Interpreting ethics: Public relations and strong hermeneutics

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Abstract
This article suggests that public relations’ inadequate engagement with the complexities of ethical theory has contributed to public loss of trust in its activities. Instead of blaming this on publics, communicators could take more responsibility for their professional ethics. The author suggests that a hermeneutic approach to ethics opens up a new area for debate in the field. Public relations ethics have traditionally drawn on the major approaches of deontology (Kant) and consequentialism (Bentham and Mill), with marginal reference to the more recent revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 1984), an approach that shifts attention from ethical action to ethical agent. Thus discussion of ethics in public relations literature (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006; S. A. Bowen, 2007; McElreath, 1996) concentrates on rational approaches to ethical decision making, based (respectively) in marketplace theory, Kantian approaches or systems theory. In these and other writings, there is an emphasis, as is common in approaches to professional ethics, on external rule-based ethics rather than attempts to focus on inner processes to assess ethical implications of practice. This article argues that as concepts of professionalism shift and buckle under global economic and social pressures, it might be timely to look less to systems and more to human experience for ethical guidance. A hermeneutic approach, drawing on the philosophy of interpretation developed in recent decades by thinkers such as Gadamer, Habermas and Riceour, offers an alternative, inner, path to an ethics drawn from the search for shared meaning.

The article starts with a brief overview of the current state of public relations ethics, suggesting a reliance on somewhat superficial codes for guidance and the absence of reflexivity in ethical debates; it then introduces concepts from hermeneutics and its main schools or approaches, with a particular focus on hermeneutic ethics. Finally, the article links the two topics to show how ‘strong’ hermeneutic ethics might contribute to greater reflexivity in public relations ethics. It aims to shift the ethical debate away from...
notional reliance on codes and external guidance towards a deeper ethic. The approach taken is broadly critical (Hall, 1980; Heath, 1992) and is itself interpretative, making the article doubly-hermeneutic (Giddens, 1984) in both form and content.

**Keywords**
hermeneutics, hermeneutic ethics, Gadamer, Habermas, reflexivity, public relations ethics

**Introduction**
In May 2011, it was revealed that Facebook had hired Burson-Marstellar (B-M) to ‘bad mouth’ Google; B-M then pressured journalists to write negative copy, until the transactions were revealed by internal emails. Responses in various blogs included: ‘called a spade a spade’, ‘smearing is an integral part of PR’. and, more thoughtfully from a senior member of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA):

Will our profession use this as a teachable moment – an opportunity to reassess our commitment to serving the public interest and being ethical counselors to our clients? Or will we just brush it aside as yet another instance of an ethical lapse taking center stage for a couple of news cycles? (Trivitt, 2011)

This story made mainstream coverage. But every day websites such as spinwatch.com and corporatewatch.com provide examples of other public relations ethical lapses, from creating false front organizations to public relations people masquerading as journalists, which fail to attract such attention either inside or outside public relations circles. Of course, public relations is not alone in its derelictions: professions that have been exposed in recent years as falling below expected – and self-proclaimed – standards include banking, accounting, the clergy, the medical and caring professions, athletes, sports institutions (look at the mess at FIFA)... the list goes on. At the time of writing (December 2011) the UK Leveson Inquiry is receiving detailed testimonials from those who have been abused by the unethical behaviour of journalists. It is not surprising, therefore, that various business surveys in recent years (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2009; Edelman, 2009) have identified the loss of public trust in institutions as a major priority. The 2009 Mori/Ipsos survey exploring trust in professions found that ‘Cynicism also surrounds business leaders. They registered their worst net trust score – the percentage of people who trust them minus those who do not – since the yearly veracity index began in 1983’; other groups (police, civil servants and clergy are cited) also experienced loss of trust (Campbell, 2009).

I suggest that this loss of trust relates to perceived ethical deficit, but would seek to shift the focus from the perceiver to the object of attention, because the dominant framing of these business-led reports problematizes the public rather than the organizations or professions under scrutiny. It is about our lack of trust not their lack of trustworthiness. This framing has ethical implications for practice: if the public is the ‘problem’, better communication might be the solution; but if the professions and/or organizations were to reflect more deeply on what changes they need to make, then ethics not communication is the key. For example, Tom Watson (2010) notes that claims made by corporate communicators
(Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2009) to be responsible for generating and maintaining the organization’s core values, particularly that of authenticity, are undermined by their failure to explore the concept. This leads to the kind of apology offered ‘to those who have taken offence’, evidenced in the sense of grievance found in many of the cited reports, that we, the taxpayers, have failed to understand their situation together with the hope that public relations can bridge this failure of communication.

Traditionally professions secured (or at least asserted) public trust by virtue of their professional status (body of knowledge, extensive training, extra-moral ethical standards). However, the reports cited above suggest that the traditional claim to work for the benefit of society, by which professionals secure social status, no longer has credibility. What Larson (1977) calls the ‘professional project’ is under threat, and professional identity is in crisis (Broadbent et al., 1997; Dent and Whitehead, 2002; Tony Watson, 2002). It should not therefore be surprising that many professional bodies are looking to ethics for validation. As Sama and Shoaf (2008) put it:

As scandal continues to rock the professional business sector, questions abound as to cause and effect, while clients’ trust and business legitimacy wear down. Understanding the fundamental drivers of ethical lapses in the professions is a critical pursuit of academics and practitioners alike (2008: 39).

It is worth pointing out here that approaches to professional ethics tend to reflect the split between approaches to professionalism, which Sciulli (2005) calls functionalist and revisionist; the first consisting of those who see professions as maintaining status quo and playing a positive role in social development (such as Durkheim, Parsons) and the latter who follow Weber in critiquing these claims and perceive professions as bureaucratic mechanisms to promote exclusivity and monopolistic practices (Larson, Johnson, Friedson, for example). Functionalists can be said to envisage professional ethics as embodying the profession’s commitment to social value and also to offer a protection for ignorant clients. Revisionists see professional ethics as empty and self-promotional. Most codes are constructed by the former group, setting out criteria for the ideal-typical professional. But as Larson points out, the display elements of the ideal-typical constructions ‘do not tell us what a profession is, only what it pretends to be...’ (1977: xii). Critics of professionalism, such as Brecher, tend to be scornful of professional ethics, which ‘instrumentalize moral concern; and in doing so, both take morality out of the picture and depoliticize the object of what might have been moral concern’ (2010: 353). The debate on professional ethics as a concept is thus polarized between idealized self-images and accusations of hollow vainglory.

