, as participants explicitly stated or implied via their tones. Emotional skills and empathy seemed paramount in navigating ethical situations.

Professional roles and responsibilities. Many participants constructed the meaning of ethics from the perspective of perceived responsibilities to certain groups, including clients, society, or both. This section can further be organized into (1) advocacy, (2) dual role, and (3) societal function, reflecting participants' emphasis on specific relational partners.

Advocacy**.** Almost all participants embraced their advocacy role as a public relations/communication practitioner, without compromising public interest. That being said, only one participant—Andrew—displayed a very strong, almost blind affinity to his clients. He openly acknowledged a willingness to stage false protests as a form of lobbying and political advocacy. Yet, he said he valued accuracy and ignored the ethical implications of his practice. His quotation, shown below, reflected a law mindset and uncritical loyalty to clients. He said,

> Though I firmly believe that as long as you're presenting factually accurate information in an accurate way, you're not violating any core ethical grounds. I really feel the role of a public relation firm is to provide a megaphone to the clients' agenda, and present that in the best possible way, it's not necessarily to have a political opinion. We're a neutral entity. I feel that public relations firms, your ethical duty is to your client, more than anyone else. And, it is to perform the best possible service in an attempt to achieve your client's goals, without violating any substantial laws or I would say, accepted practices in the industry.

His words such as "accepted practices in the industry" implied a lack of awareness of certain ethical standards such as transparency, and his biased interpretation of values such as accuracy. His use of qualifiers, such as "any core ethical grounds" and "substantial laws" suggested he merely observed the ethical "floor" or minimum. Andrew's example was one that privileged relational responsibilities to clients at the expense of public trust.

Dual role**.** By comparison, many participants emphasized their dual responsibility to the clients/employing organizations and the publics at large. They mimicked the roles of boundary spanners and organizational conscience, who sought to balance an organization and its environment, and maintain the moral grounds of organizations. This can be best illustrated by Joshua's statement, "It's as much about bringing the outside in as the inside out. I mean that's what we were always taught …

You know a big part of your job is to be the conscience of your organization." Joshua further expanded from a relational perspective, "If we are in the business of fostering relationships that are going to lead to companies thriving and employees thriving and communities thriving and shareholder thriving, then it's based on building mutual awareness and understanding and empathy." This quotation suggested that Joshua tended to conceptualize relationships from a broader, organizational-public perspective.

Another participant, Evan, not only highlighted the idea of dual role and balance, but also mutual adaptation and change. He said,

> So if you see something wrong or the way your customer was treated and essentially think, what happened to this customer is wrong, then we should do something, not only just to apologize to that individual, but we should change how we do business, to be sure that something like that won't happen again in the future.

This quotation reflected Evan's concerns for the public—even above organizations. Some participant took this concern even further by linking ethics with public relations' societal function, particularly because practitioners hold power through communication.

Public relations' societal impact**.** Notably, those who connecting ethics with public relations' societal role seemed to genuinely care about ethics—in a much deeper way. They also exhibited a caring attitude not just for the practice, but for the profession. They equated ethics with morality, and connected ethics in public relations with ideals of democracy. Logan—a practitioner who also teaches—exemplified this point by his language,

> To me, there is a deep, deep, deep, ethical obligation, for our profession, and this is why I am here. If we can figure out ways to train people, that a lot of them will be a functional part of the news generation process, it helps … If there is some consistency and training and morality instilled in the people who are graduating from PR programs, then they're coming from a place of at least being protective of these ideals, how news and information should function and flow in the society.

Similarly, Jade shared the same sentiments by caring for the profession and the larger American ideals and human values. She emphasized,

> I've seen so many people doing it wrong and undermining it, devaluing what we do. I don't want to be one of those people. I want to be somebody that shows the value of what we do and the importance of it, not only in the American economy, but you know, the sense of democracy and truth that is our core American value. I think for human values.

On the other hand, participants highlighted the positive impact public relations could bring to the community and society, whether through relationship building with publics or via socially responsible initiatives. And those positive impact seemed to drive participants' ethical conduct. For example, Sadie shared, "Public relations had a significant social benefit, brings people in touch with their leaders. So, if an organization is to succeed, whether it's government, corporate, nonprofit, it has to connect and have a closer and honest relationship with its key publics."

Joshua further illustrated the connection between ethics and a sense of fulfillment through positive social impact. He said, “My other big client is the Metro [City] Chamber. And it's all about helping [City] be a better place to live, work, grow a business. I start off in a good place because I find value in the work that I do.”

Furthermore, though very uncommon, one participant—Jade—suggested the power communicators have over publics necessities an emphasis of ethics. She said emphatically, “It’s not easy not to influence people in social media, and how we use our power effectively is important, so it’s good that we’re continuing to look at [ethics].”

Overall, participants’ meaning-making of ethics can rationally, stem from their perceived professional roles and responsibilities, ranging from advocacy to dual loyalties to primarily society focused. This finding again seemed to suggest the various layers of relationships in which participants conceptualized ethics—whereas those preferring advocacy at the cost of public interest focused solely on client relationships in immediate work environments, the other two groups were equally or more concerned with the broader organizational-public relationships. Regardless, this theme indicated that roles and responsibilities cannot be understood in a vacuum—it was again through relational contexts that ethics emerged.

Image, credibility, and reputation. Participants who made meaning of ethics through the lens of reputation and credibility—on both individual and institutional levels—seemed to be pragmatic and consequence-driven. Hence, it was rationally based. This sub-theme also reflected an enlightened self-interest approach. Sometimes, the potential of reputational damage was the final push for participants to act ethically. For example, Leo, a social media strategist was once asked by a client to start a troll army for a competitor online. Leo tried to oblige first, but when he realized his client did not want to leave evidence for such request, he experienced emotional struggles but eventually decided to quit. He shared,

> I think the line was when my own reputation was on line. If I had built this troll army for him, I would definitely be fired, because eventually the client's boss would find out about it. He would've been very angry, as he should be. I would've been thrown under the bus, because I told you, there's no paper trail. The client could've said, it was Leo who did this. I didn't want him to do it, and he did it anyway. So, that was my shift moment, I realized that my whole professional credibility was on the line.

After this "shift moment," Leo quit the job. But it was after several months' struggling and emotional upheaval with the same client, who asked for other smaller unethical requests that Leo accommodated.

Anna echoed this concern for professional reputation and said, "I guard my integrity very, very, very strongly. I need to have people be able to trust me. And once you breach that, or you're caught lying, you cannot do your work. There's just no trust factor there anymore." Anna's statement suggested that focus on trust drove reputational concerns.

On the other hand, a few participants made meaning of ethics through organizational reputation and the consequence of losing it. For example, Matthew, an in-house practitioner working in a university, recounted a dilemma in which the university unknowingly used embezzled donation for a new building. Once the university learned about the embezzlement, the leaders were hesitant at first but later were persuaded by Matthew to proactively return the money. Matthew said,

> It [the money] wasn't just sitting in a bank account that it had not been spent and then we can just return it. So, you know that presented its own challenges of, where are we going to find the three million dollars to return it? But I think ultimately, it was the reputation risk of the institution on the line that caused some of those people that originally said we cannot return the money to change their minds. Ultimately, it was the risk of the institution's reputation being damaged that made the final decision.

Business case for ethics. Last but related, a few participants made a business case for ethics—they believed that strategy and ethics went hand in hand. This was a rational and practical approach to conceptualize ethics—these participants adhered to ethics not out of altruism but with an intention of efficiency, profitability, and good business. For example, Logan mentioned his agency's attempt to balance time and effort for clients, but not due to a concern for fairness but efficiency. He said, "Most people see that as a purely business challenge. But there were definitely moments when I felt like an ethical issue. There's no motivation within the firm for fairness, right? Everyone's thinking about how to be more efficient. It's a business."

Similarly, in a tobacco-related campaign, Andrew refused to promote tobacco's health benefits as suggested by clients, due to concerns that those statements will be counterargued and disputed. He said,

> We avoided that specific requested talking point, both for strategic public relations reasons, and for ethical reasons, but I'd say, most of the time, when

> asked to do something that's unethical, it's usually not good industry practice … If I'm going to go forth and try to put that message [about nicotine's health benefits] out there in the world, they're going to immediately counter with, hold on, one of the reasons that there are less occurrences of Alzheimer's because of nicotine is because everyone dies from cancer before Alzheimer's can set in … There is never a business case for behaving unethically. And so, it's in a firm's best interest to prevent an unethical behavior from beginning to end, both on the behalf of their clients and on behalf of their own teams.

Through this quotation, in which Andrew stressed several times the connections between ethics and good business, illustrated the rational and practical side of ethics, as well as a consequence-driven mindset.

In short, participants' accounts across the board reflected a rationally based approach to ethics from several dimensions, including conceptualizing ethics in terms of professional roles and responsibilities favoring specific relational partners, concerns surrounding image, reputation, and credibility driven by trust concerns, and finally, linking ethics with effective strategies and good business.

Tackling ethical issues as an emotional experience. Though most participants explained their meaning-making of ethics in rational, logical, or analytical language, a few defined ethics as an emotional experience. Even those who did not conceive ethics in emotional terms expressed varying levels, forms, and valence of emotions when recounting ethical situations that they have experienced. For example, Leo described how he felt when he realized the ethical implications of a client's request. He said, "I can sort of feel my chest constricted … that was the feeling when this whole thing was happening. I was torn between what I felt was an obligation to my ethics, and an obligation to my employer." When asked whether he experienced the ethical dilemma more rationally or emotionally, he acknowledged, "It was more emotional. There was just a feeling inside of me that said, this is a very bad idea. This is not gonna end well for anyone … it was a sinking sensation about what it meant for me." Other participants also mentioned feelings such as fear, anxiety, disappointment, uncertainty, nervousness, and guilt. As will be discussed later, these emotional responses manifested as intuitions and gut feelings that usually prompted participants to recognize the ethical component of the situation.

On the other hand, emotional skills—including self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and emotional influence—were mentioned across interviews. For example, Patricia said, "My ethics is based on my feelings, and that may or may not always be right." This quotation suggested that Patricia had the self-awareness to monitor her emotions but did not get caught up in them. On the other hand, empathy was emphasized across the board—toward clients/employers, media professionals, and publics involved in the ethical issue. For example, James said, "Every day, every decision we make, we need to think about the receiver… what will our messages cause them to do? How will they react, and what would they feel in regard to that?" Since participants' emotions and emotional skills were weaved seamlessly through their ethical decision making process, they will be addressed in more detail in RQ2.

Alignment of personal and professional ethics

The relationship between personal and professional ethics came up frequently across interviews, with several participants directly constructed the meaning of ethics around personal values. Though most participants believed personal and professional ethics were intertwined, their accounts also suggested that personal ethics were subjective and malleable. A lifespan perspective was notable. The following section will be organized around these three sub-themes.

Ethics is alignment. Except for one participant, all other participants concurred that personal and professional ethics were intertwined, interactive, closely connected, and inseparable. This idea may best be explained by Isaac's quotation that linked alignment with integrity. He said, "You're one person. Integrity means one … That line between the personal and the professional is disappearing." In particular, participants who cherished their work identity showed a particular appreciation for personal-professional alignment. This idea was exemplified by Jade's quotation. She said,

> I don't think they're [separable] … I couldn't go work for things I just fundamentally disagree with. I would probably use my career as one of most defining things about me. And so therefore, it puts even more pressure on it to be consistent with the values and the things that I care about.

Other participants simply acknowledged the fact that it was impossible to separate personal and professional ethics. For example, Nathan said, "If you're an ethical person, you're going to bring your ethics to your job, to how you act. I don't think it's something you turn on and off. It's just who you are." Furthermore, Chloe illustrated the idea that her professional ethics were an extension of personal moral compass. She shared, “There are sometimes external guide, and I would go according to those. But primarily, they emanate from me, and I use my values to my best … within the organization to manage them.” On the other hand, Allison related the idea of personal-professional alignment to the practical situations of the contemporary workplace. She said,

> I don't know that it's really easy to separate personal from professional. I think they blend for people. We are no longer in a society where people show up at work at 9:00 and they do their job to 5:00 and then they go home. And like they don't think anything about their jobs and that's just not the way at least in this country or at least in my personal experience, like I bring my job with me everywhere I go, because that's my approach. So, there is no line between what's personally ethically for me and what's professionally ethical for me, and I wouldn't if I ever felt like we were veering in a direction of being unethical personally or my organization professionally. Neither would be OK with me.

This quotation implied the broader context of non-separable personal and professional time and space in the contemporary society, with ethics being part of it.

In contrast, Andrew was the only participant who believed it was possible to compartmentalize his personal and professional values. His agency also represents a wide array of controversial industries, such as tobacco and arms companies. In his words, he evoked a legalism metaphor which effectively rationalized leaving personal ethics at home. He said,

> Absolutely! I absolutely believe they can be separated. I think it's no different than an attorney defending a murderer or rapist. Somebody has to … every industry, every government entity, every topic deserves a vigorous public defense, when their products, their service, either being vilified, or is under attack from a competitor. My experience has been, there is almost always a business case to be made, for every public affairs advocacy campaign.

Andrew believed compartmentalization may be easier for agency practitioners as projects are comparatively short-term. He explained,

> So in-house is working permanently for the same client, or for the same organization day in and day out, whereas agencies are usually brought in, I'll go as far as describing it as mercenary, whose job is either supplementing the in-house staff, or provides specific expertise. Our firm does a lot of tele-marketing related public relations, for example, so often we're brought in, when you need 50,000 people to call the White House in 24 hours, and so, we've brought in for that kind of things, and our engagements are not usually long, either. We rarely work for individual clients for more than two or three years, whereas if you are in-house in an organization, that's a career inside one issue, one topic, or one direction.

Andrew's quotation implied that it might be easier for agency practitioners to disregard or rationalize the ethical implications of their tasks, due to the fact that they may not have to permanently deal with the psychological dissonance caused by misalignment.

Personal values are subjective. Even though most participants valued integration between personal and professional ethics, the fact that personal ethics are subjective and malleable can make practitioners work for accounts/clients that are perceived as unethical by the general public. In addition, several participants expressed loyalty to their core values but allowed flexibility with peripheral values. For example, Jade recounted her experience at a governmental agency, and said, "It's nice to bring change to government and act on behalf of a policy. I don't always completely agree with the policy, but there was never anything where I felt I was doing something out of the line with my values." Sadie offered a more detailed explanation of situations where she would relax her standards. She said,

> Will I work for somebody whose main business was selling firearms? No! But would I work for a store which that's part of what they do among many, many things they sell? As long as they comply with federal legal principles, yes! It's that with the sole business is something that I would have trouble with, I wouldn't do that. Yeah, you are not a big fan of what they do, but I'm okay as long as it's not a strong disconnect.

Interestingly, Sadie's subsequent accounts suggested that she may have changed her personal values to accommodate her work. She said, "Ethics is very connected to values. My values may not include, because I'm working for a meat-producing company, being opposed to eating animals, that's not one of my core values because of my businesses, and different people may believe in different things." This quotation is illuminating, because if practitioners adjust personal values to suit the nature of their work, then personal-professional alignment loses its significance. Worse still, practitioners could be socialized in believing things that are against public or societal norms. It is beyond the scope of the dissertation to debate the relative values and morality of specific industries, but the finding that one's work can alter personal beliefs is worth noting. In this lens, Andrew's perceived compartmentalization may suggest a personal belief system that gradually aligned with his work, instead of true compartmentalization. In fact, several participants acknowledged this lifespan perspective on ethics system formation.

A lifespan perspective on ethics. A majority of participants' accounts reflected a gradually formed ethical system, usually stemming from past experiences, mistakes, aging, higher status, and increased ability to navigate business relationships. Penelope's quotation best exemplified this growth perspective. She said, "I'm constantly learning every single day about ethics, and questioning myself every single day about ethics … When I talk to other people, I gained new perspectives of what's ethical and what isn't." Additionally, Penelope offered one example that illustrated her gradually solidified personal value system. She recounted,

> And there were projects where I was doing … I joke because at that time, I was having a pitch, a book written by two republicans on politics. Now I would never do that because I own and do things aligned with my political view, but at that time, my political view wasn't strong enough to know that I disagreed with that. It was more along the lines of, I don't understand why I was getting paid so much money to make these calls. Yeah, it kinda took me a long time to figure out.

Equally important are skills in navigating business relationships with political savvy and having the financial resources to walk away from unethical situations. Andrew illustrated this point,

> First and foremost, is being more confident in my career and having a number of clients currently. I definitely feel like I'm able to say no in a way that I wasn't early on. Thing two is I've gotten better at navigating and making the business case for ethical behavior. Clients, when they ask for some types of engagement that is unethical, usually they're not thinking about it correctly, so it's getting confident enough to have that conversation, and then I think the third piece of it, is, I think is being more comfortable with either walking away from projects, or from defiantly say that's not prudent or ethical cause of action … and I'll add that as a fourth element, is usually, if a client or a superior, someone you perceive to be superior is asking you to engage in an unethical way, that person usually does not have the final say or authority on that decision, so understanding how to navigate that world better … if that person calls you and says I need you to do X, that appealing that to a board decision, usually will re-center that ethically.

This quotation illustrated multiple factors that may contribute to practitioners' higher levels of ethics in the workplace, beyond knowledge or sound judgment. Similarly, a few participants recounted gaining ethical perspectives through mistakes or negative experiences. For example, Thomas said, "Having direct experience with unethical situations where a judgment has to be made, and maybe some boss in the past made a decision that didn't feel right to me, would inform my decision when it's my decision to make when I'm the executive." Other times, simply getting old gave participants a sense of limited time and inspired doing good, ethical work. For example, Leo expressed this sentiment,

> I'm rapidly approaching 40 years old. I think for the first time in my life, I actually begin to take that longer-view of life, and I don't live in the moment so much. I start to think about what sort of a track record that I want to be on. I want people to think about my career, how I distinguish myself, what I chose not to do, and I do start to think about what sort of a person do I want to be, and I want to be is a reliable professional. I don't chase awards; I never really have. I want to be a reliable professional who has created things that enlightens people and gives them some reassurance about the levity of their day.

This statement suggested a correlation between ethics and age, mediated by a perception of limited time to leave legacy in the world.

Interestingly, some participants extended the developmental, lifespan perspective on ethical codes or standards. For example, Anna said, "I think there's set of ethics, a code, that we look at overtime to say, do we need to strengthen this, or add something? I think it's not static. It's not a static doc." Isaac echoed this standpoint by suggesting, "Guidelines should not be something written in concrete, because life evolves and changes, we improve. So, if it's stale, and it never changes, it becomes less useful."

Overall, this theme—alignment of personal and professional ethics—revealed many layers. While the idea of alignment was linked to integrity, and many participants did not believe they could separate their personal and professional ethics, it did not mean those who adhered to alignment had a stronger moral compass. Personal values are subjective to change, and sometimes, a practitioner can adapt personal values to suit their work. This adaptation may partially account for the idea of compartmentalization, in which practitioners first experience a cognitive dissonance and then gradually modify personal values to accommodate professional standards and tasks. The formation of ethical systems also takes a lifespan perspective, in which aging, life experience, past mistakes, increased status, financial situations, and political skills all contribute to a stronger moral compass.

Complex/multifaceted nature of ethics in the public relations workplace

Though not a primary concern for the dissertation research, interview data revealed complex and multifaceted nature of ethics in the public relations workplace. This finding is important to note, as content- and profession-specific codes and rules may be insufficient to address all the ethical issues that practitioners encounter in daily work. Specifically, four levels of ethics were identified, including (1) work ethics, (2) professional/media ethics, (3) business ethics, and (4) organizational/managerial ethics. The four levels seemed connected and crucial to the public relations practice, particularly when practitioners saw themselves as responsible advocates and organizational conscience. Next, these four sub-themes will be detailed.

Work ethics. Work ethics emerged as central to practitioners' perceived role as effective advocates. Participants explicitly stated or implied this dimension by emphasizing good performance. For example, Logan emphasized, "I think it's ethically important, as a professional, to do your work well, so if I know I'm in a situation where I cannot do my work well, and pretending that I'm gonna do good work, it's unethical." This quotation implied alignment was closely connected with work ethics. Another participant, Grace, echoed this point. She said,

> I have to be able to serve people with all of me, that's just my personal guiding principle. If I don't believe in you, I don't believe in the work that you're doing, and I can't stand behind it, and I'm not being fair to you. So, in my opinion, it would be unethical for me to continue on serving somebody that I don't believe in, because I'm not gonna give you all of myself.

This statement implied work ethics are closely related to public relations' advocacy function, as practitioners need to truly "stand behind" a client/brand to be able to represent them well. That being said, when participants strove for strong work ethics while feeling personally misaligned with client/employer goals, they experienced identity conflict— between an effective employee and a moral person. This cognitive dissonance was exemplified by Leo, who quit a position due to an ethical issue, but harbored feelings of loss and regret. He said,

> I think back to the [agency name] days, and I still regretted that I had to do that, because I was walking away from opportunities. There was a side of my brain that just says, fool, you should just get your mouth shut. A part of me does. Because there's an ambitious side of me. I had to resist listening to that side of me, because it's very persuasive. I mean, I had a great apartment, the money was good. It was damn good money. You know, that side of me is still

there … But ultimately the sense of dread was more palpable than the sense of ambition.

Not every participant was able to let the moral or ethical side of selves prevail. Penelope reflected on her early career, and shared her quandaries,

> I was very young when I was doing a lot of stuff for the PR firm, that I worked for [controversial person], even now I wonder about it, because I worked on something that was very controversial. And you know, that kind of impacted people, that I haven't really probably considered what I was doing because I was effective, so when I'm effective, is that effectiveness good?

This quotation suggested that work ethics may counteract professional ethics. Since public relation's professional ethics encompassed its societal roles and functions, practitioners may sacrifice professional ethics when they prioritize work ethics through effective but uncritical work.

Professional/media ethics. Professional ethics in this dissertation project refers to ethical imperatives confined to the public relations domain. This level of ethics has been discussed already (see previous theme—professional responsibilities and universal values). An additional dimension is media ethics. Though the profession has long transcended its media relations role, ethics pertaining to interacting with media professionals came up frequently across interviews. Participants generally valued good media relationships and emphasized achieving it through empathy. In contrast, a few participants revealed the dark side of media—media professionals can be unethical even when participants remained ethical within the partnership.

Media relationships based on empathy, duty, and fairness. First, several participants stressed empathy as core to good media relationships. This point is exemplified by Daniel, who said, “When you’re doing crisis communications or any other PR, put yourself in the reporter’s shoes, and try to get information accurately. And then, basically play reporter yourself.” Lily went into more detail and said,

> I feel fortunate that I’ve been in my current company for a couple years, and I’ve been able to build relationship with a lot of media members over the years… I send them things that are factual, delivering on time, and always being easy to work with, and kind of going above and beyond whenever I can … make sure that you are really delivering a sharp pitch and getting what that media member might need. And being persistent and working with them how they want to work … The honesty comes when working with journalists and the media … when things are completely out of your control, just being honest, and letting the person know, trying to be as communicative as possible.

Lily’s quotation again emphasized the relational nature of the public relations profession, such that honesty, transparency, and responsiveness can only understood in the context of maintaining good relationships. Her statement also emphasized being attentive, empathic, and accountable, in line with principles of care ethics. Lydia echoed this point when discussing working with bloggers. She said, “You have to know the different ways to work with bloggers. You have to be able to read people too, to know what you can ask for, what their policies are, and what is appropriate.” This quotation suggested relational skills via words such as “read people.”

Additionally, Daniel stressed being fair with reporters. He recounted a situation where he inadvertently relayed inaccurate information during a press conference and got contacted by a reporter. After finding out about the truth, he reached back to that reporter to clear up as well as to ask for permission to contact other reporters. He said,

> I explained that to the reporter. And then I said, you know, I'm gonna have to ethically by responsibility contact other reporters, who covered the news conference, because I didn't want them to get the information incorrect. And, so I called other key reporters, not every reporter. But you know, the Newsweek, the Times magazine, AP, and Boston Globe, and Washington Post, you know, major reporters that were covering the [event], because most of the smaller papers would just take the information from the AP anyway.

This statement, though, suggested Daniel's perceived fairness was skewed toward major news outlets. This reinforced the finding that values are not necessarily reflected in actions.

Uncontrollable and sometimes unethical media. An interesting subtheme that emerged from data dealt with the uncontrollable and sometimes unethical media, which may jeopardize participants' ethical standards and professional reputation. For example, Emily shared a story in which she was blacklisted by Vogue for six months due to another media outlet's violation of promise. This happened because a client of hers was booked for two publications—an exclusive with Vogue and a feature story with another outlet in the next issue. Yet the second publication broke the promise and ran the feature at the same time with Vogue. Emily lamented, "It's very interesting because you vowed to be truthful and honest with them, and you are, but sometimes things just become out of your hand, and there's nothing that you can control on the editorial side.” Eventually, Emily had to hire a lawyer to protect her client’s reputation with Vogue.

Reporters may also unfairly write contents without giving credit. This was experienced again by Emily. She said,

> Time came out with this health article and the reporter did not include my client in the conversation. I had been in contact with this reporter numerous times, shared a lot of information, and so we were really dumbfounded as to why in her article she didn’t mention that once, because the subject matter that she was talking about, there was no way that she could talk about it without referencing my client because it had to do with a certain vitamin ingredient in a certain supplement.

Despite being “dumbfounded,” Emily dealt with the situation with relationship concerns in mind. She said, “So we went back to the reporter and said, hey, we’d really appreciate a mention of this. So, my philosophy is, you always try to work it out with the person that you're with to maintain that good relationship.” It is obvious that relational goals were prioritized by Emily. It is the bedrock of her personal philosophy, or ethics, even when her relational partner—in this case reporter—violated ethical standards.

In short, professional ethics—or ethics within the narrow domains of public relations—included values and responsibilities discussed before, as well as ethics with media, which participants tended to emphasize. Participants overall valued benign and mutually beneficial media relationships and sought to work out issues even when media turned out to be unethical sometimes.

Business ethics. Business ethics in this dissertation project refers to the business side of public relations work, particularly client management and transactions. Issues with billing and client transparency came up frequently.

Billing and bonus. A majority of participants considered billing as the most challenging and complex aspect of the public relations work. For example, Daniel said,

> Billing is the most complex jobs of running a PR agency. How do you bill? I try to do a combination of both time and value. If it's crisis communications, then it's easy to just bill on an hourly basis. But if you're doing just media relations, really a combination of value and cost comes in. It also depends on the client's ability to pay. You know, I charge corporate clients more than a local theater group. So, I always ask, what's fair? What's fair to me? What's fair to the client?

This statement suggested that Daniel was trying to attend to the particulars of the task as well as clients' financial resources. While fairness was central to his billing decisions, an underlying theme paralleled with care ethics that emphasize context, attentiveness, and being responsive to needs. Thomas echoed this flexible approach, and said, "I can think one nonprofit that we worked with, where you need to do more for them, because the money they spent with us is money that would not be directed in helping, so we put the clients and society over the interest of our company."

A few participants explained that billing can be challenging for public relations due to unpredictable results, its creative nature, and difficulties in defining success. To begin with, the work involved brainstorming which is hard to justify. Penelope emphasized this point. She said,

> The fact that I brainstorm first for three hours, and then actually doing the work, it only takes a smaller portion of that, but you know, this [brainstorming] takes more time, that's not something that can really be quantified. It continues to be an ongoing challenge to think of how do I effectively do my work in a way that portrays what I'm doing and also not unethical for the billing process either, because it sounds really ridiculous to say I brainstorm for three hours and what does that mean? Like, am I just sitting in my bed and take a nap? You know, it's hard to prove the validity of what you're doing, especially when you aren't working in an office.

Penelope's statement articulated the quandaries many entrepreneurial practitioners in this study shared—difficulties justifying the validity of their work. Connor concurred, "The real ethics for me, comes in in terms of filling out that timesheet in the privacy of my office." On the other hand, the way agencies bill clients may also have issues. Penelope shared an example when she was working in a big firm that billed client high hourly rate with minimal results. Penelope recounted,

> One thing I didn't like when I worked at the big PR firm was that I didn't always get result when pitching the media, and that's pretty much the typical standards, but they would tell the media relations people that we'd get the results for you, and then I'd have all these pressure because they're charging

> so much money for me to get these results, and I knew, it's gonna be really hard for me to get.

Penelope later confided that she left the agency and started out on her own not due to egregious ethical issues but her disagreement with the agency's billing policy. With that said, after many years on her own, Penelope realized the benefits of having a billing system not contingent on results because coverage is unpredictable. Emma echoed the sentiment and said, "A lot of the ethics really swirls around payment for basically placement. I can never say I guarantee I'll get you in the Wall Street Journal. Because we have no control over that." Emma concurred, "As part of our ethics, we can't pay for placement. We get paid either way for the effort, not for the result."

Another challenge with billing had to do with difficulties in defining success. This point was articulated by Andrew, who said,

> In public relations, you live in a world where there's not clear successes and failures in what we do. In our office, we often refer it to a football game, and our job is to move the ball five more yards down the field on our side, and the public relations firm working for the other side, its job is to prevent us from moving the ball five more yards down the field for their side, which could create some very interesting ethical situations.

Ultimately, Andrew suggested shifting defining results from public relations firms/practitioners to businesses that hire public relations. He said, "There's a big question of what you pay for when you hire a PR firm. Is it just outsourced labor? Or you're paying for a political result? Or a public opinion result? Or a sales result? Or you're just paying people?' Then, Andrew explicated additional ethical issues associated with charging hourly rate,

> In my state, it's illegal to charge success fees, which means I cannot charge a client based on achieving a political outcome or public affairs outcome. I have to charge just simply an hourly or monthly rate. That creates a very interesting ethical situation, because people will take projects. You can make money taking projects you know you'll never succeed at … a good friend of mine is working for the adult entertainment industry, related to strip club issues. There's no way he's going to succeed, but he is gladly taking their $10,000/ month retainer. So, there's a lot of ethical issues around, can you actually achieve what you say you can achieve for the cause of industry? It's very difficult to quantify how public relations works, and so, I think one of the very interesting challenges is where small firms will often overpromise in order to lend clients, and milk them for fees, whereas larger firms will continue to throw in billable hours at a project long after it's not successful.

In summary, billing came up frequently across the interviews and was commonly referred to as one of the most challenging ethical issues.

Managing client relationships. Ethical issues related to managing client relationships encompassed setting realistic client expectations and being transparent about those daily tasks required to fulfill that promise. These can be challenging as clients do not always understand news values of stories or the changing face of public relations work. For example, Anna half-jokingly shared a story in which the client asked to be covered in Boston Globe for a Chowder fest they would hold. Anna said,

> You know, especially to Boston Globe, you know how many Chowder fests must have in the Boston area? And we told them, no, that's not gonna happen. That's not something that's seize-able. I mean, we were kind and gentle, but I mean, John made a joke, said you know, if you have food poisoning everyone you can get them to do that. But we know there was another organization that said, oh yeah, that's something we can accomplish. Of course, it's nuts. And we didn't get the job, and you know what? It's okay.

Here, Anna tried to maintain ethics by correcting the client's unrealistic expectations—in a humorous and courteous way. Ultimately, her firm lost the account but maintained ethics. Emma shared the sentiment and emphasized "hav[ing] a contract upfront" and "mak[ing] sure the client understands that you're not guaranteeing anything."

Penelope struggled with staying completely transparent, especially when making small errors that presumably did not affect results or when clients did not completely understand the public relations process. She shared, "There's rarely ever an ethical issue of my content matter, of my work itself … But it's more along the lines of, oh, I did this wrong, should I tell the client that I messed that up?" Penelope did not seem to have an answer to her struggle, except for knowing "it's kind of a balance between knowing when to admit you have screwed something up, and when to keep quiet." She then expanded on the ethical dilemma around process-driven versus results-driven client relationships. She said,

> It also comes down to educating the person you're working with on the process of how you're doing it, versus just going ahead and doing it, getting

> them their results, and they don't really need to concern themselves with how it happens. It's not really ethical to say you're making phone calls and when actually you are doing other things like brainstorming, but at the same time, I don't know if it makes sense to explain this is exactly what I did, in the time I spent for you. So yeah, I constantly feel like a little torn of truth.

These statements reflected participants' day-to-day ethical quandaries went beyond the communication aspect of public relations and may not be addressed by professional-specific codes and rules. The next sub-theme, organizational/managerial ethics shared the same pattern.

