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Relationships, Transparency, and Evaluation: The Implications for Public Relations

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This chapter discusses the concept of organization–public relationships and the relational perspective. It reviews definitions of key terms such as organization, publics, and organization–public relationships within the public relations context. As a number of other fields use relationships as a fundamental concept, this chapter reviews literature from relationship marketing, organizational theory, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, and public relations in order to identify relationship components (characteristics or elements) deemed necessary to build and maintain organization–public relationships. Dialogue and transparency are identified as relational elements that have been largely ignored in public relations literature on the relational perspective. Dialogue is considered essential for a relationship to exist and transparency is identified as a key relational condition that is connected to other relational characteristics such as trust, accountability, cooperation, and collaboration. Transparency also has “negative” coercive attributes as increased transparency may lead to lowering the level of decision making and increase self-censorship in an attempt to protect senior management from perceived negative societal consequences. A new phenomenon termed “stakeholder fatigue” is also briefly discussed, as is a summary of recent public relations research on evaluating organization–public relationships and possible evaluation methodologies.

THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The relational perspective builds upon and transfers ideas based on interpersonal relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution from the individual level to organizations and publics. This may be problematic in that it is not as straightforward simply to treat an organization or a public as if it was an individual. Many models and theories of public relations involve the concept of communicating with groups, group dynamics and behaviour,

and building relationships with specific groups or publics, a bias resulting from an emphasis on the media relations function. What has been sidelined is the central concept of the individual and interpersonal communication (persuasive communication) and interpersonal relationships which is emphasized once again in the relational perspective. Sriramesh's (cited in Taylor, 2001) personal influence model is based upon individual relationships between public relations practitioners and external publics. In reality these relationships are cultivated with "opinion leaders" or key representatives of targeted external publics. Public relations practitioners do not have relationships with publics; they build and nurture relationships with individuals within publics. Campaigns target individuals within defined publics in order to reinforce or change particular attitudes and the linked behavioural outcomes. Therefore, relationships are not with publics but with individuals identified as belonging to the particular public.

The relational perspective concentrates on the organization–public relationship and sees it as being central to the public relations function. Interest in public relations shifting over to a relational perspective is a quite recent phenomenon within the mainstream public relations literature. It has been identified as part of the natural evolution of the field as it moves away from technician practitioners toward strategic counselors (Heath, 2001a).

The first person to challenge academics and practitioners to take a fresh approach to public relations by focusing on relationships and also proposed that it was likely to be the most fruitful area for future theory building was Ferguson in 1984. She issued her challenge as a response to criticisms that public relations was not an area worthy of scholarship or theory building as it simply absorbed theories from related disciplines such as communications, management, and psychology. In order to identify areas of potential research for public relations scholars that were distinct from other disciplines, Ferguson attempted to categorize research published from 1975 until 1984 in the journal *Public Relations Review*. As a result of this categorizing, three broad categories emerged: introspective articles, the practice and application of public relations, and public relations theory development. Ferguson went on to identify three areas of scholarship that were unique to public relations and which she believed might be further developed into paradigms: social responsibility and ethics, social issues and issues management, and public relationships. She argued that the public relationships area had the most potential because of the primary focus on the relationship between organizations and publics. Whilst organizational theory specifically looked at the organization and sociology was concerned with social groupings (or publics), public relations could legitimately consider the actual relationship and adopt it as the unit of analysis. Ferguson proposed that the initial steps in developing the organization–public relationship theory would benefit from categorizing the types of public relationships that exist and also examining the relational elements such as satisfaction and control mutuality. For the underpinning theory Ferguson pointed to Scott (1983, cited in Ferguson, 1984, p. 17), who proposed that the relational and normative structures found in the interorganization field affected both the nature and type of relationship experienced. Organizational variables such as structure, values, goals, leadership, and management style need to be considered as they may have an effect on the type of relationship. For example, if the organization is hierarchical in structure and has an authoritarian management style, it would affect the relational elements found in the relationships it has with all its publics. Grunig (1983, cited in Ferguson, 1984, p. 18) suggested that environmental variables explained public relations behaviour far better than structural ones. Therefore, public relations variables were dependent upon the organization's environment, emphasizing the necessity of the boundary-spanning activity and careful analysis of external variables. The organization's relationship with its publics is linked to the nature of the external variables and their impact on the organization, but the organizational-level variables will dictate the tone of the actual relational elements or

characteristics. Since 1984 there has gradually been increased interest in this “new” perspective, especially with regard to measuring and evaluating relationships, as public relations practitioners still need to be able to prove the value of their expertise to senior management and budgetholders.

The continued interest in evaluating organization–public relationships led Hon and Grunig (1999) to start to address the question: “Why is it important to measure *relationships* in public relations?” (p. 4). As the practice and academic pursuit of public relations matures and evolves, evaluating only the short-term outputs and even outcomes of specific public relations programmes is recognized as being shallow in that it provides no concrete information regarding the actual state of long-term relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). If public relations is to be taken seriously as a management function, then the focus must shift to ongoing monitoring through continual measurement and evaluation. Only this can provide an accurate assessment of the organization’s long-term relationships with its publics.

While measuring and evaluating outputs is the most basic level in assessing the success or failure of a particular public relations programme or campaign as opposed to measuring the success of a strategy (as outputs are the visible results of a particular public relations programme such as news releases and feature articles), measuring and evaluating outcomes (such as attitude and behaviour change) provides a far more sophisticated look at whether the persuasive communication message was successful. Most public relations evaluation centres on measuring the tactics used and whether they were successful—for example, whether the news release was picked up in the target media. Very seldom is the strategy evaluated, which would entail examining the actual outcomes. Measuring and evaluating outcomes involves looking at “whether target audience groups actually *received* the messages directed at them . . . paid *attention* to them . . . *understood the messages* . . . and *retained* those messages in any shape or form” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 4). Measuring outcomes also requires looking at the actual organization–public relationships to see how they have been affected. Most public relations strategies revolve around building or maintaining a particular relationship or sets of relationships, yet these relationships are not evaluated before the programme is launched or after it is completed.

