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PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN AGENCY CONTEXTS

by

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MINOR MA DISSERTATION
Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

COURSEWORK MASTERS
in
Strategic Communication
in the
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
at the
UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

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Submission date: October 2018
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Sonja Verwey, for her guidance and unwavering support over the last four years of my time spent in academia. Professor Sonja not only helped me understand the complexity of this topic, but also awarded me the opportunity to lecture whilst completing my studies which I believe contributed positively towards my overall growth and understanding of powerful research and the importance of contributing to a greater body of knowledge. Thank you, Professor Sonja, for having so much trust in me over the years as both a lecturer and as an academic under your wing. It was your faith in my abilities that pushed me towards completing this study and becoming ever-so-passionate about teaching, learning, and research. I hope to continue researching with you over the years to come and I cannot emphasise how grateful I am to have had the opportunity to learn from you.

To my dearest parents, Yvette and Shaun Carter, who have continued to support me financially, emotionally, spiritually, and have been there every step of the way over the past eight years of studying – this study is the culmination of your investment in me. I thank you both for your support, your prayers, your physical help with my research, the late nights, your patience, and your tough love provided throughout the completion of my studies. I appreciate all of your time and love provided to get me to where I have wanted to be. I believe that my love for learning has been the result of your guidance and mentoring when I was younger, and this effort is without a doubt a reflection of both of you and your mindsets. I love you both so much.

To each of my interviewees who availed themselves to be interviewed for sessions lasting well over one hour – I thank you for your time spent preparing to deliver quality insights, your time availed to be interviewed, and most importantly, I thank you for your time and energy spent towards helping me grow. Taking in your knowledge and wisdom has been priceless and I am incredibly grateful for the guidance and mentorship provided along the way.

To my copy-editor, Emmerentia Breytenbach – thank you for not only availing yourself to assist me with language editing and proofreading, but also for your kind words and emotional support provided as I reached my end destination. Thank you for giving me peace of mind with my writing and for helping me to push through in the final hours.

To my transcribers, Nikki Solomon and Gaynor Paynter, who availed themselves to help me with transcribing – I thank you for your professionalism and most importantly, for helping me to progress with my research at a speed not possible without your help and commitment.

To my fellow lecturers and colleagues in the Department of Strategic Communication, who not only inspire me to never stop learning, but also never lost faith in me over the past few months,
thank you. Every message of support or bit of help offered to help me become a stronger researcher or simply get me to the point of submission did not go unnoticed.

To my friends who have supported me in becoming the best person and academic that I can be, thank you for always supporting me, pushing me, taking my mind off work when needed, and for being patient with me. I believe that I completed my studies knowing that each of you were with me. You all know who you are, and I thank you from the bottom on my heart.

To my students, who have been my greatest joy and will continue to be a part of one of the happiest times in my life – I completed my research with all of you at the back of mind every single day. I will never regret taking the time to grow young minds and complete my studies concurrently, even if this route took slightly longer.

Finally, to my dearest and late grandfather, my Oupa – your spirit remains in my heart and it was because of you that I was able to find in myself the faith and motivation that I needed. I promised you that I would complete my studies, and in honour of my promise, I dedicate this study to you.
ABSTRACT

This study seeks to understand South African PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice in agency contexts. PR professionals are guided by their moral frameworks for practice. However, conflicting loyalties lie at the heart of ethical decision-making in PR. Two conflicting views underpin the debate on ethics and PR practice. On one side, the positive role that PR contributes to society is emphasised through dialogical and reflective practice, and on the other side, PR is viewed as modernist, one-way communication predicated upon compliance and blind obedience to commissioning interests. Ethical PR conduct is outlined as the simultaneous balancing of three distinct interests namely: duty to self, client and society. However, the demands of balancing conflicting interests often result in moral tension and even role strain for the PR professional. On the one hand PR professionals may find that they practice asymmetrically, reflexively, and simply comply with prescribed ethical codes of conduct rather than holding their own moral accountability. On the other hand, professionals may find that they are able to assume a strategic activist role, and practice symmetrically and reflectively, where ethical decision-making is agent-centred and predicated upon ethics of care and virtue.

The results of this study suggest that South African PR professionals’ moral decision-making fluctuate between modern and postmodern ethics and that PR professionals’ moral accountability is predicated by the moral assumptions that underlie their practice. This results in an ethical paradox because inasmuch as professionals hold a community outlook and practice ethically in accordance to their role within an interdependent eco-system, this eco-system is not exclusionary of moral tensions that arise between interests. PR professionals in agency contexts may find themselves to be products of an ethical paradox, with PR professionals practicing both asymmetrically and symmetrically in order to meet not only the agency’s needs, but also those of the clients and the public.

This research provides insight into how moral accountability and ethicality is conceptualised by PR professionals in agency contexts and contributes to PR scholarship and practice by outlining how agency-based PR professionals are guided by their moral frameworks for practice.

Key words: Public relations, ethics, moral framework, ethical PR practice, moral accountability, postmodern communication practice, conflicting loyalties, virtuousness, social roles
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the minor dissertation submitted for the MA Strategic Communication degree to the University of Johannesburg, apart from the help recognised, is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another university or institution of higher education for a degree.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The proliferation of digital technology has contributed towards the need for communication professionals to act ethically in order to build mutually beneficial relationships with society (Brito, Vanzin, Ferasso & Saldanha, 2010:113; Melcrum, 2012b; Melewar, 2008:121). Ethics, also known as “moral philosophy”, forms the rational basis for a moral framework for communication practice (Bonde & Firenze, 2013). A moral framework, or the ethical judgements made about specific cases, has been termed as “quintessential” for today’s practice of public relations (PR) due to the requirement of PR professionals needing to build a fundamental trust between organisations and their publics, as well as potentially determine priorities between conflicting loyalties to specific parties (The Commission on Public Relations Education, 2013). According to Clark (2008), conflicting loyalties lie at the heart of responsible and ethical decision-making. Berg and Gibson (2011) and Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) further note that communication professionals are in a unique position as a liaison between a company and the public, and as a result of this dual role, professionals may find themselves choosing between their own personal values and loyalty to their cause. Bowen (2007) supports this by stating that the use of a moral philosophy “lends consistent methods of ethical analysis and decisions” in PR practice and can alleviate the tension that exists in practice between personal, societal and organisational interests. Second to this, The Commission on Public Relations Education (2013) and Grunig (1992) add that top management can determine the way an organisation practices its PR, but that communication professionals can have a real impact on organisational decisions made in the C-suite based on their own ethical role enactment and decision-making. Doorley and Garcia (2007:36) add to this by stating that there is a need for PR practice that is founded on ethical principles such as being sensitive to cultural values and being truthful and fair.

Grunig (2001) and Igboanugo (2014) then elaborate on ethical practice by stating that there have been two conflicting debates around ethics in PR practice, where on one side the positive contribution of PR to society is emphasised, and on the other side, critics argue that the practice distorts messaging to the public, otherwise known as “spinning”, in order to advance a company’s agenda. Doorley and Garcia (2007:1) concur with this by stating that spin, or propaganda, are common themes linked to unethical PR practice, which Harrison and Galloway (2005:1) reiterate by stating that certain professionals’ behaviour over the years has attracted criticism of the professional practice of PR. However, communication professionals have been trying to change this image of lack of ethicality in PR, in order to show that the practice truly aims to serve the public interest in an ethical manner based on virtue ethics, by developing
mutual understanding between organisations and their publics via dialogical communication (Skinner, 1994:16). Importantly, ethical communication in PR practice cannot be achieved until PR practice is based on the underlying principles of postmodernism and dialogical communication (Athanassoulis, 2015; Lavinia, 2014:2), and involves the communication professional adopting an agent-centred theory of morality, thus emphasising ethical enactment based on virtuous loyalty or authentic desire to respond to the needs of others, as opposed to acting ethically simply due to obligation or the duty to perform the right action (Lavinia, 2014:2, Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261).

However, despite wide-ranging debate and research on ethical PR practice and ethical communication, what has been missing from discussions considering ethicality in PR is the need to understand the moral philosophy underlying PR practice in South Africa, and to understand how South African PR communication professionals are guided with regard to professional role enactment and ethical decision-making. In line with this, Berg and Gibson (2011) and Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) further note that PR communication professionals are in a unique position where they act as a liaison between both a company and its public, thus reinforcing what The Commission on Public Relations Education (2013) notes regarding the dual position that communication professionals may find themselves in. Clark (2008) notes that conflicting loyalties lie at the heart of responsible and ethical decision-making for communication professionals. Meng and Berger (2013:141-142) add to this by supporting what Grunig (1992) states regarding ethical communication practice from the top-down, and leadership playing a role in shaping organisational performance, therefore emphasising the importance of understanding the relevance of leadership values in managing ethical PR practice, as well as a consideration for a framework of responsible PR leadership from top management. In this case, management-level professionals provide leadership by communicating broader concerns and guiding principles within the agency environment, namely the agency mission, vision and strategic goals.

In terms of this particular study, the purpose of this research is imperative for the following reasons, namely:

- To understand to what extent a moral framework guides South African PR practice.
- To understand the perceptions of South African agency-based PR professionals in respect of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in South Africa; and,
- To contribute to the understanding of the extent to which a moral philosophy guides individual PR practice in South Africa.

This research will provide insight into ethicality in PR practice in South Africa and will contribute both to PR scholarship and practice by allowing scholars and professionals an understanding of
the philosophy of PR and moral frameworks for practice. More specifically, this research will highlight perceptions held by PR professionals with regard to what constitutes ethically responsible communication practice and how it is applied by organisational leaders and communication professionals in day-to-day PR practice. Furthermore, this research will provide insight into the worldviews held by South African PR professionals, the theoretical communication approaches that inform these professionals’ ethical PR practice, as well as note what PR professionals use for moral decision-making.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS

As noted, there is a need to understand how South African agency-based PR professionals are guided by a moral framework for practice, and to see if there is a concurrence between agency-based professionals on ethicality and moral frameworks for practice. This study thus seeks to understand how ethicality is perceived and practiced by South African agency-based professionals. Consequently, the research problem to be investigated is how South African agency-based PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice.

The following overarching research question can be noted as per the identified research problem:

- How do South African agency-based PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?

As related to the identified research question, three sub-questions can be noted, namely:

- What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?
- Do South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?
- How do the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making?

In line with the identified research sub-questions, three research aims can be noted namely:

- To determine what South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice.
- To determine if South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice.
- To determine how the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making.
1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

The main concepts and constructs in the study are: Moral philosophy, ethics, moral decision-making, Public Relations (PR), PRISA, worldviews, moral framework, ethically-responsible communication practice, postmodern ethics, leadership, professional accountability, virtue ethics, virtuousness, person-organisation value congruence, and the social role of PR practice.

See definitions below:

- **Moral philosophy:** A body of knowledge which provides the basis for rationalising motivation in moral decision-making, such as virtue ethics, where a person will then take account of their personal values and beliefs held in accordance to the situation they are in (Lavinia, 2014:2; Robbertson & Crittenden, 2003:391; Verwey, 2015).

- **Ethics:** Bennett-Woods (2005) explains that ethics is also termed “moral philosophy” or “the science of morals” because it is a branch of philosophy that studies morality through the examination of right and wrong in human action. In this case, moral philosophy can be understood as being a body of knowledge which provides the basis for rationalising motivation in moral decision-making. Ethics is a term derived from the Greek word “ethos” and can be defined as a system of moral principles that affect how people make decisions and lead their lives (BBC, 2013; Grunig, 2014; Lavinia, 2014; Bennett-Woods, 2005).

- **Moral decision-making:** Lavinia (2014:2) states that humans are influenced by personal values which dictate their reactions towards situations and decision-making in accordance to their morality, or their set of beliefs held based on the notions of duty and obligation.
  - **Moral philosophies for decision-making:** Five moral philosophies exist which provide their own basis for rationalising motivation in decision-making (Lavinia, 2014:2; Robbertson & Crittenden, 2003:391; Verwey, 2015). These approaches include egoism, utilitarianism, formalism, virtue ethics, and moral relativism.

- **Public Relations (PR):** According to Skinner, von Essen, Mersham and Motau (2004:4), public relations (PR) can be defined as “the management of the perceptions and strategic relations between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders.” Heath and Coombs (2006:7) and The Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) and expand on this by stating that PR is a strategic communication process that builds
relationships between an organisation and its publics through collaborative and ethical communication practice.

- **PRISA**: PRISA stands for the Public Relations Institute of South Africa, which is a professional body established in Johannesburg, with a mission to serve the interests of the PR profession and foster ethical behaviour in the practice of PR via a standardised code of ethics (Ki & Kim, 2009). For the purpose of exploration, this study will highlight the views surrounding a standardised code of ethics which informs ethical PR practice.

- **Worldviews**: According to Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2011:57), and Emerson (1996), worldviews constitute of assumptions about how the world is, and the nature of reality. Thus, worldviews form an integral part of intercultural communication and the way that communication is practiced. In line with this, two worldviews of communication practice exist, namely the symmetrical worldview of communication, and the asymmetrical worldview of communication.

- **Moral framework**: Moral framework is seen as consisting of a particular worldview, and it entails adherence to a particular value system that guides professional behaviour and that assists practitioners in navigating their decision-making in ways that they consider to be ethically-responsible and accountable.

- **Ethical communication**: Ethical communication is frequently described in terms of the asymmetrical and symmetrical models PR models (Igboanugo, 2014). The following values and principles underpin ethical communication, namely: honesty, respect, integrity and openness, and principles including dialogue, reflective practice and an appreciation for multiple views held (Bowen, 2007). Ethical communication is “fundamental to responsible thinking and thoughtful decision-making” (Mayhew, 2018). Responsibility is an important element of ethical communication, which emphasises the societal need for an organisation’s practices to connect moral conduct with value creation (Goel, 2010:32; Hubbard, 2009; King Committee on Corporate Governance, 2002). The effectiveness of ethical communication is criticised by Ki and Kim (2009) who state that ethical codes will simply promote the appearance of ethical communication, rather than discourage or prevent unethical behaviour.

- **Ethically-responsible communication practice**: This refers to the responsibility that communication professionals have in terms of practicing in ways that reflect the values of the organisation, or what professionals judge to be right, for instance; demonstrating societal responsibility by working competently, honestly, and transparently towards the
public and the organisation, ensuring that all stakeholders are always engaged through symmetrical dialogue (Rensburg, 2012:4).

- **Postmodern ethics:** According to Singer (1993), postmodern ethics maintains that ethics and morality are socially constructed, asserting that postmodern ethics must be understood in relation to the context. For instance, what is ethical in one context may not be ethical in another. A postmodern ethical system would suggest that there is no unified approach to understanding what is ethical and would then align to moral relativism which claims that no standpoints are superior to others, emphasising the accommodation of all views.

- **Leadership:** The ability of an individual to exert influence in an organisation, which guides ethical communication practice and legitimises organisations (Meng & Berger, 2013:141-142).

- **Professional accountability:** The provision of a true and accurate account of what the professional does in a transparent manner to internal and external stakeholders (SAICA, 2009).

- **Virtue ethics:** Virtue ethics is concerned with “what kinds of people we should be and how should we live” in order to act ethically and achieve good all the time (Athanassoulis, 2015).

- **Virtuousness:** Virtuousness can be defined as “excellence in the human soul” and further states that it is a form of behaviour or virtues acting in combination that leads to beneficial outcomes. In short, Horne (2012) summarises virtuousness is “an ultimate good”. Cameron (2003) expands, saying that that virtuousness in practice relates to the behaviour of individuals in organisational settings, further stating that virtuous organisations must be designed to foster the following in professionals:
  - “Interpersonal relationships, meaningful work, enhanced learning, and personal development.”
  - “Social betterment that extends beyond mere self-interested benefit.”

  - **Virtuous loyalty:** Virtuous loyalty is defined by Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) as “being loyal to your own deeply held beliefs and ideals.” Thus, virtuous loyalty is concerned with which entity supports the professional’s own personal values. In contrast, non-virtuous loyalty would involve the professional going against his or her personal loyalties in favour of public loyalty, which is an inauthentic action.
Virtuous leadership: Islam and Crego (2013) claim that a virtuous organisation is “built from the leader out”, with the leader’s vision and values shaping and defining the company culture and everything that the business does in terms of community involvement, to the way that the company treats the employees. In addition to this, Islam and Crego (2013) state that virtuous leaders who intend to build virtuous companies do not focus purely on short-term performance and profits and need to have a strong moral compass.

- Person-organisation value congruence: Research has been devoted to understanding congruence between an individual’s preferences and values and the characteristic of their work environment (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Irvine (2010) explains that professionals struggle to experience meaningfulness in their work if they are expected to behave in ways that are inconsistent with the highest values, they espouse to themselves and others. Interestingly, Irvine (2010) states that the organisational leader’s behaviour should also reflect values congruent with employee values, in the sense that the leader should speak and act in ways consist with employees’ values.

- The social role of PR practice: According to Verwey (2015:12) and Skinner (1994:45), looking at socially responsible communication practice includes social roles which can either enhance PR, or detract from it. In line with this, Grunig (2014) questions whether contemporary PR should be practiced in the interest of the client, or in the interests of the public, society and the organisation. Grunig (2014) believes that divided loyalties are central to PR practice, and states that the social roles of PR help to clarify decision-making when PR professionals are faced with conflicting loyalties because the underpinnings of these roles shed light on the question of right and wrong.

As such, the intention of this study is to unpack the abovementioned concepts and constructs in order to further explore the identified research problem which will be looked at from a postmodern paradigm using a systems framework for understanding interdependencies amongst concepts listed above.

1.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Due to the exploratory nature of the identified research problem for this study, this study will utilise a qualitative research design, which Creswell (2008) defines as including investigational approaches that are helpful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon and will include a population consisting of South African agency-based PR professionals. Crossman
(2012) and Herek (2012) further state that researchers cannot make direct observations of every individual in the population they are studying, and instead need to collect data from a subset of individuals known as a sample. In line with this, purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, allows for the researcher to select available and representative participants that formed part of the study. Thus, participants of this study will be chosen intentionally for the goal of being able to efficiently contribute towards exploring the identified research problem (Babbie, 2001; Carroll, 2012; Crossman, 2012). This study’s data collection methods speak to the utilisation of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which are a method of gathering rich, detailed information using pre-planned core questions (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005). In this case, open-ended, pre-planned questions will be posed to participants of the study, thus allowing for the production of rich, qualitative data via face-to-face or telephonically recorded interviews which will be transcribed and qualitatively analysed. Qualitative analysis in this regard constitutes a qualitative thematic content analysis which will allow for the researcher to explore the meanings that will be represented in the recorded and transcribed data, where data will be examined and categorised into themes in accordance with the research questions (Anderson, 2007; Seale, 2004; Neuman, 1997:273). In concluding data analysis, Motari (2015) asserts that researchers should be able to “reflect deeply in order to be competent professionals of research”. As such, the researcher will ensure for deep reflection on responses delivered to avoid conforming to personal bias, thus linking to validity and reliability in research because researchers are required to practice reflection to legitimate and validate research procedures.

1.5 STRUCTURE OF STUDY

In line with the abovementioned research questions, theoretical framework and research methodology for the study, chapters are broken down as follows:

1.5.1 Chapter 2: Elements of moral philosophy

This chapter is based on the elements of moral philosophy and unpacks common terms used in moral reasoning, as well as expands on the three fields of ethics and their application, namely meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. In addition, this chapter will include a discussion of the different theories of morality, as well as elaborate on the moral philosophies which guide ethical decision-making. Lastly, a detailed overview of applied ethics will be provided with emphasis on various fields of human interest related to the purpose of this research study.
1.5.2 Chapter 3: Moral philosophy of PR

This chapter is based on the philosophy of PR practice and will highlight communication paradigms such as postmodernism and modernism, reflective versus reflexive practice, as well as expand on the asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews of communication. In addition, this chapter will include a discussion of the evolution of PR practice, as well as elaborate on the various theoretical approaches which guide ethical communication practice.

1.5.3 Chapter 4: Moral frameworks for PR practice

This chapter is based on understanding how South African PR professionals are guided by a moral framework for practice. Additionally, this chapter will highlight existing research relating to two of the identified research sub-questions, namely “What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?” and “Do South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?” Consequently, comprehensive literature will be provided on the following aspects: elements of ethical communication, ethical systems used in professional practice, responsible leadership and professional practice towards the stakeholder, ethical decision-making and practice towards the organisation, and the social role of PR. Moreover, a dialogical communication approach will be highlighted throughout this chapter.

1.5.4 Chapter 5: Research methodology

This chapter includes the sampling and data collection process. To unpack this, this chapter outlines the research methodology utilised in the context of the specific study, which encompasses focusing on the specified research problem concerning the investigation of what constitutes a moral framework for South African PR practice, and to what extent it guides South African PR practice. In accordance with the purpose of the study, a qualitative methodology will be unpacked and justified while emphasising the research design encompassing the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

1.5.5 Chapter 6: Discussion and interpretation of findings

This chapter formulates an in-depth discussion based on the findings of the study which will be interpreted in accordance with the identified research problem and sub-questions. The in-depth discussion details similarities and differences in perceptions held by each of the PR professionals interviewed.
1.5.6 Chapter 7: Overall conclusion and recommendations

This chapter summarises the study's key findings noted in chapter 6 and outlines the proposed moral framework for practice. The chapter also highlights the limitations of the study, includes recommendations based on the study findings and concludes with suggestions for further studies. In line with this, and in summary, this chapter provides conclusions around how ethicality is perceived and practiced by South African agency-based professionals, as well as answers the research problem investigated of how South African agency-based PR professionals compared in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice.

This research will be conducted honestly, accurately, and confidentially whilst ensuring that the well-being of participants is protected. In line with this, permission and written consent will be sought from the identified organisations and participants before undertaking any research. Furthermore, the purpose of the study will be clearly explained to participants, and participants will be made aware of the type of information needed for the study, all participants will be made aware of how they are expected to participate, and they will be made aware that their participation is voluntary. Lastly, the researcher will ensure that final results are unbiased and do not deviate from key questions and objectives of the study or conform to any of the researcher’s assumptions.
CHAPTER TWO: ELEMENTS OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

“Scholars and professionals outside the profession of public relations believe that public relations is a derogatory term used to describe ethics programmes that are largely cosmetic and designed to make the organisation look better without affecting the way it acts. However, the issue of ethics in public relations is complex, and those within the profession have long recognised the importance of ethics” (Holmes, 1994).

According to Grunig (2014), PR scholars claim that PR is inherently about ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability. Ethicality involves the responsibility to define and maintain personal and organisational values, defined as what we judge to be right, and the guiding principles for personal and professional behaviour which need to be modelled by professionals (O’Brien, 2015). Wright (1985) asserts that understanding ethics is important because it is an essential part of the foundation on which society is built. Additionally, Wright (1985) claims that learning more about the moral value judgments of individuals would provide useful insights into how society, and more importantly, PR professionals, make ethical decisions and how they ascribe values to their occupational activities. In an uncertain world where “trust is at a premium”, understanding ethics has never been more important (Wakefield, 2017). As such, this chapter is based on the elements of moral philosophy and unpacks common terms used in moral reasoning, as well as expands on the three fields of ethics and their application, namely meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. In addition, this chapter will include a discussion of the different theories of morality, as well as elaborate on the moral philosophies which guide ethical decision-making. Lastly, a detailed overview of applied ethics will be provided with emphasis on various fields of human interest related to the purpose of this research study, which is:

- To understand to what extent a moral framework guides South African PR practice.
- To understand the perceptions of PR agency-based professionals in respect of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in South Africa; and,
- To contribute to the understanding of the extent to which a moral philosophy guides individual PR practice in South Africa.

2.2 CONCEPTUALISING ETHICS

Ethics is a term derived from the Greek word “ethos” and can be defined as a system of moral principles that affect how people make decisions and lead their lives (BBC, 2013; Bennett-
Philosophers claim that ethics have been derived from human conscience and intuition, God and religion, political power, and a desire for the best for people in each unique situation (BBC, 2013). In other words, a person’s concept of ethics derives from religions, philosophies and cultures. BBC (2013) adds that some of the following dilemmas are covered by ethics, namely: Moral decisions, how to live a good life, and the language of right and wrong.

Interestingly, Bennett-Woods (2005) explains that ethics is also termed “moral philosophy” or “the science of morals”, because it is a branch of philosophy that studies morality through the examination of right and wrong in human action. In this case, moral philosophy can be understood as being a body of knowledge which provides the basis for rationalising motivation in moral decision-making, such as virtue ethics, where a person will then take account of their personal values and beliefs held in accordance to the situation they are in (Lavinia, 2014:2; Robbertson & Crittenden, 2003:391; Verwey, 2015). Grunig (2014) concurs with Bennett-Woods by noting that the term “ethics” is often used interchangeably with many terms such as “morals” and “values”, because ethical questions generally ask what is morally right and what should be valued. In other words, the study of ethics will ensure that individuals can determine how to make moral judgements versus value judgements. Although philosophers suggest that many of these ethics-related terms can be used interchangeably, it is, however, still important to unpack each term in order to fully understand their application during moral reasoning. As such, common terms used when referring to and understanding moral philosophy are unpacked below:

- **Morality, values and ethics:** According to Holtzhausen (2015) and Grunig (2014), morals are values or beliefs held based on the notions of duty and obligation concerning what is right or wrong. Thus, morality can be understood as being a particular system of values and principles of conduct. Lavinia (2014:2) adds to this by stating that humans are influenced by personal values which dictate their reactions towards situations and decision-making in accordance to their morality, thus relating to moral decision-making. Values would then be the beliefs that motivate individuals to act one way or another (Grunig, 2014). In other words, values are beliefs about what ideas are important and values are the embodiment of what an individual or organisation stands for. For example, an organisation’s core values would be to ensure that the entity operates professionally and with integrity at all times. From a personal perspective, values refer to the beliefs for which a person has an enduring preference, such as being kind at all times and having honest relationships with others (Grunig, 2014). In addition, values are not to be confused with virtues, as virtues are concerned with the moral excellence of a person and can be defined as a moral habits and characteristics which result in the gaining or
maintaining of values (Athanassoulis, 2015). For example, a morally-excellent person has a character made up of virtues which are valued as good; namely, he or she is honest, kind, empathetic, etc. Surbhi (2016) then goes on to unpack ethics as being the “set of rules that govern the behaviour of a person, established by a group or culture”, and further states that ethics addresses certain questions of morality, such as: what are the appropriate actions in given situations and what should be a standard way for people to live? Virtue, when applied to ethics, would then be concerned with living in accordance with a set of virtues deemed morally-valid (Athanassoulis, 2015; Verwey, 2015).

In line with the abovementioned definitions, the main differences between ethics and values are summarised in table 1 below:

Table 1: Differences between ethics and values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis for comparison</th>
<th>Ethics</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition:</td>
<td>• Guidelines for conduct that address questions about morality</td>
<td>• Principles and ideals that help individuals in making moral judgements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are they?</td>
<td>• Consistent and uniform amongst all</td>
<td>• Differs from person to person (what is valued by one may not be valued by another)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• System of moral principles</td>
<td>• Stimuli for thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they tell us?</td>
<td>• Based on what is morally correct or incorrect</td>
<td>• Based on what we want to achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Determines to what extent our options are right or wrong</td>
<td>• Determines where our priorities lie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do they do?</td>
<td>• Ethics compels to follow a particular course of action (limiting)</td>
<td>• Values strongly influence the emotional state of mind (motivating)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Surbhi (2016).

Importantly, Holtzhausen (2015) points out the differences between what is morally right versus what is ethically right or legally right, stating that morality and ethics are often confused with the law and what is unethical or immoral might not be illegal, and vice versa. Before continuing with an example, it is important to note that morals refer to an individual’s own principles regarding right and wrong, whereas ethics are rules provided via external sources such as organisational
or professional bodies’ codes of conduct (Holtzhausen, 2015). For example, lawyers are 
ethically-bound to rules that supersede their ideas of what is morally right and wrong. A lawyer’s 
morals may tell him or her that murder, crime and rape should be punished, but their 
professional ethics require them to defend their client, even if the client is guilty of such actions.

- **Moral principles**: Bennett-Woods (2005) explains that a principle is a basic truth or 
assumption, and in the case of ethics, would then be used in moral reasoning. Thus, a 
moral principle would then be understood as being a special rule of good conduct. 
Examples of moral principles are listed and defined below (Bennett-Woods, 2005):
  - Respect for persons: Treat all humans with respect and high-value
  - Non-maleficence: To do no harm
  - Beneficence: To do good
  - Veracity: To tell the truth
  - Fidelity: To act in ways that are loyal
  - Justice: To treat people equitably and fairly

Moral principles can be translated into guiding questions to help professionals in practice. 
Examples of such questions include asking the following (Arthur W. Page Center, 2018):

- Will anyone be harmed if we use this approach?
- Are we taking advantage of an opportunity to contribute something good to society?
- Is the message truthful, or could anyone be misled?

### 2.3 FIELDS OF ETHICS

Bennett-Woods (2005) states that the study of ethics falls into different areas of focus, which 
Holmes (2018) and Grunig (2014) unpack as three (3) areas, namely; meta-ethics, normative 
ethics and applied ethics, all of which are unpacked and summarised in table 2.3.3 below.

#### 2.3.1 Meta-ethics

Meta-ethics asks what the meanings of ethical terms are, for example, the meanings of good 
and bad. Additionally, meta-ethics asks whether there are, in fact, any fixed principles for 
guiding conduct at all (Grunig, 2014). Bennett-Woods (2005) explains that meta-ethics is 
concerned with where and how ethical judgements originate and the very nature of what is 
considered right and wrong. For instance, the application of meta-ethics includes defining the 
nature of a good act. BBC (2013) provides the following examples of meta-ethical questions to 
assist in understanding the application of meta-ethics:
• Meta-ethics example 1: “Should I eat a piece of cake while on a diet?” is not a meta-ethical question, but more a question related to applied ethics and how to act in a particular situation.

• Meta-ethics example 2: “Is it possible to have secure knowledge of what is right and wrong?” is an example of meta-ethical questioning. Therefore, it can be noted that meta-ethical questions are abstract.

2.3.2 Normative versus descriptive ethics

Normative ethics asks what the basic principles and values are that everyone should acknowledge. Grunig (2014) points out that normative ethics should not be confused with descriptive ethics, further noting that normative ethics explain how professionals should practice versus descriptive ethics which explains how professionals are actually practicing. Thus, descriptive ethics examines the ethical behaviour of groups of people and would, for instance, apply to how PR should be practiced, versus how it is being practiced (normative ethics versus descriptive ethics). Another application of normative versus descriptive ethics includes understanding whether a business leader’s personal beliefs would affect the ethical choices and organisational decisions made in relation to social upbringing (normative ethics), and descriptive ethics focusing on how the business leader actually incorporates best practice into the organisation (Tutorials Point, 2018). Bennett-Woods (2005) summarises the above by stating that normative ethical theories attempt to “systematically formulate guidelines to answer the basic question of how one ideally ought to behave in a particular situation” (criteria for conduct). Whereas descriptive ethics then describes ethical beliefs and behaviours of an individual or group as they actually exist, as opposed to how they ought to exist.

2.3.3 Applied ethics

Applied ethics, or “practical ethics” is a discipline of philosophy that applies ethical theory to real-life situations (BBC, 2013). Holmes (2018) explains that practical ethics has its place in almost all social practices because it deals with the controversial moral issues that people face in their lives. Thus, applied ethical systems help guide individuals in making sound choices and resolving conflicts with others. Normative ethics provides a basis for applied ethics when employed in the analysis of specific practical issues (Holmes, 2018). BBC (2013) provides the following examples of applied ethics questions to assist in understanding its application:

• Is having an abortion wrong?
• Is selectively withholding potentially-damaging public information wrong?
• Is affirmative action right or wrong?
Table 2 below provides a summary of the differences between the three fields of ethics.

Table 2: Overview of differences between fields of ethics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch of ethics</th>
<th>Overview of differentiators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Descriptive ethics: | • Social scientific investigation, description and analysis of the state of ethical affairs.  
| | • **Example:** What do people think is right? |
| Normative ethics: | • Value-judgements that are made that set standards for ethical conduct.  
| | • **Example:** How should people act? |
| Applied ethics: | • What a person is obligated to do in a particular situation within a particular domain.  
| | • **Example:** How do we take moral knowledge and put it into practice? |
| Meta-ethics: | • Examines the characteristics of ethical reasoning.  
| | • **Example:** What does "right" and "wrong" mean? |

Adapted from Holmes (2018).

2.4 THEORIES OF MORALITY

According to Lavinia (2014:2), individuals are influenced by personal values which dictate their reactions towards situations and decision-making in accordance to their morality, or their set of beliefs held. Athanassoulis (2015) expands on this morality by mentioning that morality is based on the notions of duty and obligation. Igboanugo (2014) further elaborates on this by stating that moral theories are concerned with right and wrong behaviour, and further notes that there are two theories of morality which are used to conceptualise ethical enactment, namely the act-centered theory, which focuses on duty and consequences, and an obligation to achieve good, versus the agent-centred theory, which focuses on character and the desire to achieve good over and above obligation. Bennett-Woods (2005) states that distinguishing between such moral theories forms part of assumptions in normative ethics, with distinctions being made between deontological and teleological perspectives to be discussed below.

2.4.1 The act-centered theory

Igboanugo (2014) and Athanassoulis (2015) explain the act-centered theory by mentioning that the motivation to be moral is found in an individual’s desire or duty to bring about a good
outcome. Igboanugo (2014) further goes on to state that the act-centered theory can be broken up into two dominant schools of thought based on short-term plans of action, namely:

- **Deontology (from the Greek word “deon” meaning “duty”):**
  - Focuses on the intention for an action and then being assessed to see whether it conforms to a specific duty, such as always telling the truth and doing no harm unto others.
  - Referred to as “ethics of conduct” and is predicated upon duty and obligation. An example of deontological ethics involves an individual choosing not to disseminate misleading or inaccurate information because the act would be tantamount to lying.

- **Teleology (from the Greek word “telos” meaning “goal or end”):**
  - Teleology focuses on the consequences of the action to understand if the act is good or bad. Thus, teleology emphasises consequentialism, or the consequences that may result from any action.
  - In practice, this approach requires an individual to think about the consequences of their actions when serving the interests of the organisation and the public.

2.4.2 The agent-centred theory

As stated by Athanassoulis (2015) and Hogan (2010), the agent-centred theory is referred to as “ethics of character” and is based on virtue itself, with virtue being defined as “moral excellence” or a moral quality that is regarded as good (Athanassoulis, 2015; Your Dictionary, 2015). Athanassoulis (2015) expands on the notion of virtue and mentions that virtue is an “appropriate response to a situation” and that virtues are exercised within practices or social activities and seek to enable us to achieve good. Examples of virtues can include tolerance, harmony, and compassion, which are also virtues of Ubuntu philosophy, or the caring for the “other”, as noted by West (2014:51). Importantly, virtues are also associated with feelings (Athanassoulis, 2015). For example, courage and bravery would be associated with fear and friendliness, and kindness would be associated with social conduct. Athanassoulis (2015) expands on the fact that virtue ethics has been developed in the following directions, namely ethics of care, or the fact that ethics should take on more caring, feminine traits and not just be performed as an action of justice. Athanassoulis (2015) also speaks to the notion of Eudemonia, which is an Aristotelian term which means happiness and fulfilment and is linked to human flourishing or reasoning; it also recognises that actions mean nothing unless they have an aim or reason.

Interestingly, Athanassoulis (2015) also mentions that the agent-centred theory opposes deontology and teleology and was developed as a result of dissatisfaction with regard to acting
ethically simply due to obligation or the duty to perform the right action. However, there are some obligations as regards virtue ethics, or the agent-centred theory, such as the fact that the theory is only interested in the acquisition of virtues as part of the individual or agent’s flourishing, and morality requires individuals to consider others over and above how they may benefit from them (Athanassoulis, 2015; Igboanugo, 2014). Therefore, the dilemma in achieving good and acting in line with virtues lies in the fact that this will make the individual happier and would be considered as a self-centred act because its primary concern is with the agent’s own character. Though, Athanassoulis (2015) points out that the virtues being acted upon are “other-regarding” and the good of the agent is not separate from the good of others, in the sense that being kind involves responding to the needs of others in an appropriate way.

In addition to this, Athanassoulis (2015) and Hogan (2010) state that it is important to also note the main differences between virtue ethics and deontology and teleology, which is that virtue ethics is concerned with “what kind of people we should be and how should we live” in order to act ethically and achieve good all the time, whereas deontology and teleology are simply concerned with “the right action” or “intention”. Thus, it can be noted from the above definitions of virtue and virtue ethics that the agent-centred theory is aligned with feminine traits such as caring and nurturing, as well as the Ubuntu philosophy which is characterised by virtues. Additionally, it can be noted that virtue ethics theory revolves around long-term patterns of action, such as living according to universally understood virtues and always asking “what a good person would do” before responding to any situation. Furthermore, it can be concluded that the act-centered ethical theory is outcome-based due to the fact that it aims to identify with universal principles that can be applied in any situation, and the agent-centred theory is character-based as it deals with asking wider questions in line with living a good life.

Table 3 below provides a summary of the above-mentioned ethical perspectives.

Table 3: Classification of ethical perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theories of morality:</th>
<th>ACT-CENTERED THEORY</th>
<th>AGENT-CENTRED THEORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deontological ethics</td>
<td>Teleological ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deontology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on duty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(links to Formalism)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Based on consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(links to Utilitarianism)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-consequentialist moral theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Virtue Ethics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequentialist moral theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-consequentialist moral theory</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory underpinnings:</td>
<td>Based on ethics of conduct</td>
<td>Based on ethics of character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outcome-based in line with universal principles that can be applied in any situations. I.e. Concerned with “the right action” or “intention”</td>
<td>Based on living in accordance to a set of virtues and asking, “what a good person would do?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key philosopher:</td>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>Aristotle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Hogan (2010); Lavinia (2014); Athanassouli (2015) and Pritchard (n.d).

2.5 MORAL PHILOSOPHIES FOR DECISION-MAKING

There are five moral philosophies which provide their own basis for rationalising motivation in decision-making (Robbertson & Crittenden, 2003: 391; Verwey, 2015). These approaches include egoism, utilitarianism, formalism, virtue ethics, and moral relativism, all of which will be discussed below:

- **Egoism**: Stems from the word “ego”, and the individual aims at their own greatest good and places their own goals above those of society, thus reflecting an individualistic value orientation because actions are self-serving (Verwey, 2015; Moseley, 2005).

- **Utilitarianism**: Links to that of teleology due to the fact that it assesses moral right and wrong in terms of the consequences of any actions, and the desired goal is to seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people (Verwey, 2015; Rensburg & Cant, (2009:145). Importantly, this approach can be contrasted with the motivation-based theory of deontology, as motivation and intent is the deciding factor for decision-making, as opposed to the consequences or outcome.

- **Formalism**: A deontological system which focuses on duties and human intention, while rejecting utility related to consequences of behaviour (Verwey, 2015). Thus, the act will be understood as moral based on the motive or intent of the actor.

- **Virtue ethics**: Concerned with living in accordance to a set of virtues that is deemed morally-valid regardless of the actions or outcomes, as well as living according to universally understood virtues and always asking “what a good person would do” before responding to any situation (Athanassouli, 2015; Verwey, 2015).

- **Moral relativism**: The view that moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint and that no standpoints are superior to any others, thus linking to

2.6 POSTMODERN ETHICS

Postmodern ethics maintains that ethics and morality are socially constructed, and postmodern ethics must be understood in relation to the context (Singer, 1993). For instance, what is ethical in one context may not be ethical in another. Important to note is that postmodernists reject the trusting obedience to power (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002:69), and the paradigm shift of postmodernism denies the existence of a single truth that can be applied to all people at all times. Moreland and Craig (2003) support this by adding that postmodernists reject the idea that there are universal standards for determining whether a belief is rational or irrational, good or bad. Therefore, a postmodern ethical system would suggest that there is no unified approach to understanding what is ethical and would then align to moral relativism which claims that no standpoints are superior to others, emphasising the accommodation of all views. Westacott (2015) adds to this by stating that moral relativism encourages tolerance as the relativist will pass less judgment on different cultural beliefs. Wong (1991:39) adds to this by stating that moral relativism holds that "it is wrong to pass judgment on others who hold different values, or to try to make them conform to one’s own values, for the reason that their values are as valid as one’s own."

However, critics believe that there is a distinct difference between tolerance and respect, and that not everything should be “tolerated”, thus meaning that the approach is a metanarrative in itself due to the fact that the approach requires the relativist to be tolerant of intolerance. Moreland and Craig (2003) and Singer (1993) agree and further critique postmodern ethics by stating that its foundation in toleration suggests that “tolerance imposed upon people is to be intolerant”, thus making the belief self-contradictory. Secondly, Moreland and Craig (2003) state that postmodern ethics claims to reject the idea of a universal truth and approach to understanding what is ethical. However, postmodern ethics does produce an absolute standard for morality because it states that tolerance is the goal. Thus, tolerance would then be the absolute moral standard. Interestingly, postmodernists also purport that some “ultimate truths” may exist, for example; child abuse, murder and rape may very well all be universal truths (Hoffman, Hoffman, Robison & Lawrence, 2005).
2.7 COMMUNITARIAN ETHICS

According to Leeper (1996), communitarianism is a social philosophy based on the common good and the public interest. Regis University (2018) explains that communitarian ethics seek to lessen the focus on individual rights and responsibilities, and rather increase the focus on communal responsibilities and the strengthening of communities\(^1\). Such ethical thought is predicated upon communal values rooted in common history and tradition, and considerations of the larger society, where emphasis is placed on the influence of society on individuals. In line with this, Regis University (2018) explains that communitarian perspectives support that any claim of truth be validated through co-operative enquiry, and that all citizens should have equal participation and access in the power structure of society (mutuality). Thus, it can be noted that in resolving ethical conflicts, there needs to be respect for local societal values and dialogical communication with the wider public. Secondly, communitarian thought includes emphasis on connections between people, collaboration, and “diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism” (Regis University, 2018). Communitarian perspective applied to ethics would then imply that emphasis is placed on the concept of creating and building ethical communities. However, Bennett-Woods (2005) critiques communitarian ethics by stating that many scholars would question how realistic it is to actually achieve a common set of global values.

Pangburn (2017) and Moreland and Craig (2003) go on to state that all individuals have a moral compass, or in other words, a set of guidelines which have been instilled by their own social experiences. In line with this, Moreland and Craig (2003) state that “what is good for one, may then not be good for another”, and further note that this is the best way to understand individual ethics. Pangburn (2017) emphasises that individual ethical enactment is different to that of a group because the mindset and reasoning skills for an individual will be different; emphasis is therefore placed on individualism. Thus, it can be concluded that Pangburn believes large groups may fail when it comes to reasoning, as individuals may simply strengthen each other’s resolve. However, Leeper (1996) expands on communitarianism as an ideal ethical perspective, and further applies communitarian ethics to leadership and PR practice in the following ways:

- A communitarian approach applied professionally suggests that what is best for the community is in the best interests of the organisation because of the interdependence between an organisation and the community. In essence, anything that negatively affects the community can negatively affect the organisation and vice versa.
- Communitarian leaders are shaped by the values of their communities and should see themselves as parts of an encompassing whole, rather than being fully independent.

\(^1\) For the purpose of this study, the following terms are used interchangeably throughout: “community”, “stakeholders”, “publics” and “society”. 
• Communitarian leaders believe that shared values are imperative to a highly-functioning community.
• Communitarian leaders believe that they have an ethical responsibility for fostering symmetry in relationships which can be achieved through PR efforts.
• Communitarian leaders recognise that the organisation should have a responsibility not only for profits, but also for the consequences of its activities on all stakeholders.
• A communitarian foundation for PR will enable an organisation to adapt and respond to crises appropriately because of the sense of “community” that PR aims to develop and nurture.
• A communitarian foundation recognises the importance of dignity and respect for all, truth and honesty, self-responsibility, peaceful resolution of conflict, and the support of democracy.

2.8 ETHICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Intersubjectivity refers to the interpersonal dynamics between two parties and the process by which they create shared narrative (Groenewald, 2013). According to Soltoft (1998), the concept of intersubjectivity was initially used to describe “universal validity” or something that was valid for everybody. Dekker (n.d.) explains that an intersubjective stance to knowledge requires that individuals “think” themselves into the place of all others, as this fosters enlarged interpretive perspectives. In other words, an individual can compare their beliefs with another, and they will then accept the other’s beliefs while still reflecting upon their own belief. Essentially, an intersubjective stance to knowledge would be based on common human understanding and can be used to justify moral beliefs (Dekker, n.d.). Importantly, Bai (2004) states that an intersubjective stance needs to be distinguished from the subjectivist mode which simply colonises and consumes “the other”, rather than acknowledging the other as another subject in order for the self to fully experience his or her subjectivity in “the other’s” presence. With this said, it is then important to note that the self has a need for recognition and that the self has the capacity to recognise others in return. Thus, the self must recognise the other as a subject like itself in order to be recognised by it. However, Bai (2004) notes that the self’s wish for independence conflicts with the self’s need for recognition, further stating the following: “The self says, I want to affect you, but I want nothing you do or say to affect me, I am who I am.” In essence, the self wishes to affirm independence regardless of the need for the other and is, thus, an example of one-way monologue, meaning that communication with the other isn’t totally reciprocal (Edgett, 2002).

Stumm (2014) speaks to intersubjective ethics of dialogue involved in narrative collaboration and states that ethical dialogue between the self and another begins with intersubjectivity which
recognises the self as another. Oliver (2001) expands on this by stating that individuals are obligated to respond to the environment and other people in ways that open up rather than close off the possibility of response. In line with such dialogic response, scholars suggest that empathy is important in understanding the other’s lived experiences, defined as the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from within their frame of reference, rather than from your own (Zahavi & Overgaard, 2013). A subjectivist stance, for example, does not allow for empathy to be applied in the co-creation of meaning. However, an intersubjective stance requires empathy in order to understand the other separate to the self.

2.9 AN OVERVIEW OF APPLIED ETHICS

According to Holmes (2018), applied ethics has its place in almost all professional fields because it deals with difficult moral questions in practice, further noting that applied ethics are grouped into some of the following specific fields of human interest: Medical ethics, environmental ethics, business ethics and legal ethics to name a few. Essentially, each field of human interest has unique controversial issues, such as medical ethics highlighting patient-doctor confidentiality, and environmental ethics focusing on ecological issues regarding pollution and the government’s role therein. Holmes (2018) claims that although applied ethics can be sub-divided amongst such fields, some issues do overlap. However, for the purpose of this research, the following areas will be unpacked and aligned to PR practice:

- Business ethics and ethical leadership
- Personal versus professional ethics
- PR ethics

2.9.1 Business ethics and ethical leadership

Business ethics refers to the study of business policies and practices which may contain controversial issues, such as bribery, discrimination, and corporate governance, for example (Skeet, 2014; Tutorials Point, 2018). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2016) supports this definition by that stating that business ethics can be understood as the “study of the ethical dimensions of productive organisations.” Tutorials Point (2018) asserts that businesses need to abide by some of the following basic principles for ethical business practice, namely:

- Fair treatment of employees
- Keeping investors informed
- Avoiding discrimination
- Service before profit
- Respecting consumer rights
- Accepting social responsibility
Josephson Institute of Ethics (2015) further highlights that business ethics essentially deals with moral guidelines and good corporate governance supported by strong business leaders. Skeet (2014) adds that leadership is a formal role that individuals have in organisations, and when linked to business ethics, ethical leadership sets the standard for others’ professional role enactment. Thus, business leaders have the opportunity to do the right thing and also consider the kind of people they want to be. Skeet (2014) expands on this by stating that business leaders are required to engage in setting standards that encourage ethical behaviour, which may include taking responsibility for creating an ethical culture in the organisation. Ethical theories are essential to leadership; they not only speak to the actions and behaviours of leaders, but also the personality and character of leaders (Skeet, 2014).

Josephson Institute of Ethics (2015) goes on to suggest principles for ethical leadership in business, some of which are unpacked below:

- **Honesty**: Ethical leaders are required to be honest and truthful and must not deliberately mislead or deceive others through partial truths or selective omissions. Honesty is an essential element in ethical leadership, and it is said that honest leaders can always be relied upon.
- **Loyalty**: Ethical leaders must demonstrate loyalty to colleagues and clients, as well as show devotion to duty. Devotion to duty may include respecting proprietary information of an employer or client, as well as include not disclosing information learnt in confidence for personal advantage.
- **Integrity**: Ethical leaders must fight for their beliefs and should demonstrate personal integrity by doing what they think is right based on their personal values.
- **Respect for others**: Ethical leaders show empathy where necessary, treat all people with respect and dignity, and seek to accomplish work in a manner which aims for the greatest positive good in society.
- **Fairness**: Ethical leaders should manifest a commitment to justice and mutuality. For example, this includes the equal treatment of all stakeholders and publics, and respect of all beliefs held.
- **Responsible leadership**: Ethical leaders are aware of the responsibility that they have within the organisation and society. With this said, ethical leaders model ethical behaviour by their own conduct and help in fostering an ethical business environment.
- **Accountability**: Ethical leaders are personally accountable for their actions and decisions and they acknowledge and accept accountability for the consequences of their actions.

In line with the business-practice principles and ethical-leadership principles mentioned, respect, fairness, an emphasis on equality, and an emphasis on responsible leadership and transparent practice can all be noted as similarities amongst both lists of principles.
2.9.2 Personal versus professional ethics

According to the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2018), personal ethics refers to the ethics that a person identifies with, and this ethical system can be used as a moral guide for navigating ethical decisions. Jacorzynski (2009) supports this by defining personal ethics as an ethical system that has been chosen as a moral guide in life, further stating that personal ethics is built upon an “individual commitment to a moral life”. Thus, it can be noted that personal ethics determine what an individual personally believes to be right and wrong. Importantly, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2018) states that personal ethics is usually distinguished from business ethics because personal ethics is predicated upon acting ethically as an individual, versus business ethics which is predicated upon acting ethically as a business professional for good business practice-purposes. Gartenstein (2018) asserts that personal ethics systems can also be aimed at doing good for the sake of creating outcomes that improve life not only for yourself, but also for others (social betterment). For instance, telling the truth and treating friends and family with compassion and kindness can be the basis of a personal ethics system.

In contrast, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2018) goes on to the define professional ethics and state that professional ethics refers to the ethics that a person must adhere to in terms of their business dealings in their professional life. For example, acting ethically as a professional in terms of ensuring fair business dealings, respecting colleagues, and paying employees as fairly as possible (Gartenstein, 2018). Interestingly, personal and professional ethics may clash, thus causing a moral conflict, as unpacked below:

- A PR professional may personally believe that complete transparency in professional practice is the wrong approach. However, under the Public Relations Institute of South Africa’s (PRISA) code of conduct for PR practice, the professional must be truthful and transparent to all stakeholders unless there is sufficient cause to do otherwise.
- A doctor may not personally believe that the course of medical treatment chosen by a patient is the right one. However, under the country’s code of ethics for medicine, a doctor must respect the rights and freedom of choice of the patient (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2018).

Based on the above examples, it can be noted that some professions require professionals to adhere to professional codes of ethics that help to create legitimacy for the profession. Gartenstein (2018) explains that membership of such groups would mean that professionals are required to adhere to the codes set out, with any violations to the code potentially leading to a license termination. Following a code of ethics is important for personal and professional integrity. In terms of ethical PR practice, PRISA is a professional body established to serve the
interests of the PR profession and foster ethical behaviour in the practice of PR via a standardised code of ethics (Ki & Kim, 2009).

2.9.3 Public relations ethics

Public relations decisions are especially likely to involve ethics when professionals are serving in the role of organisational conscience and dealing with intangibles such as trust and reputation (Grunig, 2014). Professionals’ behaviour over the years has attracted criticism in the professional practice of PR with questions revolving around unethical behaviour (Parsons, 2008: xiii). Steyn and Puth (2000:3) agree by stating that PR has developed a bad name for itself due to professionals’ unethical behaviour and deceptive communication to the public. As such, a professional body, PRISA, was established to represent all PR professionals throughout South Africa and in Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Swaziland (PRISA, 2018). PRISA aims to unite PR professionals and drive transformation in the PR and communication management space, as well as sets standards necessary for the workplace. Most importantly, PRISA has a globally recognised code of ethics and professional standards for professional practice, all of which guide ethical enactment in the profession. Recognising that ethics plays a role in the practice of PR, some communication-focused organisations require their employees to sign up as members and comply with the codes of ethics prescribed.

Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) speak to PR ethics and note that it is “based on the PR professional’s dual obligations to serve client organisations and the public interest”; further suggesting that PR ethics is based on the principles of dialogue and symmetry and moral obligations to others. According to Grunig (2014), PR professionals face ethical problems both as individuals making decisions about their own behaviour and also as ethical counselors making strategic decisions for organisations. Grunig (2014) adds that PR professionals embrace ethical counseling as part of their professional role enactment, therefore highlighting the importance of PR theorists and researchers developing ethical theories of PR. For example, such ethical theories will provide principles that professionals can use as ethics counselors for organisations. Grunig (2014) goes on to apply teleological principles and deontological principles to PR ethics, both of which, when applied, can be understood as follows:

- Teleological principles (based on consequences) when applied to PR: Here, ethical PR professionals would ask what consequences organisational decisions have on publics.
- Deontological principles (based on rules) when applied to PR: Here, ethical PR professionals have the moral obligation to disclose the consequences to publics that are affected, and then to engage in dialogue with the publics during decision-making.
Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang and Lyra (1995) add to PR ethics by stating that Grunig and Hunt’s four models of PR represent the growth and evolution of ethical PR practice and the ethical principles that guide their practice. Such progression and ethical development of PR calls for a focus on PR ethics education in order to ensure that PR ethics is not only incorporated into academic curricula but is taught to PR professionals as part of personal skills development via PR associations (Grunig, 2014). The ability to apply ethical reasoning to various complex situations can be described as “an art” (Arthur W. Page Center, 2018), and many scholars have proposed decision-making models for use within PR ethics, as depicted in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Decision-making in PR ethics

The above ethical decision-making models were developed in order to guide PR professionals through various situations, allowing the professional to identify alignment in communication with the areas listed, as well as gain insight into the ethical obligations held by the profession. Place (2010) expands by stating that such normative and philosophical models guide how ethical PR decision-making should occur. Most ethical decision-making models in PR do not recognise reflection as being an important final element in the process; however, such models do emphasise truthful and respectful means of persuasion.

2.10 CONCLUSION

According to Lafollette (2007), “ethics is important not so that we can understand philosophically, but rather so that we can improve how we live”. Lafollette (2007) states that in
Being moral, individuals enrich their own lives and the lives of those around, further emphasising that moral decision-making requires constant practice, effort and reflection. Understanding how to make moral decisions assists individuals when faced with moral dilemmas in life, and ethics can thus be understood as enabling moral change. Questions of morality and ethics can be found at all levels of society and ethical behaviour is important in both the workplace and in our personal lives (BOMI International, 2018). BOMI International (2018) further asserts that “while ethics is a societal concern, it is of critical importance to the professions that serve society.” This reiterates Holmes’ (1994) thoughts on the importance of ethics in the profession of PR, where those within the profession have long recognised the importance of ethics.

In line with the above, this chapter unpacked elements of moral philosophy in order to not only understand the importance of ethics, but also understand the application to ethics to the field of public relations. The following elements were detailed in this chapter: common terms used in moral reasoning, the three fields of ethics and application, namely meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. In addition, this chapter discussed the different theories of morality, such as teleological and deontological perspectives, as well as elaborated on the moral philosophies which guide ethical decision-making. Lastly, a detailed overview of applied ethics was provided with emphasis on various fields of human interest related to the purpose of this research study which is: to understand the perceptions of PR agency-based professionals in respect of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in South Africa.

Parsons (2008: xiii) exclaims that if there is one question that haunts the PR image, “it is the question of its professionals’ unethical behaviour”. In recent years, the profession has done a lot to promote ethics as being fundamental part of practice, and Wright (1985) asserts that learning more about the moral value judgments of individuals would provide useful insights about how PR professionals make ethical decisions and how they ascribe values to their occupational activities. To conclude, when ethics is understood and taken seriously, people are enabled to make ethical decisions, where personal and professional success follows.
CHAPTER THREE: MORAL PHILOSOPHY OF PR

3.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic and Sriramesh (2007:4), communication disciplines were previously developed as specialty functions within a modernistic world, where during the early years, PR was viewed as a means of controlling and influencing others with a goal of gaining compliance and ensuring power. However, the proliferation of digital technology has lead towards public demands of being more involved in organisational practice, also leading to the shift towards symmetrical, dialogical, postmodern engagement (Brito et al., 2010:113). The postmodern environment that society now functions in stresses the importance of more holistic approaches to understanding the complexities of society and examining organisational changes. Dedicated efforts have been made by PR professionals in order to show that the practice truly aims to serve the public interest in an ethical manner by developing mutual understanding between organisations and their publics via the use of dialogical communication (Skinner, 1994:16). Overton-De Klerk and Verwey (2013:377) support this by stating that modernistic communication practice based on persuasion and monological communication has now been replaced by postmodern, bottom-up approaches which embrace open-systems approaches and ultimately aim for stakeholder collaboration. Ideally, the public should actively contribute toward meaning and communication within an open, participatory organisational environment.

Ethical communication in PR practice cannot be achieved until PR practice equally accommodates the public’s interests and shifts away from a persuasive model of communication towards a dialogic mode (Athanassoulis, 2015; Lavinia, 2014:2, Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261). In order to achieve this, it is necessary to also consider how theoretical approaches and moral frameworks guide PR professionals in terms of their ethical enactment and their motivation to respond to the needs of others. As such, this chapter is based on the philosophy of PR practice and will highlight communication paradigms such as postmodernism and modernism, reflective versus reflexive practice. It will also expand on the asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews of communication. In addition, this chapter will include a discussion of the evolution of PR practice, as well as elaborate on the various theoretical approaches which guide ethical communication practice. The following research sub-question identified will therefore be touched on, namely: “What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?”
3.2 UNDERPINNINGS OF PR

According to Skinner (2007), public relations (PR) can be defined as “the management of the perceptions and strategic relations between an organisation and its internal and external stakeholders.” Heath and Coombs (2006:7) expand on this by stating that PR entails collaborative decision-making to help an organisation in responding to its stakeholders in order to achieve its mission and vision. Rensburg and Cant (2003:35) provide a more comprehensive definition of the discipline by stating that PR is a “communication function which determines and evaluates public attitudes, identifies organisational procedures with the public interest, and executes a communication programme with the aim of bringing about public acceptance, understanding and support”. In addition to the above definitions of PR, Theaker (2008:5-6) goes on to define PR as being interactive, intentional, organised, based on the performance of the organisation, beneficial to both the organisation and the public, proactive and reactive, and as involving negotiation as well representation. Thus, the following key concepts can be noted from the above definitions of PR: PR is deliberate, planned, factual, performance-based, and dialogical as it considers public interest; it is representational and lastly, advisory.

Additionally, the Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) (2012), South Africa’s PR professional body, further defines PR today as a strategic communication process that builds relationships between an organisation and its publics. Theaker (2008:5) elaborates on this by noting that PR is about reputation and “is a result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you”. Therefore, it can be noted from the above definitions of PR that the practice aims to help organisations build dynamic, mutually beneficial relationships with publics, or stakeholders, in order to accumulate reputational capital. Charton (2011) expands on the notion of reputational capital by stating that reputation essentially comes from what stakeholders say about the organisation or brand, thus evaluating the organisation based on their experiences and perceptions and how their needs were catered for. This is further reinforced and linked back to the discipline of PR by Theaker (2008:5), who states that PR is concerned with the reputation of organisations because it aims to earn understanding, support, and build relationships with the organisation’s publics.

Lewis (2001) further suggests that the concept of reputation, and the accumulation of reputational capital, lie in dynamic communication and dynamic communication must take place between all parties involved in an organisation in order to make sure that all requirements are met, including taking all the voices of associated stakeholders into account. This must be done whilst noting the importance of these stakeholders engaging with the organisation and brand in order to make sure that their needs are met. Dynamic communication needs to be understood as being the key instrument of participation and relationship/reputation-building, as noted by
Awad (2011:52), because it offers a promising platform for demanding cultural minorities' participatory representation. Therefore, this links to what Theaker (2008:5-6) notes with regard to PR being interactive, dialogic and being beneficial to both the organisation and the public, where the relationships will involve mutual respect and satisfaction, which is made possible via mutual understanding from two-way communication (Mattinson, 1999:3; Scott, 2000:253).

3.2.1 The evolution of PR

According to Rensburg and Cant (2003:35), PR is a relatively young discipline and is still constantly evolving, with its strength being linked to the commitment of the public to participate in a free society. Rensburg and Cant (2003:40-43) go on to state that PR its early stages in the 1800s to 1900s was then known as “one-way persuasive communication”, which was purely used as a publicity effort to influence others and defend business interests against negative journalism. In addition to this, the 1950s to 1980s brought about the establishment of professional PR bodies such as the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), founded in London in 1955, which is focused on furthering “the highest possible standards of PR ethics and practice” and aimed to address negative perceptions related to the PR profession (Rensburg & Cant, 2003:42). Two years later, PRISA was established in Johannesburg with a mission to serve the interests of the PR profession and foster ethical behaviour in the practice of PR (Ki & Kim, 2009). Doorley and Garcia (2007:36) and Rensburg and Cant (2009:261) further expand on the importance of a code of ethics by stating that there has been a need for communication practice to be truthful, fair, accurate, and culturally sensitive because ethical communication cannot be achieved until PR practice is open, dialogical and accommodates the public’s interests.

Rensburg and Cant (2003:40-43) explain that early PR has now evolved from its “persuasive publicity” days as a result of the convergence of the following four (4) societal factors:

1. The growth of institutions and their responsibility to the public
2. Increased changes among interest groups
3. The heightened awareness of people due to technological advances
4. The spread of global democracy

Firstly, the size of society and institutions has grown larger, which means that the PR practice has had to evolve in order to interpret the large organisations to the publics that they serve (Rensburg & Cant, 2003:40-43). Secondly, the discipline has evolved in order to account for any changes in society, such as the introduction of women’s and animal rights, and the introduction of the internet, which has lead towards a shift in voice to the public, and stakeholder demands of being more involved (Brito, et al., 2010:113). Consequently, advances in technology since the
Introduction of the printing press and mass media have resulted in the heightened awareness of people and the creation of a “global village” (Rensburg & Cant, 2003:40-43). Further expanded on by Smith (2006), technology has lead towards a more interdependent world and has been influential in helping globalisation because digital communication and practice go beyond geographical and industrial borders. Smith (2006) adds that the lives of humans are now technologically-infused with mobile phones and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, which all enable “interconnectedness.” Lastly, the adoption of a democracy, like in Eastern Europe and South Africa, has heightened public opinion and given rise to the voice of the previously oppressed (Rensburg & Cant, 2003:40-43). Overton-De Klerk and Oelofse (2010:388) elaborate on the increased importance of public opinion in the 21st century by stating that organisations are now seen as being part of society, with added pressure on South African organisations and PR professionals to act ethically by taking into account stakeholder interests. This includes ensuring that business practices are transparent, contributing towards job creation and skills development since South Africa’s 1994 democratic transformation (Melewar, 2008:97). This paradigm shift has suggested that South Africa was to replace legal forms of democracy with a vibrant, participative democracy that reconciles freedom and justice, thus relating to the postmodern paradigm of communication practice.

3.2.2 Ethicality in PR

Harrison and Galloway (2005:1) reiterate by stating that certain professionals’ behaviour over the years has attracted criticism in the professional practice of PR. Bowen (2007) and Steyn and Puth (2000:3) agree by stating that PR has made a bad name for itself due to the unethical behaviour and deceptive communication certain professionals to the public, resulting in the entire area of PR being considered as unethical. Doorley and Garcia (2007:1) concur with this, stating that spin, or propaganda, are common themes linked to unethical PR practice. Grunig (2001) and Igboanugo (2014) elaborate on the notion of ethicality in PR practice by stating that there have been two conflicting debates around ethics in PR practice: on the one side, the positive role that PR plays in society is emphasised; on the other side, critics argue that the practice distorts messaging to the public – also known as “spinning” – in order to advance the company’s agenda.

Theaker (2008:38) goes on to define the notion of PR spin by stating that it can be compared to propaganda, in that it involves information manipulation in order to enhance the standing of the government or political elites. Additionally, Theaker (2008:38) further states that spinning messages is also done to secure favourable media coverage from journalists, which has been to the detriment of journalism and resulted in PR professionals being referred to as “scum” by media houses for destroying the truth and misleading the public. However, to address the negative perceptions related to the PR profession, a code of ethics has now been introduced by
professional bodies such as PRISA and IPRA in order to avoid PR spin and foster ethical behaviour in the practice of PR (Ki & Kim, 2009). Doorley and Garcia (2007:36) further expand on the importance of a code of ethics by stating that there has been a need for communication practice to be truthful, fair, accurate, and culturally sensitive, because ethical communication cannot be achieved until PR practice is open, symmetrical, dialogical, and accommodates the public's interests, as noted by Rensburg and Cant (2009:261).

- **Role of ethical communication in contemporary PR:**

Doorley and Garcia (2007) support this by stating that the role of ethical communication in PR provides a framework which fosters ethical communication. Contemporary scholars such as Kent and Taylor (2002) describe ethical communication in PR as being underpinned by the following dialogic features, namely: risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment, as depicted in figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Dialogic model**

![Dialogic model](image)

Adapted from Kent & Taylor (2002).

Kent and Taylor (2002) and Kent (2017) state that these features are humanistic, further explaining that every dialogic feature is not always present in every dialogic interaction. However, the more features are present, the stronger the dialogic bond will be. Kent and Taylor (2002) and Kent (2017) unpack the five (5) dialogic features needed for genuine dialogue below:

1. **Risk:** Involves being open to all consequences and requires an unconditional acceptance of the uniqueness of the other. Bartlett (2017) additionally points out that ethical communication practice often involves making oneself vulnerable through disclosure, further noting that professionals should aim to generate positive outcomes from tense and potentially hostile situations.
2. **Mutuality:** Involves collaboration with others and suggests that all interactions should be equal and include all voices. Bartlett (2016) adds to this by stating that mutuality in ethical communication covers the intertwined nature of the “co-dependency between organisations and their stakeholders” and recognises that any decisions made could potentially affect one or multiple stakeholders. Therefore, mutuality calls the need for symmetrical, dynamic communication and respecting others in the communication process.

3. **Propinquity:** Involves looking at the process of dialogical exchanges. Ethical communication propinquity means that organisations and their publics are willing to consult each other on matters where stakeholders are affected. In doing so, all will be handled in an open, loyal and respectful manner. Propinquity also involves immediacy of presence or real-time interactions. In addition, Barlett (2017) notes that dialogue should be used to achieve shared understanding of an idea.

4. **Empathy:** Empathetic communication is important in PR because professionals can communicate ethically by understanding each other, and it is considered as vital in building trust between entities (Kent & Taylor, 2002). According to Bartlett (2017), empathy in communication is the ability of professionals to show supportiveness and collegiality towards the other in the communication process.

5. **Commitment:** Commitment involves professionals maintaining an open and ongoing conversation and the commitment to continuously understand and interpret how others feel; for instance, being genuinely willing to make conversations work between the organisation and its publics.

In line with the above-mentioned aspects, Kent and Taylor (2002) elaborate on the application of these features in PR practice, noting that professionals need to ensure that they are equipped to build dialogical interpersonal relationships with all stakeholders. If needed, Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest that professionals be trained in dialogue to ensure that they gain the adequate skills to foster ethical communication, such as the ability to reflect, listening skills, acting truthfully, being able to identify common ground between parties, and seeking out individuals or groups with opposing views, for example.

### 3.3 EVOLUTION OF ETHICS IN PR PRACTICE

In order to understand PR practice and its evolution in terms of ethical communication with the public, it is important to note that Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested four models of...
communication relationships with the public, all of which are listed and explained below in order of the evolution of ethical communication practice, namely press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric PR and finally, two-way symmetric PR.

3.3.1 Press agentry/publicity model

Early PR practice was previously associated with press agentry (Grunig, 1993; Igboanugo, 2014; Theaker, 2008), and during the period of press agentry the role of the press agent was purely aimed at securing favourable media coverage in a misleading way or at any cost, where truth was not an absolute and no time was invested in research or ethics (Grunig, 1993:143). Press agentry took place between the 1800s and the 1900s and was primarily associated with entertainment-related events (Phillingane, 2005). Important to note, is that press agentry is a form of one-way communication because press agentry solely valued public attention and general interest over any understanding.

3.3.2 Public information model

According to Sledzik (2008), the public information era, developed around the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, is characterised by the shift toward truth and accountability in communication to the public, where persuasion and the changing of public opinion was not a goal of PR. However, Theaker (2008:29) argues that the direction of this era was simply to release only favourable information to the public. This implies that communication in the public information era was not accurate and truthful because unfavourable information was omitted, and therefore means that communication was still based on a one-way communication model. Theaker (2008:29) explains that the public information era was not necessarily about market research and listening to the public who would inform the dissemination of messaging (Theaker, 2008:29). Therefore, it can be concluded that the public information era lacked ethical, two-way communication practice which aimed to properly understand and listen to the audience.

3.3.3 Two-way asymmetric PR

According to Theaker (2008:29), the two-way asymmetric model of communication places emphasis on feedback and two-way communication. However, the model is still unbalanced due to its goal of using persuasion to trigger a transaction from the public (Sledzik, 2008). Sledzik (2008) explains that the rise in consumer products post World War 2 lead towards a need in targeted marking, and as a result of this, PR professionals made use of research in order to “hook consumers” and sell messages. Therefore, although there was an understanding of the attitudes and behaviours of the public, the insight was solely used to increase the persuasive content of messages.
3.3.4 Two-way symmetric PR

Theaker (2008:31) explains that this model of PR is seen as the “ideal” model of PR, where ideally, all stakeholders involved are fully willing to accommodate the needs of the other and are focused on building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. Thus, symmetrical PR is based on dialogical communication versus monological or one-way communication, placing an emphasis on mutual understanding and reciprocation within the relationship. Interestingly, Theaker (2008:31) does note that two-way symmetric PR describes a “level of equality of communication often not found in real life PR practice” due to the fact that any power held by a party is balanced by the power held by the other party. Regardless, Sledzik (2008) notes that the two-way symmetrical model of PR emphasises the PR professional as being a mediator versus being a persuader and ensures that professionals listen to the needs of their clients and the public, as they represent the needs of all stakeholders involved and have a duty to maintain beneficial relationships between them. Rensburg and Cant (2009:261) concur by stating that symmetrical PR is “accommodation of the public’s interests” versus the organisation’s self-interest.

Thus, it can be concluded that the PR practice was previously focused on “spinning”, persuasion, and propaganda, where the public was manipulated and persuaded in line with the advancing of an organisation’s agenda. However, over the past century, the profession is regaining its legitimacy and professionalism through the sharing of accurate and truthful information with the public, and their involvement in organisational decision-making and information distribution is embraced and emphasised. Therefore, through symmetrical communication, there has been a shift from persuasion to an emphasis on dialogue in ethical PR practice and communication with the public.

3.4 ETHICAL COMMUNICATION WORLDVIEWS

As defined by Samovar et al. (2011:57), worldviews explain the purposes of human life, define truth and reality, as well as distinguish cultures from one another, as asserted by Emerson (1996), who states that worldviews constitute of assumptions about how the world is, and the nature of reality. Thus, worldviews form an integral part of intercultural communication and the way that communication is practiced. Helve (1991) has identified the scientific worldview which suggests that all rules are based on exact sciences and an observable reality with no room for interpretation. Opposing the scientific worldview, Littlejohn and Foss (2008:11) discuss the humanistic worldview, suggesting that the humanities seek interpretation and highlight the importance of understanding individual responses, allowing for open feedback. According to Barker and Angelopoulo (2006:114), humanism in the workplace demands the transformation of organisational structures and management approaches, where subordinates are allowed to
make their own decisions free of top supervision and control, and personal achievement is embraced through participatory decision-making and management. Therefore, humanistic management approaches are rooted within a symmetrical model of communication, and the scientific worldview is related to an asymmetrical model of communication.

3.4.1 Asymmetrical worldview

The asymmetrical worldview of communication is characterised by Barker and Angelopoulo (2006:114) as involving a single controlling authority, centralised decision-making, clearly defined work roles, strict communication channels, and standardisation and systemisation of tasks. Thus, it can be noted that there is little uncertainty and room for interpretation within management in the workplace, which is often predicated on manipulation, as mentioned by Verwey (2003). Edgett (2002) explains that an asymmetrical worldview of communication practice is persuasive, based on controlling the public, and on self-interest or only caring for the well-being of the organisation. In addition to this, asymmetrical communication is characterised by one-way monologue communication, meaning that communication with the public isn’t totally reciprocal (Edgett, 2002). Grunig (1989:50) expands on this by stating that there are also gender differences within these worldviews. He elaborates on the fact that the early practice of communication was previously male-dominated, and further asserts that men typically hold an asymmetrical worldview, as opposed to feminist perspectives. In line with this, it can be noted that women could potentially enhance the field of communication and shift it towards a more open, symmetrical workplace, owing to the fact that women will commit to participation and emancipation, as well as moving away from tendencies such as authoritative management. However, Grunig (1989:51) does note that men can also follow feminine, symmetrical worldviews by learning the importance of interdependence and participation. Interestingly, Grunig (1989:57) also notes that communication practice can be asymmetrical if professionals prove that their actions will not harm others. However, he also critiques this by stating that communication should be based on ethics and should not be about the debate of ethical outcomes emphasised by asymmetrical approaches. Additionally, it can be noted that asymmetrical communication then becomes pragmatic, because there is only concern for what the clients want in exchange for compensation, which seldom adds value to the organisation in the end.

3.4.2 Symmetrical worldview

Culture-centred approaches to communication challenge the asymmetrical worldview of communication practice by drawing attention to the public, especially the marginalised voices which have traditionally been silenced, thus contributing towards change in society because symmetrical communication aims to bring about change both internally and externally. In relation to this, Grunig (1989:51) and Hallahan et al. (2007:3-4) agree by stating that communication
practice today must be viewed from this perspective, as being based on the two-way model of communication which involves the creation and exchange of meaning between parties and allows for open, unrestricted feedback, as opposed to the controlled one-way, monological model. Grunig (1989:29) and Van Ruler (2004) expand on this by stating that communication practice viewed in this symmetrical perspective shows that conflict resolution is used to bring about changes in both the organisation and its publics and allows for influence and knowledge sharing between both parties within the communication process. Rensburg and Cant (2009:261) support this by stating that symmetrical communication is a “total accommodation of the public’s interests” versus the organisation’s self-interest, which also offers communication practice the opportunity to create conditions for ethical communication to thrive (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012:6). Thus, symmetrical communication is based on reciprocity and places an emphasis on understanding and accommodating the public’s voice into decision-making via open, dialogical approaches.

3.5 THE POSTMODERN PARADIGM OF ETHICAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

According to Göktürk (n.d.), a paradigm can be defined as a set of assumptions that constitutes a way of viewing reality, which includes the paradigm shifts of modernity and postmodernism. Firstly, the paradigm shift of modernity’s main ideas are that of progress and reason (Lyotard, 1984), where the existence of a single truth can be applied to all people at all times. Modernistic communication practice also follows an asymmetrical worldview of communication, which Barker and Angelopoulo (2006:114) characterise as involving a single controlling authority, centralised decision-making, top-down communication, clearly defined work roles, no reciprocity, and standardisation and systemisation of tasks. Here, ethical decision-making is based on universal truths. Thus, it can also be noted that modernistic communication practice is based on control and manipulation (Edgett, 2002; Verwey, 2003). Hallahan et al. (2007:4) further explain that communication disciplines were previously developed as specialty functions within a modernistic world, where the existence of a single truth can be applied to all people at all times (Lyotard, 1984), whereas the postmodern environment that society now functions in stresses the importance of more holistic approaches to understand the complexities of society and examine organisational phenomena (Hallahan et al, 2007:4). Traditionally, early PR practice was based on persuasive, modernistic approaches where the role of the professional was solely to ensure that information was transferred to subordinates and the public in order to gain compliance and ensure organisational power (Hallahan et al., 2007:4), thus implying the practice of the top-down management approaches due to order and command, which have now been replaced by postmodern, bottom-up approaches that ultimately aim for stakeholder collaboration (Overton-De Klerk & Verwey, 2013:372).
In line with this, postmodernists reject the trusting obedience to power which is brought about by such metanarratives (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002:69). The paradigm shift of postmodernism denies the existence of a single truth that can be applied to all people at all times, with which Holtzhausen (2000:96) concurs, based on the reality that people with different frames of reference all have different realities, hence a single truth cannot apply to everyone. Leich, Frances and Harrison (2010:69) agree by stating that understanding human behaviour is imperative for understanding the social world today, and Davey (2004:223) further elaborates on this by stating that there is always room for further interpretation through dialogue. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002:110) further go on to state that interaction and participation are important elements as part of the postmodern approach, as the self cannot be understood in isolation from the other, because the self is continuously developing through an ongoing process of social experience within a community (Jeon, 2004:250; Mead, 1962:163). People cannot truly be themselves unless these individuals are also members of a community, and the individual self reflects the general behaviour of the social group, as stated by (Mead, 1962:163).

Stoll (1997) further elaborates on the notion of postmodernism by stating that it places emphasis on humanity and an appreciation of differences, as embraced by the discourse of multiculturalism, which values the fact that individuals have very different ideas and views about the world, hence the rejection of metanarratives. Overton-De Klerk and Verwey (2013:377) expand on this move away from metanarratives, or a top-down managerial vision towards postmodern approaches. Grunig (1989:50) further states that the paradigm shift emphasises the move away from a male-dominated environment and management style. In addition, there has been a move away from a functionalist communication perspective focusing on the production and function of communication messages, towards a postmodern, co-creational, symmetrical communication perspective where stakeholders actively contribute towards meaning and communication within a participatory organisational environment.

Postmodernism can further be summarised and linked to PR practice as listed below from the abovementioned definitions and characteristics (Barker & Angelopoulo, 2006:114; Grunig, 1989:51; Hallahan et al., 2007:3; Holtzhausen, 2000; Verwey, 2010):

- Postmodern communication approaches are based on an interactive model of communication which involves the creation and exchange of meaning between parties and allows for open, unrestricted feedback.
- A postmodern communication approach sees PR practice as an interaction with a range of different publics, as opposed to modernist communication which involves the persuasive diffusion of messages to the public without attempting to understand them.
• Postmodern communication respects the public equally with minimal dominant power exerted. A postmodern professional balances the needs of different stakeholders by understanding that people with different frames of reference all have different realities.
• Postmodern communication rejects self-interest, or only caring for the “other” and not the “other’s other”, or the wider society that the organisation and professional exists within.
• A postmodern communication approach emphasises the important role that PR professionals must play in organisations, such as being “change managers” who deal with changes in society, as well deal with differences in viewpoints held.
• Importantly, postmodern communication practice embraces multiculturalism and it can be noted that decision-making will be varied due to multiple views and knowledge exchange within postmodern, reciprocal relationships.
• Postmodernism embraces conflict, as opposed to consensus within interactions with the public and with regard to decision-making, as conflict may lead to new forms of understanding and knowledge.
• A postmodern work environment is self-managing and rejects the obedience to power, manipulation and control. Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:69) state that power now evolves upwards and is regarded as being a positive force for change.

3.6 UNDERSTANDING POSTMODERN PR ETHICS

Holtshausen (2000) sees contemporary PR efforts as “balancing acts between management practices based on modernist principles and the postmodern expectations of the organisation’s external publics”. Radford (2012) expands on Holtshausen’s view of PR in a postmodern world by unpacking what it means to say that PR is modernist and that publics are postmodern. Radford (2012) argues that postmodern PR is not about describing the profession as “new” or explaining how to make campaigns “more effective” to postmodern publics, but rather about saying that holding a postmodern perspective will allow for one to consider PR as a narrative or a way of “talking about the world, the people in the world, and the relationship with those people”. Radford (2012) expands on this by stating that providing professionals with a list of tips or strategies on how to make PR more effective would simply fall within a modernist outlook due to the notion that effective communication is seen as good communication – a metanarrative which should be challenged, according to Radford. Toth (2002) challenges Radford by stating that postmodernism must have cash value for PR, further stating that postmodern thought must aim to help the field to become more effective. Holtshausen (2000) does claim that postmodern theories can help professionals to understand their societies and come up with solutions suited to their needs. Therefore, theorists reject a modern outlook on the profession, but do attempt to explore how a postmodern frame of mind may foster effectiveness within practice.
It must be noted that postmodernism is not a revision of the “old ways” of practicing PR, but rather a reflection and reconsideration of the drivers fuelling the “old ways”. Radford (2012) emphasises that there are no prescriptive recommendations to connect modernist PR with the public’s postmodern expectations. In line with the above, Heath (2005) concludes that there is no single definition of PR practice, further questioned by Radford (2012) who asks how something can exist if there is no clear definition, or definitions that keep shifting – a result of postmodernism. Consequently, Heath’s conclusion supports that there is no metanarrative that can cover what is considered to be PR, or good PR practice. Radford (2012) believes that despite Health’s conclusion regarding what may be considered PR, there is a modernist view which still dominates the profession, namely: the realisation that PR practice exists for the “benefit of the commissioning organisation”. Thus, PR professionals control information to the advantage of the interests whom are paying them.

