Using Relationship Management to Encourage Ethical Practice among Cultural Strangers: A Survey of Millennial Generation Public Relations Agency Employees

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Abstract

This study reports data from a nationwide survey of the Millennial Generation of public relations agency employees. We examined organization-employee relationships and factors affecting ethical decision making. The survey employed Hon and Grunig's (1999) scales to measure relationship outcomes: control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. The results of the organization-employee measures were reported in previous research, and they are only used here to illuminate the relationship between ethics and the organization-employee relationship. In addition, the survey explored the usefulness of Bowen's (2005) practical model for ethical decision making from the perspectives of Millennial agency practitioners. Millennials were also asked to share their opinions about the helpfulness of educational training and PRSA's code of ethics.

Introduction

Many public relations agency managers are viewing new public relations graduates with dismay, saying "the most important target is themselves in all aspects of life, including time management" (Porter Novelli, p. 10). One agency will no longer hire recent graduates, citing their lack of work ethic (Hollon, 2008). Another manager notes new hires "believe that work should be fun and that dues-paying is for suckers" (Porter Novelli, 2008, p. 2).

Generation bashing is nothing new: "Bemoaning the self-involvement of young people is a perennial adult activity" (Rosenbloom, 2008). Yet contemporary critics are singling out this new generation for particularly harsh criticism concerning its lack of work ethic. While "members of other generations were considered somewhat spoiled in their youth, [members of this group] feel an unusually strong sense of entitlement" (Alsop, 2008, p. 2F) and are "more American Idle than American Idol" (Generation Y, 2009, p. 47).

The object of criticism is the Millennial Generation, also known as Generation Y, defined here as those born in 1982 or later. Children of the Baby Boomers, they are the largest and most racially diverse generation, almost 40% minority, and the fastest growing segment of the workforce (Armour, 2005). Their managers, however, consistently express exasperation concerning Millennials' sense of entitlement, difficulty in taking direction, self-indulgence, greed, short-sightedness, poor skills, and lack of work ethic (CareerBuilder, 2007; Harris Interactive, 2008; Randstad, 2008).

Little empirical study exists, however, concerning Millennials' perspectives on work and ethics, particularly in public relations. To fill this gap, we received a Public Relations Society of America Foundation grant to survey Millennial agency practitioners about their relationships with their employers and their approaches to ethical decision making. Our goal is to extend theoretical development in ethics and employee-organization relations (EOR) while providing agency management with guidance on how best to train and mentor this new generation.

Generational studies can be inherently problematic in that they can promote stereotyping. Many studies, however, have demonstrated that generational demographics often translate into demonstrable psychographic differences, particularly in regard to respect for authority and workplace expectations (Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Weston, 2006). In fact, our results demonstrate both wide differences in individual decision making and strong commonalities in general expectations concerning workplace ethics, both of which provide insight into productively managing these young professionals.

Literature Review and Research Questions

A Harris Interactive (2008) poll of professionals found that Millennials expect to work hard, although their older colleagues (Gen X, Baby Boomers, the Silent Generation) don't perceive them as hardworking, and they respect members of older generations, although that respect is not returned. In fact, according to scholars, Millennials are more accepting of rules and authority than their predecessors, Gen X, and they are more likely to exhibit trust in authority figures (Hershatter & Epstein, 2006). Millennials don't do well with ambiguity and risk, however: "They're very reliant on people to tell them what they need to do. . . . they're not very good at accepting end-line responsibility" (Hershatter & Epstein, para. 17). They are also conflict averse and seek consensus (Berger & Reber, 2006; Winograd & Hais, 2008) to the extent that "Millennials are alarmed by the *prospect* of even apparent ethical dilemmas or conflicts" and believe conflict can be resolved through more information gathering (e.g., Chobi, 2008, para. 4). Our first research question, then, asks

How do Millennial public relations agency employees approach ethical dilemmas?

The few extant empirical studies demonstrate that Millennials distinguish between innocuous (i.e., "white lie") types of transgressions and serious breaches of laws and ethics (Freestone & Mitchell, 2004; Pelton & True, 2004). The basis for these distinctions is a respect for authority, as noted above, which leads to deontological (rules-based) reasoning, as well as a valuing of trust, which leads to a concurrent use of utilitarian (consequence-based) reasoning. According to Bowen (2005), however, combining deontological and utilitarian reasoning is not a pragmatic alternative for public relations practitioners: Mixing paradigms "leaves no single approach as the clear or safe choice. . . . Mixing paradigms to this extent might lead to confusion for both internal and external publics" (p. 209). Instead, she developed a "layperson-accessible practical model for ethical decision making" based on deontological Kantian principles (Bowen, 2005, p. 192), which she successfully tested on older, well-established practitioners. Other studies have found that older practitioners tend to follow rules and take deontological approaches more frequently than do younger practitioners (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009; Kim & Choi, 2003; Pratt, 1994). This study asks

Do Millennial public relations agency employees find Bowen's model helpful for making ethical decisions?

Some researchers have criticized rational approaches, such as Bowen's model, as privileging white male forms of ethical decision making (Cortese, 1990; Gilligan, 1982), although empirical results to date have been mixed on this point (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009). Thus, we also ask

Do Millennial public relations agency employees differ by gender or ethnicity in how helpful they find Bowen's model?

Additionally, the public relations literature is divided on whether practitioners of any age find codes of ethics or education and training helpful in making ethical decisions (see Bowen, 2004; Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Gale & Bunton, 2005), leading us to ask

Do Millennial public relations agency employees find educational training and codes of ethics helpful for making ethical decisions?

In terms of Millennials' expectations of others, in a nationwide survey of 37,000 undergraduates, 39% said high ethical standards were their top consideration in choosing an employer (Green, 2006). Additionally, 79% wanted to work for a company that was socially responsible, 64% said they were loyal to their employers because of the socially responsible values held, and 56% said they would not work for a socially irresponsible company (Cone, 2006). An international survey conducted two years later confirmed this trend: 88% of Millennials wanted to work for a group with matching social responsibility values, and 92% of U.S. respondents said they would leave an employer whose values didn't match theirs (PriceWaterhouse-Coopers, 2008).

