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Silent & unprepared: Most millennial practitioners have not embraced role as ethical conscience

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ABSTRACT

Millennial public relations practitioners do not feel prepared to offer ethics counsel and do not expect to face ethical dilemmas at work. Through survey research with more than 200 young professionals, statistically significant differences were found regarding perceptions of readiness to offer ethics counsel based on the availability of a mentor, ethics training in college, and ethics training at work. Through the lens of social identity theory, significant differences were found based on familiarity and likelihood to use ethics resources provided by professional associations. Finally, confidence in discussing ethical concerns with their mentor or direct supervisor did impact their likelihood to offer ethics counsel.

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1. Introduction

As the oldest members of the Millennial generation are beginning to take on managerial and other key decision making roles, there is a need to expand our understanding of this generation's attitudes toward ethical decision making in the workplace. Most scholars identify Millennials, also known as Generation Y, as those born between 1981 or 1982 through 2000 (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012; VanMeter, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2013). Much of the current literature focuses on this generation's actions and ethical perceptions related to academic environments (Auger, 2013; VanMeter et al., 2013), and their views on questionable decisions made by others (Culiberg & Mihelič, 2016; Gallicano et al., 2012).

One of the few studies published on Millennials and public relations ethics found that while students at one university were aware of the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) code of ethics, it did not influence their behavior when it came to academic integrity, as almost 80% admitted to cheating (Auger, 2013). In another study, Millennials expressed concern about unethical business practices in public relations agencies related to client billing, media relations and client presentations; however, the authors pointed out that the Millennials did not provide any suggestions on how to address these issues, which may indicate "they felt they lacked any power to change them" (Gallicano et al., 2012; p. 239). In a third study, scholars found when Millennials were presented with three ethical dilemmas, they preferred "to avoid an issue rather than taking a stand" by simply referring the issue to a superior (53.5%) or ignoring a request (69.5%), or choosing to follow the boss' orders with the responses ranging from 22.1% to 52% (Curtin, Gallicano, & Matthews, 2011, p. 13). Despite these insights, scholars have decried the lack of empirical search regarding "Millennials' perspectives on work and ethics, particularly in public relations" (Curtin et al., 2011, p. 1).

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Millennials are expected to comprise 75% of the workforce by 2025 (Deloitte, 2014), and they will shift from being the “doer” to the “decider.” In addition, their ethical compass will set the course for the subsequent generation of public relations professionals, Generation Z. For these reasons, this study seeks to identify the types and sources of ethics training Millennials have received, what ethical issues they are facing, and determine whether or not they view ethics counsel as a personal job responsibility. These issues are examined through survey research with a national sample of Millennials who are members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) as associate members and/or members of the New Professionals section.

A recent study conducted with a national survey of PRSA members and educators provided evidence that the majority of practitioners and educators believe it is their role to serve as an ethical conscience within their organization and/or for their clients (Neill, 2016a). However, the demographics of the sample were skewed with an average age of 47 and the average years of experience in public relations was 21. In addition, 37% of the practitioners were accredited. For this reason, additional research was warranted to better understand the views and experiences of Millennials regarding ethics. This study builds on these findings from the general PRSA membership to examine ethical issues impacting younger public relations practitioners. This study also examined the role of mentors, who previously were identified as influential for junior practitioners as they advance into management positions (Pompper & Adams, 2006; Tam, Dozier, Lauzen, & Real, 1995).

2. Literature review

As a theoretical foundation for this study, previous literature related to social identity theory and socialization through formal and informal mentors, as well as ethics training was examined. Finally, previous research related to public relations' role as an ethical conscience is discussed.

2.1. Society identity theory & role of mentors

Social identity refers to the tendency for people to classify themselves and others into social categories such as members of organizations or religious affiliations (Ashford & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Identification involves a “perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experiences of its successes and failures” (Ashford and Mael, 1989, p. 34). Professions can be a source of social identity through membership in professional associations such as PRSA, which promote values and guiding principles through a code of ethics (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Furthermore, professionals are encouraged to “maintain professional standards of excellence” (Peluchette & Jeanquart, 2000), which can refer to a commitment to continuing education, ethical practices and concern for the public interest.

To build social identity, newcomers to an organization, such as new employees, have to learn about policies, role expectations and behavioral norms through the organizational socialization process (Ashford & Mael, 1989). One means for socializing newcomers to a profession is mentors, both formal and informal. Formal mentoring relationships tend to be associated with an employer assigning a more experienced person with a lesser experienced one, and informal mentoring relationships are associated with those that develop organically through the consent of the mentor and protégé (Jablin, 2001; Tam et al., 1995). Through a qualitative study, Pompper and Adams (2006) identified several benefits of mentoring in public relations, which are associated with socialization, such as pointing out “image and behavioral detractors that could stunt assimilation or status growth,” and opening their professional networks to protégés. Consistent with formal mentoring, Curtin et al. (2011) recommended that employers assign mentors to young employees “to help them work through ethical dilemmas rather than avoid them” (p. 15). In the previous study involving the PRSA general membership, the issues the practitioners reported personally facing in their careers based on a checklist were messaging, lack of access to leadership and information, blurring of personal and professional speech online and personal ethics (Neill, 2016a). Mentors who have faced these types of issues can guide younger practitioners based on their personal experiences.

In another study, Gallicano (2013) found mentoring in an agency environment was valued by Millennials and associated with intent to stay at the agency. When examining the impact of mentors in the academic environment, Peluchette and Jeanquart (2000) found that professors in their early and mid-career stages who had mentors from multiple sources (e.g., formal internal and informal external) experienced the highest levels of both objective (e.g., research productivity) and subjective success (e.g., work role, interpersonal, financial, life).

Based on the literature, this leads to the following research questions and hypothesis:

- RQ1: What ethical issues are Millennials working in public relations most likely to face in their jobs?
- RQ2: To whom would Millennials likely turn to for ethics advice?
- H1: Millennials who have a mentor will feel more prepared to provide counsel in public relations ethics than those who do not.

2.2. Socialization through ethics education & professional development

Members of a professional association also may be socialized through participation in professional development programs such as conferences and chapter meetings. Professional associations, such as PRSA, provide continuing education and resources focused on ethics including accreditation, a code of ethics, ethical standards advisories, webinars, conferences and blog posts. Previous research found 52% of PRSA members were mostly familiar with the code, 18.6% were extremely

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