3.6.1 Postmodern versus modernist ethics

According to Yuthas and Dillard (1999), the postmodern perspective is important for business ethics due to its rejection of modernism which privileges rationality and reason over values. Well-known postmodern ethics theorist, Zygmunt Bauman, argues that developing and enforcing universal ethical codes and laws leads to the abandonment of individual moral philosophy (Yuthas & Dillard, 1999). Consequently, Bauman states that individuals then turn to external rules and consider costs, benefits and consequences as opposed to relying on moral impulse, which requires individuals to recognise and understand the other (Yuthas & Dillard, 1999). Radford (2012) explains that a modernist society bases assumptions on universal principles and believes in a singular, objective reality, but postmodernism rejects the belief that the world can be objectively represented. Yuthas and Dillard (1999) concur by stating that any attempts to pass one’s views off as objective means that the views are exempt from self-reflection. Yuthas and Dillard (1999) elaborate on Bauman’s views of postmodern ethics by stating that modern institutions substitute ethics for morality, where the use of universal ethical codes and orders are used to rationalise moral responsibility. In other words, organisations attempt to improve human morality via the use of systems, orders and codes, and have consequently contributed towards the abandonment of individual moral responsibility of individuals.

In Bauman’s words, “when rules exist, moral agents do not choose when action is right or wrong; they simply follow the order” thus avoiding choice and taking responsibility for their individual actions (Yuthas & Dillard, 1999). Importantly, Bauman asserts that moral impulse cannot survive under the pressure of profit, thus meaning that the actions towards the other are based on expectation and are thus asymmetrical. In contrast, postmodern morality is not based on any orders or interlocking obligations, but rather a response in accordance to the presence of the other (Yuthas & Dillard, 1999). Secondly, Bauman also emphasises that this approach does
not mean that modern moral responses are abandoned, but rather that we simply change the way we respond by realising that we alone are responsible for our moral conduct and that we should be more actively engaged in moral debate and decision-making without having to appeal to any rules, order, principles or ethical codes. In essence, removing the following of rules from moral response allows the individual to avoid escaping individual choice and rather returning to morality.

Yuthas and Dillard (1999) elaborate on postmodern ethics by unpacking the following arguments associated with postmodern ethics, namely:

- **Avoiding the unfamiliar**: An individual will feel no sense of moral responsibility for situations that they are unfamiliar with, or situations that they do not recognise as moral issues. In organisations, such situations may only be recognised as concern to powerful agents due to their role in terms of actions geared toward productivity and profitability.

- **Solidarity**: Moral progress can be achieved through solidarity and the ability to see others as we see ourselves. In this case, managers are required to become familiar with the interests and concerns of stakeholder groups in order to foster such solidarity.

- **Rejection of universal principles**: Bauman states that modernists view ethics as something that needs to be taught or infused into conduct, where a set of rules or a code must be developed and obeyed in fear that the abandonment of codes will simply allow for human freedom to do wrong. Bauman continues to emphasise that obeying rules based on consequence and reason removes any autonomy and personal responsibility, further claiming that universal, objective ethics are impossible due to our postmodern word. In Bauman’s words, “the rules will never be clear and will always have grey areas”, further stating that the moral self simply cannot be removed from the equation, thus rejecting the imposing and enforcing of universal rules that silence the moral impulse.

### 3.7 THEORETICAL APPROACHES IN ETHICAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

Theoretical approaches in communication provide conceptual representations or explanations of the communication process (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008:12). In line with this, the following approaches in ethical communication will be discussed below, namely the reflective paradigm of ethical communication, the open-systems approach, excellence in PR, and the emergent strategic communication theory, and the dialogic communication approach.

#### 3.7.1 Reflective paradigm of ethical communication

According to Holstrom (2004:262), society’s accelerating complexity and diversity have put new demands on organisational decision-making and the management of the organisation, as
conventional perspectives no longer suffice for an organisation to be seen as responsible and as part of society. Holstrom (2004:262) further expands on this by stating that the organisation is not separate from society, and states that communication practice should be disconnected from central decision-making as it was before, thus showing the evolution away from modernist communication practice. Today, a perspective is required where the organisation considers themselves to be a greater part of society and "sees themselves from the outside in" (Holstrom, 2004:262), thus linking to the notion of reflection. According to Barnett (1997), reflection is “understood as a professional imperative”, and can be defined as the process of learning through and from experience via insight gained. By engaging in reflection, one is able to question the ethics and values that underpin professional practice, thus gaining insight into self and practice (Mezirow, 2000). The University of Sheffield (2017) and the University of Kent (2017) add to this by stating that reflective learning allows individuals to step back and reflect on their learning experiences in order to develop critical thinking skills, as well as to learn about themselves.

Bolton (2009) explains that reflection can enable professionals to constantly ask questions and learn from their experiences by enabling enquiry into what professionals believe, how professional's actions match with their beliefs, and how professionals take into account their personal feelings within role enactment. Bolton (2009) further adds to this by stating that professionals may not always be in control of their feelings, but reflective practice will ensure that there is a responsibility for actions, which is essential for responsible and ethical communication practice. Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005:72) and Holstrom (2004:122) support Bolton by stating that reflective practice links to the socially-responsible behaviour of the organisation and enables the organisation to see itself as part of a larger societal context, becoming aware of what is happening in society in order to reach a mutual understanding with all stakeholders. Bolton (2009) concurs with the link made between socially-responsible behaviour and reflective practice by stating that reflective practice is a social responsibility, in the sense that professionals and organisations need to take responsibility for all actions and values and understand that they are responsible for political, social and cultural situations within which they work.

Importantly, Bolton (2009) also states that reflective practice can only happen in a learning organisation, which involves groups coming together to explore new ideas and create shared vision without being directed to do so (Marsick, 2000). Marsick (2000) expands on the notion of a learning organisation by stating that there is an emphasis upon knowledge generation and sharing collaboratively through dialogue. In learning organisations, learning is rewarded and supported from the top down, mistakes and change are embraced and learned from, and information and learnings are shared freely across the organisation, no matter title or position.
This is further supported by Bolton (2009), who notes that reflective practice should lead to change and development within the organisation, with the support of a mentor or strong leader, and not by imposing top down visions that lead to compliance. Thus, reflective practice emphasises the rejection of authority and modernist power, and the importance of reflective practice taking place within a learning organisation.

Holstrom (2004:264) also makes note of key elements as part of reflective practice within a learning organisation, namely self-understanding, which is about the integrity, role, and responsibility of the organisation in society in order to make more informed decisions, and also sensitivity, which is about the way that an organisation views its environment. For instance, it can be noted that reflective organisations are sensitive to stakeholder’s needs because the environment in which the organisation operates is respected instead of managed. However, Holstrom (2004:264) also makes note of an opposing, modernistic or monological approach, namely reflexive practice, which she states implies a “narcissistic” perspective, as the organisation views itself from within, as opposed to seeing themselves as being a part of the greater society or environment in which they operate. Holstrom (2004:264) adds to the notion of reflexive practice by stating that decisions are applied “blindly”, and the organisation operates according to one specific reality, thus linking to that of modernity’s emphasis on one single truth applying to everyone at all times. This is further expanded on by Holstrom (2004:264), who states that any risks prevalent in decisions are avoided, as well as any conflicting viewpoints from society, thus limiting an exchange of viewpoints and diversified learning from the outside in.

Holstrom (2004:264) further summarises the main differences between reflexive and reflective practice by noting the following: reflective practice acknowledges the organisation as a responsible decision-maker that considers the greater good of society when making decisions, as opposed to reflexive practice which does not take into account the environment in which the organisation operates. Thus, reflexive practice emphasises the fact that organisations make decisions independently, versus reflective organisations that involve the social environment in deliberation. Secondly, reflexive practice sees the greater environment in which it operates as something that must be managed and silences any conflicts or different viewpoints held by the society (socio-uniformity). In contract, reflective practice respects the greater society and embraces any differences in viewpoints or the potential to learn from any conflict and gain diversified knowledge (socio-diversity) (Holstrom, 2004:265-269). Thirdly, reflective practice embraces dynamic communication and dialogue between the organisation and its publics, as well as ensures that organisational leaders embrace and encourage collaborative learning, partnership, negotiation, information sharing and decision-making across the organisation, as noted by Marsick (2000) and therefore linking to symmetrical communication.
In contrast, reflexive practice focuses on stakeholder management, does not embrace risk and collaborative learning across the organisation, and thus links to an asymmetrical communication model. Igboanugo (2014) supports all the above by concluding that a reflective paradigm of PR will guide the PR professional in understanding effective organisational communication and engagement with stakeholders in line with a postmodern, symmetrical worldview. Igboanugo (2014) further concludes that PR professionals are responsible for maintaining mutual lines of communication between an organisation and its publics, and this role in itself suggests that collaborative relationships with society are an important part of effective PR practice (Van Ruler, 2003:1).

3.7.2 Open-systems approach

According to Roach (2016), the social environment is always changing and organisations that adjust to those changes survive and prosper, as opposed to organisations not willing to adapt to change. Roach (2016) explains that a system is “an organised set of interacting parts” and the systems theory works from the premise that publics all form a kind of social environment for the organisation, much like customers, employees and neighbours. Bivins (1989) introduced the systems theory into ethical decision-making in PR due to the belief that PR practice should be considered in relation to other units with which it operates interdependently. Therefore, a link between the open systems-approach and communitarianism can be made, because communitarian thought includes emphasis on connections between people, collaboration, and “diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism” (Regis University, 2018). To emphasise such alignment, communitarian approaches suggests that what is best for the community is in the best interests of the organisation because of the interdependence between an organisation and the community (Leeper, 1996).

Hazleton (1992) refers to the systems theory by defining the systems theory as “a useful way for PR professionals to understand the relationship between an organisation and its publics and the role of public relations within an ever-changing environment”. When applied to PR, the systems theory helps to achieve balance between the organisation and its environment in the following ways: by maintaining interdependence among the organisations and its publics, and by monitoring the environment and alerting the organisation of the need to adapt and respond (Bivins, 1989; Hazleton, 1992; Roach, 2016). Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985) highlight that adopting an open systems-approach puts PR in the centre of bringing about changes, emphasising that PR professionals would be required to be sensitive to publics that are mutually affected by the organisation’s decisions made. In advocating an open system, PR professionals have the opportunity of placing the profession in a “broader social and ethical context” (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985). In contrast, Bivins (1989) and Hazleton (1992) point out the importance
of the PR profession adopting an open systems approach, by stating that PR problems arise
because of closed-systems where organisations are modernistic by nature and do not:

- Adapt or seek to adapt within their environment
- Engage in timely, transparent communication
- Hold themselves accountable to their publics and stakeholders, and
- Act in a way that respects that all publics may be affected in decision-making processes.

3.7.3 Excellence in PR

According to Grunig (2008), excellence in communication can be defined as being predicated on
the organisation’s relationship with stakeholders, following the two-way symmetrical worldview,
being participative as opposed to authoritarian or modernist, and having equalised opportunities
for men and women. In addition to this, Grunig (2008) explains that “excellent” organisations
empower staff members and allow them to make strategic decisions, they emphasise the
personal growth of teams, and they eliminate hierarchical organisational structures within the
organisation. Furthermore, excellent organisations ensure that departments are lead by strong
leaders who do not follow authoritarian, modernist management approaches, but rather
empower teams and encourage collaboration. Thus, the excellence theory suggests
characteristics of ideal PR practice, such as the practice of symmetrical communication which is
based on the underlying principles of postmodernism and dialogical, stakeholder-inclusive
approaches.

However, Edwards (2006:148) critiques the model of PR excellence by stating that any internal
power struggles with stakeholders, as well as organisational hierarchies are likely to clash with
Grunig’s belief that for PR to be excellent, “it needs to be symmetrical” (Grunig (1992). Kent and
Taylor (2007:10-20) and Pieczka (1996:351) reinforce this by noting that it is necessary to adopt
an adaptive, dynamic approach to understanding and practicing PR, which also requires a level
of organisational hierarchy and intervention, and a focus on PR as being about negotiating
relationships. Leitch and Neilson (2001:134) further add to this by stating that the excellent
model of PR only focuses on the surface characteristics of the practice, rather than the goals of
the practice within the broader context in which it is practiced. However, Grunig (2008) asserts
that “new research, theories, and models are needed to better describe and measure practices
in public relations”, especially because one theory on its own will never truly explain the practice
of PR. Interestingly, Grunig (2008) further states that the symmetrical model of PR is not
essential to understanding the choices made by organisations and PR professionals.

3.7.4 Emergent Strategic Communication theory

According to Bowen (2007), communication approaches must be adopted today that respect the
nature of the dynamic social world, which allows for openness and interpretation. Holtzhausen
Overton-De Klerk and Verwey (2013:377) elaborate by stating that the field of Strategic Communication is an emerging and relevant area of study in communication and management within business contexts today. Hallahan et al. (2007:3) define it as “the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission.” Interestingly, the popularity of the discipline is due to increased stakeholder power from the proliferation of digital technology, thus emphasising the importance of purposeful, participative dialogue with stakeholders, or the people who can affect or are affected by organisational decisions (Wu, 2012:162), as well as a re-assessment of the traditional roles of communication professionals (Shergill, 2012).

The emergence of Strategic Communication as a field has contributed towards communication professionals taking on a more strategic role within the organisation, ensuring that all decisions and actions are purposeful and intentional, multi-paradigmatic, and stakeholder-inclusive, as opposed to previous control-orientated decisions, which silenced stakeholders (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015:235; Hallahan, 2015:244). In contrast to these modernist managerial practices, Verwey (2015:77) and Bolton (2009:4) elaborate upon the notion of reflection as a postmodern approach to PR practice, enabling communication professionals and organisations to understand the world through the eyes of the “other”, as opposed to reflexive practices which seek to understand the world from within, and are not extended to the other’s perspectives. Thus, it can be noted that reflexivity is a narrow, marginalising and modernist perspective, as it does not acknowledge the other’s worldviews, which also goes against Van Ruler (2003:1), who states that “the practice of postmodern communication is not separate from society.”

Bolton (2009:5) adds to this by stating that reflectivity can only take place when top-down managerial visions are not imposed, and that change, and conflict management are embraced in order to advance the organisation. Grunig (1989:29) expands on this by stating that communication practice viewed in this open, dialogical, emergent perspective shows that conflict resolution is used to bring about changes in both the organisation and its publics, which links to the embracing of dissent versus consensus. Overton-De Klerk and Verwey (2013:372) agree by noting that the emergence of Strategic Communication encourages multiple perceptions and conflict in order to grow the organisation, because it is a multiple-perspectives view and it spans across all organisational endeavours and activities in response to an increasingly complex and unpredictable world. Holstrom (2005:17) further notes that this reflection and multiple perspectives views brought about by the emergence of Strategic Communication theory shows that an organisation understands that it operates within a network of other systems and takes into account multi-perspectives, as does the practice of Strategic Communication and PR within this postmodern, digitised era.
Biztrends (2015:19) comments upon this era by stating that digitisation has also blurred communication genres (Overton-De Klerk & Verwey, 2013:369), of which are defined as socially recognised communicative actions dependent on the decision-making style in the organisation (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994: 542). Overton-De Klerk and Verwey (2013:369) additionally link the trend of media convergence to this digitised existence, defined as the interconnection of information and communication technologies, which also links to disintermediation, owing to the fact that the middleman is removed in information transfer, and access to communication is democratised and freely available to many (Verwey, 2001:83). Thus, the control over information and the power or authority is taken away from communication professionals, therefore relating to the shift towards postmodernism and the need for professionals and organisations to act ethically in order to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Kahaner, 1996:15; Melcrum, 2012b; Melewar, 2008:121). To become and to remain competitive, South African organisations and PR professionals are compelled to adopt postmodern, trans-boundary business practices, adapted to meet the specific needs and requirements and complexities of society today (Van Rheede van Oudtshoorn & Van Tonder, 2006).

3.8 TOWARDS A DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH

According to Edgett (2002), there are two approaches that focus on the ethical approach that PR professionals should take, namely: the dialogical approach and the advocacy ethics approach. Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012:5-9) expand on this by stating that dialogue focuses on relationships and strives for mutual understanding, thus meaning that it encourages ethical communication, as opposed to monologue or one-way communication which does not focus on conversation between each party. Furthermore, Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012:5-9) state that dialogical communication within PR practice has been seen as foundation for ethical communication with the public, which means that ethical communication cannot be achieved until PR practice is open, symmetrical, dialogical and accommodates the public’s interests (Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261). Therefore, symmetrical, dialogical PR practice ultimately revolves around the use of communication to improve understanding amongst publics.

In contrast to the dialogical ethics approach to ethical communication is the advocacy ethics approach, which Edgett (2002) explains is persuasive and sees PR professionals as assuming an asymmetrical role in which they control the public and only care for the well-being of the organisation. In addition to this, advocacy ethics is characterised by one-way monologue communication, which goes against what Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012:5-9) note with regard to ethical communication only being achieved through symmetrical communication. Thus, it can be noted that advocacy ethics is based on self-interest persuasive tactics and can be viewed as unethical due to the inequalities in interests within the relationship held between the
professional or organisations and its publics, otherwise relating to modernist, monological communication which does not foster trusting relationships.

3.9 CRITICISMS OF ETHICAL PR COMMUNICATION

Ki and Kim (2009) criticise the effectiveness of ethical communication by stating that ethical codes will simply promote the appearance of ethical communication, rather than discourage or prevent unethical behaviour; they further state that these codes need to be put into practice in order to actually create an “ethical profession.” However, Bowen (2007) raises an interesting point regarding ethical communication, stating that early understandings of ethical communication simply involved professionals engaging in communication that was only important in shaping public opinion (Bowen, 2007). Rensburg and Cant (2009:261) further criticise ethical communication in PR practice by stating that professionals will ultimately defend the interests of their employers due to the fact that the organisation holds the power in setting the rules for the professional, who is an organisational representative. Thus, it can be noted that ethical communication within practice is not altruistic due to the fact that the professional is serving another’s interest, upon which role the enactment is based.

Ethical communication practice also attracts criticism because the process carries risk, in the sense that the nature of a reciprocal, symmetrical relationship requires all parties to be open about their interests and fears, and as a result will reveal the true “self” or authentic identity of the organisation which may deter stakeholders (Edgett, 2002; Saunders, 1999:84). For this reason, Saunders (1999:84) states that certain organisations fear the reputational risk attached to being completely symmetrical, the loss of control over their image, thus meaning that asymmetrical PR practice would be favoured. In addition to this, Rensburg and Cant (2009:261) also state that ethical codes simply raise the issue of the professional’s values ideally needing to be connected to the entity which they represent. Debates around ethical communication today include the fact that the values and principles underpinning ethical communication inform ethical PR behaviour and practice, such as honesty, respect, integrity and openness, and principles including dialogue, reflective practice and an appreciation for multiple views held (Bowen, 2007).

3.10 CONCLUSION

The postmodern era in which society and organisations exist today implies the shifting away from a mechanistic view or a modernist style of communication, to more stakeholder-inclusive, dialogical approaches and management styles characterised by ambiguity, collective learning, and as having a role in shaping organisational discourse (Melcrum, 2012b). This chapter unpacked the philosophy of PR practice and included a discussion of communication paradigms
such as postmodernism and modernism, reflective practice versus reflexive practice, as well as expanded on and critiqued asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews of communication. In addition, this chapter included a discussion of the evolution of PR practice, as well as elaborated upon various theoretical approaches which guide communication practice. In line with the abovementioned summary of literature provided, the identified research sub-questions were touched on, namely “What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?”, and “Do South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?”

Key understandings that have been identified with regard to this chapter are as follows: Previously, PR was viewed as being persuasive and based entirely on modernist, one-way symmetrical communication. However, today the practice truly aims to serve the public interest in an ethical manner through dialogical communication and reflective practice. Bolton (2009:5) adds to this by stating that reflective PR practice can only take place when top-down managerial visions are not imposed, when the organisation and professional are open to multiple perspectives from society, and when change and conflict management are embraced in order to advance the organisation. In light of this, a postmodern communication approach emphasises the important role that PR professionals must play in organisations, such as being “change managers” who deal with changes in society, as well ethically deal with differences in viewpoint held. This multiple-perspective role is important because ethical communication in PR practice cannot be achieved until PR practice completely shifts away from a monological, reflexive model of communication and moves toward a dialogic communication approach (Athanassoulis, 2015; Lavinia, 2014:2, Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261). However, this “ideal approach to practice” was critiqued by Kent and Taylor (2007:10-20) and Pieczka (1996:351), who state that although it is necessary to adopt an adaptive, dynamic approach to understanding and practicing PR, practice “also requires a level of organisational hierarchy and intervention, and a focus on PR as being about negotiating relationships”. This chapter concludes with Grunig (2008) asserting that “one theory on its own will never truly explain the practice of PR”, emphasising the need for new research and theories to better describe and measure PR today.
CHAPTER FOUR: MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR PR PRACTICE

4.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Overton-De Klerk and Oelofse (2010:388), the organisation is now seen as being a part of society, with added pressure on South African organisations and communication professionals to act ethically by taking into account stakeholder interests and ensure that PR practice is dialogical (Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261). Importantly, ethical communication cannot be achieved until PR practice accommodates the public’s interests and completely shifts away from a persuasive model of communication. It further involves the communication professional adopting an agent-centred theory of morality, emphasising ethical enactment based on character and desire to respond to the needs of others (Athanassoulis, 2015; Lavinia, 2014:2, Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261), and also relates to virtuous loyalty. Adding to this, Treviño and Brown (2005:69-70) mention that theory and research suggests that organisational leaders influence organisational ethics through the exertion of moral authority. Becker (2013:20) contends by stating that today’s organisational leaders are required to realise that they have a responsibility to serve “the other” through dialogical postmodern engagement and socially responsible decision-making. Vallentin (2009:63) then corroborates this by stating that responsible leadership is an important element of socially-responsible practice, which can either enhance or take away from adaptive, ethical PR practice, underlining the importance of understanding the relevance of responsible leadership in developing and managing ethical PR practice as well as in building an ethical culture.

With this said, this chapter is based on understanding how South African agency-based PR professionals are guided by a moral framework for practice. Additionally, this chapter will highlight existing research relating to two of the identified research sub-questions, namely: “What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?” and “Do South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?” Consequently, comprehensive literature will be provided on the following aspects: elements of ethical communication, ethical systems used in professional practice, responsible leadership and professional practice towards the stakeholder, ethical decision-making and practice towards the organisation, and the social role of PR. Moreover, a dialogical communication approach will be highlighted throughout the literature.
4.2 TOWARDS A MORAL FRAMEWORK OF COMMUNICATION PRACTICE

It was in 1994 that the first democratic elections were held in South Africa with people of all races being able to vote, and thus speak up from having previously been silenced (Bobby-Evans, 2012; Vice, 2010). This shift suggested that South Africa was to replace legal forms of democracy with a vibrant, participative democracy that reconciles freedom and justice and embraces postmodernism, due to the fact that people have different frames of reference, and different socially constructed realities, hence why a single truth cannot apply to everyone at all times (Holtzhausen, 2000:96). Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:69) further justify this by stating that postmodernism holds that a singular, all-encompassing truth is merely the viewpoint of some dominant groups in society and should not be privileged over another viewpoint.

Peréz-Torres (1993:161) additionally states that the discourse of multiculturalism is associated with this because the discourse promotes equal respect and tolerance of all individuals and their varied views. Therefore, in the process of achieving a cosmopolitan workplace and society in South Africa today, it is postmodern engagement that will contribute towards achieving it. Sue (1991) further elaborates on the fact that societies have now become more ethically-responsible, meaning that societies are changing their complexion and are becoming more diversified, therefore professionals now have the responsibility to act in a beneficial, ethical manner towards the community as a whole, as opposed to themselves as individuals (Pachamama Alliance, 2015). This ties to what Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005:72) and Holstrom (2004:122) note with regard to reflective communication practice, as it links to the socially-responsible behaviour of the organisation and enables the organisation to see itself as existing within a larger societal context and becoming aware of what is happening in society in order to reach a mutual understanding with all stakeholders.

4.3 AN OVERVIEW OF ETHICALITY IN PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

PR scholars and professionals define ethical PR conduct as simultaneously satisfying three distinct duties, namely duty to self, client and society (Lieber, 2008). Wright (1985) adds that a professional’s loyalty to the self, the client and society can sometimes be tainted with compromise, and at times, a lack of ethics. Parsons (2008) states that the ethics of PR can be understood as the application of knowledge and reasoning to questions of morality in the professional practice of PR. O’Brien (2015) supports Parsons by stating that ethicality in PR practice involves the guiding principles for organisational behaviour which need to be modelled by the professional, such as:
• A commitment to practice truthful and accurate communication,
• Collaboration with all stakeholders,
• An emphasis on collectivism within communication practice (Edgett, 2002:6; Grunig, 2000:23; Heath, 2000:69); as well as,
• Building an engaging culture linking stakeholders and the organisation together (Rensburg, 2012:1).

Rensburg (2012:4) further contends that PR professionals have a responsibility to work in ways that reflect the professional values of the organisation, for instance; demonstrating societal responsibility by working competently, honestly, and transparently towards the public and the organisation, ensuring that all stakeholders are always engaged through dialogue which is accurate and fair, as well as operating in accordance with the organisation’s professional codes of ethics and standards. It can be noted that PR professionals have professional, organisational and societal responsibilities towards both the organisation and the public, and are accountable for their decisions, as they can affect the organisation and its publics. Lastly, professionals must ensure that their personal values are aligned with the organisational values in order to maintain the organisational character and guide its behaviour. This ethical behaviour forms what is called "socially-responsible governance", with the notion of responsibility being an important element of ethical communication which includes best practice for transparency and sustainability, as well as emphasises the societal need for an organisation’s practices to connect moral conduct with value creation (Goel, 2010:32; Hubbard, 2009; King Committee on Corporate Governance, 2002).

Overton-De Klerk and Oelofse (2010:391) state that the notion that organisations and professionals need to contribute towards achieving common good links to the practice of postmodern PR, due to the fact that the field involves a series of purposeful activities that enable an understanding of stakeholders through dialogical interaction. Fontaine, Haarman and Schmid (2006:3) expand on this by stating that the organisation should be seen as a grouping of stakeholders, and the communication professional’s purpose should be to manage their varied interests, thus relating to the stakeholder theory. Fontaine et al. (2006:13) elaborate by stating that a stakeholder approach is concerned about the active management of stakeholder relationships in order to develop business strategies. Thus, it can be understood that if communication professionals treat stakeholders in line with the stakeholder theory, the organisation will be more successful in the long term (Fontaine et al., 2006:3). The stakeholder theory emphasises the fact that organisations see themselves as being made up of interconnected stakeholders, with the organisational aim to connect moral conduct with value creation (Hubbard, 2009:179; Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnel & De Colle, 2010:405-415). Lorne and Dilling (2012:2) agree by stating that the reduction of an organisation’s boundaries in terms of the stakeholder
composition is required within the 21st century in order to increase value creation and sustainability. This is corroborated by Kirkbride, Letza and Sun (2005:68) and Wu (2012:162), who argue that shareholder-orientated approaches are rigid and inflexible and based on modernist, reflexive communication practice because they do not reflect the changing nature of social reality, nor do they take note of the importance of including all stakeholders into organisational plans, like postmodern, stakeholder-inclusive approaches.

Important to note, is that these approaches relate to the shift towards sustainability and accountability (Melewar, 2008:97). Melewar (2008:98) states that this refers to ensuring that the organisation reflects its responsibility to society and the environment in terms of considering stakeholder interests and making sure that business practices reflect the organisation’s environmental efforts, thus linking to the concept of organisational legitimacy. Additionally, De Aurago and Beal (2013) state that ethical PR practice in this context also links to professionalism, which Verwey (2015:5) describes as entailing the commitment to preserve a body of knowledge and the code of responsibility for practice, therefore based on actions in line with values and defined as guiding principles, and what we judge to be right based on a belief system. An organisation's values dictate the way in which it operates, and it should ideally dictate how stakeholders are interacted with, with the values of collectivism and collaboration highlighted as being important, (Edgett, 2002:6; Grunig, 2000:23; Heath, 2000:69-73). This further relates to the communitarian ethics approach which is centred upon the strengthening of communities (Regis University, 2018). Table 4 below summarises the abovementioned information, grouping together key principles for ethical professional practice.

Table 4: Rapid overview of guiding principles for ethical professional practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guiding principles</th>
<th>Consists of the following elements:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Honesty & transparency | • Ethical behaviour  
• Integrated reporting, inclusivity and co-creation with stakeholders |
| Accountability      | • Corporate governance: King IV Report |
| Leadership          | • Links to honesty and transparency  
• Bottom-up, reflective approaches  
• Ethical behaviour (integrated reporting, inclusivity and co-creation with stakeholders) |
| Equality & inclusivity | • Postmodern engagement  
• Multicultural communication – Ubuntu philosophy  
• Stakeholder theory (stakeholder-inclusive approaches, collaboration and collectivism) |
Professionalism

- Linked to moral compass and integrity
- Linked to the way that work is approached and carried out based on values
- Postmodern engagement

Adapted from De Aurago & Beal (2013); Freidson (1994); Melewar (2008); O’Brien (2015) and Verwey (2015:5).

4.3.1 Postmodern ethics in PR practice: Rejection of universal codes

Holtzhausen (2015) supports Bauman and Yuthas and Dillard’s (1999) viewpoints on postmodern ethics by stating that codes of ethics interfere with individual ethical decision-making and move responsibility away from the self to that of the group in PR practice. Holtzhausen (2015) goes on to note that much time has been spent developing rules aimed at governing professionals’ conduct and pointing them towards ethical behaviour, but this suggests that the PR professional is not free to make choices but is rather governed by the governing body or by the performance expectations to whom they report to. This, in essence, limits decision-making power. However, this does not mean that professionals are powerless within that relationship because contracts fluctuate, however, it does suggest that there are limitations placed on individual decision-making. Holtzhausen (2015) purports that ethical decision-making cannot be rules-based due to the fact that people are morally ambivalent and imperfect, further stating that the preoccupation with ethical codes can be attributed to the desire for political power. Interestingly, tension between a code of ethics and an individual’s moral response may lead to immoral consequences, as explained by Bauman (1993). Bauman (1993) states that when an individual goes against their own ethical approaches and follows a code of ethics it may not adequately address the ethical dilemma or situation the individual finds themselves in.

Bauman (1993) and Holtzhausen (2015) summarise postmodern ethics in practice below:

- Ethics begins with a responsibility to the other and moral impulse will thus be asymmetrical because it privileges the other.
- The burden of ethical decision-making is placed solely on the individual, as moral responsibility cannot be approached through the ethical rules prescribed by organisations.
- Exposure not only to the other, but to ethical dilemmas whilst still in the classroom will help professionals to understand that ethical decision-making can be a lonely process, but also highlights the importance of professionals finding their own moral voice.
- Professionals should resist strict role definitions and should strive to break down organisational silos.
• Professionals should be able to reflect the diversity and multiple voices of their publics. In addition, professionals must acknowledge the experience and knowledge of their publics and deem them as worth acting upon.

• Postmodern PR practice will always be seen as a struggle for the freedom to make an individual moral choice and to be free from the expectation and power of others. This, in essence, requires self-knowledge and reflection in terms of being able to identify the powerful interests that wish to control professionals simply for their own benefit.

4.4 PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE TOWARDS THE STAKEHOLDER: CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP

According to Othman and Rahman (2011:174), and Ihator (2004:243), it is the notion of corporate governance that includes the obligations of companies and professionals taking an ethical stand with reference to intentionally making their activities known to their wider stakeholder group. The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) (2009) concedes by stating that corporate governance is concerned with the alignment of the interests of individuals, corporations and society, whilst noting the importance of transparency in this alignment. Therefore, corporate governance embraces the reputational capital view which advocates corporate respect for human rights as part of a strategy for maximising profits; the constitutive aspects of the well-being of individuals and the communities they form part of are stressed as well. This is additionally justified by SAICA (2009), who state that corporate governance also involves the responsible leadership of companies, whilst ensuring that this leadership is transparent, ethical and accountable towards the company’s identified stakeholders. Thus, corporate governance can be understood as encompassing the following aspects, namely responsibility, leadership, transparency, ethics, and accountability, and additionally can be understood as being a tool for effective management in the sense that it links social and business justifications for the advancement of the organisation and for stakeholders.

The Institute of Directors in Southern Africa or “IoDSA” (2010:5) note that this governance compliance can be achieved through following the King IV report which expands on the ethical relationship of responsibility between the organisation, the professional, and the public – where collaboration and co-creation is embraced, and stakeholders will be able to remain informed about the organisation’s activities, therefore making the organisation transparent, which can increase organisational legitimacy. SAICA (2009) then relates this to accountability, and states that the notion of accountability refers to the provision of a true and accurate account of what the organisation and communication professional does in a transparent manner to stakeholders or the public, therefore contributing towards ethical enactment in the serving of the “other”. For example, Grunig (2014) states that communication professionals and organisational leaders
should hold themselves accountable for accomplishing what they say they will do for their respective stakeholders, and further notes that an aspect of accountability is a fee for PR delivery. Interestingly, Grunig (2014) also makes note of the “bait and switch” move employed by agencies, as it involves organisational leaders using their experienced, senior staff members in an account pitch, and once the business is secured it is handed down to more junior employees. Thus, the bait and switch move goes against transparent, accountable and responsible leadership and PR practice towards the stakeholder.

4.4.1 King IV Report: Accountability and transparency through ethical reporting

Steyn (2018) explains that the King reports aim to set up “actionable principles for South African company leadership to act in line with good corporate citizenship”. Currently, South African organisations should be following the King IV report, published in 2017, as opposed to following the now outdated King III report, published in 2009. Steyn (2018) states that the King III report simply lists multiple ethical principles and commands companies to honour those principles, consequently leading to management taking on a “check-list” type approach. The King IV report spotlights practical implementation and requires organisations to actively report on implementation of practices, as well as provides clear guidance on real-world application (Steyn, 2018). Rossouw (2016) states that ethics have been elevated in the King IV report, also highlighting that there is a focus on ethical leadership rather than ethics management, where ethical behaviour is filtered down from the top. For example, leaders and governing bodies set the scene in terms of ethical enactment and transparent reporting. Steyn (2018) adds to this by noting that King IV propagates transparency and the implementation of accountability in the form of consistent reports used to measure all levels of staff progress. Essentially, leaders cannot act ignorantly or plead a case of not knowing about team matters, as there should be reports in place in order to identify any potential discrepancies. In short, leaders are required to be aware of all issues within the company and be held accountable.

Grant Thornton (2017) further supports this by stating that there has been a need for strong governance, with the King IV report helping to ensure accountability for organisational performance in the form of “ethical and transparent reporting and disclosure.” Grant Thornton (2017) further purports that corporate governance is the exercise of ethical leadership, with King IV aiming to lead governing bodies in achieving the following four outcomes:

1. Ethical culture
2. Good performance
3. Effective control
4. Legitimacy
Importantly, Caxton (2017) makes note of clear differences between King IV and King III, noting that there has now been a reduction of the 75 King principles in King III to 17 more focused principles in King IV. These principles set the scene for good corporate governance, and those which align to ethics are listed below:

- The governing body should lead ethically and effectively (integrity, competence, responsibility, accountability, fairness and transparency – all of which were noted in King III as values underpinning governance);
- The governing body should govern the ethics of the organisation in a way that supports the establishment of an ethical culture (oversight of ethics and disclosure of ethics performance);
- The governing body should ensure that the organisation is and is seen to be a responsible corporate citizen (overseeing and monitoring, compliance, disclosure including consequence of outputs); and,
- The governing body should adopt the necessary rules, codes and standards in a way that supports the organisation being ethical and a good corporate citizen.

In summary, Rossouw (2016) states that the above-mentioned ethics principles deal with the following three areas, namely: ethical leadership, ethical organisational culture, and the ethical responsibilities of organisations to their environments. Rossouw (2016) further suggests that the management of ethics in organisations is not sufficient until it results in the “establishment of an ethical organisational culture over time via ethical leadership.”

4.4.2 Responsible leadership and ethical communication

According to Meng and Berger (2013:141-142), responsible leadership refers to the ability of an individual to exert influence in an organisation, which guides ethical communication practice and legitimises organisations. Denton and Vloeberghs (2003:84-95) elaborate by stating that ethical leaders are thought to be moral and do the right things in both their personal and professional lives, as well as make decisions based on values and ethical decision-making rules in order to meet the needs of “the other”. Nelson and Mason (n.d.) then go on to state that organisational leaders can proactively promote ethical behaviour and prevent unethical behaviour in the organisation by encouraging ethics-centred discussions, and clearly clarifying the roles and responsibilities of their communication professionals. Denton and Vloeberghs (2003:84-95) further note that ethically responsible leaders should empower their teams and mentor employees, as opposed to managing them; they should exhibit value-driven behaviours and expect employees to abide, they should ensure that they are seen as being credible and trusted within the organisation, they should shatter top-down management structures which do not allow for democratic participation, they should create a learning organisation which fosters individual
growth and continuous learning, and lastly, they should take on a transformational leadership role as linked to the above-mentioned characteristics of an ethical leader (Meng & Berger, 2013:141-142).

Treviño and Brown (2005:69-70) and Burns (1978) expand on the two types of leadership roles in organisations, namely transactional leadership, which involves leaders being motivated purely by their own power rather than their followers’ needs, and transformational leadership, where leaders encourage employees to embrace moral values and to act in the interest of the wider organisation and society rather than self-interest. Ingram (2019) states that transformational leadership and transactional leadership are “polar opposites” in the sense that transactional leaders focus on supervision and transformational leaders focus on change within the organisation. Theory and research suggest that organisational leaders influence organisational ethics through the exertion of moral authority, and essentially “set the scene” for ethical practice within the organisation (Ingram, 2019; Treviño & Brown, 2005:69-70; Burns, 1978). Thus, it can be noted that the moral identity of the organisation is directly linked to the organisational leader’s behaviour. Greenberg (1990) found that employees reciprocate ethical practice and are more motivated to oblige should the leaders treat them well, as opposed to bad treatment from leaders which may result in counterproductive employee behaviour. Alternatively, Treviño and Brown (2005:69-70) also indicate that some organisational leaders support unethical conduct in the organisation, such as simply focusing on the bottom line, and employees who attempt to change the organisational culture or avoid aligning with leadership’s views may be marginalised in the process, thereby going against what Meng and Berger (2013:141-142) state with regard to ethical PR leadership being a process that consistently produces ethical and effective communication practice.

4.4.3 Ethical capital: The value of ethical leadership and ethical corporate culture

According to Schoeman (2015), ethical capital represents the “value that is generated by ethical leadership and organisational culture”. Schoeman (2015) goes on to state that the benefits of ethical capital accumulation include:

- A high-trust working environment
- Increased employee and customer loyalty
- Better stakeholder relationships
- Enhanced reputation

Schwartz (2013) expands on the notion of accumulating ethical capital and highlights the importance of building an ethical corporate culture. Schwartz (2013) explains that building an ethical corporate culture would involve building a formal ethics programme which includes a
code of ethics and ethics training. Berg and Gibson (2011) expand on the implications for ethics training, noting the following:

- Ethics training should address individual values as well as the nature of the profession.
- Ethics training should allow professionals to explore their own reactions and encourage them to identify what a code demands of them during an ethical decision-making process.

Schoeman (2015) also notes that ethical capital can be quantified and measured, although it would be difficult, via using suitable tools such as ethics surveys. Figure 3 below depicts how three key elements, namely ethical leadership, an ethics programme and core ethical values, come together to create an “ideal” ethical corporate culture.

Figure 3: Three key elements of an ethical corporate culture

Source: Schwartz (2013)

4.5 THE BELL POTTINGER CASE STUDY: A LESSON IN REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

“The reputation of British PR firm, Bell Pottinger, has been destroyed as a result of unethical public relations efforts for a politically controversial contract in South Africa. The firm’s executive have resigned, the clients have left, and the firm has been terminated from the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), consequently leading to Bell Pottinger being put up for sale” (Keaveney, 2017).

In a press statement released on Tuesday, 5 September 2017, the UK-based Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) terminated the membership of British PR firm, Bell Pottinger (Cronje, 2017), who were the representatives for Oakbay Investments and the Gupta
family – a family who stand accused of engaging in bribery and corruption with South Africa’s ministers and president at the time, President Jacob Zuma. Cronje (2017) added that Bell Pottinger would not be able to re-apply for membership for at least five years following the termination – “the most serious sanction that PRCA can impose.” Cronje (2017) further commented that the investigation into Bell Pottinger was initiated by the PRCA after a complaint from the Democratic Alliance, South Africa’s opposition political party, who accused the firm of unethical public relations attempts to racially divide South Africa. In line with this, Magwenya (2017) highlights that Bell Pottinger irresponsibly stirred up racial tension via running fake Twitter accounts and posting fake news for the Gupta family, in which the phrase “white monopoly capital” was deliberately used in an economic emancipation campaign to destabilise South Africa and actively promote racial tension (Evet, 2017; Magwenya, 2017; PR Week, 2017; Theron-Wepener, 2017). Consequently, Bell Pottinger breached several clauses in the PRCA Professional Charter and Public Affairs and Lobbying Code of Conduct (The Citizen, 2017; The South African, 2017), namely:

- Have a positive duty to observe the highest standards in the practice of public relations and communication.
- Ensure that professional duties are conducted without causing offence on the grounds of gender, race, religion, disability or any other form of discrimination or unacceptable reference.
- Be aware of the importance of the ethical principles set out in the Code for the protection of the good name of the organisation, and the standing of the profession as a whole.
- Lastly, ensure that a member shall engage in any practice or conduct in any manner detrimental to the reputation of the Association or the profession of Public Affairs and Lobbying in general.

Magwenya (2017) suggests that the Gupta family represented what is known as a “high-risk” client with “deep pockets that make it hard to ignore”. However, Magwenya (2017) questions how agencies can ensure ethical conduct when faced with the prospect of servicing a high-risk client whose reputational challenges could likely become those of the servicing agency as well. Magwenya (2017) points out that a high-risk client rejects any form of accountability, simply expecting PR agencies to provide image makeovers without having to actually make substantial behavioural changes, and further suggests that agencies arm themselves with policies and enough research to avoid such client-acquisition. Sparrer (2017) agrees with Magwenya by stating that a key role of PR involves ethical decision-making around mergers and acquisitions and that PR can, and should, play a role in the acquisition process from beginning to end.

Lloyd (2018) supports both Magwenya and Sparrer by stating that PR professionals have an obligation to commit to driving ethical practices, further noting that professionals should research
potential clients first, ensure for value congruency within the relationship, as well as avoid taking on clients expecting unethical practice in driving work. As such, Magwenya (2017) unpacks how agencies can protect themselves from potentially-harming client work below:

1. **Develop a client-acquisition policy:** Agencies should rely on their own policy guidelines on the nature of clients they are prepared to service. Such policies should be inspired by the values of the agency that determine its stance on the particular field of work, thus linking to organisation-person value congruency. Research suggests that enhanced engagement and loyalty are based on the notion of value congruence (Irvine, 2010), defined as “the extent to which the individual can behave at work consistent with their own self-image”. In other words, Irvine speaks of an alignment in the values of the professional and those of clients and employers, which Magwenya (2017) believes needs to be highlighted in an agency’s client-acquisition policy.

2. **Be inquisitive and frank:** Magwenya (2017), supported by Lloyd (2018), suggest that agencies can use briefing sessions for further assessing agency-client suitability. Such sessions can be used to source credible opinions and assess whether taking on the client (based on the client work required) would result in an effective reputation management exercise from the servicing agency. Essentially, professionals are required to ask as many questions as possible in order to fully assess the feasibility of the task and investigate any reputational risks involved.

On the whole, Bell Pottinger’s membership termination sheds light on the importance and seriousness of ethical standards in the public relations and communication industry (Cronje, 2017; *The Citizen*, 2017). Ethics and reputation management are at the top priority for ethical PR practice in 2018, and as a result of the Bell Pottinger episode, the following four (4) trends can be noted (Moore, 2017; Irvine, 2017):

- **1) The need for tighter ethical regulations:**

According to Moore (2017), it was the African PR industry regulatory infrastructure that led to the Democratic Alliance registering a formal complaint, but further notes that even so, there needs to be more stringent PR industry regulations across the continent, where key governments can take steps in creating national bodies to oversee the governance of the industry as a whole. Ethics has now moved to the forefront, and work conducted by global PR agencies, whether in partnership with local agency professionals or not, will be under scrutiny (Moore, 2017). Moore (2017) adds that new business will be carefully reviewed going forward – particularly business in with the field of public affairs and governmental sectors. For years, PRISA has been consulting
with industry and government stakeholders on legislated self-regulation for the PR industry, and Munslow (2017) adds by stating that Bell Pottinger has now “put regulation high on the agenda.”

Moore (2017) highlights that the ethical behaviour of professionals will be a top priority for African PR firms, as well as a focus on looking into ethical issues that may arise from working on certain accounts. Agency reputation management should be an ongoing strategy, not begin when a crisis occurs, hence the importance of agencies thoroughly looking into the accounts they want to associate with, as well as having their own ethical guidelines and crisis communication strategies in place to ensure that they are educated and prepared for any reputational crises. Conversely, Edelman believes that organisation’s individual guidelines do not safeguard ethical behaviour and cannot prevent what happens in the “underbelly” of PR (PR Week, 2017). Edelman proposes that professionals need to be held accountable to a single set of ethics principles that are universally understood across the industry, and has called on firms to follow his new four-part “PR Compact” (PR Week, 2017), which includes the following:

- PR professionals must insist on accuracy and demand transparency from clients.
- PR professionals must engage in the free and open exchange of ideas, and lastly;
- PR agencies must ensure that all staff members take a free universal ethics training course online.

Edelman believes that the “PR Compact” will help in ensuring that PR has a role in guiding transformation in business, as well as more clearly-defined ethical practice, especially since ethics are complicated and at times, entirely subjective (PR Week, 2017). Dicey (2018) further reports on results from the 2018 Global Communications Report, a comprehensive survey of PR leaders and student's feedback regarding ethics in PR, as depicted in figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Survey of PR leaders and student’s feedback regarding ethics in PR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The PR industry needs a generally accepted code of ethical standards</th>
<th>The PR industry needs a dedicated organization to enforce PR ethics</th>
<th>The PR industry needs certification programs (similar to industries like accounting)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>92% Agree</td>
<td>59% Agree</td>
<td>62% Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

58% of respondents say an industry association like PRSA, PRCA, PR Council, Global Alliance, or ICCO should be responsible for establishing ethical standards for the PR industry.

Source: Dicey (2018).
Interestingly, the report states that 92% of PR professionals and scholars agree that the PR industry needs a generally accepted code of ethical standards, with further certification programmes to enhance ethicality in the field (Dicey, 2018). Therefore, these figures support Edelman’s proposition regarding the industry’s need for a single set of ethics principles that are universally understood and enacted upon.

2) Online communication and new technologies gain momentum:

The demise of Bell Pottinger is a reminder of how quickly a company’s reputation can be undone by poor practice, regardless of long-standing client relationships and former work completed. Advisor-Hub (2017) highlights that Bell Pottinger’s client relationships were not strong enough to withstand such unethical practice, and further emphasises that news spreading online further prompted a lack of trust. Today’s world of high-speed online communication and “always-on” publics means that businesses and organisational leaders need to constantly watch what is happening and what is being said about them online at any time (Stern, 2017). Moore (2017) expands by noting that social media influence is seen during times of crises and elections, as an example, further highlighting the problem of “fake news” and how important it is that PR professionals and organisations are aware of how to strategically navigate online communication in today’s every-changing environment. Time (2017) defines fake news as “false news stories” of sensational nature, created on the basis of generating ad revenue of discrediting a public figure, company or political movement. Dicey (2018) states that “fake news” is one of the biggest threats to the PR industry because of the deliberate distortion of the truth.

On top of understanding fake news, Breakenridge (2018) further highlights Artificial Intelligence (AI) currently used in the workplace, and notes that PR professionals need to apply ethical approaches to AI, especially considering its increased use in marketing and customer service today. Breakenridge (2018) adds that PR professionals today are expected to understand ethical practice in relation to such industry changes and technological advances, where they can be the “voice of reason” and build trust amongst consumers who are becoming increasingly more vocal and demanding regardless of changes.

3) Renewed emphasis on reputation management and strong leadership:

Theron-Wepener (2017) emphasises that the Bell Pottinger case is an example of the damage that unethical, non-transparent PR practice can do to a brand’s reputation, highlighting the question whether stricter rules and regulations should be applied within the communication industry. Interestingly, PRCA confirms that there was not enough oversight from senior management in the Bell Pottinger account team, despite the controversial subject matter which called the need for senior strategic oversight (The Citizen, 2017). Advisor-Hub (2017) supports this by expressing that the management team at Bell Pottinger failed to take responsibility and
lead with integrity, referring to a comment made from the team that “they weren’t informed about the activities of the team in South Africa.” Bell Pottinger CEO, James Henderson, resigned following the firing of the four staff members who had been assigned to the Oakbay campaign, in an attempt to protect his own reputation before the reputation of the firm – further highlighting poor leadership (Moeng, 2017). Moeng (2017) adds to the news of Henderson’s resignation by noting that Henderson should not have placed blame on the disposable employees, nor should he have hidden from the fact that he had potentially been included in the early stages of the contractual discussions which, essentially, brought Bell Pottinger to South Africa. However, Moore (2017) believes that leadership would have intervened had it been accurately informed. In which case, should leadership have been truly misled about the work that was being completed for the Oakbay account, Moore (2017) adds that agency professionals should have had internal mechanisms in place to ensure that leadership is informed if work goes against the core values of the agency or is deemed as controversial. For instance, meetings could have been held with leadership based on pre-determined criteria per controversial and non-controversial accounts, with the objective of keeping leadership up to date.

According to Stern (2017), business leaders are increasingly aware of how a damaged reputation can cause an entire organisation to collapse. However, an organisational resilience index found that leaders still fail to identify the probable causes of potential reputation damage. This organisational resilience index was based on the response of international business leaders, where 43% believed that their organisation was susceptible to reputational damage, and that this damage was seen as a priority trumping financial gains, the purpose of the organisation, as well as their own leadership (Stern, 2017). However, Stern (2017) notes that thinking ahead to anticipate problems was not seen as important, along with building and maintaining organisational culture and ensuring alignment from within, referring to “horizon scanning” – an important element in building and maintaining reputation today.

4) Person-organisation value congruence

In recent years, research has been devoted to understanding congruence between an individual’s preferences and values and the characteristic of their work environment (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Irvine (2010) explains that professionals struggle to experience meaningfulness in their work if they are expected to behave in ways that are inconsistent with the highest values they espouse to themselves and others. Should professionals find themselves in situations that they feel are inappropriate for their preferred self-image, they will be less willing to give themselves to their work roles (Irvine, 2010), thereby indicating diminished loyalty. Interestingly, Irvine (2010) states that the organisational leader’s behaviour should also reflect values congruent with employee values, in the sense that the leader should speak and act in ways consist with employees’ values. Hoffman, Bynum, Piccolo and Sutton (2011) state that such
leaders would then be referred to as being “transformational” leaders, which can, based on the leadership tenure, yield follower commitment to or against organisational goals (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993).

Additionally, the followers of transformational leaders view work as a reflection of deep underlying values (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Shamir et al., 1993). However, Hoffman et al. (2011) state that prior research on leadership has focused almost exclusively on person-supervisor value congruence, rather than on person-organisation congruence. Hoffman et al. (2011) explain that although having values in line with one’s leader is important for enhancing individual outcomes, perceiving congruence at a broader organisation level plays a more important role, because followers of transformational leaders are “likely to report higher levels of person-organisation value congruence regardless of the length of their relationship with the organisational leader”. In the case of Bell Pottinger, the sudden resignation of former Bell Pottinger CEO, James Henderson, emphasises his lack of transformational leadership and value alignment with the firm’s employees. To reiterate, Henderson resigned in an attempt to protect his own reputation before the reputation of the firm and blame was still placed on the team that took up the Gupta account, as management claims they “did not know” about the work being executed (Moeng, 2017).

4.6 WPP’S MARTIN SORRELL CASE: A LESSON IN TRANSPARENCY

From a business ethics perspective and in line with Edelman’s fourth “PR Compact” item suggesting that staff members are to take an ethics training course online, WPP, reinforces the importance of employee ethical compliance. WPP is a global leader in marketing communication services and is currently made up of companies in over 100 countries, as well as number of award-winning South African communication agencies, who are all under obligation to comply with standards set out in the WPP code of conduct (WPP, 2012). This code of conduct proposes that WPP employees are to take training in “how do we behave” ethics, which covers topics such as misleading work, responsibility to the self and to stakeholders, diversity in the workplace, along with scenarios to help staff members apply themselves (WPP, 2012). To further reinforce the importance of meeting high ethical standards, WPP notes that senior management are required to annually sign an official statement, confirming that the agency complies with the WPP code of conduct (WPP, 2012). Consequently, such emphasis on senior management’s involvement in the process highlights the importance of ethics being led from the top down, with a personal note from group Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Sir Martin Sorrell, being included in the online ethics training.
Sir Martin Sorrell built the WPP group into the world's largest advertising agency over a period of over 30 years and is one of Britain's highest-paid businessmen (Austin, 2018; Pollard, 2018), where he is said to have been the passionate, energetic force behind the group for so many years. However, as of April 2018, Sir Martin Sorrell resigned from his position as CEO as a result of an investigation which launched into personal misconduct allegations (Austin, 2018). Interestingly, Pollard (2018) notes that the investigation into the misconduct allegation was concluded following Sir Martin Sorrell's resignation, where it was agreed that details of the investigation were not to be made public. Kostov (2018) states that the investigation probe drove the former CEO to step aside from the group rather than have any of the allegations out in the public, which simply would have put unnecessary pressure on the business. A person close to the board confirmed that Sir Martin Sorrell was sad to leave the WPP group after 33 years but felt that his immediate departure would be in the best interests of the group (Kostov, 2018).

Austin (2018) further quotes Sir Martin Sorrell, who stated the following: “In your interest, in the interest of our clients, in the interest of all shareowners, both big and small, and in the interest of all our other stakeholders, it is best for me to step aside.” Pollard (2018) was, however, able to shed some light on the nature of the allegations and confirms that Sir Martin was being investigated for allegations of misusing company funds after a whistle-blower's tip-off. There have been no further details regarding the investigation of Sir Martin made available to the public, though.

4.6.1 The secrecy behind the probing of Sir Martin Sorrell

Patrick (2018) believes that the Sir Martin Sorrell case “illustrates one of the biggest paradoxes of the global ethical management movement” and questions whether Sir Martin’s decision to step down without disclosing investigation details was the right move. BBC News (2018) reports that Liberal Democrat, Sir Vince Cable, along with many WPP shareholders believe that the details of the alleged misconduct allegations should be disclosed to the public, especially considering that Sir Martin was a “highly-respected” figure in the advertising world. Sir Vince Cable argues that WPP simply seemed to “sweep the investigation and serious allegations under the carpet”, further emphasising a “real lack of transparency” from WPP’s side (BBC News, 2018). Coffee (2018) summarises opinion regarding Sir Martin’s cryptic resignation and highlights that WPP's approach has ensured continued speculation based on the following aspects:

- **A resignation shrouded in mystery:**

Coffee (2018) focused on the opinions of expert PR professionals, by reporting on Peter Himler, who mentions that Sir Martin’s alleged confidentially seems unusual in an industry and space where transparency is highly emphasised. PR consultant, Teresa Buyikian adds to this by
stating the following: "there's now a big question mark where there should be a period at the end of someone's unarguably hugely successful 33-year career" (quoted by Coffee, 2018). Brian Wieser, a senior analyst at Pivotal, concurred with BBC Radio and stated that it is unlikely that the public will ever find out exactly why Sir Martin was being investigated, and further added that public disclosure may have cleared his name, as Sir Martin rejected the allegations (quoted by Patrick, 2018). However, Mr Wieser noted that from a strategic point of view, it made sense to rather focus on who was going to succeed Sir Martin, and what the WPP could expect going forward (Patrick, 2018).

- **Publishing on a Saturday:**
  PR consultant, Becky Honeyman, Managing Partner at New York’s Source Code Communications, stated that WPP made it clear that the only information that was to be released was information regarding Sir Martin’s resignation and that the money he was accused of misusing was “not material” (Coffee, 2018). In the eyes of WPP, this was seen as transparent communication during the time, and their PR team released the news well after 5pm on a Saturday – a strategic attempt to minimise the impact of the news (Coffee, 2018). However, Honeyman states that releasing news on a Saturday evening may have warranted further traffic to the story as the timing and lack of clarity simply fuelled speculation (Coffee, 2018), with further sources claiming that many within WPP’s inner circles were completely excluded during this period in order to avoid further questioning and potential reputational damage.

4.6.2 The way forward for WPP

Industry veterans all claim that a greater sense of openness would have benefitted investors and current WPP employees (Coffee, 2018). Conversely, evidence suggests that some WPP investors would have preferred it if the board simply overlooked the allegations, if any, and moved on with business (Patrick, 2018). Coffee (2018) states that information regarding the allegations will only be publicised should it help the shareholders and ensure for the building of stronger relationships with clients. However, this feedback suggests that transparency towards employees was not of importance, with Coffee (2018) agreeing by stating that employees probably did not feel a great sense of comfort following the news of Sir Martin’s resignation and the lack of transparency regarding why, further prompting professionals to question what the former CEO did and why exactly it ended a career. Thus, it can be noted that a perceived lack of transparency reflects badly on the professional, as well as the organisation associated with the professional. Additionally, it can be noted that as a leader, Sir Martin Sorrell did not encourage and foster transparency or accountability in his professional role enactment because he did not provide a transparent account of his behaviour to stakeholders or the public. Makau (2009) concludes that communicating ethically includes an awareness of one’s responsibility and one’s choices in relation to that responsibility, especially the professional’s responsibility towards the
organisation. Schoeman (2014) concludes by stating that leaders in particular are expected to live a higher ethical standard and model ethical behaviour for others. Mark Read, the newly appointed CEO for the WPP group (CNBC, 2018) will have the responsibility to lead ethically and transparently going forward, given Sorell’s previous lack of accountability.

4.7 PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE TOWARDS THE ORGANISATION: ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

De Aurago and Beal (2013:361) state that a professional’s professionalism towards the organisation is based on the individual’s moral compass, skills and knowledge, involving commitment to excellence, and meeting the needs of the organisation, and greater society. They further state that individual professionalism in an organisation can directly generate positive or negative reactions to an organisation. As a result, it can be noted that professionalism and postmodern practice carry a sense of responsibility and accountability, as professionals will have to be mindful of their decisions because ethical decision-making may contribute towards shaping opinion. Parsons (2008:131) expands on this by making note of the following quote: “a decision without the pressure of consequence is hardly a decision at all” - Eric Langmuir.

In line with this quote, Becker (2013:20) states that today’s business leaders are required to realise that they have a responsibility to serve others through ethical engagement and ethical decision-making. Parsons (2008:131) elaborates on this by stating that the heart of ethics in practice is making decisions that can be “lived with”. Lavinia (2014:2) contends by noting that humans are influenced by personal values which dictate their decision-making abilities in accordance to their morality. Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:57) further state that ethical decision-making is necessary for professionals today in order to address business and societal changes, as well as includes a resistance to dominant power and exclusion, interest in the organisation’s representation, the practice of reflectivity, emphasis on dissent, and the desire for change and transformation within the organisation (Verwey, 2015:7). Lyotard (1984) goes on to elaborate upon the notion of consensus and resistance to dominant power and believes that when professionals simply aim to achieve consensus through decision-making it results in injustice, as the professional will determine the outcome and take the role of the “most powerful party”. In addition to this, PRISA (2012) elaborates on professional practice towards the organisation and ethical decision-making, and states that PR professionals must practice with integrity in such a way that their own reputation is protected whilst serving the interests of others, and they must remain loyal to the organisation, profession and the public. Bivins (1989) contends by stating that PR professionals have five (5) moral obligations, namely:

1. To themselves, to preserve their own integrity.
2. To clients and the honouring of contracts and using professional expertise on their behalf.
3. To organisations and/or employers and adhering to the required organisational goals and policies.
4. To the profession and colleagues and to uphold the standards of the PR profession, and most importantly.
5. To society, and to consider and respect societal needs.

4.7.1 PR professionals' role enactment

Roles can be understood as the behaviour pattern of individuals and organisations and they help in understanding the functions of professionals (Dozier, 1992; Niskala & Hurme, 2014). Such roles can have an impact on structures, processes and personal achievements of the professional. According to Vieira Jr and Grantham (2014), PR professionals’ roles are continuously shifting in order to keep up with technogological advancements and an ever-changing world. Mellado and Barria (2012) explain that professional PR roles are also referred to as “professional worldviews or orientations” which refer to the functions of PR practice that guide a professional’s organisational behaviour. Early research on PR roles concludes that professionals perform in four types of roles (Toth, Serini, Wright & Emig, 1998), namely:

- Expert prescriber: Operates as authority on PR problems and solutions
- Communication facilitator: Liaison between the organisation and its publics
- Problem-solving process facilitator: Collaborates with management to define and solve problems
- Technician: Prepares and produces communication materials

However, it was later concluded that these roles could be merged into two dominant roles, namely the technician and the manager, as all roles excluding the technician role represented a broader managerial role (Toth, Serini, Wright & Emig, 1998). Today, PR organisations consist of PR professionals who possess either technical or managerial skills, with technicians executing communication tactics and offering support services to a manager who oversees the technicians and maintains a level of technical expertise (Vieira Jr & Grantham, 2014). Vieira Jr and Grantham (2014) explain that a PR role classification system essentially differentiates managerial and technical aspects of positions, and such efforts can increase our understanding of the functions of PR professionals. Hogg and Doolan (1999) supports Vieira Jr and Grantham (1999) by stating that PR professionals generally fall into the roles of technician and strategic manager, both of which are differentiated by Hogg and Doolan, as well as Cardwell, Williams and Pyle (2017) below:
1. **Technician:** Supports strategic managers by creating and disseminating messages. Cardwell, Williams and Pyle (2017) explain that younger PR professionals are often focused more on a technician role; however, they also assert that younger PR professionals cannot solely be concerned with external communication without being trained in the managerial processes of advising executive leadership. Vieira Jr and Grantham (2014) highlight that in order for PR professionals to move into strategic management roles, they must learn to communicate with top management.

2. **Strategic manager:** Serves as a problem solver between internal and external audiences and must navigate often complicated internal processes and approvals before, during and after executing strategic plans (Cardwell, Williams and Pyle, 2017). Cardwell, Williams and Pyle (2017) further highlight that strategic managers are often required to report into executive leadership teams, and as a result may then be faced with obligations that involve approval processes, time-consuming meetings and an obligation to leaderships’ agendas.

In line with the above, Botan (1997) argues that there is a call to move away from an industry of technicians “to a professional status”, with Vieira Jr and Grantham (2014) adding to this by stating that changing technologies point to opportunities to truly reassess and revise PR role responsibilities. Zerfass, Schwalbach, Bentele and Sherzada (2014) note that professionals demand stronger strategic involvement, but emphasises that professionals need to take into account that a misaligned vision with top management may contribute towards the reason why executives do not see the relevance in an increased strategic influence of PR professionals. Additionally, Toth, Serini, Wright and Emig (1998) raise an interesting point by stating that PR professionals actually perform both technical and managerial tasks in practice, importantly highlighting that the work should not be confused with another, but rather seen as roles assumed concurrently in practice. Dozier and Broom (1995) support this statement by noting that professionals “enact elements of both the manager and technician roles”. Moss, Warnaby and Newman’s (2000) studies support this, as their findings highlight that even senior PR professionals appear to combine elements of managerial and technical roles in terms of handling media relations and publicity for example. According to Moss, Warnaby and Newman (2000), early research also states that professional roles emphasise the tendency for women to be placed in technician roles rather than managerial roles, regardless of the fact that women devote more time to performing managerial activities as well as technical activities.

Additionally, Mellado and Barria (2012) explain that within the professional PR roles, the following factors can be noted, namely:

- Management style (strategic versus technician)
• The attitude the professional has as an advisor (critical or complaisant)
• Planning over time (Long-term versus short-term approaches)

Interestingly, Mellado and Barria’s (2012) research concludes that older PR professionals place greater importance on a long-term strategic role due to the fact that their years of experience contribute towards a greater background on communicative tasks, lasting relationships and planning. This correlates to Cardwell, Williams and Pyle (2017) who explained that it is younger PR professionals who are often focused more on a technician role.

• Role enactment debates:

According to Macnamara (2006), there is a lack of audience-centric, two-way communication because professionals continue to focus on output-orientated, transactional communication – a modernist outlook. Botan (1997) has pushed for professionals to move away from a one-way transactional model towards an ethical, two-way symmetrical, dialogic communication process which suggests that the PR role should be seen as an “ethical backbone to the organisation, rather operate simply as a support system creating and disseminating messages. A dialogic approach in PR practice suggests that PR professionals should foster genuine relationships with the media and customers as well as secure executive buy-in to strategies. Thus, it can be noted that Botan’s (1997) views on professionals communicating and aligning with top management aligns to Vieira Jr and Grantham’s (2014) thoughts on professionals moving into strategic management roles. Table 5 below provides an overview of the role enactment debates outlined in the literature.

Table 5: Role enactment debates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role enactment debate:</th>
<th>Modernist</th>
<th>Postmodern</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worldview:</td>
<td>Outputs-orientated transaction communication</td>
<td>Ethical, two-way, dialogical communication process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management style:</td>
<td>Asymmetrical</td>
<td>Symmetrical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The attitude the professional has as an advisor:</td>
<td>Complaisant</td>
<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning over time:</td>
<td>Short-term approaches</td>
<td>Long-term approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical role enactment:</td>
<td>Moral laxity</td>
<td>Strategic reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of morality:</td>
<td>Act-centered decision-making</td>
<td>Agent-centred decision-making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.7.2 Moral decision-making

According to Lavinia (2014), humans are influenced and motivated by many factors and personal values which essentially dictate their reactions towards situations and decision-making in accordance to their morality, or their set of beliefs held. Interestingly, Lavinia (2014) questions whether most people naturally feel that they have any responsibility or duty towards society and the environment, and further suggests that this moral responsibility or ethical decision-making is a skill that needs to be learned. Dancy (1993) adds to Lavinia’s viewpoints by stating that when it comes to moral decision-making, a person will consider their present situation and the outcomes of their action, and they will act only if the results correspond to their personal relation to the world. Dancy (1993) designed a process of human action starting with a belief which is developed on the basis of cultural and personal determinants that influence us through life. Lavinia (2014) states that individuals will access their personal systems of beliefs when making decisions, and further states that motivational factors are responsible for the representation of moral judgments.

- **Balancing competing moral duties:**

According to Berg and Gibson (2011), professionals rarely focus on themselves alone when making decisions because they are influenced and controlled by the organisations that employ them. As a result, professionals may struggle with individual moral responsibility due to the organisational structures that foster or limit ethical decision-making. Berg and Gibson (2011) state that professionals may abandon individual moral responsibility in favour of their employer, as opposed to other professionals who may rely entirely on personal views without concern for the consequences. Typically, a professional will police themselves to comply with a code; however, Harrison and Galloway (2005) argue that code-based frameworks are inadequate because they leave professionals free to interpret them in ways that advance the needs of themselves and their clients. Harrison and Galloway (2005) further argue that such behaviour is act-centered, stating that virtue ethics represents a more authentic ethical path for professionals. May (1996) concludes with the view that we move away from an individualistic model of isolated ethical decision-making and replace this model with a communitarian, collective, group-orientated approach to ethical decision-making and enactment as this is representative of organisational practice today.

- **Addressing ethical dilemmas:**

According to Parsons (2008:134), making a decision will either result in a resolution for the organisation, or a dilemma, which can be defined as a particular problem in which the professional is usually faced with two or more disadvantageous choices to be made. Parsons (2008:134) further expands on this by stating that there are two types of dilemmas in business ethics, namely the acute dilemma; which is when the professional truly does not know the right
action to take, and the acute rationalisation; which is when the professional does know the right thing to do but fails to do it. According to Grunig (2014), PR professionals may confront a number of personal ethical decisions in the work, for example:

- Providing journalists with free passes to events in exchange for coverage
- Taking or receiving gifts, or to offer bribes
- Falsifying a timesheet or coverage report for a client
- Selectively reporting research results
- Divulging confidential information to a competitor
- Lying about giving money to charity.

Johnston (2015) expands on common ethical issues confronting PR professionals by stating that PR communication must be honest and accurate, as well as ensure that the public is given context into why the organisational leaders have taken a certain stance on an issue. In addition, it is the PR professional’s responsibility to speak up should they notice an ethical misstep the organisational leader is about to take, but also to ensure that the leader is aware of how the public would react to their action (Johnston, 2015). Thirdly, Johnston (2015) notes that it is the ethical duty of a PR professional to avoid divulging sensitive information to the public or reveal a client’s involvement in anything without their permission. Fourthly, Stos (2011:185) notes that PR professionals should also understand that payment to the media for articles obscures transparency.

Grunig (2014) states that it is ethical theories and codes of conduct that help PR professionals in addressing ethical dilemmas, and further claims that PR professionals who are more ethical as individuals generally provide better ethical advice to their clients as counsellors. Symmetrical PR professionals who see themselves counsellors who help clients to implement mutual values when making decisions, while asymmetrical professionals see themselves as advocates of the values of their clients (Grunig, 2014).

- Types of ethical decisions made in addressing dilemmas:

In line with the above-mentioned examples of ethical issues, Parsons (2008:132) makes note of three types of ethical decisions which can be made to address the challenges of identifying a suitable resolution to issues, namely the principled decision, the precedent decision, and the patron decision, all of which will be discussed below.

- The principled decision: This type of decision is based upon the well-thought out application of ethical principles or duties such as always telling the truth, serving justice, and doing no harm unto others. Thus, a link can be made between principled decisions and the notion of deontology as part of the act-centred ethical theory, because
deontology focuses on the intention for an action and its alignment with a specific duty, as noted by Igboanugo (2014).

- The precedent decision: This type of decision involves the individual using an already solved case or example or in order to predict situation outcomes as the outcome of the situation is already known and will provide a “starting block” for ethical decision-making.

- The patron decision: This type of decision is where more experienced individuals are turned to in order to assist with the making of an ethical decision. Thus, trust is very important within this working relationship.

4.7.3 The social roles of PR practice

According to Verwey (2015:12) and Skinner (1994:45), looking at socially-responsible communication practice includes social roles which can either enhance PR or detract from it. In line with this, Grunig (2014) questions whether contemporary PR should be practiced in the interest of the client, or in the interests of the public, society and the organisation. Therefore, it can be noted that Grunig questions whether PR should be practiced asymmetrically or symmetrically, and further asks the following question: “To whom should PR professionals be loyal to?” (Grunig, 2014). Grunig (2014) states that PR professionals cannot always practice symmetrical PR but can explain why certain actions cannot be disclosed (asymmetrical PR). For example, asymmetrical messages - messages that are truthful but do not reveal all information - can be ethically communicated as long as the professional reveals the reasons for the selective secrecy (symmetrical PR). In addition, Grunig (2014) expands by stating that PR professionals may have undivided loyalty to their client or what the employer asks them to do, where problems then become the boss’ problem and not their problem. Thus, it can be noted that a shift in accountability takes place based on whom the PR professional decides to be loyal to. Regardless, Parsons (1993) states that PR professionals not only have a responsibility to their client but also have a responsibility to be loyal to “themselves, the profession, to society, as well as to the organisation that employs them”.

Grunig (2014) believes that divided loyalties are central to PR practice, and states that the social roles of PR help to clarify decision-making when PR professionals are faced with conflicting loyalties because the underpinnings of these roles shine light on the questions of right and wrong. As identified by Grunig and White, these social roles include the following (Grunig, 2014; Verwey, 2015:12):
1) The pragmatic social role, which sees public relations as contributing simply towards the bottom line or wealth maximisation, as well as only doing what the client wants. PR professionals who view their work in terms of a pragmatic social role represent the client’s views and help the client to achieve their objectives, thus relating to asymmetrical PR which only serves the client’s interests but not those of the public (Grunig, 2014). Therefore, the question of ethics is left to the client organisation. Pragmatic PR professionals’ work is value-free, and they will work for any organisation that hires them, as well as passionately defend the values of their client organisations. However, pragmatic PR professionals can make unethical decisions due to too much commitment and obedience to the client organisation.

2) The conservative social role, where the status quo of public relations is maintained and protected, and public relations is seen to defend the privileges of the economically powerful by protecting the capitalistic system from attack by activist and the government, for example (Grunig, 2014).

3) The critical social role, which constructs and deconstructs, thus embracing interpretation, understanding of the other and their realities, and human emancipation. Such professionals typically align with organisations that have similar values to their own. Additionally, PR professionals who take on this role generally practice asymmetrically, by representing organisations that want change in society (Grunig, 2014).

4) The idealistic social role, which is characterised by reciprocal relationships and dialogue. Thus, public relations practice in this context will be symmetrical and the question of ethics is predicated upon negotiation and dialogue. Grunig (2014) states that these PR professionals facilitate dialogue with all publics and advocate that mutual values be applied to decision-making. However, they run the risk of damaging their reputation from potentially aligning with an unethical client only wanting to “appear” ethical and socially-responsible on the surface and not wanting to actually change their behaviour. Hence, the danger of purely symmetrical PR, as stated by Grunig (2014).

5) The strategic activist role, where a multiplicity of views and voices are embraced via purposeful stakeholder engagement. Importantly, strategic activists engage in strategic influence if they are trying to influence another public, or in other words, trying to shape society or change behaviors. Grunig (1992:504) expands upon the strategic activist role that PR professionals need to assume by stating that strategic
activists are important for the development and overall practice of ethical PR due to the role that it has in challenging unethical practice and effecting social change. Goel (2010:31) further states that the communication professional should actively adopt relational perspectives, understand the fact that nothing is absolute, but rather intersubjective, and avoid taking on a pragmatic social role which simply sees communication practice as contributing towards wealth maximisation (Goel, 2010:31).

4.8 PROFESSIONAL BODIES AND ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

According to Lloyd (2017), PR professionals have an obligation to commit to driving ethical practices, with many PR agencies in South Africa adhering to the PRISA code of ethics and professional standards. Lloyd (2017) highlights some of the following PRISA codes to be understood and implemented in a PR agency in South Africa, namely:

- **2.4** – “We are committed to ethical practices, preservation of public trust, and the pursuit of communication excellence with powerful standards of performance, professionalism, and ethical conduct.”
- **2.6** – “We shall conduct our professional lives in accordance with the public interest. We shall not conduct ourselves in any manner detrimental to the profession of public relations”.
- **2.7** – “We have a positive duty to maintain integrity and accuracy, as well as generally accepted standards of good taste.
- **2.8** – “We shall not knowingly, intentionally or recklessly communicate false or misleading information. It is our obligation to use proper care to avoid doing so inadvertently.”
- **7.1** – “We respect the principles contained in the Constitution of the country in which we are resident.”

The above-mentioned codes of ethics listed align to several PR professional values, namely advocacy, honesty, integrity, fairness and loyalty; all of which form part of an emergent framework to foster ethical communication (PRISA, 2012). Additional links can be made to moral principles, as applied to PR practice:

- **Advocacy**: The PR professional is accountable to his or her client or organisation and provides a voice to aid informed debate.
- **Honesty**: The PR professional must act in ways that are truthful and accurate while advancing the interests of those being represented (veracity).
• Integrity: The PR professional should practice with integrity (based on strong moral principles).
• Fairness: The PR professional should act in ways that are considered to be fair and socially responsible, respecting all opinions and dealing fairly with clients and the public.
• Loyalty: The PR professional should be faithful to those being represented (fidelity).

4.8.1 Elements of ethical communication

According to Lieber (2008:244), professional bodies view ethical communication in PR practice as the concurrent satisfying of three duties, namely: duty to the self, duty to the client, and lastly, duty to the public. In the satisfying of these duties, there are three key elements of ethical communication for PR professionals, namely: choice, moral agency, and responsibility (Makau, 2009; Grunig, 2014). The key elements of ethical communication for PR professionals are unpacked below:

• **Choice:** PR professionals have the choice of whether to be ethical or not and more often than not have the power to choose between more than one possibility (Grunig, 2014).
• **Moral agency:** When making a choice where more than one possibility applies, moral agency will then apply to the PR professional. According to Grunig (2014), moral agency allows the PR professional the freedom and the choice to act responsibly.
• **Responsibility:** The consequences of one’s choices and responsibility matter when communicating ethically, thus ethical communication requires an understanding and awareness of one’s responsibility (Makau, 2009).

4.8.2 Ethical systems as applied to professional practice

According to Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002), ethical theories such as teleology (the ethics of consequences) and deontology (the ethics of rules) are mostly predicated upon the principles of dialogue and symmetry. Grunig (2014) provides the following examples of teleological and deontological principles being used within ethical PR practice, as depicted in table 6 below.

Table 6: Teleological and deontological principles as applied to ethical PR practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teleological principles</th>
<th>Definition:</th>
<th>Example by definition:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Teleological principles** | • This system takes on a results-oriented approach.  
• Ethical behaviour is based on the consequences of an action.  
• Which decision will provide the greatest good to the greatest number of people? | |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deontological principles</th>
<th>Definition:</th>
<th>Applied in practice:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Humans must treat others with respect and dignity.</td>
<td>• PR practice should serve the public interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ethical behaviour is judged on whether the action violates human</td>
<td>• Choices are not based solely on financial considerations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>rights.</td>
<td>• Requires a consideration of all alternatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example by definition:</td>
<td>• Which human rights are deemed more important?</td>
<td>• Requires ethical PR professionals to consider what consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>decisions have on publics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied in practice:</td>
<td>• Ethical PR professionals have the moral obligation to disclose</td>
<td>• Choosing not to disseminate false information because that would</td>
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<td></td>
<td>consequences to affected publics, and further have to engage in a</td>
<td>be untruthful and dishonest.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>dialogue with publics about the decision.</td>
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4.8.3 Ethical discipline in PR practice

As explained by Bratt (2017), when a PR agency or professional joins PRISA they are bound by the code of ethics and professional standards, with any infringement potentially leading to the company or individual being suspended. Thus, relating to the Bell Pottinger case which highlights the firm’s expulsion from the UK professional body, the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA). When it comes to non-PRISA members, “the only action that can be taken is damaging their reputation by publicising what they have done” (Bratt, 2017). Bratt (2017) further states that most agencies and PR professionals do maintain a strong code of ethics – whether through PRISA or self-regulated. However, Bratt (2017) does note that self-regulation is simply not enough, especially as PR professionals are heavily reliant on their reputations. What Bratt (2017) suggests is that as an industry, pressure needs to be placed on clients, where it can be stated that clients should only deal with professionals and agencies that have formally committed to an industry code of ethics.

Importantly, Lloyd (2017) points out that all PR professionals and agencies should also take note of the following tips for ensuring ethical enactment in practice:

- PR professionals should agree not to use “underhanded approaches” as PR tactics. PR professionals need to push back on clients expecting unethical practice in driving work.
• PR professionals should not simply take on any client or client’s work and should first research the client and source credible opinions beforehand. Bratt (2017) supports this by stating that clients should be researched very well by looking at what has been produced in the media, especially if they are high profile.

• PR professionals should commit to the industry’s codes of conduct, especially PR leaders who have the responsibility of ensuring that those codes are filtered down and modelled in the organisation.

• Most importantly, Lloyd (2017) highlights that PR professionals and agencies should not take on clients who whose values do not align with that of the agency’s, as the client will potentially damage the agency’s reputation in commanding it to execute work in line with what they say, and with no freedom for any push-back.

4.9 UNDERSTANDING VIRTUOUSNESS IN PRACTICE

According to Horne (2012), virtuousness can be defined as “excellence in the human soul”; further stating that it is a form of behaviour or virtues acting in combination that leads to beneficial outcomes. In short, Horne (2012) summarises virtuousness as “an ultimate good” and argues whether this moral excellence can be found in the soul of an organisation. The Financial Times (2017) expands on this by stating that virtuousness, or “virtus” in Latin, means the highest aspirations of human beings or the best behaviours and outcomes of people. Interestingly, the Financial Times (2017) states that virtuousness is a combination of the following virtues: caring and compassionate support, forgiveness, meaning, respect, integrity, and gratitude. In line with these virtues, Spielthenner (2017) suggests that a virtuous organisation and virtuous leader would aspire to those attributes, with the Financial Times (2017) suggesting that the association between extraordinary organisational success and virtuous organisational practice has been confirmed by research.

