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Toward the Establishment of Ethical Standardization in Public Relations Research, Measurement and Evaluation¹

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Abstract

Research is an enormous part of the public relations function. A review of the literature on ethics in public relations research concludes that it is severely lacking study. To move the public relations field as a whole toward professionalization, ethical standards for the conduct of research, the treatment of both data and humans, and the values underlying the meaning of data should be agreed upon. To answer the Research Question, “How do professional associations that deal with public relations research, both academic and professional, express codes of ethics, statements, or conduct regarding the ethical practice of research? If they have an ethics guideline, what principles or values are espoused?” we collected data on ethics from 14 associations – both professional and academic. We compared 5 principles of ethics and 18 core values across the statements, examined the philosophical basis for a complete statement and a close example from one organization. Based on the literature and on our data, we then offer a normative ethics statement to guide research standards in public relations. We hope that this research spurs discussion and a move to foster and standardize ethics in public relations research, measurement, and evaluation.

Purpose

In a recent article, Michaelson and Stacks (2011) argued for the standardization of public relations measurement and evaluation. The authors averred that measurement and evaluation should move beyond a “best practices” orientation, which is methodological in nature, and move toward a standardization of measurement and evaluation, which is professional in nature, to create a level of consistency across the profession. In another article, Michaelson, Wright, and Stacks (in press) argue for standardization of public relations programming and campaigns. Similarly, Bowen (2010a) argued for a new public relations ethics paradigm. Her model

distinguished between consequentialist (or utilitarian) and deontological (or principled) approaches to the ethical practice of public relations/corporate communication.² The need for standards of public relations ethics, especially in terms of measurement and evaluation, follows Michaelson and Stacks' line of reasoning based on a professional standard, and values acting as a true counseling function rather than simply as an advocate for whichever client is paying the bill.

Simultaneously, the Institute for Public Relations' Commission on Measurement and Evaluation (<http://www.instituteforpr.org/research/commissions/measurement/>), a learned group studying research and measurement from professional and academic standpoints, created a committee of members to explore ethical standards in research. The Ethics Task Force (<http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/ethical-standards-and-guidelines-for-public-relations-research-and-measurement/>) conducted formative research to understand the ethical nature of public relations in terms of the values that measurement and evaluation should possess. This approach differs from the concept of *codification*; instead it focuses on the core values that underlie the ethical standards of the profession. Although there are many ethical codes found in many professional associations, that which comes closest to research value standards are found in research societies, such as the American Association for Public Opinion Research (http://www.aapor.org/AAPOR_Code_of_Ethics/4249.htm), that emphasizes “principles of professional responsibility” (np). Although public relations relies heavily on research—formative, strategic, and evaluative—we had to turn to the research specialty to find supporting information.

Interestingly, most public relations ethics codes, either as subsets of larger communication codes or related to public relations associations, either do not mention research ethics or put ethical research on as wide a platform as possible. It is for this purpose that the authors undertook the study of research ethics in public relations in hopes of beginning to move the field, as it professionalizes, toward a standardized ethical values system that can help to

drive data collection, measurement, analysis, and interpretation. By moving the conversation about ethical standards in research forward, we also seek to add to the professional standards in the field and to distance the public relations function from its historical roots in unethical practices that lead to modern-day credibility questions and legitimacy gaps for the field.

Codes and Conduct versus Standards and Statements

To avoid confusion, we must define a few key terms before moving forward to ethical standards in research. Ethics is based on a value system that guides decision making, indicating which actions have moral worth or which actions are right or wrong. In general parlance, people refer to codes of ethics as a large class of guidelines to moral behavior. However, to ethicists, codes of ethics are specific and differ from both codes of conduct and ethics statements or statements of standards. The differences in the lexicon of ethics may seem small, but correct terminology is important to help us determine what *type* of standard should provide a standardized ethical guideline for the conduct of research in public relations.

According to DeGeorge (2010), a code of ethics is a list of guidelines specific to an industry that is normally written in negative terms, such as, “You should *not* disclose proprietary information to others.” Codes of ethics are often the means to deal with the most common dilemmas in a profession, but often exclude certain situations entirely, offer contradictory advice, or do not provide enough specificity to be helpful, such as offering advice to advocate for the client but no guidance on exaggeration in promotions or the use of hyperbole as part of that advocacy.