This ties into the research around persuasive communication and hinges upon the origins of public relations in mass media, which emphasises “an interest in message design and dissemination to achieve awareness (publicity and promotion at their best), to inform, and to persuade—even manipulate” (Heath, 2001b, p. 2). The role of public relations practitioners as persuasion gurus should be relinquished or at least take a back seat to the relational perspective, which enables practitioners to identify mutual values, interests, and benefits between the organization and its publics so that “win–win” situations result.

Heath (2001b) suggested that academics’ interests ought to lie in the conflict reduction paradigm, which fits well with the relational perspective. By reducing conflict with publics, practitioners move towards a “revenue generation paradigm” (p. 2) as costly crises are averted. To do this requires investing in building and maintaining positive relationships with key publics. This logically leads to the need for an appropriate methodology for measuring and evaluating the organization–public relationship.

Huang (2001a) found that the effect of public relations on conflict resolution was mediated by the organization–public relationship. Not only does public relations increase the organizational effectiveness by building and maintaining positive relationships between the organization and its strategic publics (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992), but it also can be used to reduce the organization’s costs due to issues management and crisis aversion (Grunig, Grunig, & Verčič, 1998; Heath, 2001b). Using the relational and cost reduction paradigms of public relations, it can be proposed that public relations is responsible for building and

maintaining positive relationships between organizations and publics and thereby manage and reduce conflict. Positive relationships are those that benefit the organization and do not hinder its objectives. Whilst there may be times when there is disagreement regarding these objectives and consequences or implications that may result from them, members are able to work through them in a constructive manner that strengthens the offering, producing the ultimate “win-win” situation. It would then seem logical that a negative organization–public relationship could be described as having a high degree of conflict in it or alternatively that a positive relationship would possess a minimal amount of conflict.

Whilst Ferguson (1984) first introduced the concept that public relations should focus on relationships and indeed adopt the relationship as the unit of study, J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined public relations as the “management of communication between organization and its publics” (p. 6), which only implicitly refers to organization–public relationships. Interest in the relational paradigm diminished until the late 1990s as Grunig and Hunt’s focus on the management of communication became the dominant perspective that forged ahead whilst Ferguson’s became less influential. Positioning public relations as a strategic communication management function catered to the occupation’s desire to be taken seriously by senior managers and be recognized as part of the management team as opposed to skilled technicians. Hutton (1999, p. 212) blamed Grunig and Hunt’s four models of public relations for strangling theoretical developments, particularly those in the relational perspective, by proclaiming communication as being the core of public relations. Instead, communication should be viewed as a necessary tool for developing and maintaining organization–public relationships and to promote mutual understanding. The continued focus on communication overshadowed Ferguson’s correct conclusion that the organization–public relationship was core to the public relations function. By the late 1990s the relational paradigm was resurrected by Hon and Grunig (1999) and Bruning and Ledingham (1999) as interest in evaluating organization–public relationships increased after Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models were found to be unsatisfactory and limiting.

KEY RELATIONAL DEFINITIONS

Before examining key relational elements and possible evaluation and measurement techniques, it is important to explore what key terms such as “organization”, “publics”, “relationship”, and “organization–public relationship” are understood to mean within the public relations context. Relational characteristics are discussed in literature covered from related disciplines such as relationship marketing, organizational theory, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication. Much of the work done in related disciplines is relevant for public relations and furthers the understanding of relational characteristics as well as building and maintaining “positive” relationships.

Organizations

Organizations can be defined as being “goal-directed, boundary-maintaining, and socially constructed systems of human activity” (Aldrich, 1979, cited in Aldrich, 1999, p. 2). By “goal-directed” behaviours, Aldrich is creating a distinction between other social collectivities such as family groupings. Individuals who are members of a particular organization behave in ways that lead to fulfillment of the organization’s goals, even if on a personal level they may not fully agree with them. Recognizing and maintaining the boundaries of an organization is important as it separates out and makes the distinction between members and

non-members. This separation helps to identify the boundaries of the organization within its environment. Aldrich's definition is simple and, given the criteria Grunig and Hunt (1984) provide for identifying active publics, it could be argued that active publics are in fact organizations.

Publics

Whilst Grunig's theory for identifying publics may be useful for the developing theories of public relationships, it is at times problematic in that it is crisis-focused and active publics are purely reactive. Grunig and Hunt's (1984, p. 144) definition of the term publics is preoccupied with "active publics" who are directly interested in the organization's activities.

Publics consist of individuals who detect the same problems and plan similar behaviours to deal with those problems. Thus, we can define a public as a loosely structured system whose members detect the same problem or issue, interact either face-to-face or through mediated channels, or behave as though they were one body (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 144).

Vasquez (1993) reinforced the idea that publics exist only if there is a problem and defined a public as being made up of "individuals that develop a group consciousness around a problematic situation and act to solve the problematic situation" (p. 209).

Hallahan (2000, p. 499) noted that this focus on active publics was troublesome in that it did not acknowledge or even consider the importance of inactive publics in influencing the organization's decision-making process. The preoccupation with active publics is understandable when the public relations function is purely reactive in nature and is responding to crises, but with the desire to move in a more strategic and proactive direction it becomes crucial to evaluate relationships with non-active publics as well. Grunig and Hunt's definition builds on historical definitions (Dewey, 1927; Blumer, 1966) that connect the term "public" with "issue". The actual term public has more recently become blurred and is interchangeably used with the term "audience". Public relations practitioners also use demographics such as age, gender, education level, and socioeconomic status in order to identify recipients of a message in much the same way marketing tries to segment the population. Hallahan (2000) and Vasquez and Taylor (2001) argued that as the term "public" is used so liberally and has been expanded to cover such concepts as audience, market segment, community, constituents, and stakeholders, the accuracy of meaning is lost in the ambiguity.