For the first half of the 20th century professional ethics focused on the specific conflicts facing particular professions, such as patient confidentiality or accounting procedures, following the trait approach (Cooper, 2004). Then wider reading of philosophy introduced the established schools of consequentialism and deontology, as developed by Bentham and Kant, respectively, which have since dominated the development of professional ethics (Lefkowitz, 2003), although Lucas (2005) points out the dehumanizing and de-professionalizing aspects inherent in both approaches. Discourse ethics, as developed by Habermas, has shifted this field by engaging with the power dynamics involved
in constructing ethical communication, though this has not led to revision of professional ethics, unlike virtue ethics, as described by MacIntyre (1984) and others, which has had an impact on the field of professional ethics (for fuller discussion of these approaches, see below). There are other approaches to professional ethics, drawing on Confucianism, social identity theory, postmodern and feminist approaches, but the virtue approach is particularly relevant in its lack of reliance on external rules or codes to prescribe acceptable ethical behaviour, focusing instead on character and reflection, making it an agent-based ethics (Oakley and Cocking, 2001). It is this shift away from ethics based on codes and rational evaluation of choices that creates the space for discussion of a hermeneutic approach to ethics.

Before coming to hermeneutics, however, the current state of public relations ethics is assessed and critiqued, in order to make the case for a new approach.

**Public relations ethics – current issues and approaches**

In previous writing (Fawkes, 2007, 2010) I have summarized public relations theory as falling into the following loose groupings: (a) excellence; (b) advocacy; (c) relationship management and (d) critical theory. This is not a perfect taxonomy (Macnamara, 2012: 246) points out that it omits the information role, though I would include this in the excellence project), but it allows a differentiated discussion of public relations ethics, which seems meaningful, given their foundation in competing approaches.

**Excellence**

The excellence project, based in systems theory and developed in quantitative longitudinal studies (Grunig et al., 1992, 2007), seeks to measure the dimensions of best practice both in its country of origin (USA) and worldwide. Here the practitioner is primarily (though not exclusively) conceptualized as a boundary spanner, linking external publics to organizational strategic communications. This role achieves its highest level in symmetric communication when the full range of negotiating and diplomatic skills is deployed to secure positive outcomes for all parties: ‘In the two-way symmetric model … practitioners serve as mediators between organizations and their publics. Their goal is mutual understanding between practitioners and their publics’ (Grunig and Hunt, 1984: 22). This level is also described as inherently ethical, with all other approaches being less ethical. The ethical approach in excellence tends to rely on structural issues, stating that public relations is only truly ethical when it is symmetrical: ‘it is difficult, if not impossible, to practice public relations in a way that is ethical and socially responsible using an asymmetrical model’ (Grunig et al., 1992: 175). This is critiqued by other scholars (see below), most recently Porter who suggests the Grunigian approach limits discussion of public relations to output rather than outcome, and that a post-symmetrical theory ‘requires a reorientation towards audiences rather than organisations’ (2010: 127).

Although detailed systems theory approaches to ethics are developed by Bivins (1992, 2003), S. A. Bowen (2007) and McElreath (1996), overall the project tends to focus on codes and idealized or excellent behavior, particularly regarding duty to client and society. Parkinson (2001) suggests that the PRSA code of ethics is influenced by the excellence
model in its emphasis on symmetry and avoidance of persuasion but concludes that it was designed more to improve the reputation of the profession than to control its standards of behaviour (2001: 28). This echoes Larson’s view that codes tell the public ‘what the profession wants to be, not what it is’ (1977:x). Breit and Demetrios (2010) also report that practitioners in New Zealand support the existence of a code of conduct but rarely consult it for guidance in ethical issues.

The adoption of the excellence approach in professional public relations codes may be testament to its salience, but as others have pointed out (Holtzhausen, 2002; L’Etang, 2003), it is popular with pro-public relations voices because it glorifies their contribution to democracy and social progress, and avoids awkward discussion of its involvement with historical or contemporary propaganda. The image of the ethical boundary spanner contributing to ‘social harmony’ (Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995:1) dominates the conceptualization of public relations, informs attitudes to corporate social responsibility, issues management and many other aspects of the field. For example, S. A. Bowen offers a detailed Kantian perspective on excellence, but is uncritical of both elements, finding that ‘ethics is a single excellent factor and the common underpinning of all factors that predict excellent public relations’ (2007: 275). She concludes that ‘public relations is serving a larger and more ethically responsible role by communicating for the good of society, both for the benefit of specific groups and for the maintenance of society itself’ (2007: 279). The tone throughout promotes the ethical contribution of public relations without addressing the reservations posed by others (see below) and is explicitly founded in the Durkheim view of professions as offering a structural function in maintaining social order (2007: 278).