However, Horne (2012) contests this statement by stating that there have only been few studies about the relationship between virtues and increased productivity, loyalty, and profit, and further goes on to state that virtuousness may simply act as a buffer which helps organisations to perform despite any setbacks. Spielthenner (2017) supports this argument by stating that virtuousness simply justifies our actions and further questions whether virtues are evaluative traits. Horne (2012) does, however, make note of the effectiveness of virtuousness in health care systems, for example. Horne (2012) notes that research does suggest that virtuousness, or virtues acting in combination (also known as “aggregate virtuousness”) has a significant relationship with organisational success versus business units not engaging in improving measures of virtuousness. From these debates, it can be noted that there is much to learn about the relationship between virtuousness and organisational performance. However, it is imperative
to first unpack what constitutes a virtuous organisation before one can unpack critique surrounding such.

4.9.1 Virtuous organisations

According to Clark (2008), conflicting loyalties lie at the heart of responsible and ethical decision-making. Berg and Gibson (2011) and Stoker and Stoker (2006:510) add to this by stating that previous research has revealed that PR professionals struggle with conflicting loyalties. In line with this, Berg and Gibson (2011) and Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) further note that communication professionals are in a unique position as a liaison between a company and the public, and as a result of this dual position, professionals may find themselves having to choose between their own personal values and loyalty to their cause. Conflicting loyalties raise some of the following questions for professionals, namely: To whom do professionals owe their loyalty? Secondly, how do communicational professionals ethically choose between potentially conflicting loyalties? Thirdly, is it the communication professional’s duty to protect one stakeholder at the expense of another? With this being said, professionals will then turn to their basic set of beliefs to make sense of right and wrong, which links to the research study purpose of understanding how South African agency-based PR professionals are guided by a moral framework for practice.

Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) go on to mention that the quality of a professional’s loyalty is ultimately defined by a person and personal beliefs, and not by a public, which further relates to the notion of virtuous loyalty. Virtuous loyalty is defined by Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) as “being loyal to your own deeply held beliefs and ideals.” Thus, virtuous loyalty is concerned with which entity supports the professional’s own personal values. In contrast, non-virtuous loyalty would involve the professional going against their personal loyalties in favour of public loyalty, which is an inauthentic action (Stoker & Stoker, 2006:510-516). Therefore, if there is dissonance between a professional’s values and the company’s values, then any loyalty given would be non-virtuous and inauthentic. Importantly, Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) note that when professionals put public loyalties over and above personal loyalties, they allow the professional to avoid taking responsibility and be held accountable for their actions, as any credit or blame will go to the whole group as opposed to the individual.

In previous research conducted, Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) report that one in eight professionals reported pressure to compromise working standards to complete a task for client, and a further forty percent of professionals who have reported misconduct have not been happy with the organisation’s response, linking to what has been noted with regard to organisational leaders promoting ethical leadership, and ethics flowing from the top down. However, Stoker (2005:271-283) notes that in some cases, the professional may find that no matter what
concerns are voiced, the organisational leaders will still not listen, in which case the professional needs to determine whether top management has the capacity to change. Interestingly, Stoker and Stoker (2006:510-516) note that research suggests that professionals have tried to resolve conflicting loyalties and practice authentic loyalty by reaching out to peers, and by familiarising themselves with a standardised PR code of ethics. PR codes of ethics remind communication professionals that they have equal loyalties to their clients, publics, media, employers, the profession, and most importantly, themselves, because equally-divided loyalty is at the “heart of dialogic, symmetrical communication” (Grunig, 2014).

4.9.2 Models of virtues-based organisations

According to Williams (2015) and Laloux (2014), new, promising models of virtues-based organisations are emerging, and research is now pointing towards a “new type” of organisation (Teal organisation) which requires virtuous leadership characterised by distributed authority, wholeness and evolutionary purpose, as unpacked below:

- **Distributed authority:** Refers to the distribution of decision-making authority to all members and is centred upon trust, non-hierarchical systems and collectivism. Distributed leadership requires high levels of awareness and self-responsibility, where leaders must let go of decision-making power and put their trust in their frontline staff members.

- **Wholeness:** Involves the “whole” person at work and is driven by self-management, creativity and the goal of making the world a better place (ideally, a non-ego, soulful organisation is ideal for the “whole person” in terms of physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual needs).

- **Evolutionary purpose:** Involves the organisation naturally adapting and growing, rather than being driven by a leader. Reflective practice and mindfulness are required to understand the deeper reason why the organisation exists and the difference it wants to make in the community. Reflective leaders listen to where the organisation wants to go and they align people and processes accordingly (values-driven, transcendent purpose guiding the organisation towards the greater good).

Thus, the following can be noted with regard to virtuous leadership in Teal organisations, namely:

- Competition and profit are not a driving force for virtuous leaders
- Virtuous leaders navigate reality and adapt, much like systems (self-managing)
Virtuous leaders enable a sense of purpose and well-being in human beings in virtuous organisations. In line with this, organisational virtuousness is experienced by the whole self (cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally)

Virtuous organisations are characterised by reflection and spiritual mindfulness which builds trust amongst all employees via dialogical communication and active listening.

Laloux (2014) concludes that Teal organisations embrace the notion that “a person’s deepest calling is to achieve wholeness”, with such organisations fostering vibrant, democratic workspaces where trust and dialogue are embraced, as depicted in figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Underpinnings of an ideal state of virtuousness

Adapted from Laloux (2014).

4.9.3 Virtuous leadership

According to Islam and Crego (2013), a virtuous organisation is “built from the leader out”, with the leader’s vision and values shaping and defining the company culture and everything that the business does in terms of community involvement, to the way that the company treats its employees. In addition to this, Islam and Crego (2013) state that virtuous leaders who intend to build virtuous companies do not focus purely on short-term performance and profits and need to have a strong moral compass. Islam and Crego (2015) further go on to note that virtuous leaders have to take on three (3) critical roles in practicing virtuousness (as depicted in figure 6 below), namely:
1. **The navigator:** This leader is in charge of overall organisational direction, and must ensure that the organisation’s beliefs, such as acting with integrity and being ethically-responsible, are highlighted and constantly abided by. The navigator must ensure that the organisation does things “the right way and does them well”.

2. **The capital creator:** This leader needs to think beyond financial capital and must identify many alternatives to generating return on investment. This, for example, can include the building of reputational and intellectual capital in developing a virtuous organisation. Here, the opportunity lies in fostering a collaborative environment driven by “teamwork that results in synergy” (Islam & Crego, 2013).

3. **The value generator:** This leader essentially builds the virtuous organisation via the company value chain, consisting of operations, logistics, and support activities such as human resources and technology, for example. This leader needs to ensure that each element in the chain adds value, with Islam and Crego (2013) further quoting Medtronic CEO, Bill George, in conceptualising the role of the value generator: “Companies do not exist to create value strictly for their shareholders. They are there to create value for their customers, and that gets to the mission of the company. Ultimately, in doing that, the company then creates value for society.”

In line with the abovementioned literature, figure 6 below highlights the underpinnings of virtuous leadership.

**Figure 6: Underpinnings of virtuous leadership**

Adapted from Laloux (2014).
4.9.4 Virtuous PR practice

According to Cameron (2015), virtuousness in practice relates to the behaviour of individuals in organisational settings, further stating that virtuous organisations must be designed to foster the following in professionals:

- “Interpersonal relationships, meaningful work, enhanced learning, and personal development” (human impact)
- Social betterment extending beyond mere self-interested benefit.

Bowen (2017) adds to this by stating that in a field such as PR, “fraught with conflicting loyalties and problematic issues to solve on a daily basis”, professionals are required to know how to weigh moral values from a variety of angles. Moral judgement is considered a virtue, and exercising moral judgment takes rationality, deliberation and objective perspective, all of which can take years of practice in the field (Bowen, 2017). Additionally, Bowen (2017) notes that moral judgement must be incorporated into the personality of the PR professional, further pointing out tips to enhance a high-level of moral judgement in virtuous PR practice, namely:

- **Think through all consequences:** PR professionals should consider all options and potential outcomes in relation to all stakeholders other than just clients, thus, linking to a teleological decision-making approach where ethical decision-making is based on the consequences of a decision.
- **Strive to empower others:** PR professionals should strive for social betterment, as well as contribute to solutions via analytical thinking. This is done via gathering and including all perspectives from multiple internal and external stakeholders.
- **Act with character and integrity:** PR professionals are required to ensure that they act ethically with character and integrity, avoiding only doing what would benefit clients, thus relating to the PRISA code of conduct and professional standards which emphasise that all stakeholders are taken into account during decision-making. Additionally, this relates to the element of responsibility in ethical communication as the PR professional has to understand one’s responsibility in the process of professional role enactment.
- **Do not seek power or authority:** PR professionals should not seek to be controlled via top-down power, as opposed to Teal organisations which are characterised by fluid hierarchy, distribution of power and self-management (symmetrical professional practice). Professionals should model ethical behaviour, as well as seek to enhance the moral judgment ability of other professionals (enhanced, collective learning).
- **Consciously practice PR:** High levels of moral judgment in PR require PR professionals to constantly reflect on their decision-making because it builds professional credibility and allows for increased ability in applying moral judgement to ethical dilemmas.
4.10 SOCIALLY-RESPONSIBLE PR PRACTICE: SOCIAL ROLE ENACTMENT

Social responsibility is characterised by accountability and promises an achievable and realistic approach with regard to the role of business in society today (Vallentin, 2009:63). Therefore, this accountability role is the action phase of management responding in the social sphere, and it calls for skills in the areas of stakeholder management, PR and public affairs. Organisations do need to additionally invest in the communities in which they operate, which Skinner et al. (2010) state link to the shift away from responsibility and rather into accountability, and investment into the communities within which the organisation operates. Skinner et al. (2010) further define accountability as encompassing community involvement because communicating with society could potentially have an impact on the organisation’s development. Thus, it can be said that accountability efforts also aim to enhance connections and relationships with the public through the concept of dynamic communication. This is further justified by Awad (2011:52) as being embraced by multicultural postmodernism, because it involves both freedom and the ability to be able to communicate in a participatory process and emphasises the democratic significance of including all voices in the process of engagement and interaction, which is extremely important in South Africa due to past struggles.

4.10.1 Ubuntu philosophy

West (2014:51) and the FW de Klerk Foundation (2011:8) elaborate on the importance of including all voices in South Africa, and describe it as relating to the concept of “Ubuntu”, an African philosophy which emphasises the understanding and respect of others and their unique realities, as well as sees the value of doing good for the community over and above self-interest. Moreover, Chaplin (2011:9) states that the notion of Ubuntu means that “we are who we are through others”, and states that an individual’s humanity is expressed through his or her relationship with others, and via the recognition that the individual possesses a “self” through the community in which he or she belongs. Thus, it can be noted that the notion of Ubuntu links to multiculturalism because multiculturalism promotes equal respect and tolerance of all individuals and their varied views, as stated by Peréz-Torres (1993:161).

Additionally, Ubuntu can be linked to what Mead (1962:163) notes with regard to individuals developing and experiencing the self through the process of social experience and interaction within a community, as well as the fact that people cannot truly be themselves unless these individuals are also members of a community. Thirdly, Holstrom (2004:262) expands on the association between reflective practice and Ubuntu, because the notion of reflection requires professionals and organisations to see themselves as existing within society and “see themselves from the outside in” with regard to decision-making and ethical communication practice. West (2014:51) then concludes that the Ubuntu philosophy is characterised by virtues
such as tolerance, harmony and compassion towards the other, as well as inclusivity and the
embracing of social justice, of which postmodern engagement, today's PR professionals, and
Post-Apartheid South Africa embraces.

4.10.2 The #AdamCatzavelos case study: A lesson in social responsibility

On 21 August 2018, a racist video surfaced of South African businessman, Adam Catzavelos,
boasting about being on a beach where no black people were in sight (Caxton Central, 2018).
Catzavelos used the “K-word” in describing the lack of black people in sight, consequently
leading to many South Africans expressing their dismay on Twitter by using the
“#AdamCatzavelos” hashtag, further asking for identification of the man and harsh action to be
taken against him (Caxton Central, 2018). According to Baxter (2018), Adam Catzavelos worked
in the family's sauce business, St George’s Fine Foods in Johannesburg. In light of South
Africans’ views on racism, Baxter (2018) states that the surfacing of the Catzavelos video
recording lead to several restaurants and outlets which stock St George’s basting products
being named on social media, with calls to boycott them unless they cut ties with the Catzavelos
business (see figure 7 below).

Figure 7: South Africans express dismay in relation to #AdamCatzavelos racist video

In line with the above imagery and calls to boycott anyone linked to Adam Catzavelos, many restaurants have since terminated their contracts with the family’s company St Georges Fine Foods. Destiny Man (2018) confirmed that Adam Catzavelos has since been fired from the family business, St George’s Fine Foods, with additional terminations, statements and charges being laid, namely:

- Adam was informed by his sons’ private school, St John’s College in Johannesburg, that he has been banned from school premises until further notice, further stating that his sons and the school community have been exposed to the negative publicity his actions catalysed. (Etheridge, 2018). Due to Adam’s actions, the school issued a letter to parents stating that it will not tolerate racism of any kind and continues to hold a stern position against such appalling and unacceptable behaviour. Additionally, the private school noted that all members of the school community were expected to behave in line with its values, as well as the country’s constitution, ensuring that ethically-responsible behaviour filtered down to the children (Etheridge, 2018).

- The Economic Freedom Fighters in Gauteng have laid charges of racism against Adam Catzavelos at the Bramley police station in Johannesburg following the surfacing of the video. Additionally, the Democratic Alliance Youth have also referred his conduct to the South African Human Rights Commission for investigation (Mabuza, 2018).

- Baxter (2018) adds that there have also been calls to boycott Nike, with Nike sales expected to drop following the discovery that Adams’s wife, Kelly Catzavelos, is associated with the brand. Nike South Africa has since issued a statement noting that the brand opposes discrimination and has a long-standing commitment to diversity, inclusion and respect. The statement further noted that Adam is not a Nike employee.

- Butcher Boys, a client supplied by St Georges Fine Foods, along with many other clients of the family business, have stated that they are keen to protect their reputation, consequently disassociating themselves immediately, further stating that they do not support what Adam has done and have no tolerance for racism.

- Eyewitness News (2018) confirmed that Catzavelos took part in a Business Accelerator Programme on 702 radio, sponsored by Nedbank four years ago, with both the radio station and Nedbank issuing statements condemning the racist rant. Caxton Central (2018) supports this by noting that both 702 and Nedbank have since disassociated themselves from Adam Catzavelos.

- The Catzavelos family have since released an official statement stating that Adam had been dismissed from the family business, and that “they are appalled by the video and his minority shareholding will be unwound soon” (Caxton Central, 2018). Mabuza and Gous (2018) add that the family appealed for some measure of calm and proclaimed the following in their official statement: “Our primary concern, therefore, right now, is for the
safety of the extended family, and that of our staff and associates. As stated before, we reject racism and seek, in our own small way, to work for the betterment of this country, for our immediate families and for our communities."

4.10.3 The rise of social responsibility in line with Ubuntu philosophy

Adam Catzavelos has since issued a personal statement, which South Africans have further rejected online (eNCA, 2018). The apology and example of angst from South Africans is depicted in figure 8 below.

Figure 8: Adam Catzavelos’ apology and online reactions from South Africans

According to Baxter (2018), “the tragic outcome of Adam Catzavelos’ video is not a hit to Nike’s sales or St George’s sales, but the impact it has on reconciliation and forging a future in South Africa in which all races can live in harmony” (Baxter, 2018). Interestingly, and in support of Baxter’s statement, the #AdamCatzavelos incident shines light on how quickly communities take a stand against entities not acting ethically, or where there are discrepancies in personal value alignment. In line with this and Baxter’s statement above, Adam Catzavelos’ actions do not align to Ubuntu philosophy in South Africa. Cornell (2010) unpacks the relationship between Ubuntu
and ethical communication by stating the following: “Ubuntu calls for ethical morality, where the
individual is called back towards the community and further towards relations of mutual support
for the potential of each one of us.” The below areas of ethical importance indirectly highlight
gaps in Adam’s ethical leadership, failure to align to Ubuntu philosophy, as well as social
responsibility:

- West (2014:51) and the FW de Klerk Foundation (2011:8) elaborate on the importance of
  including all voices in South Africa, and describe it as relating to the concept of “Ubuntu”,
  which emphasises the understanding and respect of others and their unique realities.
- South Africans today embrace a vibrant, participative democracy that reconciles freedom
  and justice (Holtzhausen, 2000:96).
- Holtzhausen and Voto (2002:69) state that postmodernism holds that a singular, all-
  encompassing truth is merely the viewpoint of some dominant groups in society and
  should not be privileged over another viewpoint in the process of achieving a
  cosmopolitan workplace and society within the Post-Apartheid South Africa.
- Today’s business leaders are required to realise that they have a responsibility to serve
  others through ethical engagement and ethical decision-making, both personally and
  professionally (Becker, 2013:20). Reflection requires professionals and organisations to
  see themselves as existing within society and “see themselves from the outside in” with
  regard to personal and professional decision-making (Holstrom, 2004:262). Denton and
  Vloeberghs (2003:84-95) state that ethical leaders are thought to be moral and do the
  right things in both their personal and professional lives, as well as make decisions
  based on values and ethical decision-making rules in order to meet the needs of “the
  other”.
- If organisations and leaders act in ways compatible with a will towards human fulfilment,
  such as understanding the human rights of important associated stakeholders, such a
  broadened conception will pave the way ethically building reputational capital (Jackson,
  2008:447).
- Skinner et al. (2010) state that accountability efforts must aim to enhance connections
  and relationships with the public through the concept of dynamic communication. This is
  further justified by Awad (2011:52) as being embraced by multiculturalism because it
  emphasises the democratic significance of including all voices in the process of
  engagement.
- Sue (1991) asserts that societies have now become more ethically-responsible, meaning
  that societies are changing their complexion and are becoming more diversified. This
  means that professionals have the responsibility to act in an ethical manner towards the
  community as a whole, as opposed to themselves as individuals, and not cause harm to
  the community or to the environment (Pachamama Alliance, 2015).
Bolton (2009) explains that reflection can enable professionals to constantly ask questions and learn from their experiences, enabling enquiry into how professionals take into account their personal feelings within role enactment.

All of the above-mentioned points relating to suppliers cutting ties with St George’s Foods align to a lack of value congruence, which states that should individuals find themselves in situations that they feel are inappropriate for their preferred self-image, they will be less willing to give themselves to that role (Irvine, 2010). In short, a difference in values held between suppliers and Adam Catzavelos lead to the termination of their contracts with his business. Secondly, the above-mentioned information links to reflective communication practice, as reflection links to the socially-responsible behaviour of the organisation and enables the organisation and leader to see itself as existing within a larger societal context (Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005:72; Holstrom, 2004:122). Adam Catzavelos did not act in line with Ubuntu philosophy, communitarian ethics, virtuousness, nor did he act in line with the discourse of multiculturalism and the need to value, respect and tolerate all voices in South Africa. Reflective practice ensures that there is a responsibility for actions, which is essential for responsible and ethical communication practice; therefore, it can be concluded that Catzavelos failed to reflect on the consequences of his personal views put out into the public. Catzavelos did, however, hold himself accountable for his actions in terms of attempting to remedy the situation with an official apology (see figure 8), where post-situation reflection can be noted. It can also be noted that Adam Catzavelos’ decision to write and publish an official apology links to two different types of ethical decisions, namely:

- The patron decision: This type of decision is where more experienced individuals are turned to in order to assist with the making of an ethical decision. For example, Adam Catzavelos turned to PR professionals in order to ensure that his efforts to remedy the situation were in line with what the public and his clients expected (Parsons, 2008:132).
- The principled decision: This type of decision is based upon the well-thought out application of ethical principles or duties. For example, Adam Catzavelos identified the ethical route to take with regard to his video surfacing.

Thus, a link can be made between principled and patron decisions and the act-centred ethical theory because it focuses on the intention for an action and its alignment with a specific duty. The question remains as to whether Catzavelos reached out to a PR professional for assistance entirely due to obligation and the duty to now perform the right action based on his public apology, or because he has reflected on “what kind of person he should be” in line with virtue ethics.
In summarising the abovementioned literature on a moral framework for practice, the researcher has developed a model, as depicted below in figure 9, which speaks to the various outlooks and positions that PR professionals hold with regards to ethical practice. The below figure highlights principles of postmodern and modern ethics and shows the ethical paradox that professionals face when confronted with conflicting loyalties.

Figure 9: Principles of postmodern and modern ethics

On one side, professionals follow a postmodern approach to practice – characterised by reflectivity, an agent-centred theory of morality and the view that ethical practice cannot be
governed by universal codes which prohibit individual moral accountability. On the other side, practice is governed by codes of conduct, compliance and blind loyalty to commissioning interest. Professionals are reflexive and ethical enactment is act-centered, thus focusing on outcome-based decision-making. What is important to note in figure 9 is the middle-dotted area, the ethical paradox, where most professionals find themselves in. Ethical decision-making in this case is then based on context and is relative to the self.

4.12 MORAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE

In summarising the abovementioned literature on a moral framework for practice, the researcher has developed a second model, as depicted below in figure, which visually shows the thinking behind what is considered a moral framework for practice.

Figure 10: Moral framework for practice
In unpacking figure 10, moral framework is seen as consisting of a particular worldview, and it entails adherence to a particular value system that guides professional behaviour and that assists the practitioner in navigating their decision-making in ways that they consider to be ethically-responsible and accountable. Figure 10 depicts a moral framework for practice as an eco-system, where worldviews seen in the figure must be understood as being able to affect behaviour in another level and vice-versa. In other words, a moral framework for practice is best understood as an eco-system of interdependencies. For example, professionals may hold a symmetrical or asymmetrical worldview of communication, thus aligning to whether they believe in obeying prescribed codes of conduct or rather reflecting and practicing individual moral accountability. Each of the arrows in the figure show that worldviews and beliefs held on one level will impact decisions and behaviours in another.

4.13 CONCLUSION

In terms of ethicality in PR practice, spin and propaganda are common themes linked to unethical PR practice (Grunig, 2001). However, communication professionals have been trying to change this image of ethicality in PR in order to show that the practice truly aims to serve the public interest in an ethical manner (Skinner, 1994:16). Guiding principles of ethical PR practice include honesty, transparency, accountability, responsible leadership, bottom-up approaches, professionalism, and equality and inclusivity. Kefela (2010:160) and Accenture (2012) reiterate the importance of these guiding principles and socially-responsible governance as part of ethical practice, because stakeholders today are more diversified, ethically-responsible, collaborative, and more powerful with regard to the power that they hold in being able to affect the way that the organisation is seen by society (Lewis, 2001). This suggests that the way the public is dealt with by organisations and professionals needs to be more engaging and responsive, and thus based on postmodern engagement.

Importantly, it can further be noted that a multicultural postmodern approach to engaging with stakeholders in South Africa is required because of the discourse’s appreciation for diversity, difference in opinion, and the fact that all voices deserve to be heard, as emphasised by the Ubuntu philosophy. However, what this chapter truly highlights is that professionals may find themselves choosing between their own personal values and loyalty to their cause because of conflicting loyalties (Berg & Gibson, 2011; Stoker & Stoker, 2006:510-516). To unpack this statement, PR scholars and professionals define ethical PR conduct as simultaneously satisfying three distinct duties, namely duty to self, client, and society (Lieber, 2008). This is where complexities come in because the profession today stresses the importance of ethically and responsibly serving “the other” (Becker, 2013:20). In line with this, this chapter was based on delineating a moral framework for practice, and provided insight into elements of ethical
communication; more specifically, explanations on perspectives of ethicality in PR practice, ethical systems used in professional practice, responsible leadership and professional practice towards the stakeholder, ethical decision-making and practice towards the organisation, and socially-responsible PR practice and the social role of PR. Lastly, this section included a discussion of dialogical communication in ethical PR practice, as well as made note of the criticisms of ethical PR communication.

Important findings highlighted in this chapter included discussions on some of the following topics, namely:

- Ethicality in professional practice
- Professional practice towards the stakeholder:
  - Responsible leadership and ethical communication
  - The value of ethical leadership, value-congruency and an ethical corporate culture
- Professional practice towards the organisation:
  - Addressing ethical dilemmas and the ethical discipline required for practice
- Socially-responsible PR practice and the social role to be fulfilled by professionals today.

To summarise this chapter, today’s organisational leaders are required to realise that they have a responsibility to serve “the other” through dialogical postmodern engagement and socially-responsible decision-making (Becker, 2013:20; Treviño & Brown, 2005:69-70). The case studies of Bell Pottinger, Adam Catzavelos and Sir Martin Sorrell all highlight the importance of ethically-responsible leadership, with studies claiming that leaders play a strong role in shaping organisational culture and ethical communication practice. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the importance of responsible leadership in developing and managing ethical PR practice, as well as a consideration for a framework of ethical leadership within PR practice (Meng & Berger, 2013:141-142). Interestingly, the emergence of virtues-based organisations known as Teal organisations highlights the need for leaders known as “transformational” leaders (Laloux (2014; Williams, 2015). Virtuous organisations are characterised by reflection and mindfulness which builds trust amongst all employees via dialogical communication and active listening. Based on reflective practice, virtuous leaders build organisations from the leader out, with the leader’s vision and values shaping and defining the company culture and everything that the business does, to the way that the company treats the employees (Islam & Crego, 2013). Virtuous leaders are not driven by profit and take into account the interests of the society, thus aligning to social responsibility. It can be noted that such practice aligns to communitarianism because:

- Communitarian leaders recognise that the organisation should have a responsibility not only for profits, but also for the consequences of its activities on all stakeholders.
• Communitarian leaders believe that they have an ethical responsibility for fostering symmetry in relationships (which can be achieved through reflective PR efforts).
• Communitarian leaders believe that shared values are imperative of a highly-functioning community.

Further to this, Grunig (2014) touches on the divided loyalties central to PR practice and states that beyond following a code of ethics, such as PRISA’s codes of ethics and standard for practice, the social roles of PR help to clarify moral-decision making, especially because completely symmetrical “excellent” PR will not always be possible. In terms of the social role to be played in practice, organisational leaders and PR professionals should avoid taking on a pragmatic social role which simply sees communication practice as contributing towards the bottom line, but rather assume a strategic activist role which can effect social change, or the integrative social role within practice. The integrative social role is based upon multiple perspectives of postmodernism, such as notions of reflectivity, inclusivity, dialogue, and care for the “other” (Verwey, 2015:26). These perspectives are emphasised by the Ubuntu philosophy for ensuring tolerance, compassion and, ultimately, an understanding, both for and towards others amongst South African professionals and the way that communication should be practiced. In line with this, it must always be remembered that ethical communication in PR practice is based on the underlying principles of postmodernism and dialogical communication (Athanassoulis, 2015; Lavinia, 2014:2, Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261), and involves the professional adopting an agent-centred theory of morality. Thus, ethical enactment based on virtuous loyalty, or character and authentic desire to respond to the needs of others are emphasised, as opposed to acting ethically simply because of the duty to perform the right action (Athanassoulis, 2015; Lavinia, 2014:2, Rensburg & Cant, 2009:261).

In closing and in line with the summarised information above, PR professionals are in a unique position as a liaison between a company and the public, and as a result of this dual position, may face conflicting loyalties. Such conflicting loyalties raise some of the following questions for professionals, namely: To whom do professionals owe their loyalty and how do professionals ethically choose between potentially conflicting loyalties? Professionals will then turn to their basic set of beliefs to make sense of right and wrong, which links to the research study purpose of investigating whether South African agency-based PR professionals are guided by a moral framework for practice, as summarised above.
CHAPTER FIVE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 INTRODUCTION

“Primarily, the first decision you make as a researcher is whether to collect certain categories of information, and once that decision is made, you are responsible for what is done with that information and how it will be used in accordance to the particular objectives of the research” (Greaves, Kirby & Reid, 2006:57).

According to Kothari (2004:8), research methodology can be applied to qualitative research or quantitative research depending on the context of the research study. In line with this, this section will elaborate on the research methodology utilised in the context of the specific study, which encompasses focusing on the specified research problem concerning the investigation of what constitutes a moral framework for South African PR practice, and to what extent it guides South African PR practice. In accordance to the purpose of the study, a qualitative methodology will be unpacked and justified while emphasising the research design encompassing the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Importantly, Silverman (2000:8) notes that interviews provide "a deeper understanding" of social phenomena, which are ideal for the nature of this research. After the procedure of data collection has been discussed, the specific methods of data analysis will follow, all while taking note of the importance of validity and reliability in contributing towards achieving a competent and accurate study. The analysis of results will then follow in the next section when findings will be discussed and interpreted.

5.2 KEY RESEARCH APPROACHES

As stated by Flowers (2009:1), when undertaking research, it is essential to understand the different research matters that can influence the way in which research is undertaken, which includes ontology, epistemology and axiology, all of which describe the nature of reality and assumptions of truth. Carter and Little (2007:1319) expand upon the definitions of such research matters by describing epistemology as the nature of human knowledge through methods of investigation, and additionally goes on to state that reflexive researchers actively adopt theories of knowledge, as opposed to less reflexive researchers who already have assumptions about what knowledge is and how it is constructed. Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) concur by stating that epistemology is about ‘knowing how you can know’, thus emphasising the importance of the position of the researcher as their assumptions may influence any conclusions drawn in research. Flowers (2009:1) and Blaikie (1993) then describe ontology as the study of being and consisting of views on the nature of reality and whether the reality is objective and exists, or subjective and was merely created within the mind. Thus, it can be noted that ontology and
epistemology can be tightly coupled, as both attempt to define what constitutes reality. Thirdly, Flowers (2009:4) notes that our values guide our actions, stating that they are the basis for making the judgement about research approaches, which is highlighted by axiology, which studies values such as concepts of right and wrong, and beauty and harmony.

Additionally, Flowers (2009:4) states that the research paradigms of positivism, interpretivism and realism also need to be understood within the research context, with Johnson (2006:229) defining positivism as embodying “the virtue of clarity” because it places emphasis upon verification and identification of causal relationships, where truth or falsehood can be clearly settled through quantitative and objective measurement (Firestone, 1987:16). Melcrum (2012a) argues with the above by stating that in today’s age, an approach must be adopted that respects the nature of the dynamic social world, which allows for openness and interpretation, rather than merely importing scientific methods. Thus, positivism can be characterised as follows:

- Scientific research to account for an observation,
- Based on a single reality; and
- Predicated on modernism and realist ontology.

Leich, Frances and Harrison (2010:69) agree by stating that understanding human behaviour, entering people’s various realities and interpreting perceptions are imperative in understanding the social world today. Fawkes (2012:127) explains that this mindset can be classified as the interpretive approach and is based on the philosophy of interpretation through dialogue, which embraces a more qualitative postmodern role where language is focused on interaction within, because realities are constructed through the use of language. For example, interviews and focus groups embrace open dialogue and the fact that realities are constructed through this dialogical process. Lastly, Flowers (2009:4) describes the next research paradigm of realism as an inductive, theory-building approach which takes aspects from both positivist and interpretive positions and attempts to depict subject matter as it is without superficiality.

In terms of research methodologies, Hopkins (2000) defines quantitative research as involving the quantification of relationships between variables, which can be expressed by using effect statistics, such as frequencies and correlations, therefore relating to the paradigm of positivism and modernity, where the existence of a single truth can be applied to all people at all times (Lyotard, 1984). Myers and Newman (2007) explain that quantitative research methods were developed in the natural sciences to study the natural phenomenon, and qualitative research was developed in the social sciences to explore the social and cultural phenomenon. Quantitative analysis, on the other hand, is descriptive and is about quantifying relationships between variables, which, Hopkins (2000) mentions, can be expressed by using effect statistics, such as frequencies and correlations. Keyton (2010:41) expands on this by mentioning that phenomena are quantified and can be compared using descriptive or inferential statistics which
ensures greater objectivity to the study. However, Hampton (2004) states that this approach tends to exclude notions of freedom and choice because it fails to take account of people’s unique ability to interpret their experiences, as embraced by the paradigms of postmodernism and interpretivism. Postmodernism denies the existence of a single truth that can be applied to all people at all times, which more qualitative, interpretive methods would embrace, as these methods exist to understand people with different frames of reference, and different realities.

According to Hampton (2004), narrative ethnography also emphasises the fact that single truths cannot apply to everyone, and further describes narrative ethnography as a method of analysis in public participation, owing to the fact that it enables meaning and cultural context to be socially constructed and shared, and it caters to cultural diversity in the participation process. Darokin and Schulkin (1994) further expand on this by stating that culturally diverse communities often have restricted access to decision-making, and today it is essential that methods of analysis in strategic communication accommodate such groups and their cultural and social needs to enable full participation and engagement. Therefore, in aiming to understand the perceptions and understandings of communities, narrative ethnographical approaches are imperative because they will contribute towards further understanding stakeholders’ understandings. The purpose of this type of ethnography is to invoke understanding and embrace the inclusion of the ‘hidden voice’, as well as touch points engaged within their lives, hence the importance of adopting narrative ethnographical approaches.

Importantly, future research within the field needs to realise the importance of encompassing postmodern, bottom-up, participative, collaborative and ethically-responsible approaches towards understanding communities, and the satisfying and advancing of their personal needs and organisational needs. As noted by Awad (2011:52), dynamic communication needs to be recognised as being the critical instrument of participation and involvement, and engagement must take place between all parties involved to make sure that all requirements are met. Interestingly, researchers also believe that the convergence of approaches are more useful for the field of strategic communication because mixing them may afford the opportunity to understand better how to capture the complexity of the social world, where limitations of approaches will be minimalised, and strengths of singular approaches can be built upon (Bryman, 2006:105; Creswell, 2003:16), therefore allowing for greater validity and a greater range of tools to meet the aims of studies.

Similarly, transdisciplinary research approaches appreciate the convergence of disciplines by moving beyond the limitations of singular focus points in order to form new frameworks for conducting research, capitalise on new innovations made across approaches, and to better understand human phenomena and the complexities that organisations face today (Abrams, 2006:516; Frosh, 2003:12). Abrams (2006:522) further notes that transdisciplinary research
aims to promote solidarity. Importantly, transdisciplinary research transcends the traditional boundaries of natural, social and health sciences, as opposed to multidisciplinary research which acknowledges knowledge from other approaches, and interdisciplinary research which works between approaches (Choi & Pak, 2007:224; Du Plessis, Sehume & Martin, 2011:21). Therefore, transdisciplinary research values interpretation, collective action, empowerment, cultural humility, the transcendence of boundaries, open systems, and the two-way symmetrical model of communication, all of which are embraced by strategic communication. Strategic communication is a transdisciplinary practice itself, aiming to make use of multi-paradigmatic approaches for evaluating and research in order to understand the postmodern era in which society and organisations exist. Table 7 below provides an overview of the characteristics separating research approaches in science.

Table 7: Overview of research approaches in science

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH APPROACHES</th>
<th>Research standpoints:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Epistemological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Axiological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ontological</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH APPROACHES</th>
<th>Research paradigms:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Positivist – closed systems, based on a realist ontology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interpretive – open systems, based on the philosophy of interpretation and understanding</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH APPROACHES</th>
<th>Research methods:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Qualitative – interpretive – two-way symmetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Quantitative – positivist – one-way symmetry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mixed methods – transdisciplinary – two-way symmetry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


5.2.1 Underpinnings of qualitative research

According to Fawkes (2012:177) and Howe (1985), this interpretive approach to research is human-centred, as an interpretive, qualitative role is respected in the social world because it acknowledges the rights of people to draw their own conclusions (November, 2002:117). The flipped-classroom approach used in teaching today is an example of this, as students are placed in an interpretive role (November, 2002:117). Davey (2004:223) further elaborates on interpretivism by stating that there is always room for further interpretation through dialogue. According to Littlejohn and Foss (2017), it is the phenomenological approach that views communication as dialogue or direct contact with others to understand people's realities and
lived experiences, where understanding is valued over explanation, and language is focused on within interaction. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002:110) further go on to state that language, knowledge and understanding characterise the postmodern approach, and they note that control is exerted through the use of language because all perceptions are said to be constructed in language. Communities use language to construct narrative realities, thus meaning that these groups are distinguished by their particular use of language (Bruner, 1991:3). Therefore, language is essential for participation and interaction, and it must be noted that the self cannot be understood in isolation to the other because the self is continuously developing through an ongoing process of experience and participation in society (Jeon, 2004:250; Mead, 1962:163).

Keyton (2010:64) and Creswell (2009) explain that qualitative research includes investigational approaches that are helpful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon. In addition to this, Domegan and Fleming (2007) point out that qualitative research aims to explore and discover issues where nothing is known about the problem or where there is uncertainty about dimensions and characteristics of the problem. Keyton (2010:64) expands on this by noting that qualitative research is often referred to as “field research” and emphasises empirical and interpretative approaches applied to interaction. Thus, qualitative research can be understood as being exploratory and underlines interpretive approaches to communication with subjects, as well as highlights the importance of understanding their roles in the process of interaction. Creswell (2009:8) further unpacks interpretivism by stating that interpretive methodology involves uncovering and understanding phenomena from the researcher's standpoints in the social world. In other words, the views held by the researcher are considered in the quest for scientific inquiry.

It is essential that the qualitative researcher not only researches in accordance with their viewpoints and research objectives but also seeks to understand from the perspectives of the participants (Creswell, 2009). Thus, emphasis is placed on the importance of the researcher breaching the "distance" between themselves and those being researched to truly understand the experiences of the phenomenon through the participants’ “subjective worlds” (Jackson, 2013; Salvador, 2016). For the qualitative researcher to make informed decisions regarding the methodology to be chosen and prospective outcomes to be defended, it is imperative that the researcher considers both ontological and epistemological perspectives (Salvador, 2016). Differing ontological and epistemological positions held may lead to different research approaches towards the same phenomenon. However, the issue of how the social world can be understood and pragmatically unpacked still raises philosophical questions and criticisms (Scotland, 2012). In line with the above, table 8 below provides an overview of differences between quantitative versus qualitative research practice.
Table 8: Overview of differences between quantitative versus qualitative research practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Quantitative practice</th>
<th>Qualitative practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The assumption of the world:</td>
<td>• Single or “objective reality”</td>
<td>• Multiple realities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reality can be measured using an instrument</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific approach:</td>
<td>• Positivist approach (no room for interpretation)</td>
<td>• Interpretive approach (human-centered)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research purpose:</td>
<td>• To establish relationships between measured variables</td>
<td>• To understand a social situation from a participant’s perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research methods:</td>
<td>• Deductive research methods</td>
<td>• Inductive research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• A hypothesis is formulated before research starts</td>
<td>• Strategies are flexible and subject to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s role:</td>
<td>• The researcher is an &quot;objective&quot; observer and does not participate in the study</td>
<td>• Researcher participates and becomes immersed in the research setting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Mead (1962); November (2002); Davey (2004); Jeon (2004); Creswell (2009); Keyton (2010); Fawkes (2012); Littlejohn & Foss (2017).

5.2.2 Criticisms of qualitative research

“Research must be conducted objectively and factually, therefore avoiding the use of suppositions and possibilities” (Vyhmeister, 2008).

Hammersley (2007) adds to this by looking at the value of qualitative research, noting that researchers believe that qualitative practices do not serve evidence-based practice well. However, in contradiction, Hammersley (2007) also believes that it is vital for researchers to accept differences in research to allow for new findings and research methodologies to develop. On the other hand, Mays (1995) firmly believes that qualitative research is no more than a collection of personal impressions, all of which are strongly subject to researcher bias. Adding to criticisms surrounding qualitative research practice, Kvale (1994) lists the following critiques:

- Qualitative research practice is not scientific, but relies only on common sense, thus meaning that data collected and interpreted is subjective and immeasurable.
• Different researchers and interpreters will find different meanings in findings due to the explorative nature of the approach.

• Qualitative research does not yield generalisable results because there are too few subjects being targeted.

The challenge of conducting qualitative research in a way that sensitively and accurately captures the multiple levels of research is due to the respective data capturing methodologies, where the richness of interaction is reduced through tape recordings and transcription, as well as broader concerns over knowledge production and position (Riach, 2009:356-367). Salvador (2016) and Scotland (2012) agree by stating that ways of discovering such knowledge are subjective, where realities are multiple; as opposed to quantitative research where there is one objective reality. Miles, Huberman & Saldana (2013) suggest that the researcher's agenda or "personal bias" may skew the ability to represent the data collected and analysed effectively and objectively, which leaves scholars questioning the trustworthiness of the data. Sikes (2004) adds to this by stating that “researcher positionality” can shape the outcome of the study. The consideration of epistemological positioning is therefore crucial to decision-making within qualitative research, thus emphasising the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research practice. Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls and Ormston (2013) highlight three epistemological debates in social research to take note of, namely:

• **One – The way in which knowledge is best acquired:**
  Qualitative researchers cannot approach their research with a “blank mind”, even though the process of collecting data is inductive, as the questions to be addressed and categories employed are based on previous work in the field.

• **Two – The relationship between the researcher and the researched:**
  Some researchers believe that the relationship can be completely neutral and free from values; however, other researchers believe that the researcher absolutely cannot produce objective results as people will primarily be "affected by the process of being studied" and this will have an effect on the data retrieved. Therefore, the researcher-researched relationship should be seen as interactive and one of continuous cause and effect, whether intentional or not.

Ritchie et al. (2013) further suggest that the findings from data collected will, in essence, be understood in line with the researcher's values in mind. However, this highlights the need for researcher reflexivity, strengthening the importance of neutrality. In other words, it is understood that values cannot be absent within the researcher-researched relationship, but transparency and objectivity are emphasised.
• Three – Conformity with a particular theoretical tradition:

Researchers believe that although it is advisable to have an understanding of the theoretical standpoints related to the study at hand, this may also result in what is known as “epistemological determinism” (Hammersley, 2007). Epistemological determinism is frowned upon by researchers because ideological commitment may be used as an excuse for not thinking or adding new knowledge to the space (Hammersley, 2007). Thus, pragmatism and reflexivity are incredibly important within social research, as appropriate methods can be chosen to address specific questions, rather than alignment to a particular standpoint.

5.2.3 Reflexivity in qualitative research

According to Riach (2009:356), current research practice is dependent on the relationship between the researcher and the participant, and researchers are now required to be responsive to societal complexities, relating to the concept of sustainability, which Landlearn (2015) defines as the ability of something to be maintained over the long term without jeopardising society. Regarding the sustainability of research practice, Riach (2009:356) makes a note of the challenge of researching in a way that sensitively captures the multiple levels of research required by the qualitative researcher. In addition to this, Sue (1991) notes that researchers should be guided by societal and participant values when conducting qualitative social research and should, therefore, take a humanistic and reflexive research approach within practice.

The notion of reflexivity has become a priority on the research agenda, with Day (2012:56-60) defining reflexivity as “continual mindfulness of the social processes between the researcher and researched.” Day (2012:57) further reiterates this by stating that reflexivity can provide an understanding of the challenges, consequences and transformative potential of qualitative social research through offering the qualitative researcher a critical lens through which to analyse the methodology of qualitative research. As an example, reflexivity seeks to understand research challenges relating to subjectivity and issues of power in research relationships, and raises the following question: “What effect does the insertion of the self into the research process have upon the production of social knowledge?” (Day, 2012:56; Lal, 1996:200).

Naturally, power is exhibited within the relationship between the researcher and participant, as power between parties shifts back and forth in interviews, as an example. Researchers have the power to present certain versions of reality through authoring interpretations, but also ask questions and probe however they choose (Day, 2012:60). Importantly, Day (2012:60) notes that the participant also has the power to challenge the researcher by redirecting questions, thus meaning that this power can be attained, used, and switched throughout the research process by social actors. Hoffman (2007) states that the production of social research often neglects power shifts, and reflexive research analysis can, therefore, provide a starting point for thinking
about any power imbalances and how the researcher presents themselves, as well as how participants are represented. Thus, reflexivity can be understood as an ongoing process of self-awareness where the researcher can be understood as being a research tool.

Best (2003) contends with this by stating that researchers present themselves in particular ways, such as having integrity, and further notes that this can affect the kinds of research relationships experienced. Interestingly, Arber (2005:3) and Brewer (1994) comment on the notion of integrity by stating that reflexive analysis links to the practice of ethnography because it establishes the researcher's integrity and is seen as an essential element of ethnographic practice. Gooberman-Hill (2013:32-35) defines ethnography as a form of "participant observation", a multiple methods type of qualitative research used in an attempt to capture transdisciplinary research or understand the participant's actions, behaviours and knowledge. Ethnographic research methods can include field notes, interviews, surveys, and participant observation as an example, and is aimed at legitimacy and the achievement of a trusting researcher-participant relationship via inductive, exploratory research approach.

5.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

A research design typically includes how data is to be collected for a study, what instruments will be employed for obtaining the relevant data, how the instruments will be used and the intended means for analysing the relevant data collected (Business Dictionary, 2012). Due to the exploratory nature of the identified research problem for this study, an exploratory, qualitative research design was utilised, which Creswell (2008) defines as including investigational approaches that are helpful for exploring and understanding a central phenomenon. Malhotra and Birks (1999) add to this by defining exploratory research as a “flexible and evolving approach to understanding phenomena that may be difficult to measure." Thus, it can be noted that exploratory research links to inductive reasoning, which is a bottom-up approach centred on qualitative research practice, further defined by Dudovskiy (2018) as involving the "search for a pattern from observation". Hunter and Brewer (2006:39) point out that an inductive, exploratory qualitative research design allows for insight into human perceptions, and thus will assist in investigating the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals.

5.3.1 Research problem

Leedy and Ormrod (2005:49) state that a research problem serves as the starting point for research efforts, as well as serves as the axis on which the study revolves. Hunter and Brewer (2006:39) expand on this by stating that research problems represent an opportunity because
they indicate gaps in knowledge that need to be addressed. In terms of this particular study, the purpose of this research is imperative for the following reasons, namely:

- To understand to what extent a moral framework guides South African PR practice.
- To understand the perceptions of South African agency-based PR professionals in respect of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in South Africa, and
- To contribute to the understanding of what extent a moral philosophy guides individual PR practice in South Africa.

In line with the above, this study thus seeks to understand how ethicality is perceived and practiced by South African agency-based professionals and their management. Consequently, the research problem to be investigated is how South African agency-based PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice.

5.3.2 Research question

The following overarching research question can be noted as per the identified research problem:

- How do South African agency-based PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?

5.3.3 Research sub-questions

As related to the identified research question, three sub-questions can be noted, namely:

- What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?
- Do South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?
- How do the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making?

5.3.4 Research aims

In line with the identified research sub-questions, three research aims can be noted namely:

- To determine what South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice.
- To determine if South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice.
To determine how the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making.

5.3.5 Population and sample

“Researchers cannot make direct observations of every individual in the population they are studying; instead, they need to collect data from a subset of individuals known as a sample” (Crossman, 2012; Herek, 2012).

A sample should correspond to the broader population, and sampling methods should encompass the ability to make use of smaller groups of people to make inferences about larger groups of people that would be expensive to study as a whole (Bartlett, Higgins & Kotrlik, 2001). Two general approaches to sampling are used in research studies, namely probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling is a sampling technique whereby samples are “gathered in a process that gives all the individuals in the population equal chances of being selected” (Crossman, 2012; Herek, 2012). Types of probability sampling include the following: simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling and cluster sampling. Non-probability methods involve reliance on available subjects, such as stopping individuals on the streets or in shopping centres and, according to Crossman (2012), are sometimes referred to as a convenience or snowball sampling, and also include quota sampling and purposive sampling.

For this research, the method of purposive sampling, which is a type of non-probability sampling, will be utilised to select available and representative participants that will form part of the study. Thus, participants will be chosen intentionally for the goal of being able to effectively contribute towards exploring the identified research problem (Babbie, 2001; Carroll, 2012; Crossman, 2012). Regarding this particular study, the population for this research has been proposed as South African agency-based PR professionals serving stakeholder interests across different industries. More specifically, this study suggests a sample consisting of eight South African agency-based PR professionals serving stakeholder interests, which will be identified from within PR agencies suitable for answering the proposed research question.

An overview of the study sample selected can be viewed in table 9 below. The particular agency of each participant has been omitted for the sake of protecting the participants’ identities.
Table 9: Overview of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant professional overview</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Participant 1: Account Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Participant 2: Executive Director of Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Participant 3: Senior Account Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Participant 4: Account Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Participant 5: Founder &amp; Managing Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Participant 6: Senior Account Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Participant 7: Founder &amp; CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Participant 8: Co-Founder &amp; Director</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.6 Purposive sampling

Maxwell (1997:87) defines purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the critical information that they can provide, or when the entire population is unknown. These sampling frames are typically informal, as noted by Mason (2002:140) and are based on the judgement of the researcher being able to accurately choose participants that will be able to contribute towards answering the research problem and research questions effectively. Thus, an advantage of carrying out purposive sampling is the fact that the people who have been selected for the sampling have been chosen with a particular purpose already in mind. These participants therefore contribute towards making the process less time consuming because they have been selected purposefully and intentionally. However, a disadvantage of purposive sampling is the fact that the sample may not be representative of the larger population (Babbie, 2001; Crossman, 2012; Gliner & Morgan, 2000:154).

Purposive sampling techniques will be used to select appropriate participants, which Teddie and Yu (2007:80) state, have also been referred to as non-probability sampling. Maxwell (1997:87) further defines purposive sampling as a type of sampling in which particular settings, persons or events are deliberately selected for the critical information that they can provide. For the purpose of this study, participants will be selected if they currently work in a South African PR agency and can assist in contributing towards answering the research question related to uncovering the extent to which a moral framework for practice guides South African agency-based PR professionals. For the purpose of this research, the research question does not propose that the South African agency-based PR professionals are required to have a particular level of seniority or years in practice, thus participants across varied levels of seniority will be chosen randomly based on their availability in a South African PR agency. Participants’ varying roles and levels of experience within agency contexts will provide for comparison representative
of both junior and senior PR professionals in the PR industry. Importantly, specific gender and race will not be of relevance as the study does not seek to understand the differences or similarities in perceptions held per gender and race, but simply seeks to explore the perceptions held by PR professionals. South African agency-based PR professionals will be identified based on their accessibility to answer the proposed research question, and the relevant participants are already known to the researcher, specifically within the Gauteng region. In line with the above, such sampling frames are typically informal and are based on the judgement of the researcher while indicating that it may not produce a sample that is representative of a larger population (Gliner & Morgan, 2000:154; Mason, 2002:140).

5.4 METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

There are a variety of data collection methods in qualitative research, namely: observations, visual analysis and interviews (Silverman, 2000:8). Silverman (2000:8) highlights that interviews remain the most common method of data collection in qualitative research practice, with Shneiderman and Plaisant (2005) defining an interview is a method of gathering information through oral quiz using pre-planned core questions. Shneiderman and Plaisant (2005) go on to say that interviews can pursue specific issues that may lead to constructive suggestions, as well as are good at obtaining detailed information where few participants may still be sufficient in gathering rich, detailed data. Silverman (2000) adds to this by noting that there are three types of research interviews which can be unpacked as follows:

- **1) Structured interviews:** Structured interviews consist of a list of predetermined questions with no room for variation and follow-up questions, thus also limiting participants’ responses and “depth” required.

- **2) Semi-structured interviews:** Semi-structured interviews consist of essential questions that outline the areas of the study to be explored. These interviews allow for open-ended answers and probing, which may result in new questions being formulated while conducting an interview.

- **3) Unstructured interviews:** Unstructured interviews do not reflect any predetermined thoughts, theories or questions and as a result, may be time-consuming due to the absence of direction. Significant depth is required during such interviews, primarily because such interviews are conducted when little to no previous information exists about the subject in question.
Importantly, Silverman (2000) compares qualitative interviews with that of questionnaires which are used in quantitative research studies and notes that interviews provide "a deeper understanding" of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely scientific methods.

5.4.1 Semi-structured interviews

Regarding methods of data collection, this study proposes the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews in order to gather rich, detailed information using pre-planned core questions to guide the interviewer (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) further mention that semi-structured interviews allow the participants the flexibility to elaborate, as per the interview schedule, as well as enable the researcher to probe where needed as this is important in exploring the identified research phenomenon. As such, this study will involve semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, where open-ended, pre-planned questions will be posed to which participants will answer verbally via a face-to-face or telephonic interview, dependent on their availability. Importantly, the interview schedule will be designed to maximise interviewee freedom to produce rich, qualitative data. Important to note is that the data collection will be conducted personally, and not by an external researcher, where participants will be met individually and guided by the primary researcher.

5.4.2 Development of discussion guide

“Discussion guides are structured scripts created to assist the researcher in completing a research interview within the time available” (Cooper-Wright, 2016).

Cooper-Wright (2016) expands on this by stating that discussion guides should consist of essential questions that the researcher needs to ask those being researched, as well as examples of how and where to probe. Secondly, a timing plan should be developed to ensure that interviews run on schedule, as one-on-one interviews take up valuable time and those being researched need to be respected in this regard (Cooper-Wright, 2016). Hutchinson (2017) expands by unpacking useful tips for discussion guides, such as thanking the respondent for taking part, presenting the purpose of the research and why it is being done, outlining topics of discussion, reassuring participants that their answers are confidential and prompting participants to introduce themselves and ask questions. In addition, Hutchinson (2017) outlines that researchers should also take note of the following when developing discussion guides:

- Researchers should keep the study objectives in mind when developing the discussion guide questions
- Time limits should be allocated per section to keep track of time during the interview
Researchers should develop probes that will ensure more detailed responses from participants. For example, researchers should ask participants to give real-life examples when answering questions listed in the discussion guide.

Concerning this research study, qualitative approaches to gathering research were undertaken and a discussion guide populated with a formalised set of questions was created to be utilised during each in-depth interview conducted. Siniscalco and Auria (2005:3) state that the discussion guide contains a formalised set of questions for obtaining information from participants and questions that assist in the investigation of the intended subject. Additionally, the discussion guide is standardised because each respondent is to be exposed to the same questions (Siniscalco & Auria, 2005:3) and the aim is to ensure that differences in responses to questions can reflect any differences among participants. Utilising standardised questions during the interview is important because this standardisation allows for the useful collection of facts, activities, level of knowledge, opinions, expectations, and aspirations and attitudes and perceptions concerning the research questions to be addressed (Siniscalco & Auria, 2005:4). Questions in the discussion guide can be seen in table 10 below (see APPENDIX A).

Table 10: Overview of interview questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe what you do in your role as a PR professional.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do you regard yourself as accountable for the way that you serve these interests? Why/why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How do you respond to any conflicting interests?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What, in your opinion, constitutes ethical communication practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What, in your opinion, constitutes unethical communication practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR professional? Why/why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Can you explain the similarities and/or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes, please elaborate on whether the system is adequate or state whether there are grey areas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
12. What kind of role(s) do you think PR professionals should be enacting in the South African context?
13. Any other comments or observations?

5.5 QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected by addressing the research problem and research question will be recorded and unpacked in accordance to qualitative data analysis, which Thomas (2003) states is an inductive approach because it allows research findings to emerge from any dominant or frequently recurring themes organically. Bogdan and Bilked (2003) concur by stating that qualitative data analysis includes working with and organising data to discover patterns, themes and meanings and comparing them to identified trends. Emerging categories will form an essential part of qualitative thematic analysis where the researcher will make contrasts and comparisons following the transcription of recorded interviews.

5.5.1 Transcription

According to Bailey (2008), the representation of data, both written and visual, forms part of an interpretive process called transcribing – one of the first steps in analysing qualitative data. Davidson (2009) agrees with Bailey by noting that transcription is a theoretical, selective and interpretive process. Bailey (2008) adds to this by stating that the data for a qualitative study may comprise written data such as field notes and documents, visual data such as non-verbal cues from interviews, and audible data from recordings of interviews to be transcribed. Thus, the following can be drawn from the abovementioned definitions of transcription:

- The process of transcription involves documenting and affirming positions; thus, all transcription is inherently selective, as selectivity is enacted while making sense of talk and interaction during the interview recorded.
- Transcribing involves the transformation of audible and visual data to text.
- Transcribing is a process of revision, and this revision is essential to the trustworthiness of the qualitative study, primarily when an external researcher has been employed to transcribe findings concerning the research goals.

Importantly, Lapadat (2000) notes that the researcher should think about transcription before the process begins to ensure that the interviews yield a transcript that enables the research goals of the study to be addressed. Transcribing challenges are also important to note, which includes transcriptionist errors due to external transcribers being utilised and the absence of direction given from the researcher regarding the study (Davidson, 2009). For this study, in-depth
interviews were recorded via a mobile recorder and were then transcribed immediately following the completion of the interview. Additionally, interviews were transcribed word-for-word to ensure that messages did not deviate from what was noted by the participants (see APPENDIX F). In line with the abovementioned information, the transcription template for this study is depicted in table 11 below.

Table 11: Transcription template

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position title:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time period spent in current position:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time period spent working in PR:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting line:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview length:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of interview:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Interviewer greets participant and begins with interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewer: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant: xxxxx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finish</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- END OF AUDIO -</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5.2 Qualitative thematic content analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis can be defined as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data collected.” In line with the purpose of this particular study, a thematic content analysis will be used to explore the meanings represented in the recorded and transcribed data, where data will be examined and categorised into themes as per the research questions (Anderson, 2007; Neuman, 1997:273; Seale, 2004). Thus, categorisation of themes, using keywords and meaning units, will ensure that the researcher can make comparisons and contrasts between patterns of data (Anderson, 2007). Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) suggest that when the researcher is working
through text, it is imperative that any patterns that “jump out” are noted and are condensed by grouping sets of similar information into clusters. Therefore, clustering allows the researcher the opportunity to understand a phenomenon better and is a tactic that can be applied to many levels of qualitative information. Seale (2004) adds to the definition of clustering and concurs by stating that data is broken down and grouped into discrete parts, examined and compared for further similarities or differences.

Braun and Clarke (2006) further provide six steps for carrying out a thematic analysis and additionally note that these steps should be used in relation to the particular research question and available data noted and collected throughout the study. These six steps are summarised as follows:

- **Step 1 - Familiarising yourself with your data:**
  
  This step provides the foundation for the analysis, and it is essential that the researcher comprehensively understand the content collected. Ideally, the researcher should transcribe the data first, then re-listen to the recordings and read the transcripts to avoid forming premature conclusions.

- **Step 2 - Generating initial codes:**
  
  Once the researcher is familiar with the data collected, the researcher is required to start identifying codes, which are the interesting or meaningful features of the data.

- **Step 3 - Searching for themes:**
  
  This step is centred on an interpretive thought process and data is sorted according to overarching themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) point out that themes should not be confused with codes, as codes are more specific and numerous than themes. In other words, information is grouped and coded according to similar themes, and the researcher would search for themes amongst the codes.

  According to Saldana (2009), questions to consider while coding may include the researcher asking the following:

  - What assumptions are participants making?
  - What did I learn from note taking?
  - What am I trying to accomplish?
  - Why is the respondent repeating this?

  In short, coding helps the researcher to find more possibilities for analysis and will ensure that the researcher identifies as many commonalities as possible, or patterns to be focused on and interpreted, even if seemingly irrelevant at first glance.
• **Step 4 - Reviewing themes:**

This step involves the researcher checking and reviewing themes in relation to codes, as well as ensuring whether specific themes should be combined, separated or discarded in order to warrant meaningful interpretations of data collected.

• **Step 5 - Defining and naming themes:**

This step may involve the researcher checking for sub-themes, and finally; naming the themes and providing clear definitions which concisely capture the theme’s “essence”. At this stage, data should start to form a “story” in line with the specified research questions to be addressed.

• **Step 6 - Producing the report:**

This is the final step of the thematic analysis, and it involves the researcher transforming their analysis into a coherent piece of writing concerning the literature and research problem and questions provided. This interpretation should include examples and evidence that addresses the research goals, all while ensuring the validity of data.

In terms of this particular study, data was analysed manually and grouped into categories which depended on the aims, objectives and theoretical framework of the research.

5.6 THE ROLE OF THE REFLECTIVE RESEARCHER

Motari (2015) asserts that researchers should be able to “reflect deeply in order to be competent professionals of research.” Marshall and Rossman (2006) support this by stating that the researcher's presence in the lives of the researched in qualitative studies is fundamental to the methodology. As previously noted, ethical decision-making for communication professionals includes the practice of reflection, otherwise referring to openness to multiple perspectives from the outside in (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002:57; Verwey, 2015:7). Further substantiating the importance of the reflective role that researchers are required to play, Bolton (2009) explains that reflection is an ongoing state of mind and a component of communication practice, which can enable researchers and professionals to do the following:

- Continually ask questions and learn from their experiences by enabling enquiry into what professionals believe
- Gain insight into how professional’s actions match with their beliefs, and lastly
- Understand how professionals take into account their personal feelings within role enactment.
In line with this, Motari (2015) mentions that the researcher is expected to ensure that ethical principles are considered by ensuring deep reflection throughout research practice. Motari (2015) further highlights that researchers are required to learn about the practice of reflection because it will ensure that the researcher gains an "awoke" stance about their lived experiences and positionality within the research process. Concerning this particular study, the researcher's reflective role includes the consideration of ethical principles, the responsibility of comprehensively unpacking and utilising a discussion guide through the data collection; and importantly, reflecting upon how participants may or may not have been affected and influenced by the researcher within the process. Additionally, the researcher vows to hold a completely neutral standpoint while probing participants and will deeply reflect on responses delivered to avoid conforming to personal bias. This links to validity and reliability in research, as researchers are required to practice reflection to legitimate and validate research procedures.

5.6.1 Ethical considerations

Research ethics signify the credibility of researchers in the community, and ethical norms help to ensure that researchers can be held accountable for their actions in a research study (Resnik, 2015). For example, researchers cannot fabricate data or jeopardise the safety of those involved in the study. The University of Connecticut (2017) expands on this by stating that there are five critical ethical principles that need to be followed by all researchers, namely:

1. Obtain informed consent from participants
2. Minimise harm to the participants
3. Protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants
4. Avoid deceptive practices by avoiding the fabrication of data to conform to the researcher's ideals
5. Ensure that the participants are aware that they can remove themselves from the research process at any time.

In line with the above-mentioned ethical principles, this research has been conducted honestly, accurately, and confidentially while ensuring that the well-being of participants was protected (see APPENDIX B & C). In line with this, permission and written consent were sought from the identified organisations and participants before undertaking any research (see APPENDIX D & E). Furthermore, the purpose of the study was clearly explained to participants, and participants were made aware of the type of information needed for the study, all participants were made aware of how they are expected to participate, and they were made aware that their participation is voluntary. Lastly, the researcher aimed to ensure that the final results are unbiased and did not deviate from the fundamental questions and objectives of the study or conformed to any of the researcher’s assumptions.
According to Thanasegaran (2009:35), validity and reliability lie at the heart of a competent and effective study, and research will not be accurate and reliable, nor will it be productive, if the instrument used to collect the data does not measure what is intended. Validity determines whether the research indeed estimates what it was designed to measure or how accurate the research results are (Golafshani, 2003). Creswell and Miller (2000) further suggest that the validity is affected by the researcher's perception of efficacy in the study, as well as their ideas and assumptions. Reliability is characterised by the degree to which measures are free from error and yield consistent, replicable results, as well as if a measurement device consistently assigns the same score to individuals or objects (Thanasegaran, 2009:35). In other words, the instrument is then considered reliable. Thus, the following can be noted about the concepts of validity and reliability; validity refers to whether the means of measurement are accurate and measure what they are intended to measure.

Other methods used to ensure reliability in a study include that of pilot testing, which is utilised during this study. Willis (2005:8) describes pilot testing as an essential step in a research study, and it will contribute towards ensuring those questionnaire items can measure the domains of interest reliability and validly and help to identify ways to improve the questionnaire before it is sent out to be completed. The data collection instrument that is utilised for an investigation should be pilot tested or pretested with prospective participants as this will ensure whether the instrument will be appropriate to be used and whether it can easily be understood (Ho, 2005:246). Regarding this particular research, the researcher ensured that validity and reliability were achieved in the following ways:

- The researcher ensured data quality of the completed thematic analysis through checking for representativeness, checking for researcher effects on the study, and finally, by getting feedback from the participants (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013:277-321).
- The researcher conducted a pilot study before interviewing participants to ensure that the interview schedule did not deviate from the intended research objectives.
- Lastly, the completed transcripts were checked by the researcher to ensure that there were no mistakes, and participants were included throughout the analysis process to verify the accuracy of messaging, thus ensuring consistency and reliability in the research (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013). Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) link this to triangulation, a method to determine qualitative data validity and more specifically, “the cross-verification of data from two or more sources.”
5.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter detailed research methodology and methods in line with qualitative research. The identification of the research problem which concerns the investigation of what constitutes a moral framework for South African agency-based PR professionals guided the qualitative methods chosen. Strong emphasis has been placed on the use of purposive sampling as part of an inductive research design, as well as semi-structured in-depth interviews being scheduled in order to adequately collect data for the purpose of this study. Referring back to Fawkes (2012:177) and Howe (1985), open-ended qualitative research approaches are welcomed in the social world and are human-centred because they acknowledge the rights of people to draw their own conclusions (November, 2002:117). In line with this, this particular study structure characterised qualitative approaches in view of the fact that it attempted to understand what constitutes ethical PR practice from the perspectives of professionals, as well as investigated participants' perceptions and experiences in their efforts to communicate ethically. This further supports Domegan and Fleming's (2007) views on qualitative research aiming to explore and discover issues where nothing is known about the problem or where there is uncertainty about dimensions and characteristics of the problem.

In closing, a qualitative thematic content analysis of the study results will follow in the next section when findings will be discussed and interpreted in an attempt to:

- Understand to what extent a moral framework guides South African PR practice,
- To determine if South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice; and to,
- Determine how the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

6.1. INTRODUCTION

“It is essential that the qualitative researcher not only researches in accordance to their viewpoints and research objectives but also seeks to understand from the perspectives of the participants. Thus, emphasis is placed on the importance of the researcher breaching the distance between themselves and those being researched to truly understand the experiences of the phenomenon through the participants’ subjective worlds” (Creswell, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Salvador, 2016).

This chapter discusses and interprets the study’s key findings noted in line with the literature unpacked in chapters two until four, as well as the responses retrieved from qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted with eight PR professionals serving stakeholder interests within agency contexts. These interviews were each recorded and transcribed in order to allow for a qualitative thematic content analysis following the completion of data collection. The proposed timeframe for these in-depth interviews was thirty to sixty minutes in duration, however, participants of this study contributed to conversations lasting between forty-three minutes up until just under two hours in an attempt to fully articulate themselves and properly contribute towards answering the key research questions. The transcribed responses of each participant have been carefully understood and analysed by the researcher, who looked for similarities and differences between the patterns of data. Importantly, the researcher ensured that a reflective role was undertaken whilst analysing data in order to legitimate and validate research procedures, as well as remain a competent professional of research.

To recap, this study aimed to understand how ethicality is perceived and practiced by South African agency-based PR professionals. Consequently, the research problem investigated was how South African agency-based PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice. The following research aims guided this investigation and data collection process, namely:

- To determine what South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice.
- To determine if South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice.
- To determine how the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making.
In terms of this particular study, the purpose of this research was imperative in terms of understanding to what extent a moral framework guides South African PR practice, as well as understanding the perceptions of South African agency-based PR professionals in respect of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in South Africa. The specific conclusions linked with the above-mentioned research problem, aims and the rationale driving the research are detailed below.

6.2 OVERVIEW OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

In terms of this particular study, data was analysed manually and grouped into areas of importance which depended on the aims, objectives and theoretical framework of the research. Braun and Clarke’s six steps for carrying out a thematic analysis were used to make sense of data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2006), namely:

- **Step 1 - Familiarising yourself with your data:** After each of the eight interviews conducted with agency-based PR professionals, the researcher had the recorded data transcribed by external transcribers. The researcher then listened to each recording to ensure that recordings and transcriptions were aligned and to check that there were no deviations from participants’ interviews.

- **Step 2 - Generating initial codes:** Once the researcher was familiar with the data collected, the researcher manually coded the eight transcriptions, highlighting commonalities, differences and interesting or meaningful features. For example, any interesting findings which stood out were noted.

- **Step 3 - Searching for themes:** Once the transcribed data was coded, the researcher searched for themes and grouped the important information together into areas of importance. Importantly, the researcher reflected on the aims of the study. Any handwritten notes taken during interviews were used to support the identified themes. What helped the researcher, was to tabulate participants’ answers per interview question.

- **Step 4 - Reviewing themes:** The researcher checked and reviewed themes in line with the research questions of the study, in order to warrant meaningful findings related to the overall purpose of the study.

- **Step 5 - Defining and naming themes:** Here, the researcher confirmed all areas of importance and named each area in line with a specified research question in mind.

- **Step 6 - Producing the report:** This is the final step of the thematic analysis, and the start of the researcher’s interpretation of the data, with examples and evidence included from the transcriptions.
6.3 PARTICIPANT PARTICULARS AND KEY FOR CONTENT ANALYSIS

In understanding and unpacking each participant’s transcribed interview, it is important to highlight the level of seniority amongst each participant in order to assess how participants compare in their perceptions and to identify whether differences are a result of the levels of experience held amongst each professional within their agency contexts. Table 12 below provides an overview of the participant key for analysis throughout this chapter, as well as participant profiles and levels of seniority, while still disguising their identity and agencies employed at in order to ensure for anonymity as promised during collection.

Table 12: Overview of participants’ levels of seniority

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key for analysis</th>
<th>Position within agency context</th>
<th>Years of experience in PR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant 1 (P1):</td>
<td>Account manager</td>
<td>1.7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 2 (P2):</td>
<td>Executive Director of Strategy</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 3 (P3):</td>
<td>Senior Account Manager</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 4 (P4):</td>
<td>Account Director</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 5 (P5):</td>
<td>Founder &amp; Managing Director</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 6 (P6):</td>
<td>Senior Account Executive</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 7 (P7):</td>
<td>Founder &amp; CEO</td>
<td>15 years (25 years in industry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant 8 (P8):</td>
<td>Co-Founder &amp; Director</td>
<td>16 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of eight participants, four participants have between one and a half and five years of experience in PR, whilst the remaining four participants have over fifteen years’ experience within the industry and within agency contexts. Four of these participants were males and the remaining four participants were females. Interestingly, three of eight participants founded their agencies. Participants’ varying roles and levels of experience within agency contexts provides for comparison equally representative of both junior and senior PR professionals in industry.

6.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As per the participant profiles listed above, and in understanding and categorising the key findings of this study, the following nine (9) areas presented reoccurring and noteworthy findings in terms of investigating was how South African PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in agency contexts:

- Worldviews held by PR professionals in PR agency contexts
- Individual versus community outlooks in PR practice
- Modern versus postmodern PR practice
The study’s findings are discussed in line with each of the nine abovementioned themes. Data that aligns to each of these themes has been further unpacked into relevant sub-themes discussed below which provide more in-depth, granular information in line with each main theme.

6.4.1 Worldviews held by PR professionals in PR agency contexts

In order to adequately unpack this theme, the researcher has referred back to a self-developed model (see figure 9) presented in chapter 4 which summarises the key debates and outlooks detailed in the literature, namely: principles of postmodern and modern ethics. This model guided thought and analysis in investigating what particular worldview is held by PR professionals in agency contexts. In understanding what worldviews are held by professionals, it is also necessary to refer back to the literature and understand that communication disciplines were previously developed as specialty functions within a modernistic world, where the existence of a single truth can be applied to all people at all times (Lyotard, 1984). The postmodern environment that society now functions in stresses the importance of more holistic approaches to understanding the complexities of society and examining organisational phenomena (Hallahan et al, 2007:4).

In line with the above, data collected emphasised that PR agencies find themselves to be products of a paradigmatic paradox, with PR professionals practicing both asymmetrically and symmetrically in order to meet not only the agency’s needs, but also those of the clients and the public. This confirms literature on ethical PR conduct, which states that professionals simultaneously satisfy three distinct duties, namely: duty to self, client and society (Lieber, 2008). In most cases, professionals’ interviews suggested that professionals are not morally confused, but rather morally ambivalent. In other words, professionals tend to respond from a position of moral relativism, where they have to weigh various interests. This may lead to role strain as a result of the moral tensions that arise between these interests. In line with this, professionals’ responses below provided insight into the fact that they struggle to practice symmetrically within modernist environments.
Asymmetrical PR practice:

Interestingly, Grunig (2014) states that PR professionals cannot always practice symmetrical PR but explains that they can explain why certain actions cannot be disclosed (asymmetrical PR). Messages that are truthful but do not reveal all the information are also considered asymmetrical but can be symmetrical if the professional reveals the reasons for the selective secrecy (Grunig, 2014). Participant 2 (P2), an Executive Director of Strategy, comments on asymmetrical PR practices by labelling it as “omission”, further elaborated below. In other words, there is a distinct level of moral laxity.

“It’s called omission, and it's almost like when you’re told to tell the truth and then you kind of tell it, but you leave something out. And, because our industry, when we train, even from a college or university perspective, we are trained to bring out the best in the client… put that first, and then the stuff that’s negative somewhere in the bottom of the release or shine this item until it really sparkles and take the best picture of it. That’s our natural training, and nothing wrong with that… but I do think that sometimes, when it comes to complex and serious matters that can have a negative effect on anyone or society or anything like that, it can be omission, and I think one has got to be very careful that they’re not finding themselves in that practice of omission.” ~ P2

Participant 6 (P6), a Senior Account Executive, further elaborates upon P2’s views on omission, unpacking asymmetrical PR practice below:

“Sometimes the work requires you to keep some things from certain people, but it is operating with transparency to say listen I can't disclose this particular thing to you at the moment but just be aware that that is my current standing and I won't be able to tell you at this time or whatever it may be. So, it’s just operating with transparency and respect and also an understanding of the scope of work that everyone individually has in all their different roles.” ~ P6

In line with this, Grunig (1989:57) explains that professionals must essentially prove that their asymmetrical actions will not harm others, which opposes what participant 1 (P1), an Account Manager, speaks to below in terms of their client’s targeting as a financial services provider. P1 explains that they face an ethical dilemma with their client when it comes to the omission of important financial information that misleads their target audience – an audience in the same LSM group as the participant.

“…they encourage a certain lifestyle that most of them can’t really afford and they continue to drive that message heavily…they will target young black males, offer them car loans that they can’t really afford and then from that we need to motivate for the spokespeople in the financial segment to talk on those radio stations that we know that
young black males actually communicate on in order to drive this message and actually convince them they can afford this, even though we all know that they can't. They can't afford a certain luxury vehicle, if we give them the luxury vehicles then the only things they can afford based on their salary because we've done all the research is their rent and obviously the car. That means that they're going to have to get money elsewhere to survive for the rest of the month and as a financial institution, they have that information they're going to offer you a loan and you're going to take it up. You're forever in the cycle of debt with them, and that's really difficult because we know what they're doing… and to communicate that is very, very hard with the client because they also have their KPIs that they are given by business. It's very difficult to manage the communication and it's very unethical at the end of the day.” ~ P1

The above statement shows the “omission” which P2 speaks to in terms of withholding selective pieces of information in order to highlight positive messaging to serve in the best interests of the organisation, rather than shine light on the negatives in the best interests of the consumer. This is supported by Edgett (2002) who explains that an asymmetrical worldview of communication practice is persuasive, based the controlling of the public, and is based on self-interest or only caring for the well-being of the organisation. Participant 7 (P7), a Founder and CEO, provides similar feedback to P2, by also referring to the asymmetry prevalent in the communication practices of financial services institutions.

“I worked for a financial services institution where, as a consumer of financial services products and as someone who knows people who consume financial services products, I was aware that what we were promising in our communication as living up to our values was in contrast to the actual experience that consumers were getting.” ~ P7

This aligns to Rensburg and Cant’s (2003:40-43) description of early PR, which was known as “one-way persuasive communication” which persuades publics and defends the business interests of the organisation. Secondly, such practice highlights that honesty, a professional value which forms part of an emergent framework to foster ethical communication, is missing. PRISA (2012) states that the PR professional must act in ways that are truthful and accurate while advancing the interests of those being represented, and although the ethical dilemmas outlined by P1 and P7 are linked to their organisation’s and client’s directives, it is still a reflection of their own decision-making and individual moral compass because ethics begins with the individual’s responsibility to the other. Lloyd (2018) exclaims that PR professionals need to push back on clients expecting unethical practice in driving work; however, the reason behind P1 and P7’s decisions to follow through with PR practices in such instances may be linked to what Radford (2012) believes in terms of PR professionals controlling information to the
advantage of the commissioning interests - a modernist view which still dominates the profession.

Based on P1’s response, there was, however, an attempt made to push back to client, even though unsuccessful. In cases where organisational leaders and clients do not listen to the opinions of those in agency contexts, Stoker (2005:271-283) explains that the professional needs to reflect on whether top management has the capacity to change. This is especially important because literature suggests that ethical behaviour is filtered down from the top (Rossouw, 2016). P1 and P7’s loyalty to the client in these cases shows that an act-centered theory of morality was followed, as this theory focuses on duty and consequences (ethics of conduct). Although dissatisfied with the asymmetrical, modernist client practice, P1 and P7 still acted on the task, regardless of their ability to both clearly articulate what constitutes unethical, monological PR practice.

“Unethical communication practice is any form of one-way communication that is intended to not have the consumer’s best interests at heart…agencies are put in place to communicate between brands and organisations. For me whatever is being communicated does not sit with me ethically or morally, it’s a red flag and I think because it’s my opinion I feel like as soon as something is not in the best interests of the consumer it’s very unethical. It’s very unethical, it’s a red flag, and it should never be done at all to begin with. As soon as it hurts the consumer… we’re trying to educate, we’re trying to make the consumer’s life better but as soon as the communication is unethical, the communicating is driving or persuading the public to do something that doesn’t sit well with me personally I feel like it’s unethical.” ~ P1

In summary, the above outlooks of P1 and P7 align with Edgett’s (2002) views on an asymmetrical worldview of communication being characterised by one-way monologue communication, or in other words, communication with the public isn’t totally reciprocal. Importantly, Holmstrom (2004:264) links such one-way monologue which does not serve the interests of the public with that of reflexivity, further noting that reflexive professionals and organisations operate according to one specific reality, thus linking to that of modernity’s emphasis on one single truth applying to everyone at all times. In this case, decisions would be applied “blindly”, as Holmstrom (2004:264) emphasises in literature, further explaining that reflexive communication avoids an exchange of viewpoints and diversified learning from the outside in. Therefore, although participants were morally aware of the unethical practices, their ability to fully exercise individual moral accountability was either not prioritised or their efforts were ignored from top management. This speaks to the culture of the agency and the community of practice where such moral laxity is tolerated from clients and encouraged amongst professionals.
Participant 5 (P5), a Founder and Managing Director, provided insight into an example of asymmetrical, one-way monologue PR practice they had experienced in their time as a junior practitioner. To summarise, P5 worked in a company where their business unit was being sold and misleading promises were being made to staff members. P5 was a part of the communication team that was responsible for unpacking that journey as transparently and honestly as possible, but the organisation was not open to being entirely honest about organisational decisions that could adversely affect staff members. According to P5, the organisation was making false promises such as “whoever buys the business promises to not retrench within the first year or two”, inaccurate information that P5 could not justify.

“We were not giving people enough information to make informed decisions about their own futures. We were not being honest, we were not being open and transparent about the way we communicated. We took a very clinical stance that was not thoughtful.” ~ P5

P5 explained that they too were at a junior at the time and their opinion did not have a big impact on top management’s decision-making in terms of what the final outcome would be. However, P5 expressed that this did not stop them from speaking out and voicing their concerns, further expressing that they looked for alternative employment whilst completing their initial job.