Hallahan argued there are limitations with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetrical model of public relations and situational theory as it assumes that publics are actively engaged and are motivated to participate in some way and that prediction is only possible for identifying when a public might shift from an inactive to active state and interact with the organization. Hallahan's assumptions differ in that he proposed that not all public relations activities are directly connected to issues or crises and that some activities exist purely to build positive relationships where the organizational interests are best served by meeting the public's needs. Many organizational relationships exist at a low level with publics that do not require extensive knowledge of the organization, and in these circumstances information is then offered on a "need-to-know" basis. Hallahan differentiated between publics by the activity-passivity levels and provided an updated definition of the term "public" to reflect this: "a group of people who relate to an organization, who demonstrate varying degrees of activity-passivity, and who might (or might not) interact with others concerning their relationship with the organization" (2000, p. 502). Hallahan tied his definition and understanding of how publics behave with the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) developed by social psychologists Petty and Cacioppo (1986, cited in O'Keefe, 2002, pp. 137–161), which explains how the level of

personal involvement is linked directly to the way people process information and with attitude and behavioural change. Individuals with high levels of involvement with the particular issue will process the message/information via the central route which entails engaging with the argument at a cognitive level. In order to target these individuals, the persuasive message needs to be directly relevant and also contain a two-sided argument. Individuals with low levels of involvement will process the message/information by the peripheral route which makes use of cognitive shortcuts and stereotypes which are used to filter the message. Changes in attitude and behaviour using the central route tend to be more effective in the long term. The ELM works on an individual level to reinforce or change behaviour and in the public relations context, the central route is used mostly as it cognitively engages people who have a high level of involvement and who are considered to be “active” publics. The peripheral route is often used by advertisers as it works to familiarize a particular message with an audience that is characterized by having “low involvement”. Celebrity endorsement is a tactic which uses the peripheral route as it makes use of cognitive shortcuts and stereotyping as assumptions are made with no supporting evidence in tow.

Organization–Public Relationships

Like most concepts in public relations, there is no single definition for relationship that is unilaterally accepted. Interpersonal communication literature describes that relationships exist between two or more people when there is a link between them that mutually serves a purpose over a period of time (Coombs, 2001). For a relationship to exist, both parties need to be aware of each other and also aware of their interaction and understand it as a two-way process. One-way relationships exist in that they tend to occur when one party identifies that it would like to have a relationship with another party and therefore engages in relationship “grooming” strategies to “woo” the other party and gain their interest and attention in order to start building a relationship. Ledingham and Bruning 2000 defined relationship with regard to public relations as being the “state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political, and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (p. 160). Broom et al. went further and proposed a definition of the specific organization–public relationship as:

Organization–public relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics. These relationships have properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships. Though dynamic in nature, organization–public relationships can be described at a single point in time and tracked over time. (2000, p. 18)

In order to describe the organization–public relationship, the relational elements or characteristics deemed essential for a relationship to exist need to be considered. Relational characteristics are discussed in literature from “neighbouring” disciplines such as marketing, organizational theory, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication as well as more recently within public relations. Key relational characteristics are identified as being common within the interdisciplinary literature, with some having more of an emphasis than others. The relational characteristics are those elements that are crucial for a “positive” relationship to exist and flourish. Without the presence of the relational characteristics, the relationship will falter and, if not attended to, ultimately dissolve.

MARKETING LITERATURE

Marketing literature and scholarship is moving aggressively into what has traditionally been viewed as public relations territory and in doing so is methodically reinventing itself as public relations, according to Hutton (2001, p. 205). Public relations academics have failed to collaborate with related disciplines, such as marketing, which has led to public relations being blinkered and isolated from parallel developments in neighbouring disciplines (Heath, 2001c, p. 184) and has laid the way open for marketing to expand its borders and include public relations academia and practice within its intellectual domain. This gradual hostile “takeover” was initiated by the advertising industry in the 1980s and 1990s as conglomerates decided to include public relations within their extensive offerings and the term “integrated marketing communications” (IMC) was born (Duncan, Caywood, & Newsom, 1993; Lauzen, 1991; Rose & Miller, 1994; cited in Hutton, 2001, p. 205). IMC changed the relationship between public relations and marketing from that of rivals jockeying for organizational recognition and budget towards marketing re-creating itself as public relations.

While Ferguson in 1984 championed the relational perspective for public relations as an area of research that could be owned by the discipline, the previous year a marketing academic, Berry (cited in Buttle, 1996, p. vii), had already coined the phrase “relationship marketing”. As public relations evolves into the relationship management and organization positioning strategic functions (Cropp & Pincus, 2001, p. 198), marketing is also steering a parallel course and could be accused of hijacking public relations’ territory (Hutton, 2001, p. 205). As marketing reinvents itself and updates its definitions, it has been argued that the field has recognized the value of public relations and is attempting to own it and rebrand it, leading to some debate regarding jurisdiction. This jurisdiction battle is more serious than the weight it receives within public relations as it has implications for the future of the discipline and practice. The abduction of public relations by marketing is occurring at both the tactical and strategic levels. Marketers who only understand public relations to mean media relations and publicity have already incorporated it into the “marketing mix” by adding it as the fifth “p” to the product, placement, packaging and price mantra, and have reduced the public relations function to being purely technical. If public relations is unable to identify and claim its territory as a management function, then the evolution of the discipline will regress and public relations will end up being subsumed into marketing communications.

However, the other perspective is that marketers cannot be “taking over” public relations as they are unaware of what public relations fundamentally is about and do not bother to use public relations academic sources to understand the discipline properly. Marketing’s lack of acknowledgement that it is shifting into public relations territory therefore is mainly a consequence of public relations’ failure to educate marketing and other business disciplines as to what public relations is and does. Public relations is equated with publicity and is then only used to boost a marketing campaign by securing “free advertising” in the editorial pages. Marketing, like public relations, is simply operating in a rather blinkered way and is unable to step outside of its own paradigms. Academics disciplines need to break through the “fire walls” and subject politics and become more interdisciplinary and collaborative where there are common or parallel paths.