Advocacy

This model recognizes that public relations often plays a more asymmetrical or persuasive role than is encompassed by the boundary spanner. One view locates this approach in marketplace theory (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006), which argues that all organizations are entitled to have a voice: ‘Marketplace theory is predicated, first on the existence of an objective “truth” that will emerge from a cacophony of voices promoting various interests; second on a marketplace in which all citizens have the right – and perhaps the means – to be both heard and informed; and third, on the rational ability of people to discern “truth”’ (Fitzpatrick, 2006:4). It is strongly USA-based, citing the First Amendment as inspiration, as well as social responsibility theory. The problems with the ‘objectivity’ of truth (despite the inverted commas) are not explored. Indeed, this approach, as presented by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, is fairly uncritical of the workings and morality of the free market, but does recognize the need for constraints within the marketplace and suggests that these should involve awareness of factors such as access, process, truth and disclosure (Fitzpatrick, 2006:3). This is where debates about the ethical nature of withholding information from the media that is detrimental to client’s interests are often located. It will be interesting to observe whether this position shifts in the light of the global financial crisis and what many, even Harvard Business School (Mann, 2011), consider the end-state of free market capitalism.
A deeper approach to advocacy is based on rhetorical theory (Heath, 2001; Porter, 2010; Toth and Heath, 1992) and addresses the role of persuasion in communication, dating back to Aristotle and strongly linked to concepts of democracy. The communicator uses words and symbols to influence the perceptions of others, with varying outcomes. The roles of speaker, audience, the choice of message and the dynamics and characteristics of each provides the focus of study. Writers on ethics from the rhetorical perspective such as Pearson, Heath, Sullivan and Toth have examined the ethics of persuasion at depth. Heath (2007) explores the tension between the symmetry proposed as the basis of ethics in the excellence approach and the ethical aspects of advocacy, noting Grunig’s (2001) acceptance that not all ethical dialogue can be symmetrical, or there would be no room for debate. Rather, argues Heath, ethical advocacy requires equal access to the structures and platforms of debate. Porter goes further, suggesting that public relations is rhetoric (2010: 129, my emphasis) and that ‘rhetoric provides a framework for ethical public relations’ (2010: 128), illustrating the earlier comment that ethical approaches to public relations are framed by competing theoretical lenses.

There is also a strong correlation, unsurprising given their shared origin with Aristotle, between the rhetorical school and virtue ethics (MacIntyre, 1984). There is not space for detail, but this can be summarized as: (a) an action is right if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances; (b) goodness is prior to rightness; (c) the virtues are irreducibly plural intrinsic goods; (d) the virtues are objectively good; (e) some intrinsic goods are agent-relative; (f) acting rightly does not require that we maximize the good (Oakley and Cocking, 2001: 9). Although MacIntyre’s notion of a practice takes in more than the activity of professions, it is relevant to the place of professions in society and the tension in professional roles.

Virtue ethics has made an impact on public relations: for example, Harrison and Galloway’s analysis of the public relations practitioner roles found that ‘Virtue ethics can explain, in a way that codes-based approaches do not, how “good” people can be led into acting badly because they care for the wrong person or organisation’ (2005: 14). Edgett (2002) proposes 10 principles for ethical advocacy, while Baker and Martinson (2002) suggest five principles, which they call the TARES test (for Truthfulness, Authenticity, Respect, and Social Responsibility), both drawing on virtue ethics. This approach addresses the personality of the communicator and asks them to reflect on their own motives and behaviours, shifting the focus from action to agent. L’Etang (2006; L’Etang and Pieczka, 1996) cautions against rhetoric’s tendency to concentrate on the speaker rather than audience, but Porter (2010) argues rhetoric does engage with audiences, citing Burke’s (1966) work on ethical persuasion. Another caveat is made by Appiah (2008), who suggests that virtue ethics sometimes leads to disputes about dominant virtues and can be used to reinforce idealized self-images, particularly where it has been narrowly interpreted as a tool for deciding which acts are virtuous, despite the theoretical emphasis on agents.

**Relationship management**

Audiences move to centre-stage in relationship theory, which conceptualizes public relations professionals as negotiating a complex set of relationships inside and outside client/employer organizations (Ledingham and Bruning, 2001). Relationship management
draws on a variety of theoretical disciplines to identify the elements that make up a positive relationship, such as: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship and communal relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Unlike the organization-centred perspective of systems theory approaches to public relations, it takes the standpoint of the publics (Leitch and Neilson, 2001). Jahansoozi (2006) suggests that this is partially due to cultural and technological shifts that have empowered publics and facilitated international dialogue and/or coalitions. The ethics of relationship management seem underexplored, particularly in the lack of a developed theory of relationship dialogue. Jahansoozi (2006) does connect relationship management and ethical dialogue, citing Kent and Taylor’s contention that dialogue is ‘one of the most ethical forms of communication and… one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood’ (2002: 22). Day et al. (2001) reiterate the importance of dialogic communication as the emerging theme in public relations theory for the 21st century, a view shared by Grunig (2001), indicating a convergence of values in this area over the past decade. However, Pieczka (2010) suggests that while many public relations scholars have stressed the centrality of dialogue to the field, there has only been superficial engagement with dialogic theory, unlike related disciplines such as political science and organizational communication that have developed a range of techniques and applications that have changed their practice. In contrast, she says, ‘there is very little in public relations scholarship to help the discipline think about how dialogue can become an expert communication skill’ (2010: 117). The resonance between this dialogic theory and hermeneutics is considered later in the article.

Interestingly, while discourse ethics is applied to public relations (Day et al., 2001), this is not located in the context of relationship management, which might appear a natural ‘home’. Discourse ethics rests on the notion of equal access to ethical debate and decisionmaking, founded in Habermas’s (1989) ideas of dialogic communication. These principles have been summarized as: (a) participants must have an equal chance to initiate and maintain discourse; (b) participants must have an equal chance to make challenges, explanations or interpretations; (c) interaction among participants must be free of manipulations, domination, or control; and (d) participants must be equal with respect to power (Burleson and Kline, 1979, cited in Day et al., 2001:408). Curtin and Boynton (2001) explore the application of Habermas’s discourse ethics to public relations by Pearson (1989) and Leeper (1996), in particular the attempt to construct procedures to enable all participants to communicate equally. However, as they point out, this disbars advocacy approaches and requires rational application of procedural rules that are more likely to be observed in theory than practice.

**Critical theory**

Critical approaches, including postmodernism, political economy and, at the outer reaches, propaganda studies, are sceptical of the public relations role. L’Etang summarizes this grouping as ‘an interdisciplinary approach which seeks to define assumptions which are taken-for-granted with a view to challenging their source and legitimacy’ (2005: 521). Critical writers scrutinize the power dynamics of organizations and their publics and often reveal persistent involvement of public relations practitioners in propaganda and
deception, past and present. While the previously covered models share an optimistic view of public relations’ contribution to democracy and tend to minimize the role of propaganda in the formation of the field (Fawkes, 2006; Moloney, 2000), critical scholars are more sceptical (L’Etang, 2004; Moloney, 2006; Weaver et al., 2006). The propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) and Chomsky (2002) suggests that ‘free’ press can be manipulated to serve governmental and business interests and that public relations is inherently propagandist. This argument is repeatedly made by public relations’ greatest critics, Stauber and Rampton (2004) in the US and Miller and Dinan (2008) in the UK. They particularly highlight the distortions to the democratic process, caused by public relations firms’ fake grassroots campaigns (astroturfing), or planting questions in press conferences by public relations people masquerading as journalists. However, they provide little insight into what might constitute legitimate public relations, and they tend to conflate corporate business interests with communication, without considering the promotional activities of voluntary, charity or trade union groups, for example.