“So yes, sure I said what I said, but it wasn’t going to change people’s minds… I did my responsibility, I did what I could, which was obviously to satisfy my own conscious [SIC] in terms of knowing that I’m doing the right thing by speaking out and not keeping quiet in that space and obviously owning that. But at some point, I started looking for another job, because I felt like it does not feel comfortable for me. …because I’m passionate about the practice and the value that the practice brings to a business, so I come from that perspective that when I leave an organisation I want… so for me, I’m always cognizant of the practice because I understand the fact that a lot of organisations don’t value PR as a strategic tool, as a strategic management discipline. I feel for me, my presence in an organisation is also an advocate of the value of what PR is about.” ~ P5

Based on the above example, the participant adopted an act-centered theory of morality underpinned by duty and obligation (deontological ethics) that is outcome-based in line with universal principles that can be applied in any situations. Such decision-making focuses on the intention for an action and then being assessed to see whether it confirms to a specific duty such as always telling the truth and doing no harm unto others. Additionally, P5 shines light on a single controlling authority, one-way monologue and the standardisation of tasks, all linked to asymmetrical practice. P5, however, remained true to their values in this regard, ultimately
leaving the organisation upon completion of the work. What can be noted with P5’s thinking is the importance of person-organisation value congruence, expanded on by Irvine (2010) who explains that professionals struggle to experience meaningfulness in their work if they are expected to behave in ways that are inconsistent with the highest values they espouse to themselves and others. Importantly, asymmetrical professionals see themselves as advocates of the values of their clients, whereas this participant sees him/herself as an advocate of the profession which is reflective of a postmodernist mindset.

- **Symmetrical PR practice:**

In contrast to asymmetrical communication practice, professionals were all very clear in highlighting the fact that PR professionals should work beyond their traditional job scopes and fees earned, and rather aim to positively influence society, change behaviours, and truly accommodate the other’s interests into all communication practice. This view supports Rensburg and Cant’s (2009:261) views on symmetrical communication being the “total accommodation of the public’s interests” versus the organisation’s self-interest. Grunig (1989:51) noted that a symmetrical worldview of communication aims to bring about change both internally and externally, and this was supported by all professionals who unanimously believed that it is the responsibility as PR professionals to positively contribute to society, shape narratives, and understand that as much as the practice does contribute towards the bottom line, it should not be the only role that PR plays for a client and for the brand. P5 expands on the fact that their job is never just their job, and they feel they absolutely have a responsibility to understand their moral commitments and social contracts with the community. This particular outlook shows that the participant holds an agent-centred theory of morality, a non-consequentialist moral theory based on ethics of character and living in accordance to a set of virtues.

“A job is never just a job for me. I don’t sway from where I’m standing because of money in most cases. You don’t want to have to sway your own values just for the sake of revenue.” ~P5

Interestingly, this participant is seen to hold both an agent and act-centered theory of morality, given his/her feedback on asymmetrical communication practice. However, it can be noted that the participant was occupying a junior level role at the time of the initial ethical dilemma, as opposed to where he/she is now in terms of their reflective thinking as a management-level professional. Another interesting difference here is that other professionals commented on the fact that revenue pressures adversely affected their ability to communicate ethically, so this outlook on revenue is not equally held amongst all participants. This speaks to PR professionals as a hired gun that can subjugate responsibility for their actions elsewhere.
However, P8 compares similarly with P5’s views on pragmatic PR practice. P8’s views are indicative of a non-negotiable personal framework; hence there is a limit to each individual’s ethics of intersubjectivity.

“No amount of money is worth breaking your morals. I’m sorry. I don’t care how much money you want to pay me.” ~ P8

P7 also contends with P5, making note of the importance of recognising the other in decision-making, thus linking to symmetrical communication practice. Symmetrical communication practice emphasises understanding and accommodating the public’s voice into decision-making via open, dialogical approaches (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012:6), thus aligning to communitarian ethics – a community outlook.

“We have to equally understand the impact and the influence of communication, and, when we do and we understand what the impact of our clients or the companies we work for is to society, we’re then able to provide solutions, to provide advice that will constantly place our clients, will place our employees in the right sort of space that keeps them aligned to society’s expectations, to expectations of their own stakeholders. That, to me, is what PR practitioners should be enacting in the South African context. Influencing society and changing behaviours. If we can influence our clients in a way that positively impacts their constituencies, we’ve done our job, and that job goes beyond just delivering to our scope and earning our fees.” ~ P5

6.4.2 Individual versus community outlooks in PR practice

Based on the findings noted above and the unanimous shared sense of wanting to contribute toward societal betterment through PR practice, professionals hold a strong community-based outlook. Professionals believe that there needs to be an appreciation of the other’s voice and reality, as well as constant reflection on whether communication practice that is in the interest of the public. This aligns with literature outlining communitarian ethics, which when applied professionally, suggests that what is best for the community is in the best interests of the organisation because of the interdependence between an organisation and the community (Regis University, 2018). Secondly, literature on communitarian thought shines light on communitarian leadership which aligns with all participants’ perceptions on what they believe should be the role of PR professionals today – a symmetrical role underpinned by dialogical, communitarian principles. The abovementioned literature aligns directly with at least four out of eight participants who hold a clear communitarian outlook within role enactment. P7 states the following:

“Because I exist in a community and I have a role in that community. Whether small or big, I have a role in the community in which I exist. As a company, we are a corporate
citizen. So, as a generator of economic activity as well as an enabler of economic activity, there is an interest that we serve that is bigger than ourselves as individuals where we’re playing a role in the community. In delivering our services, we assist institutions to communicate better. In communicating better, they improve their delivery to their constituents. So, there’s a very strong community element to what we do.” ~ P7

The abovementioned view also correlates with literature on virtuous leadership and practice, where PR practice in this regard is designed to foster the following, as touched on above by P7:

- Interpersonal relationships, meaningful work, enhanced learning, and personal development.
- Social betterment extending beyond mere self-interested benefit.

P5 concurs with P7’s outlook by emphasising that their individual views do not matter within the context in which they operate, as decisions are not theirs alone, but include the views and decision of the other. Therefore, moral accountability is perceived as external to the individual professional.

“I feel like my responsibility is to myself so if I want to make a particular decision and it feels right with me then I make that decision. But the difference with my business is that I try to maintain a certain level, to create a standard of what is acceptable within the community that we operate in and that is the level that determines the decision. So, the decision is not mine alone, it is looking at what is good for everyone. It’s about the good of the community because them not delivering is affecting everyone.” ~ P5

P5 continued to elaborate on the fact that holding a communitarian outlook means understanding that as professionals, we are accountable to the other.

“As PR practitioners we can’t knowingly get into situations that are to the detriment of the community. By community I mean us as a country. So, we have that ethical responsibility towards our community of fellow South Africans.” ~ P5

Both P5 and P7’s communitarian views held correlate with the reflective paradigm of PR practice, as this perspective ensures that the organisation considers themselves to be a greater part of society and “sees themselves from the outside in” (Holmstrom, 2004:262). Van Heerden and Rensburg (2005:72) corroborate by stating that such reflective practice links to the socially-responsible behaviour of the organisations and enables the organisation to see itself as part of a larger societal context and become aware of what is happening in society in order to reach a mutual understanding with all stakeholders. Reflective, communitarian practice, as reflected in P5 and P7 above opposes reflexive practice which does not consider the environment in which
the organisation operates, where decisions are applied “blindly” and the organisation operates according to one specific reality, thus linking to that of modernity’s emphasis on one single truth applying to everyone at all times. Reflective practice will ensure that there is a responsibility for actions which is essential for responsible and ethical communication practice, and thus linked to a symmetrical worldview of communication.

In line with a community outlook, participant 8 (P8), a Co-Founder and Director, voluntarily spoke to their agency’s perceptions of a moral framework for practice rather than their individual views held. This participant believes that their agency is “run like a cog” where everyone has to work together and even though they sit in a management-level position; they also perform technician-level roles to model equality within their agency culture. P8 is an example of a communitarian leader, encapsulated in the quote below:

“I would talk broadly about the agency and not necessarily myself because the agency works as a cog…or that we have functions that everybody has to work together. And, because we’re such a flat structure here, everybody gets their hands dirty once the client comes on board. So, I’ll give you this example… I don’t sit in my throne in an office and direct my teams. I sit open plan. I sit diagonally opposite an Intern and opposite an Account Manager. Behind me is an Account Director, behind her is a Business Director, and then that corner is my business partner… over there’s the content team. We’re all part of this team and, if I need to do PR, I do PR. I love that part of how we work together as a team, that everybody just does everything. Treat people as your equals and treat people fairly, pay them well, listen to them, and I think my key philosophy is I will trust you until you give me a reason not to, and not the other way around.” ~ P8

P8 continues to speak to compassionate leadership as being an important element of their agency culture and how they operate as a leader and PR professional:

“Yes go to your uncle’s bedside if he’s had a liver transplant and take family responsibility leave. So, we are very flexible because everything we do is for people number one. If it was me in that position, what would I want? We just get it. As an organisation, we get it, and I trust you until you give me a reason not to. I’ll go back to that. ~ P8

Communitarian leaders are shaped by the values of their communities, and see themselves as parts of an encompassing whole, rather than being fully independent. This supports P8’s sentiments on their agency working like a cog, their decision to speak on the agency’s perceptions rather than their own individual perceptions, and their outlook on how they fit into a
team within their flat structure environment. P8’s community outlook on PR practice reflects the following aspects:

- A symmetrical worldview of communication is held.
- Virtuous, communitarian leadership is employed.
- The participant’s practices are underpinned ethics of care and virtue (postmodern ethics). This in interesting, especially because P8 is a female leader and ethics of care take on more caring, feminine traits and not just be performed as an action of justice.
- The flat structure environment fosters equality in the work place, one of the guiding principles of ethical practice.
- A link between the open systems-approach and communitarianism can be made because communitarian thought includes emphasis on connections between people, collaboration, and “diminished emphasis on self-serving individualism” (Regis University, 2018). P8’s thinking aligns with systems thinking due to the fact that they understand their individual role and agency’s practice as needing to be considered in relation to other units with which it operates interdependently.

Importantly, virtuous leaders whom intend to build virtuous companies need to have a strong moral compass, practice reflection and mindfulness in order to understand the deeper reason for why the organisation exists and the difference it wants to make in the community. Such organisations are values-driven and are underpinned by caring and compassionate support, as noted in P8’s responses above. Secondly, communitarian approaches suggest that what is best for the community is in the best interests of the organisation because of the interdependence between an organisation and the community (Leeper, 1996), thus showing a great sense of reflection on the other within the “eco-system” professionals find themselves in. This speaks to agency cultures and also to the community of practice.

P7 expands on and aligns with P8’s community outlook, also making note of the fact that PR professionals operate within an eco-system that absolutely has to be conscious of the other within decision-making, thus aligning to postmodern PR practice. Postmodern PR practice balances the needs of different stakeholders and considers the wider society that the organisation and professional exists within, as encapsulated by P7 below:

“What’s your state of mind in recognising where you exist, and the impact of your behaviour and your decision making on them?

…Every organisation exists within an eco-system. Within that eco-system, you have a set of stakeholders, and your relationship with those stakeholders is around shared
values, shared interest, and expectations. And it is in the process of ensuring adherence to those shared values that you can understand what constitutes ethical communication practice. It’s an evolving sort of phenomenon that says this is what my stakeholders expect from me. I’m going to operate and apply myself within that system. And, therefore, it’s going to be extremely difficult for me to engage in unethical communication behaviour when I understand the holistic system that governs my clients, and what they have to deliver to. The eco-system that you exist in, whether its clients, suppliers, media, employees…demands some form of accountability. And, for those relationships to work there has to be accountability that is shared, that we all live up to.” ~ P7

6.4.3 Modern versus postmodern PR practice

Radford (2012) states that shifting definitions for PR practice is a result of postmodernism. Radford (2012) did, however, also critique this by stating that a modernistic view still exists in the practice due to professionals’ views that PR practice exists for the “benefit of the commissioning organisation”. In other words, PR professionals control information to the advantage of the commissioning interests. This modernistic view of PR practice is encapsulated by at least half of the participants who believe that their role is to make their client money and first and foremost, serve the commissioning interests first. Participant 6 (P6), a Senior Account Executive, and participant 8 (P8), a Co-Founder and Director, both hold this view quite strongly. P6 expands on the fact that there is an order to how various interests are served in their role based on the party paying them.

“I would definitely say there is a hierarchy to it, also because of the level of investment that there is into it. So, with the client, the client pays a significant amount of money to ensure that you are serving their interests. And then with the agency and the business, they are paying you. So, basically they’re paying you to ensure that you’re serving the client’s interest and their interest as a business.” ~ P6

P8 holds the assumption that PR practice is a tool for wealth maximisation, thus showcasing a pragmatic outlook that sees PR as simply contributing towards the bottom line or wealth maximisation. Grunig (2014) and Verwey (2015:12) state that PR professionals who view their work in terms of a pragmatic social role represent the client’s views and help the client to achieve their objectives, thus relating to asymmetrical PR.

“I do believe that we are trying help our clients make more money, or else they shouldn’t be using us. We are an extension of that marketing arm. So, you have marketing, you have advertising, you have social media strategies in place. All of that has the intention of making them more money and, if our job is to create brand awareness or to help a product get more exposure, the end goal of that is so that people buy it, surely, and I’m
talking pure PR... I’m not talking about reputation management; I’m not talking about crisis communications. But even that, reputation management, you’re turning a person’s reputation around so that people will use their services or use them. So, yes, I do think it’s a commercial tool that companies use. It’s not just a nice-to-have. There’s a strategic reason that companies employ PR agencies or hire PR agencies. And we do guarantee to our clients that we will help you achieve your business objectives, and, most of those times, it’s to increase sales, increase leads, create awareness that leads to sales. So, I’m not ashamed of that...

...the ultimate goal is to help them achieve their business objectives. So, everything we say or do on behalf of them has to help them achieve their business objectives. So, our clients inform our strategy. Without their business objectives, we cannot come up with a communication strategy. And that’s where we begin. So, every conversation we have with a new client starts with: what are your business objectives?” ~ P8

PRISA does, however, state that PR is a strategic communication process that builds relationships between an organisation and its publics. Heath and Coombs (2006:7) state that PR entails decision-making to help an organisation in responding to its stakeholders in order to achieve its mission and vision. Theoretically, these definitions of PR practice suggest that the PR professional is to serve and help the client to achieve their objectives, but one cannot assume that the views of P6 and P8 are entirely pragmatic simply because wealth maximisation or working in accordance to a commissioning party guides behaviour. Pragmatic PR professionals’ work is value-free, and completely asymmetrical behaviour in this regard includes professionals serving client interests but not those of the public. Though conclusions can be drawn that both P6 and P8 are guided by serving client and business objectives, both participants do still emphasise that their own personal values play a role in decision-making, as well as the best interests of the public. This speaks to ethics of intersubjectivity and correlates with Holtshausen (2000) and Radford’s (2012) thoughts on contemporary PR as “balancing acts between management practices based on modernist principles and the postmodern expectations of the organisation’s external publics”. To add, Radford (2012) expands on Holtshausen’s view of PR in a postmodern world by stating that PR practice is modernist, and publics are postmodern. These statements are reflected in the paradigmatic paradox prevalent in professionals’ practice, further supported below to showcase such contrast from the pragmatic views also expressed. This paradox further contributes to role strain and the likelihood of having to adopt increasing moral relativism resulting in increased role strain.

“My business partner and I would never compromise our own values. We’ve often turned down business if it doesn’t meet with our value systems. The agency and our consultants...
are committed to practicing ethical public relations, and this commitment guides our behaviour and decision-making processes." ~ P8

The above view shines light on professional practice towards the organisation, with De Aurago and Beal (2013:361) stating that a professional's professionalism towards the organisation is based on the individual’s moral compass, skills and knowledge, involves commitment to excellence, and meeting the needs of the organisation and greater society. P8’s abovementioned view does not correlate with pragmatic practice which suggests that professionals’ work is value-free, and a pragmatic role suggests that the public’s interest is not at heart, further contended by P6.

“The consumer is in mind at every stage of the process and while at the same time that we are trying to feed content into the media, but whether it is me, the brand or the media person, all of us have a consumer in mind… I’d say the consumer is definitely in mind from the beginning until the end.” ~ P6

Participant 1 (P1), an Account Manager, concurs with P6’s views on consumer interests by mentioning that consumer's best interests should, essentially, be at the heart of ethical PR practice.

“I feel like as soon as something is not in the best interests of the consumer it’s very unethical. It’s very unethical, it’s a red flag, and it should never be done at all to begin with. As soon as it hurts the consumer… we’re trying to educate, we’re trying to make the consumer’s life better, but as soon as the communication is unethical, the communicating is driving or persuading the public to do something that doesn’t sit well with me personally I feel like it’s unethical. Ethical communication practice for you needs to be in your own best interests and the interests of the consumer.” ~ P1

Interestingly, P8 adds to the notion of postmodern PR practice by stating that there are very blurred lines amongst the technician and manager roles in their agency. In this case, it is important to highlight that P8 is a Co-Founder, and their views below are a direct reflection of their leadership. P8 explains that they do not believe in the traditional hierarchies that exist in PR agencies today, emphasising equality amongst the team. This particular outlook aligns not only with postmodernism, but also a symmetrical worldview and postmodern ethics. P8’s statement below confirms Bauman (1993) and Holtshausen’s (2015) views on postmodern ethics, where they both state that professionals should resist strict role definitions and should strive to break down organisational silos.

“It’s not like an AE just has to pack boxes. I don’t know if you saw, on the table here, we have a big press drop coming for a client. I have an AD, an AM, and two AEs busy packing boxes. I will sit on the floor and cut ribbon for them. That’s how it should be in
Participants’ understandings of ethical PR practice are further detailed below.

6.4.4 How ethical communication is understood and practiced in PR agency contexts

In referring back to the literature, PR scholars highlighted that PR professionals’ behaviour over the years has attracted criticism, with the entire practice of PR being considered as unethical (Bowen, 2007; Harrison & Galloway, 2005:1; Steyn & Puth, 2000:3). It was noted by Grunig (2001) and Igboanugo (2014) that there are currently two conflicting debates around ethics in PR practice, where on one side the positive role that PR makes to society is emphasised and on the other side, critics argue that the practice distorts messaging to the public, otherwise known as “spinning” in order to advance the company’s agenda. In line with the abovementioned summary of literature on ethical PR practice, all participants were able to clearly conceptualise ethical and unethical communication practice, and all participants of the study unanimously responded that truthfulness and personal integrity was of utmost importance and undoubtedly constitutes ethical communication practice. P4 speaks to truthfulness and personal integrity below:

“If you don’t have personal integrity as self, how are you then going to be able to represent the truth for anybody else that you are supposed to represent? Once I know my truth, once I am aware of what I am going through, then I’m able to actually give the right kind of counsel or right kind of representation… At least for me, as a practitioner, it will always be something that I refer to and base my craft on.” ~P4

Truth is so important in everything that we put out there. Whether it’s in crisis mode, whether it’s in celebratory mode, truth will always set you free. And whether you are being persecuted about it, you know that is your ultimate, ultimate truth. And, for me, that is where it starts. Everything else then follows after that, to be quite honest, because, also, not every situation is the same and your ethical practice may then differ based on that particular situation, but the key at the centre of it, or for me, is truth.” ~ P4

P4’s view is in line with a postmodern view that the personal moral compass should guide ethical practice. All participants share the same views as P4, with one participant even outlining six key attributes that they feel are the “recipe for the sustainability of any organisation”, otherwise known as ethical communication drivers, namely: Strong leadership, transparency, innovation, honesty, engagement and accountability. Some of these drivers are echoed by other participants, as is depicted in table 13. In line with the abovementioned literature and participant perceptions on what constitutes ethical communication, table 13 below provides a collective summary of unanimously held responses, as well as unique views that stood out. Participant
views held on ethical versus unethical communication correlate with postmodern and modern principles which drive behaviour, where modern principles would include one-way monologue and reflexive thinking (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012:5-9). In contrast, and in line with participant’s views on ethical PR practice, dialogical communication within PR practice has been seen as foundation for ethical communication with the public (Theunissen & Wan Noordin (2012:5-9).

Table 13: PR professionals’ perceptions of what constitutes ethical and unethical communication practice

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETHICAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE</th>
<th>Unique views:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unanimously held participant outlooks:</td>
<td>Ethical crisis management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Being truthful</td>
<td>• Being “socially-plugged in”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Transparent practice</td>
<td>• Understanding industry best practice through the Marketing, Advertising and Communication Charter (MAC Charter) and King IV</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strong leadership</td>
<td>• Abiding by the constitution of the republic</td>
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<td>• Accountability</td>
<td>• Understanding your diversity proposition</td>
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<td>• Integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Diverse thinking</td>
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<td>• Sustainable practice</td>
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<td>• Inclusivity</td>
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<td>• Honesty</td>
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<td>• Respectful media relations</td>
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<td>• Communication in the best interests of the client and consumer</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Alignment to personal values (value congruence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Following ethics systems in place in the agency</td>
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<tr>
<th>UNETHICAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE</th>
<th>Unique views:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unanimously held participant outlooks:</td>
<td>Racially-divisive communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lying</td>
<td>• Short-term thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Misleading people</td>
<td>• Ignoring the law to serve profits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Media bribery for coverage</td>
<td>• Industry bullying</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Using PR as a propaganda tool</td>
<td>• Not adhering to the labour act and considering how hiring is done</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Overexertion of power</td>
<td>• When controversial business is not turned away</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Inaccurate information</td>
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<tr>
<td>• One-way communication intended to not have the consumer’s best interests at heart</td>
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<td>• Unilateral work</td>
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<td>• Omission</td>
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</table>
6.4.5 PR professionals’ role enactment

In recapping the literature, roles can be understood as the behaviour pattern of individuals and organisations and they help in understanding the functions of professionals (Dozier, 1992; Niskala & Hurme, 2014). Mellado and Barria (2012) explain that professional PR roles are also referred to as “professional worldviews or orientations” which refer to the functions of PR practice that guide a professional’s organisational behaviour.

To begin in understanding role enactment, when posed the interview question “describe what you do in your role as a PR practitioner?” professionals in the study all indirectly unpacked their roles in terms of two specific roles, namely: strategic manager or technician. The researcher was able to identify that three of the junior to mid-level professionals majorly spoke to traditional technician duties, all emphasising that they were a supporting resource to the wider team. With the remaining five professionals outlining more long-term, strategic roles, where in one case, a management-level professional even chose not to speak to their own role but rather to the role of the agency and the sum of its parts (the employees). This professional’s viewpoints are further depicted below. However, what was interesting to note was that all professionals’ roles did seem to overlap, and at times, managers did perform technician roles and professionals in technician roles employed strategic thinking to the completion of tasks. Strategic managers performing technician roles became especially evident in interviews where professionals were also the founders of their agencies, some of which are still in start-up phase and required the professional to enact a dual role.

- Manager versus technician role:

Interestingly, P8, who currently occupies a management-level (founder) role within their agency context, explains that they occupy both a managerial and a technician role in practice, as do many of the staff members in their agency.

“I would talk broadly about the agency and not necessarily myself because the agency works as a cog or that we have functions that everybody has to work together. And, because we’re such a flat structure here, everybody gets their hands dirty once the client comes on board. So, I’ll give you this example. I don’t sit in my throne in an office and direct my teams. I sit open plan, I sit diagonally opposite an intern and oppose an account manager, behind me is an account director, behind her is a business director, and then that corner is my business partner, over there’s the content team. We’re all part of this team and, if I need to do PR, I do PR. I love that part of how we work together as a team, that everybody just does everything. Treat people as your equal and treat people fairly, pay them well, listen to them, and I think my key philosophy is I will trust you until you give me a reason not to, and not the other way around. ~ P8
P8’s combined managerial-technician role confirms not only Moss, Warnaby and Newman’s (2000) studies on senior PR professionals’ dual role, but also Toth, Serini, Wright and Emig (1998), as well as Dozier and Broom (1995) who also claimed that senior PR professionals combine elements of managerial and technical roles in terms of handling media relations and publicity for example.

- **Moral obligations:**

PR scholars and professionals define ethical PR conduct as simultaneously satisfying three distinct duties, namely: duty to self, client and society (Lieber, 2008).

Table 14 below summarises unanimously held participant outlooks, unique views held, as well as shines light on interesting findings noted across all participant responses captured. Participant feedback supports both Lieber, as all participants spoke to serving themselves, their clients, the profession, the business, and lastly, society.

Table 14: Interests served by PR professionals in agency contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERESTED SERVED BY PR PROFESSIONALS IN AGENCY CONTEXTS</th>
<th>Unanimously held outlooks:</th>
<th>Unique views:</th>
<th>Interesting findings:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Client’s interest</td>
<td>• The industry/ profession (MAC Charter &amp; King IV)</td>
<td>• 360-degree approach to serving all interests (all are affected by decisions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Consumer’s interest</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Not all professionals see themselves as serving the media because media is a platform and not seen as an interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Media’s interest</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Must be alignment between personal values and company’s values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employees’ interest</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Business interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Personal interest</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Societal interest</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly most participants believe that these interests should be served equally because of how symbiotic relationships are; however, at least two participants did not seem to hold this same viewpoint, further stating that there is definitely a hierarchy to how they serve interests. These participants serve the commissioning party’s interests first, which in this regard, is the
client. These participants are then understood to hold an asymmetrical, modern PR outlook due to the fact that one party’s interests are valued above another.

“I would definitely say there is a hierarchy to it, also because of the level of investment that there is into it. So, with the client, the client pays a significant amount of money to ensure that you are serving their interests and then with the agency and the business is that they are paying you and so basically, they’re paying you to ensure that you’re serving one the client’s interest and their interest as a business.” ~ P6

P4 raises an interesting point by stating that PR professionals juggle so many interests at once. While P4 does not expand on one interest being more important than other, P4 does express the challenge of having to understand many stakeholder’s needs concurrently.

“It’s such a difficult role for any practitioner because you represent so many interests in one. So, meanwhile, I may understand what the consumer wants and needs, I also then have to understand what the client is going through and identify how I can merge and bring these two worlds together.” ~ P4

Participant 3 (P3), a Senior Account Manager, aligns the above views held by P4 by stating that the concurrent satisfying of stakeholder needs should be a 360-degree approach that considers every stakeholder affected by decisions within what they call “a chain”, thus aligning to an open-systems approach. This systems thinking aligns with many other participants who also understand PR practice as requiring professionals to recognise where they exist within the chain, whilst not valuing one interest over another.

“So, the whole ideology of a 360 approach is the consideration of every single person that’s involved within this chain. So, this chain would include the company/ the client, internal publics, people that are employed by the company…”

…I firmly believe that and it’s in line with my current role as well, that we don’t put say clients’ needs, above other people’s needs so everything needs to be in line because at the end of the day who is going to be consuming the information. I think that’s a question that we always need to ask. So, if we think that the client is far more superior which means that the client can then get away with feeding us information and we just accept it. It doesn’t and it shouldn’t, it shouldn’t work like that.” ~ P3

This particular view contrasts the practices of pragmatic PR professionals. Pragmatic PR professionals’ work is value free and the question of ethics is left to the client organisation (Grunig, 2014). Pragmatic PR professionals are inclined to fall prey to unethical PR practice due to their blind loyalty and obedience to the client organisation, which P3 agrees with.
- **Role governance - PR professionals’ accountability:**

All eight participants hold themselves accountable for the way in which they serve stakeholder interests. In unpacking this accountability, participants reflected on their responsibility to pay attention to detail and be accurate in everything they do from a communication perspective. Secondly, participants highlighted that it is their responsibility to understand the outcomes based on their decisions, thus aligning to outcomes-based decision-making. Decision-making in this regard is based on consequences and links to Utilitarianism, a consequentialist moral theory otherwise known as teleological ethics (Athanassoulis, 2015; Hogan, 2010; Lavinia, 2014). In most cases, participants occupying technician roles based their accountability on the short-term plans of action and the consequences that would follow should they not act accordingly. This, therefore, confirms literature focusing on the act-centred theory that mentions that the motivation to be moral is found in an individual’s desire or duty to bring about a good outcome (Igboanugo, 2014). In contrast, the senior, more experienced professionals spoke to the fact that they exist within a community and it is their duty to be accountable within that community, with commentary such as: “the eco-system you exist in requires accountability”, further noting the importance of transparent, reflective practice within role enactment. Interesting findings identified include the fact that some professionals believe that you can only control clients to a point, shifting responsibility back to them.

- **PR professionals’ understandings of morality:**

Lavinia (2014:2) states that humans are influenced by personal values which dictate their reactions towards situations and decision-making in accordance to their morality, thus relating to moral decision-making. In line with this, participants expand on morality, explaining that morals are subjective and that what is moral for one person, may not be moral for another. Participants also exclaimed that one must understand that there is a difference between what is morally right, versus what is legally right. These outlooks are encapsulated by P1 and P2 below.

> “If something is unethical, it doesn't necessarily mean it's illegal. Just means it morally doesn't fit right with a certain school of thought for a certain individual.” ~ P1

> “I don't like using the word moral is because it’s so open to interpretation, and so should it be, to be honest, because who knows, really, how to define morality. It’s such an open debate. I think what’s really important is to be as practical, and, again, dealing with a problem, dealing with the solution rather than the person. And I think, for me that’s quite important, because what’s moral to me may not be moral to the next person…So, the precaution that then we take, as an organisation, is to cultivate it as part of the way we do business so that we don’t rely on your personal viewpoint on a matter. We rather rely on… so, it’s more the collective.” ~ P2
• **Values-based PR practice:**

When asked what values PR professionals considered necessary for enacting professional communication roles in SA, participants all answered with almost identical responses to what they perceived constitutes ethical communication, depicted in table 13 above. Some of the recurring responses amongst participants include the below ten values held:

1. Transparency
2. Understanding
3. Honesty
4. Diversity
5. Truth
6. Integrity
7. Sensitivity
8. Cultural listening
9. Inclusion
10. Teamwork

The above viewpoints held by all participants align with two of PRISA’s (2012) moral principles, namely:

- **Honesty:** The PR professional must act in ways that are truthful and accurate while advancing the interests of those being represented (veracity).
- **Integrity:** The PR professional should practice with integrity.

Secondly, all of the ten values held correlate with literature on the emergent strategic communication theory which exclaims that professionals are required to ensure that all decisions and actions are purposeful and intentional, multi-paradigmatic, and stakeholder-inclusive (Hallahan, 2015:244). This alignment also speaks to postmodern practice that balances the needs of different stakeholders by understanding that people with different frames of reference all have different realities (Barker & Angelopoulo, 2006:114; Holtzhausen, 2000). When asked if the abovementioned values provided by the participants affect how they practice PR, all participants agreed that their personal values did, in fact, impact how they practiced. Interestingly, one participant answered, “yes and no”, further stating that professionals should be able to separate their own personal values from strategic thinking required in practice.

> “I personally believe my personal values, whether they’re considered positive or negative by society, should not influence my strategic thinking for my clients or the end user or the target audience that I work with.” ~ P2
On the topic of personal values and person-organisation value congruence, all participants stressed that it was important to have personal alignment with the tasks and organisation at hand, also providing examples of how their personal values guided decision-making. In referring back to the literature, research has been devoted to understanding congruence between an individual’s preferences and values and the characteristic of their work environment (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Professionals not working in ways consistent with their highest values is said to negatively affect the professional’s loyalty to the organisation. P8’s response below shines light on virtuous leadership:

“We’ve got rid of clients who have not treated us with the respect that we give them based on what the value systems are in this organisation. We have resigned business for the benefit of our staff so that we keep our team.” ~P8

P3 contends with P8, shining light on a reflective, postmodern outlook, firmly asserting that they will not go against their values on certain tasks:

“I don’t think that taking on a client that goes against what you believe, or you know full well that what they’re doing is wrong and yet you take them on, you know, that won’t serve any great purpose. I always view ethics as something that is multi-dimensional. So, one I always look at things from my point of view. What are my values in this regard and secondly, I will look at it from you know, what regulates this particular industry? So if I am doing something which I’m uncomfortable in doing, let’s say for instance I am against, you know, the legalisation of dagga or whatever the case may be, and in my, from my vantage point I completely, don’t tolerate that and I’m put on a project which promotes that, I will have to politely excuse myself from the project because I won’t be able to deliver on it.” ~P3

The abovementioned view is shared by many participants who all listed areas which would make them feel uncomfortable enough to decline working on a job. Some of these areas were: clients who sold weaponry and tobacco, clients who supported cheating on a spouse and working on any competitors of their current clients (unless approved by their current clients). Most participants stated that they would not sway from their value systems for certain jobs, as listed above, and stated that their method of communicating that with the prospective client would include being completely honest and upfront. This is indicative of a moral strain experienced in professionals’ role enactment. Participants’ outlooks on turning away jobs that cause moral discomfort also suggests that professionals are guided by virtue ethics, which is concerned with living in accordance to a set of virtues that is deemed morally-valid regardless of the actions or outcomes (Athanassoulias, 2015; Verwey, 2015).
6.4.6 Socially-responsible PR practice

Verwey (2015:12) and Skinner (1994:45) mention that socially-responsible communication practice includes social roles which can either enhance PR, or detract from it, with Grunig (2014) questioning whether contemporary PR should be practiced asymmetrically (in the interest of the client), or symmetrically (in the interests of the public, society and the organisation). In line with this, scholars have made reference to practice within a South African context, specially making note of the importance of including all voices in South Africa, otherwise known as “Ubuntu”, which emphasises the understanding and respect of others and their unique realities.

The abovementioned outlooks mentioned in the literature were corroborated by all participants who believe that it is important to understand the other and constantly question how communication is being received by them, thus aligning to a strategic activist role. Participants all felt that as South African PR professionals, they had a role in producing communication that should positively impact society and all participants clearly understood the importance of understanding diversity and then executing diversity accordingly. Participants highlighted that there needs to be a sensitivity and appreciation of different environments and different voices because all voices are meaningful in SA. Importantly, participants highlighted that as a professional, one must contribute towards the shaping of the narratives that are put out into the public. Overall, participants were passionate about the bigger role that PR plays and stressed that the value of the profession and importance of communication throughout discussions. Essentially, participants spoke to the “power of PR” and the importance of impacting society in a way that goes beyond just delivering to a traditional job scope and earning fees. This supports literature on the strategic activist role that PR professionals should assume because participants all speak to PR practice effecting social change, where a multiplicity of views and voices are embraced.

Participant 4 (P4), an Account Director, encapsulated these thoughts by emphasising the importance of inclusive, multicultural, sensitive PR practice towards the other – practice that appreciates all views and differences within any decision-making processes.

“Think in a way that is inclusive; think in a way that is diverse, because we live in a country that has so many different people, different ways of doing things, different approaches, and different cultures. So, you cannot just have a singular or, is it, a unilateral way of thinking. It just doesn’t work. There has to be a lot of sensitivity and understanding of the different stakeholders, but, most importantly, the people that we are communicating to, because they all come from different backgrounds, they all face different challenges, and, so, there needs to be just sensitivity and an understanding and appreciation of different environments and different people. I think inclusivity is so important... as much as there are different people with different voices; they all have
meaningful voices that have, in some way or another, an impact on who we become and what we do. So, we cannot just pretend like they don't exist. And I think, lastly...I think it really is just genuinely understanding and really appreciating the contexts of SA because we have a lot of politics, we’ve been through a lot, and people fight different struggles from economic, emotional, psychological, trauma... there is a need for that sensitivity and understanding.” ~ P4

P2 contends with P4, stating that PR professionals should be “contributing to the positive positioning and shaping of our society”. Interestingly, P2 showcased reflective behaviour through the identification of what questions the PR professional should ask when creating “inclusive” work. This directly speaks to Holmstrom’s (2004:262) views on reflectivity required in professionals, stating that they should see themselves as existing within society.

“It’s even before you hand over your work to the client that you have to go through the details of what...again, what we were speaking about earlier, what’s ethical?...What’s right? What’s correct? Is this diverse? Is this reflective of society? Is this in the law? All those questions that you need to incorporate into what you do anyway, which takes long enough to produce as it is for it to be quality.” ~ P2

Interestingly, P6 who openly confirmed that there is hierarchy to how they serve interests also somewhat aligns with the strategic activist role. Upon reflection throughout the interview, this participant seemed to change his/her outlook once thought was given to the bigger role of PR practice in serving the community, as opposed to their own individual role enactment focused on initially. P6’s outlook below shows a pragmatic outlook based on the fact that he/she consider PR as a wealth optimisation tool, however, they do also take note of the fact that messaging should be empowering and helpful to the other. Therefore, P6’s thoughts signify an ethical paradox; where one side they practice symmetrically, and on the other they practice asymmetrically and pragmatically.

“I think PRPs need to be contributing besides just in a way that serves their client’s interests, but they need to be contributing information and content that is uplifting, that is motivating, that helps someone else and that goes back to how PRPs approach their different tactics and how they choose to communicate the planned messages... I think as much as it does contribute to the bottom line that is not the only role that PR plays for a client and for a brand.” ~ P6

P5’s outlook below echoes what all participants spoke to regarding socially-responsible practice. There were no participants who offered any differing outlooks in this regard.

“I think we have a responsibility to the stories that South Africans seek in the media, because as PR practitioners we are also big contributors to the stories that people
consume. We are big contributors to the shaping of the narratives that are put out there.
We support politicians, we support business, we support all sorts of you know, corners of
the South African society. So, to me it's cognizant of how important a role we play in how
South Africa develops.” ~ P5

In summary, and important to note, is that at times participants do fulfill both a pragmatic social
and a strategic activist role in practice – the result of a postmodern society operating in
modernist practice.

6.4.7 Systems used to foster ethical communication in agency contexts

“Ethics systems need to be in place. We cultivate it as part of the way we do business.
We don’t rely on personal viewpoints, but the organisational collective as a whole.” ~ P2

In line with the above collectivist outlook on ethics systems, professionals were questioned if
their agency has a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its
employees. Figure 11 below provides an overview of participant responses to question 11.

Figure 11: An overview of participant responses to question 11

Participants all highlighted the fact that their agency had numerous ethics systems in place to
foster ethical communication and govern their PR practice. Though, participants did highlight
many gaps, especially questioning the value of being a member of both PR and ethics-focused
professional bodies in South Africa. All participants were able to pinpoint systems in place by
referring to day-to-day organisational procedures, meetings, approval processes, professional
body membership, ethics checklists, and many other elements of ethical governance. What
stood out to the researcher is that all participants clearly identified that their agency has an
open-door policy where professionals are welcomed to speak with any member in the agency in
order to better mitigate or understand ethical dilemmas and how best to approach them.
In terms of gaps in the ethics systems, participants all agreed that ethics-specific training was not something the agencies offered, and all participants stressed the need for ethics training and workshops to be held internally, thus fostering conversation surrounding what is considered ethical and unethical. Interestingly, participants stated that the lack of ethics training is definitely a grey area for them; further noting that a lot of what is spoken about regarding ethical practice in the agency is not put on paper but is “intuitive”. Participants all confirmed that their ethical behaviour was not measured and stated that although this may be unnecessary at times, they do welcome more informal conversations surrounding ethicality in the office in order to encourage ethics-focused reflection which simply isn't happening enough. In line with this, P4 speaks to ethics training and conversations required in their agency.

“Do I believe that we could have more done? I definitely think so, because it’s a function that, I suppose, as a growing business, we are now realising that we need more of, and, as we introduce and bring on board new people, it’s important to have those at least running every three months/six months in a year to ensure that people are aligned and are aware of ethical communication…ethical practices. So, for me, it’s more training opportunities, more conversations around what ethical communication is, because sometimes, up in the air, we think we know, yes, because you’re putting together two words and these two words make sense, but…when translated loosely, but what does it actually mean? And more training, like I said, whether it’s us bringing in specialists or people that are within the organisation that know of this, it’s important to have it.” ~ P4

P2 expands on P4’s outlook on ethics systems and strongly expresses that such systems need to be a part of the company culture, regardless of how long they take to build and implement.

“It’s a lot of work, Simone, and, for companies, it’s one of those things that you’ve gotta carve out the time to do because it can have an impact on your bottom line, but, more than anything, again, it speaks to the bigger responsibility that you have. So, you may have many things in the system in terms of the things you need to achieve, keeping the company afloat, especially with SMEs, but it’s so critical that you can’t avoid it.” ~ P2

In referring back to the literature, Lloyd (2018) states that PR professionals have an obligation to commit to driving ethical practices, with many PR agencies in South Africa adhering to a professional body’s codes of ethics and professional standards. For example, PRISA’s prescribed codes of ethics listed align to several PR professional values, namely: advocacy, honesty, integrity, fairness and loyalty; all of which form part of an emergent framework to foster ethical communication (PRISA, 2012). However, the abovementioned literature and participant views on ethics codes employed in their agencies does not align to postmodern ethics which purports that the burden of ethical decision-making should be placed solely on the individual, as moral responsibility cannot be approached through the ethical rules prescribed by organisations.
(Bauman, 1993; Holtzhausen, 2015). P4 supports the fact that systems do help with communicating ethically but does state that ethical systems only work when they aren’t approached through a singular, individual lens, but rather through employing a collaborative approach with other important stakeholders. Not only does this statement show systems-thinking, but also shows that the participant understands their responsibility to understanding the needs of the other in their decision-making.

“Systems and processes help with putting out ethical communication...where what you put out is bullet-proofed and tested. BUT, it’s not a singular approach. It’s collaborative and clients need to be involved!” ~ P4

P2 expands on P4’s outlook on ethics systems and strongly expresses that such systems need to be a part of the company culture, regardless of how long they take to build and implement.

“...it should be a part of your culture, the culture of the organisation.” ~ P2

Schwartz (2013) expands on the importance of building an ethical corporate culture. Schwartz (2013) explains that building an ethical corporate culture would involve involves building a formal ethics programme which includes a code of ethics, ethics training and most importantly, ethical leadership.

- Responsible leadership and corporate governance:

Ethics has been elevated in the King IV report, importantly highlighting that there is a focus on ethical leadership rather than ethics management, where ethical behaviour is filtered down from the top (Rossouw, 2016). In line with this literature, participants all agreed in that strong leadership drives effective PR and communication, further stating that communication failures can almost always be directly linked to poor leadership. P7 often spoke to strong leadership throughout their interview, and even went on to refer to the leadership of former South African resident, Nelson Mandela, in an attempt to provide a solid example of transformational leadership.

“Without leadership, you have no effective PR, you have no effective communication. Those leaders were strong leaders who could make tough choices during difficult times but had the immense power to then communicate those choices in a way that inspires action that inspires everybody behind them. And, so, without leadership, you have no communication, literally.” ~ P7

P7 continued to speak to strong leadership by emphasising the fact the leaders need to understand the systems within which they work, therefore showing a link to systems-thinking, a collective outlook, and the responsibility towards the other. P7 also highlighted the fact that
leaders sometimes undermine the eco-system’s interdependencies for the own personal interest, thus linking to transactional leadership.

“The will of leadership is hugely important. So, the challenge that we have as practitioners, that communication is general, because communication is a particular art, we tend to focus more on the skill around the arts, how the art is applied and delivered, and we forget the interdependencies that influence the effectiveness of the arts. And that’s why leadership, to me, is hugely, hugely important…

…where you have organisations where communication has spectacularly failed, that failure can be traced directly to the failure of leadership, and there are case studies to prove that…and, sometimes leaderships’ willingness to undermine those eco-system interdependencies for their own personal interest.” ~ P7

Adding to this, P2 practices responsible leadership through serving the industry, more specifically, by implementing King IV. King IV propagates transparency and the implementation of accountability in the form of consistent reports, which sets the scene for good corporate governance (Rossouw, 2016). P2 believes that following principles outlined by King IV ensures that the agency is aligned from an ethical and business perspective. Interestingly, P2 was the only participant who mentioned the King IV Report during the interview process, emphasising that King IV helps professionals understand how best to conduct themselves ethically.

“I’m no King IV expert, but part of my training and my interests in King IV is why we decided to become members of IODSA, and, again, there is a lot to read, it can be extremely intimidating, but it spells out the basics that you can really look at as an organisation. So, I would say, yes, we are guided by the practices of King IV.” ~ P2

In line with the abovementioned participant responses and literature, table 15 below provides a comprehensive, collective overview of participant responses regarding the systems used to foster ethical communication in PR agency contexts.

Table 15: Systems used to foster ethical communication in PR agency contexts
6. Part of the International association of business communicators (IAB)
7. Guided by King IV principles
8. Human Resources team serves as a support system
9. ICAS – lifestyle platform for skills development
10. General operations management – status documents and status meetings
11. Ethical tick-list created for PR tasks
12. Quality assurance and internal approval processes amongst client service teams
13. Weekly/bi-weekly training sessions (themed training, but not ethics focused)
14. Content Central platform for writing in order to ensure that no plagiarism is prevalent in written pieces and to foster referencing of sources
15. Probation periods and monthly performance reviews
16. Barcelona principles used for AVE reporting
17. Risk assessment
18. Audits on new clients and legal contracts in place when hiring and firing clients
19. Statement of ethics in credentials document
20. Organisational pillars are in place and reflect the agency's culture, vision and values for staff.
21. Individual reflection

Key similarities noted across all responses:

- An open-door policy is in place.
- No ethics-specific training is conducted in the agency.
- Ethical behaviour is not measured at all.
- Internal teams are simply “trusted” in terms of understanding right from wrong.
  - Those in management-level roles believe that those in technician roles “intuitively know”.
- Participants all reflected on ethical governance during and post-interview.

Key differences noted across all responses:

- The value of PRISA membership is not shared across the board, both in terms of the participant’s individual membership and the agency’s membership.
- No formal ethical communication policies or statements in place in all agencies.
- Not enough emphasis placed on a thorough induction in all agencies.
- Not all participants realised the importance of reflecting on ethical PR practice prior to the interview conducted.
- Not all participants knew whether there was a formal process in place when hiring and firing clients, but all agreed that it was important to have this in place.

Gaps listed in ethical governance within their agency contexts:

- No ethics-specific training or workshops are available internally.
- HR has made efforts to communicate policies, but this has not been enough in terms of
starting conversations about ethics.

- At least half of the participants (generally those not in management roles) were unaware if ethics agreements or policies exist between the agency and its clients.

**Suggestions made for improvement in terms of ethical enactment within their agency contexts:**

- Ethics education needs to be considered – “not just a module, but a course over an entire year” in terms of fostering conversation around ethical practice.
- The PR profession should be regulated via licensing of the craft.
- There should be written codes that PR professionals sign to.
- Identification of the consequences of non-compliance.
- Translation of personal values into practical business processes.
- Compulsory and rigorous induction processes should be in place for new staff.
- More open conversations around the office in terms of what is considered ethical and how to address ethical dilemmas.
- Expert ethics trainers to be brought into the agency environment to facilitate ethics training and start conversations around ethics.
- Consideration of taking out personal indemnity insurance as an agency.

### 6.4.8 Challenges of ethical communication

There are factors which adversely impact PR professionals’ ability to communicate ethically. In line with this, ethical communication challenges that affect South African PR professionals in agency contexts include some of the following aspects, as summarised from all participant responses:

- PR practice is unregulated, and the absence of regulation blurs the lines of ethical practice. However, industry regulation may not be enough to stop unethical practice and professionals from reincarnating themselves. Participants referred to Bell Pottinger and Adam Catzavelos in this regard, further questioning how PR practice can truly be governed.

  “PR is unregulated. Doctors lose their licences when they engage in unethical behaviour. Lawyers lose their licences to operate. Chartered accountants, they lose their licences and status. We don’t. So, what has happened with Bell Pottinger is that they’ve had to close down, rebrand. They’re going to reincarnate themselves into another business. The leaders that led to the Bell Pottinger disaster will operate from behind the scenes, but they will reincarnate themselves. And I don’t know what we do about this. Do we push for some form of licensing of our craft, such that, when you engage in unethical behaviour, you are severely punished, or do we leave it to some form of industry self-
regulation? Do we look for an independent body that is made up of clients, ourselves, and other parties to do this regulation? But we are one of the few professional services providers that are not licensed, and that’s the challenge that you face.” ~P8

The above viewpoint shows a paradigmatic paradox in thinking, because on one side the professional suggests that practice should be governed, essentially opposing postmodern ethics. Modern ethics literature points to the fact that a professional would police themselves to comply with a code; however, Harrison and Galloway (2005) argue that code-based frameworks are inadequate because they leave professionals free to interpret them in ways that advance the needs of themselves and their clients. Harrison and Galloway (2005) further argue that such behaviour is act-centered, stating that virtue ethics represents a more authentic ethical path for professionals. Interestingly, the participant above does still reflect a level of understanding that such governance may still not be enough to protect the profession and ensure that unethical practitioners are adequately dealt with.

- Revenue and income pressures drive decision-making. This, however, was not a shared view across all participant responses.
- Media saturation makes media relations incredibly difficult because PR professionals are increasingly expected to pay for coverage which they believe goes against the value of the profession and crosses an ethical line for them (bribery).

“The line becomes very blurred and it seems as if I’m almost paying for coverage or I’m being blackmailed to pay for coverage. I don’t know if I’m making sense. It’s also going to say ‘sponsored’, so as soon as I see sponsored, it’s not genuine. Someone paid money for it to be there.” ~ P1

- Approvals from clients can be time-consuming and the time it takes to implement ethical processes can deter PR professionals from looking into adequate ethical governance.
- Younger PR professionals do not feel that their voices are heard when faced with ethical dilemmas due to clients’ unwavering focus on KPIs, regardless of any unethical practice on their side.
- The advertising value equivalency (AVE) is still expected by some clients in order to prove the financial return on investment. Although a critiqued and outdated element of practice, when professionals claim that when this financial ROI is not expected, this then requires the professional to prove their worth in other ways, which proves to be more challenging.
- Clients do not properly understand the role of PR, nor do they adequately understand themselves and their brand well enough before commissioning PR agencies for outputs. P4 describes certain clients as “self-sabotaging” further unpacking this below:
“Sometimes you are guiding a client that is self-sabotaging, but they’re not aware of it, and, as much as you may try to give counsel and feedback, it’s just they’re not getting it. So, you kind of let them walk the journey and walk into whatever it is that they are getting into because you’ve done your part; you’ve done everything that you possibly can to educate and empower them, but, ultimately, they’re the ones that make the decisions. So, that’s also something that we’ve just…or I’ve learnt to accept and be more receptive to is the fact that client will always be clients and they always need to be given the respect of being client and the autonomy to make decisions, even when, as a professional, I know that that’s not the right thing, but it’s for them to deal with, I suppose.” ~ P4

In critiquing the above viewpoint, P4’s moral response is eventually left in the client’s hands, aligning with literature suggesting that PR professionals avoid choice and taking responsibility for their individual actions (Yuthas & Dillard, 1999). However, Berg and Gibson (2011) state that professionals rarely focus on themselves alone when making decisions because they are influenced and controlled by their organisations that employ them and the clients commissioning them. As a result, professionals may struggle with individual moral responsibility due to the organisational structures and politics that foster or limit ethical decision-making in this regard.

6.4.9 Interesting findings

Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2013) suggest that when the researcher is working through text, it is imperative that any patterns that “jump out” are noted. Not all interesting responses speak directly to the research question at hand, however, each response showcases the evolution of the industry and how this has impacted client-agency PR practices and the mindsets of the participants. Such findings may provide insight into the thought-processes of participants and contribute towards an understanding of what has driven decision-making. This section outlines interesting points noted by participants, all of which open doors to further research studies and questioning.

- Experienced PR professionals hold a long-term strategic mindset:

Interestingly, out of the professionals interviewed, the more experienced management-level PR professionals all agreed in that they applied long term, multi-perspectives thinking and approaches to building ethical cultures and frameworks in their agencies. Professionals emphasised that their years of experience has allowed for more holistic approaches to be implemented from their side, stating that it was this totality of experience and reflection upon it that informed overall ethical practice. Interestingly, Mellado and Barria’s (2012) research concludes that it is more experienced PR professionals that place greater importance on a long-term strategic role due to the fact that their years of experience contribute towards a greater
background on communicative tasks, lasting relationships and planning. This correlates to Cardwell, Williams and Pyle (2017) who explained that it is younger, less experienced PR professionals who are often focused more on providing support to their teams and thus taking on technician roles.

P5, now a senior, experienced PR professional, reflected on their role and power of voice as a junior PR professional many years ago:

“I think having grown through from being a very junior person, when I started to where I am now and working with very senior people in businesses, that it’s important to highlight all these issues that I’ve spoken about, of truth, of ethics, of representation of diversity, it’s important to raise those at the highest level possible in an organisation so that those are considered when the organisation sets its goals and its objectives so that it trickles down – it’s so hard to be a junior person and you try to push for those things at a lower level so if an organisation understands using PR as a tool in that way to project a reputation that is of integrity and credible, those things, and often a lot of organisations are not aware that they need to apply those things so deliberately.” ~ P5

P5’s reflection shines light on the difficulty of expressing views that are not heard when still a junior. This corresponds with P1, a junior PR professional, who expressed the difficulty in pushing back to their client, a financial services provider, on their unethical targeting of the same LSM group. P7 and P2, the remaining senior professionals interviewed, also reflect a more strategic, long term outlook, further emphasising it is their experience over the years that guides their outlooks and decision-making.

“There’s building a reputation and at the same time, I have a reputation to protect that I’ve built over the years. So, whilst, on the form, I’ve written the time spent working in PR fifteen years, I’ve been working for twenty-five years, and the remainder of that time has been spent in broadcast journalism, both locally and abroad... I bring in a totality of experience and knowledge into what I do.” ~ P7

“I think my own thinking...I would say my own experience because it counts for something. That fifteen years comes with all the different...whether it’s conflict, ethics, great successes, whatever it is that it’s comprised of does help to then guide the future of a company or of a practice, and, so, I would rather phrase it in that way. Experiences... And the nice thing about that is that that experience encompasses an entire group of stakeholders. So, its stories from...it’s examples of small conflicts that could have happened, or big successes that could have happened, or anything that, really, along that journey, has crafted what, I think, makes sense for an organisation.” ~ P2
In contrast, when interviewed, less experienced PR professionals tended to approach the responses to the questions from a more technical mindset, unpacking how they support their teams within role enactment. P6 speaks to their technician role within an agency context and explains how their role fits into what they termed “a puzzle”, as they believe they are accountable to their managers and boarder teams.

“I act as a supporting sort of resource to account managers who work on brands so that’s in terms of anything from curating media lists and keeping them updated… … It’s a step by step process and if my piece of the puzzle is not complete it affects the entire chain.” ~ P6

Less experienced professionals saw themselves as being important parts of a bigger system, serving support roles to ensure that experienced professionals could focus on strategic decision-making, thus aligning to literature detailed above. Notes taken during and post-interview provided insight into the fact that senior professionals felt that they have a voice with stronger impact now, therefore allowing them to push back more easily on tasks than they would if they were still inexperienced and in junior roles. Therefore, this leaves the question of whether title and level of experience contribute to more ethical communication practice in the long term.

- The science of communication:

P8 speaks to the inherent power in communication, further noting that as a society we need to conduct more research into the science of communication and contribute towards understanding what can be done with communication, as well as understand what is expected from it. This particular view is shared by other professionals who felt that PR as a discipline is finally being recognised by the C-suite for the genuine contribution it can make when employed strategically.

“If you look at the growth of telecommunications network service providers… If you look at their growth, their growth is centred on the recognition that communication is a fundamental personal and societal need. If that recognition could give rise to multibillion-dollar multinationals that just service that need, you then understand the power of communication; you then understand the power of our practice, the power of our talents and our passion. And, with that understanding, you can service clients better; clients can service their customers better because they can communicate better. Communication is fundamentally important at its basic sort of level, at its complex sort of level, and at its far more sophisticated level where you’re dealing with multiple audiences from multiple backgrounds and competing interests and so on. And, so, as we grapple with ethics, we need to also enhance our understanding of the science of communication, we need to support communication with more research, and that research goes into how people respond to communication, what they expect from it. We are dealing with the daily lives
of people in the most fundamental way. And, so, with that, we are then better placed to appreciate the importance of ethics in communication.” ~ P7

- Practice still haunted by criticism and image issues:

In referring back to the literature, Harrison and Galloway (2005:1) stated that certain professionals' behaviour over the years has attracted criticism in the professional practice of PR, thus resulting in the entire area of PR being considered as unethical. This aligns with the viewpoints held by participants in terms of feeling like they need to prove their value, especially when the profession has been ridden with morally-corrupt practices that paint PR professionals with the same brush. Although dedicated efforts have been made by PR professionals in order to show that the practice truly aims to serves the public interest in an ethical manner, certain professionals still feel that PR practice is misunderstood in terms of its purpose.

“We believe it’s vital that PR organisations and individuals abide by ethical practices to ensure that the integrity of our profession…and to make sure that it’s a profession that we are proud to represent. So, I want to be standing around a braai and, when somebody says to me: what do you do? I want to say I’m a PR consultant or I’m a PR director or I’m a PR professional. I don’t want to have to be embarrassed about my profession, and, for a good while, I was when the whole Reeva Steenkamp and Oscar thing happened, when the Bell Pottinger thing happened, and, now more recently, with Adam Catzavelos and all these stupid things that people are saying in South Africa, they always go to a PR agency to try and fix their mess. They think that a company can just tell the audience what it’s like and then they’ll be forgiven. That’s not the case. That’s really not the case.” ~ P8

- Professional indemnity insurance:

P8 exclaimed that their clients and insurance brokers have posed questions before in terms of identifying whether their agency has taken out insurance referred to as “professional indemnity insurance” which will allow the agency to protect themselves in case of a potential lack of morality on the part of their employees. The participant explained that the insurance policy protects the agency on behalf of their employees’ potentially unethical behaviour.

“Interestingly, a few clients have asked us if we have professional indemnity insurance. So, if you say something on behalf of your clients that can put them into ill repute, there is insurance for that. So, for example, if I go and out a client because I know something, and I was under a confidentiality agreement but now it gets out there that I heard this CEO slept with this person, for example, they can sue me for defamation, and I can have insurance to cover myself. This is something our clients have asked: do you have professional indemnity insurance and public liability insurance? And, interestingly, I’ve
recently changed insurance companies twice for BEE reasons and both of the new companies have asked me do we want professional indemnity insurance. Apparently, this insurance is fairly new and it's something that a lot of companies are taking out now because, like that Penny Sparrow thing, the Adam Catzavelos thing, he said something which has now caused companies to close down, multiple companies, and staff to lose jobs. Is there insurance against that…?

…I've turned it down because we haven't ever had a case because everything I've said today is that we're an ethical organisation and I don't believe…but is it something we should be considering? Will I have a rogue employee?” ~P8

The abovementioned feedback speaks to the fact that any unethical behaviour, whether yours or someone else's, can be protected by simply paying a monthly fee for such “protection”. Johnson (2002) notes that it is the ethical duty of PR professional to avoid divulging sensitive information to the public or reveal a client's involvement in anything without their permission and such an insurance takes away from the individual moral accountability of professionals.

- Is the moral fabric of society corrupted?

In line with the professional indemnity insurance feedback above, P8 speaks to a corrupt society by emphasising that morally corrupt businesses are still thriving. P8 claims that the continued success of morally corrupt companies suggests flawed societal values, as outlined below:

“We've often been asked by clients that do not meet my moral or ethical...my values, my value system, it goes completely against my value system, and one was a dating service for married people where you could go and find somebody to basically cheat on your partner. You could go into these rooms where...and it's a huge success globally. Huge budget. And my business partner and I said absolutely not. No amount of money is worth breaking your morals. I'm sorry. I don't care how much money you want to pay me. It gives me goosebumps to think that people take that on. Massive retainer and the thing is, because they're doing so well...so, there's something fundamentally flawed with our society that we need to cheat on our partners. I would never in a million years even consider cheating on my husband, and vice versa, I know. And my business partner's the same. And, so, that is where you go to your morals and your ethics and your values.” ~ P8

- Interviewee reflectivity:

Barnett (1997) defines reflection as the process of learning through and from experience via insight gained. The University of Sheffield (2017) and the University of Kent (2017) add to this by stating that reflective learning allows individuals to step back and reflect on their learning
experiences in order to develop critical thinking skills, as well as learn about themselves. In line with literature detailing the reflective paradigm, participants reflected on their professional role enactment, as well as the industry during and after the interview process. The researcher’s probing allowed participants the opportunity to identify gaps in their own practice and encouraged the questioning of their own behaviour and thought processes. To corroborate this, four participants provided reflective feedback during each interview, confirming why such a study was imperative to conduct. For example, P6 and P2 provided the following reflections during their interviews conducted:

“Honestly, as I’m doing this interview with you, I’ve actually realised almost how ethics are not played up enough in the PR space in the country. We are playing in a space where we’re dealing with sending messages to people and we need to be very responsible in the process of sending those messages and communicating those messages. So, I think there’s definitely work that needs to be done to educate PRPs on ethics and to make us understand the role of ethics in the work that we do and how we can employ the best ethical practices to ensure that we’re playing in an environment…an environment that is safe, that is respectable, that is accountable and that is secure for all stakeholders involved.” ~ P6

P2 contends with P6’s reflection, as shown below:

“These questions very intelligently set up, sowing the seeds in the minds of people like us who have important decision-making positions. I hope you get a diverse group of people to build your case, which we will all learn from. It leaves people to think about some of the things you’ve really interrogated in your questions.” ~ P2

Based on notes taken during and after interviews with participants, most professionals interviewed spoke to the value of simply being asked these questions, whether they could answer them or not and further emphasised that the interview questions simply got them thinking – both honestly and strategically. Consequently, such feedback aligns with the need for ethics training, conversations and reflective practice to ensure that professionals are aware. The abovementioned feedback does not necessarily show moral confusion, but simply highlights the fact that these conversations are simply not happening enough.

6.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, data gathered from eight South African agency-based PR professionals has been presented and analysed via a qualitative thematic content analysis. This study aimed to understand how ethicality is perceived and practiced by South African PR professionals in
agency contexts. Consequently, the research problem investigated was how South African agency-based PR professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice. For this purpose, moral framework was seen as consisting of a particular worldview, and it entails adherence to a particular value system that guides professional behaviour and that assists the professional in navigating their decision-making in ways that they consider to be ethically-responsible and accountable. In understanding the underpinnings of a moral framework, participants’ responses were presented and analysed in accordance to the following areas which not only revealed interesting and reoccurring participant perceptions, but also directly spoke to elements of a moral framework. Participants’ responses were compared and critiqued according to the following areas of importance:

- Worldviews held by PR professionals in PR agency contexts
- Individual versus community outlooks in PR practice
- Modern versus postmodern PR practice
- PR professionals’ role enactment
- Socially-responsible PR practice
- How ethical communication is understood and practiced in PR agency contexts
- Systems used to foster ethical communication
- Challenges of ethical communication

Data collected emphasised that PR agencies find themselves to be products of a paradigmatic paradox, with PR professionals practicing both asymmetrically and symmetrically in order to meet not only the agency’s needs, but also those of the clients and the public. This confirms literature on ethical PR conduct, which states that professionals simultaneously satisfy three distinct duties, namely: duty to self, client and society (Lieber, 2008). In most cases, professionals’ interviews suggested that professionals are not morally confused, but rather struggle to practice symmetrically within modernist environments. The participants all had a shared sense of wanting to contribute toward societal betterment through PR practice, being professionals with a strong community outlook. Professionals believe that there needs to be an appreciation of the other’s voice and reality, as well as constant reflection on whether communication practice is truly representative of the public. However, a modernistic view still exists in the practice of PR due to professionals’ views that PR practice exists for the “benefit of the commissioning organisation”, or in other words, PR professionals control information to the advantage of the interests who are paying them (Radford, 2012). This modernistic view of PR practice is encapsulated by at least half of the participants who believe that their role is simply to serve the commissioning interests and further enhance their wealth. This outlook on PR practice is pragmatic, which sees PR as simply contributing towards the bottom line or wealth optimisation. Although participants were morally aware of the unethical practices, their ability to
fully exercise individual moral accountability was either not prioritised or their efforts were ignored from top management.

Data also revealed that majority of professionals can clearly conceptualise ethical communication, stating that it should be understood as truthful behaviour underpinned by accountability, personal integrity, and the responsibility to produce communication that should positively impact society. This is indicative of a communitarian outlook. Furthermore, in terms of gaps in the ethics systems, participants all agreed that ethics-specific training was not something the agencies offered, and all participants stressed the need for ethics training and workshops to be held internally, thus fostering conversation surrounding what is considered ethical and unethical. Interestingly, ethical obligation is subjugated especially at lower levels, and this is where professionals’ perceptions differed, because more senior professionals exhibit greater moral obligation and moral compass.

The final chapter summarises the abovementioned findings in relation to the study’s three research questions.
CHAPTER 7: OVERALL CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In concluding this study, this chapter summarises the study’s key findings noted in chapter 6 and provides the overall conclusion based on the research topic. The findings summarised in his chapter highlight perceptions held by agency-based PR professionals with regards to what constitutes ethically-responsible communication practice and how it is applied by technician and managerial-level PR professionals in day-to-day PR practice in South Africa. Furthermore, the findings summarised in this chapter provide insight into the worldviews held by South African agency-based PR professionals, the theoretical communication approaches that inform these professionals’ ethical PR practice, as well as a discussion of how these professionals’ moral frameworks held impact their ethical decision-making. This chapter also details the limitations of the study, includes recommendations based on the study findings, and finally concludes with suggestions for further studies.

7.2 SUMMARY OF STUDY FINDINGS

As noted, there is a need to understand how South African agency-based PR professionals are guided by a moral framework for practice, and to see how these professionals compare in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice. Underpinnings of a moral framework for practice are detailed below and summarised in terms of the researcher’s own models for a moral framework for practice (as seen at the end of chapter 4), and in answering the study’s three key research questions listed below.

7.2.1 What do South African agency-based PR professionals regard as a moral framework for PR practice?

Data gathered reveals that participants hold both asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews of communication practice. Participants aim to practice PR from a postmodern perspective but find that they operate within modernist practices, hence the dual worldview held which speaks to a tendency for moral relativism and inter-subjective ethics. Most participants hold a community outlook for practice, thus focusing on communitarianism and systems thinking to guide their ethical enactment, ensuring that the professional understands their interdependent position within the eco-system. This systems approach to practice highlights the fact that professionals understand that their views held on one level may impact behaviours and decision-making on another, both for them and the other.
7.2.2 Do South African agency-based PR professionals differ in their perceptions of what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice?

Overall, most professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for practice do compare favourably. However, ethical obligation is subjugated especially at lower levels, and this is where professionals’ perceptions differed, because more senior professionals exhibit greater moral obligation and personal moral compass. Senior professionals reflect more strategic, long-term agent-centred outlooks aligned to postmodern ethics due to their experience in the field. Whereas technicians’ views held are generally act-centered, short term, and are predicated upon compliance and ethics of community of practice. Secondly, professionals do differ when it comes to moral obligations. On one side professionals’ behaviour is agent-centred and indicative of a non-negotiable personal framework, whereas on the other side, professionals are pragmatic and take on an asymmetrical, modern stance due to prioritising the interests of the commissioning parties above other interests – a modernist perspective that still dominates the profession.

7.2.3 How do the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals influence their ethical decision-making?

Inasmuch as professionals hold a community outlook and practice ethically in accordance to their role within an interdependent eco-system and their known responsibilities to the other, this eco-system is not exclusionary of moral tensions that arise between interests. As a result, professionals tend to assume a position of moral relativism, where they have to weigh various interests. In line with his, professionals’ moral decision-making fluctuates between modern and postmodern ethics based on ethics of intersubjectivity, where on one side professionals may find that they practice reflexively, and simply comply to prescribed ethical codes of conduct rather than holding their own moral accountability. Decision-making in this regard is based on consequences and links to Utilitarianism. On the other side, professionals may find that they are able to assume a strategic activist role, and practice ethicality and reflectivity, where ethical decision-making is agent-centred and predicated upon ethics of care and virtue. Thus, what can be drawn from the aforementioned findings is an ethical paradox.

7.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researcher found that there was limited literature relevant to ethical PR practice in South African agency contexts. This was the main limitation of the study, and as a result, the researcher could not always present localised literature in line with the topic, but rather presented literature which spoke to the topic very broadly. Often, such literature only spoke to ethical PR practice from a corporate or global perspective, and as such, the researcher sought
literature from other disciplines such as industrial psychology, management, and business ethics in order to understand and still comprehensively represent the topic at hand. Overall, this approach taken may have influenced the verification of local findings. Secondly, time constraints during the completion of the study impacted the methodology employed. Although the data collection methods employed, sample size, particular professionals interviewed, and the agencies identified were all suitable for this study, the researcher would have preferred to employ a mixed-methods approach to a larger, more representative sample in order to increase the validity of the study. However, the researcher does feel that data saturation was achieved regardless. Importantly, this study’s findings show a difference between the input received from the senior participants and the input received from the junior participants. The sample for this study did not ensure participants with similar levels of seniority, thus participants did not have the same decision-making powers or experience, which may have impacted the results of the study. Additionally, the trustworthiness is limited by the fact that the study only speaks to agency contexts that are typically characterised by their transactional nature of business and focus on serving client’s needs. In line with this, the study is only representative of Gauteng-based agency contexts and is, thus, not representative of the larger PR landscape in South Africa. Participants’ responses also could not be verified from other sources thus meaning that data reflects their subjective experiences. However, despite the limitations this study has identified, there are further research opportunities to now compare findings not only across various agencies in the country, but also within different agency-levels.

7.4 RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS AND LIMITATIONS

The following recommendations are presented in accordance to the study’s findings and limitations, with the intent to further the study in the future.

7.4.1 Consideration for industry regulation

Although subscribing to prescribed codes of ethics is a modernist outlook and opposes postmodern ethics ontology, the researcher emphasises the current need for industry regulation in order to protect the profession given flawed societal values, the subjectivity of morality, as well as the ethical paradox most PR professionals still find themselves in when confronted with conflicting interests. Industry regulation would mean a consideration of a professional model of certification, where the practice is licensed just as you would find in law, accounting and medicine. Based on the findings of this research it is evident that professionals need to be held accountable for their actions. To expand, industry regulation must encompass the requirement to reflect on role enactment via ethics training and education. As seen with the Bell Pottinger case study, prescribing codes of conduct and licensing the craft may not completely stop individuals from acting unethically but enabling a reflective mindset will empower the
professional to reflect on their personal values in line with the work they do, the agency they align with, and the ethical decisions they make while in a dual role serving multiple stakeholder interests concurrently. The researcher does, however, consider what can be done to promote a more ethical community of practice and supports the idea of more engagement within professional bodies to assist the community to engage in conversations about how professional responsibility amongst professionals can be fostered.

7.4.2 Ethics development opportunities and education

Given the findings of the study and the gaps in practice noted by the participants, as well as what was noted above, PR professionals should be educated on ethical communication either within a higher education environment or in the agency. The researcher suggests that PR professionals are provided training opportunities on ethical communication in order to foster and encourage the following:

- More conversations on what is considered ethical and unethical,
- Greater understanding of how to address ethical dilemmas,
- Revision of current ethics management systems within agency contexts; and,
- Reflection on ethicality and a focus on individual moral accountability.

Many organisations and PR agencies offer training on reputation management and crisis management but fail to offer ethics-specific development opportunities not only to their staff members but also to their clients. Providing ethics development opportunities would not only foster an ethical, more sustainable client-agency relationship, but also foster a reflective agency culture, as well as strengthen and highlight the importance of ethical communication practice. Professional bodies and higher education institutions should ensure that working PR professionals and PR students are trained properly, as well as encouraged to practice reflection throughout the duration of their professional and academic lives. Reflective practice will enable individuals to not only seek greater understanding of ethicality, but also reflect on their own values which guide general decision-making. In line with this, and based on the findings from participants, PRISA, for example, is in a position to lead such reflective PR development opportunities and thus, regain relevance in the eyes of those professionals who fail to see current value in their professional bodies.

7.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Based on the literature and findings of this study, PR agencies find themselves to be products of a paradigmatic paradox, with PR professionals practicing both asymmetrically and symmetrically in order to meet not only the agency’s needs, but also those of the clients and the public. Given the limitations listed in terms of sampling a more representative group, as well as the limited
local literature available on the topic at hand, there is great potential for future research to be conducted on the moral frameworks of more PR professionals not only operating in Gauteng-based agency contexts, but also in other regions in South Africa, as well as corporate contexts in South Africa. Such research would allow for comparison between different regions and different contexts, which may also be useful for client-agency sustainability.

Future studies could include a two-part qualitative approach that compares PR professionals’ perceptions about what constitutes a moral framework for PR practice in agency contexts. This two-part approach could include the leader of the agency, either those PR professionals who are founders or occupying management-level positions, along with lower, technician-level professionals from the same agency. This would enable comparisons between those enacting different roles within the same agency, thus eliminating potential bias from senior level PR professionals who were directly involved with establishing the ethical culture within the agency. Essentially, a two-part study would enable a comparison between leaders and technician-level PR professionals, which would provide a more representative, comprehensive view of the ethical culture and community of practice per agency.

In summary, there is room to expand this research on a moral framework for PR practice in the following ways:

- Country-wide study: Conducting the study across multiple regions in South Africa.
- Two-part qualitative study: Conducting the study at various levels within the same agency, and across various agencies as well.
- A broader context of practice: An investigation into both agency and corporate PR contexts in order to compare perceptions held and foster sustainable client-agency relationships based on findings.

Other than the need for further research and investigation into the moral frameworks for PR practice in agency contexts in South Africa, there is a great need for research into effective ethics training and most importantly, reflective education practices which will allow for bridging the gap between modernist organisations serving postmodern publics and adequately cultivate a reflectively-driven society not protected and fuelled by any prescriptive practices.
8. SOURCE LIST


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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based public relations professionals use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. This interview consists of the below 13 questions and the expected duration of the interview will be 30-60 minutes.

1. Describe what you do in your role as a PR professional.
2. Whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests?
3. Do you regard yourself as accountable for the way that you serve these interests? Why/why not?
4. How do you respond to any conflicting interests?
5. What, in your opinion, constitutes ethical communication practice?
6. What, in your opinion, constitutes unethical communication practice?
7. What challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice?
8. What values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?
9. Do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR professional? Why/why not?
10. Can you explain the similarities and/or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?
11. Does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes, please elaborate on whether the system is adequate or state whether there are grey areas.
12. What kind of role(s) do you think PR professionals should be enacting in the South African context?
13. Any other comments or observations?

Thank you for your participation in this study.
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, ________________________ , transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Simone Carter related to her Masters study on agency perceptions of a moral framework for public relations practice. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or digital files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Simone Carter;
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Simone Carter in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s name: ____________________________________________________________

Transcriber’s signature: ________________________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX C: SIGNED TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENTS

Transcriber 1:

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT
Transcription Services

I, [Graynor Payne], transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in
regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Simone Carter related to her
Masters study on agency perceptions of a moral framework for public relations practice.
Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently
   revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or digital files of the transcribed interview texts,
   unless specifically requested to do so by Simone Carter;
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they
   are in my possession;
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Simone Carter in a complete and
   timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard
   drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for
any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes
and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s name: [Graynor Payne]

Transcriber’s signature: [Signature]

Date: [17/9/2018]
CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Transcription Services

I, Nicki Solomon, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from Simone Carter related to her Masters study on agency perceptions of a moral framework for public relations practice. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio-taped interviews, or in any associated documents;
2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or digital files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Simone Carter;
3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;
4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to Simone Carter in a complete and timely manner.
5. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber’s name: Nicki Solomon

Transcriber’s signature:

Date: 2012/01/14
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study topic: Public relations professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for public relations practice

Research overview

The purpose of this research is to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based public relations (PR) professionals use to guide the enactment of their professional roles in a variety of communication contexts. For this purpose, moral framework is seen as consisting of a particular worldview, and it entails adherence to a particular value system that guides professional behaviour and that assists the professional in navigating their decision-making in ways that they consider to be ethically-responsible and accountable.

Ethical PR conduct can be understood as the simultaneous satisfaction of three distinct duties, namely: duty to self, duty to client and duty to society, all of which can sometimes be tainted with compromise. This raises some of the following questions for professionals: To whom do professionals owe their loyalty? Secondly, how do professionals ethically choose between potentially conflicting loyalties? Thirdly, is it the professional’s duty to protect one stakeholder at the expense of another? In navigating these questions, professionals will then turn to their basic set of beliefs to make sense of right and wrong, which links to the research study purpose of understanding the extent to which a moral framework guides South African PR practice.

This research aims to determine how agency-based PR professionals view their moral accountability. In line with this, some of the topics to be discussed in the interview include conflicting loyalties in practice, ethical decision-making, personal and professional values, ethical communication practice, unethical communication practice, codes of ethics, and PR roles to be enacted in South Africa.

The results of this survey will be published anonymously in the Master’s dissertation of the researcher, Simone Carter, in October 2018. Your voluntary participation is important to ensure reliable and valid findings about the perceptions that are held regarding the moral accountability of South African agency-based PR professionals.

The interview will be recorded via an audio recorder and will then be transcribed immediately following the completion of the interview. Interviews will be transcribed word-for-word to ensure that messages do not deviate from the fundamental questions and objectives of the study or conform to any of the researcher's assumptions. All transcribed content will be kept confidential.
You can remove yourself from the interview at any time and you are urged not to mention any names during the interview in order to ensure for complete anonymity.

The interview should take 30-60 minutes to complete and the researcher will probe where necessary when navigating the interview questions. You are, however, welcome to speak for as long as you deem fit in answering each research question.

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential, and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za.

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Name and surname

Date

Signature
APPENDIX E: SIGNED INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

*Name and surname of each participant has been blurred to protect their identity. Participants’ signatures have also been blurred in the case where their identity is still visible.

Participant 1:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Date: 28 September 2018

Name and surname

Signature

Participant 2:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Date: 2018/09/29

Name and surname

Signature
Participant 3:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Name and surname

Date

Signature

Participant 4:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Name and surname

Date

Signature
Participant 5:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on averwey@ul.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Name and surname

Date

Signature

Participant 6:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on averwey@ul.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Date

Signature
Participant 7:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Name and surname

Date

Signature

Participant 8:

This research is being conducted under supervision of Professor Sonja Verwey: Department of Strategic Communication at the University of Johannesburg. You have been selected for this study because you have been deemed suitable in being able to contribute towards the overall research question. Your participation in this process is highly valued. All responses are confidential and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results.

Should you have any concerns about any aspect of the research process you are welcome to contact Professor Sonja Verwey via email on sverwey@uj.ac.za

Your signature on this consent form indicates your agreement to participate in this study. You will be sent a copy of this form to keep and the signed consent form will be kept by the researcher.

Name and surname

Date

Signature
APPENDIX F: TRANSCRIPTIONS

PARTICIPANT 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Position title: Account Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time period spent in current position: 4 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time period spent working in PR: 1 year, 7 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting line: Account Director</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview length: 43:37
Date of interview: 16 September 2018

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based PR practitioners use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. The interview consists of 13 questions and the expected duration of the interview will be 30 – 60 minutes. All responses are confidential, and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of the results. I urge you to leave out names in the interview to ensure for anonymity. Alright, so I’m going to start with question number one. Describe what you do in your role as a PR practitioner?

Respondent: In my role as a PR practitioner, I basically oversee the accounts that I work on… the numerous accounts that I work on. And it goes from day to day things, like all the admin, I create basic content, I create content calendars. I manage and play, I play messenger between my client and any third parties and any subcontractors.

Interviewer: Okay, so you deal with people?

Respondent: Ja and I basically interact with media on a day to day basis in order to just make sure that my client’s reputation is well perceived in the media.

Interviewer: Okay perfect so, whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests? You did actually touch on some of this in the first question now. So just explain to me whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests? You did touch on this already so just expand on it a little bit more, so give me an idea, very clearly what exactly you do for each stakeholder, do you deal with any sensitive information, the level of responsibility…just tap into a little bit more.

Respondent: With regards to whose interests do I serve – primarily, I serve the interests of my client. Whichever client that I’m working on, I serve their interests and then this ranges from very familiar queries to both leadership and conversations that are happening. I always put my client first but then if there’s an instance whereby I have two clients and both their interests need to be taken into consideration I’m in the middle. That’s where it becomes a little bit trickier and I take my own personal interests and I will serve them depending on what I see fit.

Interviewer: Okay alright so you use your discretion. Okay number 3. Do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve these interests? Why or why not?
Respondent: Yes, I do, I would say that I'm very accountable for these interests because I'm given the responsibility to oversee all of this, so any decision that I take I take it knowing what the outcomes are going to be and if I miscalculate or I misinterpret a situation it is up to me to stand by those interest and where I’m wrong admit that I was wrong and admit my mistake. Learn from that mistake so yes, I would say I’m very accountable for everything that happens.

Interviewer: Alright, excellent. Number 4. How do you respond to any conflicting interests, so how do you go about decision making when facing conflicting situations with your stakeholders?

Respondent: Usually with my stakeholders I would engage with them directly, especially if something just doesn’t add up or the interests are very conflicting. I prefer to be open about it, I prefer to put everything on the table, and just tell them exactly like how it is but obviously I put it in a professional PR manner and it’s not as easy as it sounds because in order to respond to the conflict of interests someone’s going to have to be disappointed, someone is going to have to be disappointed but at the end of the day when you walk away, you know that you did the right thing.

Interviewer: Do you have any examples you can touch on where you have had to respond to any conflicting interests?

Respondent: I couldn’t catch that – you sound very far away.

