

August 2008

## The Moral Sensitivity and Character of Public Relations Students: A Preliminary Study

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### Recommended Citation

Mathew Cabot. "The Moral Sensitivity and Character of Public Relations Students: A Preliminary Study" *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Annual Conference* (2008).

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Running Head: MORAL SENSITIVITY/CHARACTER OF PR STUDENTS

*The Moral Sensitivity and Character of Public Relations Students:  
A Preliminary Study*

### Introduction

Public relations practitioners and academics have been exploring ethics models, revising ethics codes, holding ethics workshops, and building ethics curricula – all in an attempt to address the ethical lapses that continue to occur in the profession. Little of this activity, however, has included research dealing with the moral development of public relations practitioners and its connection to ethics theories, codes, and instruction.

Cabot (2004) explored the integration of moral development theories into applied professional ethics by introducing Rest et al.'s (1999) Four-Component Model of moral functioning. By dividing moral functioning into the four components of sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character, the FCM provides a valuable research tool for applied ethics. Using the FCM, researchers can concentrate on specific aspects of moral functioning and implement corrective measures where deficiencies are found.

Cabot's (2004) article focused on Component Two (moral reasoning), and presented the results the largest study to date using the Defining Issues Test (DIT) on the moral reasoning of public relations students. The current study focuses on components one and four, and begins to explore the *moral sensitivity* and *moral character* of public relations students respectively.

To do so, the researcher surveyed public relations students ( $N= 129$ ) from three California universities. Following Likona's (1991) procedure, the questionnaire lists seven behaviors (all of which are clear violations of PRSA's code of ethics) and asked the respondents whether these behaviors are wrong (using a "No, "Yes," or "It depends" scale). Then, the respondents were shown these behaviors a second time with a modified question: "Would you ever do the following if you were certain you would not get caught?"

The pair of questions was designed to elicit important data about (1) the students' sensitivity to industry-specific ethical dilemmas, and (2) their commitment (i.e., character) to acting ethically in these situations. This study was designed to generate baseline data on the moral development of public relations students in the areas of moral sensitivity and character. Additionally, by integrating moral psychology and moral philosophy, the study offers a new way to approach the challenge of producing ethical public relations practitioners.

#### Moral Psychology and the Four-Component Model

Bebeau points to Rest et al.'s (1999) Four-Component Model (FCM) as a means for examining other aspects of moral functioning. The four components, which Bebeau calls "four integrated abilities" necessary for moral functioning, are: Moral *sensitivity* (interpreting the situation, role taking how various actions would affect the parties concerned, imagining cause-effect chains of events, and being aware that there is a moral problem when it exists); Moral *judgment* (judging which action would be more justifiable in a moral sense – purportedly DIT research has something to say about this component); Moral *motivation* (the degree of commitment to taking the moral course of action, valuing moral values over other values, and taking personal responsibility for moral outcomes); and Moral *character* (persisting in a moral task, having courage, overcoming fatigue and temptations, and implementing subroutines that serve a moral goal) (p. 101).

The FCM was created to "synthesize" various traditions in moral development and recognize that moral functioning cannot be reduced to one ingredient: "Rest's model was intended to describe the four psychological processes (with both cognitive and affective elements) that, in complex interaction, contribute to observable moral behaviour" (Walker, 2002, p. 354).

### The Four-Component Model and Applied Ethics

Perhaps no other researcher has done more to test and promote the use of the FCM in professional ethics than Bebeau (Bebeau, 1993, 1994, 2002; Bebeau, Born, & Ozar, 1993; Bebeau, Rest, & Yamoore, 1985; Bebeau & Thoma, 1999). In her research into applied professional ethics in dentistry, Bebeau has administered the DIT, conducted lengthy interviews, and developed a Professional Role Orientation Inventory, among other things. Bebeau (2002) analyzed DIT studies from medicine, veterinary medicine, law, and dentistry, and provided an overview of the FCM's contribution to the research in moral development in these professions. One of the first things she noticed was that most of the research focused on moral judgment – only one of the four components in the FCM. As such, researchers are left with an impoverished picture of the moral state of these practitioners, not knowing how they fare on the other components necessary for moral functioning. The purpose of this study, at least in part, is help fill that gap by conducting exploratory research into two other important components (moral sensitivity and character) as they relate to applied ethics in public relations.

