“I Just Say I’m in Advertising”:
A Public Relations Identity Crisis?

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Abstract: This study uses a critical sensemaking approach and draws upon role identity theory to explore individual understandings of the public relations identity. Public relations practitioners are asked to share their own sensemaking about their professional identities within the context of negative societal perceptions of the field.

Keywords: Public relations; Organization theory; Identity; Sensemaking

Résumé : Cette étude emploie une approche critique de création de sens et recourt à la théorie sur l’identité de rôle pour explorer comment les professionnels en relations publiques perçoivent leur identité personnelle. On a demandé à ceux-ci de partager leur propre création de sens par rapport à leurs identités professionnelles dans le contexte de perceptions sociales négatives à l’égard de leur profession.

Mots clés : Relations publiques; Théorie organisationnelle; Identité; Création de sens

“When people tell me they need some “good” PR it just makes me cringe. Because I know they don’t really mean PR—they mean they want their image polished in the media. PR is one of the most misrepresented professions I know of.”

This quotation, from a participant in the following study of public relations (PR) practitioners, highlights the frustration of those who work in public relations concerning competing, and often conflicting, views of what they do.

The major public relations professional associations—the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)—boast codes of conduct highlighting ethical practice as a cornerstone of PR practice for their members. However, PR is referred to more commonly in the public sphere as “spin doctoring,” manipulation, and flack. This has caused some practitioners to question whether the label “PR” is actually detrimental to their prac-
practice: “The credibility of our industry—public relations—is so low that many practitioners are distancing themselves from the term public relations while continuing to practice the discipline of public relations” (Sparks, 1993, p. 27).

Because of the lack of a clear definition of PR and clear professional standards, practitioners in this field may have developed very different professional identities. At the same time, recent examples of unethical public relations practice may contribute to a negative public perception of the profession.1

Within that context, the purpose of this study is to provide insight into the sensemaking processes employed by individual PR practitioners as they create their identities as meaningful. Using a critical sensemaking approach (Helms Mills, 2003; Mills & Helms Mills, 2004) as a heuristic to understand the ways in which meaning is constructed and enacted, I was able to gather and share information with other PR practitioners in an attempt to gain insight into individual understandings of the PR identity. Critical sensemaking helps capture a more profound understanding of how practitioners identify with the “public relations” label and make sense of their roles in the field given that society’s view of the profession tends to be negative. This approach allows us to explore avenues for change and growth within the field.

Critical sensemaking is a methodology that is emerging in organization theory; however, its application is relatively new in the study of public relations. This study draws on the experiences of six public relations practitioners, three men and three women, and is concerned with the processes in which the participants engage as they make sense of their roles and identities. This research employs in-depth interviews that seek “deep information and understanding” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 106) from the participants. This method allowed me to gain insight into individual processes of sensemaking, and I used in-depth interviewing as “a way to learn the meanings of participants’ actions” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 106). The conclusions drawn from this research, therefore, are not intended to provide broad interpretations of the construction of professional identity. Rather, the application of social/psychological principles within an analytic framework and an organizational context may open the door to further understanding of how broader societal meanings are made sense of at the local level.

I brought my own sensemaking to the process as I attempted to gather insights into how individual practitioners make sense of the following questions: What constitutes a “good” PR person? And how do individual practitioners feel about being labelled as a PR person? As a public relations practitioner in the government, corporate, and non-profit sectors for 15 years, and now as an educator of public relations students, the process of making sense of an identity that represents “good PR” is an ongoing journey for me. In the current context of media backlash toward the profession, unethical corporate behaviour, and the struggle for PR professionalization, practitioners are exposed to many competing versions of their identities.

As a woman in the field of public relations, I have also experienced the struggle for legitimacy in what has been historically a male-dominated field. Although women now outnumber men in the profession by almost 20 percent, men con-
continue to hold the senior positions within the profession and have better access to organizational decision-makers (International Association of Business Communicators, 2002), thus it is arguably their sensemaking that takes priority, provides a guiding heuristic, and gains legitimacy.

Women in public relations do represent a marginalized voice in terms of organizational decision-making. They continue to be placed in technician roles while male practitioners tend to hold the managerial positions. A recent Public Relations Society of America report confirmed that men are still more likely to be promoted than women in the profession, even though women have represented the majority of practitioners for over 20 years (Toth & Aldoory, 2001). As with research on women in other business disciplines, there is very little research representing the voice of women PR practitioners from a qualitative perspective. Although existing studies (i.e., Cline, Toth, Turk, Johnson, Masel-Walters, & Smith, 1986; Grunig, Toth, & Childers, 2001; Toth & Aldoory, 2001; Toth & Cline, 1991) use quantitative methods—primarily survey research—to gain insight into this issue, the qualitative approach reflected in this paper offers an important opportunity for both women and men in the PR profession to visualize their roles and identities as practitioners.