Interviewer: Sorry. Do you have any examples that you can speak to?

Respondent: Yeah. For example, my background, my PR background is very financial heavy, so I have a lot of finance clients. So, with regards to sending out quarterly reports and certain reports on certain financial departments, I received the same reports at the same time and they, it's important to get coverage. So, Client A has come to me with the report and client B has come to me with the exact same reports with their logo on and this still needs to go out and still needs to get traction. And is it a thing of do I send my Client A's release and hold back on client B, and then the next quarter I send out client B’s release, and hold back Client A. It gets very tricky and then as well if I go to the management during the problem, it's not their problem. They don't care. They're being paid to do a certain job so what I would do is I would take a media list with all the media list and divide it up in half and then half the media list will go to client A and half would go to client B. Or one of the ways I would do it.

Interviewer: So, you tried to split the work up fairly so that everyone has an equal chance of receiving the work.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay so next question is what in your opinion constitutes ethical communication practice?

Respondent: For me it's just that agencies are put in place to communicate between brands and organisations. For me whatever is being communicated does not sit with me ethically or morally, it's a red flag and I think because it's my opinion I feel like as soon as something is not in the best interests of the consumer it's very unethical. It’s very unethical, it’s a red flag, and it should never be done at all to begin with.
As soon as if it hurts the consumer, we’re trying to educate, we’re trying to make the consumer’s life better but as soon as the communication is unethical, the communicating is driving or persuading the public to do something that doesn’t sit well with me personally I feel like it’s unethical.

Interviewer: Okay so what’s interesting is you actually mentioned two things. So, you said whatever you do has to be in the best interests of the consumer, but you also said it has to sit morally with yourself as well. Correct?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay so ethical communication practice for you needs to be in your own best interests and the interests of the consumer.

Respondent: True, yes correct.

Interviewer: Okay can you give me an example of what you have done that you feel has constituted ethical communication practice, even if this just something that you do on a day to day basis?

Respondent: Well I have a financial client who – when I say client, right now the date of this interview I think, it’s the 16th or 15th of September, so obviously we’re getting close to the Christmas season so now this financial client wants us to push like a – the holiday lifestyle, and everything, encourage people to spend and then we are really seeing plans for early next year January which wants us to encourage clients to actually pick up loans. So that for me is very unethical because you’re encouraging people to spend money, which right now South Africa we’re in a recession, you want people to spend money that they don’t have, after they spend that money you want them to come back and loan money. And to get money. You’re profiting at the end of the day. That doesn’t sit well with me. That’s one of the examples.

Interviewer: Okay that’s actually one of your examples then I think for unethical communication practice, but how you have managed to be professional and push back on that correct?

Respondent: Correct.

Interviewer: So, were you then honest with your client in saying you believe that is unethical and you should be a little bit more transparent with the consumer group, right?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: So, moving then onto question number 6, what in your opinion constitutes unethical communication practice? So, you gave me an example, but can you just explain to me in words what you believe is unethical?

Respondent: Unethical communication practice is any form of one-way communication that is intended to not have the consumer’s best interests at heart.

Interviewer: Okay alright so anything where again you keep on emphasizing you need the consumer’s best interests to be there and whatever you do needs to be for them?

Respondent: Yes.
Interviewer: So, do you have another example, maybe this doesn’t need to be something that you have done in your work but another example of what you have seen or read that you believe constitutes as unethical communication practice?

Respondent: Yes, I see it every day. For example, for example I’m just going to make a financial institution, example again because I pay particular attention to them, because – most of them - if you’re not my client you’re my competitor so what I’ve seen is a lot of the financial institutions will go into the system and they will call you up, calling you up for funeral policies, for instance, for life cover - for all the works, but then what they sometimes do from a peer point of view is they will write these piece of articles talking about how good it is to have good credit and the best way to do that, they will say is through a credit card but then they only highlight the positive side of having a credit card. They don’t actually communicate what are the downfalls and how you need to be responsible using a credit card so after you read that article, and the sales person rings you up on the phone and you earn, hypothetically speaking you earn less then R10,000 and that’s before tax. After tax maybe around 8 grand, 7 grand and they call you up and they’re offering you a credit card with a limit of 50 grand. They know very well that you can’t afford that. Because you read an article the previous week talking about how good it is, for your credit store, you’re going to take it up, but they haven’t highlighted the negatives, the negative aspects of having a credit card and how we need to use it responsibly to improve your credit score. So, they’re only giving a certain part of the information that they think you want to hear. So, they’re not, with the communications that they’re releasing it’s not very holistic.

Interviewer: Yes. And it’s almost like selective truths to almost increase their bottom line, almost like you said have the consumer’s best interests at heart and be completely transparent.

Respondent: Yes, so they nitpick what financial information they want to give you.

Interviewer: Okay ja I’ve got you, I understand. Alright number 7, what challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice? So, you can refer to you know working with difficult clients or any organisational politics or management or procedures. What challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically?

Respondent: One of the biggest challenges that I faced ethically is a lot of the brands, a lot of the brands that come to us or what’s in right now is targeting young black males because that’s the majority of the population and from previously disadvantaged individuals, there’s a lot of new money with these - so all the brands, all the corporations, they want to in there, they want them as consumers and the way they [geo target them] or place them in different categories and the way we communicate with them, it doesn’t really fit 100% written because they ask for certain things that they know will only appeal to the certain market and then with that they encourage a certain lifestyle that most of them can’t really afford and they continue to drive that message heavily and with that, once again if I can give an example, they target young black males and the financial institution, there’s something called vehicle asset finances. So they will target young black males, offer them car loans that they can’t really afford and then from that we need to motivate for the spokespeople or the certain business segment in the financial
segment to talk on those radio stations that we know that young black males actually communicate on in order to drive this message and actually convince them they can afford this even though we all know that they can’t. They can’t afford a certain luxury vehicle, if we give them the luxury vehicles then the only things they can afford based on their salary because we’ve done all the research is their rent and obviously the car. That means that they’re going to have to get money elsewhere to survive for the rest of the month and as a financial institution, they have that information they’re going to offer you a loan and you’re going to take it up. You’re forever in the cycle of debt with them, and that’s really difficult because we know what they’re doing and to communicate is very very hard with the client, they also have their KPIs that they are given by business. Business has their KPIs and so on and so on. Just so frustrating and it’s very difficult to manage the communication and it’s very unethical at the end of the day.

Interviewer: Yes so this actually relates back to one of the questions was how do you respond to any conflicting interest because now obviously you have done enough research to understand that the target audience that they’re trying to target they’re like selling a dream to them that is not even going to work out but they don’t know that and you now are relating to this target audience, and you’re like this is not on. But there’s not much you can do because the client needs to meet their own goals.

Respondent: That’s the thing - everybody’s worried about their only KPIs.

Interviewer: Yes. That’s actually very interesting. So, for you I’m just going to sum up your answer, so the challenge that you face is actually linked to the targeting for your campaigns with your particular financial client that you work on, you just don’t agree with the way they’re targeting the people so it’s not necessarily who they’re targeting but how they are targeting the people.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay, are there any other challenges that you face?

Respondent: I would say when it comes to PR like [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:17:36.7] there are a couple of other challenges when it comes to getting coverage. Like sometimes you’ll motivate it’s a very good piece, it’s very educational but a certain publication won’t pick it up and they’ll say that they’re not going to pick it up because my client doesn’t advertise on their publication. Cool, I get that, you have to make money. But then if we’re running a different campaign and I advertise with you, obviously I’m advertising as advertorial. I don’t want to send you a piece [that automatically is like going up or the] because I advertise with you. The line becomes very blurred and it seems as if I’m almost paying for coverage or I’m blackmailing us to pay for coverage. I don’t know if I’m making sense.

Interviewer: Ja no. You are making sense. They almost won’t publish your article if you don’t advertise; essentially that’s giving them money.

Respondent: Ja so, and the thing is that’s not what PR does.
Interviewer: No.

Respondent: PR knows, people forget that PR has a human element to it, if you watch an advert you see that they’re product pushing but then on the other side of PR you see a human being talking about the certain issue, whatever you’re going through and giving a solution and breaking it down and being on a platform that allows two-way communication where people call in for questions and the expert gives back answers, it seems more trustworthy than one form of one-way communication.

Interviewer: Yes, no absolutely. I mean what’s the point of trying to push a genuine article that you feel deserves to be there if you’re going to be paying for it anyway? That takes away from the purpose of PR, right?

Respondent: Yes, and it's also going to write ‘sponsored’, so as soon as I see sponsored, I'm not even about [unclear 0:19:35.8], it's not genuine. Someone paid money for it to be there.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely. Alright so politics in the media space essentially and then back to your targeting issue that's obviously just clients wanting to meet their own goals.

Respondent: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Very interesting so number 8 is what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in South Africa? So, I can read out a little paragraph to you, so humans are influenced by personal values which dictate their reactions towards situations and decision making in accordance to their morality. What values do you believe are necessary for enacting professional communication roles in South Africa?

Respondent: Personally – personally for me values, I think honesty, honesty, honesty - I feel like honesty should just be one of them. You have to be honest and keep on going back to - it has to be in the best interests of the consumers, because they don't know any better. They take the media's word as truth so as soon as you start being unethical with that, they're going to take everything that they said that's unethical and consider it as the truth, and that's not the case. They rely on us to get the truth. They rely on media, so honesty - you need to be honest. For me two-way communication is the best way for honesty and also with honesty I feel like transparency. You need to be very transparent with everything that you're doing. Because if a brief lands on my desk and I'm seeing this and I can see this is very unethical, if I'm honest with the client and I'm very transparent with the client, when things go wrong, when things go south, and now the [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:21:52.1] I can always go back and refer to in the pre-phases of the campaign, this was flagged, because now I showed my honesty and I was very transparent about how I feel about the campaign and changes need to be made. But then changes were not made, we see that from a reputational point of view, this was considered it's just that client did not listen the client did not listen when we consulted with them. So, I would say the transparency and honesty are the two - top two values for me.
Interviewer: Alright, so it’s always tell the truth and almost treat your target audience with a level of respect, you know to understand their level of understanding, and give them what they need rather than what your client thinks they need.

Respondent: Ja.

Interviewer: Okay. You actually touched on number 9 already but do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR practitioner? Why or why not?

Respondent: Definitely – definitely because one thing that clients fail to understand is that they’re so caught up in their KPIs that they don’t engage on a human level with their target audience and they get that, us - although we work for them, they’re our clients, but we’re also their consumers. They forget that. So, whilst I’m writing a piece on credit and I’m telling them to increase the credit score through, via credit card for example, I would listen, and I’d take a step back and I’m like is this something that I would personally do and because I know [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:23:42.8] are like no. And if I were to do this there are certain risks associated with using a credit card, there are things that I need to consider and then when you write the article, and send it to them for approval, when it comes back – all those things that you put in there in order for the pieces to be ethically correct, and morally right, with me personally are taken out [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:24:08.5] played with those ethical messages. So, now, it’s selling a product. It’s pushing their agendas. So and I know that if someone, if someone misuses a credit card or does not pay off the mortgage or their car loan or whatever, it can be taken away if someone loses a job, because you’ve taken out too many accounts, or whatever the case may be, the real – the things that are actually going to happen is that it’s going to be taken away, you’re going to be kicked out, you have a wife or family, there’s blood tax involved because what they don’t understand is that one person’s salary usually affects 4 – 5 different families. That’s one thing they don’t understand because from a grassroots level we can relate to them. So, I know that if I’m putting this person in debt, if I’m encouraging them to spend and be in debt – and they have to pay back the money. For those 4 – 5 families that are being fed through that one salary, someone has to take a knock, because the money has to be paid back. No one, you can’t have your cake and eat it as well. Somebody’s going to have to take a knock. And it’s not going to be the bank because the bank always finds a way to make their money back. If it’s a house, they will take back your house and auction it out. Just so they make their money back. If it’s a car they’re going to repossess it. If it’s your business they’re going to close it down. Whatever it is the bank will always win or the financial institution will always win so for me my personal values affect how I do my job as a PR practitioner heavily.

Interviewer: So, you believe that, I’m going to call it “value congruence”. So, do you believe that the person, organisation value congruence needs to be there, which is essentially an alignment between you and your client and you and your agency? Do you believe there needs to be that congruency or alignment in your preferences and their values and the work environment?

Respondent: Yes definitely. I feel like this should be done in the beginning in the negotiation stage where clients have got a brief that they open their businesses up to
whoever wants to pitch for it. All the PR agencies, all the corporates and everyone. After you’ve pitched and after they’ve told this is who you want to go with, I feel like the agencies should say this is who we stand for from an ethical point of view. We will not be associated with A, B, and C, we will not do this, we will not do that. Then ethically if the client is, that’s something they can’t go with then they part ways, so doing this will always protect the PR agency and the PR agency will always be known to do ethical work, not just good work, great and ethical work every single time. So, when you see a client associated with that agency, we already there’s that – okay no, they’re trusted, there’s that sense of credibility that comes with it as opposed to being another communication agency.

Interviewer: Absolutely so just to summarise that thought you said you believe it needs to be stated up front by the agency to the client in terms of who we are, what we stand for, what we value, this is what we believe ethical communication practice is, either you fall in or you fall out.

Respondent: Ja.

Interviewer: Alright, excellent. Can you explain the similarities and or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?

Respondent: I think the similarity, the similarity would be what the agency on my account personally, because it’s broken up, we have different line managers, different statements of the account. The similarities would be when a brief comes in, an extension, and I look at my contact and I tell her, I don’t agree with this she always looks back at me and says she also doesn’t agree with this and then we sit down, and then we [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:28:36.7] but they wait for the agency to come together and help us think, and help us attack the brief, we’ve already positioned it from an ethical point of view. So those are the similarities that I would say that are there. But then the differences come through with I would say in terms of background because if something is unethical, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s illegal. Just means morally doesn’t fit right with a certain school of thought for a certain individual. For example, I might sit with a situation and think it’s unethical, you might look at it as very ethical. So, this is where our different backgrounds and viewpoints come into play. And this is something to do with not fully understanding everyone in the country. For example, if a brief comes in and it’s talking about stokvels, those stokvels we know that the majority of the stokvels in South Africa are owned by the black community so if a stokvel brief comes in and they’re talking about how they’re going to have a new stokvel account or have a stokvel but take a certain commission or whatever the case is going to be usually the older white employees will look at it and just kind of [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:30:21.6] but as a young black South African, I will look at it. Because I know how it operates, I know the reasons, I know the history behind stokvels, why stokvels are there in the first place. It’s because people can’t really afford groceries, they can’t afford clothing, they can’t afford education, and they can’t afford clothing. So, what they do is they come together and contribute a little piece every single month and then at the end of the year [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:30:44.3] then at the end of the year it comes out and then because there’s so much money it goes to buying food for Christmas, because all the
family is together. It goes to buying uniforms for kids in January, in January. It goes to – it’s such a community-based activity but then when certain people look at it, because they don’t understand the history behind it and the initial purpose they just see it as another money scheme if you will and then they just disregard it but when I look at it I look at it these are people live, these are people last financial chances to survive January or to survive the year. This is what they have to do. So, with that this is where the difference comes in where I’ll say these people, this is their last bit of money that they’re putting towards this. I’ll put this to come through. If this financial institution brings up this law, [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:31:42.8] product, this is going to help them – it will help the consumers in the long run and then that’s where I stand but somebody else with a different background will not see it that way. They’ll see it in their own way so that’s where the differences come in. And obviously vice versa. Is there something else that they would see that I don’t really relate to? Maybe because of my age and I’m quite young. I’m 23, they’re 35, in their 40s. They see something [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:32:10.2] and they see it from their perspective. So obviously they had a different understanding and a wealth of knowledge in that department. So, they can say this is very unethical and doesn’t sit well with me. I’ll be like how, explain, then once they explain I see it, but I still don’t understand it. But then that’s where I think the different backgrounds are where our ethics just become a little bit different.

Interviewer: Alright interesting. Basically, what you’re saying is that obviously everyone is different and what is ethical for one person may not be ethical for another and the way they understand consumers in the country may be different to you. However, in your teams you have found that you do have similarities in terms of being able to distinguish between right and wrong.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright very nice. Number 11. Does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes, please elaborate on whether the system is adequate or state whether there are grey areas?

Respondent: I wouldn’t say there’s a formal – I wouldn’t say there’s a formal ethical communication policy in place for the employees, but what we have is an open-door policy, whereby, if I’m sitting and a brief comes then or whatever’s happening, I can get up and go to the MD or go to the business unit head and explain why whatever doesn’t sit well with me ethically.

Interviewer: Okay so you don’t have like ethics training or ethics workshops, but you do have an open-door policy where you can go and speak to whoever is available in the department or in your division just to double check your thoughts.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Is it compulsory that you are part of PRISA?

Respondent: I’m not really sure if it’s compulsory that you’re part of PRISA but yes, we are part of PRISA.
Interviewer: Okay so as agency or are you speaking as you as an individual?

Respondent: As an agency.

Interviewer: Okay so as an agency you are then registered with PRISA and open-door policy for individual staff members?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Almost done. Number 12. What kind of role or roles do you think PR practitioners should be enacting in the South African context?

Respondent: I think more transparency and more two-way communication is needed. Because I feel – I feel with – yes, we are writing and we are producing content that is very informative but then we never really, it's very – we all know – as PR practitioners, it's very hard to measure the impact that PR plays in a certain campaign. It's very hard. It's very hard because if you're running a campaign to sell cards or whatever and you guys are launching and advertising is doing their thing, marketing is doing their thing, digital marketing is doing their thing, traditional PR Is doing their thing and digital PR is also doing their thing, there are so many pillars that are taking place, it's kind of hard that with marketing if it's digital, we can tell how many people clicked on the banners, how many people stand up for test drive and all of that but we can't really measure the metrics of what PR, that one interview that was on 702 or 94.7 how many people heard that interview actually, that interview convinced them to actually go down to the dealership or call the dealership and ask for a test drive. Or asked for a quotation on the car. You can't really – you can't really measure that so there needs to be a way – they need to aware of the metric system put into place where you can actually measure that. You can actually think what happened, and I think the first thing we need to is allow two-way communication where we can hear from the consumers whilst you're absorbing the content, how did it land with you. Did you hear this interview, did it work, how did you feel about it? Did it convince you or would it make you go and get the car? So, once that's happening, I think with more research being done, we can actually start understanding how we should be planning the content. What works, what doesn't. Because right now if you're like don't know how to measure, but you know that plays a very big role but getting the exact number to be key is quite hard. I think introducing two-way communication that would help.

Interviewer: Absolutely, so just to summarise that you're saying it's important that there is a multiplicity of views and voices that are embraced via purposeful communication that shapes society and changes behaviour?

Respondent: Ja.

Interviewer: Alright and then number 13, any other comments or observations so you can speak to anything else regarding the moral role that you have to take on, any other experiences that you feel are important to note. Overall thoughts on the field and ethics.

Respondent: I just feel like as PR practitioners we always just need to ask ourselves that if my client has a certain product and he brings the product to market, would I use this
product, is this ethical would I – would I honestly speaking use this product. Because you might find that even the client that’s giving you the product, they’re not going to use it, and they don’t even use it. They are actually using the competitor’s product. So, if they don’t even believe in their own product, why should I carry on messaging. And also, one thing that I’ve seen is the lines between discipline is clearly being blurred whereby marketing digital and PR sometimes play in each other’s fields. Just because I do marketing doesn’t mean I have to disregard PR and just because I do PR, I can’t just disregard advertising. Those layers are starting to be blurred and it’s starting to become one. And with that I feel like when it comes to legislations, when it comes to rules, it becomes very very tricky because you don’t know which rules to play with. For example, a South African – a South African toy store was actually, because I don’t want to mention any names, was actually advertising their products to kids in a way that is very illegal. But because people didn’t really know which rules to go with, it flew under the radar but then while we were looking at it and going through the legislation, we see they broke a couple laws. It’s very unethical direct selling to kids in the manner that they did it in.

Interviewer: Okay, I get you. So, do you as a PR because there’s now a blur between the disciplines that it’s important for you to understand ethics with regards to direct selling, social media laws stuff like that.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay the one thing that you also touched on that was quite interesting was that you said clients are selling products but they’re not actually questioning whether they themselves would use that products. So, do you feel that they’re not reflecting enough before they’re attempting to communicate with consumers?

Respondent: Ja. I feel like they’re, I feel like they’re not because for example, if I can make an example with the bank. If the client is a bank and they work for the bank and they bank with that same bank and they’re pushing out a certain product they’re going to make sure that the product is extremely good so that they look good, so they give quality service, so they never have complaints, they never have systems down or systems are offline. They’re going to make really sure that everything is perfect, because they’re going to be using the product as well.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: But because they don’t use those products, they don’t actually use the products or services they don’t really care, they just put it out there and just use the competitors’ products and services. So, they’re very not in touch or not in tune with the reality of what they’re putting out to market.

Interviewer: So, they’re just putting out products, working towards the bottom line, they’re not reflecting on how this actually services the consumer, they’re not reflecting on whether they would actually use it themselves. they’re just doing it to meet their KPS, make money and then move forward. Right?

Respondent: Ja. KPIs and also although it’s the PR practitioner’s job to look at what’s been done and analyse it from an ethical point of view, I feel like they should start with the client, when the investors are trying to push a certain method, they should
push back to the creditors and tell them that this is unethical. If it starts with them, it trickles down to us it wouldn’t be such a problem because we already know that the client has already pushed back to business. Business was pushed back to the shareholders – shareholders pushed back to the investors, everyone – so it starts from the top so when it trickles down all the way to us the ethical problems are not a tier one, it’s a tier three, tier 4 it’s more manageable as opposed to a big problem that only PR has to deal with. Because as much as the problem could be from a PR point of view, if the product is wrong there’s nothing that PR can do from an ethical point of view, if the product is wrong.

Interviewer: Right, so you believe that that ethical mindset needs start from the very top and filter itself down before it even gets to the PR practitioners?

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Respondent: No, I think I’ve said my piece.
PARTICIPANT 2

PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position title:</th>
<th>Executive Director of Strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time period spent working in PR:</td>
<td>15 years</td>
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<td>Reporting line:</td>
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Interview length: 1:21:40
Date of interview: 16 September 2018

Participant: Generally, my role is to position companies and people positively. So, in a very short nutshell, that’s generally what my job is. However, as our company, we take the viewpoint that we are dealing with reputation management, we’re known as reputation management experts, and we believe that’s actually what truly holds a position of a company or a person together, so the positive positioning of that. And PR is just an element of it, as much as it’s part of the marketing mix, that’s how we see it. My role, specifically, is a strategic one, as my title states, but, more than anything, it’s about formulating the thinking that drives the successful positioning that I’m speaking of. So, at a very high level, I look at organisations and people and what they have in place in terms of their strategies, and then, from a communications perspective, I then implement the strategies, which will then be rolled out by various members of the team utilising different tactics. And that’s your usual press release, articles, speaking engagements, stakeholder engagements, that type of thing. So, the main thing that holds what we do together is reputation management, and that speaks to what I do personally as a PR professional, in inverted commas.

Interviewer: Thank you for being interviewed. The study aims to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based PR professionals use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. This interview consists of thirteen questions, and the expected duration of the interview will be thirty to sixty minutes. All responses are confidential, and I urge you to leave out names in the interview to ensure for anonymity. Question number one, describe what you do in your role as a PR professional.

Participant: I found this one very interesting because there are various interests in terms of stakeholders that we serve as communications people. But, for me, the most important are our employees and our clients. If I were to zoom into those... because I believe they have a symbiotic relationship in terms of the value that comes out of that. So, in terms of employees, for us, I think it’s about creating a safe environment that’s conducive and diverse and encourages a good working environment where people feel developed and have an opportunity to teach and learn, all at the same time. The reason we do it like this is because, obviously, for us, the people who pay us, our clients, really rely quite heavily on us and our employees in order to deliver that, to deliver success that is. So, in terms of our...
clients, who we serve, is producing quality work that makes a significant impact in their lives, in the lives of their customers, so the value chain increases as well in that perspective. If we do our jobs properly, our clients are satisfied in terms of what they’ve contracted us to do, but, if you look further down the value chain, much like what we were just discussing now, people feel more enlightened, more educated, more understanding of whatever the message we have been responsible to construct is. So, that’s quite important. And then we also serve, in my belief, the industry. We have the MAC Charter, the Marketing Communication Charter, that guides us in terms of how we should be practicing communications in our country, and I think we’ll talk about that a little bit later. And, of course, King IV that ensures that we’re in line from an ethical and business perspective. So, for me, those are the main people that we serve, the interests that we serve.

Interviewer: Perfect. When you say that you serve the industry, can you just explain what you mean by the industry? So, who would be the industry?

Participant: I think the industry, for me, is...it’s the communications and marketing industry as a whole. So, my company forms but one element of that. And, if you look at our responsibility in a South African context of the industry and if you read the MAC Charter, it speaks about many things such as diversity, responsible practicing of what we do, and, as a result, as an entire industry, when we don’t separate ourselves as individual organisations, we have a huge responsibility to produce communications and messaging that has a social impact in our country. The way in which we do our jobs actually influences, because part of what we do in public relations is to influence the thoughts of people, whether it’s to drive or if it’s to drive aspirations. And, so, there’s a great industry body that we all serve as a body to ensure that that happens properly.

Interviewer: Absolutely. And, when you speak about these different interests, do you feel that one is preferenced [sic] over the other, or do you feel that they should all be served equally?

Participant: I think they should be served equally. Again, that’s my opinion and it’s, I think, the opinion of my organisation as well because, like I said, the client/employee relationship is so symbiotic. You can’t actually have one malfunctioning if the other is to be successful. And then what we then do for the clients again speaks to the public, which is the end user or the end consumer of our messaging or the products that we promote. And then, of course, as an industry, we can’t have rogue bodies sort of deciding we don’t care about diversity or we don’t care about ethics, we’re just going to do communications or marketing or advertising in our own way, because, ultimately, it influences the entire positioning of what we all do. And the objective again, if you read the MAC Charter, is to Interviewer: So, it’s a bit like a domino effect. You have to serve them all equally in order to really achieve what you need to.

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Question number three: do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve these interests? Why or why not?

Participant: So, yes, because, personally, like I said, I’m a reputation management specialist, which means, to advise clients, to put together messaging, to put together
strategies and thinking, I need to respect the importance of managing my own reputation. So, again, I have to take accountability. We strive, obviously, to build great relationships with our clients and, as a result, we need to be accountable for whatever we produce for them, and, again, play that challenging role or that role that guides in the right way. So, when you take accountability, you take accountability for the good and the bad, and, so, in a way, it does kind of rest quite squarely in terms of how you personally conduct yourself as a person because you’ve got to be able to distinguish between what can be borderline a grey area or wrong or right, and the responsibility and accountability that comes with that.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Number four: how do you respond to any conflicting interests?

Participant: This is a very difficult one, and I think I had to really dig deep in terms of how I personally do it because it’s how I would then advise the people that I work with to do it as well. And how you respond to conflict is something you carry with you, whether you’re within a company meeting and people can witness it, or you are on your own having a conversation after a meeting with a client or after a meeting with a stakeholder, and whether you agree or don’t agree with them, and how you manage yourself if there is a conflict. So, for me, I deal with that with consistency and focus. I think consistency in the sense of how I have crafted conflict management based on my experience thus far, whether that’s theoretical or in actual practice, because I’ve had many incidents where I’ve had to deal with conflict. And then, of course, from a focus perspective, they say you play the ball and not the man, and I think that’s what’s important in problem solving. It’s not to focus on the problem itself, but the solution. And you’ve gotta do this daily on the job. It’s not one of those things that, quarterly, let’s list all the conflicts and try and solve them, because festering conflicts, as you know, lead to long-term problems which are.

Interviewer: So, you speak about the fact that you’ve dealt with many conflicts before. Can you please just explain the process of how you dealt with them, if there was someone that you could report into, into the company? Just explain the process of how you went about solving conflicts.

Participant: I think, in my earlier years as a professional, I would have to utilise the platforms that were available to me. So, as a rule, my first approach is to again deal with the problem. So, often, conflicts are amongst…it’s human to human, so they’re amongst people, and, of course, if the conflict is one that you have with another person, the first step to take is to address it with that person, whether that’s a peer or a client or anyone within your ecosystem of delivery, and, so, that’s the first step. Often, that works very, very well, but sometimes it really doesn’t because, after the conversation, there may be further conflict when people are not on the same page in terms of whatever the conflict might be. And the next step, again, would be then to say, okay, let’s take one step back, and, again, I always say one night’s rest just does wonders sometimes because it helps your brain to recalibrate in terms of how next you can approach a situation. And, again, my approach has then been to what are the platforms? What are the policies? What’s in place at an organisation? And I’m speaking specifically in an organisation context. Then I would then look at those, have a look at does it make sense to me? And then take those steps. So, whether that’s then going to
a line manager and, if then that doesn’t work, going to someone more senior than
that. If that doesn’t work, going to HR. Again, in our country, not all SMEs have
that framework, and a lot of the businesses that operate within communications in
the country are SMEs, and, so, you’ve gotta be very creative in terms of how we
do that because sometimes it’s just not as formalised as a large business. But I
would say, initially, it’s the human touch that works, it’s that practical approach to
another human being or to the challenge or to the conflict approach to the issue,
and then, of course, you can start looking at, when that fails, how to implement or
enforce policies that are in place. And, further than that, I’ve had, in my...not in
my career, but in my personal life, once, which I will not name the details as you
said, I’ve had to then go to...what do they call that...the Human Rights
Commission in South Africa, and the reason I use that example is that our
Constitution allows us, further than the rules of our organisations or the spaces
we work in, to exercise our rights in terms of solving conflicts where you have
been unable to do so in the space you’re in.

Interviewer: So, just to summarise your answer, you speak about you have to have almost a
mental mindset in yourself, and then you look at all the platforms, all the
alternatives, and, essentially, you focus on a solution. So, it’s almost outcome
based. You look at what the solution is or what’s the best that could happen and
you look at all the platforms available to get you there, right?

Participant: So, the reason why I don’t like using the word moral is because it’s so open to
interpretation, and so should it be, to be honest, because who knows, really, how
to define morality. It’s such an open debate. I think what’s really important is to
be as practical, and, again, dealing with a problem, dealing with the solution
rather than the person, and I think, for me, that’s quite important, because what’s
moral to me may not be moral to the next person.

Interviewer: Absolutely. It is very subjective. In terms of responding back to conflicting
interests, have you ever had any specific situations where you have had conflict
with a client before?

Participant: Yes. It happens often, and the higher, I think, you get in an organisation, the
more it happens because you are responsible for being the mouthpiece that
addresses conflict, addresses issues that perhaps can create conflict. And, so,
yes, I have had many, many instances where that has happened.

Interviewer: Would you like to expand on how you have dealt with it, or do you feel like you’ve
covered that already?

Participant: I think it’s the same steps. It’s just that, usually, what happens, people speak
of...and I don’t want to use this word actually. In the end, if you’ve reached a
point where you are unable to resolve a conflict with a client and it’s really bad
and it’s something that has legal implications or implications that mean that you
are not conducting yourself ethically and responsibly as a business, then that is
the time to consider whether that is the right client to have within your portfolio,
and that’s where a decision needs to be made to say we’re actually not aligned.
You don’t have to be aligned with everything with a client, they have their own
missions and values and all of that, but, when it comes to critical things, it’s quite
important.
Interviewer: So, that almost speaks to value congruency. And, so, you say it’s not always necessary to have complete alignment, it also can’t always happen, but you say that you will know, as a professional, when you cannot come to an agreement.

Participant: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: Number five: what, in your opinion, constitutes ethical communication practice?

Participant: This one is quite difficult because there is so much, but I tried to sort of summarise it in terms of the most important topic of the day in our country and, actually, around the world: diversity. A very broad and international understanding of diversity is required to have an ethical communication practice, and we’ve seen the results of diversity not being understood or being ignored or being sort of swept under the carpet in terms of the types of communication campaigns, companies, platforms that have gotten into a lot of trouble as a result. And, so, right now, today, in twenty-eighteen, diversity, for me, is extremely important. And it speaks directly to ethics. It’s one topic that you should exhaust, and you should unpack and delve into, in your organisation, to the point where you are so satisfied that everyone within your organisation understands how you do diversity or how you implement diversity. Down to the junior, because we’ve seen where EXCOs have a good understanding of company strategy, which may involve diversity, but, when it comes down to the bottom layers where some decisions are made, that’s where some errors have occurred, and, as a result, have caused issues for the entire organisation. And those issues have cost organisations millions and billions in some cases.

Interviewer: Can you expand on those issues actually? You speak about examples of diversity not being understood, and then things going wrong, or, like you say, there are issues when it’s not understood by the juniors. Can you expand on those?

Participant: So, the obvious one, and the big one, from a communications context, is the H&M monkey campaign where, again, the idea could have resonated from one individual and perhaps then taken to a broader team, not knowing how big that team may have been, and then signed off eventually by someone with signing authority. There’s a huge debate in terms of whether there was a deliberate intent with H&M, which, as a communications professional, I would think probably not because everyone knows the ramifications of implied racism or racism just blatantly. And, so, as a result, that’s a perfect example of a company that has, in later weeks and months, explained that, of course, that is not aligned to how they do business. But that struck at the heart of the company from a financial perspective and also from a standing, a social standing, with the entire world. There were protests around the world, it was a huge deal. And how do you, as a company, say, oh, no, that is not what we stand for, but, at the end of the day, that’s what came out? And that’s how people perceived it. And another example, on our own home ground, is OUTsurance with their…they had two, didn’t they? Now I’m trying to recall. One was the Father’s Day one where they had a majority of black fathers in an advert and…I mean of white fathers in an advert, and it was a social media campaign. Again, celebrating something that’s important in our society, and especially the society such as South Africa, present
fathers, happy fathers, fathers who are engaged with their families and children, fantastic concept, but, again, a loop was skipped in terms of understanding the impact of leaving out, in a country such as South Africa...and I would dare say you shouldn't do that even in a population that has a majority of a specific race. And, again, a tough lesson that really knocked OUTsurance from that perspective, and especially a brand that home-grown, quite well-loved and appreciated in general...I've never had to claim from them and, so, I don't know how that works, but it's generally an appreciated brand, a brand that a country can be proud of, but having to then slip off that pedestal is a tough price to pay.

Interviewer: So, with diversity and understanding diversity, you could say then it's important to have inclusivity, which is what they obviously missed out on then with their campaign.

Participant: Absolutely. And, as you know, and you're right, diversity is not always about race in the examples that I've given, it's about many things. It's about gender; it's about complex concepts in terms of idiosyncrasies, of different communities. And, so, that's why I say you've gotta tackle your diversity proposition and standing within an organisation in great detail and be able to implement it, because there's no point having a diversity policy and you can't implement it. So, yes, it does include inclusivity and it includes many, many other elements that have to do with thinking diversely, laterally, narrow-mindedness, all those types of things.

Interviewer: Absolutely. So, an understanding of different people's realities, essentially.

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Other than diversity, what else do you think constitutes ethical communication practice, for you?

Participant: So, best practice?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: And, again, that's linked to, I've mentioned, the MAC Charter and King IV. For me, in your industry, you look for what's best practice and you research and understand it, and you implement it. It's a simple thing to do. And then, of course, we're all ruled by King IV in terms of, as companies, how do we conduct ourselves ethically? So, the best practice in the industry, and those are the two examples of ours. And then I also thought about sustainability. So, in tough economies, we're all responsible for preserving jobs and contributing positively to an economy like South Africa, for example, and how we do business must be sustainable. Everyone, obviously, goes scrambling in an economy like ours that's going through a technical recession, for example, at the moment, but how do you step back and say there's a...clients are cutting down and some of...the first things organisations cut down is marketing, but how do you then still ensure that there's a sustainability within your small ecosystem, and, of course, again, like I said, the industry? And it's a delicate one. In the past, there used to be this practice where you attracted a client and, if a client is on a short-term contract, you then match the employment to that contract, and, should anything happen to that contract, everyone goes, and it's a short-term thinking strategy, and, of
course, it always impacts on how our industry contributes to the economy. So, sustainability, in many ways, is very important.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Participant: And the last one is, I would say...what is it? Ethical crisis management. The reason I chose ethical crisis management is because we’ve seen so much crisis management this year alone in our country. I won’t name the names, but there’s been huge organisations that have come down crashing as a result of, I guess, ethics and how, particularly, the crises were managed. And, from our perspective, how we manage crisis as an industry, again speaks to ethical practice because our role is not to spin. Television is fantastic in creating drama around spin-doctoring, and it’s entertaining. In reality, spin-doctoring can be extremely dangerous because it blurs the facts, in many instances, and it can create what then becomes a practice, such as fake news becoming normalised, which, of course, is extremely dangerous for not just our industry and the consumers within our industry, but, actually, society as a whole.

Interviewer: You speak about ethical crisis management and I think we will touch on it a little bit later in further questions, but do you believe having an ethics system in place then is important to also avoid having to dealing with crisis later down the line?

Participant: Absolutely. So, again, what guides your ethics, you've gotta look within what already exists as policies within your industry, but, again, very much our company approach is that we often encourage organisations not to come to us, even though we are crisis specialists, when the crisis has occurred. So, we encourage crisis planning, which is again an offering we have where it says, right...and you’ve gotta look at the organisation in its entirety. We had the fires that spoke to Jo'burg Municipality last week. A crisis. When that was interrogated, it was found that some basic steps were not in place and, again, that created that issue, and, if you take that example, it’s about thoroughly putting together a crisis plan, whether it’s an evacuation plan or it’s a plan that has to do with positioning of the company. What do your spokespeople have to say? Who are your spokespeople? Whether it has to do with social media policies... There are so many intricate details that go into something like that that it is vital to look at crisis from a planning perspective versus from a fixing perspective.

Interviewer: I'll make a note of that.

Participant: Or preventative.

Interviewer: Rather than reactive.

Participant: Ja.

Interviewer: You spoke about being guided a lot by King IV. So, I just want to confirm that. Are you guided in your own practice by the King IV principles?

Participant: Yes, we are. We are also members of the IODSA, International...no, what is it? Institute of Directors, rather, and, so...listen, I'm no King IV expert, but part of my training and my interests in King IV is why we decided to become members of IODSA, and, again, there is lots to read, it can be extremely intimidating, but it
spells out the basics that you can really look at as an organisation. So, I would say, yes, we are guided by the practices of King IV.

**Interviewer:** Next question. So, you've actually touched on this quite a bit now, but what, in your opinion, constitutes unethical communication practice?

**Participant:** So, very practically, I would say short-term thinking because that speaks to the point I was making about sustainability, and it also speaks to not becoming a victim of your economy, and, as a result, being forced to make unethical decisions or putting yourself in a position where you might be vulnerable to unethical decision making, because, of course, in the long run, it's not good for the business and it's not good for the industry or anyone for that matter. Then I would say due diligence is...not doing proper due diligence can lead to unethical business practice. In our case, because our business is a reputation management company and we're known for it, we're also known for crisis management. So, oftentimes, people come to us who are experiencing crises and the types of crises they're experiencing have a direct impact on how society is shaped in our country, particularly the issues we have as a society from a women's plight perspective and from a violence perspective and things like that. And, so, as an organisation, much like any other organisation that wants to be profitable, you want to bring as much business that you can manage in. However, doing due diligence, which can include not just doing background research on anyone who approaches you as a business, but then having to sit down and say is this something, whether we do crisis or not, whether we have the skill or not, that we want to work on, and how does it contribute to broader society? And, for us in particular in what we do, it's extremely important. But I think, for anyone actually, it's just...for us, it's a daily conversation we need to have. And, again, it speaks to ethics. The money's there, but is it the right business and is it the right thing to work on, and what's the outcome going to be?

**Interviewer:** So, speaking about that, it seems like you do place a lot of emphasis on that almost societal emancipation? So, what are we doing for society?

**Participant:** Ja. It's not so much societal emancipation so much as it is societal responsibility. Because we...and the reason why it's difficult for me to mention examples, of course, because we have confidentiality agreements with –

**Interviewer:** No, all good.

**Participant:** ...all of our clients, but the difficulty with this type of thing is that it's...whether you are seen to be the agent in the middle who is assisting to solve a problem that you did not create, again it speak to how are you solving that problem in the first place? But let's say you've solved it very successfully. Once it's on the front page of the Sunday Times or the front page of the City Press that your organisation was involved with working with somebody who has contributed very badly to society, how does that leave your reputation? Is it intact? And is your measurement of whether your reputation is intact to say this is what we do, so what you expect, or is it that we've had to look at the greater conversation? Because we form part of the greater conversation because we are South Africans or whether we are naturalised South Africans, or whatever we are, we live in South Africa and we contribute to how society looks at South Africa, and, so,
what's our role? And that's where the debate is, and it's a complex one, but, when we do due diligence, like I said, we then have to make a decision just based on that.

Interviewer: Have you ever been caught in the middle of any unethical communication practice before?

Participant: No. I wouldn't say that, as an organisation. Before we –

Interviewer: As a professional?

Participant: Before I personally joined the company?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: We worked on business that was controversial, absolutely, and we probably will work on controversial business in the future, so I'm not washing my hands. What I'm saying is that we have just taken extraordinary steps to ensure that the outcome for our business and our brand keeps our reputation intact. So, that's in line between controversy and what can be unethical. I wouldn't say we've crossed that line.

Interviewer: Because, you say, you've had systems in place which have almost protected you as an organisation.

Participant: Yes. Absolutely.

Interviewer: I'm actually going to park that and ask you about it later down the line, but, for you as a professional, perhaps even before your time where you are currently employed, have you ever been in anything unethical or seen anything unethical in PR before?

Participant: So, I think it's a tough one, but I think perhaps, when putting together…our job is primarily based on messaging. That's changed a lot recently because our whole industry is becoming through-the-line, but, at the heart of it, is content and content influences thinking, etcetera, etcetera. So, a lot of things that I've observed from the time I started in this industry is what I would say…what is it? Positive positioning that doesn't necessarily delve into perhaps the negative elements of something. So, what we are trained to do is to bring out the best in an organisation, but, at the same time…I'm going to have to give this one a little bit more thought, Simone, if you don't mind.

Interviewer: No problem. We'll come back to it.

Participant: Just because I want to phrase it properly. I don't want to phrase it in a way that doesn't really do justice to it.

Interviewer: No problem. We'll come back to it. Next question: what challenges do you –?

Participant: Sorry. One more in unethical practice, and I think I touched on it, but I just want to make it clear, is ignoring the law to serve profits. It's very, very, very important because you've gotta know. You may not be a lawyer, but you've gotta know what's happening.
Interviewer: So, do you mean law in terms of PR law or social media law or actual the country, South Africa’s, law.

Participant: The country’s law?

Interviewer: Country law. So, I’m going to come back to this later, and I’m just going to see if I can get any examples out of you but let me move on to number seven in the meantime. So, **what challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in PR practice?**

Participant: For me, there’s many, but one in particular that I find extremely challenging, especially from an executive perspective, is…what is it? The implementing of processes… So, you’ve got these lovely neat policies in place and you’ve gotta utilise them to make decisions, but, in order to do that, it’s time consuming. And, so, again, like I said, if you looked at how, let’s say, you put together a diversity policy, a client once turned around, yesterday, that’s known in our industry, if you ask anyone in our industry, so how do you take the time to implement a twelve-page diversity policy or a twenty-page ethical policy within your strategy and meet your deadline? And I think that’s one of the biggest, biggest issues because, at the end of the day, all your customer wants is what they are paying for, and they want it yesterday. So, that’s my biggest challenge at the moment.

Interviewer: So, organisational procedures and getting that approval from your other stakeholders in order to proceed.

Participant: Yes. Even before approval stage because, remember, as a contributor to what the clients brings out, when an organisation brings out an irresponsible campaign, and it happened to an agency a few weeks ago…and we don’t consider ourselves an agency ‘cause we’re B2B, we deal with companies, but, nonetheless, we’re in that same mix of people. The people will question the brand; of course, they’ll knock on that brand’s door and say what is this? How do you allow this to come to light? But then they will go behind the scenes and say who produced this? What’s your thinking? And I think that’s where that is important because it’s even before you hand over your work to the client that you have had to go through the details of what…again, what we were speaking about earlier, what’s ethical? What’s right? What’s correct? Is this diverse? Is this reflective of society? Is this in the law? All those questions that you need to incorporate into what you do anyway, which takes long enough to produce as it is for it to be quality.

Interviewer: I hear you. So, other than that, do you feel that there are any other challenges that you face in your efforts to communicate ethically?

Participant: No. To be honest, I think practical and effective ethical communication is an everyday practice. It’s not one of those things that is just called on you at specific times. So, like I said, there are many, many things, but it’s the daily practice that you just have to keep interrogating as you go.

Interviewer: So, you actually spoke on this earlier, that consistency. As long as you are consistent, and I think, like you say, constantly focussing on it, it’s just part of the game.
Participant: Absolutely. Have your processes in place, follow them, and implement them on a daily basis, and your challenges should be lessened, but, again, things crop up on a daily…and our job is like that. It’s so detailed and there’s always something that’s happening, there’s always a ball in the air, and it’s about managing that daily so that you don’t find yourself in a…it should come naturally, I guess, is what I’m trying to say. It should be part of your culture, the culture of your organisation.

Interviewer: Do you believe it should be part of who you are as well?

Participant: Are you saying do I believe it should be?

Interviewer: Ja. So, you say that it should come naturally part of the organisational culture. Do you believe that it’s also something that should come from within yourself, or not?

Participant: Personally, I do, but I don’t have the expectation that that will be the position of anybody. So, the precaution that then we take, as an organisation, is to cultivate it as part of the way we do business so that we don’t rely on your personal viewpoint on a matter. We rather rely on –

Interviewer: So, it’s more the collective. It’s more the, like you say, organisational collective as a whole rather than based purely the individual, ’cause, like you’re saying, it is quite subjective as well.

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Number eight: what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?

Participant: So, I loved this one because I think how we put together…so, we recently relooked at the companies, after three new directors joined and the company was repositioning, after thirteen years. So, it’s not as if the company didn’t have its own vision and values and mission, but we relooked it as part of refreshing that. And our values, our company values, are what we call the trust values, which is five values –

Interviewer: I just want to force you to not mention any names.

Participant: Names, including the company as well.

Interviewer: No. Just to ensure that we keep this as anonymous as possible going forward. Don’t worry; we will make sure those are removed, but…

Participant: Then let me answer by picking three values. Three, ja. One is thought. It’s an unusual value, but it’s a value that I think, in our industry particularly, because we’re always printing, that’s often forgotten or left off, and, more often than not, when thought has not been applied, and I’m not talking strategic thought, I’m talking just practical thought, people get into trouble, whether individuals or organisations. Then, again, something you’ll know I’m very passionate about is sustainability. So, from a value perspective, that’s huge, and I think I’ve unpacked the concept of that from an employment perspective and from a bigger South African society perspective. And then another value that I think is important is
transparency. I think transparency speaks to this entire ethical conversation we’re having because all it means is that, whatever you have done or not done, make it clear and, that way, it’s going to be interrogated and solutions can come out.

Interviewer: Anything more?

Participant: No, I’ll just pick those three so it’s not obvious.

Interviewer: So, those are your top three that you feel are important for ethical PR in a South African context.

Participant: Thought, sustainability, transparency.

Interviewer: Perfect.

Participant: Thought speaks a lot to a lot of things I’m very passionate about, so I think it encompasses those very nicely.

Interviewer: So, it’s just a matter of understanding the other and taking into account other people’s needs when implementing anything, correct?

Participant: Absolutely. And, besides their needs, their perceptions, because how I see something could be from a completely different lens, and it could be the exact same thing we’re looking at, but we see it in different ways.

Interviewer: Of course.

Participant: So, how people perceive what you do is important, thinking about that.

Interviewer: Yes. So, understanding that what you consider as right or moral may not be the same as someone else, but that’s also okay.

Participant: Ja, exactly. No. I don’t mean it’s also okay. What I’m saying is that you’ve got to …think ahead of that, be a step ahead of it. So, to say, if this is a billboard in Soweto and I am a white male who’s lived in Sandton for twenty years and probably never been to Soweto, perhaps a need to run my concept past a few people who may know something about Sowetans and it’s just a practical thing like that.

Interviewer: I understand you. So, understanding who you are speaking to and then doing enough research to understand them better.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Number nine: do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR professional? Why or why not?

Participant: I think it’s a yes and no. Yes because we’re human and the way we view the world can always influence our professional recommendations or our professional conduct, but, more strongly, no, as I described earlier, because I personally
believe my personal values, whether they’re considered positive or negative by society, should not influence my strategic thinking for my clients or the end user or the target audience that I work with. That’s why I would say there’s many…as we kind of spoke about it earlier, there’s many laws that are held together in our country, for example, by the Constitution. The Labour Law, Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Company Law. All excellent guidelines matched with or paired with what you already have in your organisation to really guide if you find yourself having to make a decision that might influence you personally, that might have your personal…or you might feel compromised from your personal values perspective.

Interviewer: Speaking to this, so you say yes and no. So, for your yes, do you believe that person/organisation value congruence is important? So, just that alignment in values between you and your organisation.

Participant: I think it is. I think, as long as when you are recruiting, you are fair because there are, again, guidelines in terms of that, from a Labour Law perspective and that perspective, but you probably want the type of culture which is made up by individuals that speaks to the correct positioning of your organisation, the correct perception of the work you do, what is in alignment with what your company is about, and the best way to do that is to attract, I guess, the type of people who are interested in that type of culture. And I’m using words very carefully to say…we believe in diversity, for example, so it’s not about this person must look like the other Smarties in the box, it’s about what, at the core of a general belief system in terms of the work we do, does an individual hold? And, yes, I think, if people have a similar thinking in terms of that, that they are willing to debate or bring to the table should they not feel aligned with that, then it helps.

Interviewer: I understand what you mean.

Participant: It’s a bit complex but…

Interviewer: But, essentially, like you keep on saying, that organisational culture is important, but, at the end of it, the culture is also the sum of its parts.

Participant: Exactly. What did Warren Buffett say, or one of them? That culture eats strategy for breakfast because whatever you tell people, whatever you try and repeat in people’s minds and in people’s…you could say the same thing every day to people, from a strategic perspective, but, if the culture is not aligned, people are just going to go off to do whatever it is they want. Either they may have an issue with the person who’s giving the instruction, or they might feel like, oh, well, your leadership style is not exemplary of what you are preaching, or whatever they might feel, and getting into the heart of that and what tiny little pieces connect that is very, very important, and that’s culture.

Interviewer: Got it. Perfect. Number ten: can you explain the similarities and/or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?

Participant: So, again, I was a little bit personal with this one.

Interviewer: That’s good. That’s what we want.
Participant: But I just mean in the sense that, still...I was involved in the crafting of my company’s vision and mission and values, which is what I was trying to say earlier, and its procedures and policies and how they govern and how we do business, and I believe that they are reflective of my personal views. That’s not what I used to construct them, but they are in alignment. So, there’s a similarity with my personal view. So, no conflict there.

Interviewer: Yes, because you created them.

Participant: No. This is why I’m trying to carefully say. And I say I was involved, so, in other words, it wasn’t just me, it was a team of people, but what I’m trying to say is that the output is in line with my –

Interviewer: To who you are.

Participant: …personal views. Not as the author, but as the person who experiences it.

Interviewer: So, to summarise, could you say that you actually reflected on your own thinking and used that to guide you in informing the company’s ethical practice?

Participant: I think my own thinking; I would say my own experience because it counts for something. That fifteen years comes with all the different…whether it’s conflict, ethics, great successes, whatever it is that it’s comprised of does help to then guide the future of a company or of a practice, and, so, I would rather phrase it in that way. Experiences.

Interviewer: So, more a reflection on your experience in the industry, and you used your experience to guide you in the creation of that framework, you could say.

Participant: Yes. And the nice thing about that is that that experience encompasses an entire group of stakeholders. So, it’s stories from…it’s examples of small conflicts that could have happened, or big successes that could have happened, or anything that, really, along that journey, has crafted what, I think, makes sense for an organisation.

Interviewer: Yes, and it’s made it more holistic, I think, because you are using experience in dealing with different stakeholders and not just one approach.

Participant: Exactly.

Interviewer: You spoke to this earlier, so, this, I’m quite excited for you to touch on. So, does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes, please elaborate on whether the system is adequate or state whether there are grey areas.

Participant: I just want to check [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 00:58:16].

Interviewer: So, you did say that you were involved with…you were members with IODSA.

Participant: Yes. So, what I want to say...systems in place. Yes. We are members of IODSA, the 30% Club, which is...if you Google it, it’s a company that basically promotes thirty percent female Board member...membership of females on Boards in South Africa, and across the world actually, and the Ethics Monitor, as well, we are members of which speaks to guidance in terms of...and I think, if you get
their “about-us sections”, you’ll get a better understanding rather than what I’m
telling you. So, from that perspective, from a membership perspective, those are
in place. And, of course, PRISA. And then, from a day to day…’cause I looked at
this from a very practical perspective. So, other than our memberships or our
policies and procedures, various platforms that I think make practical sense for
fostering the promotion of ethical communication amongst employees is what we
have, which is an open-door policy, and that’s not just in a [wording? – 00:59:46]
perspective, it’s a practical perspective that your door is open unless you’re on a
private call or, in our wonderful winter this time around, we were trying to keep
the cold out. But, essentially, it’s an open-door policy where people can walk in
at any time to ask you. There’s no longer that the CEO is there, and the door is
closed, and you only speak to him or her once a month when you get an
appointment. So, that’s a platform that’s open, and it fosters equal relations
amongst all employees, regardless of level. And then there’s also formal
meetings where we address issues. So, at the end, for example, of our company
meetings, if the issue’s not already on the agenda, there’s a general point for
issues and problems where anyone can speak up in an open platform to discuss
that and get feedback either instantly or at a later stage because then we follow
up on those. And then, if people, which often happens, don’t want to speak in a
public platform, there’s an opportunity for one-on-one engagement with anyone
within the organisation, in a leadership position who can assist you, or, if not in a
leadership position, someone who can connect you to someone who can make a
decision. So, that’s open and everyone knows that. And then, of course, we’ve
got HR and ICAS which I think, for me, provides more of a confidential and more
professional platform for issues. Because I’m not an HR specialist nor am I a
specialist in other areas of human conditions that can affect employees for that
matter, and that’s why we have ICAS, which the companies pays for, and
employees can then have off-site conversations with people who –

Interviewer: What is ICAS?
Participant: It’s called ICAS.
Interviewer: What is it?
Participant: It’s a lifestyle platform, essentially, that deals with all types of engagement, from a
psychological perspective, so, if you’re having any problems from that perspective, depression, whatever psychological conditions, and then it also, for example, does financial literacy where, if you find yourself in financial problems, debts, that type of thing. So, that’s why it’s a lifestyle programme, it’s better to
[CROSSTALK – 01:02:31] –

Interviewer: Skills development.
Participant: Ja.
Interviewer: Do your employees have to go through any ethics training when they begin?
Participant: Not at the moment. We have not yet…again, we are very thoroughly, other than
the policies we have in place, interrogating the implementation of our ethics, and
one of the things is whether you include that in the on boarding of employees or
whether…what we do is that we have practical workshops where we unpack
policies. And, so, we prefer to have the workshop formats, because it takes you out of the office completely, or out of your workspace completely, rather, and into a space where you are just focussed on that. So, at the moment, it’s not a requirement when you join, so as in the first week or months that you join, but it is one of the workshops that we are yet to take our employees through.

Interviewer: Do you have anything in place for measuring ethical behaviour in the organisation?

Participant: Unfortunately, not tailored to ethical behaviour, but what we do have in place for communication, ‘cause that’s quite important from an accountability perspective, is that we’ve got an ethical tick-list. So, it’s a simple document that reminds you of the different elements within an ethical campaign or an ethical communication piece that you need to remind yourself of when you are then either looking at a final press release or a campaign or anything like that for a client. So, I suppose it’s an interesting thing to maybe look at how you take that into the professional culture and environment as well. Why not?

Interviewer: No, absolutely. And it’s a lot of little things, I think. Companies obviously are aware that they need to have these ethical tick-lists, as you say, but it’s often something so much bigger, like ethical management as a whole.

Participant: Absolutely. It’s a lot of work, Simone, and, for companies, it’s one of those things that you’ve gotta carve out the time to do because it can have an impact on your bottom line, but, more than anything, again, it speaks to the bigger responsibility that you have. So, you may have many things in the system in terms of the things you need to achieve, keeping the company afloat, especially with SMEs, but it’s so critical that you can’t avoid it.

Interviewer: I agree. Number twelve: what kind of role, or roles, do you believe that PR professionals should be enacting in the South African context?

Participant: Again, many, many, but…and, again, there’ll be some repetition here.

Interviewer: That’s perfect. You have touched on it. You did speak about diversity and serving society, so you can just expand on that.

Participant: So, I just said, here, daily practice of diversity. So, sensitivity to gender, race, history of the country, locations, whatever, sexuality. So, daily practice of diversity. Responsible and ethical work. So, again, we spoke about it. Not promoting fake news or being a part of fake news or supplying fake news because, again, we have a huge responsibility when we are implementing public relations, for example, like I said. It’s a bigger picture from our reputation management perspective that, if you put in contents that is not real onto your social media platforms or in a press release, that can then influence either how an organisation or a publication reports on a story, or it can also cultivate…because we know fake news also doesn’t just come from that type of transaction, it can come from all sorts of complex things, but it encourages that culture when you do it within your organisation, even in the smallest way. And spinning and all of that that we spoke about earlier. And, again, because we work with reputation management, people confuse that with spinning, and there’s a huge difference. Facts are facts and that can’t be changed. It’s more of how you
present them and present them responsibly. And then the third one that I said should be a role for us is creating employment. South Africa’s sitting at twenty-six-point-seven, I think, when I Googled this morning, of the labour force that’s unemployed, and I think it’s either point-seven or somewhere between there, but, essentially, it’s a role we have to play. We can’t rely on the mining sector and the ones that are always spoken about at budget speech. We all have small little industries that are sometimes not so little that need to contribute to the bigger South African context, and one of the biggest challenges we have is unemployment. And, in doing that as well, something that none of us have time for in the work we do, but something we have to do, is training and creating training opportunities for people. In fact, if I could…honestly, if the universe could give me time, that is what I would do because I think what we do can so easily be taught and, as a result, I think creates so much more opportunities for employment in various ways.

Interviewer: I completely agree. So, shaping society, changing behaviours, training, upskilling. I just want to get your views on PR contributing towards the bottom line or wealth maximisation and defending privileges of economically powerful. How do you feel about that?

Participant: Of the economically powerful?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: Just rephrase that for me, sorry, Simone.

Interviewer: So, how do you feel…you’ve obviously spoken about PR’s role as needing to be empowering, emancipating, shaping behaviour, obviously focussed on diversity, but I just want to get your thoughts on PR as contributing towards the bottom line or wealth maximisation. How do you feel about that?

Participant: It’s an age-old debate in our industry because I think we all know that PR is a non-paid-for form of advertising, and advertising is measured by sales versus PR that’s not necessarily measured by that, it’s more an influential thing and it’s more…it’s less, in comparison to advertising, tangible or, in terms of measurement, being a precise science that it creates wealth or it can add to a company’s bottom line. What is important to remember about communications and about PR is why you are utilising the service if you are an organisation, and it goes back to the pure definition of it, because it’s more about positioning of an organisation, which speaks to whatever your advertising or marketing strategy might be, and, again, it’s becoming through-the-line a lot these days, which I think is fantastic, but PR plays a role in influencing that line of communication or that sales line. It’s only an element in it. And, so, I think it’s quite important for people to understand what PR does and how it’s measured from whether it’s an AVE or return on investment, and, in that way, you would understand how it makes an impact on the bottom line because it does. It just doesn’t do it in the traditional sense of this is how many people clicked on this advert and we can tell that, from this link, they went straight to the trolley on this website and bought this particular thing.

Interviewer: What else can I actually touch on? So, if you had to summarise, I think, the kind of role that we should be playing, in one line, how would you summarise that?
Participant: In terms of contributing to the bottom line?

Interviewer: No, just in general. What kind of role should PRPs be playing in SA? Taking into account what you just spoke about. So, the bottom line and society, if you had to summarise that?

Participant: I think we should be shaping society positively, especially a society like South Africa. We should be contributing to the positive positioning and shaping of our society.

Interviewer: Got it. And number thirteen: any other comments or observations, or any other experiences you want to talk to, and overall thoughts on the field and ethics?

Participant: Something that I don’t think we got into, and I think it was the tail end of one of your questions, is...what is it? How do I say this? But it’s collective thinking. Collective thinking is a difficult concept in the sense that, especially in an organisation...and I speak from my experience as a new director in a company, but, of course, taking my other experience into context as well, but, at a very high level in decision making in a company, collective thinking is important in terms of creating harmony...or, rather, having a unified collective thinking is important, but sometimes it’s not possible. It’s not possible to view things in the same way. And what is really important, I think, as an individual, as a PRP, something that I’ve also seen is really a skill that lacks a lot. From a very young age and from a very junior position, you need to be able to speak up outside of collective thinking because, oftentimes, those things are left to...collective thinking can be dangerous, it can position negative cultures, it can position negative practices, and those negative practices then become what an organisation is known for. You’ll hear people say this agency’s known for this or that, and it’s not necessarily a positive thing. And I think it’s a huge challenge, especially when you are a junior, but it becomes even more of a challenge when you are at a decision-making level, and, again, it’s quite important to not always pander to collective thinking when you are aware that the outcomes will not necessarily bring growth to a challenge or a situation, and, more importantly, the society you live in.

Interviewer: I completely agree. So, you are speaking about...how can I articulate myself here? Knowing the importance of the collective, but also knowing where the line is where you have to reflect on your own values and speak out?

Participant: Absolutely. Spot on. Did you say one line? So, there’s your one line. I went on...

Interviewer: It’s fine. The more juice you give, the better. Is there anything else you want to add?

Participant: No. I think I really just want to say the structure of your questions is honestly very, very intelligently done because, more than you getting your research for your paper, what it actually does is that it’s sowing seeds in the minds of people like us who have important decision-making positions. So, I just want to say well done on that, and I really hope you get a whole diverse group of people because I think what that does is that it builds your case, which we will all learn from, I’m sure, but it also leaves people to really think about some of the things that you’ve interrogated in your questions.
Interviewer: I’m glad to hear that. I’m very glad to hear that. I’m going to continue that conversation offline ‘cause you’re still busy being recorded now. But one last thing I just wanted to touch on was questions number six, which I know I just wanted to finish off with, was what constitutes unethical communication practice? And really just to see if you had any examples, from before you even reached director level, of –

Participant: Yes, that’s what we were talking about.

Interviewer: Any experiences that you have gone through that have shaped you to get to where you are now.

Participant: So, what I was describing earlier is actually… I now found the word… It’s called omission, and it’s almost like when you’re told to tell the truth and then you kind of tell it, but you leave something out. And, because our industry, when we train, even from a college or university perspective, we are trained to bring out the best in the client, put that first, and then the stuff that’s negative somewhere in the bottom of the release, or shine this item until it really sparkles and take the best picture of it. That’s our natural training, and nothing wrong with that, but I do think that sometimes, when it comes to complex and serious matters that can have a negative effect on anyone or society or anything like that, it can be omission, and I think one has got to be very careful that they’re not finding themselves in that practice of omission.

Interviewer: Where you’re giving selective information based on what you think people want to hear.

Participant: Mm hm. And one thing that is not often spoken about and might seem quite trivial to this type of conversation, is bullying. Our industry has a long history, and it’s very much a top-down approach, it’s very much if the creative director likes it, if it’s advertising, or if the client likes it, if it’s comms for example, and I think, as leaders, we’ve gotta be very careful not to find ourselves bullying others and utilising our power in the wrong way. We’ve gotta be able to hear people out and hear concepts out, and not exert ourselves in inappropriate manners.

Interviewer: Are you referring to other employees, or industry, or who are you referring to with regards to bullying?

Participant: Definitely the industry. In my fifteen years’ experience, like I say, I… it’s difficult to bully a client, but that happens as well, but, more than anything, it’s in organisations where the power gap makes a huge difference in terms of the outcome. I don’t know if power gap is the right word, but what I’m trying to say is that the higher you are, the more influential you are on the outcome of campaigns or communication pieces, and what I’m saying is that there is such a huge opportunity to understand concepts, whether they come from a peer or somebody who’s at the junior level in an organisation, and what I’m saying is that, oftentimes, whether by [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 01:21:03], which is what really is the biggest issue for us, or it’s just you exerting your power, there is a lot of bullying. There can be a lot of bullying in the industry and I think it’s something we all need to be cognisant of and conscious of, as leaders.

Interviewer: Understanding the other…
Participant: Mhm.
Interviewer: We are done. Do you have anything else you’d like to add?
Participant: No. That’s it. Thank you.

--- END OF AUDIO ---
PARTICIPANT 3

PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position title:</th>
<th>Senior Account Manager</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Time period spent in current position:</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting line:</td>
<td>Executive Director: Client Centricity &amp; Media</td>
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Interview length: 1:14:15
Date of interview: 18 September 2018

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based PR practitioners use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. This interview consists of 13 questions and the expected duration of the interview will be 30 – 60 minutes. All responses are confidential, and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of the results. I urge you to leave out names in the interview to ensure for anonymity. Alright so the first question is, **describe what you do in your role as a PR practitioner?**

Respondent: In my role as a senior account manager -

Interviewer: Can you just speak a little bit louder please?

Respondent: My role entails media relations, reputation management as well as stakeholder relations. So, in essence if a client comes to me wanting to work on a strategic positioning, I’m responsible then for writing out a press release or a leadership article which is then pitched to different media. Also, what we do with thought leadership articles there as part of my job is to pitch for interviews. We always work on different angles and this just gives us talkers for them to work with the interview. So, it’s generally from something that a client is doing. If I can make an example of a client for instance that wants to talk about its contribution in the tourism sector so we’ll take that and make it something that would be more appealing to the masses, and if it’s something that appears to be more appealing to the masses the media is lucky to catch that so what we always look for is something that’s attractive, something that has a pull in it and something that’s interesting that will allow us to secure those interviews.

Interviewer: Okay so you do work quite a lot with the media.

Respondent: Pardon?

Interviewer: You work quite a lot with the media.

Respondent: Primarily, that’s what we do on a day to day basis. I mean, working a lot with the media, attending those motivations as well as press releases, making those calls to the media or to give the media houses, because public relations have changed over the years, and it’s not just about you sending press releases. It’s easy for somebody to ignore your email or an oversight might happen. What’s important or key in all of this, is that one needs to always make a call and inform the media house that they should be expecting a press release that’s coming out and in that
way you're more likely to get traction. Another one that we do when we're writing motivation, is we first find a media house or a publication that will print or will publish the thought leadership article. It's pointless writing a thought leadership article of say between 800 words to 1200 words in order to find that nobody's going to do anything about that. It's just a waste of resources. And you don't want to be caught in that.

Interviewer: So very strategic targeting based on the requirements or the need of what you need to accomplish.

Respondent: I'm struggling to hear you.

Interviewer: Sorry so what you're saying is it's very strategic targeting when you are speaking to the media?

Respondent: It certainly is strategic in the sense that you don't follow traditional means of practicing PR. You need to think out of the box and also when you're working on different angles, you can't say for instance send a [fake hook 0:04:47.8] to a radio station and to another radio station send the same hook so you have to be creative and see how that ties in. You need to be able to research the type of media you're dealing with. For example, if you are doing to send something related to tourism and you are sending this to a show on a particular radio station and that show deals heavily with politics or primarily with politics, you know that's not going to work unless you tie it in nicely and say okay politics, what has this particular industry and the role of government played over the past say five years in ensuring that there's a great contribution to the GDP.

Interviewer: Yes, no absolutely I completely agree with you. I just want to bring it back to the stakeholder's interests that you serve. You've been touching on how you're involved quite significantly with the media and the targeting of the correct media so can you just expand on that, and let's to go question number two, whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests? So, other than the media, who else do you serve in your role?

Respondent: So, our mandate or our role is to create compelling content so if we know that we've got a client that is within construction and we want to bring the point across and for instance if my client is highlighting the safety features that they've just introduced in their company that needs to be known, that needs to be heard. People that we would normally target would include stakeholders, the public at large. And just to make sure that they are aware of what's being presented to them.

Interviewer: Yes, can I ask you to speak a little bit louder? That's much better, can you speak a little bit louder. So, you said that you also serve the public. Can you just expand on how you serve the public in your role?

Respondent: Mm, mm. I mean if I can make an example for you, in my role, if I'm dealing with a mining company and this mining company has been embroiled in controversy and there have been a lot of deaths in the sector, how do we then change that and what other processes have been followed? We need to then make sure that due process is followed? It's not that we just write press releases for the sake of writing press releases but what we do is that we make sure that due diligence
has been done on the part of the company who will then be held accountable before we even send out those press releases because it becomes somewhat of a mess when we find ourselves, I mean our names are included in all the press releases that we distribute. So, we always need to ensure that we’re communicating is in line with the principles of the company and what the company stands for. Their mission and vision and what they are working towards, so if there’s a programme that a mining company is working towards on the safety of its employees and within its sector, particularly the mining sector, you know this affects far beyond or it affects way more than just the employees. It affects the families, it affects the family and friends and also people that have a vested interest in the industry, so we always need to look at fair communication and how that particular communication affects different stakeholders.

Interviewer: Right so like just to summarise what you’ve been saying, you say that you obviously serve your media, who you are writing the press releases for but you also consider how the stakeholders that are related to you know, those being written about in the press release, how would they feel when look at that press release, so you’re also considering the interest of the public involved, correct.

Respondent: That’s correct, so it’s more of a 360-degree approach to public relations, now remember within public relations, we’re like the middlemen so we’re more like the buffer so we need to make sure that the external publics are served with, are given the right information, then also no false information is given on the part of a company for instance. So, the 360-degree approach enables us to liaise with the company is that we’re writing the press release for and the company that’s given out the information and for us to be able to speak to the external public and like I mentioned, the people that are related to employees or people that have great interest within the industry.

Interviewer: Do you feel that any of these stakeholders within this 360-degree approach that you take, do you feel that any of them, their needs need to get put above others needs or is it a very equal approach that you take, do you feel that any of them – their needs need to get put above other’s needs, or is it a very equal approach where you try to serve all of these stakeholders fairly.

Respondent: I firmly believe that and it’s in line with my current role as well, that we don’t put say clients’ needs, above other people’s needs so everything needs to be in line because at the end of the day who is going to be consuming the information. I think that’s a question that we always need to ask. So, if we think that the client is far more superior which means that the client can then get away with feeding us information and we just accept it. It doesn’t and it shouldn’t, it shouldn’t work like that. At least that’s what I – what I do here in my prime job. So, it needs to serve, purposes which would have a positive impact so how will the public perceive the information that gets given or provided to them by a particular company. So, the whole ideology of a 360 approach is the consideration of every single person that’s involved within this chain. So, this chain would include the company / the client, internal publics, people that are employed by the company. As a public relations professional you need that you always need to get the buy in from the organisation, from the employees, so there’s no point in trying to sell something whereas internally nobody really is interested in that, nobody is informed about that, customers of this particular company and people that have interest in that
and also shareholders that have interest in this particular company. It’s a whole approach that we need to, and we do, you know consider, in formulating our cases.

Interviewer: Yes, so you were saying how it’s important that you have to internally accept what you are trying to obviously sell to the public correct? Would you say that as a practitioner you would have to first reflect on why you are selling the product or the service before you can truly sell it to the other?

Respondent: I agree, so employees of the company we see them as ambassadors for an organisation so for instance. In fact, if I can use the words or the term easy targets in terms of them selling information to other people, it’s more to do with word of mouth, so if we can get individuals that are employed by a company to talk positively about an organisation, then it’s a win for us. You know and this is, this is for us to just highlight the benefits of what we’re trying to communicate. So, this goes a long way so first things first and that is starting with you know, the internal publics, you know the employees, shareholders, all the directors and just to make sure they understand what we’re trying to communicate. Because information can easily go the wayside if people don’t understand and also have those open lines of communication where people can get more clarification on a particular issue. That remains at the core of the business that I’m in.

Interviewer: Perfect, so I just want to confirm, when you speak about internal publics, are you referring to yourself and the internal team that is involved on the particular account?

Respondent: When I talk about the internal publics, I talk about every single person that is employed by the company or, you know, affiliated by the company.

Interviewer: So, this could even be on the client’s side.

Respondent: Your shareholders that have great interest in the company, and the people who invested money to the company, directors of the company, management so from mid to senior management level. Those are the people that need to be informed about what it is that we’re putting forward. All the individuals need to be considered for them to be able to carry the message forward.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely, so just, if I’m understanding this correctly, you’re also speaking about the importance of the client themselves also doing enough reflection on why they are selling the product, in an attempt to educate their consumer group?

Respondent: That’s correct. So, if you are developing a product or if you’re formulating an idea, I think what’s important is for you to always ask yourself this question, why am I developing a product, is there a need for me to, you know, do what I’m doing now? Will I be able to sell this product? I think that on the basis of it is crucial because at a point where you’re able to understand why you’re doing something, you’re able to move forward, so for instance if you are designing a product and there’s no market for the product, you’re not going to go anywhere, and we always try and not change people’s minds but just for us to be able to say look this is the product and give them the benefit of this particular product and not necessarily, and as many people would be aware it’s very, very difficult to change the perceptions of people so we’re selling and we’re promoting something that’s
already needed in the market, or if it’s already in the market we’re promoting something that we can offer better. So, the company would then have to look at their competitive advantage, how are they doing, you know offering a product better than another company? All these factors are very important to consider.

Interviewer: Great. I’m going to move onto question three, so now you’ve really quite comprehensively unpacked who you serve and how you serve their interests, so I want to ask you for question number three do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve these various interests, why or why not?

Respondent: So first and foremost, I think as a public relations professional it is very, very, very important to be accountable, 1, and second being accountable for serving any interest is also very crucial. I’ll make an example, if you are representing a company which has been implicated in the deaths of people within the particular sector, firstly you know, you’d say we made a mistake. Admit that you made a mistake and begin to then communicate timeously and hold yourself accountable and not deny any, any wrong doing. If I think in undertaking work of this nature you always need to look at okay so how am I as PR professional responsible and being accountable to what it is that I’ve been required to do. So, all these interests that you are serving are important. For somebody who is in my position as senior account manager you are responsible for managing an account, overseeing that account and just making sure that things run smoothly and that there are very seamless operations in that account. So, you always need to be responsible and accountable in this regard.

Interviewer: How would you explain or unpack your accountability in a little bit more detail? So, you’ve said that you do believe that you’re accountable and you have to be accountable. Can you give me an example, a very clear example of how you are accountable to all of your different stakeholders or have you ever had to show accountability if something has gone wrong for example?

Respondent: Yes, sure I can make an example so for instance because we work in a reputational crisis management industry, we deal with a lot of confidential information and if it happens that you are implicated in say sending an email to somebody who was not supposed to get that email, what do you then do? You need to be accountable for that and there’s generally, there are generally consequences to that. So, if I’m sending confidential information to one of my clients and I so happen to send it to the wrong client, I’m more likely to be in trouble or get into trouble if I send this to the wrong person, because of the nature of the content that is contained in that email.

Interviewer: Okay that’s a great example. So, for you it’s just about being responsible and actually speaking up if something has gone wrong, taking responsibility for that and then moving forward.

Respondent: Absolutely so as a senior account manager, and part of the, you know as part the contract that I signed, my responsibility is to ensure that I take due diligence in my work, and also to make sure that I become as accurate as possible in as far as sending emails are concerned so you always need to check even if you’re about to send that email, it’s to make sure that it’s the right recipient that will be
getting that email so it’s a matter of going back and checking that all the information that you’re sending, is correct and that all those things that you’ve written in that email will not come back and bite you in the back.

Interviewer: So, it’s almost, if I have to summarise what you’re saying, it’s a certain level of accuracy and being attentive to detail that is very much a part of your accountability in your particular role.

Respondent: So, it’s certainly accountability, attention to detail and being very accurate when you’re doing your work. All of that forms part of you know, being a PRP or a public relations professional, for you to be able to deliver your work. Because at the same time you need to think about the credibility that comes with this particular profession. People rely on you to deliver news that is credible. So if there is miscommunication on your end, your credibility will be questioned and that’s the last thing that a reputation company or a PR company wants or needs, because that could be damaging to the organisation.

Interviewer: Yes, so I’m going to go onto question 4. I believe that you’ve touched on question 3 quite nicely. So, how do you respond to any conflicting interests amongst you and your various stakeholders or how do you go about decision making when facing conflicting situations?

Respondent: Look what remains, you know an important aspect is to always have that open communication, so for instance if you are uncomfortable with taking on a particular client, you need to make sure that it’s spoken about, and you need to voice out your - your concerns about working on a particular project because certain things will come out, so for instance if I’m on the – I’m responsible for recruiting people in my organisation and I find out that somebody that we want to get into the organisation is being accused of – of rape, and we’re trying to create awareness son sexual abuse, it’s those – it’s those things that we always need to probe and just check and verify as well. So, we can’t have someone with that record you know to take on such a role because it’s a credibility thing if we were to go back to that point.

Interviewer: In terms of you though as a PR practitioner have you ever had to respond to any conflicting interests yourself and can you just explain then the process that you’ve gone through, so take me on that journey, did you report into someone, how do you go about decision making? What’s the first thing you think of doing when responding to anything that conflicts with you?

Respondent: So, personally, I’ve never been in a situation where something I’m working on goes against what it is that I believe but if I find that you know, there are red flags, obviously the point of department is to make sure that that is communicated and to sit down and we also need to sit down and look at ways of dealing with it. But like I said I’ve never had to go through something like that but being a public relations professional I’m meant to be ready for those things so if I were to be put in that situation or be in that situation where I’m faced with a conflicting situation, I always need to make sure that I voice out my concern and this needs to be done time and time again because I don’t think that undertaking or taking on a client that goes against what you believe or you know full well that what they’re doing is wrong and yet you take them on, you know, that won’t serve any great purpose.
So, the thing is one always has to look at it from that perspective, will you take on a client that’s for instance been implicated in the looting of state funds. No, you wouldn’t want to do that because at the end of the day it is your name, it is your reputation that’s on the line, so we always need to think broadly even as a CRT or as a PR practitioner it’s not just the organisation’s responsibility. It remains the employee’s responsibility to ensure that the company is represented well and also the individual, the employee of that particular organisation represents themselves well, that they present themselves in a way that is credible.

Interviewer: Yes, no I completely agree with you and it actually goes back to what you were saying earlier about having that 360-degree approach where for you it would almost be like a 360-degree understanding. How does this affect me, how does this affect my clients, how is this going to affect my actual employer and then only investigate the alternatives or what needs to happen and communicate it.

Respondent: Ja. For instance, I can’t not say as a manager, working for a company which specializes in for example values or reputational risk. And being unable to manage my own reputation and risk but managing other people’s, other organisations values, so it becomes, it becomes something important in that it always needs to start from where you and by that I mean if you’re going to preach something then you ought to practice it, if you’re going to preach reputation, if you’re going to preach values, but how are your values in comparison to your peers, so we’ll always have critical things that you need to bear in mind – especially in our industry.

Interviewer: Alright. Let’s move onto the next question, number 5, so you have touched on this, but I’d like you to just expand, so what in your opinion constitutes ethical communication practice?

Respondent: Ethical communication practice would be precisely that, doing things right always, so you won’t be caught with your pants down. So, if I come to you only to find that you’ve not been following certain regulations that govern the industry then that is wrong. So, I think if it’s in the broader sense one always needs to look at how will this impact me at the end, how will this impact society. Society at large plays a very important role, that’s who we are communicating to and our stakeholder. If the business conducted themselves ethically and the same could be said, and the same could be applied to the individual that’s working on the account and it’s the same thing that could be applied to an employee of that organisation. Do they conduct themselves in a way that is right and holds high moral value? So, all of those things we tie them into ethics, into what is right and being able to defer and being able to just check okay is this right, is this wrong, if it’s wrong what do I then do about it?

Interviewer: So when you speak about determining what is right and what is wrong, are you referring to what is right and what is wrong in terms of PR practice, or are you looking at what is right and wrong for you as a person or as a professional, can you just expand on that what is right and what is wrong, and that being ethical is about being right, what do you mean by that?

