Continuous professional development and the discourse of professionalism in public relations practice

Sarah Williams
University Of Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton, United Kingdom

Abstract

This phenomenological study addresses the issue of continuing professional development (CPD) in public relations practice. Through a series of twelve qualitative interviews, the author considers the views of practitioners currently engaged in CPD and asks whether informants’ perceptions of their professionalism are influenced by their participation in CPD schemes.

Following detailed analysis of the significant statements contained in the interview data, several common themes emerged which raise interesting questions for the individual practice of CPD in public relations, and also for the way in which CPD is both promoted and managed by professional bodies. The paper also examines the relationship between individual practitioner and professional body discourses on CPD and professionalism.

While this small-scale study is not representative of the state of continuous professional development across the entire PR industry, it provides a useful overview of practitioner views and sets CPD in the context of current debates on professionalism in public relations. A number of areas for further research are also identified; these include issues relating to the position of professional body policy towards CPD and the role of mentoring to effective CPD practice.

Considering professionalisation discourses, the study further considers the role CPD might play in helping the public relations industry to professionalise, concluding that for this to happen, professional body policy must ensure that CPD assumes greater significance to practitioners.
Introduction

Technological advances such as the printing press, telephone, radio, television, Debates about professionalism and, in particular, the role of professional development and education are not new to public relations. Indeed in the UK, Hess (1948) formally articulated one of the aims of the newly formed Institute of Public Relations as being “to consider the institution of examinations or others suitable tests with the object of raising the status of those practising public relations to an agreed professional level” (in L’Etang, 2004, p. 65, emphasis added). However, L’Etang (2004, pp. 74–75) identifies a particular rhetoric of public relations as ‘common sense’ at this time, which seems to be at odds with the concept of professionalism espoused in those early aims.

Subsequently, many authors have examined this notion of professionalism in public relations (L’Etang & Pieczka (1996; and in Heath, 2001); Tobin (2004); Rawel (2002); L’Etang (2004)). This study has not sought to repeat this work. Rather, it considered the impact of continuous professional development on the notion of professionalism in public relations practice from a practitioner perspective. The topic of CPD in public relations has not been extensively covered, and certainly not from a practitioner perspective.

The purpose of this social phenomenological study was to understand the meaning of continuous professional development for public relations practitioners. Continuous professional development is “the term for a framework of learning and development activities which contribute to continuing effectiveness as a professional” (Phillips et al. in Friedman, 2005, p. 57). The notion of professionalism is intrinsically bound up with the practice of continuous development and has likewise been considered an integral part of the study. Professionalism is considered by Grunig and Hunt thus:

Most of its [PR’s] practitioners have little training in the social sciences. Few have been trained in public relations […] We must admit that many people today who call themselves public relations practitioners still do not measure up to professional standards. […] True professionals possess a body of knowledge and have mastered communication techniques that are not known by the average citizen. They also have a set of values and a code of ethics that discourage the use of their knowledge and technical skills for antisocial purposes (1984, p. 4).

This definition identifies several key issues for professionalism in public relations, including the importance of training, monopoly over a body of knowledge, and values and ethics. All of these issues are intrinsic to the concept of continuous professional development which is antithetical to current industry debates on professionalism.

This study investigated the role of continuous professional development in public relations practice. In line with Creswell’s (2007, p. 108) recommended approach, this research question raised several sub-questions, including: how
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does CPD contribute to being ‘professional’? What do practitioners understand by the term ‘professional’? Finally, how seriously is the practice of CPD undertaken by practitioners? Through a series of in-depth interviews, practitioners were invited to consider their approach to CPD, as well as whether they viewed themselves as ‘professionals’.

This study focused on the purpose and meaning of CPD in public relations, and in particular the discourse of CPD in public relations, which is part of the battle to establish professional status. The study asked if CPD is being taken seriously, or merely being used by both practitioners and professional bodies as a token effort to address the wider problem of the legitimacy of public relations as a whole. It considered if CPD might really be an answer to the question of professional legitimacy and if so, in what manner might it be effectively used.