In public relations, codes of ethics have also been criticized for other reasons. Wright (1989) argued that the codes are unenforceable, meaning that ethical violations at most result in the mere expulsion of the researcher from the particular association. Parkinson (2001) contended that the codes lack acceptable professional basis because of their lack of enforceability, as contrasted with law or accounting, and that requiring practitioners to adhere to such a poor and at times self-contradictory standard was, in itself, unethical. Although the major

professional societies vary in the sophistication of their codes and many codes have been rewritten due to these critiques, the inherent weaknesses of a code still persist. Even so, these codes of ethics fail to specifically address research, measurement, data collection and analysis, or the treatment of human subjects.

Codes of conduct are another form of guidelines that are more legalistic in nature, often focusing on what is legal (or illegal) rather than what is moral (or immoral) (Raiborn & Payne, 1990). Codes of conduct are often written as lengthy documents that reflect what Raiborn and Payne (1990) described as “basic” moral standards or “the letter of the law” seen through attainable behavior that is “deemed basically moral by society” (p. 885). The problem with codes of conduct is that they often let the concern of ethics fall by the wayside in favor of legal concerns (Sims & Brinkman, 2003; Bowen & Heath, 2005; Wood & Rimmer, 2003). Or, if ethics is included in the document it is likely to be given short space and little attention. For example, Bowen’s (2010b) analysis of Enron’s conduct document found that ethical guidelines were mentioned on one page of 56 total: Ken Lay, the CEO, espoused ethical principles such as integrity in the introduction, but failed to again mention ethics or how to enact that integrity in the Enron workplace. That study reinforced similar conclusions about the Enron culture mattering far more than its documents by Sims and Brinkman (2003) and Bowen and Heath (2005).

Organizational culture can be defined as the interior personality and substance of an organization, including what it values (Smircich & Calas, 1987). The idea of organizational culture playing a significant role in ethics is not new; numerous scholars have found culture to be the most important factor in ethical decision-making (Sims, 1994; Bowen, 2004; Key, 1999; Jovanovic & Wood, 2006). For that reason, many who study the issue argue that ethical statements or standards, such as a values or core principles statement, are more helpful than either codes of ethics or codes of conduct (Murphy, 1998).

Ethics statements, including standards, principles, and core values statements, are written with positive wording, as to what one should support, reward, look for in a situation, or

foster (as opposed to the more common negative phrasing traditionally found in codes of ethics). Such positive wording promotes the robust contemplation of ethical issues rather than the sweeping aside that can happen when it becomes taboo in an organizational culture to discuss such matters (Bowen, 2004). Ethics statements provide guidance, but not specific solutions; rather, they list the moral principles one should consider when making decisions. Such values could range from honesty to innovation, duty to responsibility, from character to commitment, collaboration to courage, or from leadership to moral autonomy.

Building ethics into the organizational culture can help employees resolve the vagueness or ambiguity that often comes with ethical questions by helping them prioritize what to consider in a resolution (Nwachukwu & Vittell, 1997). These types of statements also serve to keep all of the members of an organization apprised of what is valued and supported in the firm, and what will be rewarded in their own management. As long as the document is used as a discussion and analysis tool, it becomes an instrumental way to promote a cohesive organizational culture that values ethics. Discussion of ethics, rather than assuming one automatically knows what is ethical, leads to a supportive organizational culture and enduring resolutions of ethical dilemmas, helping to build relationships with publics (Bowen, 2004).

For these reasons, the authors believe that a normative ideal should be an ethics statement, as opposed to a code of ethics or code of conduct. An ethics statement should guide public relations research and analysis to be the most responsible it can be. Although much research has been conducted about the ethics of survey design and of using human subjects (Sieber, 1992, 1993), that research is not specific to the public relations industry where the analysis of data and the interpretation of results can determine how issues are resolved, shape public opinion, and to form public policy. That significant amount of power means that public relations research and analysis must be conducted with utmost ethical responsibility and rectitude.

The Phoenix Rising from the Past

The press agency days of P.T. Barnum involved little or no research and did much to damage the credibility of public relations. To some extent, the field still suffers from a credibility gap brought on by its connection to the hyperbole of press agency or the manipulation of propaganda. Scholars (Lamme, L'Etang, & St. John, 2009) urge examination of public relations' relationships to power elites, propaganda sensibilities, and its "historical relationship to truth, authenticity, and ethics" (p. 158). It has also been argued (L'Etang, 2004; Bowen, 2007, 2008) that calling public relations an ethical counsel or ethical advisor seems to lack credibility or authenticity based on the historical underpinnings of the field and the activities of press agency and propaganda.