#### *Moral Sensitivity*

Bebeau (Bebeau, 1993, 1994; Bebeau et al., 1993; Bebeau et al., 1985; 1999) has conducted significant research in the other components and offers ways to assess progress in them. Bebeau (2002) describes ethical sensitivity in the context of dental students:

Ethical sensitivity involves the ability to interpret the reactions and feelings of others. It involves being aware of alternative courses of action, knowing cause–consequence chain of events in the environment and how each could affect the parties concerned. As such, it involves empathy and role-taking skills. For individuals being socialised to professional practice, ethical sensitivity involves the ability to see things from the perspective of other

individuals and groups (including other cultural and socio-economic groups), and more abstractly, from legal, institutional and national perspectives. Thus, it includes knowing the regulations, codes and norms of one's profession, and recognising when they apply. (p. 283)

Assessing one's ethical sensitivities typically involves exposing students to real-life situations (in this case ethical dilemmas in dentistry), and asking them to articulate the nature of the ethical dilemma or conflict. Rest (1986) describes the assessment of moral sensitivity this way: "The main goal of the procedure is not to elicit from the subject a solution for the problem and a justification; rather the goal is to determine how the subject interprets or encodes the situation" (p. 23). In other words, the focus is not on the reasoning process in solving the dilemma, but rather the degree to which the individual grasps the nature and magnitude of the dilemma itself.

Component One (moral sensitivity), while not as researched as Component Two (moral judgment) in terms of the sheer number of studies conducted, has still been a main focus among applied ethicists:

Applied researchers gravitated to this component because of its perceived centrality to their mission. In short, they saw the identification of moral issues in real-life interactions with clients and patients as an important piece of professional ethics competency not captured by the judgment process. (Thoma, 2002, p. 237)

### *Moral Character*

"Moral character" is the fourth component, and the least researched – empirically – among all four of FCM's components. Under the heading of "ethical implementation," Bebeau (2002) describes Component Four:

Fundamental to responsible conduct in any profession is ability to perform with integrity the complex tasks of the discipline. The fourth component in the FCM attends to the importance of character to effective and responsible practice. A practitioner may be ethically sensitive, may make good ethical judgments and place high priority on professional values; but if the practitioner wilts under pressure, is easily distracted or discouraged, or is weak-willed, then moral failure occurs because of deficiency in character and competence. (p. 287)

Unlike the other components, “objective measures have not been devised to measure competence in implementing effective action plans” (Bebeau, 2002, p. 287). In other words, nobody has yet developed an instrument to empirically measure moral character. And, as Bebeau points out, it is hard to imagine what that test would like given that moral character is best demonstrated through action.

#### Research Questions

RQ1 – How morally sensitive are public relations students?

*Rationale.* Component One in the FCM is moral sensitivity. This study is designed to begin to explore how moral sensitive public relations students are, a vital first step in training ethical practitioners. Indeed, one cannot make a moral decision if one does not recognize a moral decision is called for. If this study demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to public relations-specific moral dilemmas, this may point to a need for increased attention given to the various codes that guide ethical behavior in the public relations field.

RQ2 – What is the moral character exhibited by public relations students?

*Rationale.* Moral character, which Bebeau (2002) calls “ethical implementation,” is Component Four. Without it, an individual who is morally sensitive, possesses sound moral

reasoning skills, and values moral behavior, may fail to act morally. Lickona (1991) says moral action is made up of three components: (1) competence – the ability to conceive and implement a plan of action, (2) will – a “mobilizing of moral energy to do what we think we should do” (p. 62), and (3) habit – having a history of making the right moral choice. Of the four components in the FCM, moral character has been studied the least (Bebeau, 2002). Accordingly, this study attempts to begin generating preliminary data on the moral character of public relations students using the questionnaire and follow-up interviews.

### Methodology

#### *Participants/Sample*

This study focused on public relations students (primarily) at three distinct types of universities: a large state university (California State University, Long Beach), a small private Christian university (Vanguard University), and a small private secular university (University of the Pacific). The researcher used a convenience sample at each university. The sample sizes for the three universities were CSULB ( $N = 87$ ), VGSC ( $N = 18$ ), and UOP ( $N = 24$ ), for a total sample size of 129 for this study.