Continuous Professional Development’s context is the ongoing debate about the nature and status of public relations as a profession. It was thus logical to examine this research from a qualitative, evaluative and practitioner-centred position. Following Creswell (2007), I determined the social phenomenological approach to be the most appropriate method for this research question. Phenomenology is exclusively associated with social constructivist or interpretivist paradigms. Therefore, I interviewed 12 current public relations practitioners, all of whom identified that they are engaged with CPD in the workplace, in order to determine their understanding of continuous professional development as it relates to professionalism. While the results were interesting, it was not possible to identify generalised conclusions. However, the study did raise some important issues for the industry and in particular, its professional bodies.

Defining professionalism

Prior to setting out the findings it is necessary to discuss what constitutes professionalism. Millerson (1964) considers that the concepts of a ‘profession’ and a ‘professional’ are problematic to define. Freidson (1994, p. 14) also considers the notion of professionalism hard to define, although he considers the creation of such a definition to be vital to the understanding of the phenomenon, “a word with so many connotations and denotations cannot be employed in precise discourse without definition” (ibid. p. 15). He considers that the problem of defining professionalism lies in its treatment as a fixed, generic concept, rather than what he terms, ‘a changing historic concept’ (ibid. p. 16). This appears to be in line with Millerson’s notion that “professional status is probably a dynamic quality” (1964, p. 9).

In line with this idea of professionalism as a ‘dynamic’ concept, this study explored individual perspectives on continuous professional development as it related to their concept of themselves as public relations professionals.

While the professional body must represent the needs of the whole membership, as Millerson observes the “status of the individual is a function of
group membership” (1964, p. 41), CPD operates at the level of the individual and, in the absence of any legal compulsion to participate, it is important to understand the motivations of individuals undertaking CPD.

Du Gay’s enterprise discourse offers a lens for this analysis. Originally developed to theorise business developments at the time of the Thatcher government in the UK, it establishes a dualism between entrepreneurialism and bureaucracy which at first glance seems irrelevant to the practice and governance of public relations. However, this discourse could be a means of attending to the intersection between authority (professional body) and the individual (practitioner) in a disparate and diverse occupation,

The notion of enterprise occupies an absolutely crucial position in contemporary discourses of organisational reform. It [...] offers itself as a solution to the problems posed through delineating the principles of a new method of governing organisational and personal conduct (Du Gay, quoted in Fournier & Grey, 1999, p. 110).

So while this discourse primarily seeks to analyse the intersection between an organisation and the individuals operating within it, it nonetheless has interesting implications for the study of occupational authority and the individuals practising within its boundaries.

Central to Du Gay’s enterprise discourse is the Foucauldian notion of governmentality which, when applied to the public relations professionalism discourse, makes explicit the links between what the authorities want to happen (professionalism), the problems in achieving it (disparate working practices; no barriers to entry; no education base), and the strategies and techniques such authorities may employ to achieve their stated aims (CPD; codes of conduct).

Du Gay considers governmentality as “a perspective that brings into view a heterogeneous field of more or less calculated attempts to shape the conduct of persons, populations and things towards desired ends” (2000, p. 168). CPD is therefore central to this discourse since it represents a ‘calculated attempt’ to shape the conduct of public relations practitioners.

Methodology

I conducted twelve interviews with public relations practitioners drawn from in-house and agency positions, ranging from managing directors of agencies and heads of communications, to account executives and press officers. Daymon and Holloway (2002, p. 149) paraphrase Creswell’s (1998) argument that, “because of the depth of research interviews and the extensive analytical process that is required, the sample is generally very small, often no more than ten”. All participants were known to the researcher and selected according to both their participation in a CPD programme and their availability. While important to understanding the context of individual practitioners’ experiences, the relative positions of the participants were discounted when determining the ‘essence’ of
the phenomenon under study. The table opposite sets out the main characteristics of each of the informants.

