An Exploratory Investigation of Public Relations Education and Profession through the Lenses of Undergraduate PR Students

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INTRODUCTION

The distance between public relations (PR) and trust has been widened by competition of organizations (Moloney, 2005). Economical, poitical, technological, and social changes gradually shaped and reshaped business activities in organizations. Inevitably, those changes have found its reflection in public relations field. Therefore, PR curriculum in universities should be planned carefully so that graduates can adjust themselves to meet the needs of changing public relations applications (Wakefield & Cottone, 1986).

It has been widely acknowledged that academia and educators should connect their studies, work, educational materials and systems to the needs and wants of the industry (Cheng & Gregorio, 2008); but, very little research has been based on the investigation of profession and education during the last decade. Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes (2008) claim that the majority of those studies based on professionalism in PR and educational matter of PR have been researched especially in the 1980s and the 1990s, but in the new millenium this issue has not attracted much attention and it seems to be ignored with the exception of a few authors in the field. Gupta (2007) underscores the importance of PR studies in this statement: "It is important to recognize, however, that the values and the body of knowledge of a profession must be constantly evaluated, researched and revised through scholarship and research" (p. 306).

Furthermore, the perceptions of PR practitioners about professionalism in PR (Gupta, 2007; Niemann-Struweg & Meintjes, 2008), the opinion of educators and practitioners on PR education and teaching (Goncalves, 2009; Sohodol-Bir, 2010), views of public relations academics (Cheng & Gregorio, 2008), and research on PR role beliefs of students and practitioners (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999) have attracted attention and researched by some scholars; however, public relations students' perspectives on the profession and education have not been researched in detail (Bardhan, 2003). It is important to get their ideas, as today's PR students will be tomorrow's PR practitioners and some of them already work in the field. The aim of this study therefore is to examine educational and professional issues in PR. In the following sections, ethical concerns and theories, corporate social responsibility, PR education and professionalism will be reviewed and research questions will be advanced. Next, methodology will be explained. Finally, results and discussions in addition to conclusions, recommendations, and implications will be drawn.

ETHICAL CONCERNS AND THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Portrayal of PR Profession

The increased popularity of public relations profession brought some ethical considerations into the light. PR profession was frequently associated with fashion models especially in the last two decades in Turkey (Keloğlu-İşler, 2006). There are some ethical problems in portrayal of PR profession in the mass media too. Bowen (2009) complains about misleading information and misconception given about the role, activites, aims and the functions of public relations portrayed in both news media and entertainment media (e.g., Samantha Jones character of "Sex and the City"® series).

Ames (2010), in contrast to Bowen (2009), in her investigation of PR profession throughout major films from Mars Attacks (1996) to Hancock (2008), found that public relations practitioners' image is now less negative than displayed in the earlier films. Jo (2003) examined the portrayal of public relatioins in the news media and the findings showed that there were negative connotations of public relations' roles and functions in journalists' stories in the mass media. Jo cautions that "Because the general public sees the world through the lenses of the mass media, journalists' word choices have an important impact on ordinary people's understanding of any subject" (p. 398). White and Park (2010) highlight that misperception destroys credibility of the profession; and therefore, they suggest that public perceptions should match media portrayal. Görpe and Mavnacıoğlu (2009), on the other hand, in their investigation of public relations portrayal in the Turkish national newspapers found that the general picture is neutral with 65.5%; negavite portrayal is 18.3% while positive portryal is 16%.

Gender Imbalance in Public Relations

The popularity of public relations occupation has attracted employees (van Ruler, 2005); but, there is gender imbalance in the public relations sector[1] (Farmer & Waugh, 1999). The occupation is female oriented with 70% women and 30% men (Sha & Toth, 2005). This is because, initially female enrollment in communication shools increased (Theus, 1985) and in turn, PR occupation boomed with the entrance of more women than men

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[1] Throughout this article the term of 'sector' and 'sectoral' have been used and sector can be clarified as "a distinct part or branch of a nation's economy or society or of a sphere of activity such as education: *the government aimed to reassure the industrial and commercial sector"* which is defined in Oxford dictionaries. Retrieved April 17, 2012, from
http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sector?q=sectoral#sector__9

recently (Andsager & Hust, 2005). Although the occupation is female oriented, women see themselves in more technical work than managerial ones (Toth, 1988). Students (future practitioners) view the gender inequality problem as gender inequity in promotional advancements and salaries (Sha & Toth, 2005; Toth & Cline, 1991). Dozier, Sha, and Okura (2007) explain that this gender difference in income is based on women's tendency to take 'time-out' from their careers to raise their children.