In fact, preliminary research suggests that Millennials, contrary to popular opinion, don't tend to complain about the amount or type of work they do, they complain about a work culture that isn't meaningful (Gerdes, 2007; Gursoy et al., 2008). In a study of public relations professionals, Blum and Tremarco (2008) found that for those respondents who had been with their firm for two years or fewer, which would include Millennials, job satisfaction was significantly correlated with the belief that "My firm has strong values—and lives them," and job satisfaction was significantly correlated with perceived ethical dealings with employees (p. 15).

This connection between job satisfaction and ethics has also been explored through the lens of relationship management theory, particularly the subfield of organization-public relations (OPR)

known as employee-organization relations (EOR). Scholars can use EOR to evaluate relationships between employees and their organizations in terms of four relationship outcomes: satisfaction, trust, control mutuality, and commitment (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Trust is the belief that the organization is fair and competent and keeps its promises. Satisfaction is the extent to which an organization meets positive expectations. Control mutuality measures satisfaction with the amount of influence employees have in the relationship, and commitment refers to the extent to which the relationship is worth the time and effort required to maintain it.

Kim (2007) found that one antecedent of good relationship outcomes was organizational justice. Employees have an expectation of "fair behavior by management and fair organizational policies and systems" (Kim, 2007, p. 191). Additionally, practitioners believe ethical decision making should be marked by respect, trustworthiness, and openness, which are key aspects of good relations, suggesting a tight link between relationship management theory and ethical decision making (Boynton, 2006). Another study (Kang, 2009) found a link between organizational environment and ethics, but the response rate was too low to lend much validity to the findings. To further explore this link, we ask

> ***What is the relationship, if any, between EOR and Millennial public relations agency employees' ethical decision making?***
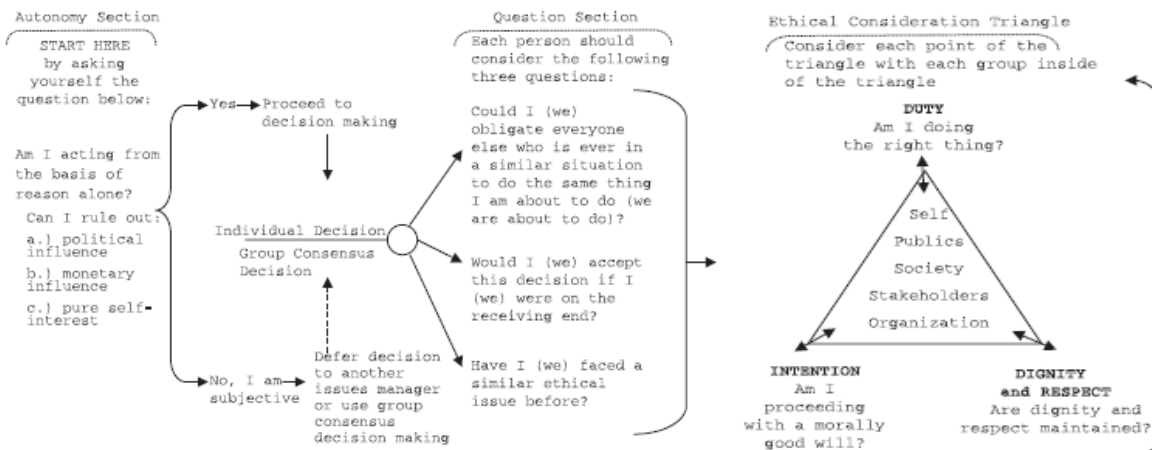
Method

Given the lack of a sampling frame for this demographic, we recruited survey participants through a mixture of convenience and snowball sampling. PRSA sent a solicitation letter and two follow-up reminders on our behalf to people who had been members for no more than 2 years. Because this list included those outside our target group, two qualifying questions were used to ensure that respondents were Millennials and that they worked at an agency. To avoid recruiting only those participants who were the most professionalized (i.e., members of PRSA), we also solicited participants through online channels (blogs, PR Open Mic, Facebook) and encouraged participants to share the survey link with fellow Millennial agency employees.

Following a pretest, which resulted in slight changes to the wording of a few measures, we posted the survey online at SurveyMonkey. A total of 433 people accessed the survey, but 152 were not of the correct age and/or not employed by agencies, leaving 281 qualified respondents. Of those, 223 answered the majority of questions, for a completion rate of 79%. In accordance with IRB guidelines, respondents could skip questions; thus, the total number of respondents varies from question to question. Given the sampling method, we cannot say how representative this group is of the population or accurately generalize our findings within a certain margin of error to the larger population. Since our purpose at this point was descriptive, however, we believe that 223 respondents allowed us to paint a broad picture of Millennial agency employees and their concerns.

To address how respondents would solve ethical dilemmas, the survey included three hypothetical scenarios (Appendix A). Closed-ended choices were provided for each, with each succeeding scenario offering a narrower range of possible options. A number of measures were used to test the utility of the main components of Bowen's (2005) model of ethical decision making (Figure 1). The first step requires respondents to exhibit autonomy: Can they act based on reason alone? Three 5-point Likert-scaled questions asked respondents to rate their autonomy in terms of perceived pressures from workplace politics, the need for job security, and personal ambition. Three questions used a 5-point scale (significantly to insignificantly) to measure the degree of impact each of these three factors had on ethical decision making. Three more questions asked whether these factors resulted in more or less ethical decision making or made no difference.

Figure 1. Main Components of Bowen's Practical Model for Ethical Decision Making

Autonomy Section

START HERE by asking yourself the question below:

Am I acting from the basis of reason alone? Can I rule out:
a.) political influence
b.) monetary influence
c.) pure self-interest

Yes → Proceed to decision making

Individual Decision/ Group Consensus Decision

No, I am subjective → Defer decision to another issues manager or use group consensus decision making

Question Section

Each person should consider the following three questions:

Could I (we) obligate everyone else who is ever in a similar situation to do the same thing I am about to do (we are about to do)?

Would I (we) accept this decision if I (we) were on the receiving end?