#### *Instrument*

Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to measure both moral sensitivity and moral character in the context of public relations. Following Lickona's (1991) procedure, the questionnaire lists seven behaviors and asked the respondents whether these behaviors are wrong (using a “No, “Yes,” or “It depends” scale). Then, the respondents were shown these behaviors a second time with a modified question: “Would you ever do the following if you were certain you would not get caught?” The respondents' answer to the first



question helped determine their moral sensitivity to ethical dilemmas specific to the public relations industry. Their answers to the second question helped determine their moral character.

In Likona's (1991) study on academic cheating, the percentages between the two questions shifted "sometimes dramatically," leading the researcher to conclude: "While nearly all students judged the various forms of cheating to be wrong, significantly fewer were sufficiently committed to the value of academic honesty to refrain from cheating when they could get away with it" (p. 58). Therefore, this pair of questions was designed to elicit important data about (1) the students' sensitivity to industry-specific ethical dilemmas, and (2) their commitment (i.e., character) to acting ethically in these situations. More specifically, the second section was designed to detect a shift in attitudes when presented with the guarantee of anonymity.

Accordingly, the respondents were asked if they would commit these behaviors – ones they may have clearly identified as wrong in the first part – if they were sure they would not get caught. To measure a possible change in responses, a "shift score" was created that counted the number of times a respondent changed his or her response in the second section based on the guarantee of anonymity. For example, if respondents agreed that a particular behavior was wrong in the first section but indicated in the second section they would perform that behavior, they received a "point." Likewise, if they marked "It depends" in the first section, but then said they would perform that behavior if they would not get caught, they received a point. The points were then totaled to produce a "shift score."

Respondents did not receive a point if they did not identify the behavior as wrong in the first section, and in the second section agreed they would perform that behavior. The "shift score" is based on the presumption that the stronger one's moral character the more likely he or she would make the right (i.e., moral) choice regardless of whether someone was watching. In

the aftermath of the study, the researcher now believes that a semantic differential scale (or another kind of scale with graded responses) might have produced more nuanced answers that would have allowed the researcher to measure greater or lesser degrees of “shifting.”

### *Procedures*

The questionnaire was administered simultaneously to students in public relations, journalism, and communication courses. Participation was voluntary, while some students received extra credit from their instructors. The questionnaire was administered in the Journalism Department at CSULB, and the Communication Departments at VGSC and UOP. Most of the classes contained between 20 and 35 students. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher personally in all of the classes at CSULB and VGSC. At UOP, a public relations practitioner and graduate student at UOP volunteered to coordinate the administration of the questionnaires in various classes there.

## Results

### *General Observations about the Samples*

The three institutions proved different in many areas and the same in others. In terms of ethnicity, about half of respondents (53%) at CSULB and three quarters (76%) at VGSC, were white. However, only 27% of the respondents at UOP were white; the majority (42%) was Asian–American. The sample at VGSC was clearly younger, with only 28% of the respondents being upperclassmen, compared to 67% at UOP and 94% at CSULB. All three samples were predominantly female (72% - CSULB; 65% - UOP; 68% - VGSC), which corresponds with trends in the public relations field.

Politically, most students at all three schools identify themselves as “moderate” (43% - CSULB; 45% - UOP; 46% - VGSC). However, while the number of students that identify themselves as “conservative” or “liberal” was roughly equal at UOP (28% and 27%), CSULB

and VGSC are mirror opposites. Forty-three percent of respondents at CSULB labeled themselves as “liberal”; only 10% did so at VGSC, where 44% of the respondents called themselves “conservative.”

In terms of religious affiliation, the largest category for both CSULB (31%) and UOP (38%) was Catholic. The largest category for VGSC was Christian Nondenominational (48%). Only 20% of VGSC’s respondents characterized themselves as “evangelical.” The category of Christian Nondenominational was also predominant at CSULB (24%) and UOP (28%). A full quarter (25%) of the respondents at CSULB checked “none” for their religious affiliation; 18% did so at UOP, and so did 10% of the respondents at VGSC.

As for part-time jobs, a third of the respondents at both VGSC (32%) and UOP (33%) do not work part time; only 11% do not at CSULB. Forty-three percent of the CSULB students work 20-29 hours a week; another 20% work 30 or more hours a week. Seventeen percent of the UOP respondents work 20-29 hours a week; 13% work 30 or more hours a week. Ten percent of the VGSC respondents work 20-29 hours a week; 7% work 30 or more hours a week.