The Relationship between PR Practitioners and Journalists

PR people know that publicity is more valuable than advertising and are willing to pay double or triple than what advertising is worth (McGee, 1996).

Grunig (1992) states the importance of giving the profession the name of "publics relations" by emphasizing the "s" in place of "public relations" for a solution to media problems and she reasons this in the following paragraph:

> A new name might be in order: "publics relations," rather than "public relations." By making the first word plural, public relations practitioners might come to regard communities, governmental agencies, stockholders and financial analysts, employees, labor unions, competitors, suppliers, clients, and pressure groups at least as important as the media (p. 129).

Supa and Zoch (2009) found in their investigation that the change of the problems in the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists has been very little over the past 23 years inspite of educational and technological changes. They also offer a solution for a better relationship between them: "In order to practice effective media relations, it is imperative that public relations practitioners commit themselves to providing information that is valuable to journalists" (p. 19). Tsetsura and Grynko (2009) mention that PR practitioners as well as other agents put pressure on the shoulders of

the media to place publicity in Ukraine and they underline the fact that "The pressure to place publicity inexchange for advertising is the most wide-spread practice" (p. 1). The practice of paying members of the press is an important ethical dilemma for both public relations and journalism. In 1977, Stanley mentioned that some practitioners –who are advertisers of certain publications –run new product publicity. Patterson and Wilkins (1991) agree with Stanley and state that with those unethical applications the fine line between commercial and news has been getting slenderized. People have started to equate advertising and public relations acitivites to each other (Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Working with unethical organizations, giving a bribe for a publication, publication out of a commercial payment, and offering expensive gifts to journalists are also ethical concerns of public relations in Turkey (İrvan, 2010). Koc (2006) verifies the unethical dilemma between public relations practitioners and journalists in Turkey in his article titled *"Order three advertisements and get one news story free": Public relations ethics practices of Turkish and international companies in Turkey*. His research results indicated that news stories and editorials in relation to paid advertising in newspapers and magazines boomed with more than 100% between 1994 and 2004. Çelebi (2009a) in her online survey investigated agency and corporate PR practitioners' opinions on the ethical concerns of the business and found that 'Running new product publicity for companies that are also advertisers in those publications' was the main ethical concern in Turkey.

The Professional Responsibility Theory of Public Relations Ethics

The concept of ethic has been in the center of the debate since the beginning of philosophy, at least for 2500 years (Uzkesici, 2003). Parsons (2004, p.10) defines PR ethics as: "The application of knowledge, understanding and reasoning to questions of right or wrong behavior in the professional practice of public relations". "There is

widespread awareness of ethics as a key issue and growing discussion by academics and practitioners about how to approach professional ethics" (Tilley, 2005, p. 305).

Grunig (2000) says that "The idea of professionalism began in the 5th century B.C., when the Hippocratic oath of medical ethics was developed" (p. 25). "Professionals are now defined as workers whose qualities of detachment, autonomy, and group allegiance are more extensive than those found among other workes" (Brown, 1992, p. 19). Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) acknowledge that previously proposed theories of public relations ethics (e.g., attorney-adversary model, two-way symmetrical communication, enlightened self-interest standard, and the social responsibility model) made great contributions to the ethics of the PR profession; hovewer, for various reasons each of them falls short of offering a universally accepted philosophy. They state the importance of professionalism and suggests that the initial step in developing standards is to recognise public relations as a profession and the practitioners' position as a professional. Fitzpatrick and Gauthier propose the professional responsibility theory of public relations ethics which is explained in the paragraph below:

> Practitioners need some basis on which to judge the rightness of the decisions they make everyday. They need ethical principles derived from the fundamental values that define their work as public relations professionals. They need guidance in reconciling the potentially conflicting roles of the professional advocate and the social conscience (2001, p. 201).