Weick’s (1995) properties of sensemaking provide a useful framework within which to analyze how PR practitioners make sense of their roles, as they explore the way in which individuals deal with the information they receive. Yet they do not account for issues of power and the role of gender in shaping perceptions of individual and professional identity. Therefore I incorporate elements of critical sensemaking to understand how individual practitioners make sense of their identities and respond to the information they receive about their profession and themselves. Although this study draws upon the experiences of a limited number of practitioners, the findings provide insight into the processes practitioners use to make sense of their professional identities. I feel that the application of sensemaking properties offers insight into the issues of social perception of the profession, professionalization, and the relationship between “good PR” and ethical practice that seem to underlie the discourse of public relations.

Role identity research emphasizes the need that individuals have to establish a relatively stable and positive sense of self-definition (Erez & Earley, 1993). The literature also indicates that this self-definition is at least to some extent dependent on the perceptions of others (Felson, 1992). Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) suggest that due to the need for social validation, individuals involved in socially stigmatized professions may be reluctant to identify too strongly with their work. The interviews in this study explore PR practitioners’ responses to the stigma of the profession and the label of “spin doctor” that so often accompanies the media and public conversations about PR.

**Sensemaking, critical sensemaking, and identity**

As a framework for investigating the ways in which individuals construct their identities, sensemaking provides an opportunity to explore the process by which changes to identity become plausible or are made meaningful. Weick’s (1995) framework tells us that individuals make sense of their environments through a process that is 1) grounded in identity construction, 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of
sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focused on and by extracted cues, and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. These properties provide us with insight into how individuals construct the day-to-day activities of organizations.

Weick describes the first property, identity construction, as an ongoing process where “people learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences” (1995, p. 23). This element of sensemaking is central to the process, as it may influence the application of all other elements in the framework.

In fact, the seven properties of sensemaking referred to above are not all equally visible in the process of individual sensemaking. At times one or more of the properties may play a more significant role in influencing sensemaking than others. In addition, the sensemaking properties may influence individual sensemaking simultaneously.

Identity construction is an essential component of sensemaking, not just as it relates to individual and organizational identities, but because it “influences how other aspects or properties of the sensemaking process are understood” (Helms Mills, 2003, p. 55). The process of identity construction itself is also influenced by what others think. In order to navigate this complex process of finding plausible meaning, individuals rely on extracted cues. This property refers to a process through which individuals select certain specific cues upon which they base their sensemaking.

At the same time, the particular meanings that are extracted from the environment as cues, or constructed as identity, must be plausible. Plausibility refers essentially to a sense that one particular meaning or explanation is more meaningful than others. It feels right within the range of possible explanations available to sensemakers in a given situation.

Helms Mills (2003) applies a critical perspective to this analysis by suggesting that plausibility is also enhanced by the same factors that privilege some meanings above others. The ability of an actor to propose a particular manner in which to make sense of an experience, the access individuals have to other plausible explanations, and in fact the access individuals have to the proposed meaning all influence plausibility.

Critical sensemaking incorporates the properties from Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework into an approach that includes the application of organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) and formative context (Blackler, 1992). In this way, we may address the need to analyze power or power relationships in the application of sensemaking properties (Helms Mills, 2003). This approach offers an opportunity to combine the ideas of sensemaking and organizational power in a way that explores sensemaking through, and in relationship to, the contextual factors of the structure and discourse in which individual sensemaking occurs.

Individuals do not determine their own sensemaking separate from external forces and the context of power. The notion of formative contexts provides a link between dominant social values and action (Blackler, 1992). Described as institutional and imaginative practices that shape a society’s routines, formative contexts are structures that limit what can be imagined and done within that society. In addition to the structures of formative context, Mills & Murgatroyd’s (1991) organiza-
tional rules set limitations on individual sensemaking and actions. At the same time, these rules may emerge as formal (i.e., policies) or informal (the way things get done) within the organization. From that perspective, rules provide pre-existing guidelines to sensemaking and contribute to the plausibility of an interpretation.

Public relations
Public relations provides an interesting context for this study. The field itself is one that lacks a clearly defined identity. Even the definition of public relations is debated among practitioners, and there is no consensus as to what constitutes “good” PR (Lages & Simkin, 2003):

Public relations is an “emerging” social science discipline currently lacking paradigmatic and topic diversity and strongly influenced by practice. The paradigm struggle in public relations is due, in part, to the lack of any consensus as to what constitutes public relations, stemming from the diversity of the practice itself and from its constant adaptation to society’s evolutionary change. (p. 298)

One of the most commonly cited definitions of public relations is “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000, p. 6). This definition highlights the need for PR to be involved at the management level, as well as the essential nature of the relationship between organizations and stakeholder groups.

