

## **Creativity vs. Ethics: Russian and U.S. Public Relations Students' Perceptions of Professional Leadership and Leaders**

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*The purpose of this study is to investigate possible similarities and differences in American and Russian public relations students' (N=377) interpretations of such concepts as leaders and leadership in public relations. Three open-ended questions were designed to examine the participants' perceptions of ethical issues and leadership in PR practice. After American (n=196) and Russian (n=181) students were surveyed, the authors coded their essay-like responses in accordance with emerged themes.*

*American and Russian students were similar in their perceptions of the public relations profession as prestigious and glamorous and PR leaders as superior to other leaders. Significant differences emerged between American and Russian participants on the three main issues—professional ethics, creativity, and the nature of leadership.*

*American students believed that public relations is inherently ethical and society-oriented, and they regarded moral values as the most important values for public relations leaders. Russian students perceived PR as an art that requires a talent, creative thinking, and knowledge of psychological methods of influence. U.S. respondents believed that public relations practice is transparent, whereas Russian participants considered public relations hidden persuasion. American respondents perceived public relations leadership as the ability to effectively collaborate with followers, whereas Russian participants thought that public relations leadership is the ability to dominate and impose leaders' opinions on team members.*

*The fact that American and Russian public relations students might possess an idealized perception of the profession calls for an assessment of teachers' instruction to create a more balanced and realistic image of the profession.*

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Leadership is one of the characteristics that builds excellent organizations. By creating a vision, excellent leaders can then empower followers to take part in implementing that vision (Grunig, 1992). A shared vision represents perspectives of not only the leader but also followers, and thus meets their needs and expectations (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007). The absence of a shared vision, along with other factors, might result in an organization's failure—ethical and

financial. The recent corporate scandals (e.g., Enron Corporation, Health South, Credit Suisse First Boston, Tyco Corporation, and WorldCom Inc) indicated that ethical misconducts can sometimes be linked to the unethical behavior of those who lead organizations (Mendonca & Kanungo, 2007).

In this regard, getting PR experts at board level or enlisting them in strategic planning (Thomas, 2002) is an essential task of public relations as a profession that strives for the legitimacy and credibility, which are central issues of leadership (Berger & Reber, 2006). PR practitioners' status, i.e., the "ethical conscience of the organization" (Bowen, 2007; Pratt, 1991), means that their concerns go beyond worries about financial success of their organizations. PR professionals bear responsibility and moral obligations not only to shareholders but to the larger society, which includes shareholders, consumers, employees, and local communities, among others. Social responsibility is a sign of ethical leadership, and the central question—*how* leaders exercise their influence over subordinates—leads us to a discussion of ethics.

Arnaud and Schminke (2007) argued that "Leadership and ethics represent a natural combination of constructs" (p. 213). This is why the history of leadership is a study of ideas about leaders *and* the ethics of leadership (Ciulla, 2002). Because leadership is a type of relationship, by understanding ethics we better understand the relationship between leaders and their followers: "The central issues in ethics are also the central issues of leadership" (Ciulla, 2003, p. xi).

The purpose of the present study is to examine PR students' interpretations of such concepts as *leader* and *leadership* in the context of the public relations profession. As future professionals, the participants are expected to demonstrate leaders' skills, character, and values in the workplace. Leadership is clearly a complex concept and process, and understanding begins with a deep comprehension of:

- The context of leadership (commitment, complexity, and credibility, as defined by Bennis and Nanus, 2005);
- Leader's values (order, liberty, equality, justice, and pursuit of happiness, as spelled out by Burns, 2003);
- Major leadership traits (intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability, as outlined by Northouse, 2007);
- Skills (*technical*, or knowledge about methods and processes; *interpersonal*, or knowledge about human behavior, and *conceptual*, or analytical ability and logical thinking, as summarized by Yukl, 1989);
- Moral leadership, or leaders' ethical conduct and their capacity to inspire the same behavior in followers (Rhode, 2006).

The present study is framed by the belief that "the future and credibility of public relations are tied to its leadership" (The Plank Center for Public Relations Leadership, n.d.). The Center, based in an educational institution, is committed to

nurturing effective public relations and developing outstanding leaders. This fact underlines the need for integrating a leadership process (Neff, 2002) into the PR curriculum, which ideally will result in narrowing the gap between what PR graduates can do and what practitioners and educators would like them to be able to do.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### *Leadership Concepts*

Conceptions of leadership have been classified in numerous schemes, which might be grouped into three broad sets: authoritative or transactional; pluralistic; and charismatic or transformational (Aldoory & Toth, 2004). The last one was conceptualized as almost synonymous with the notion of the “ethical leadership” (Ciulla, 2003).

In the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new paradigm of transformational-transactional leadership (Burns, 1978) proposed that the most effective form of leadership appeals to the higher and more comprehensive values held by followers, and, by gratifying lower needs, the leader stimulates higher motivations that elevate people’s conscience: “Essentially the leader’s task is consciousness-raising” (p. 43). According to Ciulla (2002), the theory of transformational leadership offered an answer to the question: “What is it that makes people want to follow leaders of their own free will?” (p.339), whereas previous academic inquiry was concerned with traits, characteristics and skills that made the leader effective.