Martinson (1999) questions if it is ethical for practitoners to represent "bad" clients. Liese Hutchison –the ethics officer for the St. Louis chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) –says that a PR person shouldn't comply to whatever wanted by a client. Hutchison cautions that PR person shouldn't be a 'yes person' because, those are the ones smearing the profession (quoted in Stoff, 2002). Grunig (2000) reports that professionals in contrast to non-professionals have a power of conducting their work based on knowledge, principles, and enough standards. Thus, a professional public

relations practitioner is in charge of giving consultation to a client, can be able to tell a client what is right and what is wrong, what to do and what not to do. If ever clients want something unprofessional and unethical, s/he should influence clients' opinions and choices.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON PR PROFESSION AND EDUCATION

Many scholars believe that public relations-like activities have existed throughout mankind's history (Kruckeberg, 1995); but, modern public relations developed in the fourth quarter of the 19th century in the USA, as railways and land-selling companies emerged, and the West was settled (Moloney, 2000). Fatih Sultan Mehmet's meetings with the public on Fridays and complaints were listened to by grand *vezir* (vizier) are considered among first public relations activities of the Ottoman Empire ("Halkla ilişkiler", 2006). Kazancı (2006) states that public relations activities in the Ottoman Empire were not planned and the communication flow was one-way and asymmetrical. Kazancı's line of statement goes like this: "Ottoman State had special public relations practices. It would be wrong to call it public relations in today's terms but the Ottoman Empire had a notion of public relations of its own" (Kazancı, 2006, p.5). Public relations was used during the establishment of the Turkish Republic and the introduction of Atatürk's revolutions to the public in the 1920s. Atatürk –who is the father of Turks and the founder of the republic– introduced a new alphabet, clothing and hats, tractors, and so on throughout those years (Keloğlu-İşler, 2006). In 1946 in Celal Bayar Government of Turkey, it was the first time the terminology of 'public relations' was used as 'the police and public relations' (Göksel, 2009). The first modern and planned public relations activities in Turkey was started by *Yayın ve Temsil Şubesi* (Publishing and Presentation

Branch) of *T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı* (Prime Ministry State Planning Organization of Turkish Republic) in 1961 ("Halkla ilişkiler", 2006).

In Turkey, while there were early outbreaks of public relations, PR education emerged in the mid 1960s. The first public relations department opened in 1966 at the Journalism High School in Ankara University and later, it was followed by opening PR departments in other big cities of Turkey (e.g., İzmir and İstanbul). PR courses are given in PR departments alongside two other departments; namely, department of radio and television, and department of journalism at Journalism High Schools (Yıldırım-Becerikli, 2004). PR has slowly come out from the mother discipline of journalism and now, it has set up itself as an interdisciplinary communcation area (Wakefield & Cottone, 1986). In 1992, the name of Journalism High School was changed to Communication Faculty (Yıldırım-Becerikli, 2004). Public relations was adopted and became a part of governmental institutions in the 1960s and of private organizations in the 1970s in Turkey. However, it is hard to say that there is a common consensus on the definition of public relations in today's Turkey (Akyürek & Solmaz, 2003).

There are some research papers on public relations training writing about the abundance of course titles which had started to appear as 'public relations' in American colleges and universities during the 1940s (e.g., Lee, 1947) and a growing number of practitioners in this area (e.g., Fitzgerald, 1946). Harlow (1944-1945) and Fitzgerald (1946) wrote about vougness of the PR profession approximately 65 years ago and their explanations help us to understand its complexities in those years. They state that people know what law, architecture, and medicine mean and what a lawyer, an architect, and a doctor does; but, they do not seem to know about the meaning of PR and have no idea about its roles. Even top management of many companies don't understand what

public relations is and what the functions of the profession are (Jones, 1981) and PR workers don't know where it starts and ends, what their responsibilities are and how it is operated in an organization. Unfortunately recent studies (e.g. Anderson, 1999; Azarova, 2003; Moncur, 2006), concerning PR are not much different than the earlier studies. What can be done to take more serious approaches for PR professionalism and how can educators prepare students for the requirements of the PR industy are still the main questions and core concerns of the articles written about professionalism in public relations.