Like public relations, marketing is a relatively new distinct discipline, established in the 20th century. Whereas public relations is considered to have its academic roots in psychology, sociology and communication science, marketing grew out of selling and advertising and to gain credibility as a business discipline established a connection with economics by focusing on market behaviour (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000, p. 119). Perhaps this partially explains why

marketing's position as a management function is secure while public relations battles to prove its value to management. Relationship marketing is viewed as a paradigm shift from transactional marketing with a new focus on developing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Grönroos, 1994). This move from on-off transactions to developing relationships is very similar to the shift to the relational paradigm in public relations. For marketing, however, this shift mirrors the previous practice of direct marketing, which allows the formation of relationships that go beyond isolated transactions.

Historically, the transactive paradigm came into being as a result of mass production, wholesaling, and the utilization of middlemen who were removed from the organization (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000, p. 124). The drive towards developing relationship marketing has been largely fuelled by the proliferation of high-quality competing products and services that are available to customers. Building relationships with customers provides a competitive edge, as long-term relationships with customers are hard to crack or steal. Relationship marketing is touted as the future of marketing, and the focus upon relationship building is not only a differentiator between competitors but is also an attempt to increase customer retention. Value is increasingly found in having relationships as it is believed to increase brand loyalty and it is much more cost-effective for organizations to retain customers than recruit new ones. The nature of marketing has changed as it has gone from "mass marketing" to highly targeted and personalized marketing. Information about individual customers is used to tailor both marketing strategies and the direct tactics employed. The relational perspective in marketing shifts the entire focus from customer acquisition to customer retention. Sales representatives become customer relationship managers as retention becomes the main concern (Buttle, 1996, pp. 1–13). The use of computers and customer relationship management (CRM) software has made it much easier to track and segment customers in order to increase sales opportunities over the customer's lifetime.

As the relational perspective increases in popularity, more marketing theorists (such as Cannon & Sheth, 1994; Christopher, Payne, & Ballantyne, 1991; Grönroos, 1994; O'Neal, 1989, cited in Sheth & Parvatiyar, 2000, p. 138; as well as Berry, 1983; Jackson, 1985; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Håkansson, 1982; cited in Buttle, 1996) are exploring relationships and key relational elements such as trust, customer satisfaction, and the impact upon retention, and profitability. Duncan (1993) defined integrated marketing communications as "the process of strategically developing and controlling or influencing all messages used to build and nourish relationships with customers and other stakeholders" (cited in Hutton, 2001, p. 211). As marketing shifts toward the relational perspective, Buttle (1996, p. vii) defined relationship marketing (RM) as "the development of mutually beneficial long-term relationships between suppliers and customers". The evolution of marketing from a transaction-orientation model towards a relational paradigm that revolves around the building and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships is currently embedding itself into the newly revised definition of marketing. Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 22, cited in Buttle, 1996, p. 3) removed the focus on suppliers and customers from the definition and redefined it as "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges".

However, marketing is not moving away from its customer-centric orientation, even if it appears to be given Morgan and Hunt's (1994, p. 22, cited in Buttle, 1996, p. 3) identification of 6 publics for RM to focus on that includes suppliers, competitors, non-profit organizations, government, employees, and customers. Morgan and Hunt are simply expanding the role of marketing and suggest that in order to improve customer relationships other organizational relationships need attention as well as these relationships and cannot be viewed in isolation. RM focuses on three main relationships: the company/intermediary relationship, the company/consumer relationship, and the company/employee relationship (Buttle, 1996).

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A definite change from the previous transaction-orientation model, which is supported by Naudé and Holland (1996), who highlighted the impact of technological advances on marketing and explained the shift to the new relational paradigm. Relationships in the business-to-business (B2B) arena are now based on information exchange as opposed to human interaction purely between buyers and sellers. Marketing managers are now expected to set up social, organizational, and IT networks as well as develop and maintain these relationships. This “new” focus is all part of the shift toward the network/relational paradigm (Morgan and Hunt, 1994) which emphasizes the importance of relational elements such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

In the marketing relational paradigm, organizations are required to become trusted collaborators in order to be effective in the global competitive environment. Morgan and Hunt (1994) theorized that commitment and trust are necessary in order to have a successful relationship where collaboration can occur. Commitment and trust are key elements for any relationship as they are needed for maintenance of the relationship, encouraging a long-term view as opposed to a short-term one, and also allow for certain risks to be taken because of the belief that other parties in the relationship will not take advantage of the situation. Having a long-term view and nurturing the relationship by providing and showing commitment allows for the development of deeper levels of relationships. Commitment is defined as “an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). The trust element is conceptualized as existing when there is reliability, confidence and integrity. Morgan and Hunt conducted a preliminary investigation using in-depth interviews which informed the quantitative questionnaire used to test whether trust and commitment were simply two independent variables or whether they were central for having a positive relationship. Trust was found to have a stronger effect on achieving collaboration and cooperation compared with commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Both trust and commitment were found to be mediating variables.

Trust is considered to influence commitment (Achrol, 1991; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In relationships where there is a high degree of trust present, parties are more likely to make a firm commitment to the relationship and invest appropriate resources to maintaining and developing it further. This is reflected in the notion of reciprocity found in social exchange theory, where people agree or negotiate upon the boundaries, rules, and regulations for each individual relationship. Parties in the relationship must exchange resources within an agreed or appropriate amount of time that is either equivalent or equal in value to balance the exchange. A clear link must be made between the resources exchanged; otherwise one party may be unaware that an exchange has taken place and therefore not reciprocate (Heath & Bryant, 1992).

Atuahene-Gima and Li (2002) questioned the evidence for the strong normative bias that exists in relationship marketing literature toward the importance of trust in relationships and proposed that very little empirical evidence exists to support the high value placed on it. This position draws on Dirk's (1999, cited in Atuahene-Gima & Li, 2002) review of management literature, which finds little evidence of a direct, positive relationship between trust and performance. But is performance the same as outcome? A task might be performed perfectly and yet the desired outcome might not be achieved. Quality control ensures that the process is performed to the highest possible standard. Whilst trust increases collaboration and commitment leading to improved performance, coercion also may increase performance, so it is important to identify what variable is actually at work. Atuahene-Gima and Li (2002) cited the research of Dalstrom and Nygaard (1995) as providing a differing view on the trust–performance relationship in that the cultural context becomes critical. The notion of abusing trust is touched

upon by Noteboom (1996, cited in Atuahene-Gima & Li, 2002). Trust is only likely to be abused when there is little chance of detection, and therefore transparency may solve this issue (Jahansoozi, 2002).