Organizational/managerial ethics. Organizational/managerial ethics in this dissertation study encompassed ethical issues related to organizational culture, managerial style, leadership—elements that shape the internal organizational environment. These ethical issues also emerged from data. On the surface, they went beyond public relations ethics; however, they were pertinent for several reasons: (1) the internal environment to a large extent influenced participants' morale and consequently, participants shared difficulties of having to defend an organization they fundamentally disagreed with, (2) it could shape participants' ethical standards through a socialization process, and (3) especially for those who considered themselves as the moral compass for the organization, turning a blind eye to systemic issues would be unacceptable. These reasons will be detailed with participants' quotations.

First, participants' reduced morale was palpable when discussing mismanagement. This point can be illustrated by Logan's statement, who at a point was reluctant to advocate. He said, “There were multiple sexual discrimination lawsuits against upper management. At a certain point, as a PR person, you don’t want to defend people who do that kind of work in any way.” Jade echoed this sentiment and said,

> Some of [the ethical issues] are not unique to communications, I think, every day in our environment we are confronted with people behaving in ways that you are not exactly comfortable within the workplace … we’ve seen another news lately, just how terrible some people can be in the workplace. So that’s not unique to the communication field, but sometimes we are on the frontline of defending those things.

Jade’s tone revealed at least some unwillingness to represent organizations in which inappropriate behavior occur frequently. Therefore, to advocate with confidence and motivation, practitioners could not ignore organizational-level managerial ethics.

Second, practitioners may be socialized negatively in workplaces that do not value ethics. When Leo scrambled for help after receiving client’s unethical request, not only was he rejected by the leadership, to his surprise, a colleague whom he trusted completely aligned with managerial viewpoint. Leo recalled,

> I talked to the account person. She’s presently hard-nosed about the whole thing. I mean, it’s really shocking, when I first met her, she’s very friendly and cheerful and super nice … I remember we went out, and I was like, what does this guy want for me? I cannot figure him out, and she’s just kinda parroting [boss]’s line. You know, ‘[client] wants the best social program.’ I

came to her for this whole troll army thing, and she basically gave me [boss]'s answers, like, this is client service.

Leo expressed his frustration with his boss and colleague during the interview. He eventually left the agency due to the unethical request as well as the agency's lack of ethics.

Last but not least, for participants who embodied strong sense of ethics and considered themselves as organizational conscience, it was unacceptable for them to turn a blind eye on anything ethical, even outside of public relations. This point was best represented by Jasmine's quotation, "When you stand by and allow something unethical, you witness it, you may be participating in it. And you don't speak out, you're as guilty as the unethical person." This statement indicated a higher level of ethics that involved proactively scanning the organizational environment to detect any potentially unethical matters.

In short, ethics in the public relations workplace appeared multifaceted from a participants' perspective. This point was epitomized by Thomas' words,

> Ethics comes in terms of accuracy and validity of the data we deliver, the quality of the insights we provide, the price we charge for our work, how we bill for our work, how we hire and how we treat our employees. Those are the ones that come to my mind. So, ethics include our responsibility to our employees, to our clients, to the profession, and to society.

He then expanded on the components of ethics, which included, "being sensitive to ethical situations, actively listening, and challenging the conventional wisdom, establishing values for your organization, that people don't always have to make individual decisions, but refer to company framework, incorporating ethics into the review process." Another participant, Connor, echoed this multi-component view by parsing the term ethics out into "professional and business ethical barometers," with the former addressing content issues such as not plagiarizing and the latter addressing business transactions such as billing and client relationships.

Additionally, several participants noted that various components of ethics were connected, for example, Grace commented, "We're blurring the lines, right? Do you kind of glazed over something that might be problematic in the organization? Is that unethical?" Some believed public relations ethics should be grounded in a larger, universal ethical framework. This is best articulated by Sadie, who said, "Ethics in public relations is the same in many ways as ethics in anything. It is being open. It is being transparent. It is speaking truth to power. And it's always how you are best serving the people you're communicating with." These statements seemed to suggest the importance of practitioners' ethical agency that include discernment, sound judgment, proactive actions, and humanitarian focus. These will be addressed in findings for RQ2 that dealt with practitioners' EDM in their workplaces. Before that, a summary of findings for RQ1 is provided in Table 2.

Themes	Sub-themes	Brief Description
Paradoxes between Universality and Contextualized Problem-Solving	Value-behavior gap	Participants articulated universal values they would prioritize and abide by but shared experiences where they acted differently.
	Ambiguities surrounding truth	Participants considered truth as subjective and elusive, even when built on unalterable facts. Authenticity was preferred as it addressed context and intention.

	Ambiguities surrounding spin versus framing	Participants disliked the word spinning but had trouble articulating the differences among spinning, framing, and selective reporting.
	Contextualized approach to ethical problem-solving	Almost all participants endorsed a situational, contextualized, and case-by-case problem-solving approach to real-world ethical issues.
Relationships as an overarching ethical tenet	Relationship-centered approach to ethics	Work and organizational-public relationships were the primary driving forces for practitioners to be ethical. A relationship-centered approach to ethics grounded universal values participants verbalized and contextualized problem-solving they enacted.
	Trust as the ultimate purpose for ethics	Trust helped participants navigate thorny and ambiguous ethical situations, as building trust with relational partners was the ultimate goal for ethics.
	Considerations surrounding relational partners	Participants explicitly or implicitly considered impact on and needs from their relational partners when constructing the meaning of ethics
Rational Considerations Combined with Emotions	Professional roles and responsibilities	Participants constructed the meaning of ethics from the perspective of perceived responsibilities to certain groups—clients, society, or both. They enacted roles of advocacy, dual loyalties, or a societal focus.
	Image, credibility, and reputation	Participants were pragmatic and consequence-driven. They were primarily concerned with professional reputation or institutional image. Participants made a business case for ethics—they acted ethically with an intention for

		efficiency, profitability, good business.
	Business case for ethics	A few participants believed that strategy and ethics went hand in hand; they adhered to ethics not out of altruism but with an intention of efficiency, profitability, and good business.
	Tackling ethics as an emotional experience	Though most participants explained their meaning-making of ethics in rational, logical, or analytical language, a few defined ethics as an emotional experience. Even those who did not conceive ethics in emotional terms expressed varying levels, forms, and valence of emotions when recounting ethical situations that they have experienced.
Alignment of personal and professional ethics	Ethics is alignment	Almost all participants perceived personal and professional ethics are intertwined, interactive, closely connected, and inseparable. Conversely, only one participant evoked a legalist metaphor that enabled compartmentalization.
	Personal values are subjective	Personal ethics are subjective, malleable, and comprise core and peripheral values; participants may represent clients/issues as long as they do not violate core values. Participants may have altered personal values/beliefs to accommodate work.
	A lifespan perspective on ethics	Participants formed their ethical system gradually, based on past experiences, mistakes, aging, growing status, increased ability to navigate business terrain and relationships.
Complex and multifaceted nature of	Work ethics	Work ethics emerged as central to participants' role as effective advocates due to the

ethics in the public relations workplace		creative nature of public relations. Strong work ethics (manifested as an ambitious, effective advocate) may conflict with participants' ethical identity or produce negative public impact.
	Professional/media ethics	Participants valued good media relationship built on empathy, accountability, and fairness. Yet, media professionals can be unethical sometimes, and public relations practitioners are not always in control even they maintain ethics. When conflicts arose, participants tended to prioritize relational goals with media counterparts.
	Business ethics	Billing (and bonus) was frequently mentioned by participants as the most complex and ethically challenging aspect of public relations work due to unpredictable results, public relations' creative nature, and difficulties in defining success. Participants tended to be flexible and responsive to client needs. Maintaining client relationships included setting realistic expectations and being transparent with tasks, which could be difficulty due to client's/employer's ignorance of public relations and media operations.
	Organizational/managerial ethics	Ethical issues related to organizational culture, managerial style, leadership influenced participants' morale and willingness to advocate. Participants may be negatively socialized if organizations lack ethics. This level of ethics should

		belong to public relations ethics due to perceived role of organizational conscience.

Table 2 Summary of Participants' Meaning Making of Ethics in their PR Workplace

RQ2: Public Relations Practitioners' Ethical Decision Making (EDM)

The second research question asked the extent to which Simola's (2011) care-based EDM model would reflect public relations practitioners' EDM at work. Findings of date revealed the emotional, sensemaking, relational, and communicative strategies participants employed throughout the EDM—including recognition, judgment, intent, and action—process. Furthermore, two contexts in which practitioners applied ethics emerged from data—routine, everyday situations and complex ethical challenges. Also, participants emphasized pre-recognition factors preceding EDM. This section will detail these findings, organized by the five components of EDM emerged from data: pre-recognition, awareness/recognition, judgment/sensemaking, intent/desire, and action. Before this, a brief description of the two contexts in which participants applied ethics will be presented.

Applications of ethics in the public relations workplaces: two contexts

Participants applied ethics in both routine, everyday practice and during ethically problematic situations. The first context emerged in quotations such as "ethics is in everything I do," and the second context manifested as ethical challenges that were ambiguous, complex, or involving conflicts.

Applying ethics in everyday work. About one third of participants seemed particularly mindful of the ethical implications of their daily work. Their accounts exemplified attentiveness, empathy, and sensitivity. For example, Chloe recounted a case in which she exhibited sensitivity,

> I think ethics weaved its way throughout our everyday work within public relations, things as subtle as when I worked in the research center that worked with people that had mental illness, and we had their names in our database. And I said, I don't think we should send a postcard about our initiatives to anybody that we have a name for, maybe include an address, but not a company name, because it might be a person who, if it gets sent to their house, somebody else in that house that does not know they are involved with the mental health community, you're then basically creating a problem, just like if a doctor leaves a message on an answering machines, and somebody in the household doesn't know that person has seen a doctor. They can be as trouble as something like when someone's asking you to do right or wrong.

From this statement, it was clear that Chloe put herself in the patients' shoes, and proactively addressed issues surrounding confidentiality. Another participant, Grace, demonstrated the same level of care when using consumer data in the digital space. She said,

> We have this paradox between privacy and convenience of sharing lots of information to improve products and services, but there are some ethical considerations in that. It may not be illegal or immoral, but is it really ethical how we're using that data? What we're collecting? I think it is a little more complex than sometimes what we think. You know looking at fuller, broader picture of the results of our action, not just today, but long-term down the

> road. I think that we have to stop and think, why are we collecting what we collect? How can we with the least impact on infringing on rights of privacy, gather what we need to gather in order to hear people? When are we really gathering data just for ourselves? And I think we have an absolute responsibility to make sure that we take every caution to protect that data, right? That we don't share it without people's permission, that we don't allow it to be reached in any way and that if something does happen that we are immediately ready with response and a solution so that people aren't further harmed.

Grace's statement echoed Chloe's in terms of do no harm—they both were highly concerned about stakeholder impact stemming from organizational behavior and/or public relations activities. Furthermore, Grace considered broader, long-term impact of certain actions. This reflected a humanitarian focus of ethics.

Unfortunately, not all participant exhibited the same level of sensitivity toward ethics—at least in their accounts. When asked about the ethical aspects of their work, or how they have applied ethics in the workplace, most recounted events in which they faced dilemmas. In rare but extreme cases, a few participants did not recall any ethical issue until being questioned multiple times. Next section will present common ethical challenges emerged from interview data and the nature of these dilemmas.

Applying ethics in ethical challenges. Ethical challenges in this dissertation project were dilemmas with ethical implications and defied black-and-white, easy solutions. Challenges that emerged from the interview data included (1) content-related issues such as exaggeration, omission, cherry-picking numbers, ghostwriting, etc., (2) issues related to conflicts of interest such as fake consumer reviews, troll armies, front groups, internal power competitions, serving competitive clients, (3) challenges arising from the changing media landscape including mixing of paid and organic content, and use of consumer data, and (4) relational conflicts such as the practitioner-media-client triangle, or internal misalignment of values or solutions. Note that not all participants considered them as challenges or dilemmas; those who did not either had high, non-negotiable ethical standards or rapidly rationalized the less-ethical option. Also, this list is not representative of all public relations ethical issues but reflected common themes across the interview data. Workplace dynamics, relational concerns, individual ideologies, and contextual pressures further complicated participants' EDM, adding layers to the ethical dilemmas.

Ethical dilemmas are situations that are ambiguous, complex, presenting no perfect solutions. Despite its frequent use in the public relations ethics literature, its nature has not been fully addressed. Interview data revealed participants' ethical dilemmas as encompassing the following: when participants (1) experienced an identity conflict such as that between an ambitious employee and a moral person holding certain ideologies, (2) tried to choose between two or more ethical approaches such as between perceived greater good (utilitarianism) and certain values (deontology), (3) decided on the degree of exaggeration, framing, and transparency, (4) chose between financial gain, career security, and ethics, (5) approached ethically debatable issues such as ghost-writing and bonus, (6) responded to changing social values and emerging issues (e.g., distinguishing between hate speech and free speech), and (7) encountered situations when values mismatched between organizations, clients, and/or participants themselves. These dilemmas were pooled from all interview data and may not be exhaustive for the entire industry, but the list illustrated the nature of ethical dilemmas. These ethical challenges/dilemmas necessitated an EDM process, yet participants emphasized actions that can prevent dilemmas from occurring, such as aligning values in a pre-awareness stage.

Pre-awareness: seeking alignment

The pre-awareness stage emerged from the interview data, when a few participants emphasized either hiring the right people or selecting the right clients—before awareness could even happen. This was articulated by Brendon, who stressed, "the one thing that before sensitivity for organizational ethics, is a lot of screening and recruiting, because in order to have a place where there are sensitivity and judgment, you have to have the right people on board already." Austin echoed, "It's a really important part, because if you recruit jerks and try to teach them in the best possible way for sensitivity, you're still gonna fail." The same principle applied to agencies and independent counselors, who sought to select clients whose values aligned with theirs. For example, Emma, an independent public relations consultant, emphasized,

> I have my own standards and values. I'm pretty hard-mind about that. When I started my own firm, I decided I would never work for anybody I didn't want to work for, that I felt it wasn't in concert with my values and what we wanted to achieve. I had the good fortune of working with some great organizations. I've certainly had people come to me wanting to be my client, who didn't want

> to be truthful and they really wanted to hire me to hide things or manipulate things and I just declined to take them as clients.

Emma's statement suggested that independent counselors usually had an advantage in terms of client choice. In fact, almost all entrepreneurial participants in the study showed a steadfast loyalty to their personal values and ethics, which manifested in the clients they chose. For in-house participants, almost all emphasized selecting cultures that aligned with their ethical standards. For example, Emma said she never really encountered substantial ethical blunders, because she was selective about the culture and leadership. She said, "I'm pretty intentional about it. I do feel fortunate that I've had the opportunity to work with great leaders and folks who are ethical and for whom strong moral compass guide daily life, work life, and personal life."

Seeking alignment may eliminate ethical dilemmas involving personal-professional value conflicts, but it did not mean the choice would be free of controversies. In fact, a few participants shared incidents in which they took clients despite social norms. For example, Isaac, the chief ethics officer of a public relations agency, recounted a case involving representing a controversial political leader. He detailed the process of selecting that client, and said,

> I knew it was questionable, but I was quite impressed by the [political figure]. I was quite impressed by his openness and honesty, admitting some of his mistakes. We decided that, okay, we will represent [political figure]. Then, we were highly criticized by the opposition party, so, there were pickets in front

> of our offices in London, and it got really messy. But we all agreed that it was okay for us.

This statement illustrated ethical challenges still existed even though alignment was reached. Another participant, Nathan, explicated the challenges in selecting clients only based on social norms, which may change. He said, “We don’t work for gun clients or tobacco clients. On the flip side, we do work for alcohol clients, and alcohol can kill people just like guns and cigarettes, right? So, there goes a blurry line when you say we don’t work for certain clients.”

Equally important was setting expectations before engaging in a collaborative relationship. This included defining success and setting the boundaries of professional roles. For example, Daniel said, “Before I accept the job, I want to understand the story possibilities, and I always ask, what’s your definition of success? If [there’s] 75% chance they are not gonna be successful. I won’t do that. That’s unethical.” On the other hand, Amelia, emphasizing knowing beforehand that she could fulfill a counselor’s role. She stated, “I had a friend with a business, and I didn’t take on his business. It wasn’t because he was an unethical person or his product was bad, but when I gave him advice, he didn’t follow, so I couldn’t represent him.”

Despite being careful and intentional about selecting the right clients and organizational cultures, sometimes practitioners were not able to detect ethical issues until later in the relationship. This has happened for Logan, who upon initial client meeting, was not able to see the full range of client business. Later, however, he realized the projects he worked on were funded by gun manufacturers and other ethically dubious advertisers. Logan said,

> After a few months of working hard on this client, and getting know them really well, and digging in, I realized that, oh, all of the money that is paying for all of this, is terrible. It's coming from things that I would not normally support, but it's like a step removed, so I didn't see it right away. I probably should've, but I didn't, so I found myself kind of stuck in this position, how I really don't want to be doing work for this client. This is not something that I can believe in, and I'm not someone who is good at faking that.

Logan continued by describing his emotional struggles, which were already palpable in this quotation. The statement also suggested that this mismatch could have been avoided, had Logan been more attentive and investigated deeper before accepting the client. Andrew was in a similar situation many times, but he chose to finish the project instead of stopping halfway. He explained, "I feel I have a responsibility to the clients to see them through the entire engagement, if we signed on a dotted line for an engagement." Andrew believed completing the project was necessary as the clients' stakeholders were implicated. He said,

> We obviously wouldn't stop working with them during the middle of that session, because changing teams in the middle of that session is almost a guaranteed loss on their part. And obviously, we have an ethical responsibility to them to complete the project, because they have shareholders and investors, banks, employees, etc., who were relying on them succeeding in this public affairs engagement, and so if I were to walk away in the middle, I guarantee that shareholders are going to lose value, employees are going to lose their jobs, banks are not gonna paid their loans, and so, we wouldn't walk away in

> the middle … if we have agreed to take a project with a client like that, and we walk away in the middle because we've decided it's not appropriate for whatever reason, we're effectively abandoning five to ten thousand stakeholders in that issue.

Andrew's statement, by comparison to Logan's, was more neutral in tone. His concerns for ethically problematic clients' stakeholders either reflected more mature levels of empathy or represented a form of rationalization, in which caring attitude was a façade used to hide other financially-related motives.

In short, the pre-awareness component emerged from data involves a selection process, in which value alignment are scrutinized. This component may substantially reduce possibilities of ethical dilemmas revolving value mismatch, but challenges continue to manifest as social norms change. Furthermore, value misalignment cannot be completely avoided, as sometimes the full range of client activities cannot be detected initially. Hence, EDM process must be explored.

Ethical sensitivity stage

Ethical sensitivity, or awareness, refers to that which enables professionals to recognize, interpret and respond appropriately to ethically questionable situations. Since participants applied ethics in a routine, everyday context as well as during ethical challenges, their accounts also reflected awareness cultivated on a daily basis, as well as recognition of a specific issue. The former was akin to developing an ethical radar; the latter was closely linked to the individuals' bodily reactions and intuition. Findings of ethical sensitivity are therefore organized into these two categories.

Everyday awareness: growing an ethical antenna with mindfulness. As mentioned previously, participants who integrated ethics into their everyday work exhibited a high level of sensitivity and mindfulness. Their awareness and ensuing judgment and actions appeared intuitive, but on further investigation, were results of personal choice and intentional efforts. For example, Chloe, who earlier recounted a case in which she refused to mail postcards to mentally ill patients, expounded:

> I think that ethics is in everyday event when you are working in communication. When you're writing your pieces, you want to be as honest as possible, at the same time you're often having pressure from whoever you're reporting to that has their particular needs, and you want to represent things honestly and yet still effectively. Ethics is in every communication that you choose to make. If you're in charge of creating the infrastructure for disseminating information, you know working with databases and how those databases are created, the contact information, and how you then use them, who you share them with, that can have a lot of ethics surrounding it. All of a sudden, you're supposed to send out a mailing, and you think a little bit beyond, might not necessarily come as an obvious situation. So, it's really, the choices of words, choices with superiors, all different kinds of encounter, so, I think that's my final explanation … this sense of this [ethics] really permeating all of the work, if a person chooses to, I should say. This opportunity allows a person's work to be keeping it present and front of mind.

This statement suggested that when practitioners choose to embed ethics in their daily activities, they started to be more mindful of even the small details of their work. It indicated that ethical questions can emerge in both strategies and tactics—in big decisions as well as the minutia of daily tasks. Naomi confirmed, “It [ethics] is in every decision we make, in terms of how we prioritize, how we response, how we counsel, even it’s not something that is overtly discussed, but it’s really the aorta of what I do.” On the other hand, Grace stressed being alert to ethical issues on an institutional level beyond public relations practices. She said,

> I think they come up all the time, in small ways too. Like, when you see things happening in your workplace or in a client's workplace, and they may not necessarily be happening to you, but are you silent about them? Or do you speak up? We don't think of those as big ethical concerns, right?

Interestingly, though most participants tended not to think about ethics consciously, when questioned more deeply, those who were mindful revealed a variety of ways in which they pursued ethical knowledge and cultivated sensitivity, including anticipating issues, developing knowledge of their work, clients, and stakeholders, keeping up with the media cycle and industry news, and via other educational and training sessions.

Environmental scan and issues management. The first source of ethical awareness came from environmental scan and issues management. Matthew, who worked in-house in higher education, started this exercise after a crisis in which he failed to update local media, only after someone else did anonymously. He said,

> I think in retrospect, we would probably proactively go to our local media and say, we want you to know about what has happened and we're going to tell you this story before you find out from someone else. I think the biggest thing

> that we've learned is at that time, I don't think we did a very good job anticipating what might become crisis situations. And we're much better now of doing kind of environmental scan, what we call issues management, and really try to get ahead of certain situations that might appear on campus, and I already have somewhat of an understanding of how we would respond to that situation.

This quotation suggested that Matthew became much more aware of potential ethical issues by keeping an eye on issues that may damage the university's reputation.

Understanding one's work contexts. The second way to develop ethical awareness involved understanding one's work context including one's company, clients, or a specific task. Understanding occurs during daily conversations. For example, James mentioned,

> I would say that, for a lot of people, awareness comes with their ability to understand their company. Some people just come in, they fill in the box of their to-do list, and then they go home, they often aren't aware of the surroundings. They often aren't aware of who gives them the work, what has been the setting, where's it going when they've done the work. That lack of awareness can cause a lot of people to perform tasks that may differ from their ethical standards. It's good to know where the work you get comes from and where it goes, and what happens and why. You know, you often do tasks because they were handed down to you, but that awareness comes from when sending an email, or communicating with the instructors, or your supervisors,

> oftentimes you are not aware of that, then you catch it all. But you'll definitely become aware of it, throughout your interactions. So, it'll be through personal conversation. Most people need to be able to understand what it's been asked of them, and that's kind of why lots of people say, when you're at work, ask a lot of questions. Don't just say yes, you know, ask a lot of questions, learn the why, and that'll oftentimes help.

James's statement suggested the importance of interacting with colleagues, forming relationships, and staying inquisitive, so that one may catch issues of ethical implications. Understanding the purpose and meaning of specific tasks can also facilitate ethical awareness.

Understanding stakeholders and developing empathy. Related, ethical awareness deepens with increasingly intimate knowledge of one's stakeholders—their needs, preferences, and potential complaints. Some participants emphasized developing empathy and bridging psychological distance. This point was exemplified by Naomi, who also taught a media ethics class. She described the importance of cultivating her students' empathy for stakeholders,

> Going back to teaching media ethics, we would walk through the case studies in class, and students would be like, what's the problem with that? And then you began more of a dialogue, you know, put yourself in the shoes of the victims' family. How would you feel? See that image of your loved ones, over and over and over again … you know at that point does it still feel okay? You know, encouraging them to put themselves in other perspectives, and really engaging in that, and that kinda help build awareness, because again, it's

> really easy, especially for younger practitioners, to see the world from only their lens. It's not just about making them aware of their rule, that's important, but it's also having them embody those rules by appreciating the perspectives of other people, other actors, in a situation.

Naomi's statement mirrored a process that combined rational thinking and emotions, which she emphasized later, "Building that empathy, I think, is what makes the information stick, tied between information and emotion, that would not only give the ethical concepts to resonate, but also get them to stay." Similarly, Ruby stressed thinking about the people that one would impact. She said, "Maybe thinking, who is the end person that you're impacting with your work? And making that clearer, making that more relevant, might help organizations and individuals have that sensitivity and awareness."

Keeping up with media cycle/world events/industry news. A few participants mentioned staying abreast of the media cycle, world events, and industry trends so as to be aware of current and potential ethical matters. For example, Emily detailed the benefits of belonging to a professional association, PR council. She said,

> Every day you're aware because you're reading and seeing things that are going on. For example, I'm a part of certain organizations that follow a code of ethics in public relations. So, I receive daily e-blast that talk about situations like Papa Johns or LeBron James or whatever it is.

While Emily's example was limited to public relations, Evan suggested keeping abreast with news and trends in industries that one specialized in so as to anticipate issues. He said,

> Part of my daily activities is trying to stay up to speed with all of news locally and nationally, in the financial services world, and social media too. There's a ton of ethical dilemmas in the social media world right now in terms of how people use customer data to create accounts and all that type of stuff. Whenever I see something that is inappropriate or unethical, I mark it. So now, we're not having any sort of ethical issues of paid relationships from working with influencers. But that's a huge issue these days. Companies are not good at explaining paid relationships with influencers. That's not something that we're part of yet, but it's something that I keep an eye on just to make sure that I'm aware of it, where if down the road, we wanna work in that area, we know how to do so ethically.

Evan’s quotation indicated that new ethical issues can emerge with changing industry trends, especially when intersected with social media. Therefore, ongoing learning and anticipating issues can prepare practitioners to handle new organizational activities ethically and communicating that with stakeholders.

Role models. While education and training in general could promote ethical knowledge, data showed that positive role models had a long-lasting impact on participants’ ethical sensitivity. Several participants mentioned defining moments in their professional lives during which a role model influenced them. For Evan, it was his professor in college, who frequently used his own experiences as a consultant to relate to ethical implications of public relations. Evan recounted,

> I had a great professor. He was an adjunct, so we had his class at night, and he also owned his own agency during the day. You'd come in and he’d say, you

> know I had a client who was asking for this today and here's what I said. So, we had a lot of those discussions in class. Through this professor I was able to see the types of ethical dilemmas that not just what we read in textbooks, but what you can experience in the PR world.

Evan then explained how this process helped him cultivate awareness. He said, "It was an inspiring class that really grounded myself and my classmates in terms of how to spot ethical dilemmas and how to approach them with clients or co-workers." Jasmine echoed the influence of role models by emphasizing role models' actions, "You can learn more from a role model than words that they might say or write. Actions speak louder than words, right?"

For others such as Lily, awareness came from making a mistake early on that was corrected by a role model. The experience was then stuck with her. Lily explained,

> I can pinpoint one example early on in my career. You know, I wasn't a PR major, so I kind of was learning a lot, as I went through my career, and early on at a PR firm, I think somebody has come across with asking with a client we may be advertised, and I think I talked to my boss, and said, oh maybe if we advertise, we'll see if they could promise to include an article, and I remember my boss immediately say, you could never ask for that, and that's when I kind of like, oh yeah, of course, the journalistic integrity. That's how I became aware of it, and just really wanted to pull myself to that candor, of making them separate and not crossing the line.

Lily's mistake may be representative of many public relations practitioners in the field who do not have formal education or training in public relations. Yet a role model, usually in the form of leaders or mentors, can help them grow industry-specific ethical awareness through positive modeling.

Personal background and professional experiences. Not surprisingly, personal backgrounds—including family upbringing, religious values, and education— were mentioned by participants across the board that helped foster ethical awareness. Professional experiences were also mentioned frequently. For example, Camila mentioned "my parents and in-laws … because they showed me the importance of honesty." Emma said, "I think it's experience … and also your own personal ethics."

In summary, about one third of participants embodied high levels of ethical sensitivity by interweaving ethics in their daily public relations activity. That being said, other participants also shared sources of their ethical awareness. Overall, everyday sensitivity can be cultivated through personal choice and conscious efforts, through environmental scanning and anticipating issues, developing knowledge of one's workplaces, tasks, and stakeholders, keeping up with the media cycle and industry news, cultivating empathy, and through case- and behaviorally modeling-based ethical education or trainings.

Awareness during an ethical challenge: intuition and empathy. The second context that ethical awareness takes place is at the initial recognition of an ethical challenge. A majority of participants described some sort of emotions, bodily sensations, or gut feelings that accompanied this initial recognition. These feelings could be a general sense of unease, or more specific feelings such as surprise, shock, or fear. Furthermore, most participants honored their gut reactions, but did not stop at their intuition. For example, Isaac said, “That’s where it starts. And when you have that subtle uneasiness, and you don’t know why, there is a reason. You stop long enough, find out why, and then, find a solution.” Anna echoed,

> I always tell young practitioners, if it feels wrong in your gut, it probably is wrong. You know, just like in life, if something feels uncomfortable and feels like, maybe it’s something you shouldn’t be doing, you really need to step back and question that, and take a hard look at the situation, whether it’s something a client asking you to do, or something your employer asking you to do. If in your gut, you feel like, oh this doesn’t feel right, and then it’s probably something you need to examine a little further.

Both Isaac’s and Anna’s quotations implied that while intuition—in the form of bodily sensations and gut feelings—helped practitioners recognize an ethical problem, it must also spur further investigation to be truly meaningful. This function of intuition was further explicated by Brendon, who emphasized “trust[ing] your gut” because “it’s easy to put out a match but hard to put out a wildfire.” He elaborated,

> The value of trusting your guts isn’t so much that everybody is right all the time, but the danger that you were right and didn’t say anything, can be really, really bad. It’s not that everybody has this perfect intuition. But when it comes to ethics, it’s far better to have a false positive, right? So, I would much rather have somebody come to me, and say, hey, I think this is an ethics challenge, and you’re like, okay you might be right, but also maybe not, then have a genuine, authentic dialogue about it, versus the alternative, where they don’t

> come to me at all, and either they're still worried about it, or there is something and it gets swept under the rub. So, like, going back to the fire analogy. Do you want people in your office smell the smoke and not say anything? And maybe it's just cuz somebody burned popcorn. That's okay. Better somebody talk about there being smoke in the office than not feeling comfortable talking about the smoke in the office, which might actually be a legitimate problem. So, like, trusting your gut isn't because everybody's perfect, but because the absence of trusting your gut is really, really, really, bad.

Through this statement, Austin articulated the role of intuition—it could be wrong but ensuing dialogue and exploration may in fact nip an ethical issue in the bud. At the same time, the statement demonstrated the importance of leadership valuing employees' gut reactions and creating space for discussion. By contrast, one participant—Leo—illustrated the danger of ignoring gut feelings in the pursuit of material goals and career advancement. After being hired cross-country in a new agency, Leo was tasked with a client who later asked him to form a fake troll army to attack a competing business. After in-depth investigation, little support from the upper management of the agency, and futile effort to have the client leave a paper trail for his request, Leo eventually quit. He reflected on this experience during the interview and recalled feeling uneasy when meeting with the client for the first time, yet Leo ignored his intuition. He said regretfully,

> I remember speaking with the guy, and a red flag went off. He said, I just wanna disrupt the market, wanna great things, blah, blah, blah … it was the

> sort of thing that someone who doesn't know what they are talking about. But, you know, I chose to ignore it because clients always say dumb crap like that. They hire agencies because they don't know what they're doing, and they need somebody who does. I was so entranced by the professional opportunity that I was like, whatever, I didn't hear that. You know, moving on!

This statement illustrated the danger of ignoring one's gut feelings, which echoed Brendon's viewpoint. Gut feelings may not always be precise and accurate, but the risk of pushing it aside can be enormous.

In addition, empathy seemed to trigger ethical awareness for some participants during specific ethical challenges. For example, James was both a public relations practitioner for a governmental institution and a member of the constituency. When his employer started a construction project, he felt the same way as other community members did. He said, "As someone who is a citizen in the community, I'd say, wow, this construction and traffic is unbearable, I cannot imagine more. I've oftentimes argued that with my coworkers and my executives." Though he sided with his employing organization at the very end, he had a dialogue with the executives and later used his felt emotions to communicate and empathize with the publics. He valued the role of emotions and perceived them as an integrative component of ethics. He said, "You don't pocket your emotions, because that'd be saying, pocket your ethics, leave your ethics at the door, but emotions are essential for understanding the rite of passage for everyone so that they understand what needs to be communicated."