There are many critics saying that the vast majority of the work in the public relations field are done by people who didn't get any PR knowledge and education in universities (Sayımer, 2006; van Ruler, 2005). Insufficient training of future PR practitioners is a serious problem. PR practitioners who didn't get enough training try to develop their professional status in the workplaces. However, 'professional status' is the combination of knowledge and 'organizational environment' (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999). To make this situation worse, Elmer (2008) states that "The growth of public relations as an academic discipline was accompanied by complaints from practitioners that graduates did not meet the needs of the industry" (p. 903). Both practitioners and educators agree that more emphasis should be given on research, ethics and strategic planning in the curriculum so that the profession can be able to move from a technical occupation to strategic planning (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009). Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) report that attaining a specialized degree is not a prerequisite for maintaining work as a PR practitioner and a journalist. But, through everyday interaction within a media organization, journalists in contrast to PR practitioners learn nuances of and can get enough experience in their job regardless of their background education. However, in order to have a fair and ethical decision making and in turn,

practice, a good education level is a must (Akıncı-Vural & Başok-Yurdakul, 2004) for both PR practitioners and journalists.

One of the major public relations oriented educational problems that fosters abovementioned problems in Turkey is theory-practice imbalance. Theoretcial courses are between 76% and 85% at governmental universities and between 63% and 88% at private universities (Yıldırım-Becerikli, 2004) and both are not in an efficient level. Çelebi (2009b) in her survey research found that the students agreed applicational courses are as important as theoretical courses. Akıncı-Vural and Başok-Yurdakul (2004) in their comparative study examined the curriculum of American and Turkish universities and found that education is based on more technical and practical courses in American universities than in Turkish universities. Practical courses as well as theoretical courses in Turkey should be balanced, as they are equally important and unsepearable from each other (Yengin, 2004). Similarly, Barry's (2005) research in Egypt showed that students wanted practical course work rather than having theoretical knowledge. To be an effective and practical training period, Veil (2010) suggests to use crisis simulations in public relations education.

Tirone (1979) suggests that public relations professionals should get education in how to conduct research and collect data. Salim Kadıbeşegil, who is the chair of Orsa Strategic Executive Consultancy, says that the PR profession needs a work-force who gains training in one or two years and is specialised in media content analysis and/or research and reporting. One of many problems is the shortage of such a work-force in the public relations sector in Turkey (as quoted in Akıncı-Vural & Başok-Yurdakul, 2004). L'Etang recommends that public relations should be legitimized as a field of 'vocational study' in universities (as cited in Elmer, 2008).

Cheng and Gregorio (2008) suggest that PR departments at universities must provide encouragement and inducement to the faculty members for their interaction with practitioners. Pabich (2003) suggests that co-operation between companies and universities are essential for employing the best talented students; and therefore, companies should be in touch with universities. Pabich exemplifies the efforts of the Polish branch of the management consultancy firm Ernst & Young with colleges and universities in Poland.

In order to improve the quality of PR education, educator-practitioner-student liaison is important (Kocabaş, Pira, & Sohodol, 2004). There are some exemplary initiatives for educator-practitioner-student liaison in universities: Anderson (1999) mentions about academic-industrial liaison project (AILP) of the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen; Tampere (2003) exemplifies lecturers' continuous practical experiences in different business fields for the creation and improvement of a better academia-industry relationship in the University of Tartu in Estonia; and Çelebi (2009b) proposes the SEYUME (Sektöre Yönelik Uygulama Merkezli Eğitim: Sector Oriented Applicational Based Education) project of the Vocational School at Yaşar University in Turkey for academia-industry cohesinevess. However, for better cooperation, more serious initiatives should be taken.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In light of the theoretcial framework and the literature review, the questions remain:

RQ1: From the student perspective, what are the ethical violations and sectoral problems?

RQ2: From the student perspective, what are the educational problems in the field? and what are the students' suggestions for better PR education and more professional practice?

RQ3: In which way, do the students view the requirements of the profession and the characteristics of a professional PR person?

METHODOLOGY

The focus group research methodoloy was conducted due to its strength in discussion of varieties of subjects among a group members and in generation of ideas. In this study, open-ended questions were asked. The language of interviews was Turkish and it was translated into English. The first focus group study was in December 2009 and allowing the students of the 2009-2010 academic year; and the second focus group study was in December 2010 and including the students of the 2010-2011 academic year.