As a normative theory, the transformational paradigm stipulates rather ideal relationships between leaders and their followers, seeing the leader as a person with value levels higher than those who follow him or her. This is why Burns’s theory is associated with “ethical leadership” (Ciulla, 2003). A century ago, scholars were mostly concerned with what made the leader successful, whereas today, an increasing attention has been paid to ethics—an aspect that may conflict the effectiveness of leader’s endeavor (Ciulla, 2002). An empirical question is whether in reality, leaders prioritize ethical beliefs over effectiveness.

The ethics of leadership were defined as “the obligations of leaders to promote justice, fairness, trust, and the conditions necessary for people to live well in communities that flourish” (Knapp, 2007, p. xii). Barendsen and Gardner (2007) argued that throughout history, good leadership has not been easy or unproblematic. However, leadership becomes an especially challenging endeavor in the period of rampant proliferation of technologies and globalization.

### *Leadership Scholarship*

Although hundreds of studies on leadership have appeared in the social science literature (Pavitt, Whitchurch, McClurg, & Peterson, 1995), there has been little research on leadership within the public relations field (Aldoory & Toth, 2004).

James Grunig (1992) argued that leaders of excellent organizations are committed to networking and “management-by-walking-around” rather than an authoritarian system: “Excellent leaders give power but minimize ‘power of politics’” (p. 233). Further, they foster a climate for promoting the so-called mixed-motive model, which is a combination of asymmetrical and symmetrical public relations, the most effective model in communication management (Grunig, 1992).

The two-way symmetrical model was found to be most suited for achieving a shared organizational agenda; if followers believe that they are well-informed about the leader’s vision, they are more likely to support that vision (Farmer, Slater, & Wright, 1998). The implication for public relations is that PR practitioners should help “the leader craft messages about the institutional vision” (Farmer et. al, 1998, p. 232).

Ashley and Patel (2003) found that a leader, who was an effective communicator, attracted a high degree of people’s support. Unlike governments, business organizations have severe limitations in trying to exercise coercive power (Nelson, 1990), and this is why communication as the language of leadership (Allert & Chatterjee, 1997) is an important attribute of organizational effectiveness.

As a rule, PR managers’ effectiveness is based on their ability to deal with multiple relationships, with both internal and external publics (O’Neil, 2003). This aspect defines PR practitioners’ role as boundary spanners (Leichty & Springston, 1996; Grunig & Grunig, 1991). There are two functions of boundary spanning in PR: Informational (gathering and processing information) and representational (representing the organization to multiple publics). In Springston and Leichty’s (1996) words, PR practitioners “represent the management philosophy to external publics and interpret the concerns of external publics to the organization’s management team” (p. 697).

Besides building relationships with their immediate subordinates, PR leaders must collaborate effectively with various departments within the organization—this function was termed as horizontal cross-functional coordination (Cornellisen & Thorpe, 2001). Moreover, they should establish themselves as influential figures in the “inner circle” (the dominant coalition), which includes managers with power to set organizational goals and mission and make strategic choices (O’Neil, 2003).

While the internal auditor is the eyes and ears of an organization’s finances, the public relations manager is the eyes and ears of an organization’s values and relationships (Allert, 1999). Thayer (1986) suggested that PR practitioners were best suited to the role of professionals who would facilitate a national dialogue about what kind of leaders America wanted and needed. Within the US public

relations community, there is a belief that charismatic and nationally recognized leaders would strengthen the profession's image (Berger & Reber, 2006).

Since leadership is a culture-specific concept, it is important to understand how leadership is conceptualized in different countries (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007). Discussing the genesis of Russian business culture and leadership, Grachev, Rogovsky and Rakitski (2007) argued that Russia, being a bridge between the West and East, has adopted the main values of the two hemispheres—reason and inspiration. As anywhere else in the world, in Russia, culture affects the national PR practice. As an example, Russian scholars (Kochetkova, Filippov, Skvorczov, & Tarasov, 2007) believed that in PR, a subsequent problem is not a copy of the previous one, and creative nature of PR makes it “not only a science but an art also” (p. 10). Furthermore, Chumikov and Bocharov (2007) said that creativity is the main component of PR practice. Since Russian media are more interested in scandals and business failure than positive news (Kochetkova et al., 2007), the scholars suggested that to make a PR event is attractive for the media, PR managers should tell a “half of truth” or “truth with elements of fiction, PR-fantasy” (p. 95). Such a fantasy approach to public relations seems to differ from a Western managerial concept of the profession. Yet, avoiding stereotyping is always welcomed in cross-cultural research, and the authors are cautious about making statements that oversimplify a particular culture and its influence on PR practice.