There are also public relations scholars who take a critical perspective from within the field, such as Pieczka, L’Etang, Moloney, Weaver, Pfau, Holtzhausen and McKie. They have rejected the normative influence of the excellence approach, argued for greater reflexivity, accepted the role of propaganda in the formation of public relations, and reached outside the field to bring aspects of postmodernism (Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002), chaos theory/complexity (McKie, 2001; McKie and Munshi, 2007) and social theory (Ihlen et al., 2009), for example, into discussion of public relations. Wehmeier (2006) also challenges the monolithic aspects of public relations scholarship, noting that it has fallen for what he calls the ‘myth of rationality’. There is general agreement among these scholars that public relations needs to engage with a wider range of theory to develop a greater understanding of its role in society.

These views echo those of postmodern and feminist ethicists outside public relations, such as Benhabib (1992), who suggests that postmodern approaches critique the instrumentalist use of ethics and reject universal claims to truth, arguing that concepts of reality are socially constructed. Feminist scholars particularly challenge the reliance on rationality as the ground for ethical decisionmaking and the absence of emotional or affective bases for moral judgement (1992: 49). Cooper (2004), however, argues that postmodern claims that there are no moral frameworks any more has contributed to ‘moral drift and banal choices’ (p viii).

Critical scholars have written about ethics: for example Curtin and Boynton (2001) provide a critical overview of public relations ethics; L’Etang (2003) raises serious reservations about the public relations function as the ‘ethical conscience’ of the organization, given the lack of moral philosophy in the educational or training backgrounds of most practitioners; and Weaver et al. (2006) examine the role of propaganda in shaping public relations practice and theory. Others have looked at public relations ethics from the perspectives of political economy Moloney (2006), narrative theory (Breit and Demetrios, 2010) and a Weberian approach (Waeraas, 2009). Yet, overall critical scholars tend to foreground social, political or economic theory rather than ethical issues, which may be explained by Kersten’s (1994) comment that ‘a critical perspective on the ethics of public relations maintains that the question of ethics cannot be examined without exploring the social context in which public relations practice takes place’ (cited in Bowen et al., 2006: 126). It is also natural that critical scholars are primarily engaged in
de-constructing and challenging normative assumptions in theory and practice, rather than demonstrating alternatives.

Curtin and Gaither (2005, 2007) do, however, move from critique to construction, with a proposal for the ‘circuit of culture’ as a new paradigm for public relations scholarship. This borrows concepts from cultural and sociological study, particularly Du Gay and Hall, and shows how a circuit of ‘moments’ (comprising representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation) offers a powerful model of interrelated, continuing, process-based communication with strong foundations in and implications for public relations. Practitioners are envisioned as ‘cultural intermediaries’, drawing on Bourdieu’s (1984, cited in Curtin and Gaither, 2005) concept, and key players in the ‘cultural economy’ (both terms are fully explored in the article). Curtin and Gaither’s article places ethics under the regulatory heading, recognizing that this covers cultural norms and could enable the field to move away from focus on codes to examine ‘what meanings codes have as cultural artefacts … for example, ethics codes may play quite different roles in different cultures … [and]. in constructing the identities of public relations practitioners and the profession’ (2005: 104).

In summary, this section has re-located discussion on public relations ethics to their theoretical starting points, in the belief that the underpinning body of theory determines the character of the ethical debate. Some approaches reflect this explicitly, such as the systems theory approaches to ethics; some, like the role of dialogic ethics in relationship management, are implicit or underexplored. Again it should be clear that the walls between approaches are permeable: for example, excellence theory has made extensive use of Habermas’s discourse ethics, but in so doing emphasized the procedural over the philosophical and I would suggest a richer engagement with Habermas might occur in a relationship management context. Of the approaches explored above, the rhetorical approach writes extensively on ethical issues, moving away from exhortations to ‘good’ behaviour towards analysis of the impulses that might prevent such ideals being enacted. However, virtue ethics can also be reduced to a competition between virtues or delineations of virtuous acts not agents, and also tends to reinforce the idealized professional that populates the normative prescriptions in mainstream public relations writing, leaving the discussion of unethical public relations to critics. In this respect, public relations ethics illustrates the lack of reflexivity that Holtzhausen (2000, 2002) predicted would stifle the development of theory.

I would argue that a key element in these narrow approaches to public relations ethics is the priority given to reason in ethical decisionmaking; whether it’s the procedural equity of communicative action or the systems based ethics of symmetry, rationality is the key instrument. Even virtue ethics, which shifts from act to agent, still engages in a series of rational debates concerning the nature of the just man – and has been criticized for this by feminist scholars. The inner dynamics of ethics have been relegated to religion or mysticism and appear to me to be wholly absent from debate. Yet, surely, it is the physical, social even spiritual experience of discomfort that prompts many of us to consider the ethical nature of our acts. There is not space here to consider ethics as an embodied experience, but hermeneutics does ask us to consider something more than reason in constructing our ethical frameworks, not rejecting rationality but placing it in a wider, deeper context.
The next section introduces the key concepts of hermeneutics before the article finally explores how hermeneutics might enrich the above-mentioned approaches to public relations ethics and, even, enable these approaches to be brought into closer relationship with each other. Hermeneutics offers an opportunity to view the field through a more human-centred lens than many other materialist or critical approaches, reminding the researcher that public relations is still carried out by and between human beings trying to create and disseminate meaning from the materials at our disposal, including ourselves.

What is a hermeneutical approach?