To varying degrees, research, measurement, and evaluation have been a part of the public relations process since its modern inception. If one views the public relations process as one of the popular acronyms such as "RACE" then research is involved in almost 3/4 of the strategic planning process (Research, Strategic Action Planning, and Evaluation). Today's practice, however, has put a much higher value on measurement and evaluation of results. In particular, the drive to produce support for public relations' impact on client bottom lines (as defined in financial and nonfinancial terms) or Return on Investment (ROI) versus Return on Expectations (ROE) has moved the profession towards more sophisticated methodologies and a focus on best practices (Bowen, Rawlins, & Martin, 2011; Stacks & Michaelson, 2011).

Ethics should be part of those best practices throughout the public relations process. As Bowen et al. (2011) noted:

Issues managers must identify potential problems, research must be conducted, and both problems and potential solutions must be defined in an ethical manner. Therefore, **ethics** can be defined for public relations as *how we ought to decide, manage, and communicate*. (p. 130) (Emphasis original)

Although the idea has been critiqued, many public relations professionals, as keepers of an organization's reputation, are also called upon to provide ethical guidance to their dominant coalitions (Bowen, 2008; Berger & Reber, 2006; Curtin & Boynton, 2001). Those dominant coalitions manage issues and support the conduct of research. As noted above, there is currently no standard guideline for public relations research, data analysis, or evaluation of effectiveness. In the current state of affairs, the ethics of individual firms or practitioner's guide the research process. That approach is haphazard and leads to a startling lack of consistency in ethical standards across the field. Indeed, very little ethical guidance is offered that is specific to public relations research. In terms of books dedicated to public relations research, Broom and Dozier (1990) do not include the term "ethics" in their index or offer comment. Brody and Stone (1989) include the term in their index, but their treatment is in terms of conduct and does not discuss ethics as a separate section. The only in-depth treatment of ethics is found in Stacks, which has included a chapter on research ethics in both its first (2002) and second (2011) editions. However, specific guidelines would help to unify the field and lead to a more consistent application of ethics across all forms of data collection and analyses.

An Analysis of Professional Codes and Statements on Research

Although the concept of research ethics is not new, its treatment in communication research methods texts was underplayed until the publication of *Essentials of Communication Research* (Stacks & Hocking, 1992) and the *Primer of Public Relations Research* (Stacks, 2002, 2011). Part of the purpose of this manuscript is to identify the scope and nature of research codes and statements, in an exploratory manner. As such, we asked the Research Question, "How do professional associations that deal with public relations research, both academic and professional, express codes of ethics, statements, or conduct regarding the ethical practice of research? If they have an ethics guideline, what principles or values are espoused?"

Method

To answer the research question an analysis of 14 professional associations' published ethical codes or statements were examined. The associations chosen were from those which serve public relations professionals and whose members conduct research on public relations programs or for public relations departments and firms. In addition, an Internet search using the terms "research," "ethics," "standards," and/or "code(s)" was employed to ascertain if there were any other associations that might be included in the analysis.³ The academic associations included the professional education associations that have well-known public relations divisions or interest groups.

The professional associations included the

- American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR),
- American Marketing Association (AMA),
- Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO),
- Institute for Public Relations Measurement Commission (IPRMC)
- International Association of Business Communicators (IABC),
- International Chamber of Commerce (ICC),
- International Public Relations Association (IPRA)
- Marketing Research Association (MRA),
- Promotional Marketers Association (PMA),
- Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), and
- Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA).

The educational associations included the

- Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (AEJMC),
- International Communication Association (ICA), and
- National Communication Association (NCA).

All association codes or statements were downloaded from their published websites and reflect the most up-to-date codes and statements.⁴ This qualitative study seeks to present a snapshot of what currently exists in the field as a basis for furthering our understanding of ethical standards in public relations research. Although we attempted to be complete, we were not exhaustive.⁵ Our results pertain only to the organizations we studied and are not suitable for generalization, but are best suited for in-depth understanding of the state of research ethics in public relations among the major associations.