In fact, empathy and gut feelings may be connected, especially for public relations practitioners for whom organizational-public relationship is a major component of their work. Allison's quotation exemplified this connection. She stated,

> Most of it is just a gut check. You know it's a little bit of, hey, so if I were sitting in front of a donor who had been giving to us for a really long time, and he might be older than the average American. Would he understand what we're talking about? And what kinds of questions would he raise?"

This quotation illustrated that empathy might be the basis on which intuition and gut feelings are constructed.

In short, while participants cultivated everyday ethical awareness in a number of ways, during ethical challenges, the awareness was usually triggered by intuition, bodily sensations, and a sense of discomfort. Some developed their gut reactions by way of empathy—either because they were a member of the stakeholder groups or because they developed an intuitive way of thinking about stakeholder impact. Intuitions and felt emotions may not always be accurate, but they were prerequisite to further investigation and group consultation—essential components of sensemaking in the next EDM stage, ethical judgment.

Ethical judgment stage

Ethical judgment is the stage when an individual analyzes and determines what is right or wrong, and what people ought to do in a particular situation. This dissertation research asked broadly how participants made critical judgments in ethical situations they have experienced. Intuition, sensemaking, and applying moral philosophies emerged across the interviews. Less than half of the participants utilized moral disengagement or rationalization discourse in the process. This section will detail findings organized by these four subthemes: intuitive acting, applying moral philosophies, sensemaking, and moral/ethical disengagement.

Intuitive acting. Intuitive acting based on fast judgment occurred in two contexts—during everyday practices and during relatively unambiguous ethical situations. The former has been discussed previously, and the latter will be explored here. First, data showed that whether an ethical issue was ambiguous was contingent on participants' ethical standpoint, the moral intensity of an issue, and whether it was clearly stipulated in professional/organizational guidelines. For example, when asked about how he made ethical judgments, Nathan, leader of a public relations research firm insisted, "I'm having trouble with the concept, overall, because ethics is like oxygen, you just do." Thomas, who also worked in research, echoed, "I think I just do it. I don't think I've meditated the process. I think people, for the most part, in their heart, know what's right in a moment of decision-making, I don't know there has to be a systematic process." Both statements showed that ethical judgment did not have to be systematic or deliberate. That being said, further exploration of data showed that both participants considered the research context as being relatively value-neutral and clear-cut, as long as they followed the research process and explained to clients the trade-offs between precision and budgets. Additionally, most participants recalled refraining from certain actions that were clearly forbidden by professional/organizational codes. Similarly, as will be shown later, participants' underlying moral philosophical orientations could dictate their intuitive judgment/actions.

Applying moral philosophies. Almost all participants evoked certain moral philosophical tenets—often implicitly—when making ethical judgments. During the interviews, they were provided with descriptions of deontology, consequentialism, virtue and care ethics, and they usually identified with one or more. Occasionally, however, seeking to satisfy two equally appealing frameworks per se presented an ethical dilemma. In this section, how and why participants applied certain moral philosophies will be detailed.

Deontology. Only one participant, Isaac, chief ethics officer of an agency, emphasized deontology exclusively. He said, “I think values have never really changed. They are timeless, and they’re cross-culture. Honesty is a value in every community, and I think PR professionals [should] respect the values of transparency and truthfulness.” Isaac’s quotation resonated with deontology’s rule-based, universally appropriate tenets. A few other participants also preferred deontology, but stressed using it concurrently with others, such as consequentialism, to avoid being too idealistic. Furthermore, although almost all participants used values to define ethics in the public relations workplace, most did not agree with the universal nature of ethics as depicted in deontology. As mentioned previously, an underlying pattern was that while universal values were widely acknowledged, a contextual and situational approach to problem-solving was preferred by most participants.

Teleology. Teleology was widely endorsed by all participants, but they differed in terms of what outcomes they were concerned about. For some, it was the potential impact on publics, but a more prevalent concern had to do with professional credibility or organizational image. Regardless, participants endorsed this moral philosophy due to its pragmatic nature. For example, Penelope maintained, “You have to focus on what’ll happen if you do something the wrong way. You cannot be completely ideal and think only like, you’re gonna steal bread for a starving person, that’s moral but there will be consequences.” On the other hand, Hazel’s quotation explicated the need to consider different scenarios and associated consequences,

> We do often have conversations about what are the consequences ensuing X, Y, or Z. So, when we're making decisions, we're very mindful of what could happen … It really is an approach to understanding the problem that we're presented with, the opportunities that exist around that problem and potential solutions and the impact of the choices that we're going to make. And then it's a response to the “what ifs.” Understanding of the consequences doesn't necessarily mean we won't do something. It just means that we're going to be prepared with the public response to that action.

This statement showed the necessity to employ consequence-based thinking to public relations, as practitioners are usually charged with responding to public concerns caused by organizational practice.

On the other hand, many participants’ use of teleology was fear-based, due to the potentiality of being caught, being found out, and failing eventually. For example, Sadie believed that being unethical was not just wrong but also “stupid.” She said,

> And from a very pragmatic point of view, people should understand that not only is misleading communications unethical, because it’s not transparent, it’s not open, it also means ultimately, you’re gonna fail. If you’re going to go out there, and you only reveal half of the truth, people are gonna find out. In

> addition to the fact that it’s unethical, you’re gonna get caught. Because it is not successful to mislead people; ultimately it will catch up with you. Not only it’s wrong, but it’s also stupid.

In this statement, Sadie mentioned “being caught” many times. Clearly, being ethical was not an altruistic act, but a pragmatic move based on second-hand experiences. Nora echoed this point from an organizational perspective. She said, “My understanding of the folks that I worked with is that it really was not in a company's best interest to be unethical or not be transparent because in my opinion the truth would always come out.”

Virtue ethics. Quite a few participants believed that their ethical judgments and actions emanated from who they were—or their character or ethical identities. For example, Anna said, “I would say the virtue model would be more appropriate to me, because if it’s something that I’m not comfortable with, or I know that doesn’t align with my value and belief systems, then it is an immediate red flag to me.” On the other hand, Isaac emphasized ethical aspirations—or the person one wants to be/become. He said, “If you have that motivation [of doing with right thing] as the start, because of who you are, what you want to be, that’s a good start, and then you look at it, and it’s the best you could do.” Isaac’s quotation illuminated the motivational advantage of virtue ethics.

Virtue ethics also emerged on an organizational level, as participants referred to organizational missions, guidelines, or core values to make decisions. For example, Andrew listed a few ethical guidelines of his agency, and emphasized that every decision was measured against them. He stated,

> I would say there are three ethical cores that drive what we do. First is you don't lie. You don't present factually inaccurate information, um, that doesn't mean you have to present the entire picture of the story, but the information you provide must be accurate. The second is you need to be a passionate advocate for your client, and their agenda, and I think the third piece of that, is that you need to be aware that what you're doing does have a substantial effect on public opinion, can affect policy, and often policy that goes beyond just your smallest engagement.

This statement, however, suggested the arbitrary nature of an organization's core values and ethical guidelines. Andrew's agency had a distinct emphasis on advocacy and was ambiguous about the definitions of lie. Similarly, quite a lot of participants praised their leadership for being committed to organizational goals and missions, but it was not clear whether those missions/goals were more aligned with public interests. For example, James commented,

> Our company has a great leadership team that values the voice of the company. They often take their words seriously. You know, if it isn't aligned with the progress and the mission and the value system of the company, then they will often say this isn't in line with where we're going, or it will lead to having that person leave the company because of the disagreement, or even just say, hey, this probably isn't the best fit for you, because this is where we're headed, this is what you're wanting.

Though James admired his leadership for staying aligned with organizational missions, it was unclear whether his leaders were dismissing valuable feedback that prioritized public welfare. Hence, virtue ethics need to be taken with a grain of salt due to its subjective nature.

Care ethics. At least two thirds of the participants aligned with care ethics, as they exhibited a caring attitude, prioritized relationships, and incorporated emotions especially empathy. Some considered a caring attitude as core to ethics, not just in public relations, but across all human endeavors. For example, Chloe emphasized, "I cannot imagine for me, caring being anything but intrinsic to ethics." This sentiment was echoed by Lily, who believed caring was simply a good way to behave. She said, "I think the caring one kind of jumped out. I think it's great if it's applied to the PR professionals, but I think just as a person in the working world, or a human being in general, I think it's a good way to behave, always."

An ethic of care is also embodied by participants who prioritized relational goals. For example, Connor said,

> I think, ultimately, if you start with the premise that ethics begins with treating others with respect, I guess I think a little bit more like that [care ethic]. Because to me, at the end of the day, a lot of this begins with relationships, right? It's the relationship to deal with, your employees, your staff, the relationship with your client between yourself and a professional peer … If you do right by the people that you're dealing with, or you're working with, or for you, then you know, the big decision, the ethical decision will be easier to make. So, I guess I would come down in that area, ethics is caring.

Other participants emphasized use of emotional intelligence to feel people and respond to potential concerns. For example, James said, "I would say that every day, every decision we make, we need to think about the receiver … what will our messages cause them to do? How will they react, and what would they feel in regard to that?" While James's statement alluded to the role of emotional skills and empathy, Ruby explicitly tied emotional skills to relationship building, a core public relations function. She said,

> Public relations is about relationship building; it's about making sure there's mutual beneficial relationship on both sides, and so I feel like the ethics of care framework very much fits the PR practitioner role, because it's making ethical decisions based on what is going to help people. I feel it's a much more empathetic caring, nurturing framework, and as a PR practitioner, someone who is trying to build the relationships, literally, whether it's the media, whether it's the employee in the example that I gave, if it's an outside person that was affected by your organization, using the ethics of care framework is a way to demonstrate that you're putting the needs of others, kind of much more outside of your own, but at least take that into account, because I think what happens a lot and the reason why PR gets such a bad reputation is because people think of it as manipulation or has been, you know, it's only our own reputation on the line, but I think, using that framework shows, no, we're taking others into account as well, if that makes sense.

In this statement, Ruby articulated why care ethics is appropriate for public relations—not only due to their shared concerns on relationships, but also care ethics' emphasis on relational partners. This would allow practitioners to step away from their own self-centered reputation and benefits. That being said, a general pattern emerged from interviews was that participants would immediately mention clients, media, and their organizations when referring to building relationships. Though they were also concerned with public impact and relationships, these concerns seemed to lag behind relational concerns within one's workplace. Furthermore, when asked about handling relational conflicts, such as those between clients and publics, participants mentioned "you cannot satisfy every stakeholder" or "that is very difficult," instead of prioritizing public or society.

Combination and/or balance. In fact, many participants combined two or more moral philosophical frameworks when making decisions. Commonly, teleology—a pragmatic approach—was combined with others. For example, Jade tried to balance care ethics with teleology. She said, "The ethics of care [is] very appropriate, as well as the greater good argument. I think for me, a lot of it comes down to, what's the outcome, how do we balance what we have to do versus the bigger wider implications." Camila, on the other hand, integrated care ethics and deontology with a slightly more emphasis on the former. She said, "Honesty and care … if you cannot care about people, there're very limited things that you can do." Similarly, James slightly preferred care ethics but did acknowledge all frameworks. He commented, "To a degree, I identify with all of them. I would say that the most relevant one for me is the last one [care ethics], in the sense that you need to understand how other people feel as a result of receiving information." These statements seemed to suggest that while all philosophical frameworks have merits and are instrumental, care ethics is the basis upon which other philosophies build on. This thought was confirmed by Naomi, who said,

> Really honestly, it's a combination of all of the above. But I think the strongest ones is the care theory of compassion, and empathy. It's a key one. But also about consequence, especially when I'm trying to counsel others within my organization about the decisions that are placed in front of us, really running them through the ramifications of decisions, how it's likely to play out, and what outcomes that we want out of this, and you know, oftentimes the outcomes that we want are the ones we arranged through making the right decisions that are ethical. And, sometimes it's not the easiest path, it's not the least expensive one for sure in many cases. Um, but I'd say probably a combination of the consequential and care theory, are probably the predominant ones, I would say.

Whereas it appeared beneficial to analyze through multiple ethical lenses, the downside was that different moral orientations may compete in a situation. Chloe's example best illustrated this quandary. She recounted one experience early in her career when she served as an in-house public relations practitioner for a community college, and the president asked her to not include pictures of men of color in one pamphlet so as not to alienate the White population. Chloe struggled with the request as diversity and fairness were important values for her. She decided to lighten the color of the skin of an African American, but on the other hand, she questioned her dishonest behavior. Chloe reflected,

> It frequently came down to, what is the greatest good being done? … was my honesty more or less problematic than the certainty that it would get declined? So, what's the greatest good, and to hope that it's not a slippery slope, to let one start behaving that way and to presume to know what the greater good is, but in many cases, that's what we are asked to do anyway.

This quotation illustrated that ethical dilemmas could arise from innate tensions among moral philosophies. Here, Chloe valued both deontology (e.g., honesty) and greater good (having the black person featured in the pamphlet), but they could not co-exist. Additionally, this statement reflected difficulties in determining the ultimate greater good due to individuals' bias. According to Chloe, the greater good might be including the African American man with lightened skin color or, instead, promoting the ethos of diversity. Eventually, Chloe rejected the latter option due to perceived futility. Chloe's statement was in line with criticism against consequentialism: often times, one cannot presume what the greater good is, and using only this criterion can be a slippery slope.

In summary, this section has demonstrated that participants evoked a variety of moral philosophical orientations when making ethical judgments. Whereas all moral frameworks presented merits and challenges, care ethics fit particularly well with public relations with its emphasis on caring attitude, relationship maintenance, and emotional skills, and it was the basis on which other frameworks could be considered. Additionally, consequentialism, or teleology, was used concurrently by many due to its pragmatism as well as public relations' concern for organizational consequences on the publics. That being said, tensions can emerge among competing philosophies, such as between deontology and consequentialism, leading to another ethical dilemma within the ethical dilemma. Therefore, flexibility and contextualized problem-solving were upheld by participants. Additionally, sensemaking emerged as key to diagnosing ambiguous and complex situations.

Making sense of ambiguities. Across the board, participants' accounts reflected several sensemaking strategies during the judgment stage: investigation/research, consultation, considering personal situations, and monitoring and reasoning with emotions. These strategies will be explained in more depth.

Investigation/research. As mentioned previously, most participants engaged in investigations/research right after they had a gut reaction of something being wrong. During this step, participants shared strategies such as identifying values, playing a reporter role, and examining information in a group setting. For example, Isaac said, "When someone came to me with an ethical problem, my first reaction is to identify the values involved in the problem. What are the conflicts of values? You try to resolve the legitimate values that are in conflict." In addition to examining values, Isaac emphasized investigating the issue from multiple perspectives. He said,

> Ambiguity and many shades of gray. So, what do you do? You look at the situation. Then you consult with people outside the firm. They know the company involved or had the same experience, and then you do some research, and then you make a decision. You make a recommendation. But as counsel, we advise, we make a recommendation. The decision has to be made by the management.

Despite knowing communicators/public relations practitioners do not have the ultimate decision power, Isaac believed the investigation process was crucial because "at least you have the comfort to know that you stopped long enough, to examine the problem, to look at the option, and then you can make the best decision you could with that information."

Data showed journalistic experiences or motivation to play a reporter's role were beneficial in this phase. This is demonstrated by Nora, who was once a reporter. She said, "I think I got that previous experience of being objective; it helps because it'd allow me to look at something from lots of different sides of the issue. Understanding where other opinions come from." On the other hand, Austin stressed simply taking on the role of a reporter,

> I think the PR people have an obligation to play reporter in a sense and they continue to ask questions about, you know, what's the story here? How do we want to promote it in a way that both grabs our audience's attention because that's a PR person's job, but also how do we do it in a way that is authentic and credible? Because if I don't do it in an authentic and credible way, either it's kind baseless, or it creates the opportunity for people to dig deeper into it, and find out that it's a transparent PR stunt, versus something that can actually serve the community well. And what they need ethically, I think, is to also be the reporters that dig into the matter. There are facts that are being misrepresented or facts that should be included or whatever. They have a role, they have a responsibility to the organizations overall, to say, hey listen, this

> part doesn't seem right, what do we do about it? Rather than kind of sweeping it under the rug.

Brendon's statement also emphasized the role of research and investigation. Furthermore, the sensemaking process usually involved group-level consultation, dialogue, and debates.

Group consultation and dialogue. Far from the idea that practitioners are sole, struggling ethical decision-makers, participants across the interviews stressed having a group-level dialogue within the organization/agency, or seeking consultation from mentors, colleagues, or even friends/family. The purpose was to gather multiple perspectives, check one's gut reactions and blind spots, seek social support, and sometimes, debate issues so as to yield the best solutions. For example, Isaac stressed obtaining different points of view. He said, "When you had a problem, you get together, you get more information, you get different points of view. The consensus builds up, and then it becomes clearer, what's the right thing to do." Furthermore, he emphasized talking to others so as to identify personal bias,

> Second is to talk to someone, you talk to your supervisor, you talk to the ethics officer, you talk to the CEO, you talk to someone. You may have some biases. You may have strong dislikes, you may have different elements in your psyche you ignore … once you talk to someone else, they reacted to it, it comes back to you, and then half time the solution appears. This is why at the beginning of the process, you need counsel.

Additionally, to achieve this, Isaac emphasized the ability to listen with humility. He said, "Be a good listener. Other people have different points of view, and there may be some value within them. Have an attitude of creation, or an attitude of humility … [be] a problem-solver more than a problem-maker." In fact, a problem-solving attitude and corresponding skills were emphasized across all interviews.

Seeking counsel does not have to be confined to one's own organization or even the public relations field. In fact, some participants encouraged seeking outside mentors or even family/friends for more objective, unbiased opinions. For example, Anna said,

> I think it's good if you have someone who might not have the same background. I think it's someone who you respect, someone who has had valuable experience, someone who's willing to share their thoughts and their advice with you. But no, I don't think it has to be in the same industry. One of my closest mentors is one of my best friends, but I've mentored her, and she's mentored me for years, and she's not all in public relations. She's in sales and marketing. But I learned a lot from her.

While Anna sought help from her friend in sales/marketing, Penelope turned to her husband and other men for a male perspective. She said, "And talking with my husband, also, empowered me a little bit because they're more into have a higher confidence … working with a lot of men, I learned different ways of thinking about things." At the same time, Isaac came up with the term "passive listening," which referred to a process of describing the situation and explaining his thought patterns to family/friends, and during the process uncovering new patterns in his own mind.

Group consultation sometimes evolved into debate and learning lessons, as illustrated in James's comments,

> If I wasn't comfortable with the direction they were taking, I will probably want to raise a flag, tell them why, and then if it wasn't going to be resolved, I know I can just leave. But, from my experience, when you bring up those arguments, they turned into debates, and debates turned into a learning lesson, where you can learn both sides, you can say, oh okay, well that makes sense, and it's not as doom-and-gloom as everyone else in the community says it is, or as the media portray it.

The caveat embedded in this statement, however, was that practitioners—especially younger ones like James—were likely to be socialized and co-opted into the executives' point of view. As James debated with the managerial team, he seemed to both widen his perspectives and assimilate managerial perspectives, rationalizing "it's not as doom-and-gloom as everyone else in the community says it is."

In short, participants across the board valued a group process that involved either colleagues from inside the organization, or peers, family members, and mentors who could bring in objective, empathetic, and unbiased perspectives. This section can be best summarized by Ruby's quotation, who valued "requisite variety" including community's perspectives. She said,

> You know, not having one sole dictator of everything. You need to have varying perspectives, you need to have diversity in your organization, you know, requisite variety as you need to have these varying perspectives … I think having a number of people, having a say in terms of how to deal with a situation, as we talked about, teamwork and collaboration is so important, because if one person is making the decision all the time, on what's gonna

happen, but that person is human, they are gonna make mistakes as well … I think just having these varying perspectives … also having boards of people in the community or in the audience, again, just tapping into people's experience, I think it's helpful, so you're not just going in there blind, making decisions.

This statement was echoed by Joshua, who stressed differences and diversity in thoughts, "The thing you do more than anything else is you need a lot of people not like you and you're forced to have conversations with folks from different backgrounds and different experience and different points of view."

Considering personal situation and seeking support. Considering personal situations emerged as a common thread during the judgment stage, and some participants offered this as a piece of advice. For example, Isaac made the following suggestion, "Firstly, I would ask him [practitioner in an ethical dilemma] to look at the situation, to understand it, to get other options. You don't always have to take the ultimate measure. I wouldn't jump to the conclusion too fast." Similarly, Leo reflected on his experience of quitting when he was single, and said, "Then, it was just me, with no wife, no kids to worry about, so I could afford to walk away from that job. But if I had children, I would have to suck it up and take it." He then added,

> I suppose if someone came to me, looking for advice. I guess I'd say take very careful stock of the situation, consider your own position, your whole life, what are your obligations, and measured against that. If you're still uncomfortable, I guess you gotta go, but I guess you can find a way … not

> necessarily comfortable, but at least okay with what you're doing. But it's a tough one. There's no easy way out of the situation.

Ultimately, Leo seemed to suggest that acting unethically due to familial obligations was not a good option. In fact, some participants contemplated on worst-case scenarios, and decided they were not as bad as sacrificing personal ethics. For example, Anna once made a mistake and was terrified to speak the truth, but a conversation with a trusted mentor dissolved her fear. She recounted, "She gave me the best advice. She goes, 'If she fires you, are you gonna die?' I said, 'no. I might be upset.' She goes, 'then, just go and tell her.' Then I realized, if it's not life-and-death, don't worry about it." This statement implied the importance of social support, because dealing with ethical issues is an inherently emotional experience. Related, emotional management skills emerged as important during sensemaking.

Monitoring and regulating one's emotions. Emotions in the form of bodily sensations and intuitions did not just trigger ethical awareness for participants. For at least half of them, emotions continued to manifest during investigation and lingered even when the situation was resolved. These emotions can affect participants' analysis of the issue. For example, Leo considered his reasoning process as emotional, after being asked to start a troll army. He said,

> It was more emotional. There was just a feeling inside of me that said, this is a very bad idea. This is not gonna end well for anyone. I think I tried to take the focus off of me for my own sake, trying to convince myself that this is bad for the two creatives, because they are young and relatively new for their careers, and they get dragged into something like this. I didn't want them to be

> touched by something like that. But really, it was a sinking sensation about what it meant for me.

The "sinking sensation" that Leo described seemed to linger after the event, as he commented, "Even talking about it now, I can feel my chest constricted. I was torn between what I felt was an obligation to my ethics, and an obligation to my employer." Eventually, Leo prioritized his personal ethics and quit the position. In this sense, the frustration, anger, and disappointment Leo experienced were positive as they enabled him to make an ethical move. However, not every emotion was beneficial. Fear and guilt may be counterproductive, leading to less sound ethical judgment. Jade explained fear may stem from both losing one's job and lack of confidence. She said, "Sometimes it can be as simple as fear of losing your job, but I think the greatest one is always fear of being wrong. Sometimes you are just not really sure what would happen either way." To counter fear arising from uncertainty and making mistakes, Jade emphasized using peers and forming informal coalitions "not just for advice" but also "sounding board for when things don't feel great." Similarly, Penelope learned to discriminate among her feelings. She said, "My ethics is based on my feelings, and that may or may not always be right." As a result, she consulted with her husband and friends when feeling uncomfortable at work.

Moral/ethical disengagement. Whereas investigation, group consultation, emotional regulation, and actively applying moral philosophies are processes contributing to sound ethical judgment, a small number of participants seemed to engage in moral/ethical disengagement or rationalization. This process manifested itself in the following cognitive patterns: feeling powerless/helpless, designating responsibilities to supervisors, believing someone else would still do the unethical request, a blind trust of the top, and practitioner as attorney discourse.

First, some participants exhibited a sense of powerlessness exemplified in the phrase “cannot fight the fight.” For example, Logan said, “Particularly in agencies where lots of clients ask you to do bad things over long period of time. Then, you disengage. You’re removing your own emotions and your ethical standards from the process, because you’re like, I can’t fight that fight.” This statement also showed the importance of noting one’s emotions. Logan later expanded on how disengaging could lead to a bigger problem—cynicism. He elaborated, “A lot of people, I think, are really cynical, which ends up reflecting poorly on the industry as a whole. They weren’t working from place of beliefs and engagement of those issues, and I think that matters.”

Second, a few participants—especially lower-level ones—disengaged by placing ethical responsibilities on supervisors/leaders. For example, Chloe, who lightened the skin color of an African American in the community college’s pamphlet, reasoned,

> There was nothing that I could do about that … If anything could have been done, I felt confident that my immediate supervisor can report directly to the president, and she has been there for years and years, that if it could’ve been done, she would’ve made it be able to happen. From some respect, I was relieved of the ultimate responsibility.

Equally important, Chloe did not want to be perceived as a problem or alienate her supervisor. She said, “An additional element was not wanting to make a problem for my boss, who did the best that she could to also forward the cause of racial diversity within our publications and public relations outreach."

Related, some participants shifted responsibility to consumers and stakeholders, particularly with content-related issues. For example, Lydia commented on the current media environment filled with half-truth and fake news, and said, "If you're [stakeholders] looking at a company's website, and you're reading their blog, that's content they've created. So, you have to take that with a grain of salt … you have to be a little bit discerning in research."

The third rationalization was "if I don't do it, someone else will." Isaac considered this as an excuse, and emphasized, "If you are not going to do it, someone else is going to do it. You don't want to use that as an excuse, that everybody does it, it's a never morally correct answer." That being said, some participants suggested as long as they were removed from an unethical request, they did not care if anyone else would do it. For example, Camila said emphatically that she would not participate in any unethical conduct, but, "I mean, if other people say they're going to do it, there is nothing I can do about it, because you know, it's the job."

Fourthly, some participants suggested they had to "default to trust" of the top decision-makers due to lack of information. This point was exemplified in Jade's quotation. She said,

> I generally default to a trusting status, and I've been lucky that I've not been burned by that, to date. Sometimes you just have to rely on the fact that a person, holding a certain position, is behaving ethically, and that is not always a safe assumption. But in the roles that we do, we have to assume that,

> because if you aren't sure the information that you're giving out is accurate, then you shouldn't be giving it out. I definitely remember just being like, well, I'm just gonna trust the people above me, do not feel confident that I know what the right option is here.

Jade's statement seemed to hold a false logic—that she chose to believe the information was accurate just because there was no other way around. This disengagement process mimicked the sense of powerless in the "cannot fight the fight" discourse but differed because there was not even a fight.

Next, only a few participants evoked the marketplace of ideas and practitioner-as-attorney analogy to rationalize ethical stances that were controversial. Andrew, who represented debatable industries such as gun manufacturers and tobacco companies exemplified this mindset. He said,

> It's incumbent upon the media outlet to provide the counterbalance. And I think it's also very important to understand that almost all issues would actually hire public relations firms, or public relations professionals have people working on the other side, this is not one-sided conversation. Let's go back to the tobacco, the nicotine example, so if I'm gonna put forth the argument, hypothetically, that nicotine products are good for you, because they can prevent Alzheimer's, and that is a scientific fact, that is true. It is very likely that the gentleman from the American Cancer Foundation is going to come forth and make the counterargument to that.

Andrew's statement seemed to provide good rationale for him to represent any client and put forth any argument as long as it is not a lie. Nevertheless, he was unaware of the fact that not everyone has access to a public relations representative or to the marketplace, and he remained uncritical of the long-term societal impact of certain clients' undertakings.

In short, moral/ethical disengagement and rationalization were present across participants, usually manifested in the forms of a sense of powerlessness/helplessness, shifting responsibilities to supervisors and consumers, reasoning that the work would be done anyway, defaulting to trust indiscriminately, and using the marketplace/public relations as attorney analogy. The next section delves deeper into the intent stage of EDM.

Ethical intent stage

Ethical intent refers to the prioritization of certain values over others in order to motivate certain behavior. Interview data uncovered factors driving both ethical and unethical conducts. This section details these findings.

Desires to do good. While participants' personal background (e.g., personal values, family upbringing, religious and spiritual beliefs, education) and professional experiences served as the wellspring for their ethical intentions, three desires emerged that enabled participants to prioritize ethics over other motives (e.g., financial gains) in the immediate situation, including anticipated emotions, relationship/trust concerns, and a vision for democracy and society.

Anticipated emotions. Across the interviews, participants mentioned anticipated feelings as a primary source of motivation. These included feelings of peace of mind, pride, fulfillment, and simply feeling good. For example, Emily emphasized, "I wouldn't feel good about myself and my work if I were conveying things that weren't true and inaccurate and could potentially harm people. That's definitely where you can have an impact on people you don't even know." This sentiment was echoed by Nora, who prioritized feeling good and peace of mind, which was contingent upon her holding onto her personal ethics. She said,

> For me personally it's about doing something good and feeling that peace with myself, and knowing I've made the right decision. I know plenty of other people who are motivated by the fear of getting caught, and I can't say that has never been the case. I just think for me personally is more, I want to do good work, and I want to be recognized for the work that I do, and have a solid reputation because of that, rather than anything else. At the end of the day, I wanted to go to bed every night and feel good about what I did that day. And I think the biggest thing for me is just that you stay true to yourself, so you can feel good about yourself and your actions, at the end of every day.

In this statement, Nora acknowledged fear but doing good work and subsequent feelings ultimately drove her ethical behavior. Nora's statement also reflected a concern for professional reputation, which was linked to professional pride among other participants. For example, Leo commented on his decision to quit, "That's when I realized this is not something I could do, because it was not an accomplishment that I would want to tell people about." Anticipated pride—or conversely, shame—stopped Leo from acting on his client's unethical request.

Related, a few participants articulated a sense of fulfillment that pushed them to do good. For example, Joshua commented, "I will say that the number one driver for me is do I think the work is meaningful and valuable and contribute to the society?” Joshua described the work of one of his clients—Metro [city] Chamber—and expanded, “So it's all about helping [city] be a better place to live, work, grow a business. Not that I don't have issues within that, but I start off in a good place because I find value in the work that I do. I can deal with situational challenges.” This statement suggested that feelings of fulfillment due to meaningful work made participants more resilient in the face of ethical challenges. The feelings of fulfillment can also come from helping vulnerable stakeholders. Hazel exemplified this point when commenting on her work,

> I'm intellectually challenged, but I'm also altruistically fulfilled, when there's a victim of domestic violence who calls and says I need to get out of this situation. Can you help me? And I'm able to say to her, yes, I think we can. That feels good at the end of the day, it doesn't matter what my paycheck looks like. And we have lots of opportunities like that where we're able to help individuals and families in need.

While Hazel would prioritize feelings of fulfillment over financial gains, Logan linked this fulfillment with excitement, which he considered as necessary for excellent public relations work. He said, “It was sort of like, how can I do this work in a way that I am feeling fulfilled? If you can get excited about it and you’ll be better at work; you’ll feel good about doing good work.” This statement again showed participants’ desire for good, ethical work stemming from personal feelings. In comparison, other participants were motivated mostly by relational goals.

Relationship and trust concerns. Long-term relationship building and trust were the driving force for many participants. For example, Lily said, “I guess, usually for me, it's the long-term relationship building, whether it's with a client, or with a member of the media, that's usually the driving force of why I behave how I behave." This idea was echoed by Naomi, who also stressed relationships. She noted, "Your relationships at the end of the day are almost everything, your relationship with the media, the clients, and if you don't have those relationships, you're not going to get very far. So, I would say that's definitely a motivating factor." Relatedly, Emma emphasized "you want to be a person that people trust." Again, most participants seemed to be most concerned with relational partners in the immediate workplaces they were situated in (e.g., media, reporters, clients, leaders), instead of publics or members of community. That being said, at least a few participants were driven more by a sense of community wellbeing and vision for society.

Vision for society and democracy. Some participants transcended self-oriented or workplace-centered concerns to the society at large. Their visions for social good and democracy were usually grounded in personal upbringing or education. For example, Naomi attributed her concern for greater good to her younger years. She said,

> I think it definitely comes from my upbringing, my family was very great about having conversations about current events and having grown up in the Wonder Day era, and I was a political sciences major in college, and I've developed a concept of ethics and decision-making and a connection to democracy, things that have been core to my interests, since I was very young. So, in that sense, you know, connecting to history and responsibility to the greater good.