Finally, 92% of the VGSC respondents live either on campus or in walking distance, compared to 68% for UOP and 14% for CSULB (where 46% of the respondents have between a 15-minute and one-hour commute).

### *The Moral Sensitivity of Public Relations Students*

RQ1 asked, “How morally sensitive are public relations students?” The questionnaire listed seven behaviors – all clear violations of PRSA’s code of ethics – and asked respondents whether these behaviors are wrong. Table 1 lists the behaviors and the frequency/percentages of respondents from each university who identified them as wrong.

Table 1.

*Frequency/Percentage of Respondents Who Correctly Identified PRSA Code Violations by University*

Behavior	CSULB <i>f</i> / <i>n</i>	UOP <i>f</i> / <i>n</i>	VGSC <i>f</i> / <i>n</i>
1. Failing to release financial information, giving a misleading impression of a corporation's performance.	71/84	15/68	13/81
2. "Spinning" a situation to make it look better than it is.	28/33	7/32	9/56
3. Offering an expensive gift to a reporter to influence a favorable article about the company or product.	59/69	17/77	5/31
4. Implementing a "grass roots" letter-writing campaign to legislators on behalf of undisclosed interest groups.	30/37	7/32	5/31
5. Not disclosing your strong financial interest in a client's chief competitor.	46/55	12/55	2/13
6. Employing people to pose as volunteers to speak at public meetings.	69/84	16/73	10/63
7. Participating in a "chatroom" discussion about your company or product and not identifying your association.	33/39	8/36	2/13

*Note.* CSULB = California State University, Long Beach (*N* = 87); UOP = University of the Pacific (*N* = 24); VGSC = Vanguard University of Southern California (*N* = 18).

As Table 1 indicates, certain behaviors were more readily identified as more wrong than others. Garnering the largest percentage of "yes" responses (i.e., that this particular behavior is wrong) were behaviors 1 and 6. The majority of the respondents believe it is wrong to mislead the public concerning a company's financial performance or using "fake" volunteers to speak at public meetings. However, only about a third of the respondents identified as wrong "spinning" a

situation to make it look better (more than half of Vanguard students thought this was wrong), manufacturing a “grass roots” letter-writing campaign without disclosing special interest groups, or not disclosing an association to a product or service in a chatroom discussion (only 13% of Vanguard students thought this was wrong). Also, a slightly smaller majority of students thought it is wrong to offer an expensive gift to a reporter to influence a positive story (although only a third of the Vanguard respondents thought this was wrong). Additionally, a little more than half of the CSULB and UOP students thought it was wrong to not disclose a financial interest in a client’s chief competitor (although only 13% of the Vanguard students thought this was wrong).

With the exception of the “grass-roots” letter-writing campaign scenario, those respondents who did not identify these various code violations as wrong, most often chose the “It depends” option. As for the “grass roots” campaign, the majority of respondents from all three institutions thought it was not wrong. The behavior that elicited the most “It depends” (CSULB – 42%; UOP – 55%; VGSC – 31) was behavior 2 (“spinning” a situation to make it look better than it is).

### *The Moral Character of Public Relations Students*

Component Four of the FCM is Character. RQ2 asks, “What is the moral character exhibited by public relations students?” Sometimes called “ethical implementation” (Bebeau, 2002), character may be the determining factor in whether an individual behaves ethically. Character is the least studied component in moral development literature, primarily due to the difficulties in devising quantitative assessments that measure this component.

As mentioned in the Methodology section, students (public relations majors only) were first asked if certain behaviors were wrong (moral sensitivity) and later asked if they would perform these behaviors – even if they believed they were wrong – if they were certain they

would not get caught. As mentioned previously, the researcher then created a Shift Score, measuring how many times respondents “shifted” their attitudes in light of guaranteed anonymity. Table 2 lists the aggregated frequencies and percentages of the “shifts” made by the public relation students in this study.

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Table 2.