Respondent: So, ethics is, I always view ethics as something that is multi-dimensional. So, one I always look at things from my point of view. What are my values in this regard
and secondly, I will look at it from you know, what regulates this particular industry? So if I am doing something which I'm uncomfortable in doing, let's say for instance I am against, you know, the legalization of dagga or marijuana or whatever the case may be, and in my, from my vantage point I completely, don't tolerate that and I'm put on a project which promotes that, I will have to politely excuse myself from the project because I won't be able to deliver on it. And secondly if it's coming, or when it's coming from a point of, an organisational regulator, which oversees the running of this industry and that's another consideration one has to bear in mind. In our industry we say that we will not tolerate false communication, miscommunication in essence, lying about certain brands, writing of a press release that contains wrong information. If it's wrong, it's wrong just to go back to your question earlier about ethics. My view about ethics is that it's always multidimensional, so you always need to look at so what are my values in this regard and if my values promote say the killing of albinos for example then I need to do a lot of introspection first of all but what does the regulator say about that, what does the governing body say about you know the act of killing of albinos. If it says yes and my values say no then I need to politely step back and say I cannot work on this even if it's just vice versa where I firmly believe for instance a governing body agrees that that should be done and my stance is no, I do not agree with this, then again, I need to excuse myself. So, we always need to, you know, look at ethics from that point of view.

Interviewer: Okay. I need to bring you back again to something that you said, so when you say again that ethical communication is about being right and doing right, can you unpack that doing right? Is it - does it consist of honesty, does it consist of accountability, transparency fairness, can you just unpack doing right in a PR sense? For me, what is that for you?

Respondent: For doing right, in a PR sense means that you go about conducting yourselves, doing business in a very transparent way and literally I need to stress, when I say transparency, I’m not saying that we will not divulge confidential information which we will be sharing with our clients. No, how we conduct ourselves as an organisation as professionals within the industry is to say that this is how we do business and this is what we commit to, and again I’m going to tie in commitment and also just doing things right, from a moral point of view, we need to make sure that in undertaking the business and then doing business we need to make sure that whenever we communicate with people, you know there are other considerations that are done. For instance, I know that the bank that recently rebranded and this bank posted a poll on social media and they – you know spoke about something to do with black cats. Now if you’re going to talk about being socially plugged in it is that some things may not necessarily be wrong but from a social point of view you might find that they are unacceptable which in turn affects – you know - the reputation of a company, so just doing the right thing, one always needs to make sure that they are socially plugged in and legally plugged in because we work in an industry where we are regulated. We are regulated by a body and we also need to make sure that we abide by the constitution of the republic for instance.

Interviewer: Yes, no I completely agree and when you speak about the body that regulates the PR industry are you referring to PRISA?
Respondent: That’s - ja that’s PRISA. For any public relations industry that is credible and that understands the importance of public relations, they need to make sure, they need to understand how this body that represents you know, PR agencies or professionals, because people can join in as organisations or professions from grass roots levels. They need to understand the significance of being able to work ethically and being able to work accordingly to what PRISA or its mandate stipulates.

Interviewer: Okay. Now you’ve spoken about examples of unethical communication practice but I’m just going to ask you to unpack that in a little bit more detail, so for question 6, what in your opinion constitutes unethical communication practice?

Respondent: Well that’s a - at the core of it, it sounds very simple. So, if you are selling a product to customers, and there is - I mean your press release contains information that is incorrect, that is unethical. If you conduct your business in a way that puts other people’s lives in danger, that is unethical. If you are not adhering to the labour relations or labour act, which is highlighted by the republic, then it’s unethical. For instance, I think it goes within the core of the business where we need to ask ourselves are, we are doing the right thing. So, for instance if we’re just looking at the unethical practice within an organisation. Firstly, it starts from the bottom where we say okay when are we hiring people in a company, how are we hiring? Do we follow due process, and also when we conduct ourselves as professionals and when we do work for our clients, do we make up stuff or do we actually do the work and present it as fact, or do we just go about it the wrong way, and say okay this is what we’ve done, only to find that we haven’t so we always need to consider those aspects.

Interviewer: So, it goes back to if I’m understanding this correctly accuracy and transparency that we’ve spoken about [repeats]

Respondent: Absolutely. So, in, in delivering what’s required of you, if you signed a contract with a client and you promised that you would do something, you need to be able to deliver on something that is what binds you. If you say you are going to write a thought leadership in the month of September based on tourism then you have to write that thought leadership article and if one of your promises was to distribute that to mainstream media, that needs to be one of your deliverables. So, you can’t not be able to produce proof that you’ve done so and also to say that you’ve distributed this to tier one media, you must also make sure that you’re able to produce all of that?

Interviewer: Yes. Now have you ever been a victim of unethical communication practice or have you ever found yourself in a situation where you have felt you are doing something unethical or one of your stakeholder groups has expected something that you feel has been unethical?

Respondent: I’ve never been in that instance where, I’ve never been in that situation come to think of it.

Interviewer: Okay and no ethical dilemmas ever experienced when working in media relations?
Respondent: No so but what I can tell you as far as media relations are concerned is – you just always need to speak the truth. Right. At times for instance if you get interviewed by someone in the media and they want to know something, which in an organisation has been implicated in, you know you, in most instances and depending on the media training that one would have received, it's just to make sure that you are as honest as possible but sometimes at that point you may not necessarily be ready to give the information about that.

Interviewer: So, would you say like –

Respondent: But eventually you always need to obviously say that at this point I obviously can’t comment on this, but we will be able to comment on it. Because I know that we get, specially us PR professionals and I'm talking boldly here. There are times when we are representing a client and we are spokespeople and we get asked questions and we say no comment, whereas we know full well there is a comment, I think it’s very dangerous to say it’s a no comment, but what one should then do is to make sure that you do give an answer. I think the answer is we are currently working on something and we will, you know I mean we continue to investigate the matter and we will communicate with the public as soon as the information becomes available to us, and, and, and, that sort of thing.

Interviewer: So, there’s almost a level of, it’s not lying, and it’s not withholding information to be malicious, it’s rather withholding information until you have the full truth to be completely transparent?

Respondent: Absolutely, so for times, it’s not that when you package information, you give it a nice twist. No, it's how you then communicate information that will cause reputational damage. So, you're never denying, nor saying that yes sure, we are responsible for this. So, then that is why saying we are looking into the matter and saying yes, we have received claims of x, y, z, is the safe answer until all the investigations have been concluded.

Interviewer: Okay for the sake of time let’s move onto the next question, number 7 so what challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice. What challenges do you face?

Respondent: One of the challenges I face at this present moment is securing interviews is one of the biggest things, because you always need to look at packaging information which will appeal to the masses, you know, to the media houses, so and I’m not sure if that answers your question.

Interviewer: No, not quite. I’m going to stop you right there before you go off track. I’m just going to bring you back to the gist of the question which is what challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically? So not necessarily what challenges do you face in your role but what challenges do you face when trying to communicate ethically? So, like you said now, how you can’t always give the full truth you know then and there to the media. You sometimes have to wait until you have more answers. You can't be completely transparent at first, you know sometimes in this case you may find that you would have to go through like organisational procedures before you’re able to come to a solution for a client or maybe your clients demand certain things that you can’t push back on. Do you
face any of those challenges in your efforts to communicate ethically, so what kind of gets in your way when you’re trying to be an ethical PRP?

**Respondent:** Okay, so to answer your question, I think for me personally I’ve never really had to, I’ve never encountered such challenges, however I have, heard of other PRPs you know going through incidences or incidents where a client wants something communicated to the media and they know full well that they can’t so what happens in turn is they end up spicing up their motivation letters and their motivation just to make sure that they please the client. Personally, I haven’t been in that situation touch wood, and I hope I don’t have to go through that, but it certainly does raise an issue of ethics.

**Interviewer:** Okay. I just want to see if I can try and get any more out of you for this question. So obviously in earlier questions we spoke about the fact that you have to be loyal to yourself, you have to reflect on why you’re selling the product, do you believe in it, you have to understand your audience, you have to see if it aligns to your own employers values. Have there been any challenges when you’re trying to serve all of those interests all at once, has there been anything that has come in the way where any of your clients have expected anything that hasn’t necessarily aligned with you or your organisation or the same with the media.

**Respondent:** No not - not that I can think of but I can make an example of a client recently where we had you know secured an interview and they felt that they did not speak to the right market you know because of the nature of the show, but we then had to do a lot of research on our end, just to make sure that they come on the interview which didn’t work out. So, I mean in my case – ja - I haven’t been through that.

**Interviewer:** Okay. You’re very lucky. You’re very lucky not to have experienced anything yet.

**Respondent:** Touch wood.

**Interviewer:** Ja touch wood. If you have any examples, we’ll come to it at the end of the interview but let’s move on for the sake of time, so number 8, what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?

**Respondent:** I think at the core of you know ensuring professional communication roles within the South Africa context is always being able to listen and understand in order for you to deliver what’s required of you, so if you are in communication with the client and this is what the client needs from you… you need to make sure that what you put out there is what the client needs. Because what tends to happen a client will have unnecessary expectations. In the South Africa context, one always needs to be socially plugged in. There’s an issue of race which is quite an important one to talk about but how do we then deal with those issues and what is necessary? So, for instance if there’s a company that comes in to our organisation that wants a bit of reputational assessment and for us to work on their reputation and they’ve been involved in some scandal or they haven’t been hiring you know, people of colour or whatever the case may be. Do we then take on such a client and how would it affect us as a company? It’s those kinds of aspects that we need to look at.
Interviewer: Yes, I just want to bring you back to the question, you did ramble a little bit off topic, but it’s okay. So, I just want to go back to answering it, so what values are needed as a PR in South Africa? So, you do keep on touching on your clients, but I want you to consider the South African communities and the people that you are targeting so your consumer groups. What values do you believe you need as a PR and your clients, what values do you need to really like you were saying their South African consumers?

Respondent: So, I mean personal values and values that one would need to be able to practice as a – you know practicing within the profession – you always need to have that level of respect and understanding. You know, so I don’t know if I’m on the right track -

Interviewer: Yes no, you’re on the right track, this is what I’m looking for. So just specific key values that you feel are absolutely needed in understanding your stakeholders.

Respondent: So, it’s that level of respect and understand that we are operating within one of the most diverse countries in the continent and it comes with complexities. So always being levelheaded as a PRP holds you in good stead in you carrying your work.

Interviewer: So, you’ve spoken about being level headed, understanding the diversity –

Respondent: And considerate, ja.

Interviewer: Ja, being considerate to, almost culturally considerate – I think is what you were trying to say -

Respondent: And also, being socially plugged in and knowing what it is that may make you offend other cultures. I mean if you look at certain things which are practiced in a certain culture but may be offensive to another. So those sorts of things are very important because you end up offending people, but you don’t want that. You don’t want to do that. Sometimes you tend to offend people unintentionally. Our communications always need to look at all the different dimensions and say okay but if you say this and it’s accepted by this culture but what would this culture, how would they respond to it. It’s like having that open view of how we maneuver around our communication and just being aware of the way in which we communicate?

Interviewer: Okay and in terms of personal values that you believe you need to hold, or does it not matter?

Respondent: Certainly, I stress this a lot. Personal values are a key in the undertaking, if you were to do something that you, are right again [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:55:00.3] because it’s what you have to do. I mean for instance if I was appointed as a police man and as part of my job, I would have to kill somebody, do I follow through and do that, no of course that, do I communicate things which are not in line with my personal values and cultural values, of course not. That’s where the whole idea of communicating effectively, I do not stand for this – and can I be excused from this campaign.
Interviewer: Yes. So, I’m going to stop you right there, because you’re actually touching quite nicely on question 9 which is our next question, so do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR practitioner?

Respondent: I think in honesty it does. Personal values do affect how – you know PR practitioners work. And one always needs to be mindful of what those ethics, I think knowing what your personal values are. Let’s say you’re working on a project or on a campaign and you realise this is not in line with your personal values then what’s more ethical is for you to put your hand up and say no – you know what, I’m just being honest about it, that because of certain reasons I cannot continue to work on this, because you’d be doing yourself and the client and the people you want to communicate this campaign to a great disservice, because it will be a bit biased. So often that, if at any point let’s say you found yourself working on a particular campaign and that mid-campaign you realised that this is not in line with my personal values then you need to voice it and say right there and then this does not align with your personal values, because you’ll be doing yourself a great disservice because if you continue working on that account, knowing full well it’s not aligned with your values, because it will and there’s a high chance that will happen, because what will happen is you will find that things get slanted and there’s a lot of bias that gets involved. You don’t want to do that. As a PRP you want to be objective as possible and not allow any personal values to interfere with your work then going back to what I said about how you may be feeling at the present moment or what your personal values are, you need to be able to communicate your personal values and communicate its misalignment to that communication.

Interviewer: Okay so it’s about understanding your personal values but also knowing that your personal values are perhaps not, I don’t want to say not important but not necessary for the particular role.

Respondent: It’s quite crucial. The industry holds in high regard a very strong values and those values are transparency, objectivity and honesty so it also opens communications, so if at a point you are not communicating truthfully then that – you know raises a lot of red flags.

Interviewer: Okay I also want to speak to something called personal organisation value congruence. So, you’ve spoken about how important it is to ensure for that alignment of values. Do you believe that it’s important from an organisational point of view, as well so for your employer to have that person organisation value alignment? [repeats]

Respondent: Of course, and this has to with a great cultural fit. Organisations and the hiring process need to make sure that they hire somebody with good credentials to be able to take on a lot of accounts.

Interviewer: But does it matter values, you’re speaking about credentials, I’m speaking about personal values. Is that value alignment necessary?

Respondent: Of course, it is. I think now in the 21st century companies understand you know the importance of personal values. If you are going to say for instance disqualify someone on the basis of the fact that they were or they don’t believe in let’s say, a campaign on initiation, would you not take somebody because they don’t
believe in that or do you take them on, so it’s very important you know to be considerate of people, employees personal values and also becomes employees working for an organisation will not have similar values and we’ll all differ at some point. You know and that will come across really in the organisation but working in such an environment you’d have to understand that it’s critical for you to be able to work with people from different backgrounds and also, I’m going to pull in the whole idea of socially plugged in.

Interviewer: Okay. I’m going to move onto question 10 which you have touched on as well now in this question, so can you explain the similarities and or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication.

Respondent: Okay similarities and or differences between agencies that I’m currently part of and my personal views of ethical communication. I can safely say that having joined this company I realised that it’s certainly in line with my personal values in the sense that we are all about honest open communication and this is what we aim to deliver to our client. It’s just a matter of how we then execute that. I personally feel that it’s really aligned so the current, the company that I currently work for now is it speaks to objectives, communications and open communication transparency honesty and those are values that I live by. So those are the similarities are sort of intertwined in the process.

Interviewer: Okay are there any differences?

Respondent: Differences, I haven’t picked up any at this present moment, no.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s move onto question 11. So does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees. So, if yes just elaborate on whether the system is adequate or state whether there are any grey areas?

Respondent: So, the organisation that I’m currently working for is quite stringent in terms of following good practice and we’re always looking at ways of making sure that the information that we put out there or information that we communicate speaks the truth. I’m going to make an example, for instance in terms of formulating a press release we always need to check with the client for approval and the client needs to okay that – [phone rings]

Interviewer: Can you just repeat what you were saying now in terms of the strict systems in place?

Respondent: So, I mean the organisation follows processes in terms of quality assurance and whenever there’s a press release that’s due to come out, we always need to check with the client for approval so the client needs to give us an education so this is the angle that I’m going with, and this is what I’m trying to communicate in terms of you know, key messages. So that is the core of what we do here.

Interviewer: Okay. What other systems do we have in place? Do you maybe have to be members of a certain body, are you a member of a body, are there any ethics training, what other systems are in place to ensure for ethical practice in the company amongst staff members?
Respondent: So, the company has regular internal training. This is the same training that’s given to clients in terms of being able to communicate effectively and being able to – being ethical communicators. So that is crucial and if, just to go back to your question on whether we are or I am part of any professional body, yes, I am part of a professional body, and this is a body that regulates the industry and just to make sure that we are sticking to, we are adhering to the regulations as set on by the body.

Interviewer: Okay is there anything else to measure your ethical behavior at all or not yet?

Respondent: Look I mean at this stage, because I’ve been here for three months, my experience working with media and the public relations industry, one of the ways you know one can really measure whether we are being ethical or not, is just to check what it is that’s being asked of you and your personal values or the company values, are those things aligned and are you delivering what you’ve been requested.

Interviewer: Yes okay.

Respondent: So that’s key.

Interviewer: Alright. Let’s move onto question 12, so what kind of role or roles do you think that PR practitioners should be enacting in the South African context?

Respondent: So, PR practitioners I’m sure you know play a critical role in the South African context. This is very important because it requires them to be cognizant of the different cultures that exist in the country, within the continent as well but more so in the country because we’re so diverse, right and we always need to educate, continuously educate ourselves about how we conduct ourselves socially and in producing, you know, and acting ethically we always need to look at how we do our work in the bigger frame of things. So, the role that PRPs play in the South African context is very, very, very important. We need to continue communicating, ethically, honestly, truthfully and going about doing business in a way that reflects what is that, you know, is set out and that is being very honest and transparent.

Interviewer: So, would you say that social responsibility is an important part of the role?

Respondent: Social responsibility as well, and I think the organisation that I’m currently employed by is big on social responsibility and giving back. We recently participated in a programme, I think it was for Mandela day where we went to plant vegetables at a clinic so it’s that kind of a behavior that is required, or you know [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 1:10:46.4] and that is being socially responsible doing the right thing and helping others in the process.

Interviewer: Yes, now what are your thoughts on PR as only contributing towards the bottom line, what are your thoughts there as opposed to the role we are currently playing.

Respondent: PR plays a very important role, both contributing to the bottom line and also creating awareness on what impacts society, so there’s quite, and I stand by this, there’s quite a lot of work that we can still do and there’s work that we have done as – as professionals but we continue to, you know, ensure that we are in line
with, you know, not just focusing on, you know, the bottom line, but also benefitting other aspects, like for instance you know, CSI and I’ve heard of a lot of PRPs that are going to work, and it’s not just about the bottom line, it’s more of how do we contribute to a larger society, it’s very inspiring about the industry.

Interviewer: Yes. Okay. I’m going to end off on then question 13, which is just any other observations regarding ethics and PR and our current industry, ethical communication practice, anything you want to add.

Respondent: I think the PR industry is evolving at such a rate where we need to be mindful of what’s happening around us firstly and secondly, we always need to be educating ourselves around the latest trends and also educating ourselves about how to be socially responsible. I think just to add on to all the elements we discussed in the interview is just to make sure that we continue to uphold the image of public relations. That’s very very, very important and I mean – my observations that I’ve made in the industry is if of course bottom line is very important, but because we’ve heard of stories or incidents where PR people would do whatever it takes, even if that means lying to the media, lying to the public about what it is that they do and spinning a story. There is a term that I don’t like using very much, that is a spin doctor, we tell the truth. We’re communicating and part of our job is to make sure that the greater public benefits from what – from what we do.

Interviewer: Absolutely. No, I completely agree. Is that all from your side? [repeats]

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright, thank you.

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PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice

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<th>Account Director</th>
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**Interviewer:** Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR practitioners and what they use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. This interview consists of the below thirteen questions and the expected duration will be thirty to sixty minutes. All responses are confidential, and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of results. I urge you to leave out names in the interview to ensure anonymity. So, let’s start with question number one. So, just **describe what do you do in your role as a PR practitioner?**

**Participant:** So, I am currently an account director, obviously having undergone all the various promotions, which has been really cool, over the years, and I get to work on some really awesome lifestyle brand across the business. I’m looking after a team of four. And, basically, we come up with really amazing PR plans, PR strategies, brand communication strategy, and, overall, just assisting the clients with their marketing sort of portfolio.

**Interviewer:** And **whose interests do you serve, exactly, and how do you serve those interests?** So, just tap into your types of clients. Do you speak to the media, since you say you work in a PR type role? Just expand on whose interests do you serve and how exactly do you serve those interests?

**Participant:** So, there’s [sic] so many stakeholders involved within the role that I occupy and in terms of the interests of the people that I serve. So, from a client perspective, there’s an interest to have to represent, media, there’s an interest to have to represent, but, also, something I think we tend to forget at times, or not talk about, is the business interest as well. So, my role is in three parts in terms of who I look after, and maybe if I can just elaborate a little bit more. From a client perspective, it’s always just to ensure that their bottom line is met in terms of getting the right kind of publicity that will enable them to drive product uptake, if it’s a product that we are selling, or service uptake, if it’s a service that we are promoting. From a media perspective, we work with a lot of media across different beats or across different sectors, depending on that particular project that we’d be working on. But their interests, obviously, is [sic] always getting the right kind of story and also giving them the right opportunities to be able to interview the right stakeholders, the right brand ambassadors, the right influencers, etcetera, etcetera. So, from a media point of view, it’s quite clear in terms of what they need in order for them to be able to help us is where we, as account directors or as PR practitioners, sort of then mitigate to ensure that, from a client perspective, there’s availability, but, also, from a media perspective, the
lining of question is also aligned and is relevant to that particular topic. Then, from a business point of view, that’s also mostly bottom-line driven in terms of ensuring that we bring in revenue so that we are able to pay for salaries, we are able to keep the business afloat, but, most importantly, we are able to generate profits that will enable us to keep the business running and also getting the team, the rest of the team, the bonuses that they deserve at the end of the year. So, the role is very much focussed on those three sorts of pillars, and it’s quite a joy. It’s quite a joy actually. It doesn’t come without challenges, but it’s a joy.

Interviewer: I can imagine. So, you’ve spoken to dealing with the media, ensuring that your client is happy, and also business interest, and what you touched on was your clients and obviously getting that return on investment for them, but now what about your own organisation and the bottom line for them, and, obviously, serving the organisational needs? Can you just touch on that? What are your thoughts?

Participant: It’s a very good question, and a very broad one at that, but, in terms of the organisational culture, if I may, it’s one that is really promoting of individuals to grow and be challenged in different facets. So, whilst I may have started, for instance, as an account manager, my growth into account director had come because of the value that I was able to demonstrate for the business from a revenue perspective, and, quite frankly, that is the bottom line. For any business to thrive, it needs to have revenue and it needs to have people who are working together to ensure that we meet the bottom line, or the targets that have been set on a monthly, quarterly, and yearly basis. So, that, predominantly, is an interest that I serve from a business point of view. But, also, from an organisational point of view, that would very much allude to the team that I work with and the staff, which is to represent their interests as well from a business perspective. So, to ensure that leadership is aware of the issues that the team is facing and, also, there are solutions. Not only just are we hearing problems, but we are solving them in a way that will enable the employees, the staff, to be able to be more productive.

Interviewer: And yourself, do you consider the interests of yourself in serving all the other interests, or…can you speak about how you think about yourself in this process?

Participant: So, it’s always so difficult to speak about one’s self, but anyway. I look at myself as a professional and there’s a couple of things that must be met in order for me to be able to service these three different pillars. So, my mental well-being is very important, my spiritual well-being is important, physical, and financial well-being. So, if these are not met, I don’t think I am able to then operate at my optimum level. And, although I’ve gotten into this state of mind of just trying to be motivating of myself, even when circumstances are not really allowing within the business, it’s tough but it’s done? – 00:06:42, and I try, by most means, not to allow anything that happens in my space to affect the work and the quality of work that is put out. Although it’s a very difficult balance to strike because you are ultimately a human being and, therefore, whatever happens in your life does tend to have an influence. But, be that as it may, once those four pillars in my life are served, I am then able to sort of then focus at an optimum on my client, on the media that I work with, as well as the business.
Interviewer: So, you do consider yourself, obviously, as being important in this process and making sure that your own needs are met to be able to properly and truly serve the other stakeholders. However, you’re able to draw the line when it comes to this is [sic] my personal issues, I can still work as a professional and get the revenue needed.

Participant: Absolutely. You cannot exclude yourself as a professional when you are working in a professional environment, which obviously means then you need to be aware of what you are going through in order for you to be able to address whatever…or mitigate whatever situations that may arise as a result of that, which will ultimately then affect everything else. So, I’m a very important part of this equilibrium, or else then there isn’t anything worth going for.

Interviewer: And the last stakeholder group that I just want to ask you about is the consumer. So, you already touched on three main stakeholders that you serve, which are the media, the client, and then the overall business interest, but now the consumers, does the consumer come into play for you, or are you generally focussed on making your clients happy, or where does this come in? What are your thoughts?

Participant: So, the consumer is generally a function that the client looks after. Yes, we do flag quite a lot of things for the client in order for them to be able to service the needs of their consumer or their customer quite thoroughly, but that is not a key, key sort of outcome or objective for me, at least at this stage. There is a brand that I started working on, a new brand, that’s within the Mxit space, and it’s really doing well. However, my involvement, where the customer is concerned, is completely divorced from the marketing function. Meanwhile, it does fall under marketing because sales and marketing are under the same…I mean sales and brand are under the same sort of banner within this particular company that I represent, but my particular interest is specifically where brand is concerned, and how are we communicating to consumers? And then the sales people will then manage or run with the sales and distribution of that particular product.

Interviewer: I think I was more going with: do you consider the consumer then when you are, for instance, serving the media? I think that’s what I’m thinking. So, it’s not so much what you do for the consumer, but I think your thought process, when you’re thinking about the consumer as the end outcome of dealing with your clients, speaking to the media, and I think how it would affect or impact the consumer?

Participant: That’s a very important part of what we do as communicators because who are we actually communicating to? Regardless of the fact that you have direct contact with them or not, you are still speaking to a particular segment, which is the consumer. So, with everything that we do, whether it is putting together press releases, whether it’s putting together brand strategies or comms plans, we have to have them in mind because we have to think about how is it actually going land with that consumer, and will it actually translate for the client and their business? So, yes, consumers are very key in terms of our thought process and how we solve problems for our brands that we work with.
Interviewer: Perfect. Let’s move on to question number three. So, **do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve these interests? Why or why not?**

Participant: So, to a large extent, we do hold ourselves accountable. I particularly hold myself accountable because I know, at the end of the day, if the target market or the audience has been clearly defined, then I have got to be communicating in a way that they are going to be...at least in a way that is favourable to both them as well as the client. How I represent the interest is by ensuring that whatever communication goes out is tailored and packaged in a way that will speak authentically to that particular target market. So, my approach for a [sic] aged fifteen to twenty-five/thirty-five, the millennial that is and post-millennial, will not necessarily be the same. So, it’s my job and my responsibility to be aware of who I am then speaking to, and how I then communicate to them. From their interests’ point of view, it’s obviously an important part as well to understand who the target market is and what they’re looking for, and, in my delivery of whatever strategy, whatever communication that is going out to them, those interests are sort of them addressed, if I may.

Interviewer: So, I just want to summarise this to see if I understand you correctly. So, for you, the way in which you hold yourself accountable is just looking at how you position your messaging so that it best suits the interests of the consumer group, and you do that via ensuring authentic communication that’s going out.

Participant: Absolutely. Otherwise then it’s pointless. Then you are just communicating to a wall and you are putting together communication strategies that are not aligned to what the consumer is looking for.

Interviewer: So, in...how can I articulate myself? So, in getting this messaging out to your consumer group, would you say then you have to have a level of understanding about them, and that’s, for you, what makes you accountable, is that you ensure that you understand them to be able to target them?

Participant: Absolutely. An understanding of the consumer means that I have to then walk in their shoes and think how would I then respond to whatever messaging that a practitioner, PR practitioner, in this case me, would be putting out? So, I always try and tap into their psyche and tap into the way that they would think and do things, because then I am putting together a well-informed communication.

Interviewer: How else do you hold yourself as accountable, other than just ensuring that the correct communication is going out, suitable to their needs? How else do you hold yourself accountable in your particular role?

Participant: Social listening is quite important for the role that I play in terms of how do I hold myself...how else I hold myself accountable in that I need to be aware of what consumers are saying and what are they putting out on social media for instance? Which is a platform where most of us need to start paying a lot more attention to because that’s where the live and actual conversations are taking place. It doesn't happen somewhere up in the sky. So, for me, I have to be aware of my people. Where are they exactly? What are they saying, and how are they saying it? In order for me to be effective in the work that I do. I often hang out with the consumer because, again, you can't tap into someone else’s shoes.
without actually walking the shoes with them. So, I hang out with them, I’m always in social spaces, and listening, basically, and absorbing the culture, essentially, that they have assimilated.

Interviewer: That’s amazing, and I love that you do that actually. So, now you’ve touched on how you hold yourself accountable towards your consumer group, but now how do you approach clients and the media?

Participant: So, approach in terms of?

Interviewer: Of how you hold yourself accountable in serving them.

Participant: It’s always such a difficult role for any account director because you represent so many interests in one. So, meanwhile, I may understand what the consumer wants and needs, I also then have to understand what the client is going through, and how can I sort of merge and bring these two worlds together? An example, without mentioning any names, but, most recently, there was a brand that I’m working on and they are trying to come into the market in a really amazing way. So, I know that, currently what is a trend is when you take over social spaces where consumers are actually at in order for us to drive talk-ability and interest around your particular brand. On the other hand, the client is then saying to me I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t see the value of investing forty percent of my budget into this particular project, so cancel it. So, obviously, I’m sitting here thinking I know what the job-at-hand is, and this is the only way I can see it happening, but I had to then step out of that sort of mentality to then understand where they were coming from and try and find other ways that I could almost do something similar, although not necessarily the same, but at least we’ll have some kind of impact within the market. So, from that point of view, I think I was then able to understand and look after the interests of the clients, from a budgeting perspective. Although, from a communication perspective, it was quite clear, they’ve got a clear understanding in terms of what needs to be done, but it was only more from a finance perspective that I just had to step back and allow them to make the decisions that they needed to make. Consumer, obviously, don’t know about it yet, so they’re not really affected, nor is the media, at that particular point in time, affected. But, had it gone to a stage where there was communication that had gone out, then we would be having a completely different conversation because now it’s the client, it’s the media, it’s the consumer who…there’s an expectation that has been created, so how do we then dissolve this expectation without ruining the reputation of the brand. So, it’s such an intricate process, but I’m grateful that what happened, happened at the time it did and not a lot of people were affected by it. So, that’s how I look after my clients’ interests. Most of the time it has to do with just compromising and trying to find solutions more than just bringing problems and challenges to them, but being solutions oriented. As well as, I think, the same principle would apply to media when they’ve been promised a particular interview or promised a particular sort of story and they’re not able to fulfil it at that particular point in time, it’s to try and manage to see how we could try and make it work without causing too much drama.

Interviewer: Absolutely understand what you’re speaking about. So, I just want to summarise this. So, in terms of your clients, you say you have a responsibility to listen to
them, though you may not agree with them, but you definitely still hold in that you have to listen to them and then, even if it means searching for other alternatives until you strike that agreement, and, with that said, in listening to the clients and listening to their needs, you also understand that you have a responsibility to protect your consumer group so that nothing comes out to them and, like you say, sabotages your relationship.

Participant: Absolutely. And there’s a great level of maturity that is required in order for you to be able to do that because sometimes you are guiding a client that is self-sabotaging, but they’re not aware of it, and, as much as you may try to give counsel and feedback, it’s just they’re not getting it. So, you kinda let them walk the journey and walk into whatever it is that they are getting into because you’ve done your part, you’ve done everything that you possibly can to educate and empower them, but, ultimately, they’re the ones that make the decisions. So, that’s also something that we’ve just...or I’ve learnt to accept and be more receptive to is the fact that client will always be clients and they always need to be given the respect of being client and the autonomy to make decisions, even when, as a professional, I know that that’s not the right thing, but it’s for them to deal with, I suppose.

Interviewer: Like you say, you know when to cross that line and to use your voice as a practitioner, and you know when to keep quiet and rather just search for those solutions yourself.

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: So, let’s move on to question number four. So, how do you respond to any conflicting interests with your stakeholder groups?

Participant: So, I think we’ve slightly touched on it, and conflicting interests can be whether I don’t agree with what they are thinking or there’s a conflict between what consumers are saying and what the client is saying. So, you kinda have to listen, that’s the most important part, before trying to address anything. So, listen, listen, listen. And, once you’ve taken the opportunity to listen, you also then have got to then process and segment what is actual fact and what is just emotions or not real facts, and I think, once you are able to do that, then you are dealing with the facts more than the other stuff that doesn’t matter. Because, ultimately, when there are more than two parties involved, the only thing that you can do is listen and, based on facts, make a decision on how you’re going to then give counsel. I don’t have an example that I can think of right now, but that is the mentality and at least the approach that I would have, which is to listen and also, based on facts, then come up with solutions.

Interviewer: So, I’m just taking down notes as you’re speaking. So, you said it’s about listening, I absolutely agree, and based on facts, and then searching for those solutions. So, almost having a very practical-solution type mindset in terms of just finding the best solution, engaging with your team. And you spoke about something, and I’m gonna use the word reflection. So, it’s about listening and then reflecting on actually what will be the best outcome or what would be the best approach. So, would you say then that you reflect as an individual practitioner, or you reflect rather as a team, or how do you go about that?
Participant: I think the reflecting part is a principle that I've always just applied in my own life, personally, which I've then been able to bring into the world? of work because there's [sic] always so many descending voices and so many people that have something to say or feel like they have something profound to say. So, it's okay sometimes to just acknowledge that you need time to sit and think about something before responding at that particular point in time because, without reflecting and having a clear sort of direction in terms of what exactly you need to be doing to solve this particular thing, that's where you get to make mistakes actually, unnecessary mistakes, because you did not take the time to think about what you need to do. Some people are able to do it much faster and it's okay, they listen, and they respond at that particular point in time, but, for me, as a practitioner, personally, that is very important and is a skill that I've always…and I do try to impart on those that I work with as well.

Interviewer: That's perfect. If you have any examples, we can come back to it later in the interview. Let's move on to question number five. So, what, in your opinion, constitutes ethical communication practice?

Participant: So, for me, ethical communication practice is based on the journalism principle of truth. Truth is so important in everything that we put out there. Whether it's in crisis mode, whether it's in celebratory mode, truth will always set you free. And whether you are being persecuted about it, you know that is your ultimate, ultimate truth. And, for me, that is where it starts. Everything else then follows after that, to be quite honest, because, also, not every situation is the same and your ethical practice may then differ based on that particular situation, but the key at the centre of it, or for me, is truth.

Interviewer: So, what's very interesting that you just mentioned is that it's situation dependent. Can you expand on what you mean by that? I'm assuming that you're suggesting there is [sic] times when you cannot always be as truthful as you would want to be or speak about this situation dependent truth.

Participant: So, the truth will always be the truth but, sometimes, how it's tailored may not necessarily be the same. And, also, depending on the context. So, if it's crisis mode, inasmuch as we are expecting a response at that particular point in time, sometimes we can't give a response. So, there's a holding statement, for instance, that will go out and then followed up by a rationale, or at least an explanation, in terms of why we have been in that particular situation or that crisis. And then there are situations where that's...you are live, you're in front of the camera, you're speaking to media, and the only way to set yourself free is by speaking your truth. Whether it will mean that the business will somehow take a knock or, in some way or another, lose something, at least you've got your integrity and, ethically, you know that you've acted in the right way. I don't always agree with practitioners who spin the story around because it always has a way of coming back to you and, if we are talking ethical communication, then, for me, truth, right throughout, is key. There isn't any other way.

Interviewer: I do agree with you. And, so, you're speaking about truth, and that, obviously, truth is the way, and, ideally, you would want to be truthful as much as you possibly can until a crisis comes out and then you...I suppose the word would be
strategically, you do have to tailor your messaging. However, it's not done maliciously, it’s done to protect the interests of the stakeholders, correct?

Participant: Absolutely. Because, inasmuch as you're also telling the truth, you've got to realise that there are people that need to be protected, I suppose. So, if you are a CEO of a business that has been caught in some kind of situation, you need to be aware, when you are telling the truth, are there gonna be people that are going to be losing their jobs? Are there families...ultimately, families are then going to be affected by whatever, should people lose their jobs. Is the share market going to drop? Are stakeholders going to now pull out? So, you just have to be aware.

Interviewer: You touched on personal integrity now, while you were speaking about truth. So, how you said you need to be very aware of your own integrity and this process of being truthful and when you are, not giving half-truths, but giving strategic truths. So, speak about how important it is that personal integrity and also reflecting then on your own reputation in this process of being truthful, how important is that for you?

Participant: If you don’t have personal integrity as self, how are you then going to be able to represent the truth for anybody else that you are supposed to represent? It's such a small thing perhaps in someone else’s mind or understanding, but, for me, it starts there. Once I know my truth, once I am aware of what I am going through, then I’m able to actually give the right kind of counsel or right kind of representation. Or else it’s just all done in vain, to be quite honest, and, inasmuch as we, or some people, may like to have the non-personal approach, but the work that we do is very personal. 'Cause we’re dealing with people, we’re dealing...and we are dealing and influencing a lot of people and their behaviours. So, think about it this way. If you are on the other end, what would your expectation be, and what would the kind of treatment be that you are looking for? So, personal integrity is so key because it then influences everything else, quite honestly, and there’s no other way. At least for me, as a practitioner, it will always be something that I refer to and base my craft on.

Interviewer: Is there anything other than truth that you would use to unpack what constitutes ethical communication practice? Or even an example of how you practice that you believe is ethical.

Participant: I think also, when there are systems and processes, I suppose, in place, it does help with putting out ethical communication, when there’s a process that you are following, when there are channels that are consulted to ensure that, whatever messaging, for instance, that you are putting out is actually bullet-proofed, it has been tested, and everyone is in consensus. So, it’s not a singular approach, but rather a more collaborative approach in order for us to ensure that we are doing or putting out the right communication. That, for me, is also quite key. Collaboration is key in terms of the different stakeholders involved. So, from a client perspective, they need to be involved, from the different reporting structures, for instance that I report to, they are involved, and, lastly, I suppose, the team that I work with is also involved in a way so that they are also equipped and are able to respond to whatever queries that then may follow after that
particular communication has been put out. But also, how they respond is in line with the intended sort of message that needs to go out.

**Interviewer:** So, you actually answered the question I was going to ask you, which was collaboration with who? Which you did touch on now. You spoke about a system that you go through, or processes, that make ethical enactment from your side a lot more [sic] smoother and easier. So, is this an internal process that you go through, an internal, your self-reflection or whatever, or is this an organisational process where you are ticking off ethical boxes that you are going through via your line managers or whatever it is?

**Participant:** So, it may not necessarily ticking off in the physical sense, but it definitely is a process that I’ve always been governed by, which is, if you are, as an example, putting out communication, that communication’s first draft, it goes to the CEO, CEO approves, once the CEO approves, client then approves, and then, once client approves, it goes out to the media. So, that is a system and a process that we’ve always applied, and I think, as we grow, we are then able to take up that role for those that we lead. Personally, I also do apply the same thing, it’s just easier if it’s something that you also believe in and have internalised so that everything else sort of flows and becomes quite seamless.

**Interviewer:** So, it is an official, almost, work procedure that you go through in terms of approvals. Before you just let out any communication, you do go through your line managers, your clients, your teams. And then you’re saying you do have an internal type process where you may consider then your integrity, which you touched on earlier, and is it necessary then for those to be aligned?

**Participant:** Sometimes they’re not, that’s the truth, because the business has its own objectives and its own sort of way of doing things, and you, personally, just have your own way of thinking and approaching things, but they can coexist. And how I’ve always approached difference is with respect and is with, I suppose, integrity, and never shunning on other people’s different sort of way of doing things or approaching things. Although I may sometimes feel mine is better, but it’s okay. It’s okay to respectfully acknowledge the differences and keep it moving. Ultimately, you’ve got to remember whose interests you are serving, and, if we go back, it’s always about the client, number one, it’s always about the media, for instance, or the consumer, and, lastly then, the business in terms of will it also meet its objectives?

**Interviewer:** Perfect. Absolutely wonderful answer. Let’s go on to number six. So, what, in your opinion, constitutes unethical communication practice?

**Participant:** I think it’s the opposite of everything we’ve spoken about. If it’s just unilateral and it’s all just about how one person sees things or does things, then it’s a bit problematic because how do we then systemise that? If it’s just about one particular individual and one brain, then I don’t think it works.

**Interviewer:** What are you referring to? Are you referring to the team itself and how the team works, or what are you speaking about?

**Participant:** So, in the work context, it would definitely be, if we are not following the aforementioned processes and it’s only just about one particular individual…so,
me, if I put together this communication and it doesn’t go through the right channels and is not vetted, then how do we ensure that it’s consistent? Unethical communication is also, again, if there’s no truth, there’s [sic] lies, then that can’t be right. The doctoring and spinning of the truth, for me, in an unethical way is not correct because then it’s false information that’s being put out there, it’s misleading, and that is certainly something that I don’t subscribe to. I know that perhaps there may be other people who do, but, for me, that cannot be a practice that I would practice at all. Sorry.

Interviewer: So, lies, false, misleading information.

Participant: And manipulation also. Manipulation, it’s very unethical.

Interviewer: So, manipulation in what sense? Is this working with the media or the consumers, or what are you referring to?

Participant: Across the different channels. If we’re trying to manipulate, for instance…it’s very difficult to give an example without mentioning names, but, if we’re trying to manipulate media to give us false coverage, for instance, it’s a problem. If we have been involved in situations where we are falsely putting together reports that have coverage and whatever that was not there, that is not good. It’s a very small thing, but it goes back to ethics and how do we communicate? If you’re communicating with your client that way, how much more of [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 00:37:15] can happen if you’re working now with media and consumers and…? It has a domino effect, and I think, for me, it’s important to always just remember the truth in everything that we do.

Interviewer: Absolutely. You spoke about an ethical dilemma, which is an example of manipulating the media to get coverage. Have you ever…I don’t want to say been a victim, but have you ever been involved in any unethical practice or seen unethical practice, not even in your current role, in previous roles?

Participant: Sure. And I think I speak from a point of conviction now because I’ve had experiences where I’ve had to do something because, if we don’t, then we’re going to lose business, then it’s gonna affect badly on your performance as an individual, as an agency, etcetera. So, there are instances where I have been involved in stuff like that, but, fortunately, that hasn’t been information that was then used, for instance, to enter awards or anything else like that. It was just to mitigate a situation at that particular point in time where we didn’t have enough time to generate the coverage that we needed, and the client was insisting that we need that report because I am presenting to the Board, etcetera, etcetera, that we then had to do, but –

Interviewer: So, your client wanted quick, easy coverage essentially.

Participant: Basically. Because they thought their product or their service was that hot it will land on the media, but forgetting the fact that, for anything to land with the media, it has to be curated, it has to be done in a way that will have a story, and there’s only so much you can do within two to three days versus if you’re given a week or a month and you are given carte blanche to curate content the way that you know it will land. ‘Cause you know your media, you know what they’re interested in. So, that was a bit of a dilemma that we found ourselves in, but, in retrospect, I
would have much rather just gone back and say, unfortunately, it didn’t come together, we would like more time and we would like to curate it in the way that we would like to curate it, but sometimes you don’t get what you want.

Interviewer: So, it’s a learning, I suppose, in your career journey. So, as it stands now, you feel you would have the power to push back and rather be honest with your clients and say absolutely not, we’re not going to manipulate the situation, whereas, back then, you say you obviously had to go about unethical practice to get quick coverage, which I’m going to ask you to expand on if you’re open to giving me an example, but was this your own choice then that you decided I just have to do this as a practitioner because this is what my client wants, or did clients actually directly say to you, you have to do this?

Participant: No. It actually wasn’t even client, it was someone that I had reported to back then. Because, remember, I started off as an account manager and I reported to a business unit director who was also under pressure to prove that we are going to turn this thing around, or else, had he not turned it around, he would have then had a problem with then having to explain to the CEO and then we all get into trouble, client might just decide to walk away. So, it was a matter of you have to act now and do it now. So, what we did in that particular instance is obviously working with coverage that we had before, just manipulating, my goodness, some of the content that was in that coverage so that it represents that of the client.

Interviewer: So, you…how can you say? You fluffed your clients in this particular coverage to make the piece look more interesting and appealing in your client’s [CROSSTALK – 00:41:11]?

Participant: The report to look more appealing whilst we were still trying to negotiate with media and get them to come on board. ‘Cause, remember, the client didn’t have time and that’s what we needed in order for us to demonstrate value, but that, for them, unfortunately, was not something that they could give us at that particular point in time. But I think we did go back and rectify it in terms of the particular platforms that we had claimed to receive coverage from, and, inasmuch as it wasn’t a [sic] earned media engagement and a paid engagement, at least there was recourse or there was…we knew that what was done was not correct, but, at that particular point in time, we needed to show the client something.

Interviewer: So, for the sake of, obviously, urgency and serving the needs of your clients, you decided upon yourself, as a practitioner, I have to do this, it’s not right, but I have to protect my clients at the end of the day and ensure that we get the revenue, or whatever you need [CROSSTALK – 00:42:15] –

Participant: That was a directive, by the way. It wasn’t personally something that I had decided on, but a directive that I then had to execute.

Interviewer: Yes. But then you say, interestingly, afterwards, as a team, you actually did go back and think this was not how we work. So, what did you say you did to kind of rectify your behaviour there?

Participant: So, we went and approached those particular platforms that we had claimed to have gotten coverage from and got into a partnership. So, it’s not, oh, okay, we’ve picked up the story, but it’s a partnership between this A company and this
particular publication. So, basically, that means you have to pay for this piece to be covered or to be featured. Because, also, media nowadays don’t just cover brand stories without expecting anything in return. Funny enough, that’s the current situation, actually, the status quo of the media space that media does not just cover brand stories anymore. It doesn’t work that way. They’ve got to make some kind of earning from it. It’s a bargaining of sorts.

Interviewer: It’s interesting. I have heard that, and that obviously makes your job quite tricky then because being able to prove what you are achieving is becoming a lot harder. What’s interesting is that you said now, obviously on the back of our previous behaviour, your team reflected and decided you’re gonna form strategic partnerships with the brands that you said you have coverage with. Was your client aware of what had been done and then you went back and formed those partnerships, or was this something that your team did out of a personal integrity, we have to do this for ourselves as practitioners?

Participant: It’s actually the latter because, remember, ethical communication is what our business is about and, fortunately, the client wasn’t necessarily aware. Yes, they questioned how it was packaged, but they weren’t aware that this was actually what was happening. And we had already, at the back of our minds, figured out how we were going to manage the situation. So, it’s an unfortunate situation that we found ourselves in, but it was a major learning from it, and I think that has helped us with how we do what we do now and enabled us to be able to push back to client when they actually are making unreasonable demands.

Interviewer: Because you’ve been there, and you know what it takes to –

Participant: Because [CROSSTALK – 00:44:56] you don’t want to find yourself in that kind of situation again.

Interviewer: Absolutely. I had a question and now it’s literally just slipped out of my mind. You said that client wasn’t particularly aware of everything that was going on behind the scenes with your internal team. Is that because your team decided to withhold everything that was happening just to save your own reputation, their reputation, and rather speak to them after you had already achieved what you needed to achieve?

Participant: We never really had to explain ourselves to the client, which is the fortunate part, but we held ourselves accountable, and I think that’s probably the most important thing is that we didn’t just rely on the fact that we’ve put out this lie and we’re just gonna run with it, but we went back to our truth.

Interviewer: Yes. So, you did reflect on what had happened and you were like we have to rectify this, this is what we stand for, and this is what we will then communicate to our clients?

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to the next question, so number seven. What challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice?

Participant: Is this in terms of media or in terms of stakeholders, client?
Interviewer: You can refer to absolutely anything. I think it's just in terms of any maybe barriers that stop you. Like you were just speaking about now, this actually would have been an example of a challenge where you have to do what you have to do. Maybe organisational politics or structures you have to go through, the clients you can't push back maybe. What challenges do you face, with any of your stakeholder groups, in your efforts to communicate ethically?

Participant: I think the biggest one right now, and probably...the biggest and only one is just managing emotional...how do I put it? Emotional clients who...and stakeholders and team members who forget about the work, because then they've forgotten about what exactly we're doing and are now being emotional, extremely emotional, to the point at which work is now being affected. That is probably the biggest and only one that I'm dealing with right now that I am still trying to wrap my head around it in terms of how do we deal with it? And I think I've somehow devised a way, which is to try and make it work to my favour by massaging egos and whatever, in order for me to then land my communication. But it's not really that easy, and that's when you start realising that, in this communication thing, you are actually dealing with human beings who have got their own mind and their own set of [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 00:48:13] that inform how they think and how they approach things, and you kinda have to have an understanding and try and be accommodating, which is not always easy, but, once you kind of crack it, you're then able to move forward.

Interviewer: So, I just want to clarify. So, in a nutshell, there are organisational politics which makes performing ethically quite difficult, you say, and people put preference over their own personal issues, and they take what happens with clients maybe emotionally whereas then they forget the professional and business reason, let's go back to maybe revenue that you touched on earlier, is that what you're saying?

Participant: Absolutely. And I think revenue also has an impact on everything else that we've spoken about because, once there is no revenue, then there's [sic] a lot of emotions flying in the room because there's a lot of angst and panic in terms of how are we going to keep the business afloat? How are we going to pay people salaries? Although that's not necessarily a situation we've found ourselves in where we can't pay people salaries, but it's a reality that we deal with.

Interviewer: So, in a nutshell, it's accepting also that people are different, understanding others' realities, but also knowing when to detach and remove yourself from yourself almost and put yourself back into that professional business mindset.

Participant: Absolutely. Although it may not be easy, but that's how it is, and you always just have to be that person. As a professional, that's what's required, and that's the only way, unfortunately.

Interviewer: Let's move on to the next question, number eight. So, what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?

Participant: This is a difficult one actually. What values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?
Interviewer: So, keep in mind and think about the country, think about the different consumer groups that you guys are dealing with, matters of diversity. So, think about who you are serving in terms of your consumers and your particular clients, and how they’re wanting to kind of connect with their consumer groups. What values do you think you need to have, as a PRP, to really do your job and serve those people?

Participant: So, I think you have to, first of all, have a mind that will allow you to think, think in a way that is inclusive, think in a way that is diverse, because we live in a country that has so many different people, different ways of doing things, different approaches, different cultures. So, you cannot just have a singular or, is it, a unilateral way of thinking. It just doesn’t work. There has to be a lot of sensitivity and understanding of the different stakeholders, but, most importantly, the people that we are communicating to, because they all come from different backgrounds, they all face different challenges, and, so, there needs to be just sensitivity and an understanding and appreciation of different environments and different people. I think inclusivity is so important ‘cause…and, as much as there are different people with different voices, but they all have meaningful voices that have, some way or another, an impact on who we become and what we do. So, we cannot just pretend like they don’t exist. And I think, lastly…I think I’ve said sensitivity, but it really is just genuinely understanding and really appreciating the contexts of SA because we have a lot of politics, we’ve been through a lot, and people fight different struggles from economic, emotional, psychological, trauma. There’s so much that is going on. So, there is a need for that sensitivity and understanding. I don’t know if I’ve answered that question.

Interviewer: You have. You absolutely nailed that question in a nutshell. Let’s move on to question number nine. Do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR practitioner? Why or why not?

Participant: Absolutely. I definitely think my personal values affect that, my role as a PR practitioner, because, if it didn’t, I would not be able to put myself in someone else’s shoes, it would always just be about me. And that, I suppose, in a nutshell, is because PR is not just about you as an individual, but it’s also about who are you communicating to? So, these things have to coexist. And, so, for me, once I am able to understand my own sort of…what is it? My own personal values, I am then able to integrate with those of others, even though they may be different, but I’ve got at least a tolerance and an understanding and appreciation of them, and we are then able to find a way forward.

Interviewer: Perfect. So, just to summarise what you said, you absolutely believe that your own personal values play a big role in your PR practice because you wouldn’t be able to put yourself in other people’s shoes and understand them if you didn’t.

Participant: Absolutely. And, also, what are my personal values? That is understanding, love, and sensitivity. And it may seem like the softer stuff, but it actually plays such a huge role with what we do and how we do it, and, without that, I don’t know, I don’t see how we could effectively be PR practitioners that communicate effectively and come up with these amazing things that we do otherwise.
Interviewer: Let’s move on to question number ten. So, can you explain the similarities and/or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?

Participant: So, I think we’ve established the ethical and clear communication practices and how those then align is because I believe in the processes and the systems that will enable us to communicate ethically. If I was an unethical person and the business was ethical, then there would be, obviously, a clash and a quandary between the two because we’re not of the same view, but, because that is who I am, and partly…not even partly, that’s what the business is about, we are able to really service our clients in an ethical way and put out ethical communication. I don’t know if I’ve…

Interviewer: Let me probe you a little bit further. Are there any differences that you can think about, just top of your head, between your agency or your own personal views, or not? Have you aligned with a company that is completely aligned to who you are as an individual and a practitioner?

Participant: I’ve assimilated the culture quite well and the company values very well, which are based on…I’ve now forgotten the three values about energy, value, and I forget the last one, but I’ve bought into it and, because of that, there is an alignment, there is a synergy, and I think, because of the sensitivity that comes from both parties, we are then able to charter a way forward as a business. Otherwise, I don’t know how it would work, honestly. I wouldn’t have been there for as long as I have if there wasn’t an alignment, definitely.

Interviewer: So, it actually links to something called person/organisation value congruence, which obviously is that alignment between the company and your values to ensure that you actually are doing meaningful work and because it aligns to what they stand for and what you stand for. So, is that important for you?

Participant: Absolutely. Then, if it doesn’t align or if the work that I’m doing is not of value to that particular organisation, then, unfortunately, I can’t be a part of it, then I’ve got to find a place where it makes sense. Yes, you may outgrow certain environments and certain spaces, but they do serve a particular purpose in one’s life. And, right now, that’s what this particular company has done for me, and, if you ask me, is there room and scope for more elsewhere? Most likely because we also can’t be doing things the same way they’ve always been done. You have to be stretched and tested in different environments, and I think I’m ready for that.

Interviewer: I wish you all the best on future endeavours, but let’s move on to question number eleven. Does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes, please elaborate, or state whether there are grey areas. So, you can touch on, for instance, if there’s any ethics training you maybe had to go through. Do you have to be members of PRISA? Ethics workshops. Are you measured on a monthly basis? Ethical processes, like you say, in terms of getting releases out. Just expand on those.

Participant: So, I think that job does lie with key management people. So, myself and the rest of the team would be…or the rest of the senior management team would be
accountable, for instance, for ensuring that releases are done right, etcetera. Do I believe that we could have more done? I definitely think so because it’s a function that, I suppose, as a growing business, we are now realising that we need more of, and, as we introduce and bring on board new people, it’s important to have those at least running every three months/six months in a year to ensure that people are aligned and are aware of ethical communication, ethical practices. HR has made efforts to communicate to us policies and procedures and that kind of stuff, but I do believe there could be more that could be done to inculcate and just bring about that awareness and appreciation of the practice. We are members of PRISA, yes, and our CEO is very much well-known within this space in terms of his contribution and the different Boards that he sits on, but that is information, I believe, that could be passed on to many other people rather than it just sitting at a top-tier level and only being transferred once a year or every now and again. If it’s done quite regularly, then everyone is empowered, and everyone knows what it is that they need to do.

Interviewer: So, you say a lot of the information sits at the top, which you feel could empower more staff members to be more ethical and also just be more aware of themselves, I think, more frequently than what’s currently happening at the moment.

Participant: Ja. I’m saying the threshold definitely...we definitely have more tolerance and need more of that. And I think, a lot of the time, it doesn’t happen because of the busyness and schedules that may not align, but, if it’s a priority, then there’s no excuse.

Interviewer: You said that more can be done, there can be more ethics procedures. Do you have anything in mind that you feel?

Participant: So, for me, it’s more training opportunities, more conversations around what ethical communication is, because sometimes, up in the air, we think we know, yes, because you’re putting together two words and these two words make sense, but...when translated loosely, but what does it actually mean? What is the [contents? – 01:02:15] thereof? And I think, once we are able to do a lot more of that, then we would have done a great job. We’re doing a good job, but it can be great.

Interviewer: So, a lot more just open-door, informal conversations about what do we, as a team, believe is ethical, just to get an idea of other people’s understandings?

Participant: It’s important. And more training, like I said, whether it’s us bringing in specialists or people that are within the organisation that know of this, it’s important to have it. It’s important to have it.

Interviewer: Do you have any ethics procedures for taking on clients or knowing when to get rid of clients?

Participant: It’s usually clients that, most importantly, from a revenue perspective, are going to bring us revenue, but also clients that are not going to be in conflict with the clients that we already have inhouse.

Interviewer: So, no competitors are taken on.
Participant: So, no competitors necessarily. Because there’s a Cape Town branch that will be opening soon so, that branch can deal perhaps with those competitors, but it’s not something that I’ve spent enough time interrogating because just because we have a different office in Cape Town doesn’t mean it’s a different company ’cause we’re still the same company, but…

Interviewer: So, you speak about now, for taking on new clients, that you do obviously consider revenue and no competitors. Is this in a written policy, or is this just something that’s –

Participant: Word of mouth and it’s spoken about, yes. It’s a well-known fact.

Interviewer: So, it’s not in formal documents or formal framework for you.

Participant: Perhaps there is somewhere, but I’ve never received one.

Interviewer: Let me just make a note of that. Let’s move on to question number twelve, and then we are almost done. So, **what kind of role or roles do you think PR practitioners should be enacting in a South African context?** So, not the same as values, what kind of role?

Participant: I feel like, much like journalists actually, PR practitioners should also be held accountable to the truth and nothing but the truth, representing the interest of the people with their clients, because it is assumed that we know the market when clients come to us. So, we need to truly and honestly represent their beliefs and what they are looking for from brands in the utmost respectful and truthful way, or else then what is the purpose? What is the role of PR practitioners nowadays? Just to run around and try and get coverage? No, I don’t think so. I personally don’t look at myself that way. I think we need to play more of a strategic partner role to our clients, we need to be able to hold them accountable. Much like they hold us accountable, and we are held accountable by various stakeholders, we need to be able to hold them accountable. And I think the role of PR practitioners just needs to be a lot more elevated. Again, it’s not just about sending out press releases to media and then Bob’s your uncle. No. But we are such an integral part of the conversations that are being had in boardrooms, on different platforms, and in different settings. So, we need to own that, and we need to rise to the challenge, and the only way we are going to be able to do that is when we realise the power that we actually hold as PR practitioners who represent our clients, who represent consumers, who represent media across different platforms.

Interviewer: So, really trying to shape society?

Participant: Absolutely. Because shaping of a society actually started the kinds of conversations that go out and the quality of conversations that go out, which means we have a bigger responsibility then to also be, I suppose, educated and, I suppose, well-informed in order for us to shape the narrative of the conversations that are being had.

Interviewer: Perfect. And our final question for the interview: **any other comments or observations with regards to ethics in PR?**
Participant: I think PR is definitely a changing environment, and I’ve written a couple of pieces on Bizcommunity just around this particular subject matter, which I believe hasn’t received enough traction, but it’s fine. Our youth or our future generation will make reference to this one day. Our industry really is changing, and we need to be more integrated across the different sort of pillars of marketing. So, for me, I don’t see PR as a practice on its own, but it’s an integral part of any marketing team, of any sales team, through-the-line, etcetera, because we are tasked with having an understanding of these things and selling them. So, if we are not acting like we have an understanding of this, then I don’t know. ‘Cause I definitely don’t see myself as just someone who sends press releases and hopes to get coverage. Sorry, I’ve got an AE that does that for me, and that is someone who is growing within this space, but, for me, it’s more about making decisions, informing and influencing decisions that will change the face and narrative of our country, and –

Interviewer: How does ethics though come into play now when you say there’s [sic] these blurred lines and that PR really should be playing a bigger role in the boardroom, it’s not just press releases? What does this mean for ethics in this space?

Participant: It means we need to have ethics that are a little bit more, I suppose, universal for this particular group of people. Once we stop seeing ourselves as two different segments or three different segments, then only will we be able to have proper sort of…or integrated ethics. And, right now, it’s happening bit by bit, I think, but not enough of it is happening, and we need more people who are actually going to champion and speak to these things in a way that will make a difference.

Interviewer: So, more just open verbal conversations about what is ethics? Also, how does ethics apply to the different disciplines that are now blurring. And this potentially would also be then a bigger understanding of ethics from a practitioner point of view that you have to understand ethics then in the different disciplines, correct?

Participant: Absolutely. ‘Cause we can’t expect people to now integrate us, but we don’t have an understanding of their environments, vice versa, because all these things come together and work together as part of the same ecosystem. So, we have to have an understanding and an appreciation of each other by empowering ourselves with understanding what are the different environments and the different sort of ethical principles that guide those particular practices?

Interviewer: So, this ethics education is actually very important.

Participant: It is. It is so important. ‘Cause I remember, in my last year of varsity, ethics was only just a module, a tiny module, where, in fact, it should be something…or a course that runs at least two/three semesters, or the entire year, because the conversations to be had are key, the information that is to be passed on to future PR practitioners, future marketers, etcetera, is key, and it will guide everything that we do and how we do it. It’s just that simple.

Interviewer: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Participant: No. I think this has been a lovely conversation and I thoroughly enjoyed it. It’s been very reflective of…even where I’m at right now, I’ve just realised that I
actually have a brain. I'm kidding. But thank you so much for having me, and I really appreciate it.

Interviewer: It's a pleasure. Let me just turn this recording off. We managed to get an hour eleven out of –

--- END OF AUDIO ---
PARTICIPANT 5

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Date of interview: 19 September 2018
Interview length: 1:12:58

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based PR practitioners use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. The interview consists of 13 questions and the expected duration of the interview will be 30 – 60 minutes. All responses are confidential, and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of the results. I urge you to leave out names in the interview to ensure for anonymity and where you can try and elaborate with examples linked to yourself or others. Just leave out names when you’re speaking about yourself or your own company or the examples.

Respondent: Okay no problem.

Interviewer: Alright so let’s start with question number one. Describe what you do in your role as a PR practitioner?

Respondent: So, in my role I work with clients to develop their strategies around managing their reputations and around rolling out PR campaigns. I advise on issues of crisis communication so some companies will approach me to assist with - them with proactive creating crisis communication policies and putting measures in place. Some will consult when they are in the middle of a crisis in terms of making sure they’re responding accordingly or just looking for counselling. I also assist with, assist clients with content development so I help create content strategies and monitor the execution of those through my company. And I assist senior executives with media training so getting them media ready.

Interviewer: Okay, so I’m going to move onto question number two and you did actually touch on now some of this answer already, so question number two is whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests? So just unpack in a little bit more detail how you go about serving your clients, the media and so forth?

Respondent: Okay so I think so for me obviously the primary interest in life with – with the client, you know, in terms of execution I need to understand how their business works and any other interactions that I may have with the media or you know, my client stakeholders, other stakeholders beyond the media, the focus for me is obviously the issue at hand and what the client is trying to – to address. So yes, so initial interests that I’m serving are the clients and obviously my responsibilities which are making sure that I serve those as soon as I can, however, I mean I know we get to address this in the next couple of questions, there is a limit to how far I go with serving those interests.
Interviewer: Yes absolutely, no we'll definitely get to that a little bit later down the line. Speaking of interests, do you consider your own interests in the serving of other stakeholders?

Respondent: Yes, absolutely – I think, I mean - so my own interests in terms of I obviously have a strategy in place around how I want to position myself so the first interest that I serve myself on is the process of deciding and choosing which clients I pursue and which projects I agree to work on so that's the first layer for me in terms of I look at in terms of is this aligned with my values, with the space I’m trying to get my business, the space I’m trying to position myself as a senior practitioner in and I go in with that and once I'm in there, I look at what are the company’s values vs my own company's values, who are the stakeholders that this company is involved with and what does that look like so what does the landscape look like for me in terms of where I want to go, in terms of advancing my own interest in that association.

Interviewer: Lovely, perfect answer you absolutely nailed everything there. Let’s move onto question 3. Do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve these various interests?

Respondent: Yes, I do. I think for me every - everything that I deliver on, everything that associates me with the client and the interest, I need to be able to be answerable to whoever is in authority in that space. So if we're lobbying government, obviously government - lobbying government specially on policy when you're coming from a commercial, - from a business end it means that there are a whole lot of other stakeholders that get affected when government takes a particular position on a particular policy so I need to make sure that personally as somebody who is a big social justice advocate that I’m able to maintain a balance that I can sleep with at the end of the day.

Interviewer: Yes, no I completely understand that. In terms of this accountability can you unpack in a little bit more detail how you are accountable towards yourself, how you are accountable towards your client as you touched on in the previous question?

Respondent: So, I think in terms of accountability, obviously for clients, we outline what the deliverables are; we outline what the key measures of success are going to be. So for, obviously when I’m out there working on behalf of the client, the expectation is that I will be open and transparent in terms of what I’m doing and in terms of how I report back to them on the work that I’ve done and I think also in cases where I feel, that whilst in the middle of executing that there’s something that you know, feels unethical, seems unethical. There is, you know, once I feel I’m certain about the environment, and the change in terms of how it links to my values and where I stand, I think I often take that responsible step of letting the client know that look there’s a challenge here, I feel conflicted or this is my opinion about this issue, and here are the facts ABC or I’m either going to take a step back and hand over to someone else, whatever the case may be. That’s usually how I approach it; I will approach the most senior person who is responsible for the decision, who is responsible for the case. To say okay cool, this was an initial, this was an initial decision that we all took collectively, however we are now here, and these are the options that I have.
Interviewer: Okay so it’s about being completely transparent and then investigating all of the alternatives within the collective team.

Respondent: Ultimately my responsibility is to deliver the best that I can to the client, so I feel that in that way by being completely open and transparent I’m still doing that. So that the client has a choice, if they want to go for, if they want to go for, you know, if I see whatever the policy, we’re lobbying for will have a negative impact on education or something else along the line. I would say for me personally this is where I stand, [I stand with quality decisions] however from your business interest, if you’re still keen to pursue it, these are the ways we can still do it, however I won’t be leading that part of the campaign.

Interviewer: This is actually really interesting and I’m glad that you’re touching on this. You’re actually touching on question four quite nicely. So, question four is how you respond to any conflicting interest. What’s nice is that you’re speaking now, this is what I’m going to do, I’m not going to hide what bothers me, I will be very open about what bothers me and then the client actually has you know that choice and responsibility then okay what do we do now, the PR practitioner has been honest and upfront so you’re almost practicing with integrity.

Respondent: Yes. No, no, I mean I think also when I deal with clients, I encourage them to be as honest as possible with me, so that whatever solutions I come up with, I come up with it based on all the facts. I always say be honest, it’s a safe space, it’s a confidential space so that if you have done the wrong thing, we need to be able to see how we are going to fix that but from a point of truth.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely agree. So, touching now specifically to how do you respond to any conflicting interests, have you ever had to go about responding to conflicting interests in your career?

Respondent: Yes, I have. There have been a couple of times, I think when I, in my consulting business I had a client that I’ve been working with in the last couple of years, towards the end of the four years, they took a very, so they were an organization that trains young people in youth leadership, in leadership, socio political navigation and around technology and social innovation for change so it was really an organization that empowers young people, who are doing amazing projects across South Africa, and supporting them I was part of the, I led the team that was responsible for telling all the stories of these different young people. So again, I am going to give a very specific example. So one very specific example of a project that I led for them was we produced a reality TV series and this reality TV series looked at, it was a journey of trying to look at celebrating June 16 in 2016, June 16, 2016 and just reflecting on the last 50 years and what it looks like, what it means to be a young person in South Africa in a free South Africa. So part of that process we had to obviously choose themes that would resonate with young people and the majority of the young people that we dealt with were majority black young people who live in villages, peri urban areas and some urban areas, mostly in town ships and the township literacy levels from matric right up to PHD level and we were trying to find specific stories to link to specific themes that were popular in South Africa, free education, unemployment and all of those things and trying to create a really, a product that would be intense and true to the experience of young people and being
respectful and inviting engagement across the board and not just black people only. So, on the team there was a mix of people. There were some older white people, not enough young black people I felt so as a result, as a person who was leading the shoot, the production, the content and all of that, producing at that level at some point a lot of people fell out and I ended up just being myself and the production team in terms of executing this thing. So, we had all agreed what it would look like on paper as a team, we had it, we agreed on the treatment of the series etc, until it was time for us to go and shoot and do the actual, go around the country, recording, phoning and all of that. So, I went on this shoot, we shot for about 6 – 8 weeks, after that we had the first cut. Then I obviously I had to then reconvene – I had to reconvene everyone from the team and allow everyone to see what the idea looked like. So, I presented this idea to everyone, so we watched the first episode. It was intense, it was like - imagine an episode of Black Twitter as a - on a TV show. That's what it felt like. We were on beautiful locations, it was beautiful, it was beautifully done but the way the young people came across they were real, they were, you know it had a lot of grit but now all of a sudden, this was what we wanted, all of a sudden everyone in the room felt uncomfortable. There were mixed views. Some people felt all of a sudden no this is too honest, no people are not, so huge conflict between me and the boss, because he felt it was too - it was too honest.

Interviewer:  Too real, Yes.

Respondent:  It was too real and here we are, we’ve spent, at that point we had spent R3 million on that production, I had spent more than a year working on this production and throughout their stages we are all touching base, we are all approving, not working alone, as things go everyone is involved in this process. Now all of a sudden, we have the first episode, SABC has agreed to air the show, and we are just, then all of a sudden client says no this is too real.

Interviewer:  Yes. So now can you take me thorough how you navigated that process of now responding to this conflict?

Respondent:  I think for me, I think I looked at the process that we had agreed on in terms of how you know, how we navigated each stage of the project so that we can see that for us to get to this final product this is the process that we had – we had followed so I needed to kind of, to be as objective as possible on one level. So that, because there was money linked to it and the money was not ours. We had a funder that gave us the money, so we needed to be able to report that to her to say okay here’s what we did, here’s where we travelled, here’s what we captured and here’s the product because at the end of the day they’re going to want to see the show on TV. Right so that was my first level that we need to, we needed to go through the process. Then the second level for me was fact checking that this was not about our personal opinions, the two of us, we needed other people, as many people as possible to watch the show, to give the feedback to so that we can see if other, bigger pool of people where they stand. So, we had senior managers watch it, we had junior staff members watch it, we had different groups of people watching at different times. We even took it to - to the young people who were part of the network that was used on the show to see what their reactions were because I wanted to obviously, from my side I wanted to prove to him, that this was, in my head I’d already made up my mind that it’s right where it
is. So, we had all of that feedback, collected some of it, some of those feedback forms and whatever so that we can – we can have another layer to it. And then I think, then the last layer of it was really I felt I needed to be, him and I needed to be honest with each other, because he’s a middle-aged white man and the show is of young people, mostly young black people below the age of 30. Right so I felt also as a black woman that I have a responsibility to tell the story of other black people as honestly as possible without - without sugar coating it. If people’s story is of poverty that’s what we’re going to tell because that’s the only story that, you know that’s where they’re coming from. So, I had to then try and shrink the distance between the two of us because I appreciated his reaction, because for me I couldn’t haveimagined it in that way as a black person, for me it made, it made sense, I was like I understand the story. I might not be a poor black person – poor young black person but I understand where these young people are coming from. So, at some point, I mean it was difficult for both of us to really kind of put aside our personal, like how we felt personally about it in order to get to a point of understanding but at some point, we did.

Interviewer: At some point you did -

Respondent: We did find each other – we did find each other, but he still disagreed, he still felt we shouldn’t show it?

Interviewer: And what actually landed up happening. Did you can it or what happened with the programme?

Respondent: They decided to, so they’ve been showing - they still are showing it, so they’ve been showing it at different, they’re still taking it around South Africa but they’re still not sure about putting it on TV, but they have been showing it.

Interviewer: Okay so I want to go back now to the process of your thoughts during the decision making now when this conflict was obviously happening. Completely understand the issue at hand, but now was your thinking as a PRP, was it oh my word, you know, I’ve made all these promises to SABC, the funders, and now my client suddenly says no were you thinking of that, were you thinking about your own integrity there, now what are you going to tell the other stakeholders – or -

Respondent: So, what was, I was fortunate in this instance that I played the middle man, so I worked with a client and on the production side and on managing our media partner which was the SABC in this case was the production company, so the production company came with the SABC. The SABC was their stakeholder and the funder was my client’s stakeholder so I was literally in the middle, so I had these two buffers I guess for me in terms of, in terms of – terms of minimizing the backlash I get from people at the SABC because they’d given us free airtime and obviously having to explain to the funder. However, whatever was given to the funder had to come from me because I had to justify everything to my client. My biggest challenge was facing those young people who were part of the documentary series, facing them and being able to say look we won’t be airing the story in the way that we had originally planned and having to explain the decision of how we came to the decision of not airing the story in the way we had promised. That for me was the most difficult part out of the whole thing. Because I now had to tell people whose stories I’d been advocating for because we had a
free, we had a lot of media coverage, because we filmed in such amazing historical sites, we were at Steve Biko’s centre, we filmed at Steve Biko’s grave site, we filmed at Fort Hare, and we filmed at Freedom Square. We filmed in such, in very historic places. That got us a lot of interest about the project. So we had, so I had done a lot of work around announcing this amazing project and journey that we were on because it was a journey that we were on with the project, so there were a few other stakeholders that I needed to face myself and it was I think for me I tried to, the process for me in that was I tried to not, to constantly remember that A the project was not about me, and secondly while I felt that my opinion and my emotions about it were valid they were not the most important in this instance even though they were informing the decision that I was making.

Interviewer: Yes, no I completely understand.

Respondent: So, I mean so I think for me, I always always try to strike a level of objectivity in, in, how I, how I come across as a practitioner.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Respondent: Like you were saying you have to strike that balance between yourself serving obviously the consumer group that was involved, the client and what’s interesting is that you were saying although you didn’t agree with the client’s views you were still able to understand where he was coming from and understand that it’s also based on his own background.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely. Let’s move onto question number five, so what in your opinion constituted ethical communication practice?

Respondent: I think for me it is practice that aims to, you know it deals with being able to represent the moral good, right as in in terms of understanding what is this group that the interest, the communication, is filtering to and what is a moral and acceptable standard of ethics within this group. Being ethical is being able to maintain good moral and ethical standard of communication for that particular group.

Interviewer: Okay. Define good. What for you is good?

Respondent: Oh wow.

Interviewer: Yes, I’m trying to dig deep here, because it does seem to be quite subjective amongst candidates so in your own opinion what for you would be good ethical PR practice?

Respondent: I think in my opinion it’s to understand, for example in the South African environment, that in South Africa we have a very, you know we have a very clear history of inequality, right, we have a very clear history and we have a general good understanding of what is acceptable and what is not, I think I feel as a country we have, we have a general standard of what is acceptable and what is not, when it comes to morals and ethics so I think for me that’s where I draw my yardstick, but if this were going out to a group of South Africans that cut across all areas of South African society, how would this be received?
Interviewer: Okay so in a nutshell it's almost accepting other people’s differences, very inclusive diverse communication?

Respondent: Yes, yes and also, I think honest and truthfulness, that for me is a good, is a good, my personal values, honesty, transparency and informed, and people need to be able to make informed consent based on that piece of communication.

Interviewer: Okay so for you let’s go back to the stakeholder groups that you mentioned so let’s go back to your client so how would you go about then ethical communication practice when engaging with your clients?

Respondent: So, for example, I will give you an [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:27:44.4] example, when I worked for quite a big corporate, when I joined them, the business unit I was in was on sale, so they were literally looking for a buyer. So, obviously the implications for a business unit being sold, so it was a business within a business. Pity I can’t name the company otherwise it would be easy to understand. So, it was a business within a business, and they wanted to sell that as a going concern. So obviously you know what’s like in any work place, the minute they talk of sales, mergers, acquisitions, people start worrying about jobs, they start worrying about their security, and they start worrying about a lot of things. So, at that time I was part of the communications team that was responsible for unpacking this journey – with the MD, with the direction of the MD and his exco team. So, the biggest challenge I faced with that was that the company decided to take the legal route and they decided that let us explain what we mean by going concerns so they chose to be very clinical about how they were communicating. That they did not want, they were not open to much. They didn’t want to come, to communicate from an oh we know this does not sound right for you, we’re doing to try as much as we can to prevent, they didn’t want to make unnecessary, they didn’t want to make promises that would backfire through the communication so they chose to be very clinical and to the point but even then they did not, I think to this day feel that they were not very honest with how they positioned even that legal position because they did the whole thing of no we’re selling the business as a going concern and we will try and make sure that whoever buys the business promises to not retrench within the first year or two etc etc and I felt personally that those weren’t guarantees that they could keep because we didn’t have a buyer. Right we didn’t have a buyer, and -

Interviewer: So, they were just trying to – they were trying to make people feel comfortable and it was like false security.

Respondent: Yes. So, I felt we can’t tell people, we can’t lie to people, not telling them the whole truth is lying. So, I felt this is very misleading what what what. So, for me that was, there was a line there that was cut.

Interviewer: What did you do?

Respondent: We were not giving people enough information to make informed decisions about their own futures. We were not being honest, we were not being open and transparent about the way we communicated. We took a very clinical stance that was not, thoughtful.
Interviewer: Yes. So now what did you do in this regard where you could see that this was happening, where there was misleading information going out?

Respondent: The thing that I did personally was obviously I was not the most senior person in the room. My opinion was taken into consideration, but it was not, obviously didn’t have the biggest impact in terms of what the final thing would be, right. So yes, sure I said what I said but it wasn’t going to change people’s minds. So on one hand I felt I needed, I did my responsibility I did what I could, which was obviously – [talking to child] – so my thing was I needed to satisfy my own conscious in terms of knowing that I’m doing the right thing by speaking out and not keeping quiet in that space and obviously owning that but at some point I started looking for another job, because I felt like it does not feel like, not comfortable for me.

Interviewer: Okay so there’s definitely links to a term called organization person value congruency which I’m going to tap into a little bit later but really speaking into the alignment of values held by the organization and then the individual obviously because it impacts, you know, is your work then meaningful, does it align to who you are?


Interviewer: So, this then speaks to what you’ve been speaking about where you – I mean you wanted to leave the company on the back of I spoke up, but it still wasn’t enough, it just - it didn’t speak to who you were as a person.

Respondent: Something for me, obviously the down side always, this is something that I can at every point where I’ve left a position, I’ve moved onto another thing., the downside for me is that a job is never a job. I don’t know if it’s a downside, but you know a job is never a job for me?

Interviewer: Can you just explain what you mean by that, so for you a job is, I think I understand what you’re saying, so it’s not necessarily something you’re just going to do because you’re getting paid for it, it’s something that you want to do that really speaks to who you are because you’re passionate about space?

Respondent: Yes and also because I’m passionate about the practice and the value, and the value that the practice brings to a business, so I come from that perspective that when I leave an organization I want – so for me, I’m always cognizant of the practice because I understand the fact that a lot of organizations don’t value PR as a strategic tool, as a strategic management discipline so I’m always on the... I feel for me, my presence in an organization is also an advocate of the value of what PR is about.

Interviewer: Absolutely. And I’m going to stop you right there because I’m going to touch on this in the second last question actually which speaks to the role of PR because I’m going to actually make a note of this, because I love that you spoke about this, as PR’s role being something much bigger than just a press release and that value congruence that I mentioned, I’m going to tap on that also a bit later with you so let’s just go back to our questions so question six was what in your opinion constitutes unethical communication practice, which you actually answered now with this example of where you said you had to not necessarily go against your own values, but for you misleading information about people’s jobs
is just unethical for you. Can you give me other examples of what in your opinion constitutes unethical communication practice?

Respondent: Under [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:36:27.2] information and I think also deliberately trying to sway perceptions by, you know by using PR as a propaganda tool. I’ve worked with government before and I felt like sometimes some of the activities that get done are, you know, have an agenda beyond just serving the people. Right so I think for me that also is an element of being unethical, when you deliberately strategize around swaying people’s opinions for personal good.

Interviewer: Okay no that’s perfect, nicely summed up. Number seven, what challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice?

Respondent: I think the biggest one is that often it’s someone else’s time, it’s someone else’s money, I have to like I said earlier that I have to constantly wrestle with making sure that I don’t, if I’m with a client who – who is not big on representation, who is not concerned about what’s right or what’s wrong, I don’t sway from where I’m standing because of money in most cases. I think money for me is a big one. Like who controls the budget.

Interviewer: Yes so for you obviously you’re cognizant as a PRP, you now you have to make money, the client is paying the bills, but you don’t want to have to, if I’m understanding you correctly you don’t want to have to sway your own values just for the sake of revenue.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Okay very interesting. Other than budget and potentially unethical clients coming your way, what other challenges have you faced in your efforts to communicate ethically?

Respondent: I think it also depends on some issues, you know - for you know we all, there are certain issues I feel passionate about, there are certain issues I don’t feel passionate about. So sometimes like I say I’m a big social justice advocate. I’m very big on equality, and you know, and all of those, nondiscrimination, those things but there are issues that I’m like I say what I’ll let this one go, and I think it is good for me to be cognizant of those issues because if there’s a potential ethics issue it is possible that I could let it slide because for me it’s not an issue that I feel strongly about.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Like sometimes it’s just to obviously keep myself in check around, around, I think maybe an easy one would be on the issue of the – in the issue of the marginalization of people in the LGBTQ community for example. Why they may be sensitive to that, and I’m cognizant of it, I don’t have a lived experience of what that’s like. So, if the client is perhaps blind to that, a lot of people are Christian, a lot of people of Christian faith and many other faiths don’t - obviously don’t consider, can be seen as homophobic. So if for example I’m not a person who is very well versed on issues of the LGBTQI community I might not, I’m not so close to those issues even though I am aware of them so I think it will be easy
in an environment like that to be blind to those and I can find myself being in an ethics breach because of that bind spot there.