Although this definition and its source textbook are often used in academic PR programs, there are many other definitions available. The public relations societies have each developed their own definitions. CPRS defines public relations as “the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance” (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2009). Other PR textbooks tend to highlight other dimensions of the practice. As a result, a generally accepted definition of public relations remains elusive (Gordon, 1997).

A related issue in terms of establishing a shared definition of PR practice is the struggle to establish PR as a profession. Although research into the evolution of the profession indicates that organizations such as CPRS have moved public relations toward professionalism, full professionalization of the practice has not been achieved (Johansen, 2001). Several of the main characteristics defining a profession remain problematic in the context of public relations, not the least of these being the requirement of mandatory licensing. Practitioners are not required to have a particular credential or formal education, there is no mandatory accreditation process—although each of the professional associations offers a voluntary process—and there have been no clear demonstrations of the codes of ethics of these societies ever having been enforced. For example, members of CPRS are not reprimanded formally or asked to leave the society as a result of unethical practice. Nevertheless, the mandate of CPRS is

- to group all public relations practitioners in Canada and to foster their professional interests
in cooperation with its regional Member Societies and with like-minded organizations in other countries, to advance the professional stature of public relations

• to regulate its practice for the benefit and protection of the public interest

• to serve the public interest by upholding a standard of proficiency and code of ethics, and by providing ongoing professional development to its members and public relations practitioners across Canada. (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2009)

In addition to the identity debate within the profession, practitioners also operate within a broader social context that may view PR in a negative light. The current media climate presents images of PR practice as neither professional nor working in the interests of the public. Media representations of PR caricature the sector and professionals who work within it as a barrier to the “truth” about organizational activities. In his work on Hollywood portrayals of PR practitioners, Lee (2001) points out that

...public relations has had a negative image in popular culture of manipulation, artificiality and puffery. Reporters are often the conveyors and reinforces of this negative viewpoint. Reporters often refer to PR professionals—whether those working in the public or private sectors—as “flacks.” (p. 298)

The term “spin doctor” is one that we often hear connected with public relations through the media. The term began to be used in the late 1980s to describe individuals who could put a positive spin on an otherwise negative situation. It has a negative connotation that implies a whitewashing of the truth. In its organizational purpose, the advocacy group PR Watch (2004) is quite clear about its perception of public relations as negative:

In our decade of covering the public relations and public affairs industry, we’ve seen time and time again how corporate, political, and ideological groups distort issues, confuse voters, and manipulate public opinion to serve their own interests. We hope our work is an antidote, promoting citizen education and action, and challenging the media to do more than just recite the PR story line.

Sensemaking and gender

The credibility of PR as a profession has also been linked to an imbalance in gender representation within the field. In 1985 the International Association of Business Communicators Research Foundation published its study “The Velvet Ghetto: The Impact of the Increasing Percentage of Women in Public Relations and Business Communication.” This report looked at the possibility of the communications field becoming a “velvet ghetto,” a field that employs a large number of women, who subsequently experience drops in salary and status as the field moves from being male to female dominated (Cline et al., 1986).

The “Velvet Ghetto” study built on assumptions from existing research that indicated:
Women were more likely to perceive themselves as filling the technician role rather than the managerial role.

Women were paid substantially less than men, even when other variables are controlled.

When other professions had gone from male dominated to female dominated the professions had diminished in salary and status.

The researchers put forward two new hypotheses:

- In general, there is little overt bias on the part of management, although there may be some institutionalized salary bias based on the perceived value of public relations to the institution.

- A subtle socialization process is operating on women in public relations, resulting in their own choice of the technician role. (Taff, 2003, p. 10)

The 1985 study predicted that the credibility of public relations would decline as more women entered the field. Researchers looked at salaries and access to senior decision-makers within the organization as indicators of the credibility of PR professionals. When the study was revisited by the IABC in 2002, researchers found that although salaries had not declined, access to managerial decision-makers had.

Fifty percent of respondents to the 1985 study said they reported directly to the CEO of the organization, compared with only 35 percent in 2002. And in 1985, 80 percent of respondents said they always had direct access to the CEO. By 2002, only 53 percent of respondents had that same access (Taff, 2003).

The 2002 study also illustrated that the PR industry continues to be female dominated, although this trend may be changing. From 1985 to 1989, the IABC male/female member mix reflected a 40/60 ratio. In 1995, IABC membership was 70 percent female, and according to IABC’s “Profile 2002”, three out of four members (76%) are women (Taff, 2003). According to the 2000 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the percentage of women to total workers in PR grew from 60 percent in 1985 to 68 percent in 1993, where it peaked. Since 1993, the number of men entering the field has begun to increase slightly (Taff, 2003).

This study is, however, less concerned with the number of practitioners of one sex or the other currently working within the profession. My interest from a sensemaking perspective is in the impact of gendered structures, processes, and meanings on the sensemaking of individual PR practitioners. Although previous quantitative studies provide background concerning the number of practitioners involved in the profession, that information does not necessarily inform our understanding of how these numbers translate into identity construction or how the profession makes sense of this gender imbalance.