This statement suggested the importance to connect ethics in public relations with its societal function. The same sentiment was echoed by Chloe, whose concern for diversity and inclusion led her to disobey a request to remove a black person from the community college's pamphlet. She said,

> Particularly when there is the sense of injustice that I felt being perpetrated by, upon this black man, by somebody who I was judging to not have the best interest of the greater community, and the benefits to come from people who saw this advertisement, that sense of potential. So, it was against the injustice for this man and against the bias of this president, it was in favor of the hope that could survive to people, um, those were the different elements that ran through my mind.

From Chloe's statement, it can be seen that her behavior was primarily driven by a vision of community members feeling hope and seeing justice. This vision spurred her courage.

In summary, anticipated feelings (pride, peace, fulfilment), workplace relationships and trust, and visions for better society were contributing factors that drove participants' desire to proactively pursue ethics and meaning in their work. Meaning and ethics seemed to go hand in hand. On the other hand, participants named several factors that could detract from ethical conduct in the public relations workplace, according to their own experience or observations.

Factors contributing to doing bad. Participants named a few factors that may drive unethical conduct, namely, fear, greed, instant gratification. These could cause practitioners to disengage from their ethical identities or at least put ethics on the back burner.

Fear. Unsurprisingly, fear was mentioned by many as potentially detracting from ethical behavior. It included fear of career repercussions as well as fear of being wrong, as mentioned by Jade previously. Other participants noted feeling "nervous" when confronting the management. Instead of disregarding it, emotional regulation skills may help practitioners understand their emotions, seek social support, consider worst-case scenarios, and act courageously in spite of fear—these strategies were addressed in the sensemaking process mentioned previously.

Greed. Desire to advance one's career as well as hunger for financial abundance emerged as a potent combination that may drive unethical conduct. This idea was mentioned by Andrew, who spoke specifically about political advocacy and lobbying,

> Really, it's hard to get these jobs, you might only get one shot at it. If this job doesn't work out, you are gonna have to move. And so, you see some of that, as well as the money is very, very good for being fresh out of college, and so there are absolutely some individuals, people earlier in their career absolutely make mistakes in that world.

That being said, Jasmine emphasized that "driven by money can still be ethical" as long as one is not "caught up in greed."

Instant gratification. Interestingly, instant gratification, or a short-term lens, may drive unethical conduct. This point was observed by Naomi, especially among younger practitioners, who have yet developed the strategic, long-term point of view. Naomi commented,

> They [young practitioners] are used to a very short feedback loop between action and reaction and fulfillment. And that fulfillment lives very short, so it may be very difficult for them to see long-term ramifications for their decision-making, and they tend to also be very transactional in their process, in my experience. So, I think that's part of the challenge, the instant gratification. If making an ethical decision doesn't have an immediate payoff, they have a hard time seeing the value in it.

In short, fear, greed, and instant gratification emerged as immediate drivers for unethical conduct on a personal level. Participants also mentioned contextual factors that support either ethical or unethical conducts—on organizational, industry, and societal levels. Those will be detailed in findings for the third research question. Following forming an intent, participants discussed various actions they took amidst ethical challenges.

Ethical action stage

This component of EDM simply refers to the process in which individual act on their ethical intent or motivations. Two broad categories emerged from interview data concerning this component—manifestations of ethical actions in the public relations workplace and speaking up behavior. In particular, prerequisite for speaking up, mindset around confrontation, and strategies for successful persuasion will be detailed, which shed light on ways that practitioners can enhance their ethical agency in situated workplaces.

Manifestations of ethical actions. Participants' ethical actions can be organized into three categories: dissociation, confrontation, and whistleblowing, with the first two appearing a lot more often across interviews. The three may overlap—for example, some participants have confronted clients/organizational decision-makers and chose to leave the relationship after several failed attempts. That being said, each will be discussed in this section.

Dissociation. Disassociation refers to quitting a job or ending a client relationship. It is not a new finding, but the various manner in which participants dissociated is worth noting. While many participants offered parting advice to clients, and many considered quitting as the last resort after unsuccessful attempts to persuade, a few turned a blind eye to clients' unethical behavior as long as their names were disassociated with the specific unethical conduct—these illustrated different levels of ethical ownership.

First, many participants considered disassociation only as the last option, usually after counseling the clients/upper management and considering personal situations. For example, Isaac emphasized, "It's a difficult world. It's rarely black and white, not easy. There are times, ultimately, when the only thing you can do is leave. There could be other solutions before you come to that conclusion." Emma added the element of assessing personal control over the situation. She said,

> I think if you're in a situation where you have no control over the ethical behavior, you can either report it, document it, whatever you need to do that protect yourself, and then find yourself another job. You know if there is a situation where you could report it or change the outcome, you know you can

do that, and then there are some circumstances where you might just be so junior, that the best thing to say is this is not an organization for me and need to find a job that is more in keeping with my own value.

Then, Emma recounted a personal experience where she tried but failed to exert an impact on the client. She ended the relationship eventually to keep her ethics. Similarly, Thomas tried to educate his client around media copyright policies before ultimately having to let the client go. In another case, Penelope chose to end a client relationship because she believed it was not in the client's best interests to continue relying on earned contents after reaping no results from several attempts, and so "it really is time [the client] just do something different." In this case, persuading the client to use paid media—thus ending the contract with Penelope—was the way for Penelope to keep her ethical slate clean.

Some participants were primarily concerned with their own reputation. For example, Grace said,

> I'll try to counsel through that initially. You know, here's why I think that approach is not correct and can be harmful. But if you can't counsel then you can be brave enough to say I'm going to adhere to the standards and I'm not going to judge you. You know that's the way that you choose to go, but I'm also not going to participate in that.

Whereas Grace tried to persuade the client initially, she did not go above and beyond to make sure the client behaved ethically. Similarly, Daniel was satisfied as long as he was not part of the unethical act. He said, "If they want to send out something inaccurate, they say, well, you have to send out this release, I'll say, you're not gonna send out under my name. I'll take my name off the news release." These participants' relaxed approach did not alleviate clients' unethical attempt, compared with those who sought to persuade and influence.

Whistle-blowing/reporting. A whistleblower seeks outside resources to counter organizational unethical conducts. Unfortunately, whistleblowing or reporting unethical behavior was very rare in the sample of this dissertation research. Participants shared their reasons—they considered it as either futile or sabotaging in terms of career. A few mentioned having signed contracts that prevented them from ethically whistle-blow.

First, whistleblowers were perceived as poor team players. For example, Leo, who quit after client's unethical request without whistle-blowing, said, "I feel like I did experience the blowback, or at least part of the blowback that a lot of whistleblowers do. This sense that you're somehow not a team-player. I would have to think very long and hard about doing that."

Second, whistle-blowing was not perceived as useful, especially when the news value of the information was perceived low. Jade recounted her experience with whistle-blowers. She said, "What I've said to people is that once you've made this decision, come to me so I can make sure you get to a journalist who you can trust protect that information. But a lot of times, what may be really bothersome to you isn't newsworthy at the end of the day." Jade suggested that being an anonymous source has also become a common phenomenon, especially in politically active areas such as D.C., that people pay less attention to it. That being said, she added, “Oftentimes, as communications people, we are facilitating these anonymous sources.”

Potentially, whistle-blowing carries its own ethical implications, especially if practitioners have signed confidentiality agreement. This was the reason for Christian. She said, “Probably I would not [whistle-blow], honestly, because for every account that I have, I had to sign some sort of NDA, that’s actually another ethical standard that I have to abide by. Otherwise, that’s another unethical act.”

Notwithstanding the above reasons to refrain from whistle-blowing, one participant, Emma, did recount an experience of reporting a fellow public relations practitioner, though not proactively. It was when she realized this practitioner started working for the unethical client with whom she ended relationship. Emma recounted,

> But then I’m a close friend with a person who is in the Department of Environmental Quality, and we had a chance to have lunch and the topic came up and I did make sure that the person understood [the context], she asked what my opinion of that person was, and I explained that the person certainly played paid-fast-and-loose and that you know I felt it was completely unethical, and she just took that and that was all it was ever said. And that was that. I don't know what happened. But in my own way, I was able to take an additional action, so I sort of combined a lot of what you said [quitting, speaking up, whistle-blowing] into one thing.

Additionally, Emma spoke positively of whistle-blowers and showed admiration. She commented,

> I think of it positively, but I know that it costs people a lot for their personal and professional lives. These people are usually harangued, or they lose their job. They often have financial difficulty because of it, and a lot of times it affects personal and professional relationships. But I think it's essential that we have whistleblowers. You know if I were ever in that circumstance, certainly hope I would be a whistleblower. And I find them very courageous.

Confrontation. Despite its seemingly argumentative undertone, confrontation did not have to be antagonistic. In fact, many participants emphasized having an honest conversation with the client, being firm but polite and poised, and believing clients' good intentions. Furthermore, many participants displayed courage and hardiness when speaking up, in order to help client/management see the ethical implications of certain requests and change course. Their courage and tenacity may stem from personality, specific aspects of personal values, or experience gained throughout life.

For example, Anna considered herself as someone who tended to speak her mind as part of her personality. She said emphatically, "All my life I've been someone who thinks it's really important to speak up for something that either has been done wrong or that feels to me like a violate to my values." With that said, Anna acknowledged that courage in personal lives may not transfer easily to professional realms. She commented, "Professionally, it was hard to do at first, because you're young, inexperienced, and less confident about your place in the workforce**.** But I learned from my experiences, you can speak up, you can just do it politely and courteously."

For Lydia, it was violation of one of her cherished values—gender equality—that urged her to confront the management. She recounted, “I tended to speak up when I see something wrong. I mean, it’s tricky sometimes, depending on what doesn’t feel right to you, but particularly with the sexism, I made it really clear that I was really unhappy about that.”

At the same time, a few participants equated silence with lack of ethics. For example, Grace articulated, “Silence in my mind is not ethical. You have a responsibility to speak up, to advocate for others.” Grace then related to the #MeToo movement, and said, “Oftentimes people’s power was taken away by somebody who had power over them, and we see the effect of that. Could we have stopped this, decades ago, if people were just willing to take a stand and say something?” She then related the movement to everyday practice,

> So, I think now it's a big thing, but when you think about the day-to-day work, you see something that’s not right, and you remain silent because it’s not your department, you are not involved, you feel like it's not your responsibility … Those are all the ethical things that I think could come up in just in day-to-day work life.
>
> The next section details speaking up as it was emphasized across the interviews.

Speaking up/confrontation. Three sub-themes emerged when participants discussed speaking up: prerequisite for speaking up, mindset that facilitated speaking up, and strategies employed during speaking up. Each will be described below.

Prerequisite for speaking up. Investigation, listening, and forming internal trusting relationships emerged as prerequisites for effective speaking. For example, Penelope emphasized having a sense of certainty derived from observing the client and figuring out the issue. She said, "I'm actually very truth to power, [but] a lot of times, I step back when I'm originally starting out with someone, I tried to first observe, and then once I figured out, is this ethical or is it not ethical? Once I made up my own mind, then I will say it." This statement echoed building a sense of awareness through observing and knowing relational partners. Related, Naomi emphasized listening and equated it with bravery, Naomi said,

> Being an ethical PR practitioner requires an intense amount of bravery for many clients, often, in those opportunities where we need to stand up and speak, and say, I think we're going the wrong direction, or have you considered this? But it also feeds into having the bravery, especially with senior-level practitioners, we often think we know the answer, and when we need to stop and listen. And sometimes we spend a lot of time putting out information and messaging because we just want to bury the bad news, or just kind of bury the situation with a lot of information when we just need to stop and take a moment, and instead of putting information out, stop and really listen to our stakeholders.

Last but not least, participants emphasized building internal relationships and forming trust with clients before an ethical situation occurs. This way, practitioners would be kept in the know, and the relationship can lubricate potential frictions that arise from speaking up. For example, Jade mentioned staying in the loop, "It certainly puts pressure on us to make sure we have built those trusting relationships and that we are not being lied to. So, you are not caught up in accidentally telling a lie because you've been lied to as well." Jade then recounted her efforts in building relationships in an organizational setting that was inhospitable. She said,

> Embassy wasn't the most conducive for that when I first arrived. And I built the relationships to make it conducive, or people like, they can come to me, and I get things done, and I'd be helpful, or I know what's happening. So as people had that trust with you, you then feel confident to voice objections, and there are very difficult messages that I voiced to the ambassador and the deputy of ambassador about their judgment in situations. Ambassador many a time, he was not one for thinking before he spoke, I would put it that way, and the environment can seem very formal and intimidating, but if you are eager to build that level of trust, you can actually help change that environment.

Importantly, Jade suggested that public relations practitioners can actually mold organizational environment instead of solely being molded. This interaction will be explained in more depth in findings for the third research question.

Similarly, Ruby emphasized internal relationship building and being seen as a source of expertise. She said, "You have to build those relationships with executives so that they trust you, being seen as an expert within your organization so that people take you seriously."

Building trust and relationships applied similarly to agencies. Joshua emphasized being seen on the same team with clients, which lubricated difficult conversations. He commented,

> I like to say that I don't speak truth to power very easily. It’s hard for me to have difficult conversations, so in order to overcome that, I try my hardest to really get to be a part of and be treated as part of the client team. I never want to be the agency that’s held at an arm's length, and we do our best work to be part of the same group working together toward the same goals. And when you get that level of trust, I think it's easier to be able to say, you know, hey look, here's what's going on. You know, I'm doing this in the spirit of we want the best solution possible. And I think that's part of the reason that there's value in having a more enduring relationships, although somebody would argue, every once in a while, you need to deliver bad news. But the more I think the clients see that I am invested in them and their goals, and because I personally am because that’s work I really find meaningful, then it's a lot easier to have those difficult conversations, because you really do feel like, we're all in this together, we want to have the right solution.

Here, Joshua’s effort in building trust with client helped alleviate his anxiety of conducting difficult conversations. Moreover, his efforts seemed to evolve into a genuine sense of “we are all in this together.” In addition to these prerequisites, an effective mindset toward speaking up also eased anxiety, built confidence, and facilitated successful execution.

Mindset for speaking up. A majority of participants mentioned mental models that had facilitated their speaking up behavior, with the common theme of treating it as an opportunity rather than threat. The opportunities lie in assessing alignment, exerting influence, building professional reputation through voice. Also, having confidence, being service-oriented, and steadfastness contributed to raising voice.

To begin with, some participants treated speaking up as an opportunity to assess fit—whether their personal values aligned with organization's/client's. This point was best exemplified by Amelia, who emphasized, "You better speak up, because you'll find you're working for organizations that you do not align with. If you speak, and they punish you, then you're not working somewhere you should be working, right? Use your own mind." In addition, Amelia considered speaking up as an opportunity to exert personal influence. She said,

> I show up in an organization, I do what's been done, and I realize, that's not really efficient, right? Let's change it. But people are not comfortable with change. It's a very uncomfortable thing. But it's the way things get better, how progress and improvement happens. So, I would say, be aware and don't be afraid to speak up, even though you might not have very much power in an organization, you still have your own sphere, right? So, I'd make sure what I can do, I am doing. I would not be afraid to speak, and you know, if they want to judge you or punish you, then so be it. Right?

Similarly, Jade valued the opportunity to challenge conventional wisdom, and her past action of shaking status quo had in fact raised her professional reputation. She recounted,

> At the embassy, it was less like ethical challenges, and more about challenging the conventional wisdom, which isn't always the easiest either, you know, when everyone in the room is agreeing on something, and you are

> the only voice being like, that doesn't make sense, or I don't agree with that, it's a bit of a challenge. But I cannot think of an opportunity where I have regretted raising a concern or challenging conventional thinking. Creating those conversations can be very helpful, both for your professional reputation, as someone who can be considered as a valuable voice in the room. But also, because if someone's decision is taken, and it's not the one you're advocating for, then at least you did your best not just keep it quiet. My only addition on action is, taking that small step, raising the point, to your supervisor, within your group, very rarely, you'd regret that.

Having confidence in landing another job and in the power of communication appeared crucial. For example, Lydia, who spoke up against sexism mentioned early, had changed jobs many times while picking up as many skills as she could along the way. She reflected on her confidence gained through her unique career trajectory, "I think one thing I've learned through having such a diverse career and learning so many new skills, is that I'm confident that I can always find another job." Andrew echoed, "that if you have to walk away from something, or have to make someone upset, that you career will survive that." Andrew further explained where his confidence came from:

> [Confidence] came from years of experiences, and the statistics always back up. Once you know that you've got clients coming and going, the phone's ringing with people wanting you to work with them, you figured out in the case of starting a firm, you figured out your new business prospects, that I can tell you I'll have six new projects on my desk next week to take a look at, and

> pitch, I'll probably win one of them. That's where that confidence comes from … it is kind of knowing where your next meal is going to be.

Both Lydia and Andrew mentioned younger practitioner who lack experience or career history may not have the same level of confidence. In this case, confidence in oneself and in the impact of communication may alleviate fear and anxiety. This was suggested by Ruby. She emphasized, "I think that you really have to believe in yourself, in that you know what you are talking about, in that you should feel confident enough to speak up, because in the long run, people positively impact the organization." Ruby expanded on several ways to build confidence, including faking, referring to one's credentials, having internal support, and showing evidence. She articulated,

> Even if you're a little bit freaking out, just kind of faking it, and exuding that confidence, you will feel that confidence, right? But I felt like I had the credentials, like I had the resume that shows I know what I'm talking about … You know, I've done the research, and I have the statistics and the evidence that this is what needs to happen, so again, I wasn't again just talking out my butt, like, I had all my ducks in the row.

Another helpful mindset is to treat speaking up as a responsibility to serve the clients. This idea was best demonstrated by Grace, who said,

> We don't lie for our clients. We don't encourage our clients to lie. We want to find truth and we want to help them find a way to deal with that truth even when it's not so pretty, you know, even if it's ugly, even when it has results in

> the short term, may seem to be challenging. We want to help them to work through that.

Grace's quotation suggested her commitment to seeing clients through difficulties and making sure they behave appropriately. This was in sharp contrast to participants who would be satisfied as long as they were not associated with clients' unethical conduct.

Last, accepting that one may be in the ethical long haul, so to speak, can be helpful. For example, Logan recounted his experience in an in-house setting, where he was in a constant tug of war with the executives over numbers to be presented in the monthly report. Even though Logan eventually left the company, he recalled persistently arguing with the executives each month without giving in. He said, "You'll never gonna win, 100% of the time, right? So, there's just this constant act." The level of tenacity and determination were worth noting.

In summary, it appeared crucial to establish and maintain an effective mindset for speaking up so as to ease the anxiety, fear, or worry surrounding uncomfortable conversations. Positive mind models included using confrontation as an opportunity to assess alignment, to exert personal influence, to build professional reputation, and to provide service with ethics being an integrative component. In addition, confidence in one's career path, oneself, and the impact of communication appears critical. Persistence and hardiness seemed equally important. Last but not least, strategies—including cognitive, emotional, and communicative ones—emerged as indispensable for carrying out difficult conversations.

Strategies for speaking up. When asked about how they actually spoke up with success, participants offered a variety of strategies, many of which were not directly related to the core of the public relations work. The strategies included fostering a dialogue, giving recommendations, offering alternatives, naming the unethical act, using a gain frame, playing devil's advocate, embodying emotional intelligence by showing empathy and managing emotions, altering power differentials by building coalitions, and appealing to audience's moral philosophical orientations. Common among these techniques was a pursuit for win-win using creativity and empathy, even when resolution failed to materialize. Participants also displayed political, business, and relational savvy in the process. This section will detail these techniques, organized into three parts: (1) what to say (content), (2) how to say it (manner), and (3) corresponding emotional techniques.

When it comes to the content of confrontational conversation, first, many participants tended to "assume for the best," which put them in a cooperative and calm state. For example, Logan explained, "I don't think it's always the clients' fault. They wouldn't necessarily think of what they were doing as unethical from a journalistic perspective." Austin emphasized having an honest conversation and instead of pontificating, he would seek clients' ideas. He said, "If it does happen [unethical request], you can have a pretty honest conversation with folks and say, listen, we think this is a little thin. Is there a way we can go deeper on it? Or avoid this particular thing?" Sadie, on the other hand, emphasized allowing the clients/organizational leaders to raise their opinion. She shared, "You have to give people an opportunity to say, why do you think this is the way we should go? And then here’s problem and let me outline for you … You need to make sure that there’s an opportunity to have the discussion.” After having an honest dialogue, as well as mapping out different scenarios, Sadie added that one should reevaluate the situation and consider other options, such as leaving, if clients/leaders are not willing to change course.

Next, it was important to speak about ethics in a grain frame—this includes highlighting the positive aspects of ethical conduct, emphasizing clients’/organizations’ best interests, and tying ethics with business success. For example, Thomas, leader of a public relations research firm, reported that one of the biggest ethical challenges in the research/analytics sub-field was that clients may want to alter research results to reach certain goals. Thomas would then help clients look at data in a more positive way while stressing continued improvement. He said, “We had clients to say things like, there are bonus depends on this, and we say, here’s another way to look at it. It’s not as bad as you think. We help them understand the data better and help them find a way to leverage the findings in a positive way.”

A few other participants sought to emphasize client’ best interests when acting ethically. For example, Emily shared how she would talk to a client, “You need to have a conversation with them and say, thank you for sharing this information with me, but I don't feel comfortable dealing with this. I don't think it's in your best interests.” Some advocated for ethics in business terms. This is best illustrated by Andrew, who said, “I firmly believe it is in our client’s and our firm’s best interest to behave ethically every step along the way, and so learning how to make that a business case has been probably the biggest shift in that, those decisions.” Similarly, Grace would emphasize client's ultimate goals and that she had the expertise and commitment to get them get there,

> I'm always operating from that, you know, I want the best for you as an organization. I want you to make the best decisions … I want you to win, and so, how do we do that? By making the right decision. And sometimes, the way that they may be thinking may not be the way that gets us there, and I'm happy to point that out because ultimately, we're on the same page.

Third, being a problem-solver by offering recommendations and alternative solutions was one of the most often recommended strategies across the board. This requires creativity, sophisticated knowledge, and ability to detect underlying needs, in line with care ethics. For example, Amelia, who worked in public relations research and analytics, had faced the same ethical challenge in terms of clients wanting to alter research results. Amelia would first explore how the results were tied to clients' performance evaluation, and then she would double check the results, and eventually, when data looked accurate on her end, she would tell the clients, "I've done my diligence by checking every article and every score, and there is nothing I can do about it, but based on my professional experience, what I can do for you, is to recommend actions to improve your score." This approach was echoed by Nathan, who also worked in research. He said, "When you have to give someone bad news, don't just say, it didn't work, this was a failure. But a good research result is to be able to say, yeah, this didn't work, but here's what would make it work better." For practitioners who work in a more strategic communication role, participants stressed offering alternative, ethical solutions so as to be seen as a problem-solver. For example, Anna said, “I won’t say that’s a stupid idea, but I would say, let’s see, we can tweak that idea a little bit. I’m not sure that’s the way we should go.”

Fourth, directly naming the unethical act or explaining the larger implications of violating an ethical rule were employed by participants. For example, Amelia, the previously mentioned practitioner who works in research, tried to explicate to clients how changing research results would compromise not only her ethics, the firm’s ethics, but also the international standards on research and evaluation, as well as country-to-country comparison. After that, she would emphasize “I’m doing the best thing for you.” Another participant, Anna, was once asked to work for two competing clients in her agency, to the point where she felt like she was compromising both clients’ results. She then confronted her boss and directly named “conflict of interests.” Then she was dropped from the case without any repercussion.

Fifth, playing the devil’s advocate may be necessary in some situations. This was suggested by Allison, who despite her own political ideologies, would confront her boss by relating to stakeholders who she may not side with. She shared a hypothetical situation,

> So, my president and CEO come to me and says I want to put up a statement that says everyone who supported the president is an idiot. But here's the thing that I do in that circumstance. I say well, we have to take a moment and look at it from the perspective of the person who supported the president. And try to understand why that person might have made that decision, so then, maybe there's a way to thread the needle that instead of saying everyone who supported our current president is an idiot or is gullible and stupid and

> uneducated and white supremacist, that you're taking a moment, even if it's just a moment, to play the devil's advocate, to look at the other side and at least be aware of the other side, that I think is the crux of being a communication professional.

Allison’s statement paralleled previous findings that practitioners need to collect diverse perspectives, particularly stakeholders’ in the judgment/sensemaking stage. During the ethical action stage, they need to be able to relate these perspectives to the upper management/clients, regardless of their own ideologies.

Last but not least, persuasive strategies that appeal to targeted audience—in this case upper management and clients—were highly encouraged. Interestingly, this included not only using a variety of rational arguments and emotional appeals, but also discourses of moral philosophies that correspond with the audience’s moral orientations. For example, Ruby emphasized adopting a variety of hard and soft evidence. She shared,

> When it comes to anything that’s difficult for people to change their mind, showing evidence backed with statistics, and showing what good can come of it, might help people turn around. I think maybe a combination of case studies, a narrative or story, a table of outcomes, profits increase, to appeal to people who like testimonials versus statistics.

In this statement, Ruby highlighted attending to people’s acceptance of persuasive evidence. In comparison, Naomi recommended understanding how clients or upper management function from a moral philosophical perspective so as to appeal to them. She explicated,

> And oftentimes the approach I take is not so much about me, it is about the person or the dynamic that I'm working with. So, for example, when I was working with a defense contractor, there was a certain amount of care, but I was dealing with engineers; they're very rationally driven. And so, you can show numbers. My CFO was a numbers guy, so I had to be very rationally driven and consequence driven, where my VP of HR was very people-driven, so virtue and empathy were in story, and anecdotal examples were very strong persuasive tool for him. So, it's not just understanding different ethical constructs and how you function. It's even more important to understand and apply those constructs to your clients or people within your organizations so you can understand how best to reach them and how best to counsel them effectively.

This statement suggests that not only moral philosophies play a role in the ethical action component, but also an understanding of both ethical agents' and audiences' moral orientations would be instrumental for successful execution of ethical judgement.

The second sub-theme for strategic confrontation concerns with manner of speaking up, which is no less important. Participants across the board emphasized being tactful, diplomatic, courteous, and projecting power and confidence. For example, Naomi, instructor and independent consultant, commented on young practitioners' lack of diplomacy,

> How do I have that conversation? And how do I open a dialogue, with someone who doesn't see something as being a problem? We never really

teach them [young practitioners] how to do that. We never teach them how to stand up for themselves, we just tell them to go fight. So, when they cave in, and they kind of fumble their way through it, oftentimes they come out very rude, and not with the outcome that they wanted, and they're often then discouraged from doing it ever again, and I think we end up shitting ourselves to the foot when we don't pair empowerment with diplomacy.

On the other hand, Grace's account best illustrated what diplomacy may look like—it is a combination of being respectful, firm, and detecting unspoken needs and emphasizing clients' best interests. She said,

> I'm very tactful, and I always operate out of a place of respect but being firm. You have to be respectful; you hear people out, you try to listen for what not being said, and understand their perspective, you know, why they make that particular opinion or stand? I know that there are lots of unspoken clues that can help you understand people, so I'm always seeking to understand them, and to ensure that they feel heard, and check my understanding by repeating back what they are saying, and work through it. It's a process.

Equally important was to project power, expertise, and confidence, even when one needed to fake. This was emphasized by Ruby, who said, "Even if you're a little bit freaking out, just kind of faking it, and exuding that confidence." Chloe shared the importance of projecting professionalism, status, and power, through her words, manner, and clothes. She said, "I learned to foster a sense of professionalism. You went in dressed well, and it conveyed a sense of power. So, I was basically putting on a bit of an act, in order to create a greater good." Conveying confidence through expertise may be especially important in organizations filled with experts in other fields. This was Jade's experience. She reported, "Working at a think tank with a whole bunch of people who consider themselves world-leading experts on various matters, it's kinda difficult, but you get there, and convince them that you are an expert in communications." Jade concluded that her ability to ask questions, speak up, and offer expertise had earned her trust and relationships in an organization that appeared intimidating.

While an implicit emphasis on empathy was present across interviews, emotional skills were explicitly discussed by a few participants, especially the ability to monitor and regulate one's own emotions, to empathize with clients or other organizational members to alleviate stress, and to strategically influence others' emotions. For example, Thomas showed the importance of empathy. He said, "We understand the concerns that people have, and do our best to alleviate their concerns." Evelyn, on the other hand, believed emotional awareness and strategically using emotions for influence were crucial. She commented, "I think there's value in being able to mask how you feel and be strategic about how you introduce those feelings to actually move the needles in one direction or another." Evelyn's notion was similar to the concept of emotional intelligence, which she expanded on, "I think emotional intelligence is huge … because you have to know the emotions of the people, to figure out how you are gonna bring them closer to do something." On the other hand, Grace offered a more detailed explanation of the role emotions play in business decisions, including ethical ones, and why privileging rationality is dubious. When asked about her thoughts on emotional intelligence, she commented with excitement,

> Yeah, you said the word right out of my mouth. I was gonna say emotional intelligence, and I agree. I think that we are trained to believe that business decisions and ethical decisions are rational decisions, but I absolutely think that, for us to decline that part of ourselves that is emotional will race us down the false road. It's impossible to divorce them, one way or the other. So, I think that what you do with your emotions is that they can often be a barometer to learn. You have just a feeling that something is off, but you don't have the information to support that, I don't think that means that you ignore your feeling. That leads you to the next step of examining, okay, why my I feeling that? Is there something here that I need to investigate, so you gather information that help you to make that decision. Sometimes emotions lead us to act, out of compassion or out of empathy; they are not rational decisions, and they don't need to be rational. If I see somebody choking. I can say, oh my God I'm not sure I know how to help … Like I am going to be rational and say well only a trained professional should do that. Or am I going to be emotional and make ethical decisions to help in any way that I can to save a life?

Grace's statement addressed several aspects of emotional intelligence and how they may play into the EDM process: first, emotions in the form of discomfort can trigger awareness leading to examining the situation; then, emotions such as empathy and compassion can motivate ethical or prosocial actions. According to Grace, rationality may not have the same function, and may even be counterproductive, if one rationalizes inaction. Furthermore, a central idea expressed by Grace was that rationality and emotions simply cannot be divorced. This concurred with a whole-person approach to ethics.

Whereas political savvy was manifested in a variety of ways that have been discussed (e.g., being diplomatic and tactful when talking, framing ethics in gain and business terms, and offering alternative solutions), altering power differentials by building coalition with other higher-level executives was one specific political move employed by one participant. Naomi shared a story in which she was stuck between two organizational leaders who had conflicting opinion of whether to continue working with a contractor, who seemed incompetent but had a personal relationship with one of the leaders. Eventually, Naomi sought help from her PRSA colleagues and mentors, and being coached through the situation. She shared how she solved the problem,

> They [mentors] kind of coached me through how I could bring that issue off with other leaders within the company, and that's what I did, and so, my CEO ended up getting involved, and we had a productive discussion, and so it turned out that we did end up doing it properly.

Naomi's statement reinforced the importance to have allies and mentors in the industry so as to navigate ethical dilemmas better.

In short, a variety of strategies and solutions were offered by participants in order to translate ethical judgment into actual actions, this is important to consider, as public relations workplaces were characterized by relational concerns, power struggles, and conflicts in interests. Results offered insights into how practitioners can best frame ethics-related message, speak up in a right manner, and employ emotional skills and political savvy to execute decisions.

In summary, findings for the second research question revealed how public relations practitioners embodied ethical agency through the EDM process that comprised five components: pre-awareness, awareness, judgment, intent, and action. A summary of findings for RQ2 can be found in Table 3. These five components did not always happen in a lockstep manner, for example, desires seemed to motivate awareness as well as actions. Alignment during the pre-awareness did not always happen despite participants' best efforts, and participants kept monitoring client/organizational behavior to ensure ethics were maintained. That being said, each component is important because "the strength of the chain is the strength of the weakest link," as one participant, Isaac, noted. A variety of cognitive, emotional, and discursive strategies were uncovered that could both facilitate EDM. These skills not only confirmed Simola's (2011) care based EDM framework but added more nuances and layers. Since rational analysis was also found in EDM, so were other moral philosophies in addition to care ethics, this dissertation research therefore proposed a new whole-person based EDM, building upon Simola's (2011) work. In comparison to Simola's (2011) care based EDM model, the new framework is displayed in Figure 2.

Themes	Sub-themes	Brief Description
Applications of ethics in the public relations workplaces: two contexts	Applying ethics in everyday work	Some participants applied ethics in routine, everyday practice; they seemed to be mindful, attentiveness, sensitive, and empathetic.