The Darwinian perspective of marketing emphasizes the survival of the fittest and supports exchange relationships that provide a direct benefit for the organization. Any relational strategies such as cooperation and collaboration that strengthen an organization's position and help it survive in a highly competitive market environment are utilized. Darwin considered this perspective for the survival of species in his seminal work *The Origin of Species*, originally published in 1859 (Burrows [editor], 1982). Darwin's survival perspective is built upon by Dawkins with his "selfish gene" argument. It is the inherent selfishness that evaluates what gain lies in any exchange, including cooperation and collaboration that encourages and ultimately leads to relationship formation (Dawkins, 1989). In short-term relationships there is no trust as the parties involved consider the transaction as unique, not to be repeated in the future, and therefore selfish interests are met first and foremost. Here cooperation and collaboration are not linked to altruism as the relationship is over as soon as it is no longer cost-effective. The role of altruism is limited in this perspective as it revolves around self-interest or, at the very least, mutual gain. The selfish gene argument posits that relationships exist solely to further one's aims and as soon as the benefit from the relationship declines the relationship is dissolved. So cooperation and collaboration only exist whilst the benefit to do so is clearly demonstrated. In this perspective, corporate social responsibility only occurs in order to "sweeten" local communities and allow corporate interests to operate unhindered. As soon as more profit can be made elsewhere, corporate interests disengage from the communities they both supported and were supported by. A recent example is the shift of utility and banking call/contact centres from the UK to India, despite record profits. Other companies such as Shell are attempting to foster sustainable development projects in the communities they operate in (or impact) so that the projects are able to continue to exist long after the oil giant has left the area. Again, this is not entirely altruistic. Shell needs local cooperation in order to keep production costs to a minimum but has discovered that philanthropy is short-term and when in the future money goes to another worthy project bad feeling results from the previous receivers, as expectations were set.

Although this survival model based on the selfish gene argument has a winner and a loser, there is a "win-win" model which links this line of thought with literature on negotiation and conflict resolution (Fischer & Ury, 1991) and economic theories which predict and analyze strategic behaviour such as game theory (von Neumann, 1937, cited in Parkin & King, 1995, p. 351). Economists have studied the competitive behaviour of organizations operating within the same market since the 1830s (Parkin & King, 1995, p. 348) and developed models that were based upon the beliefs regarding the expected behaviour of the other parties involved. Game theory provides a method for analyzing strategic behaviour and includes the prisoners' dilemma game and Nash equilibrium. These models consider "strategic behaviour", or behaving in a way that acknowledges the anticipated behaviour of others and the interdependence of the actors involved. Nash equilibrium posits that employing a strategy that is the best solution to the strategies adopted by the other parties in the relationship ultimately results in no party going after what could be considered to be their selfish interests. In other words, both parties recognize that they will not be able to get everything they want so instead they compromise in order to get the best possible outcome. Nash equilibrium occurs when the organization takes the best possible action given the action of the public, and the public takes the best possible action given the action of the organization, and therefore both parties end up with a satisfactory outcome (Parkin & King, 1995, p. 353). For the relationship to survive, both parties must not pursue their "selfish interests" but instead must compromise so that they both can achieve satisfactory

outcomes. Cooperation exists in long-term relationships where trust is experienced and parties in the relationship know what to expect from each other. For relationship marketing to be successful, the chosen strategy must overcome the inherent selfishness and drive to exploit opportunities and short-term profits, and instead compromise and cooperate, thereby building long-term relationships.

Central to marketing theory is the concept of “mutual satisfaction”, which differs from the concept of “mutual understanding” found in public relations. Mutual satisfaction occurs when both parties in the transaction believe they have received fair treatment. It can be questioned whether the satisfactions are really mutual or equal as is implied as they are not necessarily the same. One set of satisfaction falls to individuals such as customers and the other set belongs to the corporate organization. Both will have different needs that require satisfying, which does not mean they are mutual or equal in weighting. Mutual understanding does not imply that both parties have satisfaction, but that they understand each other’s position regarding the particular situation or issue. In order for mutual satisfaction to occur, there needs to be an understanding of the other party’s desires and aims in order to reach a position where satisfaction occurs. Buttle (1996) proposed that relationship management is more about concern, trust, commitment, and satisfaction than straightforward transactive interactions. Murphy (1996) also included mutual trust and loyalty, interaction and dialogue, commitment, and satisfaction with the other parties in the relationship as elements of a relationship. The concept of mutual understanding is not found in relationship marketing but is central to many definitions of public relations as it is concerned with understanding the organization’s publics and facilitating their understanding of the organization by managing relationships with them.

Grönroos (2000) discussed the nature of the dialogue process of “relationship marketing”. Starting from the obvious premise that all forms of contact with an organization include a communicative element, Grönroos took this point further to emphasize the dialogue process being one that creates two-way, or even multi-way, communication processes. Whilst not all communication activities between an organization and its publics are two-way, investment and effort should be made in creating opportunities for dialogue and thereby strengthening the organization–public relationship. Surprisingly, marketing literature seems to be overlooked by most public relations scholars, and yet with the focus on relationship management it is developing a parallel course. Many of the relational elements identified as being critical for relationship marketing are equally important for organization–public relationships, which supports the premise that literature on relationships can be transferred across domains as long as there is sensitivity regarding the context and intent behind building and maintaining the relationship. Public relations academics and practitioners have perhaps ignored recent developments in marketing and are guilty of reducing it to the transactive paradigm much in the same way marketing reduces public relations to media relations and publicity.