Helms Mills & Mills (2000), in their study of gender and organizational sensemaking, point to the impact of organizational rules in creating gendered structures within organizations. These rules serve to privilege one sex over another within an organization and, in particular, influence the access of men and women to organizational power. At the same time, the broader formative context of gendered roles within organizations reinforces the plausibility of gendered
rules by reinforcing them at a societal level. This relationship between gendered rules and organizational power is key to the discussion of gender and identity among public relations practitioners.

At the local level, sensemaking in organizations occurs as a retrospective, social, and ongoing process. This is important to our discussion of gendered understandings of identity in that individual understandings are influenced by our own retrospective experiences of gender roles. These understandings may be challenged or reinforced within the organization. As with other aspects of sense-making, the influence of previous experiences, social discourse, and rules (both organizational and societal) creates a particular understanding of gender within public relations as meaningful.

**Identity construction in negatively perceived professions**

The role identity literature tells us that individuals prefer to see themselves in a positive light and that this contributes to a positive sense of self. Occupation is a significant piece of the individual’s identity and self-image (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). As Van Mannen & Barley state, “A major component of self-definition is the occupational identity—that is, the set of central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics that typify the line of work” (1984, p. 287).

Public relations practitioners face a complex environment in terms of defining their professional roles. Sensemaking informs us that individuals make complexity understandable by selecting specific cues upon which they base their sensemaking. As pointed out by Helms Mills, “it is obvious that in the process of decision-making people extract certain cues from the environment to help them to make sense of events” (2003, p. 153).

Weick identifies cues as being linked to a series of ideas and actions. These links can help to “tie elements together cognitively” (1995, p. 54). As a result, the cues that individuals extract from the environment help to shape their image of themselves (Helms Mills, 2003). As cues are extracted and incorporated into identity construction, the plausibility of a particular identity as “true” may be reinforced or, alternatively, challenged.

Cues may be extracted from the environment through the mass media, for example. This presents some challenges in the construction of the PR identity. Although the number of jobs in the field of public relations has risen dramatically over the past 15-20 years, it would appear that the image of the profession has diminished. At least to some extent, the media depiction of PR and high-profile examples of unethical PR have contributed to this fact. As Sparks asserts, “The public relations discipline is repetitively trashed by the mass media and in some cases for good reason—the public relations practiced in some quarters resembles influence peddling” (1993, p. 27).

According to Ashforth & Kreiner (1999), members of occupations that experience low prestige tend to work collectively to secure positive meaning in the face of pervasive stigmas. This leads to a process of work role identification, where the members of the stigmatized group define themselves at least partly in terms of their occupational affiliation. However, role identity research emphasizes the need that individuals have to establish a relatively stable and positive sense of self-definition (Erez & Earley, 1993). The literature also indicates that
this self-definition is at least to some extent dependent on the perceptions of others (Felson, 1992). As a result, Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) indicate that due to the need for social validation, individuals involved in socially stigmatized professions may be reluctant to identify too strongly with their work.

The field of public relations does not fit specifically into the categories of “dirty work” introduced by Ashforth & Kreiner’s 1999 study. PR does not have the physical elements of “dirty” work experienced by garbage collectors or grave diggers, for example. However, it does reflect the issues of low occupational prestige. It also reflects the issue of “moral taint” described in the same study. Moral taint “occurs where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 414). At the same time, the field of public relations brings with it some unique characteristics that may affect the relationship of practitioners to the profession. For example, most professions have a shared, clear definition of what members of that field do. They also include identified standards of practice. These definitions help to provide normative goals to denote conforming behaviour (Gordon, 1997). Since PR is lacking in this type of identity construction, individual practitioners must draw on other sources when making sense of their own role and identity.

**Methodology**

To gather experiences of sensemaking from the participants in this study, an in-depth, semi-structured interview of 45-60 minutes was conducted with each participant. Participants included three male and three female practitioners, who represented a range of experience in terms of tenure in the profession, sector of employment, position within their organization, and involvement in professional associations. The practitioners represented a broad spectrum of PR practice, from senior executive to junior account co-ordinator, across private- and public-sector organizations. Ages ranged from 28 to 61, and participants were all currently employed in public relations practice.

The respondents were encouraged to reflect upon experiences in their PR careers that contributed to the manner in which they made sense of their roles and identities. This information was shared largely through anecdotes or stories from their own experiences or, in some cases, as a result of discussions and interactions they had had with colleagues or external parties about their profession and their role in it. Each respondent had worked in PR for the majority of his or her career, but each had experienced at least one change of organization or sector during that time. Two respondents had changed organizations over five times up to this point. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The experiences shared by participants were then analyzed through the investigation of properties of sensemaking indicated in them, as well as in relation to the organizational rules described and the broader formative context in which the participants operated.

