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Radical research as research at the roots: Practitioner self-image, public relations and ethics

Semantically, radical derives from 'radix', the Latin for root. This paper argues that little public relations research goes back to the roots of actual practice and addresses this neglect through a project focusing on practitioner accounts of their work. When considering public relations ethics, practitioner self-images and cultural values become an essential research component. In addressing this neglected area of research, this paper examines the subjective perceptions of public relations practitioners regarding their role, commitments, and responsibilities within the framework of their specific culture and national history. In considering practitioner testimonials about professional integrity, beliefs, and goals, especially as members of the society and nation to which they belong, the paper engages with ethical aspects of the practice from a cultural perspective that assumes different cultures can have different ethical expectations. In revealing the impact of features that are often 'taken for granted' in one country, the paper uses the example of four generations of practitioners who served one major institution in Israel to suggest how similar research at the professional roots in other nations might enable knowledge of international similarities and differences in relation to ethics in action.

Key words: practitioner self-image, public relations ethics, cultural values, narrative inquiry

Introduction

The project on which this paper is based forms part of longer term research into the evolution of Israeli public relations from before the formation

of the state to the present day. Ideally, in seeking accounts of the genesis and evolution of the practice, the researcher would have interviewed all the historical and the contemporary key players. This was clearly impossible as a number are no longer alive and historical documents relating to public relations are scarce. The Israeli Public Relations Association was formed only in 1961 and had published only a few, very limited newsletters. Nevertheless, even in these cases, the researcher sought to gather information by using relevant archival materials of the Zionist movement from the pre-state period and by interviewing surviving colleagues and those currently working.

In addition, as someone who herself had a track record of long service in the public relations profession, the author, who also carried out the research, was uniquely equipped with insider knowledge of those involved in public relations practice across all levels. Thus interviewees were selected according to the following factors:

- **Generational reach:** In an attempt to capture different phases in the development of public relations in Israel, the interviews were conducted with practitioners who had retired after more than thirty years of service, as well as young practitioners who were active and prominent in the more recent Israeli marketplace.
- **Length of service:** The number of years the interviewees had spent in the practice of public relations. Veterans, who had made public relations their major career focus for a considerable length of time, were considered good sources of information.
- **Prominence in the sector and community:** Interviewees were acknowledged by the organisations that employed them and involved in professional contacts and organisations.
- **Institutional importance:** The selection took into account the role of the organisations they served in the history of Israel and in the development of public relations practice.

The aim was to track changes or the relative absence of changes, in the way public relations was practised within specific dominant, or representative, organisations. In some cases the research succeeded in tracing several generations of public relations practitioners who had served the same organisation (see case below).

This approach offers a form of radical research useful for identifying different aspects of the

practice in different cultures. Knowledge of practice in the US has been enriched by autobiographies (Hill 1963), biographies (Tye 1998) and academic accounts (Hiebert 1966) of key players, some of whom, notably Bernays (1965), made their own contributions, and institutional histories (Miller 1999). A more radical approach was pioneered by Jacquie L'Etang in her book, *Public relations in Britain: A history of professional practice in the twentieth century*. L'Etang (2004) traces the roots of British public relations not by relying on biographical books but rather on a combination of archive materials and empathic interviews to reconstruct narratives which provided a rare opportunity for an in-depth analysis of practitioners' values in the context of their specific culture, history, and environment.

Secondary research involved combing original archival material in the US, notably in the Judaica Library at Harvard University and the Center for Jewish History in New York for manuscript material. In Israel, notably the Central Zionist Archives of the World Zionist Organization in Jerusalem provided further accounts. The researcher also had rare access to internal documents of the Israeli Public Relations Association. As part of her primary fieldwork, the researcher conducted interviews with 38 Israeli practitioners and experts, with some backup telephone interviews during that same period.

Research challenges

As well as guiding the selection of the interviewees, all of the interviews were informed by the researcher's own experiences, knowledge, and network of contacts established during 20 years of practice in Israel. As an insider she had undergone a protracted period of trust-building and acquired specialist knowledge, which also enabled an exceptional level of checking on the data provided. This may also have acted as a deterrent to invention as the interviewees knew they were talking to someone who had other sources of information on the events being discussed.