ORGANIZATIONAL LITERATURE

Literature on organizational theory that has had the biggest impact upon public relations theory is largely connected to systems theory. Systems theory had its origins in biology and is based in part upon the idea that organizations can be compared with organisms as they are both self-contained entities that strive for equilibrium with their environment. Initially it was assumed that organizations operated as “closed systems” able to control the environment they functioned in, and were therefore able to meet their organizational goals and missions without input from the external environment (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992, pp. 71–74). D. Katz and Kahn (1978) moved to the “open system” perspective, which acknowledged that organizations interacted

with an external environment containing other organizations and publics. The “open system” perspective understands that the external operating environment exerts a level of influence and control over the organization’s goal-meeting activities.

The concept of “system” has a history stretching back over 300 years. It was translated into the domain of organizational theory in the 1950s and emerged as general systems theory. Pieczka’s (1996) analysis of the historical origins of the systems approach distilled the literature and the various models into three categories: equilibrium, homeostatic, and the process or adaptive system (Buckley, 1967, cited in Pieczka, 1996, p. 126). Pieczka found that these models corresponded directly with Gharajedaghi and Ackoff’s (1994, cited in Pieczka, 1996, p. 126) models: mechanistic, organismic, and “social system”. The equilibrium or mechanistic model, with roots in mechanical physics, uses the laws of motion (Kepler and Newton) to explain social interactions and is interested in the efficiency of the system. The homeostatic or organismic model grew out of the age-old comparison of society to a living organism. Society, like any organism, is interested in growth and survival. The process or adaptive system model views society as a system of interdependent and cooperating parts and social networks and is interested in development.

Much of public relations literature discusses the systems theory approach for looking at the organization and the publics within its environment (Pieczka, 1996, p. 144). Public relations practitioners enter the picture in the “boundary-spanning” role (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992) as they help and enable the organization “to manage its relationships with groups in the environment” (p. 67). The role for public relations practitioners is effectively to limit this external influence and control that the environment is able to exert and place the various relationships into a state of harmony, which allows the organization to pursue its goals with the minimum interference or obstruction. This harmonious state also saves the organization in question money in the long term, as it reduces the amount of litigation, lawsuits, and changes to operating procedures both locally and globally (Heath, 2001b). Once in this state of harmony, the organization is able to pursue its goals effectively and maintain its license to operate. However, maintaining the harmonious state requires ongoing relationship management in order for small adjustments to be made proactively when issues are first picked up on the radar instead of adopting a defensive tactical position as the result of a crisis or imbalance in the organization–public relationship.

Whilst it is obvious that most organizations would prefer to be completely autonomous to get on with the primary organizational goals and to fulfill the mission statement (Mintzberg, 1983), the reality of the situation insists that organizations are interdependent upon other organizations and groups operating in the external environment. It is these relationships with other organizations and groups operating in the external environment that must be effectively managed to create harmony and balance:

Building relationships—managing interdependence—is the substance of public relations. Good relationships, in turn, make organizations more effective because they allow organizations more freedom—more autonomy—to achieve their missions than they would with bad relationships. By giving up autonomy by building relationships, ironically, organizations maximize that autonomy. (Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling, 1992, p. 69)

Here Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) are proposing that the underlying motivation for building relationships is for the organization to retain its autonomy. The real motivation is therefore power. There is an understanding that in order to have power over how the organization operates, the organization must foster positive relationships to build trust and allow for operational autonomy. This idea promotes “exchange” relationships that provide benefits to the organization and links back to the selfish gene argument and marketing’s survival paradigm, which

does not tolerate altruism as an explanation for organizations building mutually beneficial relationships.

Theories of organization relationships drawn from organization theory validate the notion that there is a distinct link between strong and positive relationships (those relationships that aid organization goals and which are perceived to be working well) between an organization and its publics and the ability of the organization in question to be effective (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). Organizational theory has developed a body of knowledge on organizational relationships. Aldrich (1975, 1979, cited in Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992, p. 83) identified four relational dimensions: formalization of the relationship, intensity of the relationship, level of reciprocity, and standardization of the relationship. Aldrich's relational dimensions have similarities to Ferguson's (1984) relationship attributes which could be used to evaluate a relationship: the dynamic/static nature; open/closed; satisfaction; power ratio; and understanding, agreement, and consensus. Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) added trust and reciprocity to the list, while Pfeiffer (1978), Oliver (1990), Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992), and Jensen (1997) added legitimacy. Jensen proposed that organizational legitimacy was strongly linked to the organization's strategic concept regarding what it is and that it is not the same concept as legal legitimacy. If the organization's publics accept its strategic concept within the specific parameters of its operations, then the organization has legitimacy within the public sphere.

Organizational literature, especially the systems theory approach, provides a view for looking at the organization and the publics within its environment and provides an easy way for practitioners to survey and conduct environmental scanning and boundary-spanning activities. When issues are identified before they develop into full-blown crises, there is an opportunity for the organization to resolve the potential crisis using conflict resolution strategies and techniques, which are very similar to those advocated in relationship management. Many of the relational elements discussed in organizational theory resonate with the relational perspective in public relations. The systems perspective allows for the identification of key publics in the organization's environment. Once these key publics are identified, relational grooming activities can occur, leading to the development of strategic relationships.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION LITERATURE

Conflict resolution literature is useful for public relations in that it provides insight into managing levels of conflict within relationships. In order for organizations to be successful in their local and global markets, they must concentrate on developing and maintaining relationships with key publics both at home and abroad. Any conflicts among or between publics and the organization need to be resolved quickly (Plowman, Briggs, & Huang, 2001). Understanding how conflict resolution and negotiation strategies are employed has become of greater importance for public relations scholars and practitioners, especially with regard to the relational perspective. Stroh (1999, cited in L. A. Grunig, 2000, p. 77) proposed that changes occurring in an organization's environment were the main catalyst or instigator of conflict in the organization-public relationship if left unmanaged. In order to be proactive and counteract change, public relations practitioners need to be able to effectively evaluate their organization-public relationships and move towards scenario planning (Stroh, 1999, cited in L. A. Grunig, 2000, p. 77; White, 2001). Issues/crises usually occur after management has made a decision and not considered the impact upon affected publics. When change in the environment surrounding the organization-public relationship occurs, a level of conflict resolution needs to be engaged.