Analysis

Each association's code or statement was printed and analyzed for the having an existing ethics code or standard published, a formal research ethics code or statement, if so whether there were stated research principles, and, finally, whether 18 core research ethics values were present. Titles were examined to see if they included the words "research," "code," or standard(s)" and, finally, whether the material included an ethics enforcement statement. All were coded as either present or absent. The five research principles identified from previous research were: *Intellectual Honesty, Fairness, Dignity, Disclosure, and Respect for All Involved*. To be coded as present the principles had to be clearly articulated statements.

The 18 core values identified from previous research (Institute for Public Relations, 2012) were: *Autonomy, Respondent Rights, Fairness, Balance, Duty, Lack of Bias, Not Using Misleading Data, Full Disclosure, Discretion, Judgment, Protection of Proprietary Data, Public Responsibility, Intellectual Integrity, Good Intention, Reflexivity, and Moral Courage and Objectivity*. The core values were examined even if the association did not have a stated research ethics code or standards on the belief that many simply included the values as part of their general ethics statements.

Results

The results are presented as descriptive analyses of the research question. Please see the Appendix for a grid of all 14 associations that reviews their ethics statements and principles

and core values. Returning to our Research Question, “How do professional associations that deal with public relations research, both academic and professional, express codes of ethics, statements, or conduct regarding the ethical practice of research?” our results are reassuring. Of the 14 associations examined, all were found to have a published ethics statement on their websites. Interestingly, not all were easily assessable and two required member access. The majority of the websites had a direct link to their ethical statements, but several required a search of the website.

Table 1**Associations, Publication Titles, & Key Words**

Association*	Publication Title	Key Words
AAPOR	The Code of Professional Ethics and Practices (Revised May, 2010)	Code Ethics Professional
AEJMC	AEJMC Code of Ethics Research	Code Ethics Research
AMA	AMA Code of Ethics	Code Ethics
CASRO	Code of Standards and Ethics for Survey Research	Code Ethics Research
IABC	IABC Code of Ethics for Professional Communicators	Code Ethics
ICA	Ethics Statement: ICA General Statement on Standards	Ethics Standards Statement
ICC	ICC/ESOMAR International Code on Market and Social Research	Code Research
IPRMC	Ethical Standards and Guidelines for Public Relations Research and Measurement (Version 1.0)	Ethics Guidelines Research Standards
IPRA	The “Code of Conduct”	Code Conduct
MRA	The Code of Marketing Research Standards	Code Research Standards
NCA	Ethical Statements Platform: NCA Credo for Ethical Communication (1999)	Credo Ethics Statements,
PMA	Code of Ethics	Code Ethics
PRSA	Public Relations Society of America Code of Ethics	Code

	2000	Ethics
QRCA	Code of Member Ethics	Code Ethics

NOTE: List is different from Appendix due to use of abbreviations.

An analysis of the titles associated with the various codes and statements clearly articulate a focus on codes of ethics (see Table 1). Approximately one-half include the key words “research” and “code” in their titles; three contain “standards” and two employ the key word “statement.” In addition, only the Institute for Public Relations Research and Education’s Measurement Commission includes an active word by including the word “guidelines” in its title.

Analyses of the published research found that all have published ethical codes or standards. Not all, however, include research as a major set of statements or principles but many make reference to specific core values that one would associate with research (e.g., autonomy, disclosure, proprietary nature of data).

General ethics statements. Table 2 presents the findings of the overall ethics materials found on the websites in terms of the type of statement, how it is stated, and whether it has an enforcement statement. As noted, all 14 associations had published ethics statements. Ethics statements were phrased philosophically in approximately one-third of the associations and as codes of conduct in the other two-thirds. A large majority were stated positively, that is over 80% were not stated as a negative (i.e., members shall not), but most contained at least one or two “thou shall not” statements. Finally, only one-fifth of the associations reported enforcement statements, primarily associated with banishment from the association; interestingly, they were found only for professional associations and only in four of the eleven.

Table 2

General Ethics Statements

Association	Formal Ethics Statement?	Written as a Code of Conduct?	Stated	Enforceable?
AAPOR	Yes	No	Positively	No
AEJMC	Yes	No	Positively	No
AMA	Yes	No	Positively	No
CASRO	Yes	No	Positively	No
IABC	Yes	Yes	Positively	Yes
ICA	Yes	No	Positively	No
ICC	Yes	No	Positivity	No
IPRMC	Yes	Yes	Positively	No
IPRA	Yes	Yes	Negatively	Yes
MRA	Yes	No	Positively	Yes
NCA	Yes	No	Positively	No
PMA	Yes	No	Positively	No
PRSA	Yes	Yes	Positively	Yes
QRCA	Yes	Yes	Positively	Yes
%	Yes 100.0 No 0.0	Yes 35.7 No 64.3	Positively 85.7 Negatively 14.3	Yes 21.4 No 78.6

NOTE: List is different from Appendix due to use of abbreviations.