All interviews were conducted in person at the participants’ place of work, with the exception of two which were conducted via a series of telephone conversations. Interviews were framed around a series of discussion topics rather than scripted questions to enable the participants to fully explore and consider the issues. This method enabled interviews to develop organically and for interviewees to introduce aspects which the interviewer had not previously considered.

Findings

The transcripts of twelve interviews were analysed to determine whether public relations practitioners engaged in continuous professional development programmes considered themselves to be more professional as a result. Each interview was individually scrutinised to identify a series of significant statements made by the informant. These significant statements were then collectively analysed in order to establish a set of common emerging themes, which appear to be collectively held assumptions about CPD.

The analysis of the significant statements revealed eight topics which were grouped into three over-arching themes: sociological or participant-related, comprising professionalism, performance and motivation; political or policy-related, made up of frameworks, surveillance or keeping records and CIPR; and cultural, which featured support and reflection. A further theme transpired following the CIPR’s announcement that it intended to introduce criteria for Chartered Practitioner Status. There is not the space to discuss all of these topics here, so for the purposes of this paper I will examine only professionalism, performance and motivation.
Table 1: Main characteristics of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organisation type</th>
<th>Other defining characteristics (i.e. level of education; CIPR membership etc.)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Senior account executive</td>
<td>Small regional PR agency</td>
<td>Mid-twenties with a degree in a related subject area and five years experience in similar-sized agencies. Not a CIPR member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Head of communications</td>
<td>County council</td>
<td>Early thirties, with a degree in a humanities subject, plus a further CIM qualification. Has more than ten years experience in public sector and working independently. Active in CIPR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>Managing director</td>
<td>Regional PR agency</td>
<td>Mid-forties with no formal education but over 20 years experience in PR agencies. Recent member of CIPR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Managing director</td>
<td>Regional PR agency</td>
<td>Mid-thirties, with a degree in a humanities subject. Has more than 15 years experience both in-house and in senior agency positions. Very active in the CIPR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Managing director</td>
<td>Regional PR agency</td>
<td>Mid-thirties, with a degree in a humanities subject. Has more than 12 years experience in a variety of agency positions. Member of CIPR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>PR consultant</td>
<td>Independent practitioner</td>
<td>Early thirties, with a degree in a related subject, plus a further CIM qualification. Has previous agency experience. Not a CIPR member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Organizational Affiliation</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gemma</td>
<td>Communications executive</td>
<td>City council</td>
<td>Mid-twenties, currently completing a degree in a related area. Has five years experience of working in the public sector. CIPR student member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Account manager</td>
<td>Regional PR agency</td>
<td>Late twenties, with a degree in a related area. Has more than five years PR agency experience and is very active in regional marketing forums. A CIPR member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Account manager</td>
<td>National PR agency</td>
<td>Late twenties, with a degree in a related area. Has more than five years agency experience. Not a CIPR member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Account manager</td>
<td>London-based PR agency</td>
<td>Mid-twenties, with a degree in a related subject area and five years experience in similar-sized agencies. Not a CIPR member.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Joint managing director</td>
<td>Regional PR agency</td>
<td>Mid-thirties, with a degree in a humanities subject, plus a further CIM qualification. Had more than ten years experience in public sector prior to agency. Active in CIPR.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Chief executive</td>
<td>Regional PR consultancy</td>
<td>Mid-fifties, with a humanities degree and over 30 years experience in PR agencies. Has been active in both CIPR and PRCA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of one (Jane, B1), all informants were taking part in the CIPR’s ‘Developing Excellence’ scheme. This voluntary scheme was established in 1999, after a pilot study involving a small group of volunteer practitioners (Lewis-Jones, 2008). It requires participants to undertake just 30 hours per year of developmental activity, which can be decided by the individual practitioner, as compared to just the 20 hours of activity required by PRIA of which at least 10 must be in a structured learning environment (www.pria.com.au). It is structured...
in three broad sections, namely professional practice, education and training and personal development, and it is up to the individual to decide what his or her objectives will be.

The findings are presented thematically, starting with an analysis of the theme of motivation.