Literature on conflict resolution and negotiation also highlights key relational elements such as openness, trust, and mutual understanding as being essential for a good working relationship (Fisher & Brown, 1988). Both parties involved in the relationship must be open to listening to each other. The concept of trust in conflict resolution is connected with risk assessment and accountability and not with issues of morality. For example, the organizations involved can be trusted to carry out what has been mutually agreed upon and that there is little chance of a “nasty” surprise or the playing field suddenly changing. Fisher and Brown (1988) emphasized that mutual understanding was crucial for the working relationship to prosper and that there was a direct link between mutual understanding and a healthy and productive relationship. Newcomb (1953, cited in van Ruler, 1997, p. 254) coined the idea of co-orientation as a communication model in which symmetrical communication was critical for developing understanding between parties (Pieczka, 1996, p. 151). Understanding the thinking and reasoning of the other party in the relationship will decrease the chance that a crisis will occur due to a simple misunderstanding and lack of empathy. Public relations practitioners need to be able to understand where their organization’s publics are coming from in order to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. If one party of the relationship feels that the other is uninterested and unwilling to invest time and effort into understanding the issue or concern, then it is likely that the relationship will not be positive or long-lasting (Fisher & Ury, 1991).

Another important relational element identified in conflict resolution literature was communication. When relationships collapse or are dissolved, the cause is often attributed to either a lack of communication or a complete breakdown of communication, suggesting that without communication there is no relationship. Fisher and Ury (1991) described negotiation as a “process of communicating back and forth for the purpose of reaching a joint decision” (p. 33), which can be seen to be very similar to Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetrical model which “is based on research and that uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics” (J. E. Grunig, 1992, p. 18). Fisher and Ury (1991) suggested that there are three main problems with communication that lead to a breakdown of the process: first, the parties involved may not be communicating with each other as each side has mentally written off the other party and is purely going through the motions of communicating in order to maintain the facade; second, both parties may not be actually hearing what is being said; and third, misunderstanding and misinterpreting what is being communicated. This third point is particularly apt for cross-cultural communication and supports Huang’s (2001b) efforts to include a relationship dimension reflecting the Asian culture. Numerous examples exist in the area of international relations and diplomacy where relationships were destroyed by ignorance surrounding the connotations and/or meanings of certain words and gestures in different cultures.

Psychologists and therapists have a clear understanding of another aspect of communication—listening. Active listening skills, popular in the area of crisis counseling, aid in the understanding and perception of the other party’s concerns and position. By repeating back what is being said, the other party is reassured that you are listening and have heard them and it also increases their level of satisfaction with the communication process (Fisher & Ury, 1991; VWSAC, 1994). Many misunderstandings occur simply because the act of listening did not occur. Face-to-face communication is still the best form of communication, especially in a conflict situation, as non-verbal communication cues can be assessed and can make a significant difference to the meaning. Mutual understanding is important for a relationship to continue to exist. If one party feels that the other fails to understand their position, the relationship is in jeopardy. Both parties must endeavor to understand each other’s position and active listening techniques provide an easy way to establish clearly that concerns have been heard.

Power dynamics between relational parties also has implications for the relationship. More often than not, power is unbalanced within the relationship, which can lead to a breakdown. For example, the organization may have far more in the way of resources compared with the particular strategic public. While no relationship will succeed if all the power is on one side, parties in the relationship need to achieve agreement without feeling coerced into it. Whilst both parties in the relationship are aware of the power ratio, there needs to be agreement on the power balance within the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1992). If it is perceived that all the power is located on one side of the relationship, compliance may take place but the other party may feel coerced or bullied into agreement. Coercion and bullying are both remarkably effective in organizations for gaining compliance, particularly in terms of work output; however, as soon as the threat is removed the compliance ends—making it an effective tactic in the short term only with any hope of future collaboration forfeited.

Conrad (1985, cited in J. E. Grunig, 1992, p. 315) described the concept of collaboration as a strategy employed in conflict resolution as follows: “All parties believing that they should actively and assertively seek a mutually acceptable solution and be willing to spend large amounts of time and energy to reach such an outcome.” Collaboration can occur only in a climate of trust. The parties involved need to be able to trust each other enough to work together towards mutual objectives. In an organization–public relationship, both sides must understand that for a positive outcome they will need to collaborate on some level. Obviously, the level of collaboration will affect the outcome as well as the relationship itself. Mutual understanding helps to identify the level of collaboration possible between the parties. In conflict resolution literature the key relational elements of trust, openness, communication, mutual understanding, power, and collaboration have all been identified as having an important bearing upon relationships between people. Many of these concepts translate directly into public relations as it must be remembered that organization–public relationships are essentially relationships between people who simply represent other entities.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION LITERATURE

Historically, public relations depended heavily upon mass communication for its theories, which is understandable as the majority of public relations practitioners initially came from a journalism background. As the relational perspective became more influential, public relations academics turned to interpersonal communication theory, which investigates different factors that are involved in improving relationships (J. E. Grunig, 1990; Heath & Bryant, 1992). L. A. Grunig (2000b) and Huang (2001b) suggested that the resurgence of interest in the public relations relational perspective in recent years was built upon the foundations of interpersonal communication and the work of Stafford and Canary (1991), who directly influenced Huang’s research on the key relational elements of trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. Whilst the relational elements of trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction are discussed in marketing, organizational theory and conflict resolution literature, the concept of mutual influence is not. Mutual influence is the cornerstone of interpersonal communication, which entails that the parties involved in communicating have the ability to influence each other’s attitudes and behaviour (Coombs, 2001). Both parties need to have the ability to influence each other; if not, the relationship becomes unbalanced and can lead to breakdown as coercion results when only one party has the ability to influence the other.