There were many similarities in results of the second focus group with the first focus group; thus, to avoid repetition, the study was limited with two academic years. The first focus group members were made up from 7 undergraduate students and they were 4th year students of public relations department within the Faculty of Communication at a private university in Western Turkey. The second focus group participants included 10 undergraduate students from 4th year public relations students of the Faculty of Communication and 2nd year public relations students of the Vocational School at the same university. The purposive sampling method was applied in the selection of the participants. Accordingly, industrious students, some of whom work in the field and/or studied abroad, and all of them have finished their internship programs and therefore aware of problems and requirements of the business. All of the focus group participants included students who were in preparation of their research papers for Anadolu University International Student Conference. Seventeen participants in the research ranged in age from 20 to 27 years. In the first focus group (Fall 2009), six of them were

female and one of them was male; in the second focus group (Fall 2010), seven of them were female and three of them were male. The duration of the first focus group discussions was 52 minutes and the second focus group discussion lasted 70 minutes. The interviews were conducted until reaching a point of saturation. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the auhor herself. The results may not be generalized to other countries; and therefore, the study is exploratory in nature.

LIMITATIONS

The research results are valuable as it is an original study and have an exploratory nature on revealing opinons about PR ethics, education, and professionalism in Turkey. However, the use of non-random sampling limits the generalizeability of the findings to the population.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Obstacles, Problems, and Ethical Violations

The first research question in this study asks from the student perspective what the ethical violations and sectoral problems are. In order to answer this research question, the researcher asked participants two interview questions in each focus group discussions. The first question is: Except education, what are the other fundamental problems in the public relations field? And which ethical problems do arise? The second question is: Due to the natural aspect of occupation, PR practitioners are in touch with journalists. What are the problems that occur during this relationship? The results of the interview questions were summarized as follows:

- Problems of Influential Contact

All participants agreed that 'influential contact' is one of the biggest business problems in Turkey. One of the participants confessed that his father wanted to employ a PR person from their relatives who is pretty and can make coffee/tea, look after the telephones, and welcome guests to the firm. He said that although his father has worked as a manager in a high level corporation, he was confused about what PR was and what its roles were. This discussion affirms that employment of unqualified and unskilled persons as PR practitioners triggers sectoral and ethical problems (Sayımer, 2006; van Ruler, 2005). This argumentation also supports debate on voguness of PR's definitions and roles (Fitzgerald, 1946; Harlow, 1944-1945; Jones, 1981).

- Occupational Confusion

The participants believed that there were many reasons for confusing occupational duties of PR person and one of them was due to the female orientatition of the occupation. They expressed that companies prefer and recruit female employees more than male in Turkey. This statement certifies the literature on gender imbalance in PR (Andsager & Hust, 2005; Farmer & Waugh, 1999; Sha & Toth, 2005; Theus, 1985). The participants continued that this gender orientation contributed to the misunderstanding in a way that being a PR practitioner, a person must be a pretty woman who is talkative, smiley, and good at social interactions. One of the female participants complained that the public was not aware of what PR was all about and had no particular idea about it.

One participant attracted the attention to this occupational misperception with this statement: "If a person is a woman, attractive, 5 feet 9 inches tall and blond, then she

can be employed as a PR practitioner. The occupation is as simple and simplified as this". Another continued to criticize: "A person who stands in front of a stand in a trade fair can easily be called as a PR person; because, nobody knows what real public relations is". These discussions supported the argument made by Keloğlu-İşler (2006) on confusion of PR persons with models.

Another dispute was on being in front of the public's eye. The majority manifested that the community members didn't see the efforts of PR people who organize the event; but, they saw an attractive woman who welcomed guests in the event and came to the conclusion that PR was all about appearing in ceremonies, cocktails, and so on. Therefore, the whole period was missed by people and what was publically seen by them was easily associated with public relations and a PR person. The participants' explanation affirmed the similar observation by Bowen (2009) in her statement about Samantha of Sex and the City serial. As suggested by several authors (Jo, 2003; White & Park, 2010) this misportrayal contributes nothing more than misunderstanding of the profession.