As sensemaking is not a linear process, analysis does not happen in a particular sequence. Although individuals are making sense of their daily actions and interactions on a local level, the concept of organizational power places local meanings in a broader understanding of privilege. At the same time, the social
and ongoing nature of the sensemaking process results in an evolution of meanings influenced by interactions with others. For example, by putting a professional identity into language and discussing it with other practitioners, an individual may demonstrate the enactment of meaning with relation to that identity. Enactment may become visible in this process, but that same enactment of meaning may influence the plausibility of other actions and, simultaneously, the construction of individual identity. The social and ongoing nature of sensemaking further informs us that individuals within organizations may not make sense of the same event in the same way. As meanings are shared through language or other actions, they become subject to the ongoing sensemaking processes of others within the organization or profession. To that end, there is no one “right” meaning attached to a given experience.

**Analysis and findings**

The primary concern of this analysis is to provide insight into the process of sensemaking employed by participants as they create meaningful identities as PR practitioners. Although the study participants extract different cues from their environments in the construction of their identities, there was some common ground in terms of defining the formative context in which they operate. For example, all of the PR practitioners interviewed acknowledge frustration around the social stigma associated with their profession. As well, they tend to be more concerned with the image of their organizations or clients than with that of their profession. Much of the pride these practitioners expressed related to their work was related to the image of their client, rather than their own image or that of their profession. They also emphasized the importance of their ability to influence organizational decision-making as a function of how well they could do their jobs. Issues affecting their ability to influence management decisions—in particular, gender—were also discussed.

One of the first meanings I asked participants to discuss was their definition of “good” public relations. I did not define “good” to the participants. I simply asked them to describe how they see good public relations and how they have come to see themselves in terms of that description. When participants defined “good” public relations, two elements were consistently present: 1) the need for ethical practice and honest communication; and 2) the ability to influence organizational decision-making to reflect ethical practice and honest relationships with publics.

Through the lens of critical sensemaking, I analyzed these elements first from the perspective of formative context. In one participant’s statement, “Our image must be changed to reflect that we are managers and leaders in the organization,” we hear the influence of the broader discourse of organizational management. The implication of this statement in terms of sensemaking is also that management and leadership equal power. And as reflected in similar statements from other participants, without power, PR practitioners have limited influence on organizational decision-making and play a much reduced role. As one participant said, “If you’re only brought in to put out fires, or to put out the company message, then your own people are looking at you like a spin doctor. That’s what your job has become.”
The experiences shared by participants in describing these two elements further indicate the influence of organizational rules. Respondents also agreed that the times when they felt least proud to be PR practitioners came when they were unable to influence ethical practice in the organization and had to “get on board in terms of corporate messages.” This reference to informal and perhaps formal organizational rules that demand compliance on the part of the PR practitioner with a potentially unethical decision or practice by the organization provides some insight into the struggle between the identity of practitioners out in the profession as facilitating mutually beneficial relationships and the identity of practitioners within the organization as loyal to the client or company.

A junior communications officer sums up this tension between leadership and the individual practitioner as follows: “I got into PR because I definitely thought I could make a positive contribution; I thought I was doing a good thing in terms of communication. I think now that was a little naïve. It often comes down to what the leadership is willing to do.”

Although there was no uniform agreement among participants on what constituted good PR, there certainly was agreement on what it was not. “It is not a technician role, not just someone who comes in to package a message after the plan is in place,” said one practitioner. “It is not a role where someone is hired to make things look good on the outside . . . you know, make things look good for the media,” said one respondent. And, “It’s not what you see in the media. Not slick, fast-talking men and women in low-cut dresses persuading people to do things they don’t want to do,” said another.

All of the participants acknowledge that they are aware of the stigma around the label of public relations. “I have found people have an inherent bias against someone who does PR. They think we lie, twist or spin the truth,” said one participant. Those sentiments were echoed in each of the interviews.

All of the participants also expressed frustration with the stigma. “At times it hurts,” acknowledged one participant. “I am very proud of my profession, but I feel I have to constantly defend it. I get very defensive about it.” Respondents tended to feel very strongly that their practice and, in fact, their characters were being impacted by this negative perception. “It affects how I deal with people. It’s always a negative that I have to overcome,” said one. “It affects how I do my job because I have to spend time up front explaining what I do and proving who I am,” said another.

However, each participant agreed that the perception of PR as “slick” emerged because there are, in fact, unethical practitioners out there. One respondent tended to attribute this to the fact that there is no professional requirement for a formal educational credential prior to setting up practice. Another agreed that unethical practice exists, but tended to attribute it to the fact that PR people are in a position where they may be forced to cover up the truth to protect a CEO or company:

The communications person almost becomes an extension of the CEO. You come to a point in your career in business where you have to make a decision, whether it is consciously or not, that do I want to be that ruthless person? The ones that make it to the very top are the ones that are
driven. They are not always the smartest, but they are always the ones that have that ruthless edge to them that can chop 5,000 jobs and still go to bed at night and not lose any sleep over it. It’s the communications person that has to be the mouth-piece for those types of people. Everybody in their career in public relations will come to that moment in time where they’ll have to make a choice.