	Applying ethics in ethical challenges	Ethical challenges were dilemmas with ethical implications and defied black-and-white, easy solutions. The nature of ethical dilemmas was explored. Participants tended to follow a situational approach to resolving the challenge/dilemma despite following universal values, due to the uncertain, complex nature of these situations.
Pre-awareness: seeking alignment		Participants emphasized hiring the right people/selecting the right client/employer as prerequisite to EDM. But ethical challenges still existed when alignment was achieved due to subjective and changeable social norms and public expectations. Equally important were defining success and setting professional roles/boundaries before collaboration. Despite being intentional and careful, participants may not detect ethical issues until into the client relationship.
Ethical sensitivity stage	Everyday awareness: being mindful and growing an ethical antenna	Participants who integrated ethics into their everyday work exhibited high levels of sensitivity, cultivated overtime, by anticipating issues, developing knowledge of work/clients/stakeholders, keeping up with the media cycle/industry news/worlds events, cultivating empathy—combining rational thinking and emotions, and through case- and behaviorally-modeling based training.
	Awareness during an ethical challenge: Intuition and empathy	Intuitions—in the form of bodily sensations and gut feelings—emerged as the primary trigger for practitioners to recognize an

		ethical situation/challenge. Gut feelings were not always correct but ignoring them can be dangerous. Further investigation and dialogue should follow to make intuition meaningful. Empathy for stakeholders emerged as another good trigger. For some, empathy may be the basis on which intuition and gut feelings are constructed.
Ethical judgment stage	Intuitive acting	Intuitive acting based on fast judgment occurred during everyday practice and in ethically problematic situations where solutions were relatively clear-cut.
	Applying moral philosophies	Participants evoked a variety of moral philosophical tenets—often implicitly—when making ethical judgments. <u>Deontology</u>: universality <u>Teleology</u>: moral imagination OR self-enlightened approach; pragmatism <u>Virtue ethics</u>: practitioner's character or organizational identity <u>Care ethics</u>: caring attitude, prioritizing relationships, use of emotional skills especially empathy; being flexible and paying attention to situational particulars <u>Combination/balance</u>: care ethics seemed to be the basis on which others can be built.
	Making sense of ambiguities	<u>Investigation/research</u>: identifying values, playing a reporter role, examining multiple perspectives. <u>Group consultation/dialogue</u>: gathering multiple perspectives, checking gut reactions, and debating issues.

		Assessing personal situation/seeking support: envisioning the worse-case scenario and objectively considering one's tolerance for it. Monitoring/regulating one's emotions: emotions shape reasoning and analysis positively/negatively, requiring discrimination.
	Moral/ethical disengagement	Several cognitive processed emerged that allowed participants to morally disengage from the situation or rationalize less ethical options: powerlessness, shifting responsibilities, believing someone else would do it anyway, blind trust of superiors, and practitioner-as-attorney analogy.
Ethical intent stage	Desires to do good	Three desires emerged as driving ethical behavior in the immediate situation: anticipated emotions (peace, pride, fulfillment, meaning), relationship/trust concerns, a vision for democracy/society.
	Factors contributing to doing bad	Fear, greed, and instant gratification emerged as major drivers for unethical conduct.
Ethical action stage	Manifestations of ethical actions	Dissociation: usually the last option, after failed attempts, or when participants perceived little control or influence. Whistleblowing/reporting: participants considered it as futile or sabotaging. Some signed contracts that prevented it. Confrontation: usually not contentious or antagonistic; participants had honest conversations, showed courtesy, and acted in good faith; can be equated with counsel or consultation;

		participants displayed courage and hardiness stemming from personality, personal values, or experiences gained through life.
	Speaking up/confrontation	Prerequisite for speaking up: undertaking thorough investigation, listening, and forming internal/client trusting relationships emerged as prerequisite for effective confrontation. Mindset for speaking up: Assessing alignment, exerting influence, building professional reputation through voice, having confidence, providing service, and steadfastness emerged as effective mindsets that contributed to raising voice. Strategies for speaking up: a variety of cognitive, emotional, and discursive strategies emerged as effective, including fostering a dialogue, giving recommendations, offering alternatives, naming the unethical act, using a gain frame, playing devil's advocate, embodying emotional intelligence, altering power differentials by building coalitions, and appealing to audience's moral philosophical orientations; common theme was to gain win-win with creativity and empathy. Political, business, and relational savvy was emphasized.

Table 3 Summary of Participants' EDM

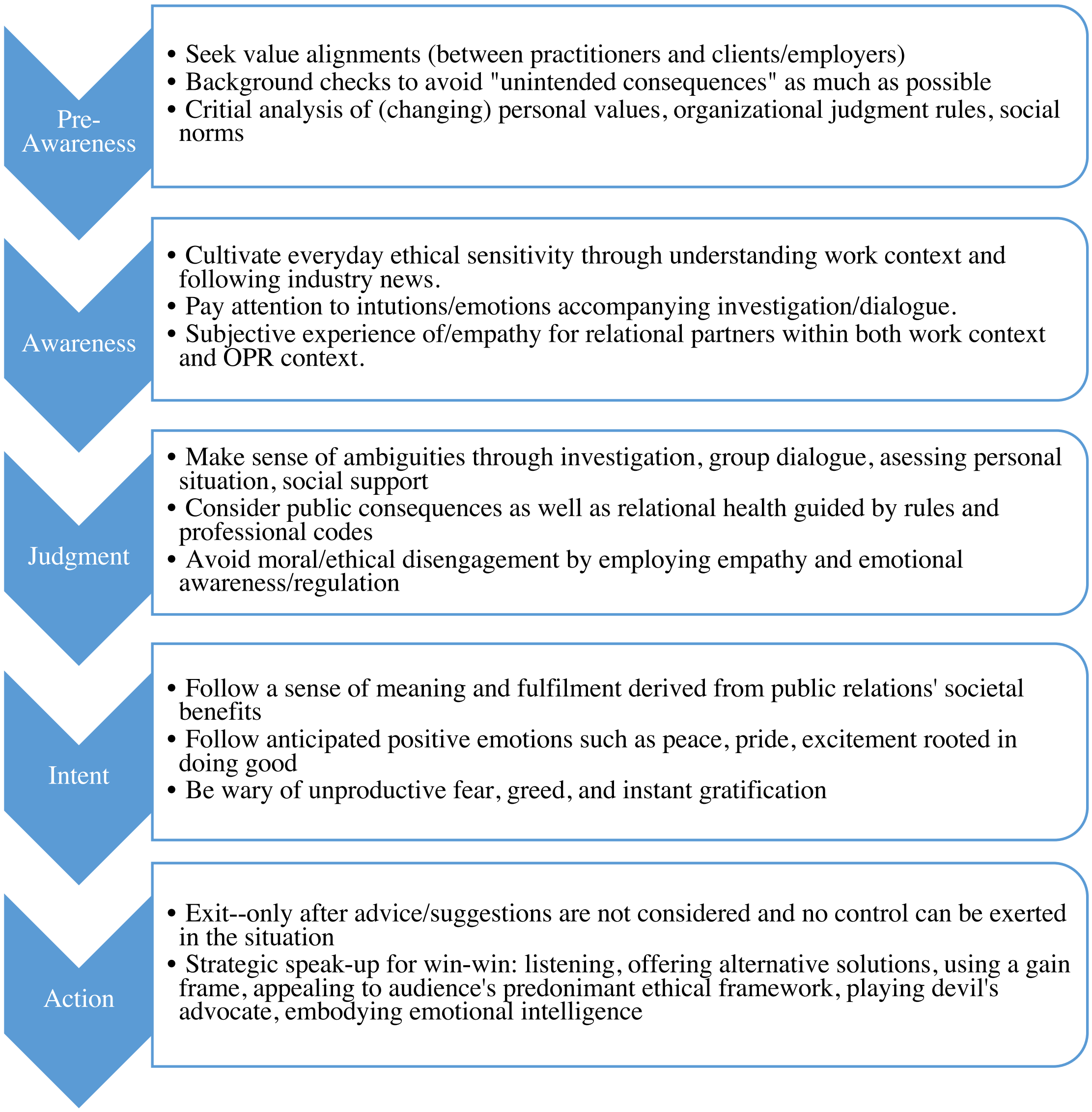

Figure 2 Whole-Person Based EDM Process

Nevertheless, practitioners do not work in a vacuum, and their EDM as well as construction of the term ethics can be influenced by meso- (organizational, industry-level) and macro- (societal) level contexts. Conversely, they may mold their environments via an ethical leadership role. This interaction among multiple levels of ethicality will be addressed next.

RQ3: Interactions among Micro-, Meso-, and Macro-level Ethicality

The third research question asked how, if at all, public relations practitioners' ethicality interact with meso- and macro-level ethicality, based on participants' perceptions. Three layers emerged from interviews, including organizational, industry, and societal level ethicality. This section will detail each layer, and how that particular level interacts with practitioner ethicality.

Individual-organizational interaction

Several organizational contextual elements emerged from data that may positively contribute to participants' EDM. They included, formal and informal ethical mechanisms, caring and protective organizational culture, permeable organizational structure, and ethical and inspirational leadership. Conversely, a business reality that prioritizes liability over authenticity, rushed pace, apathy, and negative socialization could detract from practitioner ethicality. On the other hand, data indicated several ways that participants may have influenced organizational-level ethics, including mediating relationships, building ethical and caring culture, communicating ethical standards, mapping stakeholders, educating clients and other organizational members, and last, leading by example. These findings will be detailed below.

Positive organizational contexts. This section addresses contributing organizational factors, from the aspects of ethical infrastructure, organizational structure, and leadership. These factors were commonly perceived by participants as having positive impact on their ethicality.

Formal ethical infrastructure. Ethical infrastructure includes formal and informal mechanisms that maintain organizational-level ethics. Formal mechanisms that played a role in participant ethicality included codes of ethics, ethical trainings, punishment and reward systems, oversight procedure, and the presence of a chief executive officer or committee.

First, participants commonly believed codes of ethics would be instrumental but not sufficient. For example, Evelyn considered codes as helpful because "whatever the company may be, if their marketing and the public relations team are held to a code of ethics then they're innately going to fall in line with that code, because their future has to be dependent on it." That being said, participants thought life and events may be more complicated than abstract codes could address, as discussed previously.

On the other hand, Isaac recommended a code, or guideline for ethics that is more aspirational and inspirational, which is adopted by his agency. Isaac shared,

> We did have a code, but our code was more aspirational. And we didn't call it a code. We called it a guideline, because codes always sound very legal, and you don't look at them until something very bad happens. I think it is aspirational because they inspire to a better world, they inspire to better behavior. And I think it wouldn't inspire anyone, by reading the codes.

Isaac's comment suggested that a code of ethics can carry negative connotations; it tends to follow a reactive discourse rather than a proactive theme. The difference between a reactive versus proactive discourse surrounding ethics can also be noted from participants' attitude toward punishing/reward systems. Generally, participants did not endorse punishment, but instead preferred creating cultures that reward altruistic behavior. For example, Amelia said,

> [Instead of saying] do this, don't do that, where very altruistically, you feel good, you're doing service, you're volunteering for the community, you're gonna want to make better choices. Instead of punishing, offer employees a mentor, right? Publish when someone does something good and ethical in the organization. Use internal communication to show it, when someone does something good, and then, you know, people being inspired by it, and want to do that.

Amelia's comment echoed Isaac's, in terms of inspiring organizational members to act ethically via inspiration, not policing, forcing, or punishment.

Unfortunately, most participants in the sample did not seem to have specific ethics code or reward systems in their organizations. Only a few participants referred to ethics trainings, and others mentioned generic employee trainings that included an ethics component, or trainings on specific ethical topics such as sexual harassment. That being said, Naomi noted the types of training that would be helpful. She said,

> Oftentimes, ethics training becomes an annual online course, where we talk about gift policies and contracting policies, and disclosure, privacy, and confidentiality, and all of those concepts, and I've seen my share of them, and ones that are done well are really situationally driven, and are specific to the task within the workplace. So, for example, in my previous role as a contractor, we had a very scenario driven training where we talked about actual, real-life situations that were actually rather common, about security

and privacy and confidentiality, and how you handle a situation when it comes happen and processes and procedures. And that seemed to resonate well.

Naomi's comments implied the common perception that ethics trainings are sometimes window dressing, and the truly helpful ones are situational driven and action-oriented.

Third, some participants mentioned oversight procedures, such as having leaders check each email to be sent off to clients. This approach was adopted by Andrew's agency. On the other hand, Anna perceived her agency's office arrangements contributed to organizational ethicality. In her three-person, small firm, they shared an open space and faced one another, and therefore it was very difficult to do something unethical because they could hear one another's dialogue with the client. Anna said half-jokingly, "we cannot do anything unethical even if we wanted to."

The last component mentioned by participants included the establishment of a Chief Ethics Officer (CEO), or committee, which is becoming more common in recent decades. Isaac was in fact the CEO of his agency; however, he emphasized a cultural role played by the Chief Ethics Officer, instead of being seen as the police of the office. Isaac shared a story in which he was informed by a stranger during a conference that a former employee left the agency due to ethical issues, yet Isaac was not aware of the employee's reason for quitting until he met the employee's friend—the informant—at the conference. Looking back, Isaac emphasized that a CEO is no cure-all. In fact, he or she needs to make a conscious effort not to be perceived as playing a policing role by employees, so that they would come to the CEO for consultation.

Ethical climate and organizational culture. In fact, most participants believed the informal organizational ethical infrastructure—including climate, culture, and people—are much more important and impactful than the formal mechanisms. An informal infrastructure characterized by dialogue, caring relationships, humility, and psychological safety appeared tremendously instrumental to practitioner ethicality.

Dialogue, or open communication, was emphasized by several participants; for example, Naomi, who earlier recommended situational approach to ethics training, emphasized that none could "replace the dialogue that should be happening in the workplace about situations." Sadie echoed by saying, "I think an organization has responsibility to encourage the people who work there to be open and transparent, to have an environment where there can be open discussions." Similarly, leadership's willingness to dialogue over ethics was seen as critical, usually in the form of open-door policy. Camila was proud of this aspect of her agency, and said,

> We have open-door policy. So, everyone can just go in and talk to the upper management, and as far as I know, they're pretty good about listening to employees, and in agency life, sometimes clients are not easy to deal with, in some extreme situations, our agency did fire the clients because of that. I think probably that's why I, personally, haven't really had encountered any ethical situation, because the upper management is pretty good about that.

In fact, leadership was important in establishing the ethical tones of the organization, establishing a caring and developing culture, and creating psychological safety—psychological safety emerged as an important factor for participants to speak up. Naomi explained the differences between textbook ethical cases and the real workplaces when explaining the reasons,

> How much an employee will open up and have a dialogue about how unethical decisions will affect them or their perspective depends on the culture of the organization, because they're afraid of offending a decision-maker or leader or offending someone else in the workplace. It comes with a different set of consequences than it does in an academic classroom. And so, people are much more hesitant to open up.

Anna, who earlier mentioned that she tended to speak up since she was young, concurred, "There're some places that I've worked that I felt very secure and very confident, and there are others that you never knew if you were going to be fired the next day." Therefore, employers were perceived as having an obligation to build a safe yet brave space for employees to talk about difficult ethical issues.

Next, an organizational culture that cares for and develops employees emerged as crucial to foster employee commitment, which could translate to doing what is best for the company. For example, Naomi said, "When they [organizations] have a culture that includes ethics and the overall development of their employees … when you [employees] feel that level of an organization's investment in you, you're more likely to act in a way that's best for the organization." Similarly, Evelyn commended her agency on protecting, caring for, and developing employees. She reflected, "The culture [of the agency] was great, and they really are protective of their employees. Agency work can be very grueling, right? One of the things that I've been really humbled by going to [her agency] is that, this agency really does prioritize its people." Therefore, Evelyn added that the employees were all "committed to excellence" and they continued to educate themselves to be creative. There was "an innate desire of the employees to do quality work." It appeared that Evelyn considered quality work as part of ethics.

Related, an organization's prioritization on people and relationships—both internally and externally—was perceived by participants as contributing to an ethical climate, and thereby facilitating practitioner ethicality. For example, James spoke about his employing organization with pride, "I have a company that works with every single person, and they value your opinion. They also want to make sure they're doing their best to show to the public they're interested in helping the city grow." In this environment, James noted that he was able to discuss and even debate about ethical matters. Additionally, he emphasized both internal and external relationships by saying, "You know you're dealing with a good organization when they develop a relationship with their publics, could be their internal publics or external publics." On the other hand, Thomas emphasized hiring the right people who "naturally reach ethical conclusions in their behavior" and are committed to producing honest results and helping clients. "It's not a particularly ego-driven organization," Thomas concluded.

Organizational structure. A permeable and flexible organizational structure was perceived as critical for both in-house and agency practitioners, which provided opportunities to access leadership and have dialogue. Chloe recounted her experiences in several different workplaces and noted that she was more likely to speak up in an industry setting than in higher education, because of "less impenetrable stratification of the organization." She expanded,

> In a situation in academia, there's a Dean, there's a President, and there is a real stratification in sense of hierarchy. When I worked in this industry situation, there were opportunities for casual discussion. I guess I think of the word permeable, there were more opportunities for discourse within than just simply having directive.

Hazel echoed the importance of having access to leadership and ability to discuss ethical issues. She said, "My CEO and I sit down on a daily basis and talk about any number of issues. I literally walk around the corner, knock on his door, and say, do you have a few minutes?" That being said, several participants placed responsibility on both practitioners and the leadership to form the close relationship. For example, Allison reflected on her easy access to leaders in the nonprofit organization she worked at. She said,

> I think some of it is the leadership, and some of that is I proved myself to be a really strategic thinker to be able to see the big picture and ask really smart questions, but there does have to be an openness on the part of the leadership too. And if they don't understand how important communications is, then you can ask all the smart questions in the world, but you know they're either going to say well you're just a communications person, what do you know? Or, they're going to say that's not your job.

While Allison has gained her seat at the decision table due to her own strategic thinking and her leadership's valuing the communication function, Allison noted that many practitioners still do not have the luxury to participate in strategic decision-making at the highest level, particularly in the nonprofit sector.

Organizational leadership. Leadership was widely discussed by participants as one of the most influential factors in organizations that either facilitated or detracted from practitioner's ethicality, via leaders' personal conduct, interpersonal interactions, and culture-setting. Specifically, participants mentioned several characteristics of ethical leaders, including ethical, protective, authentic, assertive, empathetic, humble, pro-social, and courageous. Furthermore, they were described as being able to set ethical standards, to lead by example, and to instill in participants meaning of the work.

With regard to personal characteristics, Evan emphasized humility, empathy, leading by example, and being approachable. He noted,

> It all trickles down within our company. The senior leadership at a company is very humble, and they are extremely empathetic as well. They don't put themselves up any sort of pedestal. I've been at companies before where senior leadership kind of come from ivory tower and they can come off as very intimidating, but that's the exact opposite of my current company. They all are very easy to approach, very just outgoing with all employees, and just exemplifies the humility and expressing empathy with our employees. It's shown in their day to day actions. Also, they are very good at the communicating to employees. They did a fantastic job just setting a great example.

While showing pride and gratitude toward the leadership, Evan added, “Because of our firmness when it comes to internal governance, because of the example of that leadership, I haven't come across any sort of ethical dilemma in my time.”

On the other hand, Leo—who previously recounted his experience of quitting an agency job due to client’s unethical request to start a troll army—described a leader with whom he worked later and spoke positively about, due to the leader’s assertiveness, courage to confront clients, and protectiveness of subordinates. Leo reflected,

> So, it’s good to know that my [current] boss is someone who is not afraid to be truthful. I don’t anticipate that problem with [current agency] because my boss, Adam, is a straight shooter. He’s easy-going, he’s friendly, but he defends his team, and it’s a rare thing. Adam is brave enough to do that. He said no all the time, and he realized that there is a point where you have to protect the people under you. He’ll take the lumps to protect his team. And Adam is very much my role model for this position.

Leo’s words that stressed leaders’ ability to say no and to defend his team concurred with the psychological safety discussed previously. Leaders appeared to play an essential role to build a culture where people feel safe and protected when voicing ethical concerns.

Leading by example was emphasized by many participants. For example, Isaac said, “The ideal is walking the talk, showing the example, actually executing what’s ethical, even if it’s going to be a cost for the company. When one commits to that kind of life, they will inspire others." Isaac's words again reflected that ethics is not taught via rules but inspired by role models.

Next, leaders' authenticity, in the sense that they firmly believe the mission of their work and integrate personal and professional lives and values, seemed to instill in practitioners a sense of mission and purpose, and again inspire ethical and even prosocial actions. Hazel articulated this point,

> I feel very confident that my boss, our CEO of the corporation, is the most ethical person I've ever worked for. And on top of that he's just a good human. Every day inspires me to be my best self. When you're the CEO it becomes increasingly difficult to keep your work-self different from who you are outside of 9 to 5. And he's done a very good job of letting us see his true self and set very high and clear expectations about ethical behavior. I would describe him as being a little bit shy, but he has done a really good job connecting his whole self to the work that he does here. His heart is in this work and that's demonstrated to our employees. And he will often talk about his children and his wife and his parents and his siblings and all of that. I think that creates a culture where it's okay to bring your full self to the work and that makes us better employees because it helps to instill that sense of purpose.

Through Hazel's statement, it appeared that authenticity plays a pivotal role in establishing a brave culture where people are not afraid to speak their mind. This is connected with a dialogic culture and open communication—themes found previously under organizational climate. Equally important is communicating ethical expectations while offering employees meaning of the work. This, stressed by Hazel, is what millennial practitioners look for in a workplace, and this inspires ethical and purpose-driven work within them.

Similarly, leadership's prosocial activities and community engagement emerged as particularly inspirational for employees. Evelyn described her leaders in the agency this way,

> Kevin is just an exceptional person. He would take on a million pro bono clients if you knew that it was in the best interests of the community. And that's really how he's built his business, a business that gives back to a community, and help build a stronger community.

Last but not least, ethical leaders promote an empowering culture that encourages employees' voice, critical thinking, and participation. They also challenge conventional wisdoms that are no longer valuable, especially from an ethical perspective. For example, Thomas, leader of a research firm, raised their analyst's compensation to be more representative of the importance of their contribution, even though other international branches of the company remained the same payment. Thomas believed treating employees well is an essential part of ethics, and "challenging conventional wisdom is part of being a leader." On the other hand, Chloe shared her experience mentoring junior-level employees and interns, and emphasized, "It's an honor and a weighty thing to know you can influence somebody else, so you use your influence carefully. You don't over-impose but encourage question and provide information, as well as introspection and active engagement in processing ethical situation." In other words, Chloe sought to foster critical thinking, analytical, and reflective skills in the realm of ethics that were beneficial to her in her early trainings.

Negative organizational contexts. Several organizational-level factors emerged from data that were considered as potentially detracting from practitioner ethicality. These included a competitive business mentality emphasizing liability, an organizational apathy toward ethics, pressure and pace of work, and negative socialization process that may co-opt practitioners in terms of ethics. Each will be discussed briefly.

First, while personal ethics is connected with authenticity and courage, as mentioned previously, the typical American company's focus on liability can discourage individuals from taking risks or reflecting on past mistakes. This idea was articulated by Naomi who said,

> It [ethics] always comes with a certain amount of vulnerability and liability. But nobody wants to own up to mistakes. So, nobody wants to say, oh well, I made this decision and we realize that, oh my God, that was totally wrong. You put us at risk. Nobody wants to be that vulnerable. Unfortunately, especially I thought in the American companies, liability outweighs vulnerability every day. And everybody is concerned about, I've got to cover myself, I've got to make sure that everything is okay. And if I admit I did something wrong, then I put myself and the company in a liability. And so, being able to really admit when you made a mistake is really difficult to do in a workplace.

Naomi's words suggested that to the extent that individuals prioritize certainty and safety over rightness and ethics, they may not put themselves in a vulnerable state to either challenge organizational operations or admit any mistakes they have made. On the other hand, Allison commented that the modern organizations are usually so big that it is almost impossible to never make mistakes. She said, "I think it would be really hard personally or professionally, especially in the corporate world, to find that pristine circumstance where you believe in one hundred percent of every single decision a big corporation has made." Allison's observation, combined with Naomi's comment, suggested an importance to encourage risk-taking, vulnerability, and bravery over safety among managerial personnel in organizations.

Second, an apathy or indifference toward ethics was detected among many participants. Though they valued ethics when questioned, they also acknowledged that their organizations either did not have ethical codes or trainings, or nobody really talked about ethics in daily practice. For example, Logan reflected on his former workplace, "There is no ethical guideline there, which is unfortunate, and probably hurts their relationship with journalists and the credibility of the organization as a whole." Chloe felt grateful to be able to discuss ethics in the interview, and lamented, "Certainly in the workplace, being able to talk to other practitioners with this level of depth of ethics, no, it really doesn't happen very much in the field."

Third, the pressure and pace of everyday practice may prevent practitioners from reflecting on their ethical decisions. Worse still, they may not recognize any ethical implications due to the fast pace of work. Ruby observed,

> I've only been in my organization for six months, but there's no discussion of ethics. No one is putting aside the budget, no one is putting aside the time. People don't want to stop and think and reflect, because then, they are not moving forward, right? People think stillness is failure, or it's accepting what you did wrong, or giving time and energy to seeing what went wrong, but in my opinion, I think that it's healthy, I think that it's transformative, I think that it is necessary in order to be better. And I don't think it's just my organization that's a victim to this, I think a lot of organizations literally don't have the time, and they're just gonna keep doing the same thing over and over again.

From Ruby's statement, it seemed that not stopping and reflecting is a choice that many organizations are making—it could be due to lack of time, or, lack of the courage to make changes. The quotation suggested the importance to build in time and space for reflection.

Similarly, though many participants praised their leadership's open-door policy, it was unclear whether leaders truly had the space, time, and resources to deal with all issues that were brought to the table. Brendon, a leader himself, recognized this dilemma,

> It's important for managers for being genuine and authentic and creating this space for junior staff to bring this stuff to them, but that is not as easy as it seems. Like, it sounds easy: Oh of course I would be genuine and authentic and listen to junior staff, who doesn't do that!? But at the end of the day, you have multiple, multiple pressure on your plate, and oftentimes, if somebody

brings an ethical issue to your plate, it feels like business challenges for you instead of bringing good news. And so, the idea that you can be an open manager is far harder than it sounds.

Brendon's quotation clearly demonstrated a gap between intention and behavior: he valued being an open manager, but simultaneously, an ethical issue for him sounded more like a challenge than good news, especially when he had competing priorities.

Last but not least, a practitioner may be co-opted when being acclimated to organizational values. They could be socialized into believing things that they personally did not endorse at the beginning. Whereas expanding one's perspectives can be a good thing, there is an ethical threshold that one may cross. This notion was best illustrated by James, who through his words, demonstrated that he was impressionable and easily influenced. He said,

> Every day, my opinions and my value systems are being challenged, because I have to do what's best for my company, and if I do feel uncomfortable, um, extremely uncomfortable about something, I know I'm able to go to my boss, and my boss's boss, or the executives, and I can speak to them about the issue, but nothing in those regards is so unethical that it's against the law. All of those things are just I disagree with. But although I may have a disagreement, I'll still be employed to write that article, or put the best face of the public forward, or you know, make sure the company appears to be moving forward, with the decision that was made.

From James's quotation, it can be seen that although he sought opportunities to speak up and discuss with the management, he would easily give in, due to his perception that he had to represent the company and do what was best for the organization to move forward.

In short, a company-wide liability mindset, apathy toward ethics, pace and pressure with no space for reflection, and co-option or negative socialization, emerged as organization-level factors that could detract from practitioner ethicality. That being said, participants offered ample ways that they could change organization-level ethicality.

Fostering an ethical organization—practitioner's' ethical leadership. This dissertation study uncovered multiple ways that practitioners cultivated organization-level ethicality, including mediating internal relationships, fostering a helpful culture, developing knowledge, communicating ethical identity, mapping stakeholders, educating clients/leadership, and being the voice of conscience. They exhibited ethical leadership even though they were not positional leaders.

The most important finding is the culture role that some participants played in their organizations. They embodied the role through careful observation, mediations, and relationship-building. These efforts helped them to spot and catch ethical issues early. This idea was exemplified by James, who recounted his observation of the sexual harassment workshops in this company. He said,

> I attended three of those meetings [sexual harassment workshops], and one meeting, I saw a lot of respectful people, another meeting, you can tell everyone was kind of uncomfortable with it. They are all cracking jokes and

> just trying to be passive. And there's a third group that was asking a lot of questions. You can tell that there are certain parts of our company that value this type of stuff, and there are certain areas of our company that don't really care. And that played a lot into the culture. That played a lot into ethics.

It appears that James was trying to observe and detect the ethical culture of his organization through the sexual harassment workshops. Then, he used another example—a marketing meeting—to illustrate his intention to spot ethical issues through self-reflection and managing relationships,

> We have monthly marketing meetings, where all the marketing managers over the country call in, and I have a chance to speak to every one of them, and give them the public relations updates, but also to request specific information. And when I request for that information, I tell them, okay, please, today, send me an email with this information, and do it quickly, so that we can help you. We had a call about two weeks ago, and I'm still waiting on information from several people who were on that call. So, to me, it's also, do they hear me? Do they want to respond? Do they trust me? There's always that question of who's actually listening, and is it a culture that if I ask for something, I am going to get it? And if I'm two weeks later without all the information I need, then there's probably something going on within the company that I have to address.

Throughout the interview, James did not mention specifically creating ethics mandates, or directly addressing ethical issues. Instead, he constantly emphasized mediating relationships among various departments, and fostering bonds so as to create a helpful and respectful culture. He seemed to connect such characteristics of culture with higher level of ethics.

Similarly, while being the voice of conscience in organizations was mentioned, the concept was connected by participants with an intimate knowledge of the organization, not simply raising ethical issues. This can be illustrated by Jasmine's quotation,

> In the end, as PR people and communicators, you absolutely must be the voice of conscience, for businesses and organizations. And the reason we have to be, is because we hold a very centered role in business. We know what's happening financially in the organizations, we understand what's happening from a marketing perspective in organizations. We understand what sales in organizations. We understand what's in research and development in organizations. We understand programming, and product development, and all of the pieces of an organization or a business we touch, and then communicate and tell those stories. I mean, we have our own role in addition to knowing all about it, but because of that centric knowledge of organization, it is imperative that we play the role of the voice of conscience for the organization.

Jasmine's words implied the cultural role that public relations and communication practitioners should take on in addition to their work, in order to establish knowledge and relationships with various departments and detect ethical issues in that culture.

Third, participants discussed the role of communication in setting up ethical expectations not only internally, but also externally. This was connected with reputation management. For example, Hazel worked in a financial institution that handled loans. She believed it was crucial to inform publics of the company's policies so as to prevent any potentially problematic transactions. She said,

> Fortunately, we don't run into that [ethical issues] very often simply because we've already established a higher ethical standard, and the reputation that we've established for ourselves makes it easier for the public to know exactly what to expect when coming in for our organization. But I mean, communication is critical to all of that, so be very clear up front with what it is that we're looking for.

Fourth, helping organizations/clients map out their stakeholders, research and articulate their concerns while educating the clients/organizations were an important way to foster organizational-level ethics, so that organizations are not completely self-focused. Joshua illustrated this point very well. He commented,

> As public relations professionals, we are in the business of fostering relationships that are going to lead to companies thriving and employees thriving and communities thriving and shareholder thriving, and it's based on building mutual awareness and understanding, and empathy and all those kinds of things. It's our job to make sure that we've thought about who all the stakeholders are in this situation. Whenever we're going to do an announcement, [we need to think] who are the stakeholders? What do they care about? How is this news going to resonate with them?

Finally, when practitioners establish a reputation for being non-negotiably ethical, while earning trust through actions, their ethics ripple across the organizations. This is similar to leading by example. Nora exemplified this. She noted, “Recently an executive asked me to act as moral compass, so I think I’ve developed a reputation where they know I’m someone who is going to be honest with them, and maybe tell them something they don't necessarily want to hear.” It appeared that recognition from the leadership as organization’s moral compass carries more weight than self-attributed titles.

In short, participants recounted a number of ways they sought to foster or have facilitated organizational-level ethicality. While communicating ethical standards internally and externally was found crucial as a formal way of establishing ethics on an organizational level, it appeared that a cultural approach that emphasized observation, mediation, relationship building, and knowledge development will complement and reinforce the formal approach. Participants implicitly connected this cultural approach with their boundary-spanner, relationship-builder, and organizational conscience roles. Furthermore, they strove to lead by example by building internal trust and being non-negotiable with their own ethical conduct. This nicely transitions to the next section, in which industry-level influence will be discussed.