Based on the above discussion, this study attempts to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1: What are the perceptions of American and Russian public relations students regarding whether there are differences between leadership in PR and other professions?**

**RQ2: What does the phrase, “leadership in public relations”, mean for American and Russian public relations students?**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leadership studies were conducted by social scientists whose philosophy was positivism, or value-neutrality (Sloan, 1980; Rosen, 1980). This is one explanation for why twentieth-century scholars were more interested in examining leaders' personality traits than their values (Ciulla, 2002).

Rokeach (1973) defined a value as an “enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (p. 5). Rokeach (1973) argued that values, like beliefs, have a behavioral component along with cognitive and affective. It means that a value as an intervening variable leads to action after it is activated. Considering the complex nature of public relations and multiple responsibilities of practitioners, a situation of competing values is easily predictable. The question is whether a PR practitioner would be loyal to the

organization or the client, i.e., would a practitioner remain faithful to his or her own moral values, or make a decision in the behalf of the public?

Rokeach (1973) divided values into two categories: instrumental (idealized modes of behavior) and terminal (idealized end-states of existence). Examples of the former are “helpful, honest, imaginative”, whereas the latter would include “freedom, happiness, and inner harmony” (p. 28). Although it should not be expected that values predict behavior perfectly, Rokeach argued that socioeconomic, political, and religious values seem to predict behavior the best. A number of studies conducted or analyzed by Rokeach suggested that social background and personality draw people with certain values into a particular profession, whereas socialization *within* the profession was not found as a determinant of professional values. In this regard, the exploration of PR students’ values as future practitioners might be considered as no less important than the examination of PR professionals’ values.

Northouse (2007) suggested that although everyone has ethical responsibilities, leaders have a special—greater—responsibility: Values promoted by them have an impact on organizational values. According to Abbott (1988), professions grow, split, join, adapt, and die. He argued that for students of the professions, focusing on *forms* of professional life—association, licensure, and ethics code—missed the *contents* of professional activity—“who was doing what to whom and how” (p. 1) as well as “a fundamental fact of professional life—interprofessional competition” (p. 2).

In this light, it is important to understand the professions as an interdependent and competitive system. As an example, Abbott (1988) mentioned journalists’ efforts to formalize the professional structure in the 1920s in the U.S. under the pressure of competition with publicity agents. Abbott (1988) suggested that “mobility between journalism and public relations is quite common” (p. 225). Thus, competition between the two occupations over “jurisdiction”, or control over areas of work might be taken as the key to their development.

A profession as a social institution is responsible for promoting and sustaining certain values, and a professional ethics governs in a field (Wueste, 1994): “Because they profess, professionals ask that they be trusted” (p. 7). Acknowledging the importance of values in PR practitioners’ professional practice, the final research question is proposed:

**RQ3: What are American and Russian students’ perceptions of the three most important values for PR leaders?**

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The purpose of this study is to investigate possible similarities and differences in American and Russian students' (N=377) interpretations of such concepts as leaders and leadership in public relations.

### *American sample.*

The sample included 196 American public relations majors (67 males and 129 females). The students were recruited from an introductory PR course and two upper-level PR courses at a large southeastern university with more than 500 PR majors.

Participant ages ranged from 18 to 29, with a mean of 20 years old ( $SD=1.74$ ). The majority of American participants (108/196) were 19 and 20 years old. The sample consisted of 20 freshmen, 65 sophomores, 63 juniors, and 48 seniors.

Students completed the survey outside of class time and received modest credit for their participation. According to statistical data, about 73% of all PR students in this university were females in 2007. This number also is consistent with the overall figure of females (70%) in the public relations field in the United States (Aldoory & Toth, 2002).

This particular university does not have a free-standing course either in PR ethics or PR leadership, but ethical and leadership components are incorporated throughout the curriculum.

### *Russian sample.*

The sample comprised of 181 Russian public relations majors (20 males and 161 females). The students were recruited at a Russian university with 510 public relations majors.

Respondents' ages ranged from 17 to 37, with a mean of 20 years old ( $SD=2.45$ ). The sample consisted of 19 freshmen, 55 sophomores, 60 juniors, 14 seniors, and 33 fifth year students (higher education in the Russian Federation requires completion of five years). The fact that only 11 percent of the overall participants were males reflects the general situation in the public relations field in Russia, where the majority of practitioners are women (Tsetsura, 2005). In addition, statistical data from the university in which the surveys took place indicate that 12 percent of all PR majors in the university were male. In terms of gender, then, the sample was more or less representative of the population of PR majors at the university.

### *Questionnaire*

Three open-ended questions were designed to examine the participants' perceptions of ethical issues and leadership in public relations practice. These questions were drawn from previous studies on ethics and leadership in public relations (Berger & Reber, 2006; Aldoory & Toth, 2004; O'Neil, 2003; Allert, 1999; Thayer, 1986):

1. How is leadership in PR different from leadership in other professions?
2. What does "leadership in public relations" mean to you?
3. What are the three most important values for PR leaders?