At the same time, each respondent emphasized the fact that the media portrayal of PR is decidedly one-sided and overemphasizes these unethical practices:

You know I think there are improvements but the media–PR relationship is strained. The way public relations is portrayed in the media. . . . I mean how many times do you hear the term PR flack? This company is waging a PR battle. Their PR person said this. . . . It is always presented in a bad way. I think the language used in the media is not necessarily positive about the public relations field.

Most respondents indicated that they thought the majority of PR practitioners were ethical and that the few that were not were the exception. As one respondent said, “A few bad apples made it bad for everyone. Ninety-nine percent of us are ethical, but someone does something unethical and it feeds the stereotype that’s out there.”

Nevertheless, the “spin-doctor” image of PR was problematic for all the respondents. In some cases, the respondents chose to distance themselves from the label and identity of the PR person altogether. They preferred to describe themselves as in “advertising” or “marketing.” Of the three respondents in the study who reported that they distanced themselves from the label of PR, two of them said it was because they were able to do their jobs more effectively and have more influence on client behaviours if they were not stereotyped as PR people.

The principles of sensemaking tell us that the plausibility of a particular meaning, as opposed to the accuracy of it, is essential to creating an identity as meaningful. In the comments indicated above, several practitioners have demonstrated a sensemaking process in which a plausible explanation of identity is privileged above the accurate label of public relations practitioner. We may also see a process indicated here in which the environment within which these practitioners operate has presented cues to meaningful identity. These cues have been extracted from the environment by the participants and others as deeming professions such as marketing or advertising more credible than those labelled public relations.

As one participant said, “If I have to spend a lot of time justifying what I do and explaining to them what PR is and why they need it, I’ve wasted time. Everyone knows advertising and marketing are connected to the bottom line.” This description of the process by which the participant has chosen to identify with professions other than PR illustrates the importance of extracting cues appropriately from an environment in order to convey a specific meaning or identity.

Another participant stated, “I always say I work in marketing or advertising. If they ask me now where do I work, I say I work at an advertising agency. I don’t say I work at a PR agency because public relations does have a stigma.” Another said, “It’s easier. I don’t have to deal with all the negativity associated with the term PR. I just say I’m in advertising.”
The two respondents quoted above were also in agreement in their desire to drop the term “public relations” from their professional designation altogether. One of the participants was adamant that the term is tainted irreversibly and should be abandoned. This speaks not just to the impact of language on identity construction, as the profession is labelled public relations, but to the importance of plausibility to the creation of meaning. In addition, the need to enact meaning, through a change of professional designation, is another important element in the creation of identity for these practitioners, who would like to distance themselves from the term “public relations.”

However, another participant suggested that more effective education about what the term “public relations” really means was required: “So I guess one of the things that I do is I take it upon myself to educate them as to what the field really is. That’s how I handle it. I don’t get defensive. I don’t dismiss these people as being uneducated or stupid. It’s just that we haven’t done a good job of educating.” She suggests that at least part of the reason for the stereotype of the spin doctor is that the PR industry has not done a good job of promoting its own image.

Two other respondents in the study agreed that a more effective approach to communicating the “true” role of public relations practitioners was required. As one pointed out, “We’re like the shoemaker’s children. We advise clients on how to improve their image and we can’t do it for ourselves.”

Gender and power
Several respondents in this study identified gender imbalance as a challenge in improving the reputation of PR practice. One respondent felt this issue was part of a broader societal problem: “It’s still a man’s world. That’s not right. I feel that women have to work harder with the same talent as a man. It’s just that society, unfortunately, is still built that way.” This reference to the formative context in which public relations practitioners operate provides some insight into this individual’s sensemaking around gender and power. The description of society as “built that way” is an interesting description of the gendered social structures that impact the way men and women access power differently in society. This statement is also given with a certain amount of acquiescence, in the sense that it would appear implausible to interpret the world differently, as the social structures are so powerful.

In a similar vein, another respondent suggested that access to decision-makers is influenced by gender “because PR is an old boy’s network. The CEO is probably still a man and the PR person needs to have access to the CEO.” In this description of his sensemaking of the issue, the respondent has referred to the example of gendered rules of access in organizations.

In terms of gender, participants did not describe the struggle for credibility particularly as a matter of sex, but more so as a factor to be considered in both the formative context of organizations and the rules within which they operate. The concern with access to decision-makers and organizational power also brings forward the issue of whose sensemaking matters most within an organization. Those who extract cues from the environment and interpret them for others may hold more power in terms of organizational sensemaking. If gendered rules restrict access to environmental cues and their interpretation, the resulting mean-
ings may reflect this bias and therefore reinforce the plausibility of a gendered perspective.