Have I (we) faced a similar ethical issue before?

Ethical Consideration Triangle

Consider each point of the triangle with each group inside of the triangle

DUTY
Am I doing the right thing?

Self
Publics
Society
Stakeholders
Organization

INTENTION
Am I proceeding with a morally good will?

DIGNITY and RESPECT
Are dignity and respect maintained?

The model provides six principles or rules to be applied during the subsequent two steps of the decision-making process. Respondents were asked to rate how useful they would find each of the six on a 5-point scale ("not useful at all" to "very useful"). Respondents rated the utility of education/training and PRSA's code of ethics using the same scale.

To measure relationship outcomes (control mutuality, trust, commitment, satisfaction), we used the 5-point Likert-scaled items from Hon and Grunig's (1999) study (Cronbach's α ranged from .886 to .958: The full results of the EOR portion of the survey were reported previously and are used here only to illuminate the relationship between EOR and ethical decision making). Demographic questions addressed gender, race/ethnicity, agency size, and income. Open-ended comments were sought throughout the survey to lend context to the quantitative findings.

Results

The average respondent was female, Caucasian, working at an agency with fewer than 25 employees, and making $30,000 to $39,999 per year, which approximates the demographic profile of recent public relations graduates (Table 1), providing support for our use of inferential statistics.

TABLE 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	%	n
Gender	Female	83.2	159
	Male	16.8	32
Ethnicity	African American	3.4	6
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	1.1	2
	Asian	6.3	11
	Caucasian	83.5	148
	Hispanic, Latino or Latina	5.7	10
Agency size	<25 employees	41.5	73
	25 to 50 employees	15.3	27
	51 to 75 employees	8.0	14
	76 to 100 employees	5.1	9
	>100 employees	30.1	53
Income	<$20,000	4.0	7
	$20,000 to $29,999	13.6	24
	$30,000 to $39,999	45.5	80
	$40,000 to $49,999	27.3	48
	>$50,000	9.7	17

How Millennials Approach Ethical Dilemmas

The first ethical dilemma addressed job security by having participants respond to a request from the boss to not disclose the corporate ties of a medical source when pitching a story to the media (Appendix A). Most respondents (53.5%) skirted the dilemma by saying they would refer the issue to a superior and ask for help. Just over a fourth (26.5%) agreed to the request. Another 15.0% said they would reject the assignment outright, despite running a risk of being fired; the remaining 5.0% said they would make the pitch as requested but reveal the truth if pressed.

In the second dilemma, a colleague asks for volunteers to pose as citizens at a town meeting and either ask an easy question of the agency's client or a difficult question of the opponent. Again, most respondents (69.5%) avoided the situation by waiting for someone else to volunteer, even though it meant less chance of career advancement. A total of 22.1% would volunteer to ask either question; 8.4% would ask the easy question only. The last scenario, involving spying on an activist group, forced respondents to choose an action option. The results were almost evenly split: 52% would pose as a member of the group; just under half (48%) would decline the assignment.

Forty respondents commented on the scenarios. One said, "I honestly don't think these sorts of things happen," but five said they had faced similar situations at work. In terms of how problematic they found the situations, comments ranged from "I wouldn't work at a PR agency that was using these tactics" to "These aren't that big of a deal." The four respondents who believed that the situations were unethical used deontological reasoning, with transparency the principle used. The eight respondents who thought the scenarios were not ethically challenging used utilitarian reasoning (e.g.,"Pretending to be a volunteer is just what a reporter will do to get a good story. I don't think anyone is really getting hurt."). The other main theme that emerged came from six respondents who said they would pretend to be a member of the activist group if they agreed with the group's goals; they didn't assume that they would be asked to monitor the group precisely because it was problematic for the client.

Some respondents (14.2%, n = 33) skipped the scenarios, although 10 contributed comments. Six respondents said they didn't answer because they didn't believe the choices provided were sufficient. They said, "There is almost always another solution" and requested "more information" and "deeper looks." Four said they didn't answer because they would never face these situations; they wouldn't work for an agency that asked such things of its employees. As one said, "Our agency holds tight to our core values. No one in my agency would ask me (or participate) in any of the above actions." Another added, "I would not want anything to do with [these situations] and would seek solutions to stop them. If I got fired, I would take pride knowing that I did the right thing . . . although that doesn't pay the bills."

Applying Bowen's Model

The first step of Bowen's (2005) model requires subjects to ask themselves whether they are autonomous by considering whether they are being guided by political influence, monetary influence, or pure self-interest. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements such as the following: "Because of internal politics in my workplace, I make decisions about ethical issues that I am not entirely comfortable with." Most respondents thought they were autonomous, with few believing that workplace politics, the need for job security, or personal ambition led them to make decisions about ethical issues with which they were not entirely comfortable (Table 2). Workplace politics garnered the highest level of overall agreement (15%) as an influential factor in making at least slightly uncomfortable ethical decisions, followed by the need for job security (12%) and personal ambition (7.5%).

TABLE 2: The Relative Role of Autonomy Factors in Ethical Decision Making

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Workplace politics	34.5	40.6	9.8	13.5	1.5
Job security	40.2	38.0	9.8	10.9	1.1
Personal ambition	41.4	42.0	8.7	6.4	1.1

When Millennials were asked to rate the impact of these autonomy factors on their ethical decision making, however, the order changed (Table 3). In response to questions such as "To what extent do internal politics at your workplace affect the ethical decisions you make?" almost a third (31.3%) thought the need to keep their jobs was a significant influence, closely followed by personal ambition (29%). Only 13.4% fingered workplace politics as having a significant impact on ethical decisions.

TABLE 3: Degree of Impact of Autonomy Factors on Ethical Decision Making

	Significant	Somewhat Significant	Neutral	Not Too Significant	Not Significant
Workplace politics	1.8	11.6	29.3	27.4	29.9
Job security	9.8	21.5	17.0	19.3	32.3
Personal ambition	10.7	18.3	18.8	21.4	30.8

The final set of autonomy questions asked respondents whether the autonomy factors ultimately led them to make more or less ethical decisions (Table 4). In every case, most respondents said these factors didn't play a role either way. For the remainder, however, a larger number of respondents said that workplace politics, job security, and personal ambition led them to make more

ethical decisions, rather than less ethical decisions, with personal ambition demonstrating the clearest demarcation of a positive influence on ethical decision making.