-Terminological Confusion

Terminological confusion of public relations has accelerated occupational confusion of the business. The participants acknowledged that the terminology of public relations was initially wrongly made up because of its translation mistake from English to Turkish. It was translated as *halkla ilişkiler* instead of *kamusal ilişkiler*; and this in turn, has caused a big misundertanding of the occupation in the eyes of both community and employers; because, it was understood as face-to-face interactions with people at special events which is an easy job and can be performed by any person without training. Grunig's (1992) terminological correction on using 'publics relations' (*kamusal ilişkiler*) in place of

'public relations' (*halkla ilişkiler*) is a good recommendation and a solution to both perceptional and terminological confusion of PR in Turkey.

-Relationship between PR Practitioners and Journalists

While PR oriented participants commented that unethical demands were coming from the press and broadcast media; journalist oriented participant claimed that it was coming from cooperations. One participant remarked that one of the biggest local newspapers in Turkey announces by fax to big companies that if they give 3 advertisements about their product/service to this newspaper, their news will be created and published about them. Her opinion affirmed the statements made by several authors (Çelebi, 2009a, İrvan, 2010, Koc, 2006, McGee, 1996, Paterson & Wilkins, 1991, Stanley, 1977, Supa & Zoch, 2009, Tsetsura & Grynko, 2009) on ethical concerns between PR practitioners and journalists. Her line of discovery went like this:

> I know this because my parents have a company and they received this announcement by fax. After this fax, I have started to track and examine the press coverage and have seen that after a certain company's advertisements had been published, a news release about this company appeared in this local newspaper.

One participant who works as a journalist looked at the abovementioned example from another perspective and gave an example from his working place: "There is a pressure from corporations to news agencies. Many corporations want to see their news release in the press, because they pay for advertising and if news is not published , they withdraw their advertising".

Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) mention that school training is a must for PR practitioners' working place socialization, but it is not as necessary for journalists as it is

for PR practitioners because journalists can adapt to a working place easily. The author doesn't agree with Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis, as it is also seen from participants discussion, there are a lot of mistakes going on for PR people and journalists who are interrelated to each other. A better and ethical practice can be only achieved, if both sides behave ethically; and one way of forming ethical behaviors can be by education in which ethics courses are valued.

Educational and Professional Issues

The second research question in this study asks from the students perspective, what the educational problems are in the field and what the students' suggestions are for better PR education and more Professional practice. In order to answer this research question, the researcher asked participants three interview questions. The first question is: When we look at the practitioners who work in the public relations field in Turkey, we see that some are lacking PR education. What do you think about it? The second question is: Do you think the curriculum of communication faculties in Turkey prepare the students to working life? If not, what kind of courses do you want from the curriculum? And the third question is: What can be done to create close relationships among PR practitioners, PR educators and PR students? The results of the interview questions were summarized as follows:

-Opinions on PR Practitioners' Education

There were different opinions about practising PR without proper training. Half of the participants considered that PR training is important, while the other half believed that it can be performed by a person whose character and abilities are appropriate to the

occupation. The participants who believed the importance of training supported the statements in the literature by Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) and Sayımer (2006). One of the participants reported:

> This is a normal situation for many occupations not only for PR. Sinan Çetin, for example, who is a famous director in Turkey, has graduated from Art History; similarly, Ferhat Göçer who is a famous singer in Turkey, has graduated from Clinical Medicine. Everybody should perform the job s/he is good at, no matter what their education is.

Another particpant questioned: "Why, then, are we trying to be specialized in our field? If anybody can do our job professionally, why are we forcing ourselves so hard to get knowledge about so many things to be a professional?". One said that without proper training, performing PR was possible, because it depends on the nature, character and abilities of a person. Another participant disagreed with this opinion and continued: "Not always good projects are produced; and its reason may be due to the lack of training, they don't plan PR activities properly, they don't know persuasive communciation or don't understand strategic communication".

Both the character of a person and his/her training is important for a bona fide PR profession. Therefore, the author suggests 'interviewing' those students who passed YÖK (Higher Education Institute) examination before the entrance of the department of public relations. During the interview process, their characters and nature can be understood by educators and the members of the department. This pre-selection of the students, I believe, provides the acceptance of the appropriate students to the universities, boosts improving the standards of graduates, and in turn, assists them to meet the needs and wants of the profession after graduation.