Motivation of participants

Informants’ motivations for undertaking continuous professional development were varied but all were agreed that it forms part of their understanding of public relations as a career choice and not merely a job: as Paul (B9) explained, “It’s about career progression”, while Julie (B5) made the point more forcefully, “I want to have a career, this isn’t just a job, and CPD will help me to develop my career”. This is in contrast to the idea of public relations being a profession, as is discussed later, where no such consensus existed.

The majority of respondents were positive about their experiences of CPD. Only Jane (B1) expressed some doubts about the validity of her motivation to take part in CPD, “I just pay lip service to it really [...], it’s just for my appraisal”, although she later admitted that she considered herself to be “committed to PR without CPD”. It is clear from Jane’s responses that her attitudes reflected both those of her employer, and also a general cynicism about professional body schemes, which she viewed as ‘ticking boxes’. In this, she is not alone as a number of participants expressed concern over the external validity of the schemes they took part in, although all remained convinced of CPD’s effectiveness on an individual level. George (B12) believed that the small numbers of people engaged in the CIPR CPD scheme has a negative impact on the external perceptions of the scheme, “[the] CIPR scheme has no teeth at an industry level but works well when individuals take control of it”. Bound up with this concept of individual motivation for participation in professional development is discipline. Phillips et al. agree, “Keeping up-to-date is a professional responsibility and part of professional culture” (in Friedman, 2005: 123). They argue that the individual should be aware of his or her responsibility and enact this duty with the support of his or her employer and industry. Individuals therefore need to have the self-discipline to carry out their duty. Victoria (B4) echoed this view, “Everyone is responsible for their own development”.

This could be said to be indicative of the subjugation of the individual interests to those of the profession which is bound up with Foucault’s notion of the interrelatedness of power/knowledge implicit in discourses on professionalism. Macdonald considers that “those who can develop and monopolise the language and concepts to be used in an area of social life do indeed have power rooted in knowledge” (1999, p. 170).

In order for this Foucauldian discourse to be advanced public relations practitioners must become objects subjected to discipline for their own good, as
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as that of the wider occupation; practitioners must collaborate in their own subjection. Foucault considers surveillance to be integral to this notion, whereby knowledge is intertwined with power and dependent on surveillance. CPD is the embodiment of such surveillance within public relations practice.

This presents an interesting dichotomy, that in order for the controlling industry powers to advance the discourse of professionalism, the individuals practising within its boundaries must surrender their own power and be complicit in their own surveillance in order to achieve it.

Another of the key motivating factors is a desire for self-improvement and life-long learning. Megan (B11) argued that “you should never stop learning and you should always push yourself to do more”. Victoria (B4) pointed to the relatively low numbers of CIPR members participating in the scheme, in particular, she discussed the number of Fellows participating in the scheme, “senior people who fail to see the benefit of CPD are often the ones who need to do it the most. PR moves so fast that even seasoned practitioners need to update their skills.” Friedman and Phillips also identify this as a problem, “there is a widespread belief among professional associations that older and more senior professionals are more likely to resist participation in CPD programmes” (2004, p. 367).

The concept of competition featured very strongly in several of the respondents’ comments – not simply with colleagues, but also other agencies. There are those, such as Jenny (B3), who viewed competition as a way to sharpen business practice, to “separate the lambs from the sheep”, while others such as Paul (B9), saw it as personally motivating, “It’s quite competitive at work […]: we don’t really support each other but I suppose that the competition is motivating”. This could also be indicative of Du Gay’s enterprise discourse at work: the competitive environment serving as a means of controlling the behaviour of individuals.

George (B12) saw CPD as a means of obtaining a commercial advantage, “CPD gives me the edge – gives us the edge as an agency. It shows that we are committed and that we care about our industry”. This aspect of motivation was particularly important to independent practitioner, Sarah (B6): “I work alone, so CPD helps me to sharpen up my practice. […] It demonstrates to my clients that I’m committed to PR”. So an element of competition is important in motivating PR practitioners to undertake CPD; it also reflects the individualisation of the industry espoused by Friedman & Phillips (2002, p. 272). Victoria (B4) additionally suggested that CPD provides practitioners with a point of competitive difference during an economic downturn, indicating that CPD could be proactively used to act as a defence against the negative impact of a recession.