In this study, ethics for the public relations profession was operationalized as "a set of a *priori* (italic in original) principles, beliefs and values that should be followed by all who engage in public relations practice" (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006, p. 21).

The researchers read student answers several times to identify emerging themes and develop a coding list (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These qualitative data were then coded by one of the researchers and a graduate student independently. Before performing coding, the student received an hour of training which aimed to provide her with definitions of the main concepts used in the study: ethics, responsibility, value, public relations, leadership, two-way communication, and boundary spanning. The intercoder reliability levels were established by using Holsti's formula; they were .92 or higher for all categories.

## **RESULTS**

The main pattern, drawn from data obtained in an American university, addressed the issue of ethics and related concepts (e.g., responsibility and honesty) in public relations leadership. The overall theme of Russian students' responses was the importance of creative approaches that appeared to be helpful in imposing PR leaders' views on followers. Both groups perceived public relations leadership is superior to leadership in other occupations.

### **RQ1: What are the perceptions of American and Russian public relations students regarding whether there are differences between leadership in PR and other professions?**

#### *American sample.*

The first research question focused on perceptions of public relations students regarding whether there are differences between leadership in PR and leadership in other professions. Of the 196 American students surveyed, 35 participants (17.86%) argued that there were few, if any differences. This view is represented in the following respondent comment:

Leadership in any profession is very important and I don't believe it differs in PR companies. Just like other businesses, PR people must be careful with decisions they make. Decisions affect everyone involved and people in the company, so they must be thought of in depth. I believe this goes for all business professionals.

Of the 196 U.S. students surveyed, 161 respondents (82.14%; 106 females and 56 males) said that public relations leadership is different from leadership in other professions (Table 1). Their responses were reflected in two primary categories. Responses in the first category (n=76; 47.20%) focused on a perceived special role of public relations in society and supra abilities of PR leaders. This category was labeled "Superiority".

As one participant wrote, "Leadership in PR is a job that keeps leadership in other professions with a clean state". Another argument may also suggest that American participants felt somewhat superior toward other occupations: "In PR you have to take a stand and sometimes do things you normally wouldn't do. You have to take risk". A few respondents depicted PR leaders as key organizational players: "The entire world is watching you, since you deal directly with the public. You also represent the personality of an entire organization". Another student stated, "Leadership in PR is different because you can be put in any situation, any crowd, and any debate". Echoing the previous statement, a participant wrote:

Many PR decisions are made quickly and the problems have a huge number of solutions. There is rarely one best way and not enough time to find all the possibilities. Therefore it is extremely important to be quick and decisive. The PR leadership is not afforded the same luxury as most other leadership.

The image of a PR leader as a high-status and high-skilled professional was supported in other reports that stated that compared to other leaderships, PR leadership is "a bigger challenge" and it requires "quicker problem-solving"; it involves "more risks and reliabilities" as well as "harder decisions" and "sacrifice". Finally, leadership in PR, according to respondents, required more skills, especially of persuasion skills, than needed in other leaderships: "In PR leadership, it involves having excellent communication skills, being an effective writer and using crisis management techniques".

Sixty answers (37.27%), aligned in the second category, emphasized the ethical foundation of PR leadership by mentioning such notions as honesty, morality, and responsibility. An example of the answer for this category is:

Leadership in PR deals with so many duties, the media, your staff, executives, and the public, to name a few. Other professions may deal with many of the same audiences, but do not face harsh

criticism in the public eye. Publics expect PR people to be very ethical in their practice, because they are delivering to so many audiences.

Another participant noted, “Leadership in PR requires motivation, creativity, and deep rooted morals. PR requires a moral compass and places the best interest at hand”. Although a few respondents mentioned creativity in their responses, only two participants focused on creativity as the main factor that distinguish PR leadership from leadership in other occupations.

In general, it appeared that participants perceived public relations as more ethical, more intensive, and more complex, compared to other occupations.

Table 1				
<i>American and Russian Participants’ Explanations of Ways in which Leadership in PR is Different from Leadership in Other Occupations</i>				
PR leadership is different because it is...	American students		Russian Students	
	Number of responses	%	Number of responses	%
Superior to other occupations’ leadership	76	47.2	27	21.43
More ethical	60	37.27	6	4.76
More creative	2	1.24	56	44
Other	23		37	
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>		<b>126</b>	

*Russian sample.*

Regarding the first research question, 22 of 181 participants (12%) stated that there were no differences between leadership in different professions. This opinion was reflected in the following statement: “The essence of leadership is the same regardless of an occupation”. Another participant remarked, “If a person is a leader, he will be a leader everywhere—in society, at work and among his friends”.