Individual-industry interaction

Many participants acknowledged they have benefitted from industry-level initiatives and progress, particularly from professional associations’ efforts, increased emphasis on ethics in higher education, and more diversified approach to teaching ethics. Conversely, participants considered the perennial negative stereotypes surrounding public relations, competition, lack of real penalty, and deficiencies in ethics training/education as potentially detracting from practitioner ethicality. On the other hand, several ways for practitioners to contribute to industry-level ethicality have emerged, including serving as mentors, advocating for ethics-related programs, and creating new services.

Industry-level trends contributing to practitioner ethicality. Participants widely praised PRSA's ethical initiatives and higher education's emphasis on ethics as positive forces contributing to ethics on an industry level.

First, many participants have noticed an increasingly strong emphasis on ethics among professional associations, especially PRSA. For example, Isaac, Chief Ethics Officer at an agency, said emphatically, "I found that PRSA this year, at the general assembly, has put ethics on the forefront. They have not been in the past." Anna, who was part of the PRSA leadership shared the association's efforts in promoting ethics. She said,

> Part of our three-year strategic plan is advocacy for the profession, so that we can educate people about the profession, about the professionals working in it, and supporting ethical behavior, and we're one year deep into that. And we're doing some real work on advocacy committee. We will take a stand if we see unethical behavior or write opinion pieces as a national organization and to support behaviors that align with the code of ethics. That's the direction we're moving in.

Grace, who served on PRSA's board of ethics, explicated the board's role, including "producing a lot of educational and informational material" so that "people have resources they can turn to." This included blog posts, advisories, case studies, which help practitioners navigate contextualized ethical situations. Additionally, Grace emphasized offering personalized help with difficult decisions. She gave one example during the interview,

> For example, maybe you work for a company or a client, you have your own agency and your client produces a piece of research, and six months later, you discover that that research has been recalled. You put that information out in good faith because at that time, there was no question about the research. Six months later, you have this formation come to you. What you do? You go to your employer, client and say hey this recall is issued, you know, to raise some written statement alerting people that this original piece of work that you put out via communication was invalidated. Those are the questions that sometimes aren't easy to make the decision on your own. So, it’s good to have people that you can talk through that with, and say what’s the right thing to do here? Because, I mean questions of ethics, are not always so black and white, and sometimes when we pick other mind to walk through some of the stuff, we get to that right decision.

Grace’s quotation suggested that industry-level ethics initiatives are gradually paying more attention to situational factors and contextual particulars, as well as soft skills in speaking up about issues in power-laden organizations. This approach is in line with care ethics and can compensate for the abstractness of ethical codes/rules. These efforts have paid dividends, as some participants noted increasing ethical awareness among practitioners. For example, James acknowledged, “Because public relations society in general preaches the awareness of ethics, I think that PR people are definitely more aware of ethical dilemmas and ethical scenarios."

Higher education's emphasis on ethics was also mentioned by participants as beneficial to foster individual ethicality. Sadie recounted her experience of working on certifying public relations programs and highlighted ethics as an essential part of program evaluation. Sadie said,

> I'm involved now in certifying PR programs in colleges and universities, and I've also been trained to be an accreditor. In both instances, one of the things we look for when we are evaluating whether or not a public relations program deserves certification or accreditation, is that ethics is part of everything. So, certainly there should be a course that emphasizes ethics, but also, ethics needs to be incorporated into all the coursework.

Here, Sadie emphasized both a standalone course and incorporating ethics in other courses. That being said, having course content on ethics may not be as important as having an instructor who can relate ethics to real-life professional workplace experiences. Evan recalled an experience in which he spoke up against managerial decisions as an intern fresh out of college. He credited his courage to his college professor who had his own agency and imparted ethical lessons with his own experiences, which included spotting ethical dilemmas and how to navigate difficult conversations. Evan reflected, "We had a lot of those discussions in class. I was able to see the types of ethical dilemmas that not just what we read in textbooks, but what you can experience in the PR world." Then, Evan added that ethics should be mandatory for each public relations program. He said, "I was fortunate that I majored in PR, so I was going to have some sort of ethical education. I think it should be part of every PR program that's out there." However, as will be discussed shortly, not every public relations practitioner goes through formal college education of public relations, and not all educational programs are effective. Next, industry-level contexts that detract from practitioner ethically will be discussed.

Industry-level contexts detracting from practitioner ethicality. A few industry-level contextual factors emerged from data that were considered detrimental to practitioner ethicality, including the inadequacy of education/training programs, stereotypical thinking, competition, and no real penalty for ethical violations. First, Evelyn acknowledged that she did not major in public relations, and only learned ethics on the job. Consequently, she believed organizations have an obligation to create ethical guidance or code for employees. Evelyn said,

> I didn't ever imagine I'd be a PR professional. I really, really, didn't. I graduated with a bachelor's in communication studies. I didn't see myself as a public relations professional, and I really wouldn't be one had it not been for jobs I fell into, and skills I've learned on the job, so I think companies that are able to have a code of ethics and hold that to a high stature so that their staff know that that's something they're abiding by, is incredibly important, because without that I don't know that I need to consider ethics in my job when advising the client. Some PR professionals who don't give consideration to ethics, because they had never imagined they actually landed a PR position.

Evelyn's statement suggested that practitioners who do not have formal training in public relations may violate ethics out of ignorance. By comparison, Grace touched on education's inadequacy in addressing soft skills required for raising ethical concerns,

> One of the important things I think of education, unfortunately is that sometimes we miss out on core skills, right? We focus on the practical aspect of a profession, but we forget about actually how do you interact with senior level people, how do you envision ideas, how do you get people enrolled in a common vision … and so, we sometimes place young people in a workplace without being equipped to understand those dynamics. Those are unfortunate, and that's why we have mentors, or in a mentoring type of environment, we'll do well, but what happens to those that don't have those resources, or people available to them? They figure it out on their own, and sometimes make big mistakes.

In this statement, Grace emphasized teaching core skills to navigate relationships and power dynamics at work, and if not, mentorship to compensate for the lack. On the other hand, Naomi, who indeed taught public relations courses, placed difficulties in teaching these skills in the larger context of higher education challenges. Naomi related, "I think education, especially higher education, is become far more transactional, because of the enrollment pressure, the matriculation, the graduation rates, we just have to push them through, rather than making sure that those concepts are actually landing right." In addition to lack of time and pressure for matriculation, Naomi was not satisfied with online education, believing it contributed to the decline of empathy. She explained,

> It's [online classes] not the same as when you're in a classroom with plenty of other students, and really talking through the ethical situations. The energy in that space, that's where the aha moments are happening. And an online class is a completely different dynamic, people there are much more transactional, not building empathy with each other.

Naomi's account emphasized empathy and relationship building, which she considered as contributing to practitioners' ethics and should be promoted in ethical training programs.

Second, the negative stereotype surrounding public relations—as unethical spin doctors—appeared to not only damage the industry's reputation, but also may deteriorate practitioner ethicality in two ways: by normalizing unethical conduct and making practitioners blame the "bad apples" instead of reflecting upon the larger, systemic issues. For example, Anna believed media were to blame for public relations' unethical reputation. She said,

> There are definitely, like in any field, no more so in PR than in any other field, people who behave unethically. There are people who cut corners with rules, but I don't think it's more prevalent in public relations. I think PR folks get a bad rap because the ways we are portrayed in the movies, the books, in TV, it's always some sleazy kind of operative. We were rarely shown as someone who's trying to do the right thing and communicating ethically.

While Anna's words contained a certain level of truth, blaming the reputation on media stereotypes and narratives may prevent practitioners from examining their role in creating social discourses and reinforcing power dynamics by representing some clients/organizations.

Similarly, Naomi blamed the "bad apples"—the unethical minority among public relations practitioners who tainted the entire field. She commented, "Unethical practitioners undermine the very value of what we do. There are people out there doing it wrong, and they're the ones who get the media attention." Again, though Naomi can be right, practitioners may benefit from contemplating why media choose to pick out on public relations instead of historically preeminent professions such as doctors.

On the other hand, interestingly, the fields' bad reputation may in fact normalize unethical behavior. This point is reflected in Leo's words. He said,

> I think no one in the communications business is a moralist. We always stretch the truth a bit, and you have to be okay with that. You cannot lose sleep over it. And I don't lose sleep over it. I don't want to make it seem as though I'm having a strong ethical clue in everything. And you know, that's just the way it goes. You have to be okay with that. Had I been very moral about things, I wouldn't have lasted as long as I did.

Leo's statement was interesting as he did quit his former job due to a more morally intense issue, troll army. His quotation seemed to suggest that there is a certain level of acceptance among practitioners to "stretch the truth." It concurred with participants' difficulties in distinguishing spinning and framing, as well as the inconsistency between value-naming and actual actions, described previously.

Third, competition within the field may contribute to practitioners prioritizing businesses over ethics, which is more common in agency environments. Andrew observed this phenomenon. He said, “Especially in PR, it’s very, very hard. It’s hypercompetitive, and very quickly, people who were your friends at one firm moved to another and now they are your enemy. Because we’re all competing for a very small pile of clients.” That being said, several participants believed that strong ethics was one of the most defining characteristics of a truly successful public relations practitioner, as a large part of public relations is to maintain organizations’ reputation. Furthermore, Naomi added, “I think everybody carries a burden in this. When one of us does well, we all do well. And so, I believe in that we all support a healthy environment, even when we’re acting as competitors.” Naomi’s statement aligned with a value creation perspective—when everyone seeks to improve the industry environment, the market will be larger, and everyone will have a larger playing field despite fierce competitions.

Last but not least, a few participants noted the lack of real penalty for unethical conduct in public relations in the U.S., which might encourage unethical acts. Thomas mentioned, “In the U.S., there’s no penalty, it’s not like the legal profession, where you can lose your license to be a lawyer or medical maltreatment, this is no law like that, malpractice law for PR.”

To summarize, inadequacies in public relations ethics education/trainings, the industry’s stereotypically bad reputation, competition, and lack of real sanction emerged from data as barriers to practitioner ethicality. That being said, practitioners articulated ways in which they consciously altered these contextual elements.

Practitioners facilitating higher levels of industry ethicality. In order to make public relations industry a more ethical environment, many participants actively engaged in mentoring programs, advocating for the profession and ethics in particular, and creating new services that may eliminate some ethical issues.

Serving as a mentor was recommended by many participants to not only benefit the field but also themselves. For example, Naomi acknowledged that being a mentor herself has held her accountable. She reported,

> Because I have mentors and I serve as mentors for other young professionals, I have a strong sense of accountability, that if I throw my reputation out, and do something that would be called into question, I cannot encourage other people to be ethical. So, it's incumbent upon me to make sure that I'm making ethical, well-reasoned, and rational decisions, in the service of my clients, my organizations, and my career and the industry as a whole.

Second, participants who currently held PRSA membership or leadership roles highly endorsed their experience—they not only facilitated a more ethical environment by advocating for the field and ethics in particular, but also were able to meet inspirational leaders, get more opportunities, and reinforce their confidence in the field. This was articulated by Grace, who served on the ethics committee and provided ethics-related advisories. She said,

> I feel like setting the standard is really humbling and noble. When we help set the standard and help people, and kind of be that guiding light through some of the thorny situations, that was very appealing to me. And this [ethics] committee, there has been a long line of just really good-hearted, passionate

> leaders, who have done such fantastic work, and so, I myself had lived by that code, and I had been a beneficiary of some of the educational information and material, and I thought it's fantastic to be able to be a part of this, developing materials and resources for other practitioners, and so I really have found my home for the next couple of years, and I really love serving and these people are amazing, and do such amazing work.

Grace's passion and energy were palpable through her words, and clearly, she gained inspiration while contributing to the industry-level ethics.

Last, though not commonly discussed, a few participants created new services that were solely ethics-focused. For example, as Isaac contemplated his retirement, he was also creating a part-time consulting firm that would provide ethics counsel for other practitioners. This way, he could transfer his lifelong experience of being a Chief Ethics Officer into valuable lessons for peers. On the other hand, Connor had created a side business that handled the RFP process in a fair, open way, so as to eliminate unfair or unethical competition during the process. Connor stressed, "There are so many agencies, if they receive a request or proposal, they'll be distrustful, they'll say, we suspect the company already know they're not gonna hire us, they're just going through the process to make some boss happy. Well, we don't allow that."

In summary, the public relations industry-level ethicality has presented both opportunities (e.g., professional associations' efforts, training programs, higher education curriculum) and barriers (e.g., unethical norms, lack of penalty, deficiencies in training, competition) for individual practitioners as they make sense of ethics and follow through on decision-making and actions. That being said, participants could contribute to industry-level ethics by serving as mentors, advocating for the industry and its ethics, and creating new businesses and services that address ethical issues in the field. Interestingly, those who made an effort to serve seemed to further enhance their ethicality, as they were imbued with higher levels of accountability, knowledge, meaning and purpose, and professional network with like-minded colleagues. Next, societal-level ethical climate will be discussed.

Individual-society interaction

Interestingly, the topic of current social environment and its impact on public relations were frequently brought up by participants before they were asked. Across the interviews, participants commented on the social, political, and media landscapes that offer both challenges and opportunities for public relations practitioners, especially concerning ethics. While the three components are inextricably connected, this section will be organized into three categories for clarity. Within each category, participants' observation will be detailed, as well as the perceived implications for public relations. This section will end with participants' efforts in alleviating society-level ethical issues.

Social trends and implications for public relations ethics. Several social trends emerged from the interviews that could have potential implications for public relations ethics, including an increasingly vocal and sensitive public, high-profile ethical charges, high transparency versus low trust society, an integration of personal and professional lives, and the blurry line between free speech and hate speech. Each will be explained briefly.

First, a number of participants observed the general public is becoming more vocal and sensitive about ethics due to an increasing number of ethical violations on a societal level. For example, Anna commented, “In today’s world, I’d say in the last 18 months or so, we’ve [general population] all become much more vocal about ethics, because there have been so many violations.” This increasingly vocal public has brought some challenges and opportunities for the public relations industry. For example, Anna shared an experience in which one of her clients—who she believed was both ethical and prosocial—was attacked anonymous on the Internet. Therefore, Anna stressed, “A lot of social media can be very anonymous, so people can say whatever the heck they want, and not have to fear repercussions. We have to be hyper-vigilant.” Evan echoed this sentiment. He shared,

> I think it comes down to going back to communicating in an honest and empathetic way that identifies with customers, because more and more often I think we're in a hyper partisan and hyper sensitive environment, where people, if they think a company has done something wrong then they will put this company on blast, they will get their friends to protest company. So, I don't want to say being overly cautious, but just being aware of the issues that are out there and being thoroughly informed about them, make sure that you're not communicating in a way that can necessarily upset anybody.

That being said, with ethics under the societal spotlight, particularly with ongoing social movements against unethical acts, such as the #MeToo movement that quite a few participants referenced, participants noted that it has been easier to make a case for ethics among clients/organizational management, due to its sensitive nature.

Paradoxically, an increasing number of high-profile ethical charges seemed to have created challenges for public relations educators and leaders who advocated for ethics. Anna shared her observation, “I live today in New York, and I don’t think there’s any state that has more elected officials, senators and assembly men, brought up on ethics charges, which is really disturbing, but that’s the environment that we’re living in.” While Anna felt disturbed by the many ethical charges among the nation’s leadership, Naomi explicated ensuing challenges for teaching public relations ethics,

> You will see what happens in Las Vegas a lot, where especially political officials were brought down because of ethical and corruption issues, but somehow, they managed to come back. For someone who’s taught ethics, it’s very difficult to say, this will ruin your career, when there’s a county commissioner who gets away from federal bribery. So, it became very difficult for me to issue cautionary tales. You know, there are a lot of people who would bounce back.

Naomi seemly slightly frustrated when explaining her difficulties in promoting ethics among young practitioners, when prominent people did the opposite with their career unscathed.

Third, participants noted the low-trust environment, with some quoting the Edelman Trust Barometer that suggested public trust in corporations and governments and even nonprofits were way down. Joshua, in particularly, considered it a paradox that transparency has been a buzzword, yet public trust has not improved substantially. This again brought challenges and opportunities, according to participants. On the one hand, public skepticism in large institutions made it harder for public relations practitioners to earn trust and relationships, especially concerning public relations' unglamorous past and its role in representing large organizations. This point was best illustrated by Matthew's quotation,

> The public is just not willing to accept what PR professionals are saying. We're not viewed as real trustworthy and probably a few bad apples have ruined it for many of us, so it makes it very challenging, especially when you're dealing on a broader level, and especially if you're dealing with issues that are somewhat sensitive in nature.

On the other hand, some participants had an easier time defending ethical behavior in organizations, when grounding ethics in the context of public trust and organizational reputation. At the same time, one participant, Isaac, praised government's effort in enforcing laws that incentivize organizations' ethics programs through tax relief.

Next, on a societal level, the boundaries between personal and professional lives have blurred. This idea was observed by Naomi, who commented,

> I think it's an especially interesting time when the behavior of a public person is affecting their public persona. The separation [between personal and professional] is now gone. So, we are judging people, the public persona by their private behavior. And the separation of public and private ethics, is getting very blurred. We are in a very interesting place in history where that separation is diminishing.

With an increasingly integration of personal and professional lives and ethics, and since the publics now judge a person's professional life by their private behavior, not surprisingly, several participants have considered authenticity as an essential component of ethics, mentioned previously. That being said, Naomi was concerned about intrusion on privacy, which already happened among celebrities and could bring challenges for public relations practitioners, if organizational members violate public expectations due to unethical acts in personal lives.

Last but not least, a few participants noted the difficulties navigating a social environment characterized by diverse perspectives, vocal publics, and partisanship. While they commended the First Amendment as contributing to the U.S. democracy, they felt ambiguous about how to best promote inclusion and diversity and simultaneously, ensuring the appropriateness of language and that no one is alienated. This ambiguity was particularly palpable among those who worked in higher education—an environment that historically featured diverse ideologies and exchange of ideas. For example, Matthew shared,

> Right now, the variety of campus' speakers that come to campus or messages that are being posted on campus are things that are becoming very difficult to deal with, and hearing from some more conservative students on campus expressing views like they don't have a venue for them to express their opinions, that makes it really challenging for PR folks.

From this quotation, it appeared that Matthew was trying hard to manage and include a variety of ideologies, but some stakeholders—in this case students—felt alienated. Sadie shared similar sentiment while noting the blurry line between free speech and hate speech. She said,

> On the one hand, you do have free speech, and that's an important value in our country, and a good value. But, unfortunately, sometimes that means, that you have people who are saying hateful things, and that's where you start to get into the line, what is free speech, what is hate speech?

As a result, Sadie emphasized conducting research so as to understand a diverse range of publics, especially those who are marginalized, underrepresented, and those who feel alienated, and explore their needs, interests, and psyche.

Political climate and implications for public relations ethics. Many participants were particularly vocal about the current political climate, and its implications for public relations ethics. Some attributed societal trends—including vocal publics, low levels of trust, and sensitivity surrounding the topic of ethics—to the current state of politics. In particular, participants noted how partisanship and leaders' questionable moral standpoints were impacting what ethics meant for the public relations field.

First, according to participants, partisanship and infighting have created an environment of bias and suspicion, and as a result, it is challenging for public relations practitioners who represent and advocate for organizations with certain missions. This point was articulated by Allison, who work for a non-profit advocacy group. She shared,

> Given the current state of politics, and all the partisan fighting, there're people on one end of the spectrum and people on the other end of the spectrum yelling at each other, and kind of touting different facts. And there isn't a as much of a semblance of things being unbiased. It really does become more

> important to be objective, but in some respects, harder because as an organization like ours, we are trying to protect the social safety net and trying to make sure that those programs are available for low income families and individuals. There's always good things and bad things, right? But the people on the other side of the argument would say there's waste everywhere. They want to highlight that. We want to highlight this. And you do have to be thoughtful about it. It doesn't mean that you have to be completely unbiased. We can't, as an organization with our mission, we can't be 100 percent unbiased. That’s not realistic.

In this quotation, Allison recognized the fact that her organization has to be biased to some extent to advocate for its mission and tasks, but as public relations practitioner advocating for organizational positions, an ethical imperative appeared to at least be thoughtful about the messages if not completely objective. Allison also emphasized clarity of messages about organizational missions and listening to stakeholders so as to provide the right amount of communication and clear up issues whenever they arise. At the same time, practitioners may be more likely to encounter attacks from opponents or those who competing for the same resources or stakeholders, especially among advocacy organizations.

Second, many participants commented on political leaders’, particularly the President’s questionable behavior, which served as poor ethical models and eroded public trust. For example, when discussing the importance of being open and transparent, Sadie in fact used the President as a negative example as by the time the interview occurred, he was the only President in the U.S. history who has not revealed his tax return. Furthermore, a few participants noted the leadership's casual definition of fake news exacerbated the already declining media environment. For example, Allison echoed Sadie's sentiment and elaborated,

> I think that part of the reason that trust is eroding in this country is because of the state of Washington right now. And the state of the partisan infighting and finger pointing and the claims of those on the right that everything that is true is not true. You know we have a President who lives in his own universe. And if it's not true to him, he just calls it fake. That all of the partisan-ness and all the telling only the half-truths, is making people go, I don't know who to believe anymore because the left side is telling me half-truth and the person on the right is telling me half-truth. And we're all so fractured in our attention.

Allison's quotation suggested that the President's causal naming of fake news created more public confusion. This could intensity publics' skepticism of public relations that subsidy news media with information.

Last, participants noted that some public relations issues have been politicized. For example, Grace noted, "I think that the social environment has definitely impacted our profession because it politicizes questions that really to the practitioner, should not be based in politics." Austin used the example of healthcare to illustrate the danger of conflating politics with initiatives, which had impacted public welfare. Therefore, when political agendas are prioritized in a public relations campaign, public interests may be compromised if not damaged.

Media landscape and implications for public relations ethics. Participants widely recognized the influence of current media landscape on public relations and its implication for ethics. Several sub-themes emerged that included the reality of media industry, the phenomenon of fake news, challenges brought by social media and citizen journalists, all of which aggravated a media environment filled with half-truths and inaccurate information leading to public confusion and skepticism.

To begin with, participants shared their observations of a shrinking media industry and 24/7 news cycle with declining news reporting quality and ethics, which contributed to the circulation of unchecked and inaccurate information. For example, Lily emphasized being a trusted source for media professionals simply because "some journalists just don't have time to break in the clutter." Andrew concurred by saying, "We've seen a large decline in investigated resources coming from newspapers, major decline in the amount of writing resources in newspapers, and watchdog organizations, in my ten years of experience in the industry." This has caused a decrease in news quality, as Joshua commented, "It has never been more apparent why we train journalists to be journalists and do the work that they do, but we don't have that in most of our media anymore." William echoed the sentiment by noting the lack of ethical standards among some outlets. He said, "I think the society as a whole has gotten a bit more coarse, and I believe there are too many media outlets. It's very easy to find somebody who will do what you ask if you pay them." In fact, pay-for-play was mentioned and even experienced by a few other participants.

The phenomenon of fake news has also emerged in interviews as both causing public confusion and potentially encouraging unethical acts. As mentioned previously, how to define "fake" has been a point of contention. Nora illustrated this point by saying,

> I think today's environment makes ethics even more important because of the introduction of fake news. Two years ago, that wasn't even something that anyone talked about or thought of or had even heard of. You know the same with alternative facts. So, I think that's just a fancy way of saying a lie. But I think that today's political climate has definitely impacted some of the things that used to seem very clear-cut. You know what is fact, and what is not fact, what is real and what is fake? Two people can look at the same thing and say two different things, seeing right now in American politics, and I think that's trickling down from the political world to the real world where everybody else lives, and I think it's a little easier for people to be unethical in today's world.

Nora's quotation illustrated a paradox—while ethics is becoming more important in today's world, the media environment also makes it easy to be unethical—because of people's disagreement on what can be considered as facts versus fake. The statement also illustrated that media space and political climate are inextricably connected, and lack of ethics in both realms may trickle into the everyday life of publics and professionals, via a modeling effect. Worse still, Joshua noted that "that type of information is very easy to produce and distribute," creating opportunities for unethical content creation. Emma believed that fake news—especially that produced by self-claimed public relations professionals—has reinforced the industry's poor reputation. She said, "Let's start with fake news. I think that you are seeing the very worst behavior from people who call themselves PR professional, and I think that's unfortunate and perpetuate the negative stereotype. They are the embodiment of stereotype of people who spin and lie." Despite this unfortunate reality, Emma said she was “hopeful” that they do not represent the entire public relations industry.

Third, participants noted that social media and digital space where everyone can publish as citizen journalist have created more opportunities for unchecked and inaccurate information. Coupled with this challenge is the blurry line among paid versus sponsored versus organic content online. Both again has led to an erosion of public trust. For example, Joshua noted, “Particularly on social media, so when somebody read something on Facebook, it usually has not been put together by a reporter who investigated the situation and sources. It makes the public less willing or less likely to trust the next thing, and that is really an awful place.” On the other hand, Lily and Lydia highly recommended separate marketing and public relations functions within an organization, to avoid mixing paid and earned content. Allison suggested being more transparent about when one is issuing information versus opinions. These strategies may ensure the quality of information while preserving public relations’ advocacy function.

In short, the current media landscape, characterized by a shrinking media industry with declining news qualities, confusions surrounding fake news, inaccurate information and half-truth partially due to social media’s unchecked milieu, has made public relations ethics both urgent and difficult, according to participants. This was noted by Matthew, who said,

> I think what it [current media environment] does is it make the public skeptical of all public relations professionals, no matter if you work in higher ed or if you work in certain sectors that you have a fairly good reputation, I

> think the skepticism, you know that old notion of PR professionals, all they deal with is spin, is probably at all-time high.

That being said, participants enumerated ways in which they strove to contribute to macro-level ethicality. These are detailed in the next section.

Practitioner's ethical leadership that promotes macro-level ethicality. Despite challenges created by the current social, political, and media contexts, participants who showed interests in broader, macro-level issues were not discouraged in their promotion of ethics. In fact, the current status quo seemed to provide impetus and rationale for more elevated ethical standards for the industry. Specifically, participants offered several ways in which they, and other public relations practitioners, may help alleviate societal-level ethical issues. These include treating challenges as opportunities to heighten awareness, incorporating critical listening in promoting diversity, facilitating voice and brand activism, counteracting fake and inaccurate news with contextualized, checked, and pro-social communication, and proactively educating clients and publics on news literacy, all of which may promote societal level ethicality.

Opportunities for more attention to ethics. First, many participants chose to believe that the current social, political, and media landscape—with many ethical issues—actually created opportunity for heightened awareness of and attention to ethics. For example, Ruby considered the election of the current President as a wake-up call. She said, "What's unfortunate, I feel like with our society today, is that there has to be literally something to wake people up. I think the election of Trump woke the nation up, in terms of we got to do something from a political standpoint." Evelyn echoed this sentiment by acknowledging ethics as being at the forefront of all aspects of contemporary public relations practice. She said,

> In the current climate, ethics are front and center in many conversations because of social media and different things happening. I think right now, because of some of the distrust that's out there. There's a spotlight on maintaining ethical across the board. I think that's becoming increasingly important among clients, and media relations.

Evelyn added that the unethical behavior on societal level provided the pressure for both media and communication practitioners to go back to a transparency model because "right now we're starting to see the curtain peeled back on the lack of ethics and what that can do to a society." Related, Joshua believed that it is easier to advocate for transparency with clients and organizational leaders. He said,

> I mean look at the state of our world today, particularly this country, and the whole idea of transparency, that you cannot go wrong with being clear about who you are, and being clear about your point of view and where you come from and why you're doing this. You had to convince people of that a few years ago. Now it's just like, well duh. You know it's for our problems with fake news and everything else. At least I feel like we're in a place where it is not as challenging to get people to agree that transparency and being upfront is the right answer.

In addition to advocating ethics among clients and organizational leaders, some participants showed increased passion and dedication to ethics so as to promote social change. For example, Ruby said, "I think it's going to take people like you and me and others who are passionate about the cause to actually make things happen.” Evan emphasized public relations’ ethical role as the conscience for organizations, and that “how the organizations communicate are all pulled into to the ethical standards we hold ourselves to.” Nora acknowledged that not everyone is equally concerned with ethics, but “if ethics is something that is important to you, and I'm saying the collective you, that is something that you have to stand firm on and be prepared for whatever may come out you as a result of that.” In short, despite or because of the current social and political environment, some participants in fact showed an increased commitment to ethics.

Attending to diverse voice and promoting inclusion. Heightened commitment to ethics, in light of a more vocal public, people’s growing consciousness of social and political issues such as sexual harassment, racial discrimination, and disrespectful comments from political leaders, and divisive ideologies, allowed some participants to contemplate on their social roles as public relations practitioners. For example, Allison emphasized listening to diverse public voice and needs instead of living in one’s own ideological bubble. She shared,

> You know people in my organization are pretty lefty, so am I. But they are way further left than I am. And I hear lots of ramble and grumble. And I'm always like, you know what? When the election happened, we all thought it was gonna go a different way. And even then, we were all saying nobody's listening, if we learn nothing about this, it's that people think nobody's listening to them. Why all of a sudden are we going to throw that learning that we had, even though when we thought the outcome was going to be different.

> Those people who didn't feel heard still don't feel heard, nothing about their circumstances changed. Why all of a sudden because we didn't like the outcome that we forgotten that.

Allison's quotation seemed to counter one of the most important principles in public relations—to prioritize strategically important publics. Instead, Allison suggested that many—in the case of the Presidential—were caught off guard because they were ignorant of the needs and voice of those who were marginalized and not taken seriously. The statement is a good reminder to incorporate critical listening of diverse public opinions as one ethical imperative for public relations, so that they can inform organizational and political leaders who then address those overlooked needs. Sadie, who earlier mentioned the blurry line between free and hate speech, echoed this viewpoint. In light of the campus protests and hate comments, Sadie emphasized researching and reaching out to stakeholders who may feel isolated, left behind, and marginalized, so that they can feel included, validated, and their voice counted.

Facilitating voice and brand activism. Furthermore, a few participants believed they could facilitate voice on a variety of social issues, particularly for brands and clients they represented, while at the same time ensuring respect and transparency through media coordination. For example, Emily, who worked in sports public relations, observed how certain brands and athletes were being more vocal with their political stands. Emily shared,

> Brands are proactively voicing their stands, and you see a lot more now, the sports media are talking more about what's going on in politics because you'll have such large celebrities like LeBron James who went on CNN talking

> about Donald Trump, and you see these athletes go to the White House. But there is a lot going on for example, like all of the NFL athletes who are taking a knee on the field and showing protests. There's no better time than the present to put something into motion.

While Emily expressed optimism for possible social change brought about by brand activism, she cautioned about careful facilitation. Emily expanded,

> So I think this definitely could potentially impact our relationship with journalists, because depending on who we work with, if it's an athlete or if it's a brand or a sponsor, you have to be certain that the information that you're relaying on behalf of your client is truthful, and you also need to make sure that before you have these discussions with the journalists, you are speaking and communicating with your client where they stand on the topic, where they feel comfortable, and what information they want to share about their political beliefs and disbelief.

In other words, it appeared that now, public relations practitioners' ethical responsibility may include added components of addressing clients' political and ideological beliefs, protecting their standpoints, and potentially facilitating their voice on issues, while at the same time maintaining ethics with media professionals by being truthful, respectful, and transparent.

Emphasizing contexts and fact-checking. Many participants emphasized fact-checking, supplying authentic messages that are contextualized, and being transparent about motives of campaigns so as to separate public relations from politics and to minimize bias. Austin illustrated this point with his quotation,

> I think that PR people can improve, by focusing organizationally and individually on the facts, and bringing it back to authentic, peer-reviewed data. It is much better than just using political or other motivated rhetoric. I think PR people have an obligation to ask more questions when they get a story.

This quotation echoed previous findings where participants emphasized the importance to play a reporter's role, but Austin added one more imperative—to be cautious about the underlying motives of public relations materials.

Similarly, some participants mentioned their organizations' participation in research foundations, and public relations can play a positive role in promoting research results, especially those that debunk unscientific, untrue, or outdated news and tales circulating in the media environment. This point was illustrated by Joshua, "We get smarter and you have to constantly adapt to what the new science says. The crux is taking the science and figuring out how to meet people with this information."