On the other hand, in line with current theorisations of qualitative research, the author acknowledges, especially for transparency, that such an inside perspective may also be accompanied by limitations. These might include the researcher's own socialisation into the profession, and her experiences of practising it, as well as the narrative inquiries themselves. While every effort has been made to

acknowledge these, and to take account of them, to some extent these are unavoidable in this kind of research since:

the socially situated researcher creates, through interaction and material practices, those realities and representations that are the subject matter of inquiry. In such sites, the interpretive practices of qualitative research are implemented (Denzin and Lincoln 2005b: 641).

As stated above, part of the documentation of the Israeli public relations development process is based on the narratives of key individuals, who practised the profession in different times and in different organisations. Such life histories exist in the intersections between personal and collective experiences. In occupying this space, they extend the limits of individual stories and enable conclusions to be drawn about the professional culture, not only as a personal experience but also as a part of socio-national history, a part of the larger cultural context. In many ways, the participants' perceptions of their professional self image – especially how they saw their role, and their social role – helped construct their practice. In turn, they also helped construct how their society viewed the profession.

Such a study of individual narratives in their social and historical context is a part of mainstream qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005a). More specifically, the research adopted Chase's form of 'narrative inquiry' (2005: 651), characterised as a combination of 'interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches...traditional and innovative...all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them' (ibid) and draws from Chase's accompanying description of what counts as relevant narratives:

A narrative may be oral or written and may be elicited or heard during fieldwork, an interview, or a naturally occurring conversation. In any of these situations, a narrative may be (a) a short topical story about a particular event and specific character such as an encounter with a friend, boss, or doctor; (b) an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma, or participation in a war or social movement; or (c) a narrative of one's entire life (ibid: 652).

The interviews with Israeli public relations practitioners fall into Chase's (b) and (c) categories: the interviewees spoke about their life history focusing on their careers, work experiences, and their professional self images. Chase further identifies pivotal terms that narrative researchers use: life history, which is an extensive autobiographical narrative or a narrative about a specific significant aspect of a person's life; oral history, which is used by historians to describe interviews in which the focus is not on historical events themselves but rather on the meaning that events hold for those who lived through them; and *testimonio*, which has been associated with the (usually oral) narrative of Latin American activists in revolutionary movements (ibid: 652-3). In line with Chase's identifications, the interviewees in this research provided parts of their life histories as resources for understanding their professional values as public relations practitioners working for influential Israeli organisations.

While the research can make no justifiable claim that the interviewees were a representative sample, it can claim to be in line with Chase's further observation that contemporary narrative researchers 'reject the idea that the small number of narratives they present must be generalisable to a certain population' (ibid: 667). The narratives provided by the interviewees are explicitly placed in a broader framework and interpreted, with support from the literature and documents, in order to make interpretations and draw conclusions.

As a result, neither the earlier surviving evidence, nor the narratives, can be, and were not intended to be, objective. The narratives are influenced by the involvement of the interviewer. This is true from the selection of interviewees, through the participant conversations, and on to the interpretation of data. Given the nature of the conversations and their context, they can be usefully classed as 'empathetic interviewing' (Fontana and Frey 2005: 696), where "empathetic" emphasises taking a stance, contrary to the scientific image of interviewing, which is based on the concept of neutrality' (ibid).

The empathetic interview is based on the assumption that neutrality in interviews is a myth because interviewing involves an exchange between two (or more) people. Accordingly, an increasing number of social scientists recognise that they need to interact as people with the interviewees and acknowledge that they are doing so. In such practices inter-

views can become 'a methodology of friendship' (ibid: 697). Indeed, in many cases, qualitative researchers advocate these methods to create 'a partnership between the researcher and respondents who should work together to create a narrative – the interview – that could be beneficial to the group studied' (ibid).

In this research the collegial relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees made the empathetic style an obvious model. As a former public relations practitioner the author knew most of the people interviewed personally and had shared experiences with them in the past. As a result, the interviewees welcomed the opportunity, and freely gave their time, to discuss their life histories and careers. They took the chance to reflect on, together with the interviewer, the role of the profession and the process of change that it went through. Thanks to these relationships, the information provided to the interviewer could be judged to be relatively open and valuable for the construction of past events. Nevertheless, it remains hard to tell to what extent the researcher, and the researcher's past experiences, influenced the respondents' narratives in other ways.