Hermeneutics is sometimes called the philosophy of interpretation and has been developed in the past few decades primarily by Ricoeur (e.g. 1981) and Gadamer (e.g. 1989), building on earlier works by Heidegger and others. Hermeneutics is centrally involved with understanding in all its various forms. Bleicher (1980) summarizes the development of traditional hermeneutic theory as: (a) technological understanding of language, vocabulary, grammar, etc.; (b) exegesis of sacred texts, such as biblical study; and (c) to guide jurisdiction. These approaches focus on methodological aspects of interpretation, but hermeneutic philosophy, as proposed by Heidegger (1962[1926]), questioned deeper aspects of understanding, such as the impossibility of objectivity when subject and object are bound together in Being, or Dasein. The goal of hermeneutic investigation is understanding through interpretation, in which the subjective limitations and frameworks – historical and linguistic – are part of the process. It does not aim for scientific replication of interpretation – Heidegger called it ‘extrascientific’ knowledge.

Types of hermeneutic enquiry and their ethical implications

Hermeneutics can be seen as either embracing or as an aspect of reflexivity; Steedman says ‘it is no longer possible to separate knowledge from knower’ (1991: 53) in his critique of scientific method and the fallacy of objectivity and there are many overlaps in reflexivity (e.g. Giddens, 1984) and hermeneutics. In an interesting discussion of knowledge and power in professions, Söderqvist traces the influence of Nietzsche’s ‘sceptical attitude to the validity of rational thought’ (1991: 145) through French poststructuralists, particularly Foucault (Foucault and Gordon, 1980), who considered the claim to objective knowledge to be a screen for ideological hegemony. N. H. Smith (1997) describes the growth of hermeneutic scholarship as a reaction to ‘enlightenment fundamentalism’; Gouldner (1976) termed the latter ‘a pathology of cognition that entails silence about the speaker, about his interests and his desires and how these are socially situated and structurally maintained’ (cited in Soderqvist, 1991: 50).

The tensions between different types of hermeneutics in regard to the search for meaning is elucidated by N. H. Smith (1997) in his book Strong Hermeneutics: Contingency and Moral Identity and it is worth exploring his ideas a little here. He distinguishes between weak, strong and deep hermeneutics, ascribing the first to those (he includes Nietzsche, Rorty and poststructuralists) who revived the philosophy of hermeneutics both to demonstrate the futility of any claim to objective knowledge and to locate all
beliefs and values in the subject. This reaction to enlightenment fundamentalism led to an anti-rationalist stance, building on the ‘disenchantments’ of Copernicus, Darwin and, later, Freud to demonstrate the contingency of the universe and the postmodern dismantling of ‘out there’ truths. Smith identifies the weakness of this position as its failure to address ‘in here’ truths; the triumph of the subjective invalidates all positions in weak hermeneutics, so that all knowledge can be dismissed as interpretation (1997: 16), obviating the requirement for any transcendent forces such as ‘the true, the real and the good’ (1997: 17) and thus incapable of developing an ethic.

Strong hermeneutics is developed by scholars such as Gadamer, Ricoeur and Taylor, who seek not to denigrate reason but to elevate aspects of identity bound in expression; ‘it takes seriously the ethic of cognition as an ethic … as one horizon of self-interpretation among others, its status as a cultural injunction is affirmed but it also allowed to admit of truth. For strong hermeneutics interpretation is the living house of reason not its tomb’ (Smith, 1997: 19).

Thus strong hermeneutics addresses the tension between cognition and identity, widening the field of ethics to include both rationality and other forms of expressive or experienced identity. In this context, the emphasis on rational ethical approaches outlined above looks very partial and thin. Strong hermeneutics admits the whole human being into the discourse, rather than just our brains. Taylor (1989) describes the goal of strong hermeneutics as one of ‘retrieval … to recover buried goods by way of rearticulation – and thereby to make these sources again empower’ (cited in Smith, 1997:25). However, this retrieval requires a high level of self-understanding, central to the hermeneutic ethic, as is emphasized by Ricoeur, Taylor and Gadamer.

The centrality of self-transformation led Habermas to develop deep hermeneutics in his early writings, using Freudian analysis as model for reflectivity, as it combines interpretive insight with empirical scientific research. For Habermas, according to Smith (1997), this ‘deep hermeneutics’ contains the notion (also found in other forms) that the human being cannot generate objective observations, that there is more than mere plurality of interpretation and that psychoanalytic self-questioning can reduce the distortions of self-interpretation. Depth hermeneutics thus engages the individual at a level of human experience with universal resonance. Later, Habermas argued that Gadamer’s approach was over-idealistic and that barriers to understanding can be ideological and resistant to sharing, thus generating critical hermeneutics, questioning the power structures in understanding and communication, before he developed the more Kantian aspects of discourse ethics (for more on the relationship between discourse ethics and hermeneutics see Smith, 1997).

Smith dismisses weak hermeneutics briskly but conducts a detailed refutation of Habermas’s approach, claiming that strong hermeneutics already fulfils the depth function. Accepting the conflation of strong and deep hermeneutics for the purposes of this article, it is this approach that is capable of providing a foundation for an ethic. Using Smith’s framework one can recast Davey’s (2004) exploration of the tension between what Riceour (1981) termed ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion’ (in which text always means something other than the author intended) and the ‘hermeneutics of conversation’ (in which the text always means something more than the author intended). The former resonates with concepts from weak hermeneutics in which the emphasis is on deconstruction
not reconstruction. The latter seems closer to Gadamer’s dialogic approach – he coins the term ‘fusion of horizons’ to indicate the possibility of finding common ground but also the transience of such discoveries; like horizons, they are always shifting. Gadamer was particularly concerned with the pre-understandings (also termed ‘prejudices’) a reader brings to the text; the interplay of expectation, realization and adjustment leads to realignments of their frames of interpretation (Jensen, 2002). These adjustments and the interplay between the part of the text and the whole, and the whole text and its context form elements of the circle of hermeneutics, a representation of the dynamics of interpretation.