Resisting unethical media practices. As mentioned previously, public relations practitioners are only one part of the ethical challenges in the media environment, and they are not always in control. As a result, some participants shared ways that media should be held accountable. Emma reported a recent, shared pledge made jointly by top media outlets and public relations professional associations such as PRSA and Arthur Page Society that addressed ethics, fairness, and quality in journalism, which made her "feel hopeful." Emma believed that "[fake news] has challenged our own profession and the professionals in it to redouble their effort and commitment to ethics." Similarly, Emily suggested boycott irresponsible media outlets. She said,

> If everyone wants to improve the situation, almost everyone is gonna have to be involved in some way. And at some point, people are also going to have to stand up to certain media outlets. And it's hard in our democracy, but just call them out on what they're doing and challenge them on the impact that they're having on people.

Promoting news literacy among publics. Last and perhaps most realistic, practitioners can promote news literacy among publics, clients, and organizational members. Grace acknowledged public relations' educational role via both positive modeling and communication. She said,

> And I think that's where our thought leadership comes into place, and the same about "fake news." How to discern and delineate between what's fake and what's just negative? Because sometimes when something's labeled as fake, it's not fake, it's the truth. It's just not a positive truth. It happens to be negative information. And so, we have to be careful with those words, right? Because those words carry such power, then when we label something falsely like that, you're adding to the bigger problem. As a professional communicator, I love when we look at the world around us and utilize our skillsets, our profession, to drive these discussions, and to help people, because we're good at it, we know how to do this. We use it for the benefit of the world at large. We don't only have to use the skills for our employers, for our business. We really have an opportunity to help those around us in a bigger way.

Grace's quotation illustrated the positive social roles that public relations practitioners can play, with the tool of communication and discourse. More specifically, Emily used the example of PR Council's news literacy project, which she was a part of, to delineate how public relations professionals can educate themselves, publics, and clients/organizational members in terms of discerning the value of news, which ultimately contribute to democracy. She shared,

> PR Council actually has an initiative [news literacy project] in progress that is dealing with ethics and combating fake news, which consists of the PR agencies like the top PR agencies in the United States as well as those who have global presence, so that we are educating not only ourselves on how to deal with these ethical issues, but as well as our employees and again our clients, and working with them. So, they foster international discussion on news literacy and ultimately having more responsible communications and bolder support for the vital importance of journalism to our democracy.

This quotation demonstrated public relations' potential positive social impact, and at least some participants' recognition of their social role and potential contribution to societal ethicality.

To summarize, the current macro environment, particularly its social, political, and media components, has produced a number of challenges as well as opportunities for public relations. Ethical issues and debates on a broader level may have shaped public relations practitioner ethicality—in terms of meaning-making of ethics, perceptions of their ethical roles, and their EDM in the workplace. While it might be easier to create and distribute unethical content or justify unethical behavior due to perceived norms/leadership's negative modeling, many participants in the interviews expressed their heightened commitment to ethics precisely due to the challenges. They highlighted public relations' social roles, and they sought to bring about positive social changes via being optimistic and dedicated, incorporating critical listening in their practice, facilitating voice and brand activism while remaining respectful and transparent, circulating contextualized and fact-checked information, and proactively promoting news literacy among peers, publics, and clients/organizational members. These initiatives illustrated what ethical conscience and ethical leadership could be conceptualized on a broader level. A summary of findings for RQ3 is presented in Table 4.

Themes	Sub-themes	Brief Description
Individual-organizational interaction	Positive organizational contexts	Formal ethical infrastructure, caring and protective organizational culture, permeable organizational structure, and ethical and inspirational leadership contributed to participant ethicality. Formal ethical system needed to be complemented with informal culture and leadership.
	Negative organizational contexts	A competitive business mentality emphasizing liability, an organizational apathy toward ethics, pressure and pace of work, and negative socialization process emerged that may detract from practitioner ethicality.
	Fostering an ethical organization—practitioner's' ethical leadership	Participants helped cultivate organizational-level ethicality by mediating internal relationships, developing knowledge, fostering a helpful culture, communicating ethical identity, mapping

		stakeholders, educating clients/leadership, and being the voice of conscience. A cultural approach seemed to complement formally communicating ethical standards.
Individual-industry interaction	Industry-level trends contributing to practitioner ethicality	Participants benefitted from professional associations' formal initiatives and positive socialization, and increased emphasis on ethics in education with diverse pedagogical approaches.
	Industry-level contexts detracting from practitioner ethicality	Negative stereotypes, competition, lack of real penalty, and deficiencies in ethics training/education were perceived as detracting from practitioner ethicality.
	Practitioners facilitating higher levels of industry ethicality	Participants served as mentors, advocated for ethics-related programs, and created new services to enhance industry-level ethicality.
Individual-society interaction	Social trends and implications for public relations ethics	Several trends emerged as having implications for public relations and its ethics: an increasingly vocal and sensitive public, high-profile ethical charges, high transparency versus low trust society, an integration of personal and professional lives, and the blurry line between free speech and hate speech.
	Political climate and implications for public relations ethics	Partisanship and leaders' dubious moral standards and (un)ethical behavior emerged as having implications for public relations ethics. Some public relations issues have been politicized.
	Media landscape and implications for public relations ethics	Participants perceived that the reality of media industry, the phenomenon of fake news, challenges brought by social media and citizen journalists, have aggravated a media

		environment already filled with half-truths and inaccurate information, leading to public confusion and skepticism, and hence having implications for public relations ethics.
	Practitioner's ethical leadership that promotes macro-level ethicality	The current macro environment seemed to provide impetus and rationale for more elevated ethical standards for the public relations industry, as perceived by participants concerned with public relations' societal impact. They have contributed to macro-level ethicality by treating challenges as an opportunity, incorporating critical listening, facilitating voice and brand activism, counteracting fake and inaccurate news with contextualized, checked, and pro-social communication, and proactively educating clients and publics in terms of news literacy and advocacy.

Table 4 Summary of Multi-level Interactions of Ethics in Public Relations

In this chapter, public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics was explored, and their EDM process in situated workplaces were illuminated. Whereas participants made meaning of ethics in a variety of ways, concerns for relationships, contextualized problem-solving, attention to emotions, and integration of personal and professional ethics indeed emerged as major ways for participants to conceptualize ethics in public relations. During their EDM, they employed a variety of cognitive, emotional, discursive, sensemaking, and moral philosophical tools. The EDM process confirmed Simola's (2011) care ethic based EDM due to participants' emphasis on caring attitudes, attentiveness to contextual particulars, responsiveness to needs, and emphasis on using emotions and prioritizing relationships. Yet, it went beyond Simola's (2011) model and hence, a whole-person based EDM model was created. Findings also shed light on the interactions among micro, meso, and macro level ethicality within the public relations field. Not only were participants' ethics shaped by organizational, industry, and social environments, they conversely exerted influence on their meso and macro environment, thus illustrating an ethical conscience and leadership role on a broader level. The theoretical and practical implications that stem from these results will be detailed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, examples were provided that illustrate public relations practitioners' meaning-making of ethics and ethical decision-making (EDM) process as situated in their organizational, industry, and societal environments. Findings surrounding participants' meaning-making of ethics illuminate tensions and interplays between traditional and emerging ethical theories. Participants' EDM process revealed a whole-person perspective to ethics-related problem-solving. Data also uncovered how micro, meso, and macro level ethicality interact. These overarching findings as well as the more detailed sub-themes presented in the previous chapter have theoretical, methodological, and practical implications, all of which will be clarified in this chapter. In addition, limitations and future directions of research will be provided.

Theoretical and Methodological Implications

Several theoretical and methodological implications emerged from this dissertation project. These include (1) the reconciliation between traditional and emerging ethical theories, (2) a whole-person based approach to ethical decision making, (3) public relations practitioners' ethical leadership for the broader environment, and importantly, continued advancement of care ethics and EDM research broadly. This section will be organized into these sub-sections.

Resolving tensions between traditional and emerging ethical theories

The first theoretical contribution of the dissertation research lies in the reconciliation of tensions between traditional ethical theories that emphasize universality, autonomy, rationality, and professional ethics, and emerging ethical theories that privilege contextualization, relationship, emotions, and personal ethics. Data showed both have merits, but emerging theories seemed to more accurately represent how public relations practitioners approached ethics in real workplaces.

First, when it comes to debates surrounding universality, data showed that participants tended to name universal values when constructing the meaning of ethics, but they interpreted values differently and usually followed a situational, case-by-case, and contextualized problem-solving approach in ethical situations. For example, while participants overall named important values such as honesty and truthfulness, their actions might suggest otherwise—many had engaged in exaggeration, selectively reporting information, and omission. Though they disliked the word spinning, many had trouble articulating the differences between spinning and framing. The notion of truth emerged as elusive and subjective, and therefore, participants preferred the word authenticity that emphasized contexts and intention. The finding concerning the value-action gap is consistent with other descriptive studies (Place, 2010, 2015a). This, combined with ambiguities surrounding the meaning of words such as truth, indicated limited utility of values in terms of guiding ethical practice.

Furthermore, findings generally supported a situational, contextualized approach to ethical decision-making among research participants, particularly when they were faced with dilemmas/challenges that were ambiguous, uncertain, and complex. This situational approach was adopted by participants in their pursuit of universal, timeliness values such as honesty, truthfulness, and justice. The paradox and compatibility between situational problem-solving and universal values are worth noting. Care ethics (Held, 2006; Simola, 2011; Slote, 2007) promotes attention to contextual particulars because no two ethical situations are same. Participants of the dissertation study echoed this argument—they compared ethical dilemmas to crises that defy one-size-fits-all resolutions.

Second, relationship—in both participants' work environment and in the context of organizational-public relationships—emerged as an overarching mechanism for participants to construct the meaning of ethics. Concerns related to trust, relationships, and public impact emerged as the final arbiter for participants' ethical decisions, and they were the basis on which participants interpreted values, professional responsibilities, and reputation. That being said, depending on participant's narrower or broader view of relationships—with the former confined to workplace and the latter extended to the entire society—participants displayed loyalties ranging from pure advocacy to a humanitarian concern for publics and society. While care ethics (Hawk, 2011; Held, 2006; Slote, 2007) emphasizes relational health and prosperity as the ultimate ethical goal, it does not problematize different layers of relationships that professionals are embedded in—this limitation will be elaborated later. That being said, care ethics' tenets regarding attentiveness and responsive engagement may help curtail ethical issues stemming from a prioritization of clients'/employer organizations' interests over public interests.

Furthermore, while autonomy was promoted and touted as superior in deontology (Bowen, 2004, 2005), data suggested that participants seldom made decisions on their own. In contrast, they sought advice from mentors, peers, colleagues, and even family and friends both inside and outside of their organizations and the public relations industry. Importantly, they also received social support in the process, which is paramount considering the emotional nature of ethical situations. That being said, a certain level of autonomy—in terms of independent thinking—seems key to not being co-opted by the top decision-makers.

Third, regarding the debate between rationality and emotionality in ethics, data suggested that participants tended to construct the meanings of ethics surrounding professional responsibilities, image and reputation-related concerns, and good business, which are typical rational conceptualizations. That being said, some participants explicitly described ethics as an emotional experience, and across interviews, participants' tones when recounting ethical situations suggested emotions were unavoidable. Furthermore, the EDM process revealed important emotional skills that could enhance participants' ethical agency.

Findings also illuminated gaps between scholarly conceptualizations of public relations ethical roles and practitioners' perceptions. Practitioners who conceptualized ethics through the lens of professional responsibilities primarily adopted a responsible advocacy model (Fitzpatrick, 2006), consistent with Place's (2010) finding. They displayed varying levels of responsibility to the publics and society, with limited reference to mutual adaptation and change that was emphasized by two-way symmetrical communication and excellence project (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 2013; Grunig, 2006; Grunig et al., 2002; Grunig et al., 2006; Toth, 2009). That being said, most participants showed at least some concerns for public impact; in fact, some derived their sense of professional responsibility from a caring attitude for people, and their actions seemed to flow from that caring orientation. This was especially true for participants who interweaved ethics into the smallest details of their daily tasks and was particularly mindful of ethical implications arising from both communication strategies and tactics. This heightened sense of responsibility and attentiveness were highlighted by care ethics (Held, 2006; Slote, 2007). Of note, participants who connected ethics with public relations' societal role and impact seemed to care about ethics and the field in a deep way—they grounded public relations professional ethics in the larger American and human values, and they derived a sense of fulfillment through contributing to community or serving publics through their public relations work. This caring attitude was emphasized by care ethics—going beyond one's professional to include humanitarian care (Slote, 2007).

That being said, many participants seemed to also be pragmatic—they were consequence- and image-driven. Some also made a business case for ethics by linking good strategies with ethics, with a purpose for higher levels of efficiency, profitability, and good business in general. This intention was considered not aligning with a deontological point of view (Place, 2015a) or the ethical conscience role (Bowen, 2008). However, participants' quotations also reflected their acknowledgement of maintaining personal and professional integrity through maintaining mutually beneficial relationships and trust with others—this again suggested relationship-building as grounding other conceptualizations of ethics. Furthermore, care ethics supports an enlightened self-interest approach (Martinson, 1994). In fact, it highlights wellbeing of both the relationship as well as the relational partners—the health of the latter is built on the thriving of those caring and those cared for (Engster, 2011).

Finally, data suggested that personal and professional ethics are intertwined, and participants derived their sense of ethics from a variety of sources. Whereas personal background—including biological makeup, family upbringing, religious teachings, and education—indeed play a crucial and defining role in one's ethical orientations, professional socialization—including one's own workplaces, professional associations, and even news, world events, and industry-specific trends—can mold and shift one's ethical beliefs and value systems. Most participants' ethics system in the study took a lifespan perspective—they strengthened their moral compass or ethics via accessing admirable role models, mentors, and leaders, or through mistakes or unpleasant experiences, or because they developed a more solidified worldview with age. Interestingly, one participant acknowledged that he raised his ethical standards with aging, due to a stronger desire to leave a legacy with a peculiar sense of limited time on earth. By contrast, some participants' accounts suggested that they had formed or altered personal beliefs to accommodate their work. The tendency to mold personal ethics to suit work may be particularly strong for public relations practitioners, as they come into contact with different stakeholder groups and employers/clients holding diverse values. The interactions between personal and professional ethics along call into question Kohlberg's (1969) moral development theory and may explain mixed results regarding the correlation between ethics and age—not everyone seemed to evolve their ethics with life; it is a function of a variety of socialization and adaptation processes. Therefore, future research should continue to explore the constructed and lifespan nature of ethics, particularly for practitioners in value-laden industries.

In addition, while most of the participants sought alignment—or value congruence—when selecting employer organizations, clients, or employees, some of their aligned choices were still viewed unethical by the general public (e.g., representing a controversial political leader that the agency has met with and deemed as respectful). The constructive nature of ethics is particularly worth noting in the current social and political background, when people hold even more diverse ideologies, and many are polarized in their opinions. The constructed nature of ethics again implies limitations of ethical theories advocating for universality and reminds ethics researchers not to adopt pre-determined standards for ethics, or at least, researchers need to test participants' views on whether the assumed ethical behavior in research design is truly ethical from a participant's perspective.

Similarly, while ethics researchers—in public relations and beyond—tend to use the term "ethical dilemma," few explored the nature of ethical dilemmas. Findings of this study suggested that ethical dilemmas can be caused by a number of reasons, including identity conflict, value misalignment, changing social norms, and interestingly, tensions between moral philosophies (e.g., the greater good argument versus universal values such as honesty). More importantly, what is considered as an ethical dilemma may not be so for others, depending on whether the individual perceives uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the situation, and this is further contingent upon the individuals' levels of moral/ethical development, ethical knowledge and experience of a particular field, and confidence in articulating his/her point of view. Therefore, future research should not use the term sweepingly without exploring research subjects' perspectives. Why an individual perceives a situation as a dilemma or not should be examined through a qualitative methodology.

A whole-person approach to EDM

The dissertation project assessed Simola's (2011) conceptualization of care-based EDM framework for the first time, while simultaneously filling in a research gap in public relations ethics that is rarely process-oriented (Place, 2011). Findings to the second research question provided empirical data for the value of Simola's (2011) framework but shed light on a whole-personal EDM approach that incorporates both cognitive and emotional skills, as well as a variety of moral philosophies. Consistent with extant research on power and influence (Berger, 2007; Berger & Reber, 2006; Reber & Berger, 2006), postmodern approach (Holtzhausen, 2000, 2013), and descriptive studies (Place, 2010, 2015a, 2015b), practitioners' ethical decision-making are complicated by workplace dynamics, relational concerns, individual ideologies, power plays, and contextual pressures; therefore, it is crucial to understand individuals' ethical agency and associated strategies and skills.

First, tenets of care ethics can be employed even before the EDM process begins, as practitioners assess clients'/employer organizations' ethics and value alignment. Participants mentioned observation, background research, dialogue and interactions to assess whether they would be able to adequately serve an ethical counselor's role. This is consistent with Bivins (2006) and Edgett (2002) that recommended selection as the first step of responsible advocacy. That being said, participants may not detect ethical issues initially, despite their best intentions. This "unintended consequence" was studied by care ethicist Koehn (2011), who argued that care ethic—with its stress on attentiveness to emotions and contexts as well as on healthy relationships, holds individuals accountable for trying to identify potential issues when making business decisions, and allows them to cope with unintended consequences when problems occur. In the dissertation study, those who did not detect clients' ethically dubious dealings acknowledged that they could have avoided the business relationships had they been more attentive and less focused on the financial results. Furthermore, those who have already entered such an unhealthy relationship may or may not leave in the middle—depending on their perceptions of how their actions may affect clients' stakeholders implicated in the business. These findings echoed Koehn's (2011) assertion that care ethics is advantageous in dealing with unintended consequence than other moral philosophies.

Second, according to Simola (2011), care ethics could enhance individuals' ethical awareness—the first stage of EDM—with its emphasis on (1) attentiveness to the particular, (2) subjective experience of others, and (3) epistemic value of emotions (pp. 129-130). Indeed, participants of the dissertation study commonly mentioned intuitions—in the form of bodily sensations and gut feeling—as triggers for them to recognize an ethical situation/challenge. Those who disregarded their sense of discomfort or gut feelings in the pursuit of material goals and career advancement when faced with an ethical dilemma recounted having to quit ultimately, due to the irreversibility of the event. The presence of gut feelings as occurring in EDM was noted by several studies in public relations ethics (Place, 2015b, Bowen, 2008, Lee, 2012), but rationality-based moral philosophies tended to devalue the role of emotions and intuition (Bowen, 2004). This dissertation research found that intuition—though rather implicit and unconscious—is in fact an expression of an accumulation of ethical and industry knowledge, personal background, and professional experiences that were consciously cultivated by practitioners. It is not unfounded. Emotions, on the other hand, do have epistemic values (Simola, 2011) as they reflected participant's implicit appraisal of the situation. With that said, some participants acknowledged that intuition was not always precise; continued investigation and dialogue would make intuition truly meaningful. Therefore, findings of the dissertation study not only provided evidence for ethicists favoring an intuition approach (Haidt, 2001; Sonenshein, 2007), but also issued caveat for solely relying on intuition indiscriminately.

In addition, not only did empathy for stakeholders emerge as another trigger for practitioners to recognize the ethical implications of a situation; in fact, empathy may be the very basis on which intuition and gut feelings were constructed, at least for public relations practitioners, for whom organizational public relationship is a major component of their work. At least for some participants, they developed their gut reactions by way of empathy—either because they were a member of the stakeholder groups or because they developed an intuitive way of thinking about stakeholder impact. The role of empathy—or subjective experience of others—in registering ethical awareness is consistent with Simola's (2011) propositions.

Third, findings of the dissertation study validated the prevalence of care ethics in the ethical judgment stage—second stage of EDM. Though participants evoked a variety of moral philosophies, consistent with Place's (2010) finding, care ethics seemed to be one of the most valued frameworks, as participants explicitly acknowledged their preference or implicitly emphasized a caring attitude, prioritization of relationships, use of emotional skills especially empathy, and being flexible and paying attention to situational particulars. Several participants saw care ethics not just key to public relations ethics but should be applied across all human endeavors. Some believed care ethics would allow practitioners to step away from their own self-centered reputation and benefits and pay more attention to stakeholder needs and voice. That being said, a consequence-based thinking was also prevalent, consistent with Hon's (2006) connecting teleology with public relations' concerns for the impact and consequences on publics resulted from organizational activities. To some extent, the consequence-based thinking overlaps conceptually with moral imagination (Kekes, 2006) as participants explored future scenarios and possibilities of public reactions and impact ensuing certain organizational/client practice.

By comparison, deontology (Bowen, 2004, 2005) was often regarded as too idealistic by practitioners. Virtue ethics (Baker, 2008; Harrison & Galloway, 2005; MacIntyre, 1984) appeared to be some participants' primary framework for operation, especially for those who had a strong ethical identity and who integrated work identity as an important aspect of self; however, it may produce mixed results due to the largely arbitrary nature of individual virtues and organizational core values to be adopted in managing ethics.

Furthermore, a sensemaking process that emerged from data emphasized emotional management skills, aligned with care ethics' emotional lens. Furthermore, emotional skills and mindfulness may be potent deterrent to moral/ethical disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2002) that some participants exhibited. That being said, participants also employed cognitive based strategies such as investigation, group consultation, assessing personal situation, and seeking support. Therefore, findings of the dissertation research not only supported Simola's (2011) proposition that care ethics could enhance ethical judgment through empathy, they added additional layers by validating the positive role of emotional skills, relational prioritization, and usefulness of other cognitive strategies and moral philosophical orientations.

Fourth, as for ethical intent, Simola (2011) proposed that care ethics holds an advantage as it allows individuals to make proactive decisions by desire "based on movement toward these feelings that will result in authentically responsive interconnections with oneself and others" (Simola, 2011, p. 133), rather than making reactive decisions following a "don't do" discourse that is characteristic of rule-abiding. Indeed, participants in the dissertation study were driven by their desires to feel peaceful, proud, and fulfilled. This finding in fact aligns with the emotional aspect of virtue ethics (Harrison & Galloway, 2005) that articulates virtue "lies not in an action … but rather in the feelings an individual or agent associate with this action" (p. 5). Also, many participants did not behave ethically to satisfy professional codes or standards of behavior; instead, they derived a sense of purpose and fulfillment by way of meaningful work. For many, this meaningful work had to do with sustaining good public relationships and trust, helping stakeholders and especially those were vulnerable, and contributing to the society built on a vision of democracy. Meanings and ethics seemed to go hand in hand. That being said, fear, greed, and instant gratification—or a short-term lens—could encourage unethical conduct. This finding again implied the importance of emotional monitoring and regulation and mindfulness—so that practitioners can seek support, consider worse-case scenarios, act courageously in spite of fear, and be more thoughtful of their actions.

Lastly, while ethics research commonly identified a knowing-doing gap (Hannah & Avolio, 2010; Place, 2010, 2015b), care ethicists (Reiter, 1996; Simola, 2011) offered some solutions with care ethics' focus on "simultaneously and creatively fulfilling seemingly conflicting responsibilities to more than one person" (Simola, 2011, p. 135) by detecting unsaid needs and creating win-win solutions. These were confirmed by data. Exploring underlying emotions and interests and offering alternative solutions while embodying a problem-solver and consultant role emerged as crucial to arrive a win-win solution. In addition, though some participants chose to exit from unethical situations as win-win did not always happen, most would provide counsel or education first, and confrontation was not antagonistic. Moreover, participants exhibited emotional intelligence, business savvy, diplomacy, and hardiness, as they solicited client views, acted in good faith, spoke tactfully and firmly, while using a variety of persuasive appeals as well as seeking to align with audience's preferred moral philosophical orientation. In other words, participants sought to recognize clients'/organizational leaders' moral orientations, and then adapted appeals that focused on values/rules, or consequences/impact, or virtues/character/anticipated feelings, or relationships/humanitarian wellbeing. Their ability to "read people," particularly their preferred persuasive appeals and moral orientations, was worth noting. While previous EDM stages required emotional skills mostly in the area of self-monitoring, empathy, and emotional regulation, the full spectrum of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) was expressed in the action stage, when participants also sought to influence audience's emotions by projecting confidence, soothing client's worries, or trying to elicit their guilt. Therefore, findings offered additional evidence as to the relevance of moral philosophies in the action stage of EDM.

In short, propositions asserted by Simola (2011) found evidence in the dissertation data, and findings suggested even more ways that care ethics could enhance individuals' performance across the EDM process, as well as other cognitive and moral philosophically oriented strategies and skills that have enhanced participants' EDM. These are important findings that led to a whole-person based EDM framework, consistent with Fawkes (2012).

Public relations' ethical conscience/leadership for broader environments

Findings of the dissertation research suggested participants' growing awareness of how the broader societal environment—with its social, political, and media components—have created ethical challenge for the public relations industry. For one thing, the topic of ethics has been put in the spotlight, due to social trends such as an increasingly vocal and sensitive general public, high-profile ethical charges, low levels of trust, blurring between personal and professional lives, and ambiguities surrounding free speech versus hate speech. As a result, participants generally perceived that they had an easier time to advocate for ethics in front of clients/employers. On the other hand, national leadership's dubious ethical behavior, the politicization of certain public relations issues such as healthcare, and a media environment that is filled with inaccurate information, half-truth, and news perceived as fake, all contributed to more public skepticism and confusion and threats to democracy and society's wellbeing. The lack of trust seemed to spill to public relations too, and at least some participants may degrade their standards due to perceived norm.

That being said, some participants in the dissertation research displayed an admirable sense of ownership of the broader societal ethicality. For them, the bleak reality seemed to provide impetus and rationale for not only more elevated ethical standards for the public relations industry, but also an ethical leadership role (Lee & Cheng, 2010) that stresses public relations' positive societal impact. Participants demonstrated this leadership role with both a caring attitude and actual efforts in promoting ethics. They showed deep concerns for and commitment to ethics itself, the public relations industry, the publics, quality of news, societal wellness, and preservation of democracy. They also sought to contribute to societal level of ethics by (1) incorporating critical listening of a variety of stakeholders, especially those who may feel alienated by mainstream ideologies, (2) facilitating voice and brand activism that resist political leaders' disrespectful comments or behavior, (3) counteracting fake and inaccurate news with contextualized, checked, and pro-social communication, (4) proactively educating clients and publics in terms of news literacy and advocacy, and (5) being non-negotiable and uncompromising with their own ethical standards and showing passion for cause for ethics therefore serving as role models. These caring orientation and practices addressing societal contexts seem to align with “humanitarian caring” that was emphasized by care ethicist Slote (2007). Also, these findings suggested that ethical leadership—characterized by personal ethics, interpersonal relationships, and communicating ethical standards (Lee & Cheng, 2010)—does not have to be embodied only by positional leaders or applied only within an organizational context (Neill & Drumwright, 2012). Themes from the dissertation study also provided clues to further operationalize the term on a societal level. More importantly, public relations practitioners’ ethical leadership, combined with humanitarian care, can be one avenue for public relations’ societal impact, a topic that has been gaining more scholarly attention (Coombs & Holladay, 2013) within the field.

In addition, consistent with EDM literature (Craft, 2013; O’Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) and public relations ethics literature focusing on organizational and industry factors (Bowen, 2004; Neill & Drumwright, 2012), participants were indeed shaped by organizational- and industry-level ethical climate. Data presented detailed findings regarding positive and negative influences from these meso-level environments. That being said, again, participants enumerated ways they had positively impacted meso-level ethicality. On an organizational level, participants’ positive impact manifested mostly via a cultural role—not only did they set ethical standards internally and externally, they enhanced organizational culture by mediating internal relationships, developing knowledge of their firms, clients, and stakeholders, fostering a helpful and empathetic culture, and being the conscience of the organization by mapping out stakeholders and educating leaders/clients. These activities aimed at adapting organizational ethical culture and climate, which answered call issued by Craft (2013). On an industry level, many participants helped elevate industry ethicality by serving as mentors, creating and advocating for ethics trainings and programs, and initiating services that tackle specific ethical issues. Interestingly, these efforts demonstrated a positive socialization process, consistent with Neill (2016a), because those who actively participated in professional ethics programs felt more accountable and exhibited high levels of ethical ownership (Hannah & Avolio, 2010).

Advancing care ethics

Care ethics is the primary ethical theory used in Simola's (2011) framework that was applied to public relations in this dissertation research. Data confirmed it is indeed utilized by practitioners to make meaning of ethics and can guide practitioners throughout the EDM process. That being said, several issues emerged that need to be further delineated to advance this particular ethical framework.

First, since public relations and care ethics share a concern for relationships, it is not surprising that this ethical framework is appropriate for the discipline. It is uncertain whether it is similarly instrumental for other disciplines—especially for those with less focus on relationship building. That being said, Hawk (2011) cogently attributed the fast development of care ethics to a world increasingly characterized by interdependence and connections. This perspective is validated by one participant who believed that one can always think of an end person that he or she helps with through work. This idea concurs with the notion of "empathic maturity" (Simola, 2011, p. 132; Slote, 2007) that underpin more advanced stages of care reasoning (Simola, 2011). Or in other words, the ethical agents concern not only with relationships that are near, closely related and at present, but also those who are distant, unrelated, at risk, and in the future. Findings of the dissertation research confirmed existence of empathic maturity among participants, as some recounted instances where they served community members, vulnerable and at-risk publics, or they contemplated long-term impact on stakeholders in the future. That being said, a tension that emerged has to do with prioritization of different relational partners, particularly for public relations practitioners, who work with two layers of relationships—work relationships as individual employees and organizational-public relationships (OPR) (Hon & Grunig, 1999) as representatives.

Overall, though participants included publics and society as criteria to judge their ethical behaviors, they tended to discuss relationships with clients, organizational management, or media when they were referring to relationship management. It appears as if they would prioritize and be mostly mindful of these relationships, which is consistent with public relations practitioners' advocacy role (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001) and dependence on these relationships for business, career, and survival (Bowen, 2004; Bivins, 2006). This sequence of prioritization is not incompatible with care ethics. In fact, care ethicists (Engster, 2007, 2011; Burton & Dunn, 1996) have developed care-based stakeholder theories that problematized the issue of prioritization. Burton and Dunn (1996) argued that three principles—proximity, relational, and urgency—should be used to determine whom to care first. Following Burton and Dunn (1996), Engster (2007, 2011) offered a more concrete order, in the sequence of stockholder, employee, local community, customer, supplier, and so forth, with an argument that a firm's caring activity can only happen when success and continuation of the firm is ensured. While Engster (2011) seems aligned with an enlightened self-interest approach, which has been applied to public relations ethics (Martinson, 1994) and seems to fit in business reality, he overlooked industries that have many more stakeholders than listed, such as public relations. Furthermore, the internal tension between a care-based stakeholder theory (Engster, 2011) and empathic maturity (Simola, 2011; Slote, 2007) need to be revisited. The current social and political environment may render a distant and unrelated stakeholder group into an urgent and proximate one all of a sudden.

Additionally, though rooted in a feminist heritage, care ethics has not fully explored the issue of power in relationships. In particular, it seems to imply those who are caring hold more power than those who are cared for. This is not surprising, as care ethics was generally studied in teacher-student relationships or applied to business and politics that generally possess more power than consumers/publics. Yet, this power structure might be altered as publics and consumers gain more power with digital tools and social media. Findings of the dissertation have revealed a more vocal and easily agitated general public based on participants' observations. Furthermore, within public relations, the practitioners who are caring—for and about clients, or organizations, or stakeholders—may in fact hold the least power. This has been widely acknowledged in public relations literature (Berger, 2007; Berger & Reber, 2006; Reber & Berger, 2006), and therefore, whether practitioners truly followed caring principles or displayed a deferential or even dismissive attitude needs to be explored further. Similarly, care ethics should be applied to more industries and disciplines in which practitioners hold less power than those they serve so as to investigate power issues embedded in caring relationships.

Finally, the notion of empathy—particularly its dark side when it comes to ethics—needs to be explored (see, for example, Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015). While care ethics seems to indiscriminately tout it as a virtue and ability leading to ethical awareness and judgment, it could also be used to rationalize ethically dubious decisions. For example, in this dissertation study, a participant indiscreetly entered into a client relationship but later found the client's unethical conduct. However, he stayed due to the possible negative impact on the client's employees, customers, and suppliers, etc. It was unclear whether he held a mature level of empathy that encompassed those who he did not come into contact with, or rather, he used the discourse as a way to ethically disengage from and rationalize his continued engagement with the client. Similarly, practitioners may compromise stakeholder wellbeing when they have a level of empathy that makes them prioritize the here and now (i.e., clients and organizational members). Therefore, critical analysis of empathy—and care ethics—is needed.