*Aggregated Shift Scores of Public Relations Majors in this Study*

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Number of Shifts (by f/%)						
0	1	2	3	4	5	Total
46/35	32/25	23/18	14/11	10/8	5/4	130/100

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Table 3 breaks down the frequency and percentage of shifts by university. As Table 3 indicates, a third of the respondents at CSULB and VGSC registered no shifts, indicating they would not perform a behavior they knew was wrong, even if they were sure they would not get caught. While half of UOP’s respondents registered no shifts, another 13% had 5 shifts – by far the largest percentage of “5” shifts in all three samples (2% - CSULB; 0% - VGSC). Certain behaviors seem to elicit the greatest number of shifts. For example, while only 12% of the CSULB respondents said it was fine to give an expensive gift to a reporter to influence of positive story, 27% said they would do so if they were sure they would not get caught. At UOP, while only 5% of the respondents said this kind of influence is fine, 18% said they would do so if they were sure not to get caught. At VGSC, there was no shift: 44% saw nothing wrong with this behavior, and 44% said they would do it.

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Table 3.

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*Shift Scores of Public Relations Majors by University*

Institution	Number of Shifts (by f%)					
	0	1	2	3	4	5
CSULB	29/32	23/25	18/20	11/12	8/9	2/2
UOP	12/52	2/9	3/13	2/9	1/4	3/13
VGSC	5/31	7/44	2/3	1/6	1/6	0

In sum, among the 130 total public relations majors in this study were 101 instances of “shifting,” where respondents changed their opinion about a particular behavior when they were assured they would not get caught. Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate the “shift” distributions at the three universities in this study.