   -Opinions on Curriculums and Courses at Universities

The participants agreed that they were good at theory but bad at practising the theory. They wanted more practical courses in the curriculum. They also stated that they worked on project based duties in their 4th year; but, they needed to start doing projects earlier –in their first or second year. The participants' demands for practical courses were in supportive manner for the scholars who investigated and wrote about its importance (e.g., Akıncı-Vural & Başok-Yurdakul, 2004, Barry, 2005; Çelebi, 2009b, Yıldırım-Becerikli, 2004).

One of the students expressed that she stayed in the U.S. on a Fulbright bursary for 14 months. She confirmed earlier explanations about theory and practise imbalance and said: "The American university where I studied emphasizes practical courses which is more effective than only learning concepts". She also talked about the importance of occupation in the eyes of American public and her line of statement went like this:

> We are 50 years back from the U.S. When we say that we study public relations in Turkey, it is not valued enough and is seen as a simple and easy occupation. But, when we say that we study public relations in the U.S., it is seen as a prestigious occupation and serious business there. If, for example, you say that you study medicine at Hacettepe University in Turkey; it is very prestigious. Studying public relations is as prestigious as studying medicine in the U.S.

Although, the participants complained the profession was surrounded by ethical issues in their earlier discussions, none talked about the importance of public relations ethics course in their curriculum which was literally mentioned by DiStaso, Stacks, and Botan (2009).

-Opinions on Creating a Synergy among Practitioners, Educators and Students

The majority of participants didn't believe practitioners' visits of universities were an efficient way for the improvement of students which was stated as an effective method for academia-industry relationship by Cheng and Gregorio (2008). One participant said: "Some PR practitioners come to universites to make speeches at seminars and meetings, and students go to listen to them. Similarly, guest personalities are invited to the classes and they share their occupational experiences, but these are not effective arrangements". The participants wanted something more and looked for a solution for accelerating their motivations, coordinating their actions, and directing them to PR duties. Another suggested: "A platform in which both practitioners and students can work on the same project must be arranged. By that way, practitioners can convey his/her knowledge and experiences to us and we share our opinion with them". After this statement, the majority agreed that the projects of the private sector should be done and supported by industrious, willing, and keen students who were willing to do real projects for real agencies and consultancies. For better and fruitful outcomes, companies, consultancies and universities should be working together, as mentioned by Pabich (2003) in her example about the Polish branch of the management consultancy firm: Earnst & Young in its efforts of cooperating with universities. Another participant supported this point of view and came up with a new idea by saying: "There must be a unit in each sector –in media, advertising agencies, PR consultancies –in which willing PR students can work". Only one participant disagreed with this idea and said: "Nobody wants their work done by unprofessional students and that is why it doesn't work. Beyond that, the practitioners may not be willing to train a student, becuase they don't want a competitor".

The Requirements of Professionalism in PR

The third research question in this study asks in which way, the students view the requirements of the profession and the characteristics of a professional PR person. When the interview question was asked, participants had different answers. The participants expressed several competencies that a PR person must have and/or acquire like: curiosity, researcher spirit, enterprise, good diction, self-confidence, good appareance and body language, being persuasive, experienced, socially responsible, detailed oriented, a good observer, and so on.

One participant explained that a qualified PR person must be able to handle even tough clients. Another participant started a counter-argument by stressing how difficult it was for them to manage tough clients and examplified the situation from her internship program:

> I had my internship in a production company which produces many professional commercials and VNRs (video news releases). During testing period, it was assured that prospective customers like the production. But, one client wanted such an unbelievable and terrribly wrong and unprofessional changes on the production. Although, the specialists explained the rights and wrongs of the situation, the client insisted on those changes. Finally, what the client wanted is operated. As a result, the production became unsufficient and unprofessional. The mentality of a traditional boss is based on what I said should be done. When a practitioner in an agency in Istanbul says that the work done has a wrong strategy and is poorly designed; then, they say the agency is unsuccesful and change the agency from Izmir to Istanbul.

After this explanation, a dissenter participant said:

> In such a situation professionalism should come up, because one of the responsibilities of a PR person is to persuade the client that the correct and sufficient work has already done by them. In other words, if the practitioner thinks that what the client want is wrong, s/he should be able to persuade the client and and shape their opinions.

The abovementioned statement corroborates Liese Hutchison's words: Doing whatever a client wants and being a 'yes person' are the ones that give a bad name to the occupation. This discussion shows the importance of professionalism in PR; because, professionals, contrary to semi-professionals or unprofessionals, have background, skills, experience, and therefore, ability to persuade clients in the right decisions and directions. Thus, the result supports professional responsibility theory of public relations for a better and ethical application (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Grunig, 2000).