Thirty-four respondents (19%) did not provide answers to the first question. Of the 181 students surveyed, 126 respondents (70%; 121 females and 5 males) said that public relations leadership is different from leadership in other professions (Table 1). Their responses were coded in two primary categories. Fifty-six respondents (44%) emphasized the creativity of PR leadership by mentioning such notions as “creative mind”, “fresh thinking”, “new ideas”, and “nonstandard decisions”. An example of the answer for this category is: “To be a leader in PR, it’s not enough to have leadership characteristics. Besides being entrepreneurial, decisive, and efficient, a PR leader has to demonstrate a creative approach in every initiative”. Another respondent said, “PR is the only one occupation in which intuition is a prerequisite for success”.

Answers in the second category focused on supra abilities of PR leaders as “powerful and influential individuals”. According to 27 (21.43%) Russian students, PR leaders should possess a talent to “persuade and motivate followers”, “to influence various audiences”, “to manipulate”, “to network behind the scene”, and “to make a brave decision”. According to one participant, because of the dependency of a PR person on a boss or client, “PR leadership should be hidden and shouldn’t be obtrusive. Leadership should be cunning”.

Another participant believed that PR leadership is “more complicated form of leadership since PR leaders need to instill trust in their clients”. An overall theme of the responses coded as “Influential individuals” revealed that respondents perceived PR as rather semi-legal activities that are associated with risk-taking behavior and psychological methods of influence.

Only six participants highlighted ethics in their answers. As one participant said, “PR leadership means a clean reputation”.

In general, Russian respondents’ responses suggested that participants felt somewhat superior toward other occupations, perceiving PR as the activity that, unlike many other professions, requires energetic efforts, a variety of talents, and the ability to perform a number of functions simultaneously. In this regard, their responses were similar to American participants’ reports.

**RQ2: What does the phrase, “leadership in public relations”, mean for American and Russian public relations students?**

*American sample.*

The second research question was concerned with students’ interpretations of the concept of “leadership in public relations”. Of the 196 American students surveyed, 192 provided a valid report (Table 2). An answer was coded as “Ethicality” if a respondent linked PR leadership with an ethical conduct by mentioning “making ethical decisions”; “keeping ethics in mind”; having integrity and diligence”; and “being truthful”. For example, the following answer was coded as “Ethical leadership”:

Leadership in PR is being able to make strong ethical decisions in your work even if you know it hurts the bottom-line. Being able to guide those working with you and under you to have the same principles that you set, and letting them know it can be done the right way with the same success.

Overall, 105 out of 192 respondents (54.69%) perceived PR leadership through the ethics prism, emphasizing strong morals, integrity, trustworthiness, accountability, and fairness in PR leaders’ relationships with employees, clients,

and publics. They indicated that PR leadership is “Having responsibility to make the best decisions for the betterment of everyone, and stick to a moral code”.

Answers were coded as “Superiority” (n=67; 34.90%) if respondents depicted PR leadership as complex and superior to leadership in other occupations. The following responses are examples of this category: “Being able to be first with a solution or an idea. You must take control of situations in which the head of the company cannot or does not know how”; “Taking initiative, being the best, and directing the situation”; “Basically sacrifice self for the benefit of the company”; “Someone who is ready for anything”; “Leadership in PR is about making hard decisions under pressure that will have major consequences”.

Although the general perception of the profession was favorable, concern about unethical practices was nevertheless evident in student answers. As one participant said, “Because a lot of malpractice is done in PR, I feel that PR leaders must be willing to offer ethical choices to companies”. Another participant wrote,

I disagreed with the majority of the wrongful practices because I know I could not live with myself if I knew the choice I made would threaten the lives of innocent children, the common belief/standard held for my company. It all goes back to morals, and I think our society is forgetting the basic truths: this country was founded on truth, honesty, justice. If people in PR and in the workforce in general would remember that integrity and honesty are true qualities of a successful person, I think the world (business world, political world, etc.) would be a much better place!

Concerning ethical violations in PR practice, students emphasized the necessity to stand up for own moral beliefs: “Never compromise learned behavior, moral or values for another propagated ways”. Also, their answers suggested that future practitioners might confront unethical superiors’ decisions: “Leadership in PR means doing what you feel needs to be done, and not necessarily what your boss thinks”.

It appeared that creativity and persuasion as components of PR practice were not main focuses of American participants (Table 2).

Overall, responses for the second question revealed that participants were aware of the complexity of PR practice in part of an ethical conduct, but they believed that personal morals are able to sustain ethics in the profession.

<b>Table 2</b>				
<i>U.S. and Russian Participants' Interpretations of the Concept of PR Leadership</i>				
<b>Leadership in PR means...</b>	<b>American students</b>		<b>Russian Students</b>	
	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Ethicality</i>	105	54.69	4	3.1
<i>Superiority</i>	67	34.9	37	28.68
<i>Creativity</i>	3	1.56	41	31.78
<i>Persuasion/manipulation</i>	2	1.04	31	24.03
<i>Other</i>	15		16	
<b>Total</b>	<b>192</b>		<b>129</b>	

*Russian sample.*

The second research question focused on students' perceptions of the concept of "leadership in public relations". Of the 181 Russian students surveyed, 129 respondents (71%) provided a valid report (Table 2). Three principal themes emerged from student responses. Answers were coded as "Creativity" (n= 41; 31.78%) if respondents perceived PR leadership as the ability to lead followers by generating creative approaches at work. As an example, one Russian student wrote, "PR leadership is a fresh head, fresh ideas and (no doubts) a sober mind; and sober decisions that a leader spices with a small portion of risk". Another student said, "PR leadership is the ability to manage conflicts and find the right solution for any problem, and a PR leader demonstrates this ability in a creative manner. Always".