TABLE 4: The Influence of Autonomy Factors on Ethical Decision Making

	More Ethical	Less Ethical	No Role
Workplace politics	35.4	27.0	37.6
Job security	26.5	22.1	51.4
Personal ambition	35.6	16.5	47.9

No significant differences emerged by gender with regard to the impact of workplace politics, the need for job security, or personal ambition. Minorities, however, reported feeling a significantly greater impact from issues of job security ($t = 2.31$, $df = 173$, $p = .022$) and personal ambition ($t = 2.08$, $df = 171$, $p = .039$) than did non-minorities.

According to Bowen's (2005) model, practitioners who can rule out political influence, monetary influence, and pure self-interest can proceed to seeing if the ethical decision they are about to make would receive an affirmative answer to six questions (practitioners who cannot rule out political influence, monetary influence, and pure self-interest should "defer the decision to another issues manager" or "use group consensus decision making" (p. 193). Based on the pretest, changes were made to the wording of four of the six questions. Bowen's question, "Could I (we) obligate everyone else who is ever in a similar situation to do the same thing I am about to do (we are about to do)?" was slightly adjusted to "Should everyone else who is in a similar situation do the same thing I am about to do?" In addition, Bowen's question, "Would I (we) accept this decision if I (we) were on the receiving end?" was changed to "If I were the customer (or other public), would I accept this decision?" Also, Bowen's question, "Am I proceeding with a morally good will?" was changed to "Am I proceeding with good intentions?" Finally, Bowen's question of "Are dignity and respect maintained?" was changed to "Will the dignity and respect I have for myself and others be compromised by this decision?" This last question would now require a negative answer, rather than an affirmative answer, to pass the test. We did not change the other two questions, which include "Have I (we) faced a similar ethical issue before?" and "Am I doing the right thing?"

Respondents found all six of the model's questions to be useful. Responses for finding the model's questions to be useful ranged from 60.2% for the question about having everyone in a similar situation do the same thing the practitioner is considering to 93.7% for the question about not compromising dignity and respect for self and others (Table 5). Conversely, about a fifth of the respondents did not find the test that would require everyone in a similar situation to do the same thing to be useful, and about 15% did not find putting themselves in the other's shoes or relating to a similar situation to be useful.

TABLE 5: Perceived Utility of Bowen's Six Principles for Ethical Decision Making

	Not Useful	Not Too Useful	Neutral	Somewhat Useful	Very Useful
Other shoes	3.9	10.7	7.8	43.4	34.1
Similar situation	2.9	12.1	14.0	47.3	23.7
Right thing	1.5	2.5	7.0	18.9	70.1
Everyone else same thing	4.9	14.6	19.9	30.1	30.1
Good intentions	2.4	6.3	6.8	29.6	54.9
Dignity and respect	1.0	2.5	2.9	16.2	77.5

Although previous literature suggests men would find the model more useful than women would, women were significantly more likely than men to find the questions about doing the right thing ($t = 2.23$, $df = 168$, $p = .027$), requiring everyone in a similar situation to do the same thing ($t = 2.50$, $df = 171$, $p = .020$), and proceeding with good intentions ($t = 3.16$, $df = 171$, $p = .002$) to be helpful. No significant differences were found between minorities and non-minorities on these measures.

Correlations were run to determine if workplace politics, job security, or personal ambition were related to the perceived utility of the six tests (Table 6). Workplace politics did not significantly correlate with any of the measures. Those who believed job security was an issue they faced were significantly less likely to find treating themselves and others with dignity and respect to be useful. Personal ambition was significantly negatively correlated with the utility of four of the six principles: putting themselves in the other's shoes, asking if they were doing the right thing, proceeding with good intentions, and not compromising their own or others' dignity and respect.

TABLE 6: Correlation of Autonomy Factors and Six Principles

Principle	Workplace Politics	Job Security	Personal Ambition
Other shoes	-.087	-.124	-.151*
Similar situation	.050	-.013	-.066
Right thing	-.116	-.122	-.238**
Everyone else same thing	-.019	-.125	-.133
Good intentions	-.012	-.024	-.172*
Dignity and respect	-.089	-.165*	-.248**

Note: * correlation is significant at the .05 level;
** correlation is significant at the .01 level.

A total of 30 respondents commented on this section of the survey, and we summarize the main themes here. Six respondents said they didn't feel pressured at work, for example

> I've actually found (and appreciated) that my agency strongly considers my personal opinion of what is ethical. I haven't been in many situations where I've needed to make decisions based on ethics, but when I was, I was pleased to see that my employer appreciated my thought process and input.

Many more respondents, however, blew the whistle on what they believed were unethical actions either committed by their employers or asked of them by their employers. Among these, six mentioned the phantom experience (i.e., inflating credentials and capabilities). One participant wrote, "Sometimes my employer makes me tell clients that I have more work experience than I really do." Five mentioned financial misdeeds. One commented

> My employer has a bad habit of taking clients to dinner and offering to pay. When we return to the office the next day, I am given the receipts and told to complete an expense report and bill the total charge to the client under "administrative costs." This is both unethical and unprofessional, and when I voiced my concern, I was told that "all the agencies do it—it's no big deal." It is unfortunate that lying to clients is considered acceptable practice.

Another who mentioned financial misdeeds said, "I felt I had no choice but to comply with his requests in order to keep my job." Five respondents mentioned lying to clients separate from the phantom experience and financial misdeeds, including "I was told to lie about feedback I've gotten from reporters about the level of 'newsworthiness' of an announcement." Three others mentioned media relations issues, including puffery and "relentless" pitching to uninterested journalists.

One respondent was asked to astroturf for a client but simply neglected the assignment, noting, "Thankfully, my supervisor never asked about it or followed up with me on the project." Two mentioned problems because their values did not align with those of the client in terms of environmental or corporate responsibility, leading one to conclude that "Public relations was fun in college to learn, but it's not fun to do."