Credibility for the female practitioners in this study was established through a combination of education and demonstration of ethical practice. They also identified a need for better education of clients and the public about the role of public relations. The female respondents also indicated that in most cases after they introduced themselves, or identified themselves, as public relations practitioners, they followed up with a brief description of what that role entailed in order to begin the education process. The challenge for the female practitioners appeared to be getting a “foot in the door” initially to create space to begin the education process. One participant described the process of building credibility this way:

“If I can get their [the CEO’s] attention, it’s a matter of educating them. People like CEOs who you would think just know that communication is as vital a function as HR and accounting and all those different things. It’s a little frustrating when those people, at that level in an organization, don’t really understand. That’s what I say is the most frustrating about what I do. In some instances it’s a constant . . . you’re in constant defence mode.”

This process may also be a function of experience. “When you’re junior in an organization it’s unrealistic to expect that you’re going to have the confidence to stand up like that,” one respondent added. Critical sensemaking in this analysis informs us that power is a central component in influencing how sensemaking will occur. For example, some voices are privileged in the extraction of cues. Although everyone in the organization may take part in sensemaking, there is an inherent inequality among organizational members that may affect the realities they construct (Helms Mills & Mills. 2000). In this case, organizational leaders emerged as key in setting the tone for how public relations would be viewed within an organization.

Professional/client loyalty
It appears difficult for PR practitioners to reconcile the pressure to protect the organization or CEO with the need to conduct themselves ethically as PR professionals. An essential element in this balance seemed to be the amount of influence the practitioner had on senior decision-makers. “My job is to protect the client’s reputation and build relationships with their key stakeholders,” said one respondent when defining his primary role. Another pointed out that the “CPRS code of ethics requires us to respect the confidentiality of our clients and protect their relationships. Sometimes that might preclude us from actually taking something to the media . . . like an issue that might hurt the client.”

One participant expressed frustration with the tendency among CEOs to “bring the PR person in to write a news release, to put out the fires. Why don’t you do fire prevention, bring us in beforehand? Why don’t you get the PR person in to develop that policy? They could say, ‘When you did that strategy, did you not take into account this and that?’”

There is also some experience in this group with the fact that organizations do not always want to move toward the highest ethical practice. When that hap-
pens, the spokesperson can be in a difficult position. “At times the PR person might suggest an alternative but then they are told to toe the line, and for the most part . . . we do,” admitted one respondent. Another summed up the situation this way: “If the PR person does a good job, he protects the organization . . . He protects the image of the organization in the minds of the target publics.”

None of the respondents had a clear direction as to how to change the image of PR in society. One respondent said, “That’s just the way it is. I try to maintain high individual standards and maybe influence through example.” From a broader perspective, another respondent summed things up like this: “You know, that prevailing discourse of the bottom line. That the shareholders are not only the primary responsibility but the only responsibility. If we ever are going to affect some real change in how companies communicate, that has to change.”

Discussion: Implications for theory and practice

There is a struggle among and within PR practitioners to construct an identity and to define what a “good” PR practitioner is. This struggle seems to come as a result of competing elements of the sensemaking process. For example, respondents were very clear that their first commitment was to the organization or clients they represented. As a result, if the decision-makers in the organizations represented turned out to be unethical, the PR practitioner’s own ethics were challenged. At the same time, the media representation of public relations is, for the most part, negative. Practitioners are exposed, therefore, to frequent portrayals of PR people as unethical, untruthful, and unprofessional. The public also sees these portrayals, and this contributes to the negative image of PR.

Weick’s (1995) work on sensemaking informs us that organizations, and the work that is done within them, are open to multiple interpretations. These interpretations may, in fact, conflict with one another and illustrate the perspectives of different stakeholder groups. This point seems quite germane in the struggle to define public relations. Particular stakeholder groups, for example, journalists and other members of the mass media, tend to define PR in pejorative terms, implying a morally questionable profession. The practitioners themselves described the profession in lofty terms involving honesty and openness.

Ashforth & Kreiner describe this process of “transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatized occupation” (1999, p. 420) as “reframing.” One dimension of this process involves what is referred to as “infusing,” or describing the “espoused purpose for which the work was created in value laden terms” (p. 420).

The competing definitions from external sources, as previously mentioned, reflect a much more negative perspective and imply manipulation. According to Weick’s (1995) sensemaking framework, when individuals receive too many different interpretations of a situation, they require values and priorities, rather than more information: “Clarity on values clarifies what is important in elapsed experience, which finally gives some sense of what that elapsed experience means” (p. 28).