Discussion of findings

To demonstrate the potential outcome of a study of individual narratives in their social and historical context, while using a combination of archive materials, narrative inquiry, life histories, and empathetic interviews, the paper looks at one specific institution. The following case presents evidence from four generations of public relations practitioners who served the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and so covered over 70 years (1924-2002) of practice in the service on one major institution. The major ethical issue underpinning the research is the practitioners' commitments: Do they have total commitment to the employer? the ideology? their own integrity? or to professional ethical standards? How do they define the goal of their work? And does the goal justify all means?

The Jewish National Fund (JNF) [Keren Kayemet le'Israel]

The JNF was founded in 1901 by the World Zionist Organisation (WZO) for the purpose of purchasing land in Palestine [called Eretz Israel by the Jews] and developing the land for Jewish settlements. In effect the JNF became a strong tool for Zionist education and had an immense influence on Israel's culture through the work of its Propaganda, Press and Youth

Department. A book published in Hebrew in 1999 by Professor Yoram Bar-Gal from Haifa University, who researched the work of this department between 1924 and 1947, documents the influence of this department on Israel's culture.

According to Bar-Gal (1999), the term 'propaganda' (in Hebrew it is often called Hasbara which means 'explanation') had positive connotations at the time and JNF propaganda personnel used it to describe their effort to persuade the Jewish people to financially support the purchase of land, as well as to educate Jewish immigrants from 70 countries around the world to love the land of Eretz Israel and to develop a new unified national identity. For the JNF propaganda personnel the goal justified all means. Via their involvement in the education system they persuaded the Zionist public that what was good for the JNF was good for the people.

The propaganda department in the pre-state period: The example of Natan Bistrizki

Julius Berger, who was responsible for the Zionist newspaper *Die Welt*, was appointed the first head of the JNF propaganda department in 1924. Two years later, Berger resigned and was replaced by Natan Bistrizki, his assistant, and a writer who emigrated to Palestine from Ukraine in 1920. In his personal memoir, *The hidden myth*, Bistrizki (1980) described his role as 'innovating an educational activity for the sake of the redemption of the national land while keeping the routine propaganda work that was practiced and accepted in the institution till then' (1980: 127).

Bistrizki's strategy focused on strong cooperation between the JNF propaganda department and the Teachers' Association, which reached the JNF's target audiences in their private and public sphere. The JNF employed a variety of creative tactics included the famous Blue Box for fundraising (a small tin charity collection box that was posted in every house, school class, synagogue and public service); commissioned documentary and feature movies, guides for holidays and family events and even activities such as promoting Israeli folk songs by financing writers and musicians to create them (Shahar 1994: 7).

According to Bar-Gal (1999), Bistrizki saw the alliance with the Teachers' Association as a systematic and gradual effort to supply the

people with the foundations of their culture. The JNF propaganda department's services included intensive press relations activities, and its press office enlisted senior writers and journalists from world Jewry to write commissioned articles and reports for the department (summarised from Bar-Gal 1999: 106).

From a contemporary perspective, this technique of using articles commissioned from journalists would be considered a corrupt and non-ethical practice. It would be seen by current codes of professional ethics as an attempt to control the way journalists would report about the organisation. At that time, it was commonly accepted as a legitimate tool. The emphasis was that the goal was much more important than the means by which it was achieved.

JNF propaganda department in the State of Israel: Hatalgi and Amitai

With the establishment of the State of Israel, JNF activity shifted from land purchase to land improvement and development as well as forestation. The JNF derives its budget from contributions from world Jewry and operates in approximately 40 countries (Tzur 1997). Theodor Hatalgi joined the JNF propaganda department in 1947 and he retired in 1977. His 30 years of service were recognised by JNF when he became member of the board. In an interview with the author in his home in Jerusalem in 2002 he said he had always kept a parallel professional identity as a journalist and a poet. Born in Poland and educated in France and Germany, he became a member of Zionist youth movements, which built his commitment to Jewish nationalist ideology. While studying political science in Warsaw, he established a Zionist activist newspaper that protested against the British White Paper.

In 1945, liberated from a Nazi camp, Hatalgi had to stay in Italy for two years, waiting for a permit to emigrate to Palestine. In Italy he started his public relations career writing articles for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) about its assistance to refugees in Italy. After arriving in Israel in August 1947, he started to work for the JNF in December as an editor of the JNF internal magazine, where he took charge of media relations. At the beginning of 1953 he was appointed head of the JNF Hasbara ['explanation'] Division. In his interview Hatalgi (2002) clearly recalled how he:

focused on field trips for journalists, and for people with influence on public opinion, in Israel and internationally. Foreign reporters who were stationed in Israel, or visited the country, were invited as our guests to participate in a two day tour [including hotel] to see with their own eyes how the JNF is developing the land. I had assistants who translated my releases and publications into English, French, German and Yiddish.