Overall, the comments revealed a distinction between those who felt they had autonomy on the job and those who didn't, such as the respondent who wrote

> At this point in my life, a job is a job, and in terms of ethics, I'll do what I have to do to keep my job, my personal feelings will take a back seat. With the economy so bad, it's just one of those things. I can't afford to let my personal feelings complicate my career.

The Role of Education/Training and Codes

In terms of the utility of education/training and the PRSA code of ethics, most respondents (73.6%) rated education/training highly, while not quite half (46.7%) rated the code highly (Table 7). Only 10% didn't find education/training useful, whereas 23.2% didn't find the code useful.

TABLE 7: Perceived Utility of Education/Training and PRSA Code of Ethics in Ethical Decision Making

	Education/ Training	PRSA Code of Ethics
Not useful at all	3.0	6.7
Not too useful	7.0	16.5
Neutral	16.4	30.4
Somewhat useful	37.3	25.3
Very useful	36.3	21.4

Fourteen respondents commented on this section. Among them, two mentioned that family values and upbringing were the major factor that guided their ethical decision making. Three mentioned teachers who had stressed ethics and inspired them to think more about ethical issues. Four mentioned they were not familiar with PRSA's code of ethics, even though at least one of these mentioned being a PRSA member. Three stated that the code simply wasn't helpful because it wasn't enforced, wasn't the focus of PRSA activities, or simply wasn't practical: "PRSA is a nice organization but when making day-to-day decisions, but you're not going to bring up the 'code of ethics' with your boss. Come on . . ."

The Relationship between EOR and Ethical Decision Making

To explore the relationship between relationship outcomes and ethical decision making, correlations were run between the four relationship outcome indices and the autonomy factors (workplace politics, economic necessity, personal ambition) and their impact on ethical decision making, Bowen's (2005) six principles, and the utility of education/training and PRSA's code of ethics. Table 8 shows a strong relationship between the autonomy factors described in Bowen's model and Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship outcome indices.

Table 8: Correlation Table Showing Relationships between EOR and Autonomy Factors

Outcome Index	Workplace Politics	Economic Necessity	Personal Ambition	Impact of Politics	Impact of Economics	Impact of Ambition
Control Mutuality	-.425**	-.414**	-.369**	.277**	.278**	.126
Trust	-.455**	-.476**	-.388**	.245**	.271**	.171*
Commitment	-.331**	-.376**	-.326**	.234**	.188*	.093
Satisfaction	-.454**	-.473**	-.416**	.250**	.197**	.100

Note: * correlation is significant at the .05 level; ** correlation is significant at the .01 level.

A lack of control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction significantly correlated with workplace politics and economic necessity but not the impact of personal ambition. A lack of trust correlated with all six of Bowen's measures. Poor employer-employee relations, then, are tied to a felt lack of autonomy on the part of employees. Correlating Bowen's six principles with Hon and Grunig's outcome indices resulted in only one significant correlation: Those who believed that the dignity and respect they had for self and others was useful for ethical decision making also reported greater satisfaction ($R = .193$, $p = .011$). No significant were found between the utility of education/training and the code and the relationship outcomes.

A few comments addressed aspects of the interrelationship of good employer relations and ethical decision making. The most common was four respondents who mentioned problems associated with their superiors lying and with a general lack of transparency, which led to ethical stress and poorer employee-employer relations, particularly since these transgressions went unpunished. Another two mentioned financial improprieties and the relationship stresses they engendered, such as

> I do not have much respect for my bosses. I feel that they are unethical people who only care about themselves or the money they are making. They do not offer guidance or good ideas. I'm disappointed with the lack of leadership in my firm.

Discussion

We address each of the research questions below, followed by a discussion of the implications for public relations theory and recommendations for public relations agency managers. One overarching observation, though, is that we learned almost as much from how these Millennial Generation agency practitioners filled out the survey and what comments they made as we did from the numerical data.

Research Questions

1. How do Millennial public relations agency employees approach ethical dilemmas? Our findings confirm that this generation is conflict averse, with the majority preferring to find a way to avoid an issue rather than take a stand. When asked to respond to specific situations, almost 15% avoided the dilemmas entirely by not responding to the survey questions; the majority of the remainder chose the option to duck the situation when this option was offered. For those who did take a stand, more followed the boss' orders than refused any of the assignments. Contextual data suggest that respondents often used utilitarian reasoning, stating that if no one seemed to be hurt by the action, then it was permissible, a perspective that may reflect Millennials' valuing of consensus and team work, as well as respect for and trust in authority. Those who rejected the assignments most often used deontological reasoning, relying on transparency as the guiding principle.

The contextual data also confirm the anecdotal literature (e.g., Chobi, 2008) that Millennials value information seeking as a means of avoiding confrontation and achieving consensus. Those respondents who agreed to monitor the activist group viewed the assignment as research, which was to be encouraged. Overall, information was viewed as inherently value neutral, no matter how it was collected.

2. Do Millennial public relations agency employees find Bowen's model helpful for making ethical decisions? Of note is that our pretest demonstrated that the wording of some aspects of the model did not resonate with Millennials. A number of pretest subjects found Bowen's (2005) question "Am I proceeding with morally good intentions" confusing, an issue that was resolved by removing the word "morally." Similarly, "Could I obligate everyone else who is in a similar situation to do the same thing I am about to do?" was recast as "Should everyone else who is in a similar situation do the same thing I am about to do?" The question "Would I accept this decision if I were on the receiving end?" was changed to "If I were the customer (or other public), would I accept this decision?" Finally, the question "Are dignity and respect maintained?" was changed to "Will the dignity and respect I have for myself and others be compromised by this decision?"

The first step in the model requires subjects to determine if they are able to act autonomously, relying solely on pure reason. The majority of respondents (about 75%) believed that political, economic, and personal ambition factors were not problematic when making ethical decisions. Only about 20% of respondents agreed that if their autonomy was compromised, their ability to make ethical decisions was as well. Most Millennials, then, disagree with the basic precondition of the model. In fact, about 80% of respondents said the three autonomy factors either had no effect on their ethical decisions or caused them to make *more* ethical decisions rather than less, as Kantian ethics would suggest. According to the model, however, should autonomy not be possible, using group consensus decision making is a possibility, and the results of this and other studies suggest that a group consensus approach is inherently appealing to this group.