Findings from these interviews suggest that sensemaking has generated interpretations of good public relations practice that are grounded in the role of manager and that identify the most value in the ability to influence decision-making both inside and outside of the organization. To that end, the effectiveness of an individual PR practitioner is described as that individual’s ability to
influence organizational behaviour and subsequently communicate that behaviour successfully to target publics. Without that power to influence decisions within organizations, the role of the practitioner seems to be very much compromised. The conflict between the ethical position of the organization and the practitioner’s loyalty to the organization appears to be a central theme in the struggle to define individual values and identity. As evidenced in IABC’s latest survey on the PR profession, the issue most affecting the profession is management’s valuation of public relations’ contribution to the organization (International Association of Business Communicators, 2002).

The necessity of organizational influence for PR practitioners relates to the close relationship between organizational ethics and PR practitioner ethics:

Public Relations practitioners function as communication liaisons at the interface of employees, external publics, and the dominant coalition, a group of powerful, influential people in the organization who typically set the strategic direction and define the organizational mission. Because they are supposed to shape the negotiation processes of the dominant coalition, they depend upon their upward influence tactics for success (O’Neil, 2004, p. 129).

Ethical practice emerged as very important to the PR practitioners I interviewed. The results of this study illustrate that, as the stigma associated with PR is one of spin doctoring, practitioners need to actually demonstrate ethical practice in order to feel good about their profession. This issue was very closely related to that of influence on organizational decision-makers. It appears that the ability of PR practitioners to enact ethical practice in the manner they would like to depends significantly upon the ethical standards of the organization they work for and their ability to influence these.

In Ashforth & Kreiner’s (1999) work on stigmatized occupations, organization members were seen to identify themselves in terms of their occupations. Because organizations tend to be structured around occupational specialties, organization members are largely known by their occupations and come to situate themselves in terms of their occupations (Trice, 1993; Van Mannen & Barley, 1984). “Pipe fitters for Exxon likely will have a much different perspective of the workplace and their role within it than will PR managers, and they likely will be regarded by others in much different ways” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 417).

However, this study raises the possibility that PR practitioners may not define themselves as much by occupational specialty as by organizational practice. The close alignment between organizational messages and the actual work of the PR practitioner may create a situation in which identity and value are derived from the image and reputation of the organization, as opposed to those of the individual. Although the stigma related to PR was certainly acknowledged, the concerns around image expressed in these interviews were really related to the image of the organizations or clients for whom respondents performed public relations activities. This provides insight into the importance of organizational rules, formal and informal, in the enactment of public relations practice. If the leadership within the organization has adopted rules, or ways of getting things done, that promote “spin doctoring” or dishonesty, PR practition-
ers find themselves in a conflict between their own professional identities and the need to “toe the line.”

Most of the respondents indicated that they felt men and women were equally qualified to be PR practitioners, equally skilled and professional. In most cases, they explained the difference in representation at senior management levels as symptomatic of a broader gender imbalance in management. Because they report having less influence at the level of organizational leadership, women may find the struggle to enact “good” public relations more difficult than men do.

Conclusion
The scope of this study was quite limited and intended only as an exploratory look at how PR practitioners make sense of their roles. Future research may more fully address the relationship between organizational influence, role identity, and gender. There is also a need for further study regarding the relationship between organizational ethics and PR ethical practice, and there is perhaps an opportunity to compare the sensemaking practices of PR practitioners from different sectors (corporate, government, non-profit).

This study indicates that the issue of organizational ethics is important in defining “good” PR practice. It appears to come down to the ability of the practitioner to influence ethical practice on the part of the organization or client. In the event that the organization still does not act ethically, the values of loyalty to the employer and the need to protect the organization seem to take primary importance.

The bottom line seems to be that good public relations is measured by the power to influence organizational decision-making. Most concerning for women in the field, then, is the fact that they are not in organizational decision-making roles and do not have access to those who are. If the current trend continues and male practitioners begin to enter the profession in larger numbers, future research may be able to determine whether the issues of access to the “dominant coalition” change along with it. Perhaps the identity of the “good” PR person cannot be defined independently from the identity of the “good” organization.

In conclusion, this analysis suggests that identity construction is a complex and ongoing process of sensemaking among public relations practitioners, their colleagues, organizational leaders, the media, and members of the broader community. It also emphasizes the importance of privileged voices within this process. Access to and influence with organizational leaders is an important element in the establishment of the public relations identity. Likewise, the privileged voices of mass media have a significant impact on the sensemaking of individual practitioners.

Note
1. Fitzpatrick & Bronstein (2006) point out several examples of unethical practice in their work on ethics in PR. For instance, “in recent years several U.S. government agencies, including the Education Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Agriculture, along with the well-known advocacy group People of the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), have conducted campaigns that violate the principles of responsible advocacy. In each situation, practitioners used irresponsible tactics to achieve a particular goal, risking organizational reputation and bringing negative public scrutiny” (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006, p. 77). See also Ewen, 1996, and Stauber & Rampton, 1995.
References