Advancing EDM

Rest's (1986, 1994) EDM framework is the other half of Simola's (2011) framework that was applied to public relations in this dissertation study. The primary methodological contributions that this dissertation research has made to the EDM literature include using a qualitative methodology, exploring the entire EDM process, and using participants' past ethical events instead of measuring their likelihood to act ethically in a certain scenario. These choices revealed some of the methodological issues among extant EDM literature. First, a qualitative methodology not only validated connections between EDM and certain personal, organizational, issue, and societal factors, but also revealed more nuances, including how and why certain personal characteristics and contextual elements were implicated in the EDM process. This methodology was called for by behavioral ethics scholars and authors of meta-analyses (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005), who identified a predominance of survey and experimental design within the EDM approach.

Second, studying the entire EDM process was also encouraged (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005) to detect the point that breaks the process. In fact, one important finding emerged from the dissertation research was that moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999, 2002) might happen both at the ethical awareness and ethical judgment stage, but through different mechanisms. Before or at the awareness stage, a few participants effectively disengaged from the ethical implication of the situation by treating it not as such—when they equated ethics with law or interpreted truth as allowing for subjectivity, they failed to see the ethical component of the issue. During the ethical judgment stage, they might disengage from ethics or rationalize their less-than-ethical behavior by adopting a discourse such as "cannot fight the fight," "if I don't do it, others will anyway," or by shifting responsibilities to supervisors or stakeholders. In short, studying the entire process can help researchers understand not only how ethical behaviors happen, but also what prevents them, or in other words, what makes or breaks the chain.

Third, this dissertation study explored practitioners' lived experience—a past ethical dilemma or challenge, or conversely, it asked participants to reflect on why they have not encountered ethical issues at work. This approach is more advantageous to studies that have pre-determined ethical behavior and ask participants to indicate their likelihood to act. This is because intention is only a proxy for action, and as mentioned previously, participants' perceptions of the ethical action or ethical dilemma may vary to a large extent. Additionally, studying lived experiences allowed participants to delineate contextual factors—including workplace dynamics, relational concerns, organizational environment, and power structure—as well as their sensemaking process. This leads to theoretical implications to EDM research.

The major theoretical contributions made by this dissertation to the EDM literature include integrating emotions and sensemaking in the EDM process, as well as exploring societal-level contextual issues that go beyond nationality and Hofstede's' (2011) cultural dimensions. First, findings indicated that emotions and intuitions played important roles in EDM such as triggering participants' recognition of an ethical challenge, while contributing to participants' judgment and actions. That being said, negative emotions, in the sense that they deter ethical considerations, must be countered with emotional awareness and regulation skills. Intuitions were widely honored by participants, but they must be followed with investigation or consultation to be truly meaningful. Sensemaking was found to occur when the ethical situation was considered as uncertain, ambiguous, risky, and complicated. Participants employed a variety of cognitive, emotional, imaginative, intuitive skills during the process, and importantly, sensemaking appears as a group process, as participants sought both advice and support from mentors, peers, superiors, and even family and friends. This is consistent with findings by sensemaking scholars (Sonenshein, 2007;

Thiel et al., 2012). Also, dialogue and debates—preferably among multiple and diverse perspectives within and outside the organization were recommended by participants. This aligns with the requisite variety perspective (Sha & Ford, 2007). Therefore, EDM will benefit from a group-level analysis, as individuals situated in organizations are rarely sole decision-makers struggling in the process; they are influenced by a variety of viewpoints.

Additionally, extant EDM research has investigated a variety of individual, organizational, issue intensity variables that affect individuals' EDM, with very limited exploration of societal-level factors, except for only a few that examined the role of nationality and cultural dimension (Hofstede, 2011). This dissertation not only provided more nuances on an individual and organizational level, but also expanded context to a societal level by examining closely the political, social, and media backdrop as contributing to individuals' EDM and sensemaking of ethics. Specifically, findings provided explanations regarding previously mixed results for age and experience, as mentioned previously.

Practical Implications

There are several practical implications stemming from the findings of the dissertation research, in the areas of ethical education and training, practitioner autonomy, as well as professional socialization opportunities.

Notably, current ethics education and training programs have made great strides over the past several decades, with most contributions from higher education and professional associations. As mentioned previously, a large number of research studies focused on ethics education (Austin & Toth, 2011; DiStaso, et al., 2009;

Erzikova, 2010; Gale & Bunton, 2005; Neill, 2017; Ragas et al., 2015; Silverman et al., 2014) that identified a few trends including educators' tendencies to integrate ethics into the public relations curriculum rather than teaching standalone ethics courses (Austin & Toth, 2011; Neill, 2017), and their tendencies to focus most on microlevel issues such as messaging, transparency and issues of representation (Drumwright, 2007; Neill, 2017) and least on business ethics issues such as overbilling and financial transparency, how to raise ethics concerns, and the effect of organizational culture and values (Neill, 2017). Furthermore, due to lack of time, educator who chose to integrate ethics into other courses tended to focus most on PRSA code of ethics, while overlooking other codes beyond PRSA, classical moral philosophes, and decision-making models (Neill, 2017).

To some extent, professional associations' ethics trainings have compensated for the lack. For example, the PRSA has dedicated time, space, and energy to educating members of ethics by not only crafting the code of ethics, but also creating the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Ethics (BEPS) that "offers analysis on current practice issues and challenges through Ethical Standards Advisories (ESAs)" (PRSA). Current ESAs cover a range of topics such as disclosure, unprofessional performance, plagiarism, deceptive online practice, and so forth. PRSA also provides case studies, webinars, quizzes, and decision making guides (PRSA) to help members familiarize with potential ethical issues in the public relations workplace and navigate them with support. Similarly, the Arthur W. Page Center offers public relations ethics training that covers 11 modules, with a clear focus on core principles, professional codes of ethics, digital and global context, decision making, transparency, and ethics in crisis management. While these efforts should be applauded, which demonstrated the growing awareness of ethics of the industry, they can be enhanced further by insights gleaned from this dissertation study.

First, ethics programs—whether in higher education or from professional associations—can put more emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of ethics in the public relations workplace. This dissertation study found participants face ethical issues in multiple areas including work ethics, professional/media ethics, business ethics, and organizational/managerial ethics. They value the importance of maintaining work ethics so as to effectively advocate for clients/employer organizations, which can be either compromised or backfire when there is a personal-professional value misalignment. Mismanagement was also considered as a breeding ground for unethical behavior, and hence, monitoring organizational culture and ethical climate should be incorporated in ethics training programs. Additionally, billing was mentioned frequently in this dissertation study as the most challenging ethical issue in their work, so was managing client relationships. Therefore, educational and training programs should address and elaborate on all areas of ethics in workplace settings.

Second, emotional skills, empathy, and strategies for speaking up should be stressed in the ethics curriculum. These skills are important for ethics in any discipline, but especially in industries involving complex relationships and power dynamics. Specifically, trainings should include the concept of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), with components spanning self-awareness, empathy, emotional regulation, and use of emotional appeals and display to influence others. Trainings can also address the role of emotions and intuition in triggering awareness, shaping judgment, intensifying desire, and motivating actions. Empathic maturity, or a mature level of empathy that emphasizes humanitarian care, should be emphasized, and corresponding exercises can be designed. For example, several participants mentioned having been through trainings in which they were asked to draft stakeholder profiles and give names and life stories to these profiles, and as a result, they were more likely to empathize with them due to shortened psychological proximity despite physical distance. Students and trainees can be encouraged to contemplate on their multifaceted identities (e.g., as community members, as a mother) to further enhance empathy. Similarly, ethics trainings should emphasize sharing perspectives, getting to know one another in the classroom, critical thinking, instead of being transactional in nature. Additionally, this dissertation study found a variety of strategies for speaking up, as well as effective mindsets surrounding confrontation. These strategies can be taught and practiced in ethics training and programs. In short, ethics education should embrace the notion of practical rationality articulated by care ethicist Slote (2007), where one use all of his/her capabilities, including affective, intuitional, and imaginative, to arrive at a reasonable assessment of the unique context and a reasonable action (Hawk, 2011). In other words, the whole-personal approach to ethics proposed by this dissertation study can be explored in ethics trainings.

Another important recommendation for ethics education and training is to emphasize public relations' societal roles and impact. Findings of the dissertation study indicate participants' desire to act ethically stemmed from anticipated feelings of peace, professional pride, and a sense of fulfillment, and they derived most meaning and fulfillment not just by advocating for clients/employer organizations or building mutually beneficial public relations, but from the knowledge and belief that they can serve the community and contribute to societal good with their work. Therefore, going beyond an organization lens in public relations education and trainings can spur ethical motivations.

A perennial issue in the public relations ethics literature has to do with practitioners' lack of autonomy, which was one reason why deontology had limited value. Researchers (Place, 2010; Bivins, 2006) have called for studies that explore how practitioners can increase their autonomy inside or outside their work context. Though this was not the primary goal of the current dissertation study, findings revealed at least two ways that practitioners can increase autonomy. First, independent consultants exhibited higher levels of autonomy compared with their agency and in-house counterparts. Their accounts showed that they more freely chose who they served and how they designed client interactions, mostly based on their personal values and moral compass. It also seems that entrepreneurial public relations career has become a common and viable career option. Second, participants who had a heightened sense of career confidence and security tended to exhibit more likelihood to speak up, confront clients/management, or exit the unethical workplace. And this security and confidence seemed to stem both from lifelong learning, particularly skills core to public relations such as writing, as well as from a diverse career trajectory. In particularly, one participant confided that she gained her job security—or the confidence to always be able to land a job—after having to quit several times while picking up a variety of skills. That being said, this dissertation study suggested the limitations of autonomy—in fact, participants across the board sought mentors, peers, family and friends when faced with ethical dilemmas. They not only gained insights but also social support through interactions with them. Therefore, while a certain level of independent thinking should be encouraged, ethics programs should also encourage networking, mentorships, and help-seeking.

Related, many studies (Curtin, Gallicano, & Matthew, 2011; Gallicano et al., 2012; Neill & Weaver, 2017; Todd, 2014) revealed that young or beginner practitioners face particular ethical challenges at work, including not being able to identify ethical issues, being overly optimistic and underestimating the possibility that they would encounter ethical event, as well as inability to speak up or confront. Findings of the dissertation study offered several practical ways to alleviate these issues, including mentorship programs, role modeling centered trainings, and professional socialization. First, mentorship program was already recommended by previous studies (Neill, 2016a; Neill & Weaver, 2017) as a complement to knowledge-based trainings. This is confirmed by this study. Participants sought mentors to check gut feelings and seek advice and support. In fact, those who served as mentors benefitted as well—they derived a strong sense of accountability from their roles. Some participants mentioned being mentored by younger practitioners due to their familiarity with and expertise in technology and social media. Therefore, both mentoring up and down can be encouraged among practitioners and especially younger practitioners. Second, a few participants recalled early experience in which they were strongly shaped by a role model—it could be their professor, or supervisor, or a mentor. The positive role modelling effect seemed to be stronger than textbook knowledge and should be utilized. Last, participants who were active in professional associations such as PRSA or PR Council exhibited extensive ethical knowledge and professional pride; they also expanded their professional network and therefore career opportunities. Therefore, both professional socialization and networking through participation in professional associations should be encouraged among all practitioners, especially young and beginning ones.

Future Directions

There are several future research directions that stemmed from this dissertation study with some having been mentioned previously in the discussion. To reiterate, the most important future direction has to do with refining and testing the whole-personal based approach to ethics, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The multilevel interactionist perspectives to ethics can also be expanded, as it was exploratory in nature in this dissertation study. Instead of investigating such interactions based on participants' perceptions, a more objective, non-biased research project that includes measurement and perspectives from practitioners, media professionals, and clients/organizational leaders would enrich our understanding. Other cultures and the global contexts can be included and problematized. Furthermore, themes that emerged from data regarding ethical leadership on a societal level offered tentative operationalizations that can be tested by future quantitative studies.

In addition, new research questions emerged from the dissertation study can direct future research. The first one involves the conceptual overlap among care ethics, deontology, and virtue ethics. For example, both care ethics and deontology emphasize responsibility, with the former stressing responsibility to the maintenance of relationship. But for industries such as public relations, relational responsibilities seem to overlap with role responsibilities. Also, care ethics and virtue ethics share a focus on emotions and empathy. Some of these conceptual issues have been explored (see, Sander-Staudt, 2006), but more studies are needed to clearly delineate the conceptual difference.

Furthermore, buzzwords such as alignment (or, congruence) and authenticity should be further explored. Both were frequently mentioned and touted by participants in the dissertation study, and it appears that participants equated those words with higher levels of ethicality or a stronger moral compass. Upon further investigation, though, those who valued alignment may still choose morally debatable clients, and those who valued authentic leadership in fact meant leadership that exhibited both morally impeccable character and integration of personal and professional lives. On the other hand, only one participant believed compartmentalization of personal and professional ethics was possible, yet his accounts did not reveal any difference between personal and professional ethics. It is possible that he experienced a misalignment at first, which he quickly resolved due to cognitive dissonance, and then he was gradually socialized to hold similar beliefs across personal and professional lives. Therefore, more studies need to understand the process of ethics or value alignment, the meaning of authenticity, while being critical of their positive connotations.

Related, the construction of ethics can be studied from a lifespan perspective. While Kohlberg's (1969) moral development framework offered one explanation as to why people's levels of ethics evolve over a lifetime, it did not account for socialization processes or broader societal influence. Furthermore, at least one participant chose to hold himself to an ethical higher standard with age, due primarily to perceived limited time on earth, a need to feel good, and a desire to leave a legacy. This thought parallels socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) (Carstensen, 1992) in that the theory postulates that as people age, they feel constraints on time, and prioritize emotional goals. Therefore, SST might be studied alongside a lifespan view of ethics, and it may be an alternative explanation of the correlation between ethics and age.

Last, research can further explore why certain public relations practitioners are more socially minded and/or more likely to exhibit ethical leadership on both organizational and societal levels. Presumably, this is due to their personal and professional backgrounds which were confirmed by this study, but more research can be conducted that further delineate the differences between practitioners who are organizationally focused and those who are societally focused, so as to designing training programs that elevate practitioners' social impact. Additionally, future research can test the effectiveness of ethics training programs that incorporate ideas that were recommended by this dissertation project, including empathy, listening, emotional skills, speaking up strategies, role modeling, cultivation of meaning, business/managerial issues beyond the realm of public relations, so as to equip practitioners with the cognitive, emotional, discursive, and relational skills that would maximize their ethical agency at work and in the current social, political, and media milieu.

Conclusion

This dissertation study explored U.S. public relations practitioners' meaning making of ethics and their ethical decision making (EDM) process from a multi-level interactionist perspective, utilizing qualitative interviews with 37 current or past U.S. public relations practitioners. Several important findings were drawn that can enrich public relations ethics literature and provide practical strategies for practitioners in the field.

To begin with, findings reconciliated tensions between traditional theories and emerging theories as well as addressed gaps between practitioners' perceptions of ethics and scholarly ethical role conceptualizations. Participants made meaning of ethics primarily via their concerns for work and organizational-public relationships, contextual particulars, and an alignment of personal and professional ethics. That being said, considerations for responsibilities, reputation, and business also emerged as important factors for participants to construct ethics, though they were grounded in relational and trust concerns. Participants experienced ethical challenges emotionally, and emotional skills proved to be important in navigating the situation.

Furthermore, participants utilized a variety of cognitive, emotional, intuitive, imaginative, and discursive skills during their ethical decision making (EDM) process. Their ethical agency and competencies seemed to be enhanced when they paid attention to situation particulars, prioritized relationships, remained flexible by responding to needs rather than following abstract rules, and applied a variety of moral philosophical approaches and emotional strategies. Therefore, a whole-personal approach to ethics was developed for public relations practitioners, building upon Simola's (2011) care based EDM propositions.

Last but not least, data showed that public relations practitioners' ethicality was both a result of contextual influences as well as a contributor to higher levels of ethical standards—on organizational, industry, and societal levels. As the topic of ethics is gaining urgency in the contemporary era, findings regarding public relations practitioners' ethical leadership for the broader social environment provided fuel and impetus for continued research on public relations' positive societal impact.

Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Script

Enacting Public Relations Ethics at Work – A Qualitative Study

Hello! We are working on a research project that explores past/current public relations practitioners' ethical behavior during their public relations practice, and we need your help. If you are a past or current public relations practitioner, and during your public relations practice, you have contemplated workplace ethics, or applied personal/professional ethics at work, or encountered situations with ethical implications, or known/experienced workplaces with exemplary/substandard ethical climate, could you please consider participating in this project? We really appreciate your generous help!

The project has already been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Maryland, so your identity will be protected, and your interview will be kept confidential. You can decline any interview questions and can opt out of the research study at any time.

In brief, this project is part of a dissertation study that seeks to enhance public relations practitioners' ethical agency at work. If you are interested, we will send you a copy of the research report that may help you strengthen your ethical agency, and/or help your unit/organization improve its ethical climate through exemplars and practical recommendations.

If you are willing to participate in this project, please contact us: Sylvia Jiankun Guo at sguo09@umd.edu or Dr. Lindsey B. Anderson at lbander@umd.edu. You will then be contacted for an approximately 60 minutes' interview, in-person or via phone/Skype, scheduled at your convenience. Your time, experience, and insights will be greatly valued.

If you know other past/current public relations practitioners who may be appropriate for this study, could you please spread the word and pass along this message? Thank you very much!

Best regards,

Sylvia Jiankun Guo
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
2130 Skinner Building
College Park, MD 20742

Lindsey B. Anderson, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Department of Communication
University of Maryland
2130 Skinner Building
College Park, MD 20742

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Enacting Public Relations Ethics at Work – A Qualitative Study

Interview Protocol

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this research project, which explores past/current public relations practitioners' ethical behavior during their public relations practice. This project also seeks to explore personal and workplace factors that facilitate or constrain practitioners' ability to exert ethical agency at work. As I mentioned, this interview is part of my doctoral dissertation at the Department of Communication at the University of Maryland. The project is conducted under the supervision of my advisor, Dr. Lindsey B. Anderson.

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant. However, the interview process may help you reflect on your understanding of ethics, your personal/professional ethical standard, and your ethical agency (abilities to sense ethical issues, make judgment, form the motivation to take appropriate actions). This research project will also uncover facilitators and constraints surrounding public relations practitioners' ethical behavior at work, both internally (e.g., emotional regulation, mental models, framing strategies, upward influence strategies, intuition, etc.) and externally (organizational ethical climate, peer influence, professional/workplace code enforcement, ethical training programs). With this knowledge, you may be able to enhance your own ethical agency and/or improve your workplace's ethical climate. Upon your request, I will send you a copy of the research results.

The interview will last about 60 minutes. Participation consists of narrating your public relations ethics-related workplace experience(s) and decisions/actions (if any), or workplace ethical climate, and responding to follow-up interview questions. The interview will be focused on your understanding of public relations ethics, your application of one or more ethical theories at work, your encounter with ethical issues and decisions (if any), and your experience with workplace ethical climate. Examples of interview questions include: *how would you define ethics and public relations ethics? Have you ever applied personal/professional ethics at your public relations work? If yes, could you please share with me the experience? Can you comment on* *your workplace's ethical climate – for example, is there a code of ethics? How about your workplace culture? Why did you perceive that situation as having ethical content? What motivated to take that action?*

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data in a secure location, i.e., principal investigator's computers. In addition, your name will not be identified or linked to the data at any time unless you give your consent to reveal these identities. The data you provide through your responses will not be shared with anyone, including other participants. Only the investigators will have access to the participants' names. You can read the consent form for more information of your rights as a research participant of the study. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report any injury related to the research, please contact my advisor, by telephone (301-405-0775) or email (lbander@umd.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact the Institutional Review Board Office at the University of Maryland, by email (irb@umd.edu) or telephone (301-405-0678). This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Do you still agree to participate? (If yes, continue. If no, stop.)

The interview will last about 60 minutes, and I would like to ask your permission to record this interview for accuracy. The recording will be available only to me, and your identity will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any report. If your words are included in the results, any identifying information will be removed.

Do you agree for me to record this interview? (If yes, turn on the recorder. If no, ask for participants' permission to take notes.)

[*The above interaction fulfills the consent process for interviews over phone/Skype]*

[Opening/RQ1: Grand-tour questions to understand participants' perceived roles, responsibilities, relationship with upper management, reporting system, perceptions of public relations, and definition of ethics and public relation ethics, etc.]

1. Could you please tell me a little bit about your public relations job and roles?
2. To what extent do you think your daily work involves ethical decisions?
3. How would you define ethics? How about public relations ethics?
4. In your opinion, is ethics different from morals, and how so?
5. Do you believe in the separation between personal and professional ethics? Have you ever encountered an ethical situation? It could be a conflict, a dilemma, a gray area, etc., or simply a situation where you think your personal or professional values were being challenged?

[RQ 2a: <u>How and why do public relations practitioners become sensitized to ethical issues at work?</u>]

1. Just now you mentioned ____________ (the ethical situation he/she experienced), please reflect on the moment you first noticed you were in this situation. What made you aware?
    a. How did you first realize this situation as having ethical content?
    b. (Emotions, ethical knowledge, personal values)
2. Do you think your public relations colleagues or peers would also perceive this situation as having ethical implications? Why?
3. Was it easy to make ethical decisions or was there a dilemma?
    a. If there was an ethical dilemma, what was the nature of the dilemma?
4. How did you feel about the ethical situation? Could you share with me your emotional experience when first exposed to this situation?
    a. How did your emotions shape how you make sense of this situation, if any?
5. Did you believe it was your responsibility to ensure an ethical approach to this situation? (Ownership)

[<u>RQ2b: How and why, if at all, do public relations practitioners make ethical decisions at work?</u>]

1. After this initial awareness, how did you decide what you should do?
2. Could you please share with me your decision-making process regarding the ethical situation you just mentioned?
    a. Did you recall any ethical guidance, for example, PRSA code, organizational code, ethical theories, or personal/professional values?
    b. Was it a deliberate or intuitive process? What was your emotional experience?
        i. How did your emotions shape how you make ethical decisions?
    c. Were you confident in applying any ethical guidance (e.g., codes, theories, values)?
    d. Did you consult with anyone else (e.g., your PR team members regarding what to do, your leaders, anyone in the PR association such as RPSA)?
        i. Yes – could you please share with me the process?
        ii. No – why not?
    e. To what extent did your personal values, apart from being a public relations professional, shape your conclusion?

[<u>RQ2c: How and why are practitioners motivated to follow through on certain actions (or enact ethical decisions) at work?</u>]

1. Having decided what you should do in that situation, what motivated you to act on your judgment?
2. What actions did you take?

    a. Do you think your public relations colleagues or peers would act in the same way? Why or why not?
    b. If not action - what has prevented you from taking any actions?
        i. How do you feel about not taking any action now?
3. Could you please share with me your emotional experience when taking the action?
    a. How did your emotions shape your action/subsequent behavior?
4. How would you have acted differently, in an ideal situation?
5. What do you believe are public relations practitioners' most ideal ethical behavior for this situation? Why?
    a. (Voicing concerns, confronting management, exerting upward influence, resistance, whistle-blowing, taking charge, keeping silence, quitting)
6. What would you say are the minimal and ideal ethical behaviors for public relations practitioners in this situation?
7. What happened afterwards (for yourself, the organization/client, the PR profession, the publics/community involved)?
8. To what extent do you think your action made a difference (would make a difference) (for yourself, the public relations unit/profession, the organization/client, the community)?
9. If practitioners mentioned several incidents:
    a. Did you act consistently each time? How have your actions changed over time?
    b. Did each situation call for different personal/professional values and guidance, why?
    c. Did each situation call for different ethical decisions and behavior, why?
10. Thinking back, would you take any different actions, why?
11. Thinking back, did you have the courage or confidence to take ethical action you deemed as most ideal?
    a. What was lacking? (Courage or confidence)
    b. To what extent do you think confidence and courage played a role?
        i. If so, what boosted or diminished your confidence and/or courage?
12. How do you feel now about your actions then? Would you act differently now, seeing the outcomes and knowing how you'd feel after the event?
13. What advice would you give to other practitioners in a similar situation, particularly with taking actions?

[RQ3a: How have workplace ethical climate (ethical culture, codes, rules, training, leadership, peer influence) shaped public relations practitioners' ethical enactment (awareness, judgment, motivation, and behavior)?]

1. You said you have never experienced any ethical situations at your public relations work, what could be the reasons?

    a. (Exemplary workplace ethical climate, nature of daily responsibilities, lack of ethical sensitivity)
2. Could you please comment on your workplace ethical climate?
    a. (Culture, codes, rules, training, leadership, peer influence, reward/punish systems, etc.)
3. Have you ever heard or seen other public relations practitioners experience ethical dilemmas?
    a. Do you think you could make the "right" decisions and act accordingly in such situation? Why? (Workplace support, peer influence, ethical knowledge, personal values, etc.)
4. Do you have any role models – inside or outside your work, who exhibit exemplary ethical standards?
    a. If so, can you tell me more about his/her influence on you? Particularly on your daily work?
5. Do you have other important personal identities – apart from being a public relations practitioner – that have crucial ethical components?
    a. To what extent do other identities shape how you react to ethical situations at work?
    b. Do you think you could separate your professional identities from other personal identities? Is the separation desirable when it comes to ethics?
6. To what extent do you think you should separate emotions from reasoning at work, especially when it comes to ethical situations?

[RQ3b: How have social environment (political, social, economic, media) shaped public relations practitioners' ethical enactment (awareness, judgment, motivation, and behavior)?]

1. How do you perceive the current social environment from an ethical perspective?
2. Do you think the macro social environment has contributed to your understanding of ethics?
    a. If so, in what way?
    b. What aspects of political, social, media environments have exerted influence on you, if any?
3. Do you think the macro social environment has influenced public relations ethics?
    a. If so, in what way?
4. Do you think public relations practitioners can reversely influence the environment? How so?
    a. What do you think public relations practitioners can do to promote ethics on a societal level?
    b. Please share any of the things you have done or would do to make the society more ethical.

Conclusion

1. These are all of my questions. Is there anything else you would like to add when it comes to public relations ethics?
2. This dissertation study is grounded in ethicist James Rest's four-component ethical model that includes sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and action.
    a. Which component do you think is the most important for public relations ethics in real-world workplaces? Why?
    b. Which component do you think is particularly lacking in education and training? Which one is rarely discussed in ethical practice?
3. Last, if I have questions regarding your answers, could I contact you in the future?

Thank you very much for your time and for sharing your experiences/insights, I very much appreciate it.

Appendix C

Code Book

(Only major codes/categories are included due to the large number of first-cycle codes)

Ethical awareness	The ability to interpret a situation as being moral/ethical
Ethical sensitivity	That which enables professionals to recognize, interpret and respond appropriately to the concerns of those receiving professional services … involves the skill or ability to interpret the reactions and feelings of others… is also the capacity to feel and be moved by others, to identify with their distress, to be aware of how one's action or inaction may affect them, and to assume a responsibility or obligation
Deontology	Derived from Kantian philosophy, deontology involves following a prescribed set of duties and obligations
Rationality (in Deontology)	Promoting objective thinking and compensating for many of the biases and subjective concerns that enter the ethical decision-making process
Practical rationality	One where the individual uses all of his/her capabilities, including affective, intuitional, and imaginative, to arrive at a reasonably defensible assessment of the uniqueness of the context and a reasonable action to care in collaboration with those who are part of the relationship
Autonomy (in Deontology)	Involves the personal freedom to make decision in accordance with universal law
Autonomy (from care ethics)	the developed and exercised capacity to think and act for oneself

Consequentialism	Judge actions by their outcomes … Consequentialism is an ethical theory that judges whether or not something is right by what its consequences are
Virtue ethics	Involves fostering a strong internal compass to guide right action
Moral/ethical judgment	the ability for the decision-maker to decide which course of action is morally correct … the determination of the ethically appropriate course of action among potential alternatives
Ethical/moral agency	The exercise of moral agency has dual aspects - inhibitive and proactive… The inhibitive form is manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The proactive form of morality is expressed in the power to behave humanely … moral agency is defined as the ability to act on the ethical judgment about what is right or good
Ethical challenge	A situation where (1) there is recognition of an ethical or moral issue; (2) personal actions regarding this issue have consequences for others; and (3) a choice is presented that engages personal volition
Moral agent	A moral agent is a person who has the ability to discern right from wrong and to be held accountable for his or her own actions. Moral agents have a moral responsibility not to cause unjustified harm … By expecting people to act as moral agents, we hold people accountable for the harm they cause others.
Moral/ethical disengagement	When people "disengage these self-regulatory processes… moral disengagement frees the individual from the self-sanctions and guilt that would normally accompany violation of one's ethical standards
Moral motivation	A person's degree of commitment to taking the moral course of action, valuing moral values over other values, and taking personal responsibility for moral outcomes
Moral ownership	The extent to which members feel a sense of psychological responsibility over the ethical nature of their own actions, those of others around them, their organizations, or another collective. This 'other collective' could be a group, a club, or even a society
Ethical leadership	The demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making
Advocacy	Involves loyally promoting the client's cause using your craft and expertise on behalf of the client
Ethical advocacy/advocate	PR practitioners perform the role of ethical advocate when they acknowledge and respect informational needs and interests of those with whom they communicate, consider the harms that may result from communication, counsel clients and employers to 'tell the truth,' and balance constituent interests with organizational interests
Ethical intent	The ability to prioritize moral values over other values
Ethical action	The application of moral intent to the situation … involves determining the best way to implement the chosen decision and having the ability and confidence to persist to completion … may be defined as action that is the product of critical reflection and analysis motivated by the desire to assist and accompany a person along his or her path. It is thus a specific form of action, adapted to

	a particular situation and context, which differentiates it from ethical behavior
Empathy	Affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another's emotional state or condition and is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel
Ethical climate	A shared perception among org members regarding the criteria (e.g., egoism, benevolence, and principle) and focus (e.g., individual, group, society) of ethical reasoning within an org
Ethical culture	Defined as a slice of the organizational culture that influences employees' ethical behavior through formal and informal organizational structures and systems
Ethical environment	Including leadership, reward system, and code support for ethical behavior
Ethical infrastructure	Contain both formal and informal elements: ethical codes and policies, communications, training, monitoring systems, sanctions, and rewards on the formal side, and attention to ethical climates and organizational cultures on the informal side
Ethical dilemma	A situation in which an individual must reflect upon competing moral standards and/or stakeholder claims in determining what is the morally appropriate decision or action
Ethical codes (e.g., PRSA)	Ethics codes typically identify the organization's conduct standards, the types of ethical and legal issues employees are likely to face in their organization, and the organization's core values
Whistle-blowing	Three levels: dissent, breach of loyalty, and accusation
Moral emotions	Haidt (2003) describes these emotions that concern the welfare of others as belonging to "families" that include other-condemning, self-conscious, other-suffering, and other-praising
Bounded ethicality	Our ability to make ethical choices is often limited or restricted because of internal and external pressures (example: we are all susceptible to the cognitive biases and organizational or social pressures that limit our abilities to make ethical decisions)
Moral reasoning	Applies critical analysis to specific events to determine what is right or wrong, and what people ought to do in a particular situation
Moral rationalization	The cognitive process that individuals use to convince themselves that their behavior does not violate their moral standards
Emotional intelligence	Four-dimensional definition: appraisal and expression of emotion in oneself, appraisal and recognition of emotion in others, regulation of emotions in oneself, and the use of emotions to facilitate performance
Organizational cynicism	A negative attitude toward one's employing organization' that includes 'a belief that the org lacks integrity
Moral efficacy	An individual's belief in his or her capabilities to organize and mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, means, and courses of action needed to attain moral performance, within a given moral domain, while persisting in the face of moral adversity
Emotional self-regulation	The individual learns to recognize unproductive automatic emotional reactions to a situation and redirect them toward more constructive reactions

Social support	Social support encompasses encouragement, advice, information, and assistance … Loyal colleagues and mentors, as well as friends and family members, can listen patiently and provide validation
One's personal situation	Key variable of one's personal situation is one's perceived need for personal gain, which can result from living beyond one's means, high debt, financial losses, or unexpected financial needs; other constraints such as time pressure or limited financial resources to do what one knows to be right can also be considered part of the personal situational context
Moral consultation	The active process of reviewing ethics-related documentation (e.g., codes of ethics) or discussing to any extent one's ethical situation or dilemma with others in order to receive guidance or feedback

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