Another discussion was based on whether or not a PR person has a journalistic root. One participant stated that a good PR person has been historically a journalist both in Turkey and abroad. Another person disagreed with his idea and said:

> Today, it is not valid; because, public relations'role includes media relations, but not limited to it. A PR person may write a code of conduct for an organization; but, a journalist may fail to do so. Therefore, a journalist cannot be a PR person today.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Two decades ago, few PR degrees were available at the major governmental universities (e.g., Ege University, Istanbul University) and they were comprising of limited numbers of courses. In those years, PR students graduated from *Basın Yayın Yüksekokulu* (Media and Publication High School). Today, many degrees, alternatives, and varieties of course options are present at both governmental and private universities in Turkey. As a result of discussions in the focus groups, the students widely mentioned the importance of practical courses in their curriculum; however, they haven't mentioned courses based on PR ethics which must be an essential part of curriculums (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009). Including PR ethics courses alongside other startegic and

managerial courses and exhibiting some unethical examples may be an effective way to inhibit their unethical attitudes and actions, while reinforcing their professional behaviors (e.g., the professional responsibility theory).

Professionalism and its importance was expressed by Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) in the professional responsibility theory. In addition to ethical courses, theoretcial courses ought to be blended with applicational courses as much as possibe to increase professional, ethical, and responsible behaviors of graduates. The high percentages of theoretical courses in governmental (from 76% to 85%) and private (from 63% to 88%) universities (Yıldırım-Becerikli, 2004) show the necessity of including practical courses alongside theoretical ones. To do this, PR departments in communication faculties in Turkey may offer two different academic options where students can choose according to their interests and future orientations. A theoretical oriented option in which more theoretical PR courses (e.g., 70% theory vs. 30% practice) can be offered to the students who want to continue his/her academic education (e.g., master and Ph.D.) A practical oriented option may offer more practial PR courses (e.g., 70% practice vs. 30% theory) to the students who want to be practitioners. The first benefit of this new arrangement is while students are still studying, they can decide about their future orientation and occupation. The second benefit is the govermental and private sector may have more qualified practitioners; while universities may have more qualified researhers and scholars. The importance of such a work-force in the industry has been mentioned by Salim Kadıbeşegil and the importance of the vocational aspect of PR education has been mentioned by L'Etang. In this way, a qualified work-force who knows how to write a news release or do a market analysis can be trained in practice oriented PR departments. Theory-practice balance in education helps to graduate students who are knowledgeable and professional. Those professional graduates may

practice their job with enough standards and experience. This helps PR graduates to meet the requirements of the sector and inhibits the employment of PR people from other occupational areas.

Problem of influencial contact fosters the recruitment of unqualified persons as PR people. This situation combined with terminological confusion, employment of female workers more than male workers, and misportrayal of PR profession in news and entertainment media help the misunderstanding of occupation in the eyes of the public. The profession in the hands of unqualified employees creates wrong and unethical relationships with journalists. It is sometimes journalists who contribute to unethicality of the relationship and sometimes PR practitioners. It doesn't matter who is on the wrong side of the coin, this shows us the importance of education for more ethical and professional behavior for both journalists and PR practitioners, as they are interrelated to each other.

In addition to the abovementioned suggestions and implications, the following recommedations, based upon the focus group discussions, are offered for developing public relations profession and degree programs in Turkey:

(1) Lecturing practical courses –in which students can create campaigns- in the first year or second year, while at the same time giving instructions on how to design and manage campaigns with theoretical lessons.

(2) Careful and continual evaluation of PR sector and trends in the field, establishing a system for tracking and monitoring the changes.

(3) Keeping in touch with the practitioners and persuading practitioners and business people for the creation of a platform in which students, practitioners, and educators can work together.

(4) Interviewing students who passed YÖK examination, as an entrance requirement of department of public relations.

This initial look produced a plethora of information that explains student's perspectives on PR education and profession in Turkey as well as some prominent recommendations for the betterment of both education and profession. As popularity of public relations is growing all around the world, its educational issues and ethical consideration gain importance and future research is essential to better understand this field.

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