About 75% of respondents said they would find the six principles helpful when making ethical decisions, although it should be noted that we only tested attitudes. More research is needed to determine how Millennials would actually use the principles, or not, in practice. Deontological reasoning was evident in some of the comments, however, lending support to the conclusion that deontological approaches could resonate with a majority of this population, although the comments also suggest a vocal minority prefer utilitarian approaches.

3. Do Millennial public relations agency employees differ by gender or ethnicity in how helpful they find Bowen's model? Contrary to expectations, women found half the principles significantly more useful than did men. More research is needed to determine why women believed the principles were more useful. Given the increasing feminization of the field, it might mean that a majority of young practitioners will find deontological reasoning quite useful, despite what the previous literature has suggested (e.g., Coleman & Wilkins, 2009; Kim & Choi, 2003, Pratt, 1994).

Minorities reported experiencing significantly more constraints on their autonomy. Given that Millennials comprise almost 40% minorities, these findings should prove cautionary because they suggest that a rapidly growing segment of the profession might find themselves in situations in which they do not feel empowered and are thus pressured to make less ethical decisions. This finding is supported by work linking Maslow's hierarchy of needs with public relations practitioners' ethical decision-making process in which it was found that practitioners would often feel forced to make less ethical decisions when faced with the need to meet basic or security needs (Boynton, 2001). As one respondent noted, "At this point in my life, a job is a job, and in terms of ethics, I'll do what I have to do to keep my job . . ."

Given the relatively small number of minority respondents, all ethnicities were combined in our analyses, which is less than ideal. More work is needed to parse out differences among races and ethnicities so that researchers are not simply relying on broad dichotomies of minority versus non-minority, which obscures important distinctions between and among groups.

4. Do Millennial public relations agency employees find educational training and codes of ethics helpful for making ethical decisions? Perhaps the most significant finding of this part of the study is that most Millennials list education and training as useful, and almost half rated the PRSA code of ethics as useful. These numbers are much higher than those found in previous studies (Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Gale & Bunton, 2005) and support the literature that suggests Millennials value ongoing education and training and like clear instructions (Hershatter & Epstein, 2006).

A number commented on particular teachers or supervisors from whom they had learned how to approach ethical issues. As one respondent stated, "I am very lucky to have an immediate supervisor with an extremely strong commitment to ethical practice . . . an important step for a young professional." The PRSA code of ethics was not quite as highly valued, and the contextual data suggest that this may stem from the perception that it lacks traction in the workplace because of lack of enforcement and difficulty of application.

5. What is the relationship, if any, between EOR and Millennial public relations agency employees' ethical decision making? Of note is that relationship outcomes did not significantly correlate with decision making tools and principles, such as education, training, and the deontological approach of the model, except for a weak correlation between satisfaction and treating self and others with dignity and respect, which may simply be an artifact of the data. What yielded quite robust findings were the correlations between relationship outcomes and autonomy measures.

The findings provide strong evidence for the conclusion that agency employees from the Millennial Generation believe they have a significantly better relationship with their employers when they experience fewer constraints on their ethical decision-making autonomy. As one noted, "I have expressed concern on actions that I felt would be unethical and as a result convinced the team not to move forward." Where relations were more strained, respondents often suggested that they felt ethically constrained because their employers lacked ethics.

In the cases of strained relationships, Millennials often employed a deontological stance, noting that lying was never ethical and that the "everyone is doing it" argument lacked validity. The results lend support to the trade literature that this generation desires work that is socially responsible and values driven (Cone, 2006; Porter Novelli, 2008). They want to work for a company whose values align with their own. As a couple respondents observed in relation to the ethical dilemmas, "Our agency holds tight to our core values. No one in my agency would ask me (or participate) in any of these actions," and "I would not take a position with a company that forced me to make this choice, it's an unfair situation to be placed in."

Implications for Theory and Limitations

This study finds conflicting support for Bowen's model. First, although Bowen (2005) stated the model was accessible to laypersons, she tested it on older, well-established practitioners. Our study demonstrates that the wording of some parts of the model is problematic for a Millennial audience, suggesting that its utility would be improved by further simplifying the language to sound a bit less like 18th-century philosophical principles.

Autonomy is a basic presupposition of the model, yet many Millennials did not subscribe to this assumption, believing that they could make good ethical decisions despite, or possibly even because of, potential restrictions on their autonomy. One group who did believe that restrictions on autonomy affected their ability to make good ethical decisions was minorities. Consequently, the model may systematically exclude this growing group of minority practitioners from being able to make a decision without either referring it to someone else or engaging in group consensus decision making, as advised by the model for cases in which autonomy cannot be achieved. Given the pressures of job insecurity and internal politics faced by the minority respondents in this study, referring ethical dilemmas to others might not be pragmatic, particularly when ethically questionable requests are given by supervisors. Although this is not a fault of the model, it suggests that more

work is needed to identify the structural barriers still facing minorities on the job. It should also be noted, however, that the ideas of deferring ethical decisions to others and engaging in group consensus would appeal to the Millennial Generation of practitioners. In addition, although most respondents did not agree with the model's assumption of autonomy as necessary for ethical decision making, they could still find the subsequent stages to be of use.

In fact, Millennial practitioners rated the utility of the six principles highly, lending support to a deontological model for the industry. This study, however, did not test the model in action, that is how Millennials would apply the model in actual situations. Further research should use methods that better capture process, such as ethnography, to determine how well the model works in practice. Further research should also follow up on the finding noted above that most respondents believe they can either set aside factors that constrain their autonomy or even use these factors to positively inform their ethical decision making. This approach suggests Millennials might find a model to be more useful that is based on third-wave feminist ethics, which balances principles with individual values and context (e.g., Jagger, 1998). Such an approach combines deontological and utilitarian approaches without devolving into ethical relativism, and the contextual data suggest that at least some Millennials would find such an approach inherently more satisfying.