Russian students' responses were coded as "Persuasion/manipulation" (n=31; 24.03%) if they contained the theme of covert influence that PR leaders exercise to accomplish their task. For example, one female student explained, "The main thing is that others should not be aware that that you are the leader, but they should feel it at the subconscious level and follow your recommendations and decisions". Another participant echoed the previous opinion by saying, "Leadership in PR is the ability to achieve your goal by any means, while everyone is sure that you do the right things". Other respondents linked the professional leadership with the ability to "manipulate employees by using techniques of persuasion"; "make people think in the way you think"; "employ the neuro-linguistic programming"; "influence thoughts and behaviors of people"; and "make people obey your decisions".

The third group of Russian participants (n=37; 28.68%) linked the occupational leadership with "success", "victory", "dominance", "competition among PR practitioners", "being the best", and "supremacy". This category was labeled "Superiority" (Table 2). This group of students perceived leadership mainly as the capacity to excel and surpass others in the profession or organization; they

thought that leadership in PR is best manifested through PR managers' professional success. A glamorous aspect of their view of the profession was evident in responses like "PR leadership is the ability to pursue and achieve a victory", "PR leadership means to be much better and higher than others", and "a PR leader has the power to inspire people; he is a good orator. Overall, it means that he is the best in his field".

Only four Russian participants mentioned ethics, integrity, and societal interests while deliberating about the concept of public relations leadership (Table 2). In general, Russian students viewed PR leadership as the ability to come up with creative ideas while "taking reality in consideration", exercise unlimited covert influence on followers, network with the powerful figures, and gain the reputation of the most talented and skillful PR professionals.

### **RQ3: What are American and Russian students' perceptions of the three most important values for PR leaders?**

#### *American sample.*

The third research question focused on students' perceptions of the three most important values for PR leaders. One hundred and ninety one participants (97.45%) gave usable answers. Overall, 153 out of 191 participants (80.10%) came up with values associated with moral conduct (Table 3). An example is:

Truth is important, because without it people would start to discredit PR leaders. That would lead to a decrease of jobs in the industry. Respect gives PR leaders dignity. This allows others to look at PR leaders with respect too. Finally consideration for all sides is important. PR leaders should learn how to look at all sides of an issue to get an accurate picture.

Responses that did not mention ethics categories were coded as "Other values". The following responses exemplify the second category: "Reputation, money, hard work"; "Appearance (how you present yourself to the public eye)"; "Good writing ability"; and "marketing/management skills".

Respondents (n=196) were asked to identify the three most important values for PR leaders; therefore, the expected number of reported values should have been 588. Participants named 552 legible items that aligned with categories developed by Rokeach (1973). Three of the categories were terminal: *Wisdom, A comfortable life, Social recognition*, with 1, 2, and 13 responses respectively. Other categories, and most of the responses, were instrumental: *Ambitious, Broadminded, Capable, Courageous, Helpful, Honest, Imaginative, Independent, Intellectual, Logical, Loving, Obedient, Polite, Responsible, and Self-controlled*

In a qualitative study that asks to provide written answers to questions on a particular topic, it is important to treat participants' reports not as a collection of

answers but rather as a coherent report, even if the report consists of three parts. Such an approach allows researchers to see, along with other opportunities, whether a consequent answer validates a prior one.

In this regard, an important finding of this study is that the theme of ethical PR leadership that emerged in answers to the first two questions was supported in answers to the third question. American participants came up with 552 values that are the most important for PR leaders, and 218 (39.49%) of them fitted the category *Honest*, which included such terms as honesty, integrity, ethics, trustworthiness, fairness, truth and so forth.

In this light, it might be suggested that U.S. PR students viewed a professional leadership as a transforming one (Burns, 2003), which is a process of appealing to moral values of followers. Obviously, such a process is more effective when the leader exhibits the ethical standards which he or she promotes (Carlson & Perrewe, 1995).

Importantly, American respondents regarded such values as competency and effectiveness (“Capable” category) as the second most important values, whereas helpfulness, or the eagerness to work for the well-being of others), was regarded as the third most important value of PR leaders.

#### *Russian sample.*

The third research question focused on students’ perceptions of the three most important values for PR leaders. One hundred and fifty two Russian participants (84 %) gave usable answers (Table 3). Since participants (n=181) were requested to name the three most important values for PR leaders, the expected number of values should have been 543. Respondents came up with 439 legible items that fitted categories developed by Rokeach (1973). Two of the categories were terminal: *Social recognition* and *A sense of accomplishment*, with 10 and 2 responses respectively. Other categories, and most responses, were instrumental: *Ambitious, Capable, Courageous, Helpful, Honest, Imaginative, Independent, Intellectual, Logical, Loving, Obedient, Polite, Responsible, and Self-controlled* (Table 3).