Research principles. Whether the association had specific, formal research ethics statement(s) and principle(s) is found in Table 3. A little over half of the associations (8 of 14) had a formal *research* ethics statement or statements that contained principles of ethical research. Of those five principles of ethical research discussed earlier, 75% of the associations

included a statement on intellectual honesty, all had a statement on fairness, 75% had a statement on dignity, 87.5% had a statement on disclosure, and all had a statement on respect for all involved. While these numbers are encouraging, only one of three academic associations and 7 of the 11 professional associations (a little over 60%) have specific research ethics statements.

Table 3
Formal Ethics and Ethical Principles Statements

Association	Formal Research Ethics Statement?	Intellectual Honesty	Fairness	Dignity	Disclosure	Respect for All Involved
AAPOR	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
AEJMC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
AMA	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
CASRO	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
IABC	No	--	--	--	--	--
ICA	No	--	--	--	--	--
ICC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
IPRMC	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
IPRA	No	--	--	--	--	--
MRA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NCA	No	--	--	--	--	--
PMA	No	--	--	--	--	--
PRSA	No	--	--	--	--	--
QRCA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

% Yes 57.1 Yes 75.0 Yes 100.0 Yes 75.0 Yes 87.5 Yes 100.0
 No 42.9 No 25.0 No 0.0 No 25.0 No 12.5 No 0.0

Note: Principle columns percentages reflect only those associations who have a stated formal research ethics statement. List is different from Appendix due to abbreviations.

Additionally, finding only 2 of the 5 principles (fairness and respect for all involved) across both sets of associations is troubling.

Ethics core values. To answer the second portion of our Research Question, “If they have an ethics guideline, what principles or values are espoused?” we turned to the articulation of core values in either a research ethics guide or a general ethics statement or code. As discussed earlier, there are a minimum of 18 core values that should be standard in all research ethics. These range from autonomy to use of data to public responsibility to moral courage and objectivity. In analyzing the various association publications it was noted that some of these core values could be found in the more general ethics code of those associations that did not have formally stated research ethics statements. Therefore, the data were analyzed as being stated through the formal research ethics statement or through the more general ethics statement. The results are presented in Table 4.

As noted in Table 4, the core values found in the 14 associations ranged from 21.4% (valuing truth behind the numbers) to 85.7% (intellectual integrity). The mean percentage of all 18 core values was 58.3%, with a standard deviation of 18.8%. Thus, overall the inclusion of core values across associations was barely over half. Those core values included (both formal and general ethics statements) **above** mean percentage across associations included *fairness, duty, honesty, not using misleading data, full disclosure, discretion, protection of proprietary data, intellectual integrity, and good intentions*. The core values that were found below the association mean included *autonomy, respondent rights, balance, lack of bias, judgment, valuing truth behind the numbers, reflexivity, and moral courage and objectivity*. Additionally, 11 of the associations had other statements that were not analogous to the 18 core values identified here.

Finally, the percent of core ethical values were examined across associations. Association core ethics values ranged from a 20% to 100% of the core values. Because the associations can be broken into two groups—academic and professional—the question as to

whether set of associations differed in the percent of core ethics values was examined.

Academic associations reported an average of 55.3% of the 18 core values as opposed to 59.1% of the professional associations.