Others saw CPD as a measure of professional competence; several identified CPD as conferring upon them a certain ‘fitness to practice’. Megan (B11) and Jenny (B3) indicated that ‘fitness to practice’ was a motivating factor
for undertaking CPD, to which Jenny also added the ‘need to develop’. Rob (B8) agreed and further linked the idea of maintaining skills-based competencies to career development, “I need to develop certain skills so that I can progress”. This is in contrast to the view of Friedman and Phillips (2004) that issues of evidencing competence are at odds with those of personal development. Megan (B11) best reflected this contradiction. While she felt that providing evidence of ‘fitness to practice’ was important, she explained this in terms of external validation of experience rather than proof of skills, “In the absence of professional qualifications, CPD can demonstrate your effectiveness to clients”. So Megan was motivated by the opportunity to demonstrate her willingness to explicitly reflect on tacit knowledge acquired throughout the course of her career, rather than taught skills. Others agreed that CPD should not be used as a measure of competence, but rather as a means of encouraging individual development based on his or her own needs:

> It’s not just about collecting things to put on your CV – although that is good! – it is about doing things that will challenge you and take you to the next level. (Gemma, B7)

It could be argued that the motivation to participate in CPD schemes is in itself indicative of the success of the enterprise discourse; that individuals bound together by an occupation rather than an organisation take for granted the need to pursue and evidence professional development. In this way enterprise could be said to have become embedded in professional norms.

Professionalism

On the subject of professionalism, informants’ views converged on two main points. The first was that professionalism is indicative of standards, a mark of ‘quality assurance’, as Victoria (B4) put it; and secondly that there are personality traits or personal qualities inherent in being a professional; introducing the idea of ‘performance’ into professionalism, as Lisa (B2) explained, “Professionalism is about looking and talking the part, as well as delivering the job”. These two differing perspectives of professionalism highlighted a contradiction in some of the informants’ understandings of professionalism. This was particularly true of Lisa (B2) who, while she felt that CPD was not a necessary task for a professional, also declared, “How can PR ever be a real profession if it doesn’t take its development seriously?” These apparently opposing views highlight the ambiguity that exists around the term ‘professionalism’ in practice.

For George (B12) the problem with defining himself as a professional was one of jurisdiction; he felt that the lack of an effective ‘barrier to entry’ prevented public relations practitioners from being able to call themselves professional:

> I’m not sure that you could call PR a profession yet, however much one might want to, it simply isn’t true. There are too many people operating
outside the CIPR for there to be any community cohesion around the idea of professionalism.

This reflects the view of seasoned public relations practitioner, Edward Bernays, who, towards the end of his career, wrote that the term ‘public relations’ is in the public domain and available for use by anyone whether possessed of training, education and ethics or not (1993, pp. 8–10).

On the issue of ethical behaviour, Victoria (B4) identified links between CPD and codes of conduct as being central to her perceptions of professionalism, “Alongside codes of conduct, CPD is central to the idea of professionalism”. This is reflected in the CPD promotional literature issued by professional bodies, according to Friedman et al. (2002), “explicitly connecting development and keeping up-to-date with standards of behaviour and a sense of obligation to clients and society expected of professionals” (in Friedman and Phillips, 2004, p. 369). Since codes of conduct are also control techniques used by professional bodies (authorities) to advance its objective of professionalism, it could be argued that this connection is not accidental.