Strong hermeneutics opens the door to multiplicity of meaning and the infinite varieties of interpretation. As Weinsheimer (1990) says:

There is always room for further interpretation. The fact that the human word is not one but many, the fact that the object of thought is not wholly realized in any one of its conceptions, impels it constantly forward toward further words and concepts. (in Davey, 2004:223)

Schweiker (2004) offers a different taxonomy of hermeneutical approaches, from the pre-critical (literal interpretations of the Bible, for example), through historical-critical hermeneutics (which contextualise interpretation) to post-critical hermeneutics, which examine the assumptions underpinning texts, as in critical approaches, but then move on to construct new meanings or interpretations: ‘The point of interpretation for any post-critical theory is to show the contemporary meaning and truth of the work. It is to open the text or symbol of event for renewed engagement within the dynamics of current life’ (Schweiker, 2004). This approach seems the most attractive to me as it builds on the philosophy of understanding established earlier then moves beyond critical deconstruction to show how deeper, richer meaning might be established here and now.

There is a strong connection between the subject-based hermeneutics and the concerns raised earlier by Cooper (2004) about postmodern ethics; several scholars have used hermeneutical approaches of varying types to question the experience of ethics in contemporary life (Schweiker, 2004; N. H. Smith, 1997; P. C. Smith, 1991). At the core of hermeneutics is the act of relation and the construction of meaning between parties; it is conscious of the place of the agent in history and of the variable and multiple filters that characterize human nature. Ethical knowledge is not ‘out there’ but ‘in here’, as suggested by Heidegger. It is not a set of technical instructions to be applied to all situations, as many ethical codes would imply, but, Gadamer suggests, an aspect of ‘being and becoming’ (cited in Warnke, 2002: 84). Warnke also explores Gadamer’s writing about advice-giving as an ethical practice: ‘ethical advice involves the same level of participation as one’s involvement in one’s own life. It is not possible to give sound advice unless one takes the situation to be one that affects one’s own life and self-understanding’ (2002: 86). This is a powerful statement if placed in the context of public relations ethics, and is discussed further below.

**Hermeneutics and public relations**

It is surprising that there is not more research into public relations and hermeneutics, given the centrality of interpretation to public relations practice: the practitioner is
constantly interpreting various internal and external publics to the organization and vice versa, and is prized for skill in understanding the nuances and navigating the pitfalls of interpretation. Hermeneutics is not often cited in public relations literature, though Habermas is considered a leading theorist for communication ethics (Pearson, 1989). Public relations discussion of Habermas often concentrates on the procedural aspects of discourse ethics and the hermeneutic roots are neglected.

The following selection of quotes illustrates the relevance of hermeneutics to public relations attitudes to meaning, text and interpretation:

[t]he speaker and the listener form a relationship in which each of them potentially brings his or her entire being to bear in an interpretive project of mutual concern which entails developing the reciprocal openness of participants in relation to their true intentions, motives, and needs. (White, 1979, cited in Sikka, 2008: 237)

To understand something is to reach an understanding with another about it, and that can only be achieved through a conversation that sustains the interplay of question and answer. (Gadamer, 1975, cited in Sikka, 2008: 235)

The hermeneutic circle may be understood as a model of communication, as it evolves not just in the here and now, but down through history and across cultures. In hermeneutic (and phenomenological) terminology, communication involves a ‘fusion of horizons’ – a meeting and merging of the expectations that communicators bring with them into the exchange. (Jensen, 2002: 22)

These quotes stress the communicative aspects of hermeneutics, the relationship between all the element in a communication: speaker, listener, text, pre-understanding, interpretation, re-interpretation and exchange of meaning. These are the tasks given to public relations practitioners in their roles of boundary spanner, relationship manager, advocate or even critic. They also illustrate a richness of possibility that might satisfy Pieczka’s (2010) concern of inadequate engagement with dialogical philosophy; although she finds the connection between public relations and dialogue theory in Deweyan pragmatism (2010: 111), I suggest the hermeneutic tradition also offers considerable potential for investigation by public relations scholars.

Burkart (2007) does explore understanding and meaning in Habermas’s theories of communicative action and their relevance to public relations practice, but does not place these theories or concepts in the hermeneutic tradition. Instead, he devises a model of Consensus-oriented Public Relations (COPR) and shows how it could be deployed in various circumstances. He urges adoption of this approach because:

The practical background is that especially in situations with a high chance of conflict, companies and organizations are forced to present good arguments for communicating their interests and ideas – in other words: they must make the public understand their actions. (Burkart, 2007: 60)

But the point of hermeneutics is that it is about mutual understanding; so the need of the public relations practitioner to understand the public deserves equal attention. As Mickey
(2003) stresses, this is not about more instrumental use of language to achieve organizational goals. And it is he who has addressed the practical aspects of hermeneutics most directly, in a chapter that analyses a brochure on mental illness from an hermeneutic perspective, illustrating how meaning is a dialogue between the author, reader and text, and in particular the prejudices that a reader might bring to the discussion of mental health issues. He emphasizes the importance of shifting from the normative and instrumental to a participatory approach to language and communication, stating that:

Writing is not getting a message across, but instead creating an experience through language that is understood by the reader as an entity in its own right... Hermeneutics offers much as a theoretical source for understanding public relations and placing public relations in a less mechanist or positivist approach. (Mickey, 2003: 118, author’s emphasis).

These points are useful indicators to how hermeneutics might stimulate greater reflexivity in public relations practice, though it focuses on practitioners as writers and on linguistic issues rather than the more experiential Being-in-the-World approach found in Heidegger. It is also worth remembering that public relations practitioners are centrally involved in consultation and advice giving, whether as independent or in-house advisers. Gadamer’s comment about the relationship between the advisor and the advisee as engaged in shared, human experience is rarely evidenced in theory or practice but raises issues about the relationship between self and other in public relations: how often do we consider the needs of the client/employer to be related to and as important as our own needs? Warnke (2002) is clear that the claim to understand another does not constitute an ethic; we must presume that the other has something to teach us. To me, the greatest challenge to the field is the reminder that we stand in front of texts (signs, symbols, words and human events) ‘that display the full range of human possibilities and capacities’. That is where ethics starts, the subject of the final section.