Table 4
Core Ethical Values*

Associ- ation**	Auto- nomy	Respond- ent rights	Fair- ness	Balance	Duty	Lack of Bias	Honesty	Not us- ing mis- leading data	Full disclos- ure	Discre- tion	Judge- ment	Protect- ion of propie- tary data	Public respon- sibility	Intel- lectual integrity	Good inten- tions	Valuing truth behind the num- bers	Reflex- ivity	Moral courage	Other	#Yes/ #Core
AAPOR	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	No	No	Yes	88.9%
AEJMC	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	No	YES	YES	YES	No	No	YES	Yes	83.3%
AMA	No	No	YES	No	No	No	YES	YES	No	No	No	YES	No	No	YES	No	No	No	Yes	27.8%
CASRO	YES	YES	YES	No	YES	No	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	Yes	88.9%
IABC	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	55.6%
ICA	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	22.2%
ICC	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	No	YES	YES	YES	YES	No	No	No	Yes	77.8%
IPRMC	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	No	100.0%
IPRA	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	22.2%
MRA	YES	YES	YES	No	YES	No	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	No	YES	No	Yes	77.8%
NCA	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	61.1%
PMA	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	16.7%
PRSA	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	50.0%
QRCA	No	YES	YES	No	YES	No	YES	YES	No	YES	No	YES	No	YES	No	No	No	No	Yes	44.4%
%	Y=42.9 N=57.1	Y=57.1 N=42.9	Y=85.7 N=14.3	Y=28.6 N=71.4	Y=64.3 N=35.7	Y=42.9 N=57.1	Y=78.6 N=21.4	Y=71.4 N=28.6	Y=78.6 N=21.4	Y=64.3 N=35.7	Y=50.0 N=50.0	Y=71.4 N=28.6	Y=57.1 N=42.9	Y=85.7 N=14.3	Y=64.3 N=35.7	Y=21.4 N=78.6	Y=42.9 N=57.1	Y=42.9 N=57.1	Y=44.4 N=55.6	M=58.3%

*YES = Found in formal ethics principles

Yes = Found in general ethics statement

**List is different from Appendix due to use of abbreviations

Commission on Measurement and Evaluation’s Ethics Statement

The results of the various academic and professional codes or standards for the ethical conduct of research indicate that across the board there are common core values, but not many are found in actual research statements and must be inferred through more general ethical statements, as indicated on Table 4. Further, less than half of the associations examined have formal *research* ethical codes and those that do are mixed in terms of positive or negative statements of conduct. There is enough, however, to suggest a beginning point to create an ethics statement that should lead to ethical standards of public relations research. As the Tables presented above reveal, the ethical standards set out by the 2012 Institute for Public Relations Commission on Measurement (<http://www.instituteforpr.org/topics/ethical-standards-and-guidelines-for-public-relations-research-and-measurement/>) provides a good starting point for a standardization of research ethics among public relations professionals. The statement is based on core values that are highly deontological, or duty based, in nature. It reads:

The duty of professionals engaged in research, measurement, and evaluation for public relations is to advance the highest ethical standards and ideals for research. All research should abide by the principles of intellectual honesty, fairness, dignity, disclosure, and respect for all stakeholders involved, namely clients (both internal and external), colleagues, research participants, the public relations profession, and the researchers themselves. (np)

The statement goes on to specify more specific values, such as moral courage and objectivity, lack of bias, full disclosure, and not using misleading information or “cherry picking” data (np). This ethics statement was written after an exhaustive review of the ethics statement and codes of research firms and the associations to which they belong. It attempted to capture the moral duty of the researcher, toward multiple publics and stakeholders, not simply the ethics of conducting research with human subjects. In that manner, this statement goes far beyond what

can be found in a traditional research methods textbook and allows insight into what experts in corporate communication value as ethical.

Based on Deontology

As a starting point for standardization, it is essential to note that the Institute for Public Relations Commission on Measurement's ethical guidelines are based upon a non-utilitarian, principle-based form of ethics. The deontological school of ethics upon which the statement is based is a nonconsequentialist moral philosophy. Non-consequentialism means that moral principle or duty alone guides the determination as to what is ethical, as opposed to schools that try to predict the consequences of decisions. Moral principles such as honesty should be used as the "yardstick" by which an action is measured as ethical.

The deontological school of ethics was invented by moral philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant based his writing on the Aristotelian ethics of ancient Greece, but wanted to update it into a more actionable form that highlighted the individual responsibility and work ethic prominent in Protestantism. To accomplish these goals, Kant created three moral tests, known as the categorical imperative that question duty, dignity and respect, and intention. In order to be ethical, a potential decision must pass all three forms of the categorical imperative. The three forms of Kant's (1785/1964), categorical imperative are:

Duty: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (p. 88)

Dignity and respect: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." (p. 96)

Intention: "All maxims as proceeding from our own making of law ought to harmonize with a possible kingdom of ends." (p. 80)

In essence, the categorical imperative provides a wonderful backing for an ethics statement because it asks the autonomous moral decision maker to do three unique things.