	American students		Russian Students	
	Number of responses	%	Number of responses	%
1. Honest	218	39.49	11	2.51
2. Capable	77	13.95	109	24.83
3. Helpful	61	11.05	17	3.87
4. Ambitious	42	7.61	39	8.88
5. Imaginative	37	6.7	123	28.02
6. Obedient	18	3.26	6	1.37
7. Responsible	18	3.26	2	0.46
8. Self-controlled	16	2.9	14	3.19
9. Intellectual	14	2.53	50	11.39
10. Other	35	6.34	34	7.74
<b>Total</b>	<b>552</b>		<b>439</b>	

Importantly, the theme of creative PR leadership that emerged in responses to the first two questions was supported in answers to the third question. It appeared that the majority of Russian participants (n=123; 68%) regarded creativity (“innovative thinking”, “original approaches”, imaginative mind”) as the most important value of PR leaders.

As one respondent said, “Without creativity, it’s doubtful whether PR managers can do their job”. Another participant said, “A common view sees creative people as disorganized people. That’s not truth in part of PR leaders, who are creative thinkers and highly organized individuals”.

The theme of the effectiveness of PR leaders to inspire followers and achieve organizational goals was the second most frequent topic mentioned (n=109; 24.83%). Such qualities as “the ability to motivate people to work hard”, “will power”, “the ability to reach designated goals”, and “purposefulness” appeared to be valued high by Russian participants. In the venue of the broader theme, “Capable”, the topic of concealed influence on people’s minds emerged in 17 responses. As an example, one female respondent said, “For PR leaders, it’s important to manage people in such a manner that the people don’t realize that they are being managed”. Another female participant echoed by saying that the most important qualities of PR leaders are “knowledge and the ability to use psychological methods of persuasion”.

The theme of influence was intertwined with the topic of secretiveness. A male participant, addressing the issue of most important leader’s characteristics,

wrote: “A cold head, a hot heart, and (if it’s possible) clean hands”. It was a slightly modified motto of the Soviet secret service, KGB (“A cold head, a hot heart, and clean hands”).

Intelligence was the third most important value indicated by Russian participants. They underlined that only well-educated and intellectual PR practitioners, who possess logic and knowledge in a variety of spheres, are able to make effective decisions. In other words, intelligence was a prerequisite for success in public relations.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

By examining perceptions of Russian and U.S. public relations students regarding professional leadership and leaders, this study showed that future professionals who study in different countries might have views that are strikingly similar in one aspect and significantly different in another.

American and Russian students were similar in their interpretations of the public relations profession as prestigious and glamorous and PR leaders as talented, multi-tasking, and charismatic individuals. The majority of American and Russian participants indicated that PR leadership is different from leadership in other occupations. The respondents underlined that such universal leadership qualities as “problem-solving abilities”, “communication skills”, “creativity”, “effectiveness”, and “connecting with followers” acquired a special importance in the PR industry.

Compared to other professions, in public relations, leaders need to react fast, take risk, and anticipate a crisis situation. As one participant said, “A person must be strong in attitude for tough situations that might arise”. Another respondent echoed, “You have to be ready for whatever this job throws at you. You have to think on your feet and be on call 24/7”. Overall, both American and Russian respondents viewed PR leaders as super heroes or individuals who are in charge of every single issue at their organizations. Both groups agreed that the ability of PR leaders to be capable (competent, effective) is one of the main professional values.

Significant differences emerged between the two groups on three main issues—professional ethics, creativity, and the nature of leadership.

### *Ethics perception.*

Although there were a few American respondents who perceived public relations practice as primarily promotional or manipulative activities (“Keep on your toes at all times, they have to be a master of spin”), the vast majority of U.S. participants regarded the profession as an ethical endeavor. As one student said about PR leadership, “Ethical issues are more prevalent than in other occupations”. Importantly, U.S. respondents addressed the issue of social responsibility in their

responses: “Leadership in PR basically requires that one do what they feel the majority of society will agree with”.

Besides the fact that American students believed that the PR practice is inherently ethical and society-oriented, they regarded moral values as the most important values for PR leaders. As for Russian students, few of them addressed the issue of ethical conduct in their reports (“Moral aspects are more important in PR than in other professions since PR is perceived as liars’ occupation”). Russian respondents appeared to believe in manipulative nature of public relations and “the ability to pull the strings”, meaning to influence and control the public.