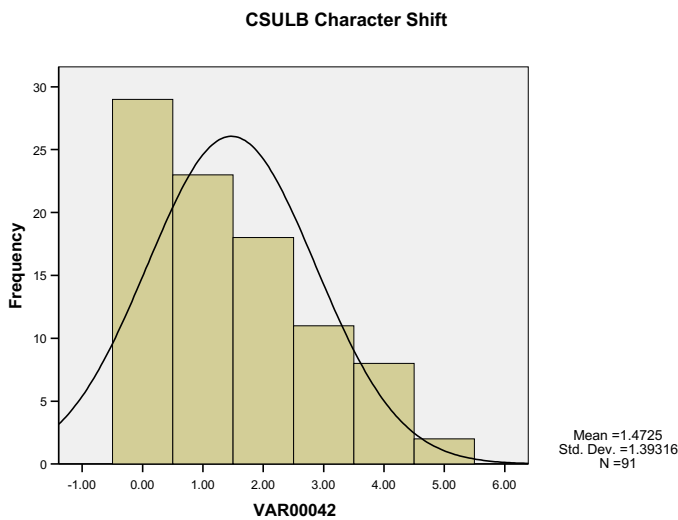


Figure 1. The Mean Shift Scores at CSULB

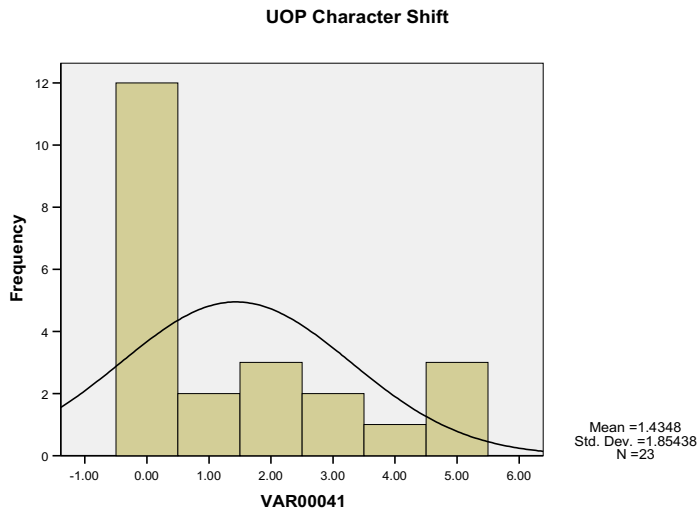


Figure 2. The Mean Shift Scores at UOP

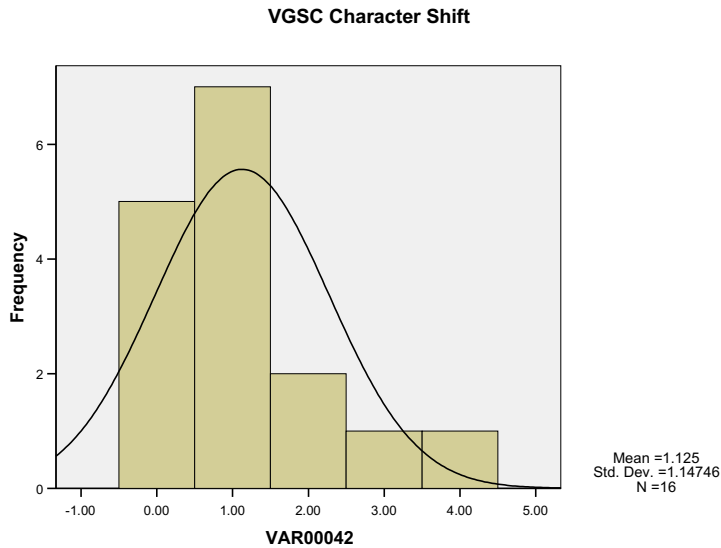


Figure 3. The Mean Shift Scores for VGSC

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“Variable 41” in Figure 2 is equivalent to “Variable 42” in figures 1 and 3.

### Discussion

#### *The Moral Sensitivity of Public Relations Students*



Component One in the Four-Component Model is moral sensitivity. This study was concerned primarily about moral sensitivity as relates to the public relations profession. In other words, could public relations students identify behaviors that clearly violate the Public Relations Society of America's professional values and code of ethics? The short answer: many could not. Most of the respondents (70%-80%) recognized that it is wrong to give a misleading impression of corporation's performance by failing to release financial information. But only a third of the respondents at CSULB and VGSC thought it was wrong to give a misleading impression by "spinning" a situation to make it look better than it is. A little more than half the respondents at UOP thought it was wrong. Likewise, only about a third of the respondents thought it was wrong to participate in a chatroom discussion about your company or product and not identify your association.

One of the reasons for the students' lackluster performance on the questionnaire may be due to the students' lack of sensitivity to *industry-specific* moral dilemmas. The problem with that argument is that the two behaviors on the questionnaire on which the respondents scored the lowest (i.e., the fewest number of respondents marking as wrong), are clearly dishonest. It would seem that even *general* moral sensitivity would recognize that (1) making something look better than it actually is, and (2) posing as someone you are not, are ethically wrong.

In answering RQ1, therefore, it may be instructive to make a distinction between *general moral sensitivity* and *industry-specific moral sensitivity*. On the one hand, if the lack of moral sensitivity exhibited by the students in this study can be mostly attributed to a lack of familiarity with professional codes of conduct, that would seem to be a fairly easy problem to fix. The apparent lack of moral sensitivity among public relations students can be remedied – in public relations parlance – by an awareness campaign. Students need to be made aware of professional

codes and values, and be given examples of what not to do. On the other hand, if the results of this study reflect a general moral indifference, that is more challenging. This would require that the instructor address rudimentary moral functioning, making a case, for example, of why it is better to be honest than dishonest. That kind of general moral sensitivity would seem to be a prerequisite for a more specialized form of moral sensitivity.

#### *The Moral Character of Public Relations Students*

Component Four (Character) is tied to behavior, making it difficult to assess on a test. However, using technique borrowed from Likona (1991), the researcher was able to quantify the number of times a public relations major said they would they would perform a behavior they said was wrong if they were assured they would not get caught. Among the 130 total public relations majors in this study were 101 instances of these “shifts.” Seventy-percent of the public relations majors at CSULB and VGSC, and half of the public relations majors at UOP, registered at least one instance where they changed their mind about a behavior when they were guaranteed they could do it with impunity.

This does not bode well for the character of these students. One possible interpretation of these “character shifts” is that the majority of these students are motivated by the external threat of punishment, rather than the internal reward of virtue. As Likona says, individuals need “to be able to judge what is right, care deeply about what is right, and then do what they believe to be right” (p. 51). What is particular disturbing about these “shift scores” is that most of the students said they would perform or consider performing a behavior they knew was wrong – simply based on the *idea* they would not get caught. If they are not committed to even to the idea of doing the right thing and living a virtuous life, how could they possibly be expected to actually *do* the right thing in the face of real-world temptations and pressures?

Given their responses, it is probably safe to say that these students do not “love the good” or as Likona says, are not “genuinely attracted to the good” (p. 59). “Loving the good” was central to Aristotle’s notion of the virtuous life. While Bebeau (2002) discussed moral character in terms of having “effective action plans to implement ethical behavior,” this may be premature with these students. It would seem that that in order for a plan to be effective, students must first see a *need* for a plan. In other words, they must first “desire the good.”