**Hermeneutics, public relations and ethics**

I am not aware of consideration of hermeneutic approaches in discussions of public relations ethics, though Pearson (1989b) draws heavily on Habermas’s discourse ethics, as have many other scholars since. However, searches for hermeneutics and public relations ethics online and in texts yield few results. I shall therefore introduce the concepts from hermeneutics to each of the approaches to public relations ethics outlined at the beginning of the article.

**Excellence**

As suggested earlier, the excellence model makes use of some aspects of Habermas’s later communicative action theory, using it to bolster the ethics of symmetry, but losing some of the dynamics of the process in so doing. The central importance of power relations to Habermas is also somewhat absent from the excellence conceptualization of the field. Despite the detailed work of Bivins, McElreath and Shannon Bowen, mentioned earlier, public relations core texts may include a page or two on ethics at most, but provide little...
of real help to the novice practitioner, preferring to rely on codes of practice for guidance. One analysis of these codes (Harrison and Galloway, 2005) suggests that most practitioners absorb the message that they should do the best they can without jeopardizing their careers. Moreover, the excellence approach lacks the dimension of reflexivity at the heart of hermeneutics, failing to account for disparities and difference between cultures, histories, power relations and other variables and seeking to define a somewhat mechanistic template for ethical communication with emphasis on the act not the agents. The rejection of persuasion as a potentially ethical form of communication is symptomatic of the narrow concept of human nature at its heart, as is articulated by Porter (2010). In other words, the (messy) complexity and fullness of human nature comes second to the efficient mechanics of systems theory, placing the excellence project in the category of enlightenment fundamentalism against which hermeneutics was conceived.

Yet the scope for hermeneutic reflection is evident in the primary definition of the agent as ‘boundary spanner’ (though not in the division between manager and technician), negotiating communication between the organization and its internal and external publics. There is a resonance between the image of the boundary spanner and the figure of Hermes who gives his name to hermeneutics, the messenger between the gods and man (one suspects many public relations practitioners treat the boardroom like Olympus):

Hermes is a god: Guide of souls to the underworld, the divinity of olive cultivation, athletics, boundaries, commerce, and messenger of the gods. Hermes stands as a liminal presence, on the threshold or boundary of depth psychology and politics, of psychic reality and social reality, of the personal and the political. (Samuels, 1993: 89)

Of course, as the Jungian writer Samuels points out, Hermes is also the arch-Trickster in Greek mythology, the deceiver, double-sayer, unreliable guide, but that’s another story… An interpretive account of the interpreter could yield insight into the ethical conflicts experienced by those in this role, who as S. A. Bowen (2008) points out are untrained in ethical decisionmaking yet subject to constraints and pressures from internal and external publics.

**Advocacy (1)**

Advocacy ethics would also be enriched by hermeneutic review and in some instances reflects awareness of these issues. However, the legal model proposed by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006), which emphasizes the speaker’s right to state a case in the court of public opinion rather than the ability to learn from the perspectives or experiences of others and assumes the existence of an objective truth that can be ascertained through this process, can be challenged by both reflexive and hermeneutic approaches. An appropriate hermeneutic response would be to examine the cultural bias involved in creating a set of ethics located so firmly in one national legal system and the presumption of a (metaphorical) court room, with public defenders, a jury and impartial judge, none of which are particularly evident in modern communication practice. It would also encourage reflection on the difference between courtroom debate and communicative dialogue and the ethical implications of these stances.
Advocacy

The other version of advocacy is that predicated in rhetorical education (which is, interestingly, not taught in the UK), the only school of public relations that recognizes the centrality of persuasion to its practice and seeks to evolve an ethical approach to this reality. As stated earlier, this approach, drawing on virtue ethics, addresses the character of the communicator and asks them to reflect on their own motives and behaviours. In this degree, it reflects Warnke’s (2002) exploration of the relationship between Gadamer and Aristotle’s ethics. It also concentrates on the communication itself—whether the message is for health or arms promotion, the act of persuasion is seen as having at least the potential to be ethical—a refreshing change from some of the approaches outlined above. There are still problems, such as public access to commercially sensitive information, for example, or inequalities of resources. (There are other problems with virtue ethics, outside the scope of this article; see Appiah, 2008.)

Relationship management

The relationship management approach might also be enhanced by discussion of hermeneutics, given its foundations in relationship theory (Ledingham and Bruning, 2000). The connections between dialogic theory, discourse ethics and hermeneutics are explored by N. H. Smith (1997) and are too complex to summarize here, but in placing these approaches in the relationship management ‘tent’ I believe a new avenue for research is created. To engage fully with hermeneutic ethics, relationship management will need to consider internal relationships—of self with self, as well as self with other. The depth approach, promoted by early Habermas and Shapiro (1972), calls for critical self-understanding in order to minimize barriers to communication.

However, as with all the approaches outlined above, relationship management theory marginalizes the obstacles created by power imbalances. Many of the most important communication issues facing this century, from global warming to religious fundamentalism, raise questions concerning the relative power of the parties seeking relationship. A hermeneutic analysis would highlight these discrepancies and locate relationship in historical and ideological context.

The resonance between dialogic theory and hermeneutic communication is evident from Wierbicka’s (2006) characterization of dialogue as constituting a process, conducted between participants, sometimes in groups, across a range of topics; that recognizes difference; seeking more than ‘an exchange of ideas’, with the goal of mutual understanding; which may not lead to resolution of differences, but may involve the discovery of common ground, if there is respect and goodwill and a commitment to the process itself, regardless of outcomes (cited in Pieczka, 2010:113–4). The goal of ‘common ground’ is analogous to Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizon’ and they share an emphasis on mutuality, fluidity and process, in contrast to the normative, instrumental descriptions of communication found in some systems theory writing. This suggests that Pieczka’s call for deeper engagement with dialogic theory might be met by hermeneutics.
Critical theory