A sizeable majority of the participants felt that, although a noble objective, public relations has yet to become a profession. Some of the informants, notably Victoria (B4), Megan (B11) and Rob (B8), felt that participation in a continuous professional development programme made them more professional than those practitioners who did not. Megan (B11) explained, “It’s the difference between being a professional or not”; Victoria (B4) agreed, “CPD develops a sense of professional identity and responsibility”. She went on to discuss the responsibility of those practitioners engaged in CPD to promote the idea of professionalism, “It is up to those of us who take part in CPD to champion it, and promote the benefits of increased professionalism it brings”, which suggests that not only are public relations practitioners complicit in their own surveillance, but they are shaping and promoting it. In this way, CPD practice in public relations could be said to diverge from enterprise discourse; for while most entrepreneurial discourses focus on the tension between the individual and the organisation, in this case it is the individual practitioners who have created and continue to shape the controlling authority. Not only are practitioners complicit in their surveillance, they are the instigators and promoters of such techniques.

There were also those who felt that CPD is one of the potential solutions to the dilemma of professionalism in an industry which privileges practice over education. Sarah (B6) explained, “We’re not professionals in the sense that lawyers are but I think you still have a responsibility to your clients to ‘act’ professionally and do your best work”. Victoria (B4) agreed, “I don’t think I could call myself a professional unless I did CPD.” She further added: “PR needs to get its act together. Without an organised education base and compulsory CPD, we will never be a profession.” Megan (B11) concurred with this assessment, “CIPR is missing a trick by not making it [CPD] compulsory – why shouldn’t every member be prepared to review and reflect on their practice?” These attitudes
to CPD’s role in professionalising an industry are supported by Phillips et al.: “individual professionals who are strongly committed to CPD are [considered] more ‘professional’ than those who are not” (in Friedman, 2005, p. 124).

Implications

It is clear that some participants in the research were more committed to the process of CPD than others; Victoria (B4), for example, was more of an advocate for CPD than Jane (B1). What motivated the informants to undertake continuous professional development also varied widely. However, they were all agreed that motivation itself is a key factor in CPD. “Something has to motivate you,” explains Jane (B1), “or you’d never get started”.

Although Friedman and Phillips (2004, p. 373) argue that CPD is a term which suffers from ‘conceptual vagueness’, all of the participants had clear ideas of what CPD meant for them which brings us to the issue of motivation for engagement with CPD. The research found that the participants had broadly seven reasons for undertaking CPD:

- Career-development
- Means of keeping up-to-date
- Formalising of the learning process
- Professional or practice development; of benefit to the business/employer
- Maintaining competence; ‘sharpening practice’
- Developing a sense of professional identity
- Individual sense of responsibility.

With the exception of ‘developing a sense of professional identity’, cited in the main by more senior practitioners, all these factors reflect the role of self-interest in motivating practitioners to undertake CPD, which would indicate that more emphasis on the benefits to the individual of participation in CPD would be most likely to increase participation. This is interesting in light of the revelation that while ambiguity exists around the idea of public relations as a profession, all participants considered themselves to be professional, which is indicative of the symbolic value associated with being called ‘professional’.

Many of the informants emphasised the need for CPD to be driven by the individual, to be the responsibility of the individual practitioner as part of his or her commitment to professionalism. This notion of individual responsibility appears to be representative of wider debates on the role of the individual versus society. Friedman and Phillips (2002, pp. 272–3) argue that the concept of individual responsibility has taken over from the notion of collective or professional responsibility as a condition of what they term the development of
the ‘risk society’. The disparity between these two concepts causes tension for the professional as the focus on individualisation distances professionals from the society they exist to serve. Seib and Fitzpatrick’s (1995, p. 1) contentious assertion that, “Every profession has a moral purpose. […] Public relations has harmony – social harmony” seems to suggest that the role of public relations practitioners is to mitigate the potential negative impacts of the ‘risk society’ for its members, yet how can this be when public relations practitioners as professionals are subject to the same forces of individualisation that affect the rest of society? It could also be argued that Du Gay’s enterprise thesis encourages the very individualisation that distances professionals from society, which is surely at odds with professionalisation discourses which seek to establish a role for occupations serving society. Further research is needed to understand how this move towards practitioner self-reliance affects his or her ability to execute his or her responsibility to external stakeholders, including society.