In terms of relationship management theory, this study lends strong support to the extant literature that posits the interrelationship of EOR and practitioner ethics. The main contribution of this study is to parse out that factors affecting ethical decision-making autonomy are strongly related to relationship outcomes, which emphasizes an environmental linkage. Practitioners who experience more autonomy feel empowered to make better ethical decisions and report higher levels of trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment with their employers. More research is needed to tease out the dimensions of this relationship, and while previous literature suggests that practitioners see a link between relationship outcomes and ethics in general (Boynton, 2006; Kim, 2007), further research is needed to determine if the strong relationship between autonomy and relationship outcomes holds across other age demographics.

Implications for Agency Managers

These findings suggest that contrary to popular opinion, Millennials don't lack ethics. It might be better said that they may have different values than older generations, but many also demonstrate a strong belief in ethical decision-making processes that align with those of older practitioners. In fact, what is notable is the number who felt compelled to blow the whistle on what they saw as their employers' lack of ethics. And most often, these ethical infringements were issues addressed by the PRSA code of ethics, such as not lying, and by a recent PRSA Board of Directors professional standard advisory (PSA-10) on phantom experience. In fact, it's ironic that a problem managers have reported with Millennials is that of lying or embellishing experience on résumés (Dorsey, 2008); our study suggests the problem is not theirs alone. It may be more productive, then, to examine how Millennials' values differ and how managing those differences can be profitably accomplished.

As this study confirms, Millennials respect authority, but that authority is dependent on trust and respect established through a strong sense of organizational mission and integrity. Interestingly, agency size was not a significant factor in any of our measures. Sheer size didn't matter, but contextual data suggest that having a clear mission or values statement that was well known by employees and evidenced every day in the workplace was key to Millennials' satisfaction. They value integrity and social responsibility, and they are quite loyal to employers who not only espouse similar values but who also live them. Loyalty suffered when Millennials believed that their agency employers lacked integrity or were willing to sacrifice values, especially when immediate supervisors were not reprimanded for ethical infractions. Their trust, then, must be earned through not just talking the talk but also walking the walk. This is a generation that has been brought up to

value transparency, and they use transparency as a principle by which to judge actions. They don't generally tolerate creative bookkeeping on clients' accounts or inflating facts to clients or journalists because it violates their sense of trust and expectation of transparency.

Millennials value mentoring, with many mentioning in this study the key role played by a supervisor or teacher. They value education and clear rules, such as those provided by codes. Assigning mentors to these young employees, then, as well as ensuring that any applicable code of ethics is readily available, will help them work through ethical dilemmas rather than try to simply avoid them, as this conflict-averse generation is prone to do.

More generally, Millennials value information, seeing it as key to understanding and working through issues ethical and otherwise. Information is an asset and as such is almost value neutral—how information is gathered is not as much of an issue as is the fact that information should be gathered. In fact, some have dubbed this group Generation Why because they continuously seek information and knowledge to understand the context for what they are doing. As one respondent said, "I like to know why we do things, not just how to do them." Providing context and demonstrating how work contributes to agency goals and missions fulfills this need to know and generates more enthusiasm for work and better insight into issues that might arise. As Carolyn Cone (2006), chairman of Cone Inc., notes, "Companies need to provide hands-on cause-related experiences and then clearly and consistently share related societal impacts" with their Millennial employees.

While these suggestions sound relatively straightforward, they may be harder to implement not because of any inherent quality of the Millennials but because of inherent qualities of older generations. As one article addressing management issues notes, "Whenever someone older needs to place blame for all that goes wrong in this world, they can pin it on the newest generation. They've got no morals, we say, they've got no work ethic" (Walton, 2008, p. E1). Our expectation is that younger practitioners will simply be younger versions of ourselves and hold the same values; when they don't, it causes us to question whether they belong in our profession as part of our group.

Giddens (1991) has termed this expectation of shared values *ontological security*. We expect a continuity in social relationships and the environment in which they take place. We are able to deal with the complexities of modern life, according to Giddens, precisely because we trust that our world is constant and knowable; it operates according to shared values. We take those shared values for granted, for "the ordinary is normal, the normal is natural and what is natural does not need a reason" (Van Leeuwen, paraphrasing John Stuart Mill, 2008, p. 151).

But what happens when we run into a cohort with different values? When that cohort stems from a distinctly different culture, we tend to make allowances, realizing that how things are done in Southeast Asia will likely differ from how things are done in U.S. agencies. But we have an expectation of shared values within our own environment, whether that be our schools or U.S. public relations agencies. And when our ontological security is threatened by difference, it "puts our certainties to the test about what is normal and healthy" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 148); "Thus, Millennials become the 'other' by which we define ourselves, which leads to the reduction of complex relations to simplified dichotomous binaries—Us versus Them—and the discourse of stereotyping" (Curtin, 2009, p. 21). What our study suggests, however, is that it is much more productive to instead think of Millennial practitioners as cultural strangers, much as we would our colleagues from Southeast Asia.

Van Leeuwen (2008) coined the term *cultural strangers* precisely to describe those who are part of our environment yet in other ways are not part of our shared values. By recasting Millennials in this way, we can recognize

> their simultaneous similarities and differences. Such recognition can be anxiety-producing, in that it threatens our notions of normalcy and tradition, yet at the same time, it can bring into play a sense of fascination and fun, of discovering different perspectives and ways of seeing the world. (Curtin, 2009, p. 21)

We would hasten to add that viewing Millennials as cultural strangers does not mean we are advocating embracing ethical relativism. While their values may be different, our study demonstrates that their sense of ethics is, in fact, in many ways quite similar to those of older practitioners. In fact, they might even demonstrate a greater allegiance to deontological thinking and to the principles underlying PRSA's code of ethics than have their predecessors. In this sense, they may even have something to teach older practitioners, if those practitioners can learn to get beyond the natural anxiety that results when ontological security is threatened.