First, decisions should be universal, meaning that any logical decision-maker could understand the ethics of the proposed solution. The universal law standard also indicates that the decision maker could be on the receiving end of the decision, so decisions are also said to be “reversible.” Second, treating others with dignity and respect means not to engage in using people to meet one’s selfish ends, but to value others as morally-autonomous individuals. And third, the intention standard means that a good will should be the overriding consideration behind all decisions, rather than self-promotion, greed, loyalty, or other factors. Kant believed that only actions taken with a good intention or based on goodwill alone were ethical, despite their outcomes.

Moral philosophers generally agree about the extreme rigor of Kant’s categorical imperative in providing an ethical test. Therefore, incorporating it into an ethics statement strengthens the ability of researchers to not only analyze the conduct of research but also to examine their own motivations (or that of their organizations). These factors form a very strong ethical examination and form the basis of the research ethics guidelines offered by the Institute for Public Relations Commission on Measurement.

Towards Ethical Standardization in Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation

This exploratory, qualitative research has allowed an in-depth study of what currently exists in public relations with regard to ethical guidelines or standards for research. To move the public relations field toward professionalization, we note that agreed upon ethical standards are an essential element of a profession (Callahan, 1988). After examining the 14 industry ethics codes or statements, it is consistent that the research ethics statement we offer is deontological, or based on duty and moral autonomy.

Because ethics statements, codes of ethics, and codes of conduct are deontological in nature we did not extend the guidelines to include a utilitarian paradigm. To do so would be rather pointless: If we did extend the ethics statement to a utilitarian paradigm, the guidelines would simply say to maximize research that creates good in the public interest, creates

happiness, or creates the greater good for the greatest number of people. We believe that such a vague guideline would not be as useful in conducting research as a deontological ethics statement that can offer more specificity and meet the three tests of the categorical imperative, duty, dignity and respect, and intention or a morally good will. Therefore, we propose the following deontological ethics statement to guide research in public relations:

Research should be autonomous and abide by the principles of a universalizeable and reversible duty to the truth, dignity and respect for all involved publics and stakeholders, and have a morally good will or intention to gather, analyze, interpret, and report data with veracity.

The above ethics statement allows researchers the flexibility to conduct data collection and analysis honestly, autonomously, and in a way that would meet the high standards of Kant's categorical imperative. It would help to eliminate unclear or unspecified areas of decision making by specifying values, and would serve to enhance organizational discussion of ethics and the use of ethical analysis tools. Human subjects would be protected, but that protection would extend to researchers, clients, contract data collectors, analysts, and the strategists who act on the data that is provided.

Adopting an ethical standard for research, such as the one above, would do several things to up enhance the professionalization of the public relations function. The credibility of research reports would be heightened, as would the confidence with which they are acted upon by organizations and clients. Doing so would strengthen the lagging credibility of the public relations field, help encourage professionalization, and allow the field legitimacy when acting as an ethical counselor or advisor to top management.

Limitations and Directions for Future Study

This research sets the groundwork for future study. Our research is limited to that data we were able to gather from the major professional associations regarding ethical standards for research. Ethical standards behind password protection for members only posed a substantial but also telling problem for our data collection. It should be borne in mind that this

research is qualitative, and no generalizable conclusions should be drawn. Rather, we sought to understand the current state of affairs regarding research ethics in public relations. Empirical research could strengthen our understanding of prevailing ethical norms in public relations research and the possibility of implementing an ethics statement such as the one we recommended. It may also allow rewording of that statement for ease of implementation in laymen's terminology. We hope that the conversation about the standardization of ethics in public relations research is only beginning and that this formative research offers food for thought.

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Endnotes

¹ Authorship is alphabetical both authors share equally in the thoughts and writing of this manuscript.

² We do not distinguish between public relations, communication management, or corporate communication as all represent the profession.

³ Two advertising associations were found using the Internet search method but were not included in this analysis because most public relations curriculums do not emphasize advertising and most public relations departments and firms take a marketing rather than advertising approach to practice.

⁴ Two professional association websites had member-only access. Materials from those websites were gathered with the help of members, and we owe them our sincere thanks for their assistance and support.

⁵ One professional association, the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation and Communication, a member-only access site, reported that it was currently working on an ethics statement; it was not included in this study.