Interviewer: Okay so you’re saying you do obviously understand that there are people with different realities but you also may be blinded because you haven’t actually walked in their shoes so although you can see it and you are aware of it, because you haven’t been in that position you can’t always truly understand to be able to as a practice as ethically as possible?

Respondent: Also, I think it’s not a space that I’ve worked in before either, so I am not - as a practitioner I haven’t been in a state where I’m representing a client who works in that space. It’s possible for me, and my good intentions might not be aware that I’m walking directly into a situation that could cause a potential crisis.

Interviewer: Okay, okay so not necessarily a lack of education but just a lack of being in those shoes, physically experiencing it yourself to understand -

Respondent: Yes, and also just following those issues intimately. I believe in non-discrimination so on that very high level, I’m like everyone deserves a fair chance and all of that. Obviously, there are specific issues, people living with disabilities, there are very nuanced disabilities – those people have that I might not be aware of.

Interviewer: So, it’s in away like your own PR practice is guided very much by your own passions, your own personal values, your own life experiences and those which you don’t follow as intimately as others, you may be caught in a rut one, maybe not intentionally. But just because it’s stuff that you’re not too familiar with.

Respondent: I try to, I’m a big reader I try to keep up with current affairs. I love the news, I try to keep up with journalism. I try to keep abreast of how much as possible but it’s not possible for me to be on the path of everything.

Interviewer: Yes, no I don’t think it’s possible for most people but obviously we try to the best of our ability.

Respondent: We need to obviously be aware of what’s happening in the world [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:36:27.2]

Interviewer: Yes, no I hear you. Let’s move onto the next question. Very interesting answer so number 8 is what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South Africa context?

Respondent: I think earlier this earlier this year I hosted an event where I looked at how do we tell an authentic and balanced South African story and I think, the pillar for that event was looking at what are the most important pillars of what we need to be aware of as PR Practitioners and those things were that ethics matter, truth matters, representation matters, and diversity matters. So, I think for me those four things, those re the four things that always come to mind for me, in terms of what I need to be cognizant of as a South Africa practitioner.

Interviewer: So, this obviously applies to your agency as well, your organization would follow through with the same values for practice?
Respondent: Yes. The work that we do will assist that as well.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you have any other personal values that you can think of other than those top four or would you just narrow it down to those four?

Respondent: I think those four for me are obviously the biggest ones. I value honesty, I said truth, and I’ve said it.

Interviewer: Yes, and you feel that your clients and your various stakeholders, this works out quite nicely in the way that you practice ethically towards them as well.

Respondent: Yes, no because I think also, like I said for me I seek out people who subscribe to those values, so it makes working with each other easier, so I represent a lot of, people who are very passionate about the development of the content and people who are actively creating solutions around. I love technology, I love innovation so I work with a lot of entrepreneurs and businesses that are doing really really amazing work around developing the continent whether in one particular country or in the region and the region but people whose stories like when I tell I know these are stories that speak to the presentation, these are stories that bring diversity to the media that we consume, these are stories you know, that speak quite nicely to representation so always for me that’s always my comfort.

Interviewer: Amazing and I actually love the way that you answer your questions because they almost lead into the next question and answer, so the next question is question number 9 which is do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR practitioner and what’s really nice is that you’ve spoken directly to person organization value congruence. And that -

Respondent: Yeah and I think for me the way I built my business and I think that’s why I had to have a long and hard think after 9 years of my own, being in practice to say actually what is the one thread through all the positions that I’ve been in and receiving them, what have been those reasons and most of the time the reasons where I thought it didn’t resonate with me. I thought like we needed to dig it deeper. I think also age plays a role. I’m not a young person anymore. Not as young as you maybe so I think also maybe personal growth and personal development you know and also having the confidence to be able to say to people no I won’t do that, it’s not easy when you are younger.

Interviewer: Yes. Like you were saying earlier you almost don’t have that voice yet when it comes to pushing back with clients. Whereas now you’ve been there, done that, you know how things made you feel inside, because of your personal values and that you actually learnt that that alignment was actually key to you practicing the way you feel you need to be practicing.

Respondent: Absolutely so for me I don’t know if I answered the question.

Interviewer: No, you did, I’m just going to repeat it for you. Can I get you to maybe sum up, sum it up for me in one line? You know, do you believe that your personal values affect how you practice as a PR practitioner? Just sum it up for me.

Respondent: Yes, I do and the reason for that I think is, I can see it in the choices that I make when it comes to the work and the satisfaction, I get from knowing that I’m
contributing meaningfully. For me my work is bigger than just being a PR practitioner. I think the biggest thing for me, personal mission is that I want to contribute meaningfully in whatever space I’m in, so I try to use that to bring that and make sure that I feel also that satisfaction.

Interviewer: Absolutely I completely understand that. What’s really nice is you spoke about how with age comes understanding of how you could have done things differently and also, it’s gotten you to where you are now which is you know you’ve taken yourself away from potentially toxic unethical PR situations. Would you say then that you needed to reflect and incorporate reflection in your journey as a PR over the years?

Respondent: Yes. Absolutely. I think you know one good example of that is that when I first started consulting on my own, the easiest thing for me in terms of getting business was working with other agencies, and also servicing clients in the corporate space, so that was the easiest thing for me to do, because that’s what I knew, because that’s where I knew, that’s where I came from. I quickly try to put brakes on and kind of remind myself why I left the corporate world and why it was that I wanted to branch out on my own. It was bigger than just being able to pay the bills, it was a very philosophical thing to say now, when I think back, to say am I giving enough money because of value. At that time, it’s not an easy decision to make, but I think for me it’s always been about constantly you get things to say am I still on track with the mission.

Interviewer: Very nice, very nice answer. Let’s move onto number 10, this may be quite a funny question for you given the role that you’re in, but can you explain the similarities and or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?

Respondent: I think with my personal views, I’m not a person who likes to explain my decisions, personally to other people. I feel like my responsibility is to myself so if I want to make a particular decision and it feels right with me then I make that decision but the difference with my business is that I try to maintain a certain level, to create a standard of what is acceptable within the community that we operate in and that is the level that determines the decision. So, the decision is not mine alone, it is looking at what is good for everyone. Even for example within the team I need to rise above my personal, so for example, a good example - a good example happened this week. I had to have a very difficult discussion with two of the interns in the team. So normally if it was a friend or a personal relationship I would, I would expect that if you are in – if you are in my personal space, you know, what irritates me and what I don’t like so when I’m upset, then you understand why I’m upset because we have a personal relationship but I felt that with them, even though we’ve had continuous feedback sessions and the same mistakes keep happening, it took me a whole week to actually work up to this because I was just like this is not about me, it’s about the good of the community because them not delivering is affecting everyone.

Interviewer: Yes.

Respondent: And me not saying anything looks wrong to the others because it now looks like I’m letting them get away with not delivering. So, in that case, there was a clear,
very clear conflict between what I would do in my personal capacity and what the company does.

Interviewer: Yes, well I mean they need to learn, and it obviously requires you to be transparent about this okay, what you need to know.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Are there any other values, not values, differences or similarities that you’d like to touch on or not?

Respondent: I feel like I’ve said so much.

Interviewer: You have, don’t worry we’re almost done, we’re on number 11 now. I’m probing you very much but when you see the research you’ll understand why. So, number 11 does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees. If yes, please elaborate or state whether there are grey areas?

Respondent: So I think so for me, whenever someone joins the organization we have a thorough induction which explains like our values, what we stand for, the history of the organization, where we come from, why we are here and the process of deciding which clients we work with and where our values align with the work that we do, so it’s an actual induction, we have a presentation and everything that talks to the value and the culture of the organization. So that’s one element. So, people can read it and access it, but that’s one way and I think we have regular sessions that are outside of work meetings, where we catch up on okay, so this is what we feel, to kind of get a sense check in terms of how people are are feeling, where are they… I’ve never set out to create a system but it’s just the way that’s worked out. I mean I’ve never called it a system.

Interviewer: So, it’s more of an open-door type policy.

Respondent: Yes, so it’s more, it’s really kind of like the policy that shapes how we work. So also, we look at in terms of we interrogate our reports for clients, we interrogate our delivery on the work, we interrogate client expectations versus what we can and what we can’t do so that we can see why is it that we’re not able to do this. Why is it now...we are pulling out of that project or why is it, if for example we had agreed on a particular strategy direction, why we are now changing tack. People understand the decisions that are being made. Sometimes the decisions are not deep. There’s no money to do that anymore we are now doing it this way. Or we’ve done research, this is not the right way to position this any more so it’s not always an ethical issue but there is that space for reflection in terms of looking at this is what we set out to do, this is where we are, these are the results, let’s interrogate the results, what’s working, what’s not, why is it not working.

Interviewer: Yes, so a very selective type process, constantly going back and forward saying to yourselves is this the best way to do it. If not let’s move forward. Is your agency a member of PRISA or do you encourage your teams to be PRISA members?
Respondent: No, we are not registered with PRISA primarily because I've never understood the value for me. I've tried, I think I was with an organization that was a member, so they had bought out membership for all of us and also was a member of IAB, International Association of Business Communicators. I was with an organization that was a member of IABC. I think for me with PRISA I've never understood the value I could get from that.

Interviewer: Okay I understand that and then one more question do you have any ethics frameworks or I don’t know like an ethics checklist when it comes to taking on new clients or you know, if you find that one of your clients is just behaving unethically or they’re expecting unethical work from you, do you have any policies or frameworks in place for how you then go about that ethics management?

Respondent: So normally, there are two levels at which I would be able to determine that. A would be when we are contracting with the client, the first thing we do we go through a review and an audit process. Specially For clients that I'm building a strategy for. I've been fortunate that I've had clients who have never had PR before. So, they don't have, they've had sporadic media coverage. They come and look at okay so in that process we will do, so the strategic building and the consultation process is usually an independent process of whether I want to work long term or short term. So it’s usually a very short-term engagement with the client and it’s a very internal process so we will look at, we’ll review, we’ll audit, look at what’s out there by client, what are they saying by their own channels, what is being said about them, who has their worked with, what is being said about those people, etc. so during that process we are able to determine is this, is this where we want to be or not. Sometimes if that doesn’t come through, usually the strategy engagement is a short period, a short project, we do it quickly, compile the strategy, if it does happen that sometimes which most of the time happens that a client sways okay can you guys implement the strategy for us then we’ve got a project of formalizing our relationship through an actual legal document. So in the, in our contract we do have, we do have a few clauses that talk to ethics, that obviously should we feel that there’s a breach of and then we list all those things that we are not comfortable with that we reserve the right to then, we reserve the right to terminate the relationship immediately.

Interviewer: Okay perfect that answers the question. Let’s move onto question 12. What kind of role or roles do you think that PR practitioners should be enacting in the South African context?

Respondent: I think we have a responsibility to the stories that South Africans seek in the media, because as PR practitioners we are also big contributors to the stories that people consume. We are big contributors to the shaping of the narratives that are put out there. We support politicians, we support business, we support all sorts of you know, corners of the South African society. So, to me it’s cognizant of how important a role we play in how South Africa develops.

Interviewer: Okay so -

Respondent: So, for example I mean with the Gupta story and the Bell Pottinger situation, fortunately, it was not a local agency that was involved there, but I think the lessons are still important for us to understand that as PR practitioners we can’t
knowingly get into situations that are to the detriment of the community. By community I mean us as a country. So, we have that ethical responsibility towards our community of fellow South Africans. We have a responsibility to tell the truth, and not, and not, you know to put the interest, you know, to understand what, I think we have a responsibility to understand the, what is our moral commitment - what is our social contract as South Africans with each other and that we are contributing positively to that. So I think we have, I think we have a big responsibility, every little thing that we do, to magazines to the conversations we encourage on radio, those are things that, those are things that don't, those have an effect on community and I think we also have, all of that contributes to the transformation and closing the inequality gap in South Africa.

Interviewer: I absolutely understand that, so understanding the realities, almost human emancipation and trying to really shape society, change behaviour and be socially and I think culturally responsible.

Respondent: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: There's something that you touched on earlier in the interview that I want to actually probe you on. You spoke about PRs needing to see PR as a strategic management tool.

Respondent: Yes.

Interviewer: Can you just elaborate a little bit on that?

Respondent: I think having grown through from being a very junior person, when I started to where I am now and working with very senior people in businesses, that it's important to highlight all these issues that I've spoken about, of truth, of ethics, of representation of diversity, it's important to raise those at the highest level possible in an organization so that those are considered when the organization sets its goals and its objectives so that it trickles down – it's so hard to be a junior person and you try to push for those things at a lower level so if an organization understands using PR as a tool in that way to project a reputation that is of integrity and credible, those things, and often a lot of organizations are not aware that they need to apply those things so deliberately.

Interviewer: Yes. Especially from the top like you were saying like ethical PR practice and the strategic role that it needs to play, it needs to come down from the top and filter down all the way to the lower level guys.

Respondent: You'd be surprised really like how many brilliant business men who don't understand the value of shaping your own narrative as an organization. They think if the media calls them for an interview, they feel that they're at the mercy of the media often.

Interviewer: Yes, and that they don't have a chance to almost have a voice and craft their own image.

Respondent: Exactly. To deliberately say this is what I stand for and I'm going to pursue those opportunities that will give me a platform to share what I've done -
Interviewer: Yes, so they almost don’t realise that the power is in their hands. And they leave it almost in the hands of the other stakeholders.

Respondent: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Okay very interesting. Let’s close off with number 13. If you want to you can expand on what we’re talking about. Any other comments and observations with regards to ethics and PR and the industry and how important ethics is?

Respondent: Um sorry repeat that last part?

Interviewer: [repeats]

Respondent: Yes I think my response, my response is probably going to be influenced by what I’ve been feeling lately and where I am, in terms of some of the dynamics that I’ve observed in my particular, in my team, that I find, I’m struggling to understand that younger PR practitioners are entering the profession in a completely different way than what we did. And I think as a result for a lot of people, coming into the profession, they’re just doing a job. They also don’t understand what, you what the practice is about and nowadays entry into the profession is so different than it was before. Before it was a ladder that you had to climb that in order to get to the next step you need to be competent in this, so you’re literally collecting bits of experience and you’re building on that and [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 1:10:15.1] was a little bit different than what it is now. Nowadays younger practitioners are entering the profession, it’s like a trampoline kind of set up. It’s not a ladder. You might land on an opportunity that will catapult you to where you land is much bigger than – than where you started and then I think there’s an opportunity that’s missed there, that a lot of young people for example are entering, are working for small businesses, working for entrepreneurs like me, that is not necessarily going to, I have a very free working element where people are clear about what they have to deliver on but they don’t have to come and sit at a desk every day to deliver on these things and there’s that element of self-discipline that is needed to carry on your work without being micromanaged all the time. So, I think there are just those, there are just little things that I don’t have answers around how we can overcome them. Since last year, since the end of the year last year, I’ve been – actually for the last two years I’ve been mentoring young people in a very structured and non-structured way and I’m still trying to figure out what is the best way. The structured was I had a very corporate set up for a person and all of that, now that my business has changed quite a lot, I mean I have a very free working environment. So, I think it’s just how we shape the next generation of PR practitioners to make sure that we leave behind some things that can guide them.

Interviewer: Okay very, very nice. With that said though do you think that ethics education is something that should be considered with the next generation of PRPs coming up?

Respondent: I think it’s something we need to be deliberate about because looking at how South Africa is right now younger kids are – younger kids are exposed to a lot of things. So, we need to be deliberate about teaching people. We can’t assume that they know.
Interviewer: Alright. Perfect. Is there anything else you’d like to add?

Respondent: No problem. No…

Interviewer: Cool, let me just turn the recording off.

--- END OF AUDIO ---
Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks that South African agency-based PR practitioners use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. The interview consists of 13 questions and the expected duration of the interview will be 30 – 60 minutes. All responses are confidential, and no respondents will be identified in the reporting of the results. I urge you to leave out names in the interview to ensure for anonymity. Alright so I’m going to start with question number one. Describe what you do in your role as a PR practitioner?

Respondent: So, in my role as an AE, my primary role is to act as a support for account managers.

Interviewer: [asks for clarity] [respondent gets off speaker phone]

Respondent: In my role as an AE, I – I act as a supporting sort of resource to account managers who work on brands so that’s in terms of anything from curating media lists and keeping them updated. It includes PR coverage reporting so using tools such as Newsclip to sort of analyse coverage received for clients and report that sort of in an Excel spreadsheet and also capture it on a Word report. I’m also responsible for organizing any PR tactics that require, you know, suppliers, for an instance if we’re doing a press drop on behalf of a brand so my role would be then to like liaise with suppliers in order to curate whatever it is the press drop may be, again curate the media list it’s going to, make sure that all the addresses are up to date and if I need to notify the media and the influencers that they are receiving this media pack, I then have to do that before it goes out and then it goes out. I have to deal with the post, the production people, whoever they may be, ja so that is my current role at the moment.

Interviewer: Okay. And in line with everything that you just mentioned, whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests? So, you spoke about an account manager. Perhaps speak about your clients and maybe give me some insights into the kinds of verticals that you’re serving, do you serve yourself, your manager, just expand on that.

Respondent: Okay so first and foremost, definitely we serve the client, so I work across clients where one is a global TV channel and the other is a global toy manufacturer so the basis of, I mean the existence of the agency within itself and them coming on board as a client means that their interest in the promotion of their project and their product is, is the primary concern first and foremost. Then there’s obviously
the element of ensuring that you're serving the interest of the agency by working at a pace, the capacity that best represents the agency. And then I would say then you're also serving my own interests to ensure that in the work that I am doing, I'm learning, I'm growing and I'm utilizing the opportunities I receive within the workspace to further myself and to upskill myself.

Interviewer: Okay perfect. So first and foremost, the clients -

Respondent: Mmhm.

Interviewer: And then you serve obviously in the business and then yourself would you say that comes last or is it equal?

Respondent: Um, I would definitely say there is a hierarchy to it, also because of the level of investment that there is into it. So, with the client, the client pays sort of a significant amount of money to ensure that you are serving their interests. Um and then, and then with the agency and the business is that they are paying you and sort of, um, so basically they're paying you to ensure that you're serving one the client's interest and their interest as a business, to ensure that they keep the client happy, and as yourself the only real sort of investment that I would say I am making to myself within the agency is that I commit to sort of getting up every morning and going to work and spending that time in the office and working in the agency and working for the brand to not only serve their interests but to grow myself but I definitely think there is a hierarchy to it and I'm basing it on the level of investment at each tier.

Interviewer: Right, no I hear you. So, you also spoke about in your particular role that you do work with the media and looking for that coverage. So just expand on serving the interest of the media and what comes into play there and also do you then consider also the consumers when you are busy serving your clients.

Respondent: Ja, so, so it becomes very complicated and we almost have to really interrogate what the objectives are at each sort of tactic level that we're doing or at each project stage that we are of the promotion, in inverted commas, process. So, your first question was in terms of media influencers and serving their interests?

Interviewer: Ja.

Respondent: So the thing with media is, especially in the South African landscape is that, they are in a very, you know difficult time in the sense their newsrooms are getting smaller and they have to do so much more with so much less in terms of resources, so then our interaction with or my interaction with the media then becomes trying to provide them with content that they can use that makes their life earlier and make sure that they can meet their deadlines but at the same time that that content is content that is actually promoting the client in the best way possible and also in a way that meets objectives and makes sure that we have the key messages in there. So you have to serve the client but at the same time serving the media because we have to make their lives easier in order for them to even consider using your content because they're flooded with sort of press releases every day and different brands trying to speak to them and trying to get into their papers, into their magazines, into their online publications, whatever it may be so it's about positioning the client and positioning that piece of content
that we're serving to the media in a way that best suits the media and it's also really about knowing specifically that media person that you're targeting at the time knowing what their beat is, knowing what kind of sort of atmosphere that they're working in and making sure that they know what their deadlines are and knowing how to supply them with that content in a way that they want to receive it so it involves building relationships in a very big way. And then to your second question, remind me again what it was?

Interviewer: How do you consider, you know, serving consumers in this regard because obviously you're working with the media and you know.

Respondent: Yes, so the consumer forms, so what will happen is the brand knows kind of who their consumer is and that will inform which media we target because different media platforms serve different audiences and readers as well. So the consumer is in mind at every stage of the process and while at the same time that we are trying to feed content into the media, but whether it is me, the brand or the media person, all of us have a consumer in mind, so – so with the brand is that they're trying to get their product sort of promoted to the consumer via the media using a PRP like myself as sort of that go-between to ensure that that happens and then for myself it's having the consumer in mind to know then which media platform to go to and then once the content is sitting with the media person, they have the consumer in mind in the sense that they need to then decipher whether this piece of content that they've received from me is going to be suitable for their reader or what do they need to do in order to make it sort of readable or consumable to the consumer, in a way that they sort of want to receive it? I'd say the consumer is definitely in mind from the beginning until the end.

Interviewer: Okay perfect, that answers number two very nicely. Let's move onto question number three. So, like in line with everything that you just spoke about now and all of these interests, you know, yourself, the media, the client, your managers, do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve these interests? Why or why not?

Respondent: I would definitely say I'm accountable. The levels of accountability though may differ because of my position and what that position means within the agency and what it means within the branch. Unfortunately, at the end of the day when it comes to PR and if you work within an agency the buck stops with your account director for that specific brand or whatever it may be. But I'm also accountable to the daily tasks that I have been one, given to do as sort of my mandate as a senior AE and then I'm also accountable for making sure that is done, because it may not directly immediately affect the success or failure of the campaign but it does impact the way that I work with sort of my AD and how my AD works with the brand and how then the brand perceives the agency. So, there's definitely accountability in every little thing that I do. It's just where that sort of task or whatever it is that I'm sort of doing at the moment, it's about where it lies within the scope of the relationship with the brand.

Interviewer: Okay so you've spoken now saying that you are absolutely [discussion re clarity] so you've spoken about how you are absolutely accountable and that it does differ amongst all of these different interests in terms of your hierarchy which you
spoke to. Can you give me an example of how you show that you’re accountable in your role? For any of those stakeholder groups...

Respondent: Okay so I’ll make an example in regard to reporting. So, every single month the agency has committed to give the client a coverage reports of that month’s PR efforts that the agency has done, and that report consists of the work hours that the team has spent on the brand an on the PR efforts. It consists of the coverage received that month. It consists of the social media chatter that has been picked up that month and then it also consists of an analysis of the kind of coverage that was received. So was it positive, was it negative, which key messages are coming through the most, etc, etc so in my position as an AE I have to complete sort of my weekly reporting because I can’t leave it to the last week of the month otherwise it becomes too much to do and it means I’ll miss my deadline so I’m accountable for every week making sure that the sort of report is updated for the end of that week and then in the last week of the month making sure that the coverage I’ve done in the previous week, it’s all correct, it’s all up to date so that I can sort of finalize that report so that my AMs can then go onto into analysing quite indepthly [sic] that coverage that we received and then from the AMs it goes to the account director who then sits and has to look at the hours that have been spent on the client vs the PR efforts that have been met that month and then from the Account Director it goes then to clients.

Now if I miss my reporting, if I don’t meet that deadline for any reason, that will affect the AM’s ability to analyse if the PR efforts that they have made in that month, whether it has been feeding content, whether it has been pitching in content, whether it has been trying to secure interviews, whatever it may be, it affects their ability to see that the work that they are doing is just either a waste of time because it’s not working or if it’s actually really successful and this is the type of feeding that they need to be doing in the future because this is what works. It affects in that way, if I don’t deliver, they’re not able to make that sort of judgment and that analysis on their own work. Then if they are not able to do that, the account director is not able to sit with clients and motivate as to why if we are one over servicing the client, they need to motivate to say we’ve spent x amount of hours, we’ve received this PR coverage, however the investment that you have made into the work that we are doing is not enough and it means that we are over servicing you or it means – or we are, if we are underservicing the client the account director then needs to be able to explain to the client why we are underservicing and where did it go wrong. So it’s a step by step process and if my piece of the puzzle is not complete it affects the entire chain which then ends with the client and it may mean that we’re sitting with a client that says ag no guys this PR company is actually not doing what we need them to do and it can affect the PR contract going forward.

Interviewer: Okay if I’m understanding correctly it’s that obviously in you being accountable it’s a lot about transparency and being transparent about what work you are doing, how long it’s taking, what do you still need to do, then being transparent to your manager, who is transparent to their director and it’s almost like a domino effect all the way to the client, starting from you.

Respondent: Exactly.
Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: That’s exactly what it is. Because you know you may think if I was sort of an insecure person I would, you may think that I’m just an AE, it doesn’t matter if I do this report or not, you know, life is going to go on because I’m just a minute sort of piece in this puzzle, but when you actually look at it deeply, my role and my daily tasks are actually extremely important in terms of how the relationship with the client and the agency is managed and also how then the client is able to report even within their own company the PR efforts and if the PR efforts are meeting their sort overall business objectives.

Interviewer: Okay perfect. So now in line with this, let’s move onto question number 4. How do you respond to any conflicting interests?

Respondent: Explain conflicting interests?

Interviewer: So, go back to all of the stakeholder groups that you serve. So, you spoke about the media, you spoke about serving your manager, you director, you have a client that you serve. Perhaps what I’m referring to is how do you go about decision making or who can you report into or confide in when you maybe don’t get along or for instance let’s say you’re serving a client and maybe what the client expects does not align with your personal values?

Respondent: Okay so within the company that I’m working at the moment, I’m very fortunate in the sense that there is a great level of understanding that beyond doing the work that we do we are human beings at the end of the day. We’re human beings with lives, with worries, with hopes, so there is that understanding first before the work. So once there are conflicting interests, I’ve been made to feel that there’s definitely someone within the company, whether it’s the account director or whether it’s the managing director. And if not the managing director, the founder of the company, there is someone that I can go to address a worry, a problem or something that is not working is conflicting if I can ask for my brand to do something and it conflicts with my personal view, there is someone that I can go to discuss that and I’m not made to feel that I have to leave my personal feelings and morals at the door in pursuit of doing a great job for the brand. So, I would say that there’s a system and there are processes that are in place within the agency that allow me to express when there is a conflicting issue, whether it was with clients, whether it is with a peer, whether it is with someone above me or whatever it may be.

Interviewer: Okay. Can you perhaps give me an example of a situation where you felt there has been a conflict in interest with any of your stakeholders and just take me through the process of what you did, did you have to reflect upon who you are or was that not important. Just take me through the process of how you went about responding to a conflicting interest.

Respondent: To be quite honest in the period that I’ve been with the agency, I haven’t had a big sort of dilemma where I’ve needed to make sure of the systems that are in place, support and of guidance, so it’s a bit difficult to speak on that and to give an example but I mean the smallest sort of microlevel example I could give was when I had a way of working issue with an account manager and in that moment we were unable to agree on a way forward. When it came to a particular PR
tactic that needed to be done for a brand, so in that situation I was able to go to the account director who sort of gave guidance on how I could solve the situation and also just address the situation in the way that does not escalate it and that worked out pretty well because by utilizing that system that is in place the account director actually gained more respect for me for actually going to her and having that difficult conversation about another colleague and being able to sort of resolve it and keep the work going so that sort of it didn’t affect deliverables that needed to be made at the same time.

Interviewer: Okay no perfect. So, would you say it’s very much like an open-door policy that is helping you to make these decisions and kind of go through with your job as professionally as possible?

Respondent: Precisely, yes.

Interviewer: Okay let’s move onto number 5. So, what in your opinion constitutes ethical communication practice?

Respondent: Whew this is a hard one. Am I able to like to think about this one and give you a written answer?

Interviewer: No, I’ve got to get a verbal answer, but I can come back to it and move onto the next question.

Respondent: Ja let’s come back to it. I think I need to think about it.

Interviewer: okay. What I can encourage you to do is maybe think of a certain term that would maybe sum it up for you. So, we spoke about transparency for example, so if you’d like to touch on that you can get into it, give me an example of what you consider other people, what are they doing in industry that you feel is actually very ethical. Obviously also within a South African context, you know being ethical is different here than it would be overseas so we can come back to that. Let’s move onto number 6. What in your opinion constitutes unethical communication practice?

Respondent: Okay so let’s do this. Let me answer number 5, and then I’m going to answer number 6.

Interviewer: Okay. What could help you also is if you refer back to your different stakeholders’ interests that you were touching on so you could speak to ethical practice; you know in terms of serving your clients, serving the media and then just sum it up in terms of being a good PR.

Respondent: Okay so I’d say in terms of ethical practices, definitely approaching any work done with honesty, with integrity, dealing with media, in a way that is respectful and a way that does not compromise, how can I say, it doesn’t compromise sort of their way of doing work and also does not compromise their commitment to providing accurate information to their readers. I’ll also say to follow, follow systems and processes that are in place by agencies in order to sort of remain professional at all times. Obviously not in instances where you should also have a conflict with your, your moral code in any way. What else can I say, how am I doing so far?
Interviewer: No, you’re doing well, you’re doing well... So, you’ve spoken, if I can summarise it for you, so you’ve spoken about being accurate, in terms of obviously serving the, serving the media, not compromising yourself the client, your actual own company, but also serving, understanding them and understanding your own audience. To summarise what you’ve been saying it’s about understanding your stakeholders first and foremost in terms of how you serve them.

Respondent: Ja and I think as well, not putting any stakeholder in the position where they have to compromise not only themselves but their brands and the messages that they are trying to put out. Ja. Ja. I’d say that’s it.

Interviewer: Okay. You spoke about also practicing with integrity. Can you just expand on what you mean by that, so what would be practicing with integrity?

Respondent: I think that just understanding number one, to put it in an South African context as well, we’re working in a country with diverse backgrounds, diverse cultures, diverse religions, diverse races and just having the integrity to approach every one that you work with, every step of the way, whether it is a supplier, whether it is a member of the media, whether it is an intern, it’s, working with them and approaching them, with respect and an understanding of the fact that people are different and working to understand their way of working so that you establish and build a relationship and also just approaching everything with as much transparency as possible. I don’t want to say honesty in this instance because sometimes the work requires you to keep some things from certain people but it is operating with transparency to say listen I can’t disclose this particular thing to you at the moment but just be aware that that is my current standing and I won’t be able to tell you at this time or whatever it may be so it’s just operating with transparency and respect and also an understanding of the scope of work that everyone individually has in all their different roles. Ja.

Interviewer: Perfect. Okay got it. Let’s move onto number six, so what in your opinion constitutes unethical communication practice and if you’ve been involved in any unethical communication practice or you know of an example, please do expand.

Respondent: Okay so in terms of things that are unethical, I haven’t been part of any story of unethical practices that I’m aware of, but I would just say that doing absolutely anything necessary in order to get your client per se in the media for bribery and manipulating relationships that you have to get what you want, in order to in a manner that sort of leads you to the next level. I’d also say using different people in order to sort of get what you want. I think ja so those are the major ones is the doing, getting the job done by like ‘any means necessary’ that may include bribery, that may include compromising yourself and then also on the flip side I would say if I was a senior person manipulating my position in order to get what I want. And just if I’m in a position of power, using that position of power to make other people feel threatened maybe under me and to make them feel threatened and also just for their own sake of hurting.

Interviewer: I do understand that. Have you ever had fellow PR practitioners that are above you in title, have you ever felt like they do what you were just saying you feel is unethical?
Respondent: I actually have not experienced any of those things, luckily enough. I haven’t been made privy to any situations where that has happened in any environment that I’ve been in or that I know about.

Interviewer: Okay so to summarise it’s just over exerting power and abusing your rights and privileges in the particular role that you’re in as a PR practitioner and bribery with the media in terms of getting coverage in quick and easy ways. Let’s move onto number 7. **What challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice?**

Respondent: I think the most common challenge would be, you’re competing with, I don’t want to say hundreds, but you’re competing with a lot of different agencies who are also feeding the same media. You know different messages and different sort of content that they want covered for their brands, so it’s the saturation of the market and so the saturation of the PR market and then also the very how do I call, how do I say that the media is just, it’s a very small pool of people, receiving hundreds of different messages from all these agencies about all these brands so that’s a major challenge, because it means that your pitch needs to be better than all the others. It means the contents that you’re seeding are better than all of the content that’s being received. And it also means that you have to work a lot more creatively to attract media to sort of cover your brand. That’s I think the biggest challenge, I would say is that. And then other challenges include I would say working with a client that does not understand one their own brand, then does not understand role of the PR agencies, and also working with a client that does not sort of heed advice or insights from the PR agency very well, which means that then the PR agency is almost working backwards because they know that something is not going to work. For example, one of our clients, they have to provide us with assets that help us sort of put together pieces of content or help us pitch into the media. For instance, if they are a TV channel, if they have talent that we can use to sort of hook the media to try and get our messages across we will use talent or whatever it may be. So, they have an event coming up and for this particular event, they have no talent coming into market in order for us to try and hook media to number one attend the event and number two speak about the bent and speak about what has been said at the event. So then we have to go back to the client and say listen in the market like South Africa where celebrity culture influences a lot of the way that the media put together their content, we’re working in a space where we don’t have anything to hook them with for this particular story and you have to go back to the client with those insights and the client can rather say let’s try help you out and get talent from this and this show. Or you have a client that will say unfortunately that is what we are working with. There’s nothing that we can do. It must mean you have to be creative in order to try and secure this coverage. So now it means that we’re working in such a way that the client is expecting coverage, but we know that it’s already going to be difficult to secure coverage without any type of hook for the media. I’m not sure if this is making sense?

Interviewer: No, it is making sense. I think it also gets to a, this is probably what pushes PR professionals to potentially act in unethical ways, like you were speaking to in the previous question which is bribery because like you say it’s becoming harder and harder to actually get ethical authentic coverage without maybe paying for it. And
your clients expect it, and they won’t know the depths to which you need to go to actually secure ethical coverage.

Respondent: Exactly. That’s the exact dilemma that we have to go through.

Interviewer: Yes. Okay no I completely understand. Are there any other challenges that you face, or do you think you've summed it up?

Respondent: I think it’s summed it up with those two.

Interviewer: Okay let's move onto number 8. What values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?

Respondent: Ja. I think you definitely have to love the work, the work in PR. Because loving the work means that, it just brings you that much closer to hopefully yourself within the work that you do on a daily basis and being able to appreciate the wins when you do get them and also being able to appreciate the losses and being able to learn from them so that you move forward. I think you also need to be a very determined person. You have to be able to learn from failures very quickly and bounce back very very quickly. You need to be able to I think have a great sort of sense of knowledge about the SA media landscape and also be someone who is constantly learning and constantly reading up on you know new ways to communicate. So, let’s say for instance we didn’t have Twitter ten years ago. So, if you were a PR person ten years ago you would need to be able to look at it and say okay this is a platform that potentially could allow me to speak to my consumers in a way that services my brand and the key messages that you were trying to communicate. So, you need to be someone who is constantly learning and someone that has an interest in communications platforms wherever they may be.

Interviewer: I’m going to stop you right here. You’re speaking to a lot of attributes I think what an ideal PR should have. But I want to take you back to values. So, for example you spoke about, earlier on in ethical communication you spoke about the importance of transparency and being understanding and obviously acting in a way that ensures your integrity is still there, so obviously maybe being loyal. I’m going to bring you back to values specifically not necessarily attributes. So, an example of a value would be empathy, transparency, being a good listener, acting with honesty, you know treating all people equally, also understanding the other like you spoke about diversity earlier so can you just touch on values. Not necessarily qualities and attributes but values.

Respondent: Okay. Okay let me go back there. Okay so the first thing that popped into my mind in terms of values is that you must be someone that values teamwork, working with others, you must be able to work with others, because we work in an industry that is very small and PR professionals are currently moving between agencies, and not only moving between agencies, someone might move into brands, so they might work directly as the PR person in the brand, so you can end up in a situation where your old director is now your client, so for, you must value [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 0:41:33.9] and respecting others –
Interviewer: Please do continue where you were.

Respondent: Cool so we were on values. I’m not sure if you got enough of that, and want to move onto the next one or if you wanted me to add more onto it?

Interviewer: Do you have any personal values that are different to the values that you spoke about now?

Respondent: No, I don’t think so.

Interviewer: Okay let’s move onto number 9. Do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR practitioner? Why or why not?

Respondent: I think, I don’t think that my personal values compete with the – because I believe that they are inline. I’m fortunate enough to work with an agency that does not ask you to compromise your morals and your values in order to work on the clients, and also it places a big emphasis on personal growth, so that you are not acting in a space where you feel at any point compromised or at any point that you are sacrificing values that you have in order to do the PR work.

Interviewer: Okay so would you say and I’m going to call it Personal Organisation Value congruence which is essentially the alignment with your own personal values with that of the organisation so do you feel that that personal organisation value congruence needs to be there or is currently there for you?

Respondent: I think it is definitely there. I’ll elaborate by saying that the agency that I work at has pillars that they have, and the four pillars are culture, and they are – performance – they are -

Interviewer: Sorry, can I just ask you to speak a little bit louder please -

Respondent: They are – [overtalking] Yes – I forget the fourth one, so basically it helps that the agency in itself has these pillars and I would also call them values for the business and these values that the agency has are actually in line with my own values. So, I feel like it is already in place and I’m so excited to work in a place where the agency’s values are in line with my personal values.

Interviewer: Okay great. Can I just ask you to repeat those three values that you spoke about? I’m not sure if I heard them correctly?

Respondent: Okay so the one was culture.

Interviewer: Ja.

Respondent: Culture.

Interviewer: Got it.

Respondent: Performance.

Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: Learning.
Interviewer: Okay.

Respondent: And I forget the fourth one, sorry.

Interviewer: No, no problem. Speaking about learning, this actually aligns to what you were speaking about earlier on the values question. [repeats] Would you say then that it’s almost a level of reflection that is needed?

Respondent: I wouldn’t say reflection. I would say – um, what’s the word?

Interviewer: Like an appetite to learn.

Respondent: Because I would say reflection is more of looking back so that you can move forward, but in that particular instance I was sort of putting an emphasis on being able to have a beat on what is trending, what is new and being able to research those things and see if there are tools that you can sort of use to propel yourself.

Interviewer: Okay so having a very current understanding of what is currently going on and how it can help you.

Respondent: Yes, precisely.

Interviewer: Let’s move onto number 10. So, number ten is can you explain the similarities and or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice and you actually already did touch on this in question number 9 so can you just expand on those?

Respondent: Okay so the differences in ethical practices my agency has vs the ones that I have?

Interviewer: Yup.

Respondent: Whew. I think, I think the difference for me isn’t a question of ethics, but more a question of methodology. So for me the biggest conflict I have with how the agency works vs how I think I should work within the agency is that they have sort of this method of sending out content to media and pitching in to media that is quite involved and requires like a personal address that is tailored to each media person vs me, I’ve been on the receiving end of press releases and still am. I feel like what whether you have a personal greeting or not, that is not going to affect whether the media person is going to use your content or not so I’m a believer in saving time because the personalizing of content to media is a task that is very time consuming. And sort of can take away from other things that you do during the day versus doing like a BCC send out of the information that you’re trying to send to media. If media want to use, they will use it. If they don’t want to use it, they’re not going to use it and I feel like a personal address to the media with their name and thought you might find this interesting, is not going to make the difference. Unless there is a very established relationship with certain media people, and you know that they want to receive the content in this particular way so then in that instance I would then pick up my five media people that I need to personalize and everybody else gets BCCs. So, I think for me that’s the biggest sort of differences I have but it’s more about methodology and not so much about ethics.
Interviewer: Okay no still definitely very relevant and I think a very interesting point to – [repeats] take note of not so much the client agency relationship but more just the way of doing things and how this may differ amongst colleagues.

Respondent: Ja and just to add onto that sorry. To touch on the ethics point, I think I have a very great respect for how my agency sort of approaches clients because in my experience and I’ve been part of a lot of pitches, even though I’m new I’ve been part of a lot of brands where brands have required, they’ve given a budget to us to say if we gave you R1.5 million what would you do with it. Drawing back to what they have asked for, what their brief was, and I love that my agency is very transparent about the use of funds that the client gives us. You know there will be a very detailed breakdown about how that budget would be used but in the more sort of day to day basis again I come back to when we report to clients, we have six months reviews with the client. Every six months it’s looking back at the last six months to say this is the way that we’ve been working, this is where we could improve, this is where we’re going well, etc, etc but again in these meetings there’s been a great deal of transparency with the client in terms of the money that they’ve invested in the PR work, where it has gone, what it’s been used for and if it has not been used they also say that to say okay within this scope, you gave us R30,000 however we only used R25,000 and you have R5,000 sitting with us, do you want to take it back, do you want to bank it for a later sort of tactic that we do. So that is the one ethics thing that I really admire about the agency.

Interviewer: Okay and in terms of the other similarities I’m just going to then say would it be those three pillars that you say align to them and to you?

Respondent: Yes definitely.

Interviewer: Okay. Let’s move onto number 11. So, does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes elaborate on whether the system is adequate or state whether there are grey areas. So, you can refer to membership of professional bodies, training, open door policy which you touched on. Stuff like that.

Respondent: Um, so ja, so I think we definitely have systems in place to ensure that we follow ethical processes. For one we do weekly or bio weekly training sessions so the entire company twice a month will go into training for different whatever, it’s like themed training that is upskilling us but also giving us different methods of working in PR and also just expanding knowledge on how we could be working better and more ethically. Then two, we have in our content central which is where a lot of the writing happens, there’s a big emphasis placed on referencing and making sure that when writing content, it is sourced correctly, so there is that we have a referencing system in place that everyone has to find out to ensure that content is not plagiarized. We also have – in a probation period if you’ve just joined the company, you have monthly reviews that you do with your direct line manager and these monthly reviews are an opportunity to address anything, an opportunity to you know, see how you’re finding yourself along the way and so this is, these monthly reviews are something that you can choose to continue with even post probation so I would say having that sort of set, sort of sit down with your line manager, I think also just allows the fostering of ethical, an ethical
environment I would say in the workspace. I'm just trying to think if there’s anything else I’m missing.

Interviewer: Do you have to be a member of a professional body, yourself or the organisation?

Respondent: So, they don’t require us individually to be members like your PRISAs or anything like that but the agency itself does make an effort to be part of the various PR bodies, so they are obviously a member of PRISA. They are also a member of another global network of PR professionals. I forget what the name was called but I'll just look it up and give it to you after this. But they are part of that, that body. I also know that the agency follow, in terms of when they measure PR coverage, they use the Barcelona, what do you call them Barcelona sort of quality standards of measurement for PR because AVE has now been something that everyone has realised that is sort of not quite accurate so the Barcelona Principles, that’s what they are Barcelona principles are something that the entire agency is required to follow and you’ve been measuring PR coverage and a certain coverage and it’s based on quality rather than quantity. It’s not about the sort of size of an article or how much it would have cost if it was paid content but it’s more about have the key messages been placed within the content, is the brand mentioned in a headline or is it mentioned in the first paragraph, do they use images that we have seeded so there’s quality standards of that with the Barcelona principles and we were also introduced to AMEC which is also another global tool of plotting PR campaigns that allows you to look at your objectives versus what your tactics are in just one sheet. So, ja so I think the agency does a lot to put in place systems that are agency wide and that allow us to do the PR work ethically.

Interviewer: Okay. You spoke about those biweekly training sessions that the agency hosts. Are any of those sessions directly related to ethical practice?

Respondent: Ja some of them are. I mentioned the plagiarism thing which is a big thing in our agency. So, we did, we had a training session that was all about referencing correctly and how to avoid being accused of plagiarism when putting together content. That’s the only one I can remember in my time there that has spoken directly to ethics. But ja, that was one.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you know if any of these ethics training sessions focus on understanding ethical dilemmas [repeats] and how to react accordingly?


Interviewer: Okay and are there any systems in place where how can I phrase this? Let me just articulate myself. How is ethically practice measured consistently in the agency?

Respondent: I think it’s definitely a case by case basis. I will say this might be a grey area then for the agency. There is almost a trust level that everyone is doing their work ethically but if there’s any sort of whiff of sort of unethicallness it’s almost dealt with on a case by case basis and sometimes I would assume when it’s dealt on a case by case basis there will be a system that is put in place to then avoid that ethical dilemma in the future.
Interviewer: Okay and in terms of hiring clients, I’m not sure if you would [repeats] do you have a system in place where there is maybe a contract or something in writing which speaks to what is considered as ethical from your side and what you will not tolerate in the client's agency relationship. Do you have something like this in place with your clients?

Respondent: I would definitely not know this. I think it's beyond my, it's above my paygrade so I don’t know if - and I would hate to say yes, it is, and it actually isn't. Certain things I don’t, I'm not privy to I don’t think.

Interviewer: Alright so you obviously don’t know about this, or you haven't seen it. And when you started at the agency did you have to go through any ethics training in terms of your induction?

Respondent: No, I actually didn't have an induction which was very sad.

Interviewer: Okay. Got it.

Respondent: So what happened was, I think I came into the agency at the time when they were just recovering from a very bad year, and everyone’s busy and it was weird so I didn’t have an induction and then I was put into the [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 1:02:20.8] as a representative of the agency because our agency is part of a full company and advertising group. So, we now have a staff room – where we deal with staff issues, health and safety and all those kinds of things. And that was actually induction, topic of discussion in the staff room. So, since the first meeting, the entire group has now established a proper induction process so new employees that come in – I haven’t –

So, I was saying that only in the sort of last two months, did the entire group actually establish a sort of set in stone induction process for new employees as a result of the staff room. But even now the new induction, I’m not sure that it actually deals with any ethics and ethical issues.

Interviewer: Okay. Perfect, thank you. Let’s move onto question 12. What kind of role or roles do you think PR practitioners should be enacting in the South African context?

Respondent: Whew, a difficult question. I think PRPs need to be contributing besides sort of in a way that serves their client’s interests, but they need to be contributing information and content that is uplifting, that is motivating, that helps someone else and that goes back to how PRPs approach their different tactics and how they choose to communicate the planned messages. It’s a hard one because you don’t often think about public relations professionals contributing to sort of a wider effort in the country.

Interviewer: Exactly why I’m posing the question, I think it’s actually to see if practitioners are really reflecting on their roles and the importance of you know it’s not just about a press release but it’s about like you were saying now changing and shaping society and -

Respondent: I think now that you’ve mentioned it – I actually realised that like I have seen public relations campaigns for brands that are actually contributing to changing narrative, promoting conversations that need to be had within the country, for
example just now for Heritage Day so Castle Milk Stout what they did was they changed their case and on the cans they put clan names. From popular South Africa can names, from Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa communities and it was almost like the Coke Find Your Name campaign that was done. But now doing it with clan names they almost sort of validated the different cultures there are in the country and to say that it may, you may not speak English, you may not be from an English background or whatever it is, but we acknowledge South African roots and we acknowledge the people that buy our product because they almost spoke directly to their consumer and reflected the identities of their consumer. So, I think that’s an example where PR directly and positively contributed to [overtalking] the state of the nation or the state of people in South Africa.

Interviewer: Okay so it’s really about understanding the other and understanding their realities and using messaging to target them in ways that make sense to them?

Respondent: Yes, precisely and making them feel like brands know who their consumers are and personalizing that consumer experience.

Interviewer: Okay and I just want to ask you about PR’s role towards the bottom line and wealth maximisation. What are your thoughts there in terms of PR just for bringing in money?

Respondent: I think PR plays a big part in bringing in money along with a lot of other things like marketing, like branding, etc etc. But I think PR is very important in being able to shape a perception of a brand which might directly affect their sales and it’s difficult because PR is the one thing that can’t almost be measured against sales. You can’t say that because someone read this brand name in a magazine they then went to go buy the Coke so it’s difficult to measure but I’d say because now that we have platforms like social media where consumers are also feedbacking directly their force on brands and how brands communicate with them, on these platforms we are able to monitor some chatter about how their spending decisions are affected by the communication that they receive about brands. So, I think I would say my one thing is that it’s difficult to measure but it definitely plays a big role in the bottom line for clients.

Interviewer: Would you say that now PR should only contribute to the bottom line?

Respondent: Definitely not. I think definitely not because the objective of the client might not be the bottom line so the client might be needing to change a perception on their brand so they may not be worried about the making sales because they are making money, it’s just that they want their brand to be thought of in a different way So PR will then play a role in that space again. I think as much as it does contribute to the bottom line, that is not the only role that PR plays for a client and for a brand.

Interviewer: Okay and let’s move onto the last question which is any other comments or observations? So, anything else about ethics and PR and where the industry is going and why ethics is important or not. Any observations?

Respondent: Honestly, as I’m doing this interview with you, I’ve actually realised almost how ethics are not played up enough in the PR space in the country. I think there’s definitely more, where we are playing in a space where we’re dealing with
sending messages to people and we need to be very responsible in the process of sending those messages and communicating those messages. So, I think there’s definitely work that needs to be done to educate PRPs on ethics and to make us understand the role of ethics in the work that we do and how we can employ the best ethical practices to ensure that we’re playing in an environment…An environment that is safe, that is respectable, that is accountable and that is secure for all stakeholders involved.

Interviewer: Perfect, is there anything else you want to add?
Respondent: I think that’s it, ja.

--- END OF AUDIO ---
Participant 7

PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time period spent working in PR</td>
<td>15 years in PR (25 years in communication)</td>
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Interview length: 1:46:07
Date of interview: 25 September 2018

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals and what they use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. This interview consists of the below thirteen questions, and the expected duration of the interview is thirty to sixty minutes. All responses are confidential, and I urge you to leave out any names when you are speaking about your own company or yourself or who you worked with. Just mention the examples, but don’t mention your name or any examples of the companies, just to ensure for anonymity throughout the interview. I’m going to probe you with these questions, but, wherever you have any examples to expand on what you’re saying, that would really help. So, let’s start with question number one. Just describe what you do in your role as a PR professional.

Participant: So, as a founder and leader of the business, I’m responsible for the running of the business. In other words, corporate governance, setting revenue targets, and ensuring the sustainability of the business, promoting the business, and driving the acquisition of new clients. My other key role is then leading the delivery of services to clients, advising clients on strategy, and leading the formulation of implementation plans, and advising clients along the way as we execute against those plans. In a nutshell...

Interviewer: Let’s move on to number two. So, can you unpack whose interests you serve and how you serve these interests? This would be your clients, yourself, your team, etcetera.

Participant: So, I see that question in a couple of ways. The first one is, as a company, we are a corporate citizen. So, as a generator of economic activity as well as an enabler of economic activity, there is an interest that we serve that is bigger than ourselves as individuals where we’re playing a role in the community. In delivering our services, we assist institutions to communicate better. In communicating better, they improve their delivery to their constituents. So, there’s a very strong community element to what we do. The second interest that we serve is obviously our own interest as founders of the business. For the business to continue, we have to generate income, we have to generate some profitability, and ensure the sustainability of the business. So, it is our way of making a living. So, we do serve our own interest. The third element to that is that of our clients. And, so, our clients come to us looking for solutions; come to us looking for advice on how to engage their stakeholders a lot better so as to enable the
sustainability of their own institutions and businesses. And, so, a great deal of what we do is in the interest of our clients.

**Interviewer:** Would you say that there is an order that you serve these interests, or not really?

**Participant:** They’re all intertwined, and they all work to feed off one another and feed into each other. If you are not a good corporate citizen, as a company, you’re not going to be able to serve the other interest. And, so, you have to ensure your own compliance, whether it be tax, whether it be labour law provisions. Whatever that we have to comply with, we have to comply because that’s our licence to operate. So, that is important. And, in ensuring that licence to operate, we are making our own little contribution to the overall economic growth and healthy economic activity picture in the country. That’s the first thing. The second vein, some of our clients are engaged in delivering extremely critical services that go to the heart of social stability, that go to the heart of economic development and economic growth, and, so, through the practice of our craft, we are indirectly responsible for the effectiveness of those deliveries, or of those expectations. And, so, I don’t see them separate and I don’t see them according to a particular order. I see them as equally important and as intertwined. So, our clients’ interest, our own interest, and the community and the sort of national goal and good corporate citizen aspect, they all just exist with equal importance because, without the other, you’re not in business.

**Interviewer:** I want to speak to two other interests. So, how do you serve yourself? So, you spoke about your own interest, but you see that as a collective business, but what about your own interest as an individual professional? Where does that come into play?

**Participant:** So, that comes into play in that, A, I’m doing what I love, I’m doing what I’m passionate, I’m doing what I believe I’m talented in, and, so, I’m applying knowledge and skills in an area where I can make a difference. So, that’s the first thing. The second thing is I can derive a reasonable income benefit out of it to fund my own livelihood. Number three, I’m building a reputation. At the same time, I have a reputation to protect that I’ve built over the years. So, whilst, on the form, I’ve written the time spent working in PR fifteen years, I’ve been working for twenty-five years, and the remainder of that time has been spent in broadcast journalism, both locally and abroad. So, what I do, I bring in a totality of experience and knowledge into what I do. I often say to people the one thing that has never changed in my career is I’ve always been a storyteller, from telling stories about what’s going on in society and around me to audiences around the world, to now telling client stories. So, that has never changed, and that assisted me in transitioning from the newsroom into PR. I’ve always been in some role that involves telling a story, and the backend process of that is to formulate that story, authenticate that story, and ensure that that story is delivered with the necessary credibility. And, for there to be credibility, you have to then understand the pressure points, you have to understand the dynamics that influence that story, that inform that story, and the dynamics that needs the story to be told in a particular way, and that’s where the holistic sort of thinking about the ecosystem around the story comes in, which I find incredibly exciting. So, those are things that drive me at a sort of personal level that I find to best serve my interest, in a way. I can derive reasonable income benefits, I can do what I love, which is
storytelling, I can immerse myself into the ecosystem where I’m telling that story, which gives me knowledge, but, at the time, demands of me to apply the knowledge I’ve acquired over the course of my career.

Interviewer: And I’d just like to speak to one last interest, which is the media. So, in serving your clients and giving them those return on investments, where does the media come into play? How do you serve them?

Participant: The media, as a stakeholder, is a platform. The media is a conduit of information between my clients and their stakeholders. So, the media doesn’t necessarily…it has its own interests from a commercial and an editorial point of view because they also serve their audiences, they know what stories or which stories are relevant to their audiences, but, from my point of view, I look at the totality of who are my clients talking to? And how do they best deliver that message? And, so, there are occasions where I will advise my clients to engage their audiences or their stakeholders directly and not via the media. But then there are cases where that message needs to be amplified, and you need to then identify the appropriate platforms of amplification, and that’s where the media comes in. You obviously then have to align your interest in amplifying your message with their interest in how they define their target audiences and in how they define the packaging of their content so that it reaches their target audiences according to their expectations.

Interviewer: That’s perfect. Let’s move on to number three. So, do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve all of these interests which you touched on?

Participant: Absolutely. First of all, I’m accountable to my clients, I’m accountable to my business partner and my employees, I’m accountable, broadly, to society. If I’m party to the distribution of false information, I have to understand that the consequences of that go far beyond myself and the client. You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Mhm.

Participant: Because I exist in a community and I have a role in that community. Whether small or big, I have a role in the community in which I exist in. I’m accountable to regulators that regulate how I do business or how I comply to certain provisions that I need to comply to as a company. So, there’s a great deal of accountability. With the media, for example, it’s about deadlines; it’s about the accurateness of the information. With clients, it’s about deadlines; it’s about aligning the information to serve their business strategies. And, so, you cannot escape accountability. In terms of governance, sustainability of the business, I’m accountable to my employees and my business partner in terms of…and even to my suppliers, my business partners…I mean partners in the sense that they are suppliers, they are people that I do business with. My business is part of a value chain. Suddenly, my business doesn’t exist; they don’t have business, so it impacts that. And, so, the ecosystem that you exist in, whether it’s clients, suppliers, media, employees, and whatever you…demands some form of accountability. And, for those relationships to work there has to be accountability that is shared, that we all live up to.
Interviewer: You also spoke about yourself as being a greater part of these interests. So, now, do you regard yourself as being accountable to yourself, and can you explain how you are accountable to yourself in this process?

Participant: So, over the years, I've built some equity around my professional status and my professional ability. Now, that has to be protected. So, I cannot engage in business practices or in professional behaviour that will undermine the investment of twenty-five years in building that professional equity, and that's where the accountability is because, with that personal/professional equity, I can be able to derive an income or generate an income. That's number one. Number two, people, irrespective of what is the nature of their professional relationship with me, whether they work for me, whether they're suppliers, whether we collaborate on a project, or they're my clients, they have to feel comfortable in working with me, they have to be comfortable with the fact that I can deliver, there has to be an alignment of values, and, so, that's where I have to reflect, constantly, on my ability to deliver to my promises, on my ability to deliver to a wide range of stakeholders that I work with. But, at a personal level, I have a family. I'm usually accountable to my family, and the family context is that I'm a breadwinner. And, so, I cannot engage in practices that will undermine not only my responsibilities as a breadwinner, but that will just undermine the balance that one seeks to create within a family environment. And, so, those are the kind of accountabilities that I have. And they emanate from, obviously, your own personal values, and those personal values are key in guiding how you do business, how you interact with people.

Interviewer: That's perfect. Let's move on to number four. So, how do you respond to any conflicting interests with any of your stakeholders?

Participant: So, maybe let's define conflicting interest first. You have a variety of ways in which you can find yourself in conflicting interest, where there's a possibility that you can serve clients that are in sectors that, by nature, are in conflict, or potential competitors, or clients that are in sectors or that do the kind of business that is in conflict with your own personal values. So, let's start with the latter. I have an issue with...and I'm not judging those clients, and I understand why they're in the business that they're in, and there's some relevance in what they do in society, but it's just my own personal issues and value. Whether it's for defence purposes or whatever purposes, I just have a personal issue. Having said that, I've run a company where we had a client who produced arms and sold arms, and it was after working on that account that I said to myself I don't want to do it ever again. And, so, I don't respond to those briefs, and I don't chase those briefs. Equally, I believe that, if you look at your tobacco and alcohol brands where people will accuse those brands of abusing customer...
ignorance, undermining public health, and what have you, I believe that people have choices and people make choices. You choose to smoke, you choose to drink, and nobody can force you to do those things. And, in some cases, there are personal and social circumstances that lead people to substance abuse. I have a conflict of interest in serving a tobacco client, unless I know for a fact that they are involved in some illicit behaviour, in which case then I will withdraw myself from that business. So, we don’t, as a business, serve clients that are competitors. If that opportunity arises, we will declare that conflict, and, if both clients do not have an issue, we will continue servicing them. We create Chinese walls between those teams, and we continue servicing them, and we do not share sensitive information across those clients. The other area of conflict for me is where we are then expected to engage in unethical behaviour, where we have to put out false information, knowingly putting out false information, or where we will publicly impugn the dignity of individuals or other institutions. We don’t engage in that. Our role is to enable and facilitate effective communication, and we stick to that, and that communication or information must be truthful, and it must not, at any point in time, involve impugning anyone’s dignity.

Interviewer: So, you’ve spoken a lot about the areas and how you prepare accordingly to avoid, obviously, being in situations where there are conflicting interests, but can you give me an example where you’ve had to be quite reactive, where you’ve maybe taken on a client or you’ve dealt with stakeholders, and only in the process of that relationship have you realised there’s a conflict here, how do I get around this? Just take me through your decision making during that.

Participant: So, there was a situation where I had to advise a client who, for a lack of a better word, had violated several governance and administrative protocols, and a report was going to be issued against this client, or findings were going to be issued against this client, that would have confirmed the violation of governance ethics as well as a series of administrative protocols, and the advice I prepared for this client was to, A, admit to these violations, cite the learnings, provide some education, public education, with respect to some government protocols around these issues, and, at the same time, communicate what you’re going to do out of those learnings. That was the advice I was willing to give. I didn’t realise that the client was more interested in embarking on a character assassination of the individual or the institution that was going to issue this report and investigation. That was the first thing I recognised. The second thing that I recognised was the client had not engaged proper supply-chain management processes in engaging my services. So, my first stance was to say to the client don’t pay me for the work I’m going to do. That was going to then give me the option to exit quickly if I could not align myself to the client.

Interviewer: And this came from your own personal value alignment that you felt already was not there and you needed to protect now yourself and your company.

Participant: And my own company, yes. And, so, I said to the client I’m going to deliver the service pro bono, do not pay me, because I could just see there was already a problem with the manner in which they went about engaging my services.

Interviewer: So, you’ve given me the example of now what went wrong with the clients. I want to go back to your own internal decision-making process now where you were
like I need to firstly speak to my team, let them know what’s going on, let them know what the decision is, or you say you are accountable to a business partner, so take me through that process where it’s not so much about what you did but what you were thinking in terms of protecting yourselves.

Participant: So, the first thing I had to do was to do a risk assessment around the brief. What is the level of risk that the brief represents to the business? And analyse that risk accordingly and think through how we mitigate that risk in the process of executing that brief, that is if we take the brief. What will be the risk of not taking that brief? Equally, what are the benefits of both taking the brief and just simply walking away from the brief? So, that’s the exercise we had to do. Then I had to debate all these considerations with a few senior people in the business to say do we take this brief? Do we not take this brief? What are the implications? What are the risks associated with this brief? After doing that exercise, we then decided let’s take the brief because it repositions our capabilities as a business, that’s number one. In the long term, we can sell these capabilities as a niche service offering that very few other companies or competitors have. The brief itself was not going to be a big-budget brief, but it was strategic enough that, if we get it right in the long term, it puts us in good stead in terms of this niche advice or a service. How do we then manage the risk? That was dependent on a number of interdependencies between us and the client. So, the client managing these processes correctly, the client listening to our advice and acting according to our advice, because all of these three are interdependent. If none of them happen, we will then walk away because we will have engaged the client, we will have delivered advice, we will have walked some process with the client for us to then say to the client this is not going to work, let’s just let it go and sort of part ways. And, so, we did enough analysis, we mapped out the process, we formulated what we felt was good ethical advice, and, in the end, when it did not work, we were able to then say we’ve satisfied ourselves with everything we’ve done, there’s some things we’ve learnt in the process, it’s time to walk away, and this is what exactly we did. We walked away.

Interviewer: So, just to summarise what you’ve been speaking about, if I understand you correctly. So, it was about, during this risk assessment and actually reflecting to see do we know what we’re actually doing? Planning accordingly so that it’s not reactive, practical planning, so, emphasis on the practical, solution crafting, and then you potentially got to a point where you needed to consider your own values as professionals, individually and as an organisation, and that’s when you say you then made it free services because you knew you needed to protect yourselves as well. Even though you had tried to craft a solution, you knew when it was time to walk away.

Participant: Ja. And, also, we simplified the process because, recognising that there was no monetary benefit for us, we had to be very clever with the amount of investment that...so, operationalising the whole thing was key towards that we do so in a more sufficient way possible that will minimise the level of exposure in terms of the time that gets invested, the amount of resources that I invested in it, so that...again, that was part of the risk assessment.
Interviewer: I think that pretty much answers the questions. If you’ve got anything else, we can come back to it. Let’s move on to question number five. So, **what, in your opinion, constitutes ethical communication practice?**

Participant: It’s quite simple. It’s really quite simple. Every organisation exists within an ecosystem, every… in fact, every being exist within an ecosystem that gives lives to it, that sustains its existence, that could potentially undermine its existence if those structures are not managed properly. And, so, every action that you undertake either attracts factors that can sustain your existence or that can undermine your existence. So, it’s difficult to list these things down, but it’s all about understanding what could give rise to undermining your existence and also give rise to sustaining your existence? And, in answering that question, within that ecosystem, you have a set of stakeholders, and your relationship with those stakeholders is around shared values, shared interest, and expectations. And it is in the process of ensuring adherence to those shared values that you can understand what constitutes ethical communication practice.

Interviewer: So, it’s something that develops based on the relationship with your stakeholder, it’s not, like you say, a [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY]. It is this, it is that. It’s actually like an evolving –

Participant: It’s an evolving sort of phenomenon that says this is what my stakeholders expect from me. As a result of our relationship, they expect me to deliver to A, B, C, and D and, because of that, here’s how I’m going to manage that relationship, and part of managing that relationship is communication, this is how I’m going to communicate to them. And, so, I’m going to communicate what my contribution is to this relationship. What am I doing? What am I going to do? How I’m going to deliver, etcetera, etcetera. And, so, in that process, I cannot misrepresent any of my actions, I cannot lie about my actions. So, it is around, really, what defines the relationship and engaging around those issues in the most transparent, open, honest sort of manner, and any deviation from that is considered unethical in terms of communication.

Interviewer: And this is now how you practice with your clients?

Participant: Yes. So, I always tease out from my clients: what do your stakeholders expect from you? And how do you rise to that expectation? What happens if you can’t deliver to that expectation? What are they expecting from you?

Interviewer: So, when you’re engaging with your clients, you actually helped them to also ensure that they are engaging their own stakeholders’ interests at the same time. So, you’re looking at this very much like a system.

Participant: Yes. And I’m going to operate and apply myself within that system. And, therefore, it’s going to be extremely difficult for me to engage in unethical communication behaviour when I understand the holistic system that governs my clients, and what they have to deliver to.

Interviewer: So, in a way, you almost step into the shoes of them to understand –

Participant: Their world.

Interviewer: …their world to help inform your practice?
Participant: Exactly. So, in a relationship, there are what I call shared benefits. There are shared values, there are shared benefits. How do we bring about that understanding? What are the interdependencies of realising those mutually beneficial outcomes? And how do you engage around those? We have what we call brand attributes, almost the personality of the company or the business, either our own company or our clients.

Interviewer: Just speak a bit louder.

Participant: Either our own company or our own clients in terms of brand attributes. And I often look out for leadership, transparency, innovation, honesty, engagement. Those are attributes I look out for. Put together, they are an excellent recipe for the sustainability of any institution because they guide behaviour, they guide engagements, and they guide everything that is about an institution. And, for me, then it's quite easy to achieve ethical communication practice because you are guided by those attributes. Those are the attributes you seek out with your clients, but those are your own attributes as a service provider as well.

Interviewer: So, speaking much to person/organisation value congruency. So, value congruence. So, the alignment of your values as a person, as an organisation, and those with the clients. So, you were speaking here about shared values.

Participant: Ja. But, also, they also align to stakeholder values. So, if you look at any company, whether it's in the private sector or public sector, that has some impact in the community, that's what the public expects, and we have research that proves that, that we expect some form of leadership to come through. And, by leadership, we don't mean titles; we mean behaviour where leadership...the other thing there is accountability, the other attribute. Accountability. So, we expect all these attributes to be demonstrated in equal form and measure by leaders in various organisations. And, so, it's not just value congruence between myself or our business and clients, but it's also what we know the public expects, whether it's a public-sector institution or private-sector institution. So, if you take, for example, private-sector companies who have engaged in fraudulent activity where people's lives are impacted, where people could potentially lose jobs, or lose jobs, where investments into those companies have a knock-on effect into other areas, so where you have pensions invested in that company. So, the behaviour of those companies or leaders in those companies have an impact beyond just their brand walls. And, so, you expect that they're going to demonstrate these attributes on a daily basis. Public sector where there's corruption, misuse of funds, all of those actions are in complete opposition or contrast to these attributes, and that's where public anger comes from. And, so, it's not only our expectation, it's not only our value congruency, but it's what we find to be the expectation within the ecosystem.

Interviewer: That's perfect. Wonderful answer. Let's move on to number six. So, in contrast to what I just spoke about now is: what, in your opinion, constitutes unethical communication practice?

Participant: So, it will be everything that is the opposite of those brand attributes. So, often, where you find deviant behaviour of individuals in positions of trust or public positions, that deviant behaviour is informed by the lack of leadership, the lack of
transparency, the lack of honesty, lack of accountability, where people are disengaged with their stakeholder expectations, where people are disengaged with issues that impact their constituencies. Innovation is not just an instrument of competitiveness. Innovation can improve lives. Innovation can ensure sustainability of businesses, of jobs. Innovation improves societies. You know what I mean? And, so, the absence of all these attributes will certainly constitute unethical communication practice, unless you are prepared to say I'm lacking in all of these and I take full accountability for it. Very few do see brands do that. And, so, in trying to mask their inadequacies around these areas, false and inaccurate information is put out, either through falsified numbers, either through lofty promises that cannot be delivered on, either through unethical conduct that gives rise to increase in profits. So, it’s the opposite of this in how companies do business, which then translate in what they will ultimately communicate. You must always remember that communication in itself is an exercise, is a reflection, and is the embodiment of behaviour. It’s not isolated to behaviour. We tend to isolate it because it is a specific craft and what have you. It is not. So, the image I project as an individual, which is in itself a form of communication, has a lot to do with me as an individual and my own value system. And, so, communication will always be impacted by how companies live these attributes or fail to live up to these attributes.

Interviewer: Have you ever found yourself a victim of any unethical communication practice?

Participant: Yes, I have. So, I worked, at some point in my life, in a political environment, intense political environment, where the environment was characterised by poor leadership, and we were faced with a crisis, and, because of that poor leadership, the crisis was not well managed. And then you had individuals acting on their own accord in trying various ways of containing that crisis. And, in the process, myself and my one other colleague were pointed out as the reason why this crisis has not been managed effectively. Closer analysis would have shown…in fact, after I departed that environment, it was repeatedly proven that the reason why communication is so poor in that environment is because the leadership itself is bankrupt of any moral authority, is bankrupt of any attributes that are deemed critical to effective leadership and, by extension, effective communication. So, literally, there was stories published about me as lacking either in professional capacity or capability to operate in that environment. Meanwhile, any reasonable person could conclude that the issues went far beyond just communication management ability.

Interviewer: Do you have any other examples which you’d like to touch on, or do you think you’ve covered it?

Participant: No. I think that one is the main example. There was a company I used to run before where that company got criticised for not assisting a particular client well enough with its issues. And, again, similar example. There was an absence of those key attributes in that business. There was a lack of accountability, a lack of honesty, leadership was poor, and, as a result, that company found itself in a serious conflict with the very same public or constituents that it was serving because it refused to be held accountable. So, in the process, as people were analysing what was going on, they found some fault in the management of the
PR. Then, again, close analysis would have shown that PR was not the problem, the problem was actually the absence of some of those attributes.

Interviewer: Would you say that leadership is one of the guiding attributes that really should be solidified from the get-go?

Participant: So important. It is so important. Without leadership, you have no effective PR, you have no effective communication. What was Nelson Mandela’s biggest strength? Nelson Mandela’s biggest strength was not so much his ability to look beyond conflicts on the surface; it was how well he communicated that ability, how well he engaged around what we needed to do as a country in order to move forward. Despite some serious, serious well-entrenched issues of mistrust, pain, and conflict that existed, that was his strength. And, if it wasn’t for that leadership ability connected to how well he could communicate, South Africa would have been in ashes by now. And, so, if you look throughout history, where nations have been able to rise in the midst of conflict, in the midst of total...what's the word? Where everything is just destroyed, it's because those leaders were strong leaders who could make tough choices during difficult times but had the immense power to then communicate those choices in a way that inspires action, that inspires everybody behind them. And, so, without leadership, you have no communication, literally.

Interviewer: What’s interesting is that this goes back to how you answered your first question and the second question where you speak about the importance of understanding the community in your decision-making process.

Participant: The ecosystem.

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: And how you are accountable to that ecosystem, how your actions are informed by the dynamics within that ecosystem. What sustains that ecosystem is what you strive to achieve. And that recognition requires very strong leadership. The will of leadership is hugely important. So, the challenge that we have as professionals, that communication is general, because communication is a particular art, we tend to focus more on the skill around the arts, how the art is applied and delivered, and we forget the interdependencies that influence the effectiveness of the arts. And that’s why leadership, to me, is hugely, hugely important. Where you have organisations where communication has spectacularly failed, that failure can be traced directly to the failure of leadership, and there are case studies to prove that.

Interviewer: And perhaps their failure to understand the importance of those interdependencies and how, if you’re not almost understanding the ecosystem as a whole, one gap is like a domino effect on every stakeholder.

Participant: And, sometimes, leaderships’ willingness to undermine those ecosystem interdependencies for their own personal interest.

Interviewer: So, like an overexertion of power without understanding.

Participant: Overexertion of power, abuse of power for interests that are in direct conflict to what governs and what sustains the ecosystem. So, let’s look at corruption, for
example. Corruption undermines the sustainability of societies, it undermines social stability. And, so, when leaders decide that they’re going to embark, promote, and operate within a corrupt sort of setting, they cannot communicate themselves effectively about that corruption. The best communicators will not be able to assist those leaders because it’s now beyond communication. You have undermined the social contract that exists between yourself and the rest of the public, you have betrayed public expectation, and you have betrayed the trust that’s been placed on you. So, nothing that communication can do there. We’re no longer dealing with a communication issue there; we’re dealing with a behavioural issue that must be dealt with in other forms. Do you see what I mean?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: And, so, when you analyse that, it’s a failure of leadership.

Interviewer: Ja. It’s not necessarily about fixing your communication to try and, like we spoke about earlier, put a plaster on a broken bone, it’s more about the leaders that are guiding the practice where you wouldn’t have to necessarily then be reactive with communication pieces.

Participant: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to question number seven. What challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice?

Participant: So, I’m going to respond to this question in general terms because, to date, since after I had my own business, we’ve not had a challenge where we are pushed to operate in a sort of unethical manner. So, in general terms, the challenge that a lot of professionals and agencies, even insourced communication professionals will have here, is that, at the end of the day, there are times where income is the overriding factor in guiding what we do and how we do it. For an insourced communications manager, the job and the salary will mean everything. And, so, in complying to the wishes of their superiors, they may end up engaging in unethical behaviour. In a consulting or agency setting, in the desire and in responding in the pressure to sustain your business and grow your business, you will end up partaking in unethical behaviour. Sometimes, the fees are so good that you’re like I can get away with it. I’ve written a paper on this where this one particular company… it’s a matter of public record, what has happened with Bell Pottinger and the Gupta account, for example, earning two hundred pounds a month, even for a British-based agency, is a lot of money. If that calls for bending the rules a little bit, and the rules I’m going to refer to here are society’s expectations, people will do it in order to sustain their businesses, in order to increase profitability. So, I think the biggest challenge here is sustaining and growing income. That’s where professionals, irrespective of where they work, will find themselves willing to –

Interviewer: Because money clouds your judgement?

Participant: Exactly. That becomes the overriding factor. The other challenge is communications or PR is unregulated. Doctors lose their licences when they engage in unethical behaviour. Lawyers lose their licences to operate. Chartered
accountants, they lose their licences and status. We don’t. So, what has happened with Bell Pottinger is that they’ve had to close down, rebrand. They’re going to reincarnate themselves into another business. The leaders that led to the Bell Pottinger disaster will operate from behind the scenes, but they will reincarnate themselves. And I don’t know what we do about this. Do we push for some form of licensing of our craft, such that, when you engage in unethical behaviour, you are severely punished, or do we leave it to some form of industry self-regulation? Will it [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 00:54:59] or we look for an independent body that is made up of clients, ourselves, and other parties to do this regulation? But we are one of the few professional services providers that are not licensed, and that’s the challenge that you face. So, I’m answering question eight now, sorry.

Interviewer: No. You’re speaking about other topics in here, which is absolutely fine.

Participant: So, the absence of proper regulation is a challenge because it then allows people to…it opens the scope, it makes it easy for people to –

Interviewer: Blur the lines of ethical practice?

Participant: …blur the lines of ethical practice. Secondly, income pressures, whether for individuals or agencies, play a huge role.

Interviewer: Would you say that that then also goes back to the personal values of the managers of the particular company and what they are in need of, or what is the thinking behind that then that would drive you towards –

Participant: It is values, definitely values. If you start valuing income and profit generation more than everything else, it…so, your values are called into question here. That’s really at the heart of it. And, sometimes, it’s just sheer professional over-enthusiasm where we start seeing bright lights, we start seeing potential awards, we start…and it goes horribly wrong. But, for me, it’s the values because values will guide what you do and how you do it, and, if income generation is no longer an issue, then what is the issue? The issue is just the absence of those values that will guide you.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to question number eight. So, what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context? The values.

Participant: I think you need both a carrot and a stick here.

Interviewer: Unpack that for me.

Participant: So, the carrot here is understanding of…is preaching…it’s growing the understanding that good business behaviour or ethical practice in the long term is necessary for a sustainable business. That’s really the bottom line. So, we all want to achieve what we’ve set out to achieve, quickly, we all want to achieve a certain level of professional status and recognition, but it’s really getting people to understand that it all comes with investing time and effort. It doesn’t happen quickly. It takes time. So, on the soft side, it’s really inculcating that understanding that you’re not going to attain a certain level of financial or professional recognition for your business in a short space of time. There are no
shortcuts. It’s going to take hard work over a long period of time, and it’s going to be quite tough and painful in the process to get there. So, we have to repeat that message, we have to showcase those case studies, we have to talk about it all the time, and inculcate that behaviour from the early stages of educating individuals all the way to embedding that sense of behaviour in our organisations and so on. That’s the carrot. The stick is we have to be far stricter in regulating ourselves as an industry. So, just like a chartered accountant that works fulltime in an organisation understands that, if they falsify numbers and they are caught falsifying those numbers, they will lose their status as chartered accountants or their status as a director, we have to make it as equally onerous for communications professionals…or not onerous but strict. We want to make it as equally strict that, whether you’re insourced or you’re a consultant or you’re operating within an agency, there will be severe consequences for engaging in unethical behaviour, and we have to define that unethical behaviour to the level of detail necessary so that people understand it. So, for me, it’s a combination of the two.

Interviewer: So, you’ve spoken a lot about areas for improvement within practice, but what…I’m going to take you back to the question which is what are the values that you feel the professional needs to have? You actually touched, I think, on some of them within these attributes which you spoke about in question number five, but what values, as an organisation and personally, do you feel you need to have –

Participant: Exactly those.

Interviewer: …especially within a South African context?

Participant: It’s exactly those. I won’t depart from those. For me, it’s exactly those. There’s always a risk because they’ve been used so many times that they become a bunch of clichés and what have you but look at any organisation that has failed to the point that it does no longer exist or it has liquidated or what have you, you’ll find all of those things lacking, either individually or as a collective. Look at your more successful organisation that have contributed to human progress or human advancement, you’ll find those elements as key drivers of the organisation. Where those organisations stumble is because…so, let’s take Facebook. What’s been lacking in Facebook up until now is accountability. Innovation has been there, strong leadership is there in terms of driving that innovation, but we have weak leadership in terms of ensuring transparency, honesty, and accountability, and that’s why Facebook is in the mess that it…reputationally, it’s in the mess that it’s in. It’s now going to require strong leadership to get Facebook at the right level of transparency and accountability to its stakeholders to bring the organisation back to where it needs to be. Now, those values are what will drive communicators because, fundamentally, communication is about everything that the organisation strives to be or an institution strives to be, and communication facilitates that understanding, communication facilitates that engagement around those attributes. So, for me, it’s exactly those values. I’ll struggle to come up with more.

Interviewer: What about diversity? Is that important? So, I completely agree with you, but I want you now to bring it back to South Africa and the fact that we do have many
cultures. I don’t want to, obviously, probe you to give a certain answer, but I want you to think about it. Do you think that all six of these are enough or adequate for a South African context?

Participant: So, let’s [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 01:03:19] with diversity in the context of those brand attributes. Is diversity an attribute, or diversity is an instrument of achieving or of living through certain values or achieving some of those attributes? If you have a diverse set of perspectives within your ecosystem, you are likely to be accountable; you are likely to engage in a far more sensitive manner than before. So, for me, diversity is more of an instrument that –

Interviewer: I disagree, actually, because, if you had to translate it to be a value, it would translate to understanding.

Participant: I agree with you.

Interviewer: So, I’m going to bring you back to values. Translate these now…some of them are values in themselves but translate it now to values. Out of these, are there any that you would then be able to translate into values? For instance, now I agree with what you’re saying about diversity, but, if you had to switch it to how you behave, it would be an understanding of the other. Sensitivity, cultural listening, stuff like that.

Participant: Ja, stuff like that. So, sensitivity, cultural listening, inclusion.

Interviewer: This is what I’m getting to.

Participant: Inclusion. And, in the South African context, we tend to look at these in terms of demographics. Sometimes, it’s just a state of being and a state of mind that says I recognise that I exist within a particular environment that has a specific context that drives it or that informs it. So, whilst I may not reflect the necessary demographics or the demographics that are considered to be inclusive or diverse, but my awareness of the environment I exist in, both in its historical and present form, may actually reflect that diversity. Do you see what I mean?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: I’m trying to run away from narrowing diversity to saying, in your composition, you must be multicultural; you must be this about gender. Those things are important, but I don’t want to go there. But I’m saying what’s your state of mind in recognising where you exist?

Interviewer: Ecosystem.