However, anecdotal data show that the notion of “manipulation” might be used in the meaning of “persuasion” rather than “deception” in Russian PR. Russian scholars seemed to be comfortable with using such an expression as “manipulative techniques” and explaining advantages of neuro-linguistic programming to students (Yudina, 2007). Overall, while American students perceived public relations as open communication and ethical persuasion, Russian students appeared to believe that PR is hidden communication and concealed persuasion. Further research is needed to examine the meaning behind the notions that are perceived in rather pejorative terms (e.g., manipulation) in the West.

#### *Creativity.*

Compared to American participants, who appeared to be concerned with professional ethics and morality, the majority of Russian respondents focused on creativity which, in their opinion, is essential to accomplish PR tasks. They perceived the PR practice as an art that requires unique approaches and creative thinking. In one respondent’s words, “Creativity and uniqueness are the main qualities on which PR is judged”. Importantly, such a perception is consistent with Russian scholarship on public relations that analytical and creative abilities are key abilities in PR (Chumikov & Bocharov, 2007; Yudina, 2007).

It appeared that Russian students thought that PR practice in Russia takes two to tango—creative approaches and the ability to influence the publics. It might be implied that creativity serves as a reinforcing power to PR efforts to “implement a project by any means”. As one female student said, “In PR, the means often justify the end”. Another Russian respondent believed that “creativity of a PR leader directs the followers to the right path”. In this regard, Kochetkova et al. (2007) argued that the main functions of PR—planning, organizing, informing publics, and evaluation of effectiveness—are deeply psychological. This is why PR managers have to be able to use psychological instruments of management while communicating with the audience; they have to be able “to persuade, to implement creative mental operations, and make effective decisions” (p. 10).

Oversimplifying, it appeared that for American participants, public relations is planned, well-organized, and ethical communication, whereas for Russian respondents, public relations is an inspirational art, in which the audience is hardly aware about being part of a play. In this regard, Ul'yanovsky (2005) argued that compared to the Russian mentality, the Western model is characterized by a "high level of the rational verbalization of interests" (p. 398). An implication for PR is that Russian practice might exemplify rather an indirect and lacking pragmatism communication process.

*The nature of leadership.*

In general, American students perceived leadership as the "ability to listen to others and take to heart what they say". Another U.S. participant argued that the essence of leadership is the "ability to effectively lead a team through a situation with the best possible outcome and maintain the unity".

Russian respondents differed from American participants on the issue of the nature of leadership. While U.S. students emphasized a close tie of PR leaders with their followers, Russian participants pictured PR leaders as individuals who are "always being one step ahead of everyone else" and "above the crowd".

Although both groups thought that "the leader is in charge to lead", Americans underlined the necessity to "always consult with others in the group to get input on issues and certain situations", whereas Russians believed in such a practice as "making others to look at a situation with your [leader's] eyes". In other words, Russian participants thought that leaders should impose their opinions on employees rather than take in consideration followers' opinions. It might be implied that American participants believed in democratic nature of leadership, whereas Russian respondents saw leadership in the context of Russian authoritarian culture (Bahry, Boaz, & Gordon, 1997). Moreover, American PR students appeared to perceive PR as a rational (logical) dialogue with the publics, whereas Russian participants believed in a dialogue at the emotional level, which is consistent with American and Russian national cultural matrixes (Ul'yanovsky, 2005).

The sense of pride about the profession is one of the components of professionalism, along with a practitioner's willingness to promote the image of the profession and pursue qualities and ideals within the profession (VanZandt, 1990). The students' pride about public relations was noticeable in many reports. As an example, a participant, explaining what "leadership in PR" means to her, wrote: "To me it means being successful and hard-working, caring and self-motivated person. It means *being good as your job*" (italic is added).

The words, *value* and *leader*, could be key words that evoked ethics associations consistent with professional ethics. It might be assumed that positive connotations of "value" and "leader" elevated respondents' interpretations of PR leaders' values to the level of rhetoric: "Integrity (standing up for what you know

is right), honesty (even if it means admitting that you screwed up), fairness (treating others with decency and respect)". Put another way, student attribution of high values to PR leaders was based on ideal beliefs rather than on reality: Groups like Corporate Watch and Center for Public Integrity (Bowen, 2007) would argue that there is a substantial gap between the student picture of a PR leader and real PR practices.

Overall, based on existing scholarship and anecdotal data, it appeared that Russian and U.S. students' perceptions of PR and leadership reflected national PR practices, teaching approaches, and such environmental variables as economic, political, social, and cultural.

This study contributes to an understanding of the image of the PR profession and leadership held by future practitioners from Russia and the U.S. The fact that American and Russian PR students might possess an idealized perception of the profession has its implications for PR education. Particularly, it calls for an assessment of teachers' instruction in part of creating a more balanced and realistic image of the profession.

More research in the university setting is needed, especially in the light of Rokeach's (1973) finding that determinants of professional values are social background and personality that draw people with certain values into a certain profession, and not socialization in the workplace. By knowing students' beliefs, one might possibly speculate about the future of public relations. The profession needs to gain public trust and compete with other occupations in order not to become dependent on or subordinate to other professions, or even to disappear (Abbott, 1988).

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