### Conclusion

How might this study change our approach to educating public relations students to be ethical practitioners? To begin, the FCM provides structure and direction for a public relations ethics curriculum. The structure should be based on the various components in the FCM. It makes sense to begin with moral sensitivity, which Clarkeburn (2002) says is an essential first step in moral decision making: “Without recognising the moral aspects of a situation, it is impossible to solve any moral problem, for without the initial recognition, no problem exists” (p. 311). This is what the researcher found in the questionnaire responses. Most of the students there saw “no problem” in “spinning” a situation to make it look better than it is; most of the students saw “no problem” in participating in a chatroom discussion about your company or product and not identifying your association; most of the students saw “no problem” in manufacturing a “grass-roots” letter-writing campaign to legislators on behalf of undisclosed interest groups.

On the one hand, as mentioned previously, this seems to be a fairly easy problem to fix. All of these behaviors – and others that clearly violate professional values and codes of ethics – need to be taught to students. They need to be sensitized to those actions that are unethical in the public relations profession. Reviewing the ethics codes and analyzing case studies are two ways to accomplish this. On the other hand, the lack of moral sensitivity exhibited in this study may go

beyond ignorance of professional codes. The pattern of responses to the public relations section on the questionnaire seems to suggest an approval of deceptive practices and a disturbing comfort-level with dishonesty. As previously suggested, this kind of moral insensitivity might need to be addressed either prior or concurrently with an ethics code teaching module. One place to start, perhaps, would be a discussion of the personal and social consequences of lying. Bok (1978) offers one of the most thorough treatises on the subject.

It is important to recall, too, that knowledge of professional codes and norms is only one aspect of moral sensitivity. The component of moral functioning also requires being able to “interpret the reactions and feelings of others,” being empathetic, and having the ability to “see things from the perspective of other individuals and groups” (Bebeau, 2002, p. 283). As such, instructors may be well served by role-play exercises. In this study, the majority of public relations students said it is acceptable to promote a product in a chatroom discussion without divulging a vested interest. Consequently, having a student experience what it feels like to be a victim of such deception may be a valuable role-play exercise.

One obstacle educators may face in getting students to be interested in perspective-taking is what Lasch (1979) called “the culture of narcissism.” Contemporary culture, said Lasch, had moved beyond self-interest to self-absorption, bringing a host of neuroses with it. Perhaps most relevant to the present discussion, Lasch noted decreased student interest in subjects such as history, foreign languages, and the classics – all reflecting a general disdain for any subject that did not seem to have immediate relevance (i.e., will this help me get a better job and make more money?). Part of the training in moral sensitivity, therefore, may have to focus on counteracting a narcissistic impulse that devalues how another might be affected by a moral decision.

After moral sensitivity, it becomes less clear of what should be covered next. It seems to this researcher that moral motivation and moral character should be next. That is because students may be more inclined to learn moral reasoning if they are at least beginning to *value* making the right decision. Without *desiring* “the good,” what would motivate a student to learn and apply a *process* for achieving the good? But teaching moral motivation and moral character is tricky, and some believe they should not be taught at all. Clarkeburn (2002) says teaching values and character are “unacceptable aims” for an undergraduate ethics curriculum:

To change character must be considered as a fundamental and long-reaching process, which is not achievable through any limited activity. If character/virtue aims are important in education, they need to be chosen as overarching principles which invade in all areas of education, not just one course with an appropriate title. (p. 310)

Instead, she advocates a “skills” approach that focuses on ethical sensitivity and moral reasoning. She calls these “acceptable aims.” Clarkeburn is correct in describing character change as a “long-reaching process.” In many ways, too, an individual’s character has already been formed and solidified by the time he or she reaches college age. That does not mean, however, that moral reflection about one’s character cannot be encouraged, or that moral motivation cannot be inspired. Rather, educators must manage their expectations and develop appropriate and feasible learning outcomes for their ethics courses.

The consideration of moral development theories as they relate to applied professional ethics in public relations is just beginning. As such, this study was designed to be exploratory and to generate baseline data and ideas that would spur other research. In general, this study encourages other scholars to consider how psychological theories and tests may broaden their research agenda in public relations ethics. More specifically, it offers a model of moral

functioning (the FCM) that could be used to structure, organize, and focus their research on particular aspects of moral functioning. At this point, more research is needed in all four areas: moral sensitivity, moral motivation, moral reasoning, and moral character.

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