As his account illustrates, Hatalgi focused on media relations without any recognition of the ethical issues involved. He had no problem sharing the information about the JNF's financial support for journalists' trips.

However, again by his own account (Hatalgi 2002), he never tried to stop negative publicity – something that was common in the local media-Hasbara relations. His experience as a journalist changed JNF expectations from the press: 'My strategy towards negative publicity was just to intensify the positive publicity – more field trips and more stories about the good work the JNF was doing.' He explained how because the 'role of the JNF as the major employer of new immigrants in times of mass unemployment was usually accepted in a positive light...we pushed this one' (ibid).

Hatalgi's work illustrates departures from the foundations laid by Bistrizki in the pre-state propaganda [Hasbara] department. Hatalgi did not emphasise the combination of Hasbara with education as a major strategy, and he did not expect journalists to take orders from the organisation. His Hasbara services were professional in a more contemporary public relations sense: he was looking for good newsworthy materials to present the organisation's case. As a former journalist he had respect for journalistic freedom. But his press relations principles did not go as far as the inclusion of a commitment to truth and honesty. His commitment to what he saw as the best interest of the JNF and the State of Israel came first. In conversation, he discussed an important cover-up story that he was responsible for in the decade following the 1967 six day war (in which Israel occupied Palestinian territories in the West Bank and Gaza):

Officially the JNF is not involved in purchasing land behind the green line. De facto, the JNF purchased land from Arab Palestinians in the occupied territories via a sub-contractor by the name of 'Himnuta'. The JNF also

developed that land as sub-contractor of the Israeli government. We had to be very careful with the Hasbara communications and with the JNF friends abroad. Any exposure of the JNF's involvement in the occupied territories could destroy the financial foundations of the JNF in those countries because the donors would lose the tax exemption. In our Hasbara abroad we did not say explicitly that the JNF was developing land in Gush Etzion for example, but we would say: 'The JNF is paving roads by government commission.' Eventually the story about 'Himnuta' was published later but it was quite modest and did not cause much harm. The publicity did not come from us, of course (ibid).

With commendable candour, Hatalgi describes his responsibility for a very misleading communication through the service he gave to his organisation. Neither did he regret it, nor did he feel bad about it: 'I totally identified with my job. It gratified me immensely. I took part in the fulfilment of Zionism' (ibid).

This statement reveals the cultural context in which professional decisions were taken and the hierarchy of ethics in these decisions. In an enlisted society, such as Israel during its first three decades, professional ethics was not ranked as that important. For practitioners, it was luxury to think about ethics when the survival of the organisation, which also embodied Zionist ideology, was at stake.

One of Hatalgi's assistants, Yehiel Amitai, joined the department in the early 1950s, and served as a mobile reporter covering many field trips with VIPs to JNF sites. When Hatalgi was appointed head of the Hasbara department, Amitai became spokesperson and responsible for the public relations department. In an interview in his office in 2002, Amitai took credit for initiating the deal between government spokespeople and Itim – the press agency that was established in 1950 by all the Israeli daily press in order to serve them all (see Caspi and Limor 1998: 67). Amitai's innovation was to use the Itim service in order to deliver news releases to the press in an effective way. The institutions and ministry spokespeople paid Itim for the service. In theory, Itim offered just a technical solution for distributing the government news, but, in effect, 'a news item delivered via Itim was perceived by the journalists more as a news item than as a spokesperson news release' (Amitai 2002).

This case typifies the confusion of journalism with public relations and propaganda that is at the cross-generational core of ethical flaws in the Israeli communication system. Itim claimed to use a special code, which identified the source of the news item when it was provided and paid for by government spokespeople, but the editors did not always have the time to pay attention to this code. The service was deemed 'effective' even though it may not have been ethical. Later a similar deal was arranged by Amitai with Israel Sun, the news photography agency. Spokespeople representing all Government ministries and some NGOs such as the JNF were part of the deal and no one felt it failed to meet professional standards either of journalism or public relations.