Participant: Ecosystem again. So, what is your state of mind? So, you can have a company of ten middle-aged white males who have an intimate understanding of their ecosystem and the environment in which they operate, and, through that, you may find them behaving, delivering in a way that is far more diverse than a company that has diverse demographics in its formulation, but you find that in how they handle themselves and how they deliver and how they behave is contrary to the understanding and the appreciation of the environment in which they operate in. And, so, diversity is important, but I suppose, for me, it is
inclusion, it is diversity, but it is how all these things are used to show how we appreciate the ecosystem and how that ecosystem informs our existence.

Interviewer: So, if I have to translate what you’re saying, it’s really just an appreciation of the fact that you are part of a greater ecosystem, it’s not just you on your own. You’re all the sum of…the whole is the sum of its parts.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: So, an appreciation of the other’s voice in your decision making.

Participant: Ja, and the impact of your behaviour and your decision making on them. They may be direct or indirect stakeholders, they may be directly affected or be indirectly affected. For me, that’s the guiding value. So, let’s take the South African context, to your point. If you’re going to put out communication that’s racially divisive, you’re just lighting up a fire that you know does exist, but it’s been contained. It's not been put out completely. It may be naïve to think we can put out that fire completely, but all you’re doing, you’re adding more fuel to it. And you may be doing to serve a particular business interest, but it has an enormous impact on society as a whole because it touches on the raw historical wound of our…on a raw wound of our past, which is still very fresh to all of us. So, why would you do that? Do you see what I mean?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: And, again, your understanding of that ecosystem then comes in and is hugely, hugely important.

Interviewer: To understand our history as South Africans, to understand races and culture, etcetera.

Participant: If you take some of the issues you have around gender violence and the historical oppression of women, irrespective of their demographic and social background, there’s certain imagery and language that you will not use about women, around women, or products for women or what have you, because you understand that. So, again, that goes to your relationship with your whole ecosystem.

Interviewer: I get it. Understanding of, like I spoke about, the systems thinking and that it’s not just you are making a decision purely for yourself, you have to understand the others and how it will affect them.

Participant: And how it will affect them.

Interviewer: That’s perfect. Let’s move on to question number nine, which you’ve actually answered, I think, quite nicely in every other question. So, do you believe that your own personal values affect how you practice as a PR professional? Why or why not?

Participant: Absolutely. They do. First of all, whatever work I do, I have to be proud of that work. It must be work that, one day, I’ll be happy to reference to. Whether I was successful in execution or I failed in execution, it’s work that I cannot divorce myself from. And, so, for that reason, it has to then be work that is aligned to my
own personal values. Now, people may disagree with who I did that work for, they may disagree with how I went about executing, which is fine for that criticism to exist, but I must be happy and be comfortable with associating myself with that work for some time to come, or forever. And, so, that work cannot be in –

Interviewer: Misaligned to [CROSSTALK – 01:11:40].

Participant: ...misaligned to my personal value system.

Interviewer: Because you obviously take a lot of pride in how you practice not even as a PR professional but it’s your name that’s attached to that work.

Participant: It’s my name that’s attached to it. So, let me give you an example. I once executed in a way that would have been defined as...not necessarily in contrast to media freedom, but as undermining editorial practice or newsroom operation. So, an investigative journalist was going to publish a story that was going to be hugely negative to my client, inverted commas, let’s just say client, but this publication operated in a particular way whenever it published those kinds of stories. Obviously, you will be given an opportunity to respond, at short notice. However, your response will be very limited in relation to the entire story they’ve written about you or about your client.

Interviewer: So, you do have to withhold some truth.

Participant: No. You try and disclose as much information as you can possibly disclose. However, you know the end result of the story is that your response is going to be limited in scale as compared to everything else that is negative. And, so, the story in your professional view and assessment is not going to be balanced, even though it will have your response, because the allocation of facts will be heavily skewed to the negative aspects of the story. And, here, we are talking about a contested terrain where lines get blurred between what’s wrong and right, between what’s true and not true, and we are guided by the interest that we are serving. Equally, both the publication and you are guided by the need for what is important from a public board or a public interest point of view. So, it’s in the public interest that the public is not misinformed. Equally, there’s an element of accountability here that public funds are involved, and the story is going to say public funds are being abused, but your knowledge and the information you have says, no, this is not an abuse of public funds, this is an appropriate deployment to support an operation that is for the benefit of the public. It’s [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 01:15:00] because you know how this publication operates and how much of its platform is going to be allocated to your side of the story. You then decide you’re actually going to contest the publication directly, but you’re going to do so in a public domain.

Interviewer: So, transparent practice is always a part of the equation.

Participant: But it’s transparent practice that actually undermines this publication, in a way, because you’re denying them a scoop. So, they’re going to publish on a particular date, the story that impacts your client is going to be the lead story and their scoop, and, in protecting your client and your client’s interest, you decide I’m actually going to scoop with their scoop. So, I’m going to, before time, disclose this issue to the public just before this publication goes to print. And, so, the
editor and the journalist concerned are angered by this because you’ve essentially undermined their commercial interest, but you’ve not undermined the public interest to know about the issue. You are seeking accountability in how you operate. And this is based on your own institutional interest. Now, this is up until...based on the facts you have at your disposal, as a communicator at that particular time, you’ll reach a conclusion that your client has not done anything wrong, you reach a conclusion that the publication is not going to give you a fair hearing, you reach your conclusion that I have to proactively take the scandal out of this story, and the only best way I’m going to do that is by operating outside of the publication’s editorial timelines and processes.

Interviewer: I know, earlier, you said all interests are equally served, but, in some cases, you aren’t able to serve them equally because you say here that you are serving the public interest –

Participant: And that of my client.

Interviewer: …and that of your client, but, in a way, undermining the interest of the media.

Participant: The commercial interest. I’ve not undermined their ability to publish their story. They will publish their story, they will derive some commercial benefit out of it, because it is a story that’s going to drive interest, that’s going to drive sales, in the short and the long term, but, at the same time, in scooping them, I have, in a way, temporarily undermined their commercial interest. And I’m aware of this.

Interviewer: And you do it because you absolutely feel you have to, to protect the most important interest to your business.

Participant: Ja. What is sad though is that, in the end, in the long run, when I was no longer involved with this client, my client was found to have committed a series of governance and administrative violations, and I also learned that I didn’t have all the facts at my disposal. So, I was misled in the process.

Interviewer: By this same client that you were trying to protect.

Participant: By the same client. Ja.

Interviewer: So, you undermined the media, unintentionally, to protect the client that actually misled you.

Participant: Ja. And this is what we mean by poor leadership.

Participant: It’s a domino effect in the ecosystem.

Interviewer: What a mess. Let’s move on to question number ten. Can you explain the similarities and/or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practices?

Participant: There are no differences. The agency’s views on ethical communication practice are informed by my own personal views and values, and this is where strong leadership comes in. Where I feel that the agency may potentially go against my own personal values, I have to intervene quite strongly so that I cannot, in future, say I did not know, or deny what could have happened. If the agency ends up
doing what is in contrast to my own personal views, I have to understand that I'll have to take full accountability for that.

Interviewer: Though you're also in a position where you are the founder of this particular company, so I know it's a bit of a funny question because, naturally, you would use your own interests to inform your practice, right?

Participant: Absolutely. So, where the agency is found to have violated ethical practice, I'm directly responsible.

Interviewer: And you see that as almost a reflection of yourself.

Participant: It's a reflection of myself.

Interviewer: So, now, let me ask you to almost take it back to your previous experience. Obviously, your own values are aligned here because you are the founder and you created those personal views and ethical practices yourself, but let's go back to your previous experience. Were there ever any differences that almost stood out to you when you were not the creator of them, let's say?

Participant: Yes. There were. So, when I worked in government, for example, there were huge differences.

Interviewer: Like what?

Participant: Where I was a communicator and I will see that this behaviour goes against my own values, for example, in terms of transparency, and I'm witnessing behaviour that is against that particular value and there are differences there. So, that's one example. I worked for a financial services institution where, as a consumer of financial services products and as someone who knows people who consume financial services products, I was aware that what we were promising in our communication as living up to our values was in contrast to the actual experience that consumers were getting.

Interviewer: So, you were very aware who the target market was and what they were actually going to get versus the way in which the brand was communicating to them, almost selling a dream.

Participant: Yes.

Interviewer: Let's move on to question number eleven. So, does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? If yes, elaborate on whether the system is adequate, or state whether there are grey areas.

Participant: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that we have this environment where we talk, and we engage over these issues on a daily basis. And one of the things that I've encouraged and inculcated are open debates.

Interviewer: Like an open-door type policy.

Participant: Like an open-door type of policy to say, where we feel we may attract unnecessary risk towards our business or run afoul of ethical communication practice, let's quickly surface it and have a debate around it. So, I'll give you an
example. In my previous company, we had a scenario where we had to assist a high-profile individual who had been suspended from their position. And, depending on where you sat on that issue, that suspension, was it justified or unjustified? And the individual approached us, presented their side of the story, we interrogated the individual in trying to satisfy ourselves about their version against the facts that were already in the public domain and against our own perspectives about that particular issue, for four hours. We then held our own debate about the different sides to this version. And then it boiled down to one thing, that this individual had not been found guilty of any wrongdoing, that this individual still retained their constitutional and their moral right to present their side of the story, and all what we had to do was to facilitate their presentation of their side of the story as best as we could and as best as they could, and, in the end, we were comfortable that it was okay to represent this individual. And our promise to this individual was, post your engagement with us, you’re not going to be a hundred percent squeaky clean to the eyes of the public, but there are those that will start believing your story, there are those that will never believe your story, and, in the end, you will end up with a healthy debate between the two perspectives about you and your contribution. Until this day, that’s exactly what you have around this individual. So, the system is, basically, through our own personal values and the values that we’ve inculcated to the organisation, ahead of whether accepting or rejecting a brief where we feel we’re going to run afoul of ethical communication practices, let’s have an open-door policy and openly engage around the pros and cons of taking on that brief or rejecting that brief, let’s do our risk assessment properly, and engage about our analysis and that risk assessment, and then take it from there. That, in a nutshell, is the system now. Where it’s lacking is that it’s a system that’s very much driven by personal values, it’s not on paper. It must be on paper as a policy where people sign on to, where, personally, there are grey…whether their personal values are aligned, or they’re not aligned. So, I’ll be the one to concede that it’s work in that process, that we’ve not put it on paper and said this is what you must do.

Interviewer: So, you’re just going on almost a verbal trust amongst you, your colleagues, and the clients –

Participant: It’s intuitive. It’s your instinct.

Interviewer: But, now, what happens when you need to protect yourself?

Participant: What happens when you need to protect yourself, what happens when you are not there? So, that’s where the risks are, and maybe that’s something I need to look into improving. So, that’s why I said yes and no. No in the sense that it’s not on paper, and that’s a major weakness and a major risk to the business. Yes, in the sense that my personal values are a major driver in inculcating an environment in which we openly engage around these issues and we do the risk assessments and we debate, and…

Interviewer: Bearing in mind your personal values may not be the same as another’s. They’re very subjective.

Participant: Yes. They may be very subjective, which is why I’m asking the question: what happens when I’m not there?
Interviewer: Exactly why something needs to be –

Participant: Or when I’m no longer there and I’ve left the business and other people are running the business, what happens? And, so, these things –

Interviewer: Because they’re looking to you, but what about them as individuals, what is guiding them when it’s not you?

Participant: Exactly. So, these things have to be written codes that we sign on to, and it has to be clear as to what are the consequences of non-compliance? And, so, we start translating our personal values into sort of practical business processes that guide what the business does and does not do. And I think that is important even to question eight that professionals and agencies have to translate what they hold as their values or as their attributes to practical business processes.

Interviewer: Let me probe you a little bit. Do you have something like ethics training which you take your employees through when bringing them into a team or when you have a new client?

Participant: We don’t.

Interviewer: Have you ever thought about it before?

Participant: I have never thought about it before, to be honest with you, and, now that you have raised it, it’s extremely important because that ethics training does not only start and end within my business, it can be passed on to clients. So, we can say to clients here’s how we work, and, in that map of ways of working, we include ethics. At the moment, it’s all about what are we trying to achieve? How do we go about it? What are the resources allocated to it? And what is the investment from the client? What is the investment from our side? It’s too operational at the moment. So, when we do what we call ways of working with clients, the biggest omission is ethical practice. When we orientate new staff that join our ranks or when we orientate project partners that we work with, the elements of ethical business, ethical conduct, are always missing, and they’re just as important as everything else. I agree with it.

Interviewer: Do you have anything in place in terms of, when you bring on a new client…so, almost like a hiring-and-a-firing type framework for, if your client’s unethical, this is where we stand, this is where our values are, this is what we will and will not tolerate, do you have something like that on paper?

Participant: No. Actually, there’s nothing on paper. It’s all intuitive that, once we get to this grey area or this area of discomfort, we will then raise the red flag and –

Interviewer: So, it’s very reactive process, as it stands.

Participant: It’s a very reactive process, as it stands. And I will be willing to bet that it’s not only in my business but it’s across most consultancies and even institutions.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Is there anything that you do, other than this open-door policy, to constantly measure ethical practice in the organisation? How are you aware of whether your colleagues are acting ethically? What system are you using to measure that constant ethical behaviour?
Participant: It's your normal sort of operations management sort of practices. Things like status reports, looking at execution plans for those clients. So, it's the normal course of day-to-day operations management and execution.

Interviewer: And, if you had to come across any ethical dilemma, do you think that your staff would then be empowered to be able to go about that decision making themselves, or would they then turn to you and what your values are as a leader?

Participant: A bit of both. Their understanding my values, understanding the values of the company, they have to be able to appropriately deal with that situation. If they are unsure, then they will defer back to me.

Interviewer: But this is not something that they've been trained on?

Participant: It's not something that they've been trained on, but it's something that they understand. It's something that they understand what they get when they're being orientated or in the course of discussing the business. So, for example, if you look at the issue of bribes, we've had so many discussions about bribes that my team knows that we do not pay bribes, we will not pay bribes. So, if they're confronted with a scenario where a client is demanding a bribe, they know that they are empowered to say that is impossible, that is just not going to happen, because this is how our boss feels about it. Even when they raise that issue with me, they will raise it in the full knowledge that they know what the answer's going to be. I've not trained them on it, but, because it's something that impacts us as a business, it's something that I observe closely, and I talk about it regularly. They know where I stand on it.

Interviewer: So, you almost are very cognisant of this. When you hire them and when you bring people on to your team, you ensure that there is that value alignment and that they understand that, what is unethical for you, is almost unethical.  
[CROSSTALK – 01:33:24]

Participant: Yes. And we will have these open discussions and debates about those kinds of issues. So, if any of them were to encounter that and they end up promising that it will happen, they know that they've just misled that client, they've misrepresented the company, and they've misrepresented our values as a business, and they've misrepresented my own personal values.

Interviewer: Let's move on to question number twelve, and we're almost done now. So, what kind of role or roles do you think that PR professionals should be enacting in a South African context? What kind of role? So, we actually touched on this, informally, in a previous conversation about the strategic managements approach or whatever. So, what kind of role?

Participant: So, first of all, we have to appreciate the power of what we do. We have to appreciate the power of communication, the power of a word, the impact of behaviour, whether it’s positive or negative. Once you have that appreciation and you are conscious of the power of communication, whether it is a word or it is behaviour in a non-verbal sort of communication sense, then you understand what the impact is going to be to a society like ours. Because, ultimately, every business that exists, whether small or big, has to have some impact or contribution to society. If it doesn’t, it’s difficult to understand what it exists for.
The owner of this café may tell you I opened this business because I just love food, or I thought it’s the best way of making money, but they employ people, they buy goods and services themselves. Those goods and services are bought from companies that employ people. So, this café has an enormous influence on society. So, we have to equally understand the impact and the influence of communication, and, when we do and we understand what the impact of our clients or the companies we work for is to society, we’re then able to provide solutions, to provide advice that will constantly place our clients, will place our employees in the right sort of space that keeps them aligned to society’s expectations, to expectations of their own stakeholders. That, to me, is what PR professionals should be enacting in the South African context. Influencing society and changing behaviours. If we can influence our clients in a way that positively impacts their constituencies, we’ve done our job, and that job goes beyond just delivering to our scope and earning our fees.

Interviewer: So, actually, I want to stop you there to just expand on how you feel about PRs as only contributing to the bottom line. What are your thoughts on that?

Participant: But what is the bottom line? The bottom line is a key element of business sustainability and, if that business is not sustainable, there is no bottom line. If you have a business that has a poor relationship with its customers, with its stakeholders, be it regulators, be it the media, whoever, there is no bottom line. So, what informs the bottom line? The bottom line is informed by a positive, constructive relationship with a myriad of stakeholders to the extent that you are able to live up to and deliver to those stakeholder expectations. And, so, as communicators, we often find ourselves as key facilitators of the building, the maintenance, and the enhancement of these relationships, and that’s a critical role that we’re playing. Accountants are there to play a functional role, the numbers must just add up. We play a far more important role than accountants. The legal guys have to ensure compliance to legal provisions.

We play a role where we help our clients, we help our employees to build, maintain, and enhance their relationships with a myriad of stakeholders that influence, directly and indirectly, the sustainability of those businesses, and, if we understand how powerful that role is, then we can understand that we are actually agents of change, and positive change, in our society. So, I’ve declared our company’s purpose of existence as using our craft or our practice as an instrument of positive change in communities. That’s what I’ve done. So, if, in the process of servicing a water services provider, I’m able to enable that company to communicate better around its challenges and opportunities, such that its constituencies are better served, we’ve impacted on a community. It may be indirectly, but we have. If I’m able, in the process of providing services to any organisation to raise the level of consciousness about leadership and the importance of leadership in enabling effective communication, enabling certain attributes that matter to stakeholders, I’ve impacted a community. And, so, our art form is the one that has that potential and ability to influence a lot of positive change and to act as an instrument or as an agent of positive change, and that’s what we have to enact in the South African context.
Interviewer: And this positive change could be in terms of financial change, in terms of reputational change, or are you referring to anything specific in terms of positive change?

Participant: If you look at the challenges that South Africa is faced with, any institution that is able to contribute to the advancement and the betterment of lives in South Africa, considering challenges that you have with poverty, inequality, etcetera, etcetera, that’s positive change, that is what I am referring to positive change. If we reduce it to the simplest of things, any company that starts and employs people and treats them well and pays them as reasonable as it can pay them, that’s positive change because we are dealing a blow to poverty, we are dealing a blow to inequality, we are enabling social advancement of future generations within families. So, if we just stick to that, that a company retains and expands its capacity to employ more people, and, as communicators, we enable that, that is positive change, just within our context. If we just simplify it to that sort of, if you want to call it, the lowest common denominator, just employment, if you consider that South Africa is sitting at over fifty percent of youth unemployment, we’re sitting at alarming levels of unemployment, we have more unemployed people than employed people. So, in other words, businesses need to be enabled to employ more people. Just as simple as that. That, to me, is positive change.

Interviewer: That answers the question very nicely, and let’s move on to our last question, which is: any other comments or observations in terms of PR ethics, where the industry is going, why it’s important or not, anything. Final thoughts.

Participant: If you look at the growth of telecommunications network service providers…what’s the best way of calling them? Its telecommunications network service provides. If you look at their growth, their growth is centred on the recognition that communication is a fundamental personal and societal need. If that recognition could give rise to multibillion-dollar multinationals that just service that need, you then understand the power of communication, you then understand the power of our practice, the power of our talents and our passion. And, with that understanding, you can service clients better, clients can service their customers better because they can communicate better. Communication is fundamentally important at its basic sort of level, at its complex sort of level, and at its far more sophisticated level where you’re dealing with multiple audiences from multiple backgrounds and competing interest and so on. And, so, as we grapple with ethics, we need to also enhance our understanding of the science of communication, we need to support communication with more research, and that research goes into how people respond to communication, what they expect from it. We are dealing with the daily lives of people in the most fundamental way. And, so, with that, we are then better placed to appreciate the importance of ethics in communication.

Interviewer: Perfect. Anything else?

Participant: That’s it.

--- END OF AUDIO ---
PARTICIPANT 8

PR professionals’ perceptions of a moral framework for PR practice

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Interview length: 1:17:41
Date of interview: 27 September 2018

Interviewer: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. This study aims to investigate the moral frameworks of South African agency-based PR professionals and what they use to guide the enactment of their professional roles. This interview consists of thirteen questions, and the expected duration of the interview will be thirty to sixty minutes. All responses are confidential. No respondents will be identified in the reporting of results. I urge you to leave out any names to ensure for anonymity. So, let’s start with question number one. So, can you just describe what you do in your role as a PR professional?

Participant: I would talk broadly about the agency and not necessarily myself because the agency works as a cog or that we have functions that everybody has to work together. But we took the definition of public relations that we learnt at varsity and we turned it on its head because it's very complicated or overcomplicated, and we said we help our clients talk with the people important to their business, which means we are storytellers, but, by doing that, the ultimate goal is to help them achieve their business objectives. So, everything we say or do on behalf of them has to help them achieve their business objectives. So, our clients inform our strategy. Without their business objectives, we cannot come up with a communication strategy. And that's where we begin. So, every conversation we have with a new client starts with: what are your business objectives?

Interviewer: Let’s move on to question number two. So, just touching on what you were speaking about now, whose interests do you serve and how do you serve these interests?

Participant: I thought about this and I was like, hmm, serve my team? We serve our clients' interest and their audiences. So, clients, one, and their customers or audiences, because sometimes we'll have a campaign that talks directly to their existing customers and, other times, the mandate or objective is to grow their customer base or grow their revenue, so we would have to talk to new customers or potential customers. So, it just depends on the messaging, will define who we're targeting.

Interviewer: I completely understand that. So, just to summarise what you just said. You serve your clients, but you're also very aware of the system that they work within and who they are trying to target, so very much like a systems-thinking kind of approach. Like an ecosystem.

Participant: Mmm.
Interviewer: In terms of the particular verticals that you serve or the kinds of clients that you serve, would you be open to giving me an idea of those?

Participant: So, we’re not a traditional agency in that sense, and there are a lot of agencies who have those sectors that you speak of, so a public-sector division or a consumer division or a B2B division. My business partner and I, at the beginning, decided that no team is going to work in one vertical and no team can have one client that’s...just one client that takes up the entire capacity of the team. So, every team at our company works across a range of clients, whether it’s in aviation, defence, consumer, we PR events, so eventing instead of doing the events, pet food. We really don’t close ourselves or harness ourselves into one sector. Financial services. And the reason we’ve done it that way is because, I think, people get very bored very quickly working in a sector. And I say that because we interview candidates, to join our company, who are working in a specific division and their feedback is...and I always say why are you leaving or looking to leave? And it’s always growth, and that growth is because I’ve now become stagnant to one division and they won’t move me across to the other division, or I really love consumer but there’s no space in that team. So, everybody here works across everything. And the other benefit of that is you get to deal with all media across all sectors. So, you’re not...and that could actually be to our disadvantage because you never actually form those close bonds with one media sector, property for example, but I think that that experience that my teams are getting is invaluable, that they can join any agency anywhere and work on any client because of the experience that they’ve got here.

Interviewer: I just want to take you back to how you said you serve your clients’ interests and then their customers as part of an ecosystem, like you said. Just how exactly do you serve their interests?

Participant: So, explain that. What do you mean?

Interviewer: So, unpack kind of the process of how you would serve your clients and –

Participant: So, what we do for them?

Interviewer: Yes. So, just take me...maybe not exactly what the specific task is, but the process of what you would do in serving them.

Participant: So, if I can unpack a plan in your mind, or in my mind. So, a plan starts with a strategic overview. We’ll get a download of the client. So, we need to know our client inside out, exactly what they’re doing, who they’re doing it with, where they want it...where they’re communicating, who their audiences are before we can do anything. Obviously, it’s a process and it takes time, but to get that plan in place, I did mention, we start with business objectives. From those business objectives, we come up with communication objectives. So, those communication objectives have to match the business objectives. From that, we come up with key messages. So, what are the things that we’re going to say, on behalf of our clients, to their audiences? We also have a [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 00:05:42] of we can use the media as a tool, but sometimes we tell our clients you don’t necessarily always need to use the media to communicate your message, you can go directly to your audience. So, that eighty/twenty rule. And I can give you examples of that just now. So, from the key messages, we come up
with a tactical plan. So, what are we going to do for you every week, every day, every month, every three months? And that tactical plan looks like a matrix. So, we’ll plot out the months and we’ll plot out the different activities that we can do, from media relations, content development, we can do social and digital communications, media monitoring and evaluation, media training. Do they need events? Do they have product launches? Do they have service launches? Is there a space for issues of crisis management there? Obviously, that’s on an as-it-occurs basis. So, we plot all of the tools, or in our arsenal, down the side and then we say to them this is what we’re going to do for you every month, obviously dependent on what they’re willing to pay us. So, we’re an hours-based consultancy. They say I have thirty thousand rand to spend with you, we’ll say, for that, you get X hours in a month and, for those hours, this is what you can expect to achieve. Obviously, that changes. It’s not cast in stone. If we, one month, say we need to do three pieces of content and a launch, the next month we might say there’s no launch this month so let’s do four pieces of content. So, we’ll always balance out and make sure that our clients are getting value that they’re paying for. No two months are the same. Some clients like an annual plan, which I think is silly because, every three months, the world is changing. So, they never really stand on a twelve-month. So, we like to propose a three- to six-month rolling strategy or rolling plan. So, from those tactics, we then say these are the deliverables that you can expect. We are aiming to get X media to this event, or we’re aiming to get these many pieces of coverage in tier-one publications with these key messages for you that should result in this for you. We’re trying to say that the results we get you should give you a return on investment, more business.

Let me give an example. Client launch, client store launch recently, their three co-founders, called the [NAME OMMITTED], and they only used PR and digital to launch the store, and on a very, very tight budget. I’m telling you this in confidence, but it was about twenty-five grand for PR. And we had to get key media, across B2B and B2C, ‘cause now they’re the first store in Sandton City Shopping Centre, so we’re talking to all the property trade, all of Sandton City stakeholders, and then Sandton City’s consumers, and client consumers around Jo’burg. We had to target media, we had to come up with an event, we had to come up with content, we had to come up with interviews, media interviews, the [NAME OMMITTED] had to be strong with people…people would often say it’s the client store. No, it’s not just the client store, it’s more buying of stuff. You’re now asking consumers to open their wallets. And we had targets, we had aggressive targets that we had to meet. Media, influencers, celebrities flocked to this store. On the night of the launch, the turnover from just the attendees of the launch, it wasn’t open to the public, blew their first three months’ targets. The weekend trade that came into that, they exceeded their nine-month targets in that weekend. It was insane. I think [NAME OMMITTED] said three thousand people walked through the door that we can… I heard much higher numbers, so were going to confirm what it was. They wanted a thousand people through the door. Stuff like that, based purely on public relations and digital that gave them their business results they made.

Interviewer: Which is what you’re trying to achieve, essentially, as an agency.
Participant: Every single time. So, that will be [CROSSTALK – 00:09:49].

Interviewer: Make your clients money.

Participant: That will be an attempt to show PR on a shoestring, it can be done. Obviously, the weight of the brand helped, but, also, our very clever way that we targeted people and what we did for them and the information we gave them. So, we invited motoring publications, ’cause they have the Bugatti, just different things. We invited architecture magazines because of the builds in the store. It was amazing.

Interviewer: Different thinking and understanding of business objectives first to drive you.

Participant: Does that answer your…?

Interviewer: Ja. So, I’m going to probe you a little bit more. So, I understand now how you serve your clients and their customers and the media as a tool. I want to speak to yourself and your wider team in the organisation. How do you serve them, or where do they come into play in this process of serving your clients?

Participant: My team?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: So, our team will always be involved from the beginning. We don’t send in the A team to a pitch and then put a B team in place. Obviously, dependent on the size of the client, we will have at least three to four people in a pitch, and either myself or my business partner will be in the pitch. We promise our clients that my business partner and I will be on every single account, or one of us will be on an account.

Interviewer: So, you’re quite transparent with who the team is and it’s not changing. What you see is what you get.

Participant: What you see is what you get. This the BUD, this is your account director, this is your account manager, and this is your AE, this is our head of content, or this is our senior account manager on content, they will be dedicated to your account. And, in that pitch, we have their little pictures and their bios, and everybody gets to introduce themselves. Everybody’s involved in that pitch. Everybody has a role. It’s not I’m talking the entire pitch. I generally do the intro, and this is our company, and this is why we’re here, and then the team does the rest. Everyone has a role in that process because that’s how it is in real life. And, because we’re such a flat structure here, everybody gets their hands dirty once the client comes on board. So, I’ll give you this example. I don’t sit in my throne in an office and direct my teams. I sit open plan, I sit diagonally opposite an intern and an account manager, behind me is an account director, behind her is a business director, and then that corner is my business partner, over there’s the content team. We’re all part of this team and, if I need to do PR, I do PR. This is the launch for a client next week. I’m busy doing his PR. I’m writing the press release [CROSSTALK – 00:12:16]. I am phoning media. We did an announcement for a client last week. I physically picked up the phone to Bloomberg, I picked up the phone to Business Day, so was the AM, so was the account director. We split that media list and went hit the ground running. We
had a very tight deadline. So, everyone gets their hands dirty. And then coverage would start coming through, and I’m doing a deep dive for coverage. I go do the Google search for the stuff that Newsclip or whoever has missed, and I’m sending them a list going here’s all coverage that Newsclip hasn’t got. It’s awesome. I love that part of how we work together as a team, that everybody just does everything. It’s not like –

Interviewer: Very blurred lines amongst the titles.

Participant: Totally. It’s not like an AE just has to pack boxes. I don’t know if you saw, on the table here, we have a big press drop coming for a client. I have an AD, an AM, and two AEs busy packing boxes. I will sit on the floor and cut ribbon for them. That’s how it should be in life. I don’t believe in this hierarchical crap that most agencies run with, and then their staff leave, and they can’t understand why.

Interviewer: I completely agree with you, and I must commend you on that. But, now, would you say that that also comes from who you are within, in terms of how you manage?

Participant: Totally. Who I am as a person, don’t be a dick, that’s my philosophy. Be a nice person. Treat people well and you’ll be treated well. Treat people as your equal and treat people fairly, pay them well, listen to them, and I think my key philosophy is I will trust you until you give me a reason not to, and not the other way around. So many people say trust is earned. That’s bullshit, in my opinion, it’s rubbish. But I trust you impeccably until you give me a reason, until you let me down. So, I’m not waiting for people to fail, I’m not. Everybody has a job to do here, and I expect you to do your job. That’s also what it’s about. We work hard, we work bloody hard, and because we have a flexitime structure here where people…you can come into work any time from seven to nine in the morning and you can leave any time from half past three to half past five, depending when you came in, and that’s to allow you to have a life. I have a life. Work is not my life. Please. Work is not everything in my life. My family is my life, and that is what I do this for is my family. So, I leave work at three o’clock. I’m like I’m done. Whatever I don’t get done at the office, I will do in the evening at home, and that’s fine because at least I get those hours in the afternoon. And everyone here can do the same thing, especially the family people. Even non-family people. Go and get your hair done, go and do your shopping, go to gym and get home before the sun has gone down. And that’s how I lead my life and that’s how…everything we’ve done here is so our team can lead the same life. And my business partner and I, again, from the get-go, we treat ourselves like staff members, we don’t treat ourselves like owners at all.

Interviewer: Everyone is the same, everyone deserves the same life.

Participant: Everyone gets the same benefits. There’s no sliding scale on medical aid. Everybody gets a…what are they called? A hospital plan. Everyone. Boom, here it is, not, because you earn thirty grand, you can get classic comprehensive and, because you are an intern, you get a…no, everyone gets the same, everyone gets the same leave, everyone gets the same…what are the other benefits? Their birthdays off. Everyone gets their birthdays off, everyone…what my business partner and I get, everyone here gets. The flexitime, everyone gets
flexitime, it's not just for our senior team. Everyone gets a laptop. Everyone gets a parking bay. Just be nice.

Interviewer: And based again on who you are and your business partner. I'm assuming both of you have shared values as business partners.

Participant: Ja.

Interviewer: So, I'm going to probe you a bit further later down the line. Let's move on to number three. So, do you regard yourself as accountable for the way in which you serve all of your stakeholder interests? So, this would then be your clients, their consumers, and, like you were saying, your team.

Participant: So, I said I believe it's a fifty/fifty client/agency responsibility. I believe that the work that we produce for our clients is always approved by our clients first before it goes out, and what we suggest to our clients we’ve done in a way that we believe will benefit their publics. If our clients come back and disagree and want to change a message or distort a message or do something for gain, we push back. So, in our creds document, it says we are not a yes consultancy. What does that mean? It means we challenge you, we challenge the status quo, we challenge you to the best you can for the people you need to talk to. We’ve had incidences, as all agencies had, where our clients do their own thing anyway and they will force us to do something. When I say force, I’m not talking breaking an ethical boundary, but doing something that we know isn’t going to work for them, but then you need to show them why that didn’t work afterwards. Not we want to see you fail, but back yourself and go this is why we believe this isn’t a good idea, we will do it, and let’s see. Let’s see how it goes. We’ve recently had an example of a client who is owned by a holding company and every second word in the communication has to be the holding company’s, this company’s, this product, and it started reading like an advertorial. And, last year, we got away with it by only mentioning them upfront and then we could go into the meat of it, but now they’ve become so strict that they want this holding company throughout. And media are saying, guys, it reads like an advertorial. We’re not going to cover it. You need to pay for this space if you want us to cover it. And we’ve gone back to the client and we keep getting overridden, and they are seeing now a decline in their results. And it’s not our fault. We keep advising. So, we consult and we’re saying this is the wrong approach, this is the wrong way to do this. We know the media, we know what they want. And I almost feel like it’s going to take us failing for them to realise that it’s the wrong approach, and it’s one person, and, unfortunately, it’s a people business. So, that person is the head and they get the final say and they’ve said, no, it has to be like this.

Interviewer: So, you’ve been transparent about where they’re going wrong.

Participant: Totally. And I’ve said to my team cover your arse, cover your arse, cover your arse, and they have. So, hopefully they’ll realise soon, because we’ve done incredible work for them. They’re a client of coming up three years now. Incredible work for the first two years. Now we’re in a position where...I don’t think it’s them, I think it’s the holding company that’s putting pressure on them. And it’s not negative communication, it’s positive, it’s just not PR. It’s advertorial.
Interviewer: But you’ve been honest, and it’s, I think, the best you can do up until they can kind of [CROSSTALK – 00:19:20].

Participant: And it’s easy to blame, it’s easy to say I told you so. I’ve said to my team, no, guys, if you honestly believe it’s the wrong thing to do… and they say what if the client doesn’t…and I said then we need to do what the client wants and then show them why it didn’t work, which is where we are now. We are in a process of wrapping up the results to go this is why we didn’t get success here.

Interviewer: But long and short answer would be, yes, you’re absolutely accountable, and –

Participant: I did say yes and no. I think it’s fifty/fifty because, if your client changes the message without your consent…so, if you write a speech for a client, for example, and you’ve given them their key messages and they’ve approved it and then they go rogue in their speech, who’s accountable? Do you know what I mean? That’s why I’m saying it’s both.

Interviewer: Yes and no.

Participant: If they’re on brief and if they’re on message, radio interview, it’s live, they’re under pressure, the broadcaster asks them something to throw them, and they kind of go where’s the answer? And then they…that’s not their fault. That’s not what I’m talking about. But I’m talking about, if they ask a question that we’ve briefed them on, this is the answer you need to give, and they give a different answer, then who’s accountable?

Interviewer: They would be because it’s out of your control.

Participant: That’s what I’m saying. So, it’s fifty/fifty. It depends on what message they’re going to deliver.

Interviewer: You are accountable, but you can only control the clients as much as…to a certain point.

Participant: Totally.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to question number four. How do you respond to any conflicting interests with your clients or your teams?

Participant: So, I actually wanted to ask you about this. Conflicting interests, are you talking about similar clients or clients in the same sector coming to this company, or conflicting interests like a team member is Halaal and now the Pig Association of South Africa wants us to work for them? What –

Interviewer: Both.

Participant: Both.

Interviewer: It’s literally anything that’s conflicting –

Participant: That’s conflicting.

Interviewer: …in terms of you bringing on the client or you not getting along with the clients or the team or…
Participant: It's such a fine balance. I'd like to believe we've empowered our teams to have those conversations with the clients first and try and sort it out before it gets escalated to one of us, but I'm also not stupid and I can read. 'Cause my business partner are on every single alias. So, how we've set up the clients' teams is that, as we win a client, I set up an e-mail address. So, it will be client at company dot co dot za and then, under that, there are five e-mail addresses. So, the client only has to put in one e-mail address and the whole team gets it. They can obviously say "hi, Sean" [SP], but consult is there, so the whole team is always on copy.

Interviewer: Whether they're responding or not.

Participant: Totally.

Interviewer: So, everyone has [CROSSTALK – 00:21:55].

Participant: But the team is knowing, knows exactly what's happening at every step of the way, and my team has a mandate to cc in the alias with every e-mail that they send so that the team knows, if they go on leave or if they're sick for the day or something happens to them and they can't get back, one of the team picks it up. But my business partner and I are also on every single alias.

Interviewer: So, you get the same client e-mails.

Participant: I get about three hundred e-mails a day because of that, which is fine. So, we've got twenty-odd retainer clients. I'm on thirteen, my business partner's on thirteen, and we get that communication.

Interviewer: Lots of e-mails, but not always actionable [CROSSTALK – 00:22:26].

Participant: No, but I'm aware. So, I'm always aware of my client health and my client happiness and satisfaction. I know if there's an issue on a client, I know if there's a problem. So, let's talk about conflicting interests. If there is...and I'm going to give you possibly three scenarios. If we have a client, say, in...here's a good example. We have an education client and we've recently been asked to pitch on another education client. We first went to our client, our existing client, and said we've been approached by this brand, would you be okay with us pitching on it if it's a different team? Absolutely, no problem, thank you for letting us know, it's for the greater good of education, go ahead. We'll then go to this client and say, heads up, X is our client and we've got their permission to pitch for your business, are you comfortable that we do that? And, if they give us the go-ahead, then we pitch, then we go ahead with [CROSSTALK – 00:23:27]. Whether we win or lose, it doesn't matter, and this is live at the moment, this is happening right now, so I'm giving you an actual example. It's actually two education brands that have recently come to us, and we've gone first to client, give them first right of refusal because I want to keep my current clients happy, or keep them, and then these two guys. So, we're waiting to hear on the second one if they would have an issue that we're working on it. They've said it's fine. In a space like aviation, we have an airline client who is an international airline. So, they only fly between here and the East. And then we had another airline client who is a low-cost carrier in Africa. They don't compete. So, they're both airlines, sure, but they're not competing for the same airspace and the same passenger.
Interviewer: They’ve got their own USP.

Participant: Totally. And we are fully transparent about those two clients. And our website lists all of our clients. So, anyone who’s coming to our company can just go onto our website and see who we work with.

Interviewer: But they’re banking on that trustworthiness from you guys to prove yourself I suppose.

Participant: So, that’s one example. And another example, we’ve often been asked by clients that do not meet my moral or ethical…my values, my value system, it goes completely against my value system, and one was a dating service for married people where you could go and find somebody to basically cheat on your partner –

Interviewer: Swinging.

Participant: Not even swinging, cheat on. You could go into these rooms where…and it’s a huge success globally. Massive freaking online business. Huge budget. And my business partner and I said abso-fucking-lutely not. They were like this is the budget, this is what we want, dah-dah-dah, and we’re like are you mad? Good luck. And another agency actually took it on. I was horrified that they took it on. That guy’s since left South Africa.

Interviewer: Out of curiosity, was their retainer worth what they –

Participant: No amount of money is worth breaking your morals. I’m sorry. I don’t care how much money you want to pay me. It gives me goosebumps to think that people take that on. So, that is one example.

Interviewer: Was it a bigger retainer though?

Participant: It was huge. Massive.

Interviewer: I’m just trying to understand the rational thinking behind the other agency.

Participant: Massive retainer and the thing is, because they’re doing so well…so, there’s something fundamentally flawed with our society that we need to cheat on our partners. I would never in a million years even consider cheating on my husband, and vice versa, I know. And my business partner’s the same. And, so, that is where you go to your morals and your ethics and your values. Don’t challenge me like that because I’m not going to help you help other people break up their families. And the other thing is tobacco. Tobacco companies, weirdly, still need PR because there’s so much regulation around the tobacco industry, the advent of…what are those things that you suck on now?

Interviewer: Those electric smoking things.

Participant: Those things. We’ve had them come to us, we’ve had cigarette companies coming to us, and, because my business partner and I don’t support smoking, it’s like, sorry, we have to turn you down as clients. Very lucrative, again, very lucrative clients. But then there are agencies that will take that on. No problem.

Interviewer: So, now, do you openly say, no, this isn’t personally what I believe, sorry.
Participant: Hundreds.

Interviewer: And they understand [CROSSTALK – 00:26:42] –

Participant: They will go we understand, thank you. We don’t lie. When we turn down business, we give the reason. Sometimes, we can just say, sorry, we don’t have capacity, which is ninety-nine percent true, maybe ninety-five percent true, but, other times, if it’s something that we really strongly don’t support and we’re actually trying to make a point [CROSSTALK] what are you doing?

Interviewer: So, like the dating example.

Participant: Ja. I was actually horrified. And then we’ll just tell them it goes completely against our ethics and values as an organisation. Boom, done. Sometimes you hear back from them, sometimes you don’t. Whatever. But what I have found is that clients do, or potential clients or non-potential clients, appreciate the truth to see what they’re getting themselves into. But, again, there are agencies who will do that.

Interviewer: Because they’re driven by the retainer.

Participant: And then we’re asked to make a recommendation for another agency, and I’m like, I’m sorry, I can’t do that. Go do your own homework.

Interviewer: We’ll just give someone else business.

Participant: Let me sell you down the river.

Interviewer: That’s a very good example, thank you.

Participant: And I think the last one is my example of Halaal and working on a bacon shop or something. I wouldn’t put that pressure on somebody. Our teams… and I haven’t actually brought this up. Our teams have first right of refusal on a client. So, my business partner and I will get a client in or get a lead or however they come, the network, website, whatever, phone call, and we will send it out to the ADs first, which is…EXCO ADs are all on there. Guys, anybody interested in working on semi-conductors? Let us know. If anyone says yes, we’ll go ahead with this or we’ll pursue this. If it’s no…but everybody has to reply yes or no. If it’s no, then we’ll turn them down. And we turn down business all the time. And, I promise you, if people don’t want to work on it…I can’t put a team on something that they don’t have heart or passion to work on. And we’ve had clients in the past and we’ve learnt from that where the team is just not passionate about the subject matter and they don’t do good work and it gives the agency a bad reputation. So, I think we turn down as much business as we accept in terms of pursuing and pitching for.

Interviewer: So, you obviously get the lead, like you say, you may speak with the potential clients, you then take it to your internal team first, anyone keen? What are your thoughts? Then you go back to the client, have that conversation, and speak about your rates, whatever.
Participant: So, if the team says no, then it’s a straight decline, apologies, we don’t have capacity to take this on, and, if it’s a yes, then let’s meet and discuss more, and then whoever has said yes will come to that initial meeting.

Interviewer: And this is then, like you were saying, based on initial interest and values and does this align with who we are and what we stand for?

Participant: Mm hm.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to number five. So, what, in your opinion, constitutes ethical communication practice?

Participant: It was simple for me. It’s “tell the truth”. Tell the truth and tell it fast. Always having your clients’ public interests at heart and never be misleading. So, we are not spin-doctors, I’m not a lobbyist. That’s not the type of PR that we do here. We tell the truth, we tell our client stories, we tell them as truthfully...or we tell them truthfully, not as truthfully. We tell them truthfully. And I’ve also said...I’ve written ethical communication is also accepting responsibility for the messages, and maybe that goes back to your earlier question of who’s accountable, you [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY – 00:30:07] to others and the short- or long-term consequences of your communication. And, from my side, I said it has always been integrity, and, for me, integrity is what you say, how you act, and what you do has to be...sorry, how you think. So, how you think, what you say, and how you act all have to be in alignment. If any of those contradict each other, you’re not in integrity.

Interviewer: Going back to tell the truth. As a PR, can you always be truthful though in your particular role?

Participant: Yes, you can. You have to. I’ve never...that I’m aware of, I have not knowingly lied or not told the truth on behalf of my clients. You can use different adjectives to make something sound better than it is, but that’s not necessarily lying. And I think advertising can distort the truth far easier than PR can. And because we’re playing in a space where earned has...or the industry acceptance of earned media is more credible, you have to be credible in your communications. And, sorry, media can see straight through something if you’re not telling the truth. People aren’t dumb. Media can get something, and they’ll do their own research, and they will call you out if it’s not the truth. We’ve had cases where we’ve included research and stuff that we’ve got off the web, and media will go and do their own research and say I’ve actually found contradicting evidence to this, do you have a comment on that? It will be like, wow, that’s amazing that you found that, we weren’t aware, or this company said this about this company, were you aware of that? We had a client in the biosciences space, which is quite a...it’s a newish sector, it’s stem-cell banking, and it’s –

Interviewer: There’s still a lot of controversy in terms of thinking around it.

Participant: A lot of controversy, but because of the success rate on redeeming your stored stem cells. So, I’m not talking about all the screening that you can do while you’re pregnant, so the pre-screening, does your baby have X diseases or is it Down’s? The actual stem-cell banking for future disease is very limited...it’s limited what you can do with those stem cells, but it’s an insurance policy. And you really
have to understand that subject matter to be able to sell it. And there’s a particular journalist at a particular publication who…she’s a healthcare journalist, she knows her stuff inside out, and we had two cases of stored cells being redeemed by the parents for kids who had a particular genetic disorder, and we sent it to her, and she literally gave the most scathing article about how it’s a con to store your stem cells.

Interviewer: Which obviously goes against what you’re trying to do.

Participant: Obviously. And she had spoken to the chief medical doctor at the company, got all her facts, and, subsequently, they weren’t a client of ours…post this article coming out, our contract ended with them, but the medical doctor went to the ombudsman and said this is incorrect reporting and I’m reporting this person because this is the facts that I gave her, and she said this, and it is not true at all.

Interviewer: And made it slightly sensational.

Participant: Totally. So, there are times when we are supporting a cause that needs a lot of PR because it’s not a well-understood subject matter. So, you don’t lie. You just have to do so much more to get somebody to believe what it’s all about. Everybody thinks their product is amazing or the best. You have to prove why it’s amazing or the best all the time in the PR world, where advertising doesn’t.

Participant: …what I say is what I say because I said it. PR is so much more than that.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to number six. So, what, in your opinion, constitutes unethical communication practice?

Participant: So, I’ve said here: doing something you inherently know is wrong, is not true, or will intentionally or unintentionally cause harm to others. So, basically, lying.

Interviewer: So, very much the opposite of what you said ethical was.

Participant: Ja.

Interviewer: Have you ever been a victim of unethical communication practices?

Participant: No. Weirdly, I haven’t.

Interviewer: Whether in this role or even a previous role.

Participant: No. This company definitely not, and my previous role I was too junior to probably know if anything was going weird, but, no, our clients were pretty above…we’re all above board, not pretty above board. Maybe the only thing I can think of in my days, but it wasn’t the client themselves, but it was what they were involved in, was the SASSA grants, and that wasn’t their fault, it was government. So, what government was saying was really…we knew the facts about grant and what was happening there and –

Interviewer: And making promises that were not being delivered.

Participant: So, our client was unfortunately caught in the middle of all that because they were the technology provider of this whole platform, and we had to keep
correcting and keep correcting because journalists would come to us going what is their view on this? And the standard response would be they are the technology partner and –

Interviewer: They’re not involved [CROSSTALK – 00:35:13] –

Participant: …they’re not involved in the –

Interviewer: …anything further.

Participant: …and who is appointed and who distributes them and who does the collections, in any fraud around it, nothing. There was a lot of more crisis and reputation management there instead of unethical, but I think…I could go on about government, and I’m not going to.

Interviewer: Speaking of unethical practice, so you say you’ve been lucky that you haven’t been involved in any unethical practice. Would you say that that’s also because of your own –

Participant: My own ethics?

Interviewer: Ja, your own ethics and strong values that have guided the practice of this agency, that you’ve been able to actually avoid anything that could be sticky?

Participant: Or see it before it happens, or realise something is awry or amiss and pre-empt it, or…what’s the word? Prevent it, sorry.

Interviewer: As opposed to being reactive.

Participant: As opposed to being…but I think, because we are maybe honest to a fault and truthful maybe to our own detriment. And I’ll go back to the fact that we’ve turned down clients for that very reason. And we’ve got rid of clients who have not treated us with the respect that we give them, or what the value systems that are in this organisation. We have resigned business for the benefit of our staff so that we keep our team.

Interviewer: Speaking of clients not treating you in the way in which you deserve, can you give me an example of how…you don’t need to mention who the client is, but how they’ve treated you that you’ve just been like, mm-mm, this is not on?

Participant: When I have my teams crying after every meeting, I think that’s proof enough that they can’t be a client anymore. Obviously, you look at yourself first and going is it us? Are we not performing? Are we not delivering? You kind of go through that whole motion and process of did we do everything that we could? Has it become personal? And, in a particular case of our largest client, for many years, this client poached two of my staff. So, it went from a Nicky is your director and your team leader to you are now my client and I have to do everything you tell me to do, which was fine, I’m very happy with that –

Interviewer: Like a reverse role.

Participant: …but I think that authority went to both of their heads and it was –

Interviewer: Very hard.
Participant: …an absolute nightmare. It was just the relationship broke down so much that we resigned that client two years ago.

Interviewer: Was it because of those two individuals that were then managing, and it made it even worse because you knew them as people working under you previously?

Participant: Ja. And they were waiting for us to fail. I knew that...every time you hit send on an e-mail, you’re just waiting for the negative comeback. Even though you know it’s what they would have done, it’s what I would have told them to do in their role, it was just to prove a point. And, so, it’s a people business. We’re in a relationship business. My team has to have a relationship with their clients that is positive and strong in order for us to do good work, and, when that relationship breaks down...and people come and go, teams move around, people leave, people change jobs, that’s fine, but, when that happened, initially I was really excited, I was like this is good for us, this is a good move, and I supported the poaching. I was like –

Interviewer: It’s a funny…

Participant: In their contract, weirdly, it said you cannot poach any of our staff, which is quite weird for me ‘cause that is, on their side –

Interviewer: It’s like a clause.

Participant: …unethical what they did to take my staff. So, I’m not allowed to do it to them, but you can do it to me. Weird.

Interviewer: Then your own employees almost went against their own contracts and went to –

Participant: Their client contracts. So, that was a bit of a grey area for me and I loved the work we did on that account and I loved the entire broader team, and the international team that we worked on. It was people. And one of them is still there. One has recently left. So, it wasn’t a bad call that I made because I don’t think it would have got better had we stayed, ‘cause they literally were both there.

Interviewer: Was the client okay before your staff members decided to go that side?

Participant: Totally. It was. I can’t even tell you, that client was my baby. You know that one client you have in your life that you will always talk about –

Interviewer: A favourite.

Participant: …and I will. I will always talk about them. I’ll talk about them and I’ll talk about another client as two of my career highs. And even the work that we did with them there was freaking phenomenal. We did amazing, amazing work, and the results we got were amazing, and the team…the experience we gained as a team. They were one of the first companies that started digital press kit. It was so ground-breaking. But we were responsible for creating all the content for that digital press kit and then uploading it on a system that they taught us to use. So, they gave us the trust –

Interviewer: New skills.
Participant: …and all the passwords to control all their communication. At any point in your life, if you want to go rogue, you could have done something there and made them…it was, and still is, a career high for me. But –

Interviewer: And then the minute that contract was overlooked, that’s when the relationship dynamic changed.

Participant: It wasn’t even that the contract was overlooked. I think the power went to their heads that they were now our bosses and we were now the agency, so that dynamic changed. So, when you say to me you want to go corporate and I said to you please just treat your teams with integrity and respect and be nice, obviously, if they’re not delivering, it’s different, but just treat them how you would want to be treated. Everyone. Treat everyone the same. I don’t know, it’s simple. It’s so simple, but not everyone gets it right.

Interviewer: Fair treatment across the board, clients-agency relationships, whatever.

Participant: I am friends with a lot of peer agency managers, general managers, owners, and I also get a lot of their staff’s CVs, and, obviously, my team CVs are out there, I’m sure, I don’t know. Whatever. It’s how life work. But I also know more than I probably should about how other people run their agencies, and I think that has also taught us just how to be even better at what we do in terms of how we treat our staff. And you will see, everywhere, our company is a people-number-one agency. We are people focussed, we are…everyone gets the same, everyone…that is no joke. Everyone here is the same. Not the same, everyone’s treated the same.

Interviewer: Let’s move on, for the sake of time, to question number seven. So, what challenges do you face in your efforts to communicate ethically in your PR practice? You’ve actually touched on a lot of this now. Is there anything you’d like to add to what challenges you face?

Participant: No. I’ll reiterate, we’re not a “yes” agency. So, we do challenge our clients ‘cause we are consultants. They’ve come to us for a reason; we are the communication experts, so please trust us that we have enough experience to tell you what the right way is to communicate to your audiences. Obviously, if you have an experienced person within your team, we are willing to learn from you as well, we will figure it out as we go, but, a lot of the times, we have clients who don’t understand PR or who don’t know PR, or don’t know what PR is, but they’ve been told by the global company you need to hire a PR agency. And it’s not –

Interviewer: They can send out press releases.

Participant: Let them send out press releases and give us coverage and give us a value for that coverage. Believe it or not, we still have clients who solely want an AV figure.

Interviewer: Some of them are old school.

Participant: Totally. And, you know what?

Interviewer: Business directors want to see the figure.
Participant: You give them that. You give them their ROI in a month; you give them their ten to one or whatever. It's fine. It's actually easy to do that. It's terrible to [CROSSTALK – 00:42:53], but it's easy to do that, yet we are now...we also have very savvy clients who know that it's not all about the AV, which is amazing. That challenges us and that keeps us on our toes.

Interviewer: Because then you have to prove to them that what you actually did that was a return on investment, if it's not a financial figure.

Participant: Totally.

Interviewer: Let's move on to number eight. So, what values do you consider necessary for enacting professional communication roles in a South African context?

Participant: So, I've jotted three things here. Now it's probably repeating, but always be integrity, to think what you say and how you act all have to be aligned. I said align your values with the work you're about to perform, so, if your gut tells you something is wrong, it probably is. And respect the past, never make judgements, and always do your research before communicating to the target audience.

Interviewer: So, you speak about respecting the past. What do you mean by that?

Participant: So, understand where the communication has been; understand who they've been targeting before. I always ask new clients: is there anything we need to know? Is there anything you haven't told us here about media you've dealt with, about stories that have been told on your behalf, about...and it takes one little Google search to find out all that stuff, and, I promise you, the majority of the time they will say we had this journalist who did this, or we had quite a negative headline once. And I ask that question because I have done my own research and I know what's happened. And we've got a potential client whose come in who's...when I say potential client, we've put a proposal, we're waiting to hear from them. They were in the mining industry, very young, two Afrikaans guys, and they started a company with an old mining magnate guy who completely took them to the cleaners, but, if you just Google their names, it's just negative headline after negative headline. And the first thing I said to them was: please tell me about what happened in twenty-fifteen. No, but... I said everyone is going to ask you that, and, because you're looking to me for communication advice and consultancy, I need to know your side of the story because the articles are all the other guys' side of the story. And, weirdly...I believe them; I believe their side of the story. They are trying to clear their names. They have gone to the ombudsman. They have given everything that the ombudsman has requested from them to clear their names. The court case that this guy did was dismissed, so it never went to trial. They couldn't find anything that these guys did wrong. So, based on that, I was okay to carry on with them as a potential client because I know that we're not at risk, and they actually have a really damn good story to tell in the future.

Interviewer: So, you're open to almost...not forgetting the past, but moving forward from it rather. So, understanding the past, moving forward from it, and giving your client the benefit of the doubt to almost prove themselves going forward.

Participant: In the future, ja.
Interviewer: And, in terms of now... I want to emphasise again, in a South African context, is there any different kind of approach you take, being in this country, with your PR practice, or something that you need to consider, or...?

Participant: I think some people would say yes. I say... which question is this?

Interviewer: It's still number eight.

Participant: Are we still on number eight?

Interviewer: Ja.

Participant: So, there is a South Africa specific one.

Interviewer: Ja. Towards the end.

Participant: So, I’m saying I don’t believe that there is South Africa PR and global PR. I think know your target audience. So, wherever you are, you're going to adapt your messages or adapt your communication styles or how you’re talking to people. How we talk to the younger generation is completely different to how I talk to granny watching Isidingo every night. But, no, I don’t think it’s a South Africa specific thing. Obviously, it’s also client dependent. If you have a race issue, then that is pretty South Africa heavy and you would need to communicate in a very carefully created way, but I think every country has their issues in that. Every country has to be careful in their communications, depending who they’re talking to.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to number nine. So, do you believe that your personal values affect how you practice as a PR professional?

Participant: I said of course. I did unpack that a lot. I think I’ve –

Interviewer: Ja, you have.

Participant: …actually gone into that quite a bit.

Interviewer: So, I just want to confirm with you then. So, I've got something here, based on my literature, called person/organisation value congruence, which is the alignment of who your clients working with you, as an individual, as an entire entity, and also the people that you’re hiring, do you believe then that that congruence... that alignment in values needs to be there for everyone?

Participant: I think most of the time. I think sometimes you’re going to get that rogue client or that client who’s completely out of your comfort zone or completely out of your depth, but what I do encourage everyone at our company to do is to become a client of their client. So, where feasible... Obviously, if you’re going to fly to Zimbabwe, please use the low-cost carrier I mentioned. If you’re going to fly to the East, please use our client. If you’re going to use a tampon, please use our client, and I did mention them. So, change your brand to see why we are saying what we’re saying about a specific product.

Interviewer: So, be the consumer.
Participant: Be the consumer so you know what you’re talking about, so that you can have an honest conversation. And a great example, recently, is [NAME – 00:48:11]. I have never looked after my skin, it’s just not something that I give a shit about. I will wash with Dermalogica facewash and then I’ll buy whatever face cream I think is cool for the month. With our client, it’s…they call it a system that there are about nine products in the system –

Interviewer: That you have to use [CROSSTALK].

Participant: …that you have to use, and the team working on that got sent on product training, had an analysis of their faces, and got given an entire pack of product, it’s worth about six thousand rand, to try and be that before and after. I swear to God, I’m not ever going to not use this product. It is insane [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY] amazing. My skin has changed completely.

Interviewer: Really?

Participant: No, completely. [CROSSTALK] I’m such a PR person. I have done it. It took me a while. It took me about six weeks to actually go –

Interviewer: There’s nine steps?

Participant: ‘Cause it’s quite a commitment, and you don’t have to do all nine steps every day ‘cause some of them you use every third day, and this one you use every other day, and this one you have to use for five minutes in the bath. But my skin…and I don’t ever feel that weird tightness after I’ve washed my face because it’s just…it’s cool. And the SPF is cool, and you never shine, and…no, it’s –

Interviewer: Now obviously you’re a PR person, so I do know when you’re punting a product, but, for you, this is coming from within, I actually love it.

Participant: I will buy the product again. I will now make the…they say it’s an investment [INDISTINCT – BACKGROUND NOISE – 00:49:35] your skin. It’s a proper investment. I would never have spent six hundred rand on the product. Frankly, I can’t afford to. And I know you’re going to go huh, but, no, that, to me, it’s not a priority. But I’m getting a bit older now, I’m kind of going hm

Interviewer: I should take care of my skin.

Participant: …I should take care of myself, I’m becoming…anyway, I’m more aware of it. But it took them being a client for me to become a client, and I will be loyal to them, and my team is slowly, slowly changing over to it because they’ve been Environ consumers…and we had to say what products we used at our onboarding. Every single product that you use, they want to know, and one chick had just bought her entire new Environ product. She said I will do it as soon as my Environ is finished, which is great because, at first, she said I’m not changing, I’ve used Environ for eighteen years, blah-blah-blah. She’ll change because I have said it’s really…it’s insane. I don’t know what is in the damn stuff, and it’s a local product. It’s a South African brand, but it’s an international product. So, they have it all around the world.

Interviewer: So, you give your clients’ products a chance to see…and I think what’s cool is that you can actually give them the honest feedback if something’s not working.
Participant: If it's not working. So, my facewash I was given, it's weird. It's a bottle in a bottle, the product. There's two products like that. And I think my kids, or my nanny must have dropped it because it's now gone into that second layer –

Interviewer: And you can't get it out?

Participant: It's kind of just leaking in there, so I'm going to have to take it back to them and go this happened.

Interviewer: [CROSSTALK – 00:51:03].

Participant: If it happened to me, I'm pretty sure it can happen to other people. I'm not asking for a new one, I can still use it, but it looks funny. And pet food, we work for a client and they're also local dog food, premium dog food, brand, but they have a cheapie range and a middle range and a very expensive range, a super-expensive range, and the account director on the team just got a puppy and what does she go buy? This product puppy. Amazing. That is what I want on my team. So, there's never been a case here where a team is too scared to use their client's products, and that, I think, talks to their values. They've never been, oh, my God, I'll never do that, I'll never fly this low-cost airline 'cause I'm scared of crashing. No, because we know enough about the client to become their client. So, every time...we had a card client for years as a client, and I was with another company, for example, but they only issue another card. Every time I pulled out my card, I nearly died...and my work card is a bank and they only issue this card. So, if I had to pay for a lunch, I would go to the till to pay for the lunch 'cause I was so mortified that my own bloody business banking account can't give me my client's card.

Interviewer: Let's move on to question number ten. So, number ten is: can you explain the similarities and/or differences between your agency and your own personal views of ethical communication practice?

Participant: So, I said my business partner and I would never compromise our own values. We've often turned down business if it doesn't meet with our value systems. The agency and our consultants are committed to practicing ethical public relations, and I said this commitment guides our behaviour and decision-making processes. So, we actually, as of this year...so, I think I started with this, we have a statement of ethics in our creds document that gets sent to everyone. So, any new business request gets a creds document from our company, and I'll show you [INDISTINCT – BACKGROUND NOISE – 00:52:58] but...so, the creds document, it'll be overview, our clients, why should we be your PR, a statement of ethics is in there now, and we've put it in, in about April this year, references, and then the small print. So, that statement of ethics is taken from an international standard, international communications consultancy organisation. We've given a blurb as to why it's here now. So, we're committed to practicing ethical PR and then this is what we commit to. But, before we put this into our creds document, I sent it around to the entire office and I said I need everybody to read this. Read this, digest it. If there's anything you disagree with, let me know. If you agree with it, let me know.

Interviewer: And this is now during the creation of it to see if there were any gaps or...
Participant: Totally. What have we missed out? What have we not said? But, guys, also, sorry, this is a promise we’re making our clients, so you better understand what is in here, because, if you ever break this, you are accountable, and our company is accountable. And then we have our promises to our clients in addition to that, right at the end of our... or in the middle of our creds, what we promise you. What have we said here? A solid commitment from our company to our consultant. So, you’ll receive value-for-money communications, you’ll receive error-free, well-written professional work. There are ten them, but you will be treated with respect, we will work with the highest integrity, we will communicate openly, honestly, and frequently. So, just those ten things alone are a commitment that everybody here has agreed to, and that’s been in it since day one. The ethics thing came in because, exactly what you’re saying, ethics got brought to task and agencies closed down because of it.

Interviewer: Was there anything specific that stood out that you said to your business partner, no, we absolutely need to have an ethics quote?

Participant: It was actually my business partner who brought it to me, and it was...he does a lot of research, he does a lot of reading. Because he’s Irish, he’s got his Irish past and he subscribes to a lot of international news, not that we aren’t, but he digests them and shares them, and it was him who said we need to, as an organisation, have an ethical code in our company, and I was like why have we not had it before? It was an absolute no-brainer.

Interviewer: So, would you say then that this was because of global best practice that he was reading and understanding what [CROSSTALK]?

Participant: It was so topical. But I think that those ten promises that we made, which we’ve always had, are almost a very shortened version of the statement of ethics that we now have, that we’ve unpacked. So, I think we always had it, it just wasn’t this –

Interviewer: What did you say it was? Ten principles?

Participant: Ten promises.

Interviewer: Ten promises. So, you always had ten promises to your clients, and you’ve now turned that into an ethical code.

Participant: Ja. But we still have those ten promises and that’s on why you should work with us, remember that page, and now we have an unpacked statement of ethics after that.

Interviewer: Out of curiosity, when you sign on new clients, do you look for their clients’ ethics codes or do some of them not have or...?

Participant: We haven’t, to be honest. I haven’t.

Interviewer: So, you haven’t come cross a client that has had one?

Participant: No. I’ve never actually asked for one because I don’t think we go with our clients’ ethics. Recently, actually, I was asked to sign a statement of ethics. It was for a big multinational. We were doing one of those due-diligence things and it’s the
first time I’ve come across where they’ve said to us please tick box that you acknowledge and assign to an ethical conduct, ethical code of conduct. But, in the past, clients have not asked us for that.

Interviewer: Do you feel that you would prefer if they had one, or does it not matter?

Participant: I believe that they should ask us if we have one.

Interviewer: I think I’m asking you not so much in terms of you have to fall in line with them, but more just to see if there’s an alignment in what you believe is ethically right and what they believe, just to see if it’s aligned. Or does it not really matter?

Participant: It’s not that it doesn’t matter. That’s a good question and possibly something you need to unpack further because I don’t actually think it exists. I don’t think it’s something that organisations consider when they are appointing agencies, and vice versa. I’ve never actually thought to ask about a statement. I’m sure they exist, I’m sure, particularly with the big guys –

Interviewer: [CROSSTALK – 00:57:35].

Participant: …but within their own…I have one within my own environment, but I’m yet to see it where it goes both ways. But I think, as this whole ethical thing happens, we might be seeing more of it, or if somebody like you goes out to industry and says I think we should do it.

Interviewer: I sit here with a smile.

Participant: [CROSSTALK].

Interviewer: We’ll talk offline. Let’s move on to number eleven, which you actually have touched on very nicely, but I’m just going to probe you a little bit further. So, just for the sake of transcription, I’m just going to repeat this question. Does your agency have a system in place for fostering and promoting ethical communication among its employees? Which you obviously spoke to, the statement of ethics which you created earlier this year. Did you have anything prior to this that you were using, like an open-door policy or…?

Participant: So, those ten promises that everybody abides to, not only in our credentials document, but also in all of our pitch documents and in our proposals that our clients sign for us. So, if it’s our client contract, so the client is to us, you guys develop the contract, those ten promises were always in there, in every pitch, and in our creds document, and those were guiding principles because those were the ten things that we guaranteed our clients, and, if we broke those on our own, knowing it was quickly rectified or noticed or dealt with. And the statement of ethics has come in because I believe it’s necessary for people to understand the consequences of unethical communication.

Interviewer: And also, just to protect yourselves if anything goes wrong.

Participant: And to protect ourselves. And, interestingly, a few clients have asked us if we have professional indemnity insurance.

Interviewer: What is that?
Participant: So, if you say something on behalf of your clients that can put them into ill repute, there is insurance for that. So, for example, if I go and out a client because I know something, and I was under a confidentiality agreement but now it gets out there that I heard this CEO slept with this person, for example, they can sue me for defamation, and I can have insurance to cover myself.

Interviewer: So, this is something that you’ve looked into having. Or was it clients –

Participant: No. This is something our clients have asked: do you have professional indemnity insurance and public liability insurance? And, interestingly, I’ve recently changed insurance companies twice for BEE reasons and both of the new companies have asked me do we want professional indemnity insurance because –

Interviewer: And what have you said?

Participant: I’ve turned it down because we haven’t ever had a case. Because everything I’ve said today is that we’re an ethical organisation and I don’t believe…but is it something we should be considering? Will I have a rogue employee –

Interviewer: Do you need it? [CROSSTALK – 01:00:12]

Participant: …one day who gets drunk at a client function and slews their mouth off? I don’t know.

Interviewer: But, like you say, you also didn’t expect your own employees to get poached and then suddenly have a switch and an overexertion of power, which you wouldn’t have expected because they were your own.

Participant: So, there’s nothing I could have done about that because, in my contract, I didn’t say you can’t poach my staff, but, in my staff’s contracts, I have you can’t poach our clients. So, there is a restraint on my staff, but there’s nothing for my clients to say you can’t poach my staff. Because I trust people until you give me a reason not to trust you. And maybe I’m oblivious or maybe I’m naïve, but I think I just…I have faith in humans that they’re not going to screw me over, and it’s happened once…it’s only happened once, and we’ve never been in a position where my team has put us into ill repute. But, apparently, this insurance is fairly new and it’s something that a lot of companies are taking out now because, like that Penny Sparrow thing, the Adam Catzavelos thing, he said something which has now caused companies to close down, multiple companies, and staff to lose jobs. Is there insurance against that?

Interviewer: And, again, that alignment in values, we saw how quickly consumers are willing to turn on him and [CROSSTALK – 01:01:36].

Participant: But also, everyone that he’s associated with.

Interviewer: Which goes back down to values and what we value, I think, as people, not just South Africans. What else can I ask you here? In terms of PRISA membership, or any membership with professional bodies, are you a member of a body? Do you require your staff members to be members?

Participant: No. PRISA needs help.
Interviewer: Do you do any form of ethics training with your staff members?

Participant: No.

Interviewer: Have you thought about it?

Participant: I have now.

Interviewer: So, what I’m referring to is in terms of induction, when you’re bringing on new interns or...’cause, like you say, you obviously hire people that share the same values, but how do you know, for instance, if you had to potentially...and I’m trying to remain neutral here, but leave the organisation that they would be able to still embody what the leaders, like you say, what you and your business partner, have? What happens if you have to leave? Can they carry on and have that same ethical mindset?

Participant: I would hope that everything that we have built and everything we stand for lives on in whoever takes over because we preach it every flipping day. Every decision that is made in this company is made with its people number one. So, if somebody’s step-granny dies, for example, and their family responsibility policy says you get three days’ family responsibility days a year for sick children or the death of a close relative, i.e. your mother or father or child or husband, I’m not going to not give you the flipping family responsibility leave. Please go to the funeral of step-granny, if she acted like your mother. Please go to your uncle’s bedside if he’s had a liver transplant and take family responsibility leave. So, we are very flexible because everything we do is for people number one. If it was me in that position, what would I want?

Interviewer: So, you’ve got a very...I’m going to call it an open-door policy, if something’s wrong, if they’re feeling like they’re not sure what to do, they’ll just come to management and [CROSSTALK – 01:03:48].

Participant: They don’t even come. Like yesterday, one of our team’s fathers had a stroke. She didn’t even have to ask. It was my dad has had a stroke, [INDISTINCT – VOICE CLARITY] said go. There wasn’t permission needed, dah-dah-dah. We get it. We just get it. As an organisation, we get it, and I trust you until you give me a reason not to. I’ll go back to that.

Interviewer: Let’s go back to ethics. So, you say that you’re preaching ethics all the time, you’re preaching this ethics code. You say you don’t have ethics training and, if there is an ethical dilemma, they know that they can speak to whoever in a team to get a consensual idea or whatever. How do you measure ethical behaviour in your organisation?

Participant: We don’t measure it. I think we just know. And I think we trust our account directors and senior team to alert us to any potential ethical dilemmas or any issues that may be arising within their clients or within their team. Because ethics is not just for the client, I think it’s for your team as well. If there’s something ethical going on in your team, one of your team’s a drug-lord or something, I would expect my senior team to come to me, or I would expect that person to come to me because, like I said, my business partner and I are completely open and have...you can come to anyone, either of us, at any time, can I have a chat?
And people do. They trust us enough. Obviously, for time’s sake, if it’s a small issue, rather go to your account director, but, if it’s something you know is hectic or is about your account director, my goodness, come to us and then we see how to deal with it.

Interviewer: But there’s nothing…obviously, again –

Participant: Process driven.

Interviewer: No process, no surveys that you do just to check in.

Participant: No.

Interviewer: Would you say that that’s something you’d consider?

Participant: I don’t think that, but I do think ethical training is key and I think, ‘cause we’re doing so much training at the moment, it’s one of the modules that we can include. It has been brought up, but I think we almost feel like, when we go through all of this stuff with our team, that it’s a done deal, but do people actually…if you had to ask somebody here what are ethics? Everyone would have a different answer.

Interviewer: Because it’s subjective, based on values, which are not always the same.

Participant: Aligned. Totally.

Interviewer: Let’s move on to number twelve. Almost done. So, what kind of role or roles do you think that PR professionals should be enacting in a South African context?

Participant: So, I said I don’t think South Africa’s any different to other countries. I said we believe it’s vital that PR organisations and individuals abide by ethical practices to ensure that the integrity of our profession, and then I said and to make sure that it’s a profession that we are proud to represent. So, I want to be standing around a braai and, when somebody says to me: what do you do? I want to say I’m a PR consultant or I’m a PR director or I’m a PR professional. I don’t want to have to be embarrassed about my profession, and, for a good while, I was when the whole Reeva Steenkamp and Oscar thing happened, when the Bell Pottinger thing happened, and, now more recently, with Adam Catzavelos and all these stupid things that people are saying in South Africa, they always go to a PR agency to try and fix their mess. They think that a company can just tell the audience what it’s like and then they’ll be forgiven. That’s not the case. That’s really not the case.

Interviewer: So, if you had to sum it up, what do you think PR should be?

Participant: From what perspective?

Interviewer: From your own perspective.

Participant: From my own perspective?

Interviewer: Now, in South Africa. What do you think it should be?
Participant: I think PR should be telling the right stories about our clients so that people use their products, and we shouldn’t ever have to distort the truth because the stories that we tell are never based on inaccurate information or untruths. I think PR has a responsibility to represent our clients and what they stand for and what they do. And I think companies who use PR agencies, they know what they’re doing, because you don’t just hire a PR agency. Some do. Sorry, I contradict myself. Some have, in the past, but I think the bulk of our clients understand the benefit that we bring to them, because it’s not a cheap service. Sure, advertising is much more expensive, but that’s because of the channels you’re using to communicate in. PR, you get a lot more value in, but I also believe you get a lot more credibility from.

Interviewer: I want to take you back to something that you answered, I think it was in question one or two. You spoke about you needing to get that return on investment for your clients. What are your thoughts on PR as simply being a tool for wealth maximisation or the bottom line or financial gains? What are your thoughts there?

Participant: I don’t disagree with it, unfortunately. I do believe that we are trying to help our clients make more money, or else they shouldn’t be using us. We are an extension of that marketing arm. So, you have marketing, you have advertising, you have social media strategies in place. All of that has the intention of making them more money and, if our job is to create brand awareness or to help a product get more exposure, the end goal of that is so that people buy it, surely, and I’m talking pure PR. I’m not talking about reputation management, I’m not talking about crisis communications. But even that, reputation management, you’re turning a person’s reputation around so that people will use their services or use them. So, yes, I do think it’s a commercial tool that companies use. It’s not just a nice-to-have. There’s a strategic reason that companies employ PR agencies or hire PR agencies. And we do guarantee to our clients that we will help you achieve your business objectives, and, most of those times, it’s to increase sales, increase leads, create awareness that leads to sales. So, I’m not ashamed of that.

Interviewer: So, would you say that PR then, for you, is also about being more up there in terms of strategic management kind of role?

Participant: It has its role there, it does, but, if you take it down to...let’s look at the PRISM Awards and how you do those entries. The feedback that the judges give is it didn’t help your clients achieve their business objectives. How did you help your client? What did you actually do for your client? You didn’t show me what you did for your client. Did you increase sales? Did they make more money? Did they hit their targets? Did people invest in their fund? That is our role. So, if the industry is saying that’s what we’re doing and we’re saying this is what we can guarantee, then it is part of the sales function.

Interviewer: So, just to summarise what you’re saying, it’s about being a strategic management tool or role, when need be, to increase sales or drive certain targets and make clients more money, but also about telling their stories to attract their consumers, to understand them.
Participant: Ja.

Interviewer: And then number thirteen: any other comments or observations about PR ethics, where we're going.

Participant: So, I think, when I started in PR, the discipline was not largely acknowledged by the CEO or the C-suite. We were reporting into marketing managers or PR managers who had a grip on the business, but we never really had access to the brains and the minds of the organisation who were actually making the decisions. We fought and fight long and hard to sit around the boardroom table and have those conversations so that we can know where the organisation is going, we can know what the plans are, the bigger plan is for the organisation, not just from a marketing perspective. And, not to downplay a marketing person’s role, marketing director, we need them there too because they’re guiding the whole...that strategic direction of the company from where we plug in, but we can often identify things that the CMO or the PR director hasn’t even thought of by having those conversations with the people in the know. The CFO, the CIO, the CTO, the CEO. Those conversations, for us, are priceless. And it was amazing to have those conversations with a telco client in the past where, once a quarter, we would sit with every single one of them and download their next six-month plan, their next six-month strategy. What did they have to achieve? What was worrying them? What was making them happy? And, from that, we could then sell in...if there’s a CIO roundtable happening in the telco space, it didn’t necessarily have to be the one spokesperson, we could sell in different roles. So, we got to know more about the organisation by having direct access to them. And, as a result, we were taken more seriously, we were seen to be adding value to their lives and making them more important and them more credible.

Interviewer: [CROSSTALK – 01:13:02] organisation as a whole rather than just, like you say, the one marketing director.

Participant: Ja. And, the majority of our clients, we know the CEOs. We have those conversations. Some of them, it’s just too complicated. It’s a multinational and we’re reporting to this agency or to that agency. It’s fine, that’s fine. But, more in a South African context, we do sit directly with those important people who are the decision makers in the company, and that guides our strategies.

Interviewer: Where do ethics come into play?

Participant: Having those conversations?

Interviewer: With being involved with having different access, what are your thoughts on now ethics? You said how obviously PR is changing and you’ve got more access to different people. What are your thoughts on ethics and how that’s changed?

Participant: I don’t think it changes at all. I don’t think the PR profession has realised the value of tapping into those resources. I don’t think ethics is something that is front of mind when you go into those conversations. I think, more and more as you communicate, those people will start realising, shit, should I have those conversations? But, also, a lot of the times, we’re under confidentiality clauses and non-disclosure agreements where we get to hear everything about the business, the good and the bad, and, from that, we are able to consult, if this
happened, this is what you need to do and, if you've done this and this...and, if we pick up something that's completely unethical, then you have a discussion with the team going is this something we should be doing? Is this the client we should be working with? It's never happened, to be honest. It's literally never happened where I felt so uncomfortable about something that I've gone, oh, my God, I can't actually work with you. And we've had people who have been very open and honest with us, to a fault, and I've never uncovered anything weird, but I think that goes back to our own values that, when we took on the client, we knew what we were getting into.

**Interviewer:** Do you think...how can I articulate myself? Do you think that there's something that maybe younger PR professionals should consider as they get more then into this space? Because you've obviously had enough time to understand how your values impact the way you practice. Is there something you would then say young PRs need to consider or do or any advice?

**Participant:** This all came from sixteen years. I can't fast-track this process. I was very fortunate enough to have incredible mentors in my PR...my business partner is an incredible communicator, an incredible strategist. I've learnt my...the way I do things is I will give him so much credit for that, up to a point, and then I started doing things my own way. I hope that, with our open system here where people can learn from me and learn from the account directors and learn from the account managers, that they will start realising what is the right way? But I don't remember ever having that. It was never grilled into me. I always had a value system of right and wrong, and I knew that what I was saying, if it was right, you can do it, if it was wrong, don't do it, but I never physically had somebody saying you can’t do that or don’t do that. It worries me that our youth are on a weird...you’re just different, and I respect that, and I think it’s okay if they are communicating to their peers who are in positions of power, because, if I think about it, and I started this company in twenty-six, and then I was hiring people older and younger than me, I had to earn respect in that regard because I had to prove that I knew what I was talking about. But peer to peer, I think, you can learn from each other. But, if a younger generation is talking to an experienced CEO, I wouldn’t put them in that position. I really wouldn’t put them in a position. I would bring them to a meeting, but I would say listen, listen to what we're saying, learn from what I'm saying, write down the questions I'm asking, write down the questions our head of content is asking so that when you are eventually senior account manager or account director leading meeting, you know the types of questions to ask, you know what not to ask. And I've been in cases where somebody feels like they need to talk for the sake of, and it's been very uncomfortable, and you can't just shut them down and you can't say shush, and you kind of have to rephrase their question in a way that the CEO thinks they're very clever. But it's all experience. I don't know.

**Interviewer:** Different [CROSSTALK – 01:17:27].

**Participant:** There's no magic wand...

**Interviewer:** You just have to learn from the people around.

**Participant:** Ja.
Interviewer: Anything else you want to add?
Participant: No - my throat's sore [laughs].

--- END OF AUDIO ---