As suggested earlier, critical theory approaches take a variety of attitudes towards public relations ethics from the Chomskian perspective that the concept is an oxymoron to Moloney’s (2006) call for funding for minority groups to enable them to participate more equally in public communication and thus revive the democratic discourse. Some critics (e.g. Stauber and Rampton, 2004) assume persuasion is the same as propaganda and often fail to distinguish between types of communication. Health campaigns, for example, are rarely attacked – unless they turn out to be disguising a commercial interest. In this respect they conform to Schweiker’s (2004) description of critical hermeneutics, cited above. Of course, much critical writing is more concerned with materialism, from a post-Marxist, Weberian perspective than the experiential, even spiritual values embodied in hermeneutics. This ensures that power relations are central to discussion of public relations role in communication (e.g. Edwards, 2006), though the arguments are often located in sociological debate. The point of connection here is early Habermas and his evolution from traditional hermeneutics to critical theory; the debate he has with Gadamer (explored at length in N. H. Smith, 1997) embodies the tension between interpretative and power-based communicative relationships and offers valuable insights for scholars in these fields. This discussion in Davey (2004) regarding the hermeneutics of suspicion and of conversation also merits further examination by critical scholars, who might be expected to fall into the former camp.

Curtin and Gaither’s (2005, 2007) work on the circle of culture, however, would undoubtedly be considered as part of the hermeneutics of conversation. Du Gay’s et al.’s (1997) circle of culture resembles the hermeneutic circle of understanding (see Jensen, 2002: 21 for details) in its fluidity and interrelatedness. Grossberg (1986) refers to the ‘complex set of historical practices by which we struggle to produce identity or structural unity out of, on top of, complexity, difference, contradiction’ (cited in Curtin and Gaither, 2005:98), a description strikingly close to some of the discussion on hermeneutics. Indeed their own term ‘a synergistic whole in constant flux’ (Curtin and Gaither, 2005: 98) would stand as a fine summary of hermeneutics.

A strong hermeneutic approach to public relations ethics would share with critical theorists the need to deconstruct the current claims found in many codes of practice and in much writing from the excellence perspective that public relations serves society. It would look beyond the insistence that ethics resides in symmetry, recognizing the essentially asymmetric, fluid and contradictory nature of most human relationships. But it could also move past the critical to consider how to engage with, rather than simply reject, those holding other views. The concept of a synergistic whole in constant flux could also be applied to the field of public relations (and other professional disciplines); the theoretical positions taken by most scholars are seen as antagonistic to each other and certainly excellence claims (or at least is given by many followers) a kind of absolute authority that creates an exclusivity of thought, what Pfau and Wan (2006:102), call ‘controversy over optimal approach [which] has stunted public relations scholarship’. Macnamara (2012:246) extends my grouping of public relations theory to five main functions in public relations (namely, public information, persuasion, relationship cultivation, social conscience and cultural participant). Hermeneutic analysis could offer a metatheoretical view.
of this schema, suggesting that these are complementary aspects of the whole, rather than competing views. This would generate an interpretative space in which all the theoretical positions outlined here are in continual conversation with each other, finding common ground, then moving away from each other, like sub-atomic particles.

Such a space would also release some of the constraints on public relations ethics, allowing it to shift beyond narrow descriptions of ‘approved’ behaviour to recognize the extent, the normalization of ethically questionable practice. To return to the Facebook/Google example in the introduction, an interpretive response would consider the disparity between the routine nature of a PR company asking a journalist to smear a client’s rival and the shock that greeted its discovery. How can we have a dialogue between those who do not question such an action and those who are appalled? As one colleague asked me at a recent conference, what are the principles that determine that third-party endorsement is acceptable when the content is positive and not when it is negative? Instead of demonizing ‘offenders’ we might engage with their perspective and learn about our own practice, our assumptions about ourselves, clients and publics, about the effect on a society in which such practices are indeed normal. Agreement may prove impossible – agreement is not a necessary outcome of hermeneutic inquiry – but it may yield more insight than the routine repetition of ‘best practice’ or idealized codes that are ignored by practitioners.

As social structures shift and buckle under the pressure of change, how will public relations – and other professions – make their contribution? Will they hold on to old codes of practice and hidden practices or begin a deeper dialogue? Negotiating the path between meaningless harmony and the struggle of engagement might not be easy, but it is central to the hermeneutic tradition, seeking Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, beyond suspicion, into conversation.

**Conclusion and research directions**

This article has argued that consideration of hermeneutics in general and hermeneutic ethics in particular would enrich public relations’ approaches to ethics, which tend to be narrowly based on competing views of the field, with little engagement with wider debates current in the field of professional ethics.

It suggests strong hermeneutics embraces concepts such as the circuit of culture, outlined by Curtin and Gaither (2005, 2007), and dialogic theory, as described by Pieczka (2010), though there may be interesting debates about its limitations. It also suggests that the relationship between Habermas’s early writing, his later discourse ethics and public relations needs revisiting, together perhaps with an investigation of virtue ethics and public relations.

The weak hermeneutic perspective offers a profound critique of normative functionalist and instrumental approaches largely found in mainstream public relations ethics debates, where ethics is seen in terms of upholding codes, serving society and advancing the profession. A Nietzschean dismissal of these parochial, self-serving and deluded positions is almost irresistible, but strong hermeneutics urges us towards conversation, so the article suggests hermeneutics as a meta-theory that would provide a large enough space for new interpretation of ethical assumptions found in all the models sketched above. It cannot describe the outcome of such interpretation – that would be to commit the same
normative fallacies it accuses others of – but it can suggest a theoretical widening of the base of discussion. The research potential for PR scholars from each theoretical approach is considerable; the last section made some suggestions, but others will follow. Hermeneutics particularly encourages interdisciplinary and cross-school interpretation, supporting the reframing of old ideas through new lenses.

One research direction, which I have pursued elsewhere (Fawkes 2010 and forthcoming), is to look to the work of Carl Jung (whose role in hermeneutics is explored by Brooke, 1991). Using a hermeneutic approach, I have constructed a non-judgemental, non-dualistic ethic encouraging reflexivity in practitioners and the profession as a whole. Hermeneutics supports the move away from reason as the sole arbiter of either right or good, encouraging greater self-awareness, a call echoed by Jungian psychology, with the ultimate goal not of goodness but of wholeness.

References


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