JNF, post-Zionism, and conservation: Benny Mushkin

The challenge for the JNF propaganda machine after the establishment of the state in 1948 was to persuade the Israeli public, and its donors abroad, that its continued existence remained essential. Doubts grew stronger at the end of the 1990s, with the post-Zionist movement and especially in political leader Yossi Beilin's (1999: 164) statement that 'The JNF's existence was convenient for the Israeli government for the sake of preventing the sale of land to Arabs and, after 1967, in order to purchase land in the West Bank (under a different hat)'.

Benny Mushkin, head of the JNF Hasbara department from 1989 to 1999, and secretary of the board since 1999, confirmed that this criticism remained a major concern. But the JNF knew how to add new goals and adapt itself to new demands in a way that would make it relevant. In an interview in his office in Jerusalem in 2002 Mushkin explained: 'Our effort was aimed at proving that the JNF is essential. It is an NGO that is dealing with functions normally performed by governments but in Israel it became a tool for involving the Jewish people in the nation-building process.'

According to Mushkin (2002), the JNF Hasbara strategy in the last decade of the twentieth century focused on conservation of the environment and developing water resources:

Even though JNF's mission statement has nothing to do with the current environmental values, we have developed an image of a green organization since the 1980s. We had always planted trees and now we are opening our green parks and forests to the public and inviting internal and external tourists to

events we are organizing there – concerts, full moon night tours, olive harvest and educational experiences. The water issue is attractive to the donors abroad. It is sometimes tricky as there is a contradiction between development of the land and conservation of the environment, but as a whole the public identifies the JNF with contributions to the green part of Israel in a positive way (ibid).

Benny Mushkin started his career as an economic reporter in 1957. He lived in the US for 14 years, completed an MA degree in speech communication at Temple University, and worked in Jewish education and journalism. He served as spokesperson of the Hebrew University in 1973 until his move to the JNF in 1989. Although never active in Zionist politics, he was involved with Zionist institutions as a professional spokesperson and public relations administrator. Unlike the founders of JNF propaganda effort, he was one of the later generations who adopted a more detached, and less ideological, approach to the job. Mushkin's educational background in communication made him aware of professional ethical standards and he respected them. He avoided practices which Bistrizki, Hatalgi, and Amitai would use without hesitation. The cultural environment in which he practised public relations had changed and commitment to professionalism became more significant than the commitment to ideology.

While academic accounts, especially from the Left, are corrosively frank (Dinan and Miller 2007; Hager and Burton 1999; Lubbers 2002) in expressing these kinds of issues and behaviours, these accounts from the roots add further data and also expose the framework of practice, and how it is tied to context rather than poor individual morals, or public relations as an automatically unethical field. They certainly raise radical questions and can better inform the reasons for unethical conduct.

Conclusions: historical roots – and looking to the future

The preceding discussion of propaganda and public relations practices in one major organisation exposes similarities in values and differences in tactics and professional self-identity due to different personal histories and historical changes in culture. The stories of four generations of practitioners who worked in the service of the JNF, a major Zionist institution, exemplified a culture that did not care how the goal was achieved as long as it was achieved.

Survival, in this case organisational survival, was paramount, and this had clear continuities from the pre-state period until the new millennium. The paper argues that its method of research produces a different perspective for understanding public relations' role in society and the importance of researching practitioner professional self-images.

Nevertheless, this focus on the protagonist in action in the field needs to be supplemented with another dimension: the historical roots of the Israeli public sphere. Until the last few years (see Botan and Hazleton 2006), the US experience has been seen as the prototype for public relations elsewhere. However, research into other national developments suggests that the American experience can be reconfigured as part, albeit a massive part, of professional values and ethics that are developing differently in different parts of the world.

Indeed, one direct contrast of the American Revolution and the Zionist Revolution concluded that 'Israeli public relations practitioners were not so well served by the public relations legacy of their Zionist founding fathers. It is probable that, outside the US, practitioners in many nations inherited similar, less democracy-friendly, founding values' (Toledano 2005: 470). That analysis helps to put contemporary Israeli practice into a longer historical framework. In particular, the traditional need for solidarity in the Jewish public sphere – as part of a response to anti-Semitism, pogroms, and the Holocaust – goes some of the way to accounting for more recent practitioner perceptions of what is ethically possible, and an unwillingness to challenge authority. In addition, the semi-permanent war footing of Israel tends to value cultural solidarity above open public debate and freedom of expression. Over time, the development of fuller historical records will enable fuller and more informed judgments to be made.

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