Some argue that this process of individualisation makes people more self-reliant, “A greater emphasis is placed on individual self-reliance to cope with change, and on individual responsibility for employability and individual skills development” (Edwards et al. in Freidman & Phillips, 2002, p. 273), reflecting Victoria’s (B4) view that CPD will provide practitioners with a key point of differentiation in times of economic downturn. But what impact does this trend of individualism have on professionalism? Victoria (B4) argued that individuals each choosing his or her own development needs, or indeed choosing to reject CPD altogether, will lead to increased polarisation of the industry, with those who take professional development seriously being perceived as more professional by external stakeholders than those who do not. This view is certainly reflected in the perceptions of certain of the participants who believed that undertaking CPD made them more professional than those who did not.

It is clear from this limited research project that CPD practices embody meanings which are not reducible to a single discourse, which indicates that the use of enterprise discourse as the sole means of analysing practitioner attitudes to CPD practice is problematic; for while there are definitely authoritative strategies in place to control practitioners, those who subject themselves to these processes of control, do so willingly, while those who do not feel neither individual nor occupational compunction to participate, in turn leads to increased polarisation in the industry.

It is interesting to note that, despite Seib & Fitzpatrick’s (1995, p. 1) view that public relations should work to create harmony in society, none of the informants who mentioned polarisation of the public relations industry viewed it as a bad thing. On the contrary, the view appeared to be that this process of polarisation is necessary to secure a professional future for public relations.

The results of this survey indicate several key areas which require further consideration. These include:
issues relating to professional body policy on CPD: in particular, consideration should be given to the implementation of an obligatory scheme, which also enables student members to participate.

The practice of the Foucauldian power/knowledge relationship in PR.

The relative importance of the concept of individualisation to the industry's responsibility to society.

Conclusions

The research was conducted on a self-selecting sample, all of whom profess to be enthusiastic about the concept of professional and personal development, if not exactly organised CPD schemes. As such, the research is unlikely to provide any concrete conclusions, rather a series of further questions has been devised. The results of this qualitative phenomenological approach cannot be generalised to the wider population of public relations professionals, particularly in light of the fragmented nature of the industry. However, it provides an indication of the range of issues and of the essence of CPD to public relations practitioners.

The research aimed to ascertain the meanings of CPD for public relations practitioners and to assess the impact, if any, this had on their perceptions of their professional status. The research had interesting results: of the eight themes which emerged from the analysis of the significant statements, there was only consensus over one of the key aspects of CPD, that of motivation. It was clear that, for the majority of participants, public relations is not a job but rather a career needing maintenance and development. It is these dual notions of career development and personal fulfilment that inspire the majority of the participants to take part in CPD.

While the use of Du Gay's enterprise theory at first seems to offer insights into the interrelationship between the individual and the professional body, it becomes clear that such analysis is problematic because contrary to the usual relationship between individual and organisation, public relations practitioners are the professional body and as such the controlling authority seeks to support the individual and advance the aims of those individuals rather than the other way around. Therefore, practitioners are not only complicit in their own surveillance, they court it, champion it and promote it as a means of professionalising public relations activities.

The research suggests that this relatively small sample of public relations practitioners view themselves as being more professional as a result of their participation in CPD. While it cannot be supposed that all public relations practitioners engaged in CPD share this view, it is nonetheless significant in terms of the future of the profession. Phillips et al. (in Friedman, 2005, p. 115) also consider that “CPD is becoming a key signifier of, and almost a proxy for,
professionalism”. If it could be assumed that all those who follow CPD schemes consider themselves to be professional and act accordingly, then might CPD offer a means for public relations to finally achieve the professional status in society which it craves? These assumptions cannot be made from a small-scale survey such as this one but it is an area worthy of further research.

A number of issues emerged from the research, which places CPD as being central to professional practice in the understandings of the participants. However, due to the limited nature of the study, further research is recommended into the areas of professional body policy, support and mentoring and individual perceptions of what constitutes professionalism in public relations.

References