Conclusion

Our conclusions are tempered by the limitations of the study. We lack a good sampling frame for this demographic, and while our results confirm much of the previous anecdotal and scholarly literature, they should still be viewed with a bit of skepticism. We are also limited in what we can say from a survey—we didn't interview participants to get their perspectives, nor did we observe ethical decision making in action. What we can do is paint a broad picture of how Millennials report their relations with their agency employees and their approach to ethical decision making.

We conclude that in some ways, Millennials have been maligned because their values are not necessarily those of their predecessors. In turn, our study reveals that Millennials are also having their sense of ontological security challenged through observation of their older colleagues' actions, and many lament what they perceive as a lack of ethics in older generations. In fact, Millennials' sense of ethics is closer to those of their superiors than either side might think, and they value good relations with their employers. What they ask, however, is that agencies have clear values statements and adhere to them, and that they allow Millennial practitioners a glimpse of the big picture so they can better do their work. From our perspective, these are suggestions that can only improve the profession.

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Appendix A: Ethics Questions From Survey

1. Please indicate the one answer that is closest to your experiences.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Skip this question
Because of internal politics in my workplace, I make decisions about ethical issues that I am not entirely comfortable with.						
Because of the need to keep my job, I make decisions about ethical issues that I am not entirely comfortable with.						
Because of my desire to get ahead, I make decisions about ethical issues that I am not entirely comfortable with.						

If there are any decisions you have made that you are uncomfortable with, feel free to use the space below to provide a description. Your answers are confidential.

2. Please provide the one answer that would most closely match your response to the following hypothetical situation.

A birth control pill for men has been developed. A pharmaceutical company has paid your agency to coordinate interviews with Rachel Kelly, a doctor. Rachel is receiving payment from the pharmaceutical company for her media appearances. Your boss asks you to pitch Rachel's appearance to local media throughout the United States. Your boss says that you are not to reveal that Rachel is being sponsored by a pharmaceutical company. Your boss explains that it doesn't matter anyway because the birth control pill has been thoroughly tested for safety, and your boss shows you ample evidence. Your boss just wants to ensure that the media treat Rachel as a health expert rather than as a corporate spokesperson. What do you do?
   a. Pitch Rachel's appearance. When media ask about the sponsor, say that you are doing this to promote Rachel's stature as a national expert.
   b. Pitch Rachel's appearance. When the media ask about the sponsor, ignore your boss' instructions and reveal the pharmaceutical sponsor.
   c. Explain to your boss that you do not feel comfortable with this assignment. (The last person who challenged the boss was let go three months later.)
   d. Refer this situation to someone about your level in your workplace. Ask for help.
   e. Skip this survey question.

3. Please provide the one answer that would most closely match your response to the following hypothetical situation.

A candidate for mayor has hired your public relations agency. In a staff meeting, Caitlin from the public affairs team says that she needs two people to pose as citizens at a debate between your client and the opposing candidate for mayor. The team needs one person to ask an easy question of the candidate who is employing your agency and one person to ask a difficult question of the opposing candidate. Caitlin says that she knows the opposing candidate will be using a similar strategy against

your client. She says the agency would greatly appreciate the help, and it would be a wonderful personal favor to her as well. She did this for her boss when she was an account coordinator, which helped her get quickly promoted. What do you do?
 a. Volunteer to ask either question.
 b. Volunteer to ask the easy question of the agency's candidate.
 c. Stay quiet and let someone else volunteer.
 d. Skip this survey question.

4. Please provide the one answer that would most closely match your response to the following hypothetical situation.

Jaime is an influential vice president in your agency, and she has national recognition. You have wanted to make a good impression on her; however, you have not had the opportunity for much interaction. She approaches you with a special assignment. Jaime asks you if you would feel comfortable monitoring an activist group by attending its meetings and pretending to be a volunteer. She says that you in no way need to accept the assignment if you don't feel comfortable. You realize that if you turn this assignment down, she will ask your co-worker, Catherine. What do you do?
 a. Accept Jaime's assignment.
 b. Politely decline Jaime's assignment.
 c. Skip this survey question.

Feel free to use this comment area for the questions on this page.
(Questions 2, 3, and 4 appeared on the page.)

5. Please indicate the one best answer.

	Significantly	Somewhat significantly	Neutral	Not too much	Insignificantly	Skip this question
To what extent do internal politics at your workplace affect the ethical decisions you make?						

6. If internal politics play a role, do they guide you toward more ethical or less ethical decisions
 a. More ethical
 b. Less ethical
 c. Internal politics do not play a role
 d. Skip this survey question.

7. Please indicate the one best answer.

	Significantly	Somewhat significantly	Neutral	Not too much	Insignificantly	Skip this question
To what						

		Somewhat				
extent does the need to keep your job affect the ethical decisions you make?						

8. If the need to keep your job plays a role, does this desire guide you toward more ethical or less ethical decisions?
   a. More ethical
   b. Less ethical
   c. The need to keep my job does not play a role
   d. Skip this survey question.

9. Please indicate the one best answer.

	Significantly	Somewhat significantly	Neutral	Not too much	Insignificantly	Skip this question
To what extent does your desire to get ahead affect the ethical decisions you make?						

10. If your desire to get ahead plays a role, does this desire guide you toward more ethical or less ethical decisions?
   e. More ethical
   f. Less ethical
   g. The desire to get ahead does not play a role
   h. Skip this survey question.

11. We would like to find out how helpful the following questions are for deciding whether a decision is ethical. Please indicate how practical these questions would be for ethical decisions you might encounter.

	Not useful at all	Not too useful	Neutral	Somewhat useful	Very useful	Skip this question
If I were the customer (or other public), would I accept this decision?						
Have I faced a similar ethical decision before?						
Am I doing the right thing?						

Should everyone else who is in a similar situation do the same thing I am about to do?					
Am I proceeding with good intentions?					
Will the dignity and respect I have for myself and others be compromised by this decision?					

12. Please indicate how helpful your education and the PRSA code of ethics are in making ethical decisions.

	Not useful at all	Not too useful	Neutral	Somewhat useful	Very useful	Skip this question
Educational training for making ethical decisions						
PRSA's code of ethics for making ethical decisions						

Feel free to use this comment area for the questions on this page.
(Questions 11 and 12 appeared on this page.)