Initially in the field of interpersonal communication, work on relationships was dominated by social psychologists as opposed to communication scientists (Duck, 1984). Duck proposed

that one of the main problems with research in the area of social and personal relationships was the fact that the concepts of relationship were very diverse and that social psychologists and communications scientists mostly viewed relationships as being in a static state with “automatic” consequences resulting from the qualities of the parties involved in the particular relationship. Duck pointed out that the important influence of “time” was neglected in research conducted up until the mid-1970s. Duck viewed relationships as processes that possess certain qualities or elements.

Ledingham (2000) utilized an interpersonal relationship model by adapting it to the organization–public relationship and outlined the 10 phases relationships pass through in an unmanaged lifecycle—in the “coming together” and “coming apart” process. At its peak, the organization–public relationship basks in the “fidelity phase”, where the public is loyal to the organization and the organization in return is committed to the public’s interests; the elements of “mutual trust, openness and commitment are perceived as operating” (Ledingham, 2000, p. 45). Reaching and sustaining the “fidelity phase” with organization–public relationships is the ultimate goal for public relations practitioners operating within the relational perspective.

Interpersonal communication literature emphasizes particular relational elements. The relational element of trust was deemed critical if the environment contained risk and there was the possibility that self-interest could direct the relational goals and ultimately lead to mistrust by the other partner and a breakdown in the relationship (Miller & Rogers, 1976, 1987, cited in Heath & Bryant, 1992, p. 176; Canary & Cupach, 1988). Trust is built up or “banked” over a period of time, which is linked with credibility and is necessary for resolving conflicts or communication problems (Plowman, Briggs, & Huang, 2001).

Stafford and Canary (1991) defined the interpersonal relationship element of control mutuality as “the degree to which partners agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behavioural routines” (p. 224). Control mutuality includes the notion of power as each party in the relationship agrees and understands that one has the rightful ability to influence the other or agree upon the power balance (Morton, Alexander, & Altman, 1976, cited in Heath & Bryant, 1992, p. 163; Plowman, Briggs, & Huang, 2001). Domineering behaviour and coercive tactics are often used in relationships where control mutuality is lacking. Habermas’ theory of communicative action recognizes that relationships require symmetrical communication (dialogue) to take place as it encourages the parties involved to develop a deeper understanding of the “other’s” position, leading to increased empathy. The concept of control mutuality is linked with Habermas’ theory as relational parties are seldom equal and one party will almost certainly have access to greater resources and power. Habermas proposed that as rational beings we seek to reach a position of agreement through symmetrical communication. When the relationship is unbalanced as a result of access to resources, power communication becomes asymmetrical and irrational and leads to the relationship breaking down. Openly recognizing where the power lies in the relationship facilitates achieving the desired relational outcome (L’Etang, 1996b, p. 121).

Along with control mutuality, commitment, liking and relational satisfaction are other elements identified (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Most of the research on commitment is based on social exchange theory and is found to be positively associated with satisfaction and long-term investment in the relationship (Rusbult, 1983, cited in Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 224). The perceived level of commitment was found to be directly related to the strength and stability of the relationship by Lund (1985). The degree of liking is dependent upon the perception of the efforts that one party has undergone to maintain the relationship by the other involved party. Relational satisfaction deals with the rewards or benefits for remaining in the relationship outweighing the costs. As long as relational satisfaction is maintained, it is likely the relationship will continue to exist (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Morton, Alexander, and Altman (1976, cited in Heath & Bryant, 1992, p. 163) also included communication as a defining element of relationships, specifically the type of communication that occurs. Taylor and Altman (1987, cited in Heath & Bryant, 1992, p. 167) provided a simple formula: "Relationship outcomes = rewards – costs". The reward/cost ratio could be used to measure each specific relationship to gauge whether it is a positive or negative relationship. Only when the rewards are more than the costs involved in sustaining the relationship can the relationship be said to be satisfying.

PUBLIC RELATIONS LITERATURE

Public relations literature on the relational perspective has drawn from interpersonal communication, organizational theory, marketing, and conflict resolution literature. The organizational perspective has been the main focus in much of the literature in the public relations body of knowledge and is based on the work of Grunig and Hunt (1984). Using systems theory as the foundation, Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations, which simultaneously described the evolutionary process of the occupation. Grunig and Hunt (1984) proposed that the two-way symmetrical model was best practice for public relations, being the most ethical and effective of the four models. Leitch and Neilson's (2001, pp. 127–138) critique of the two-way symmetrical model is derived from the understanding that within the systems framework publics exist only when the organization has identified them. Viewing publics from the organization's position is problematic as they are then considered to be equal participants in the dialogue or relationship. When power is omitted from the relationship, it is then possible to assume that an organization and its publics are able to meet on equal footing and are able to develop mutually beneficial outcomes for recognized problems. However, in reality this is not the case as usually the organization has access to far greater resources. The concept of power is ignored in the organizational perspective as the organization tends to deal with publics in much the same way it would deal with other organizations, which is why there is confusion with defining publics without there being an issue, linking back to Hallahan's (2000) work on identifying inactive publics. As the relational perspective has become more popular, publics are finally being viewed from a different standpoint—that of the publics themselves (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). This in part is due to globalization and communication technology, which have allowed global movements to operate at the local, national, and international level, promoting collaboration between publics. This has caused a shift in power relations between the organization and its publics as publics have increased access to resources and information, and are in a much better position to form coalitions with other publics that share a similar worldview.

The organizational perspective acknowledges the publics only once they have been identified as such. While different types of publics such as latent and active are strategically identified, they are treated as if they are on an equal footing with the organization. This perspective does not consider the balance of power between the organization and its publics or between publics (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Leitch and Neilson (2001) explained that this is the key reason why evidence to support the two-way symmetrical model was, and remains, scarce in practice. While the communication process between an organization and its publics may very well be symmetrical, the relationship between them will not be.

"Organization–public relations refers to relations between organizations and publics that are defined as internal to neither the organization nor other system organizations" (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p. 131). Using the relationship management perspective that looks at the relationship as the unit of analysis, there is the potential to identify an appropriate

framework or methodology to effectively evaluate the relationship between an organization and its publics. Since Ferguson in 1984 proposed that public relations should shift its focus to the organization–public relationship, other public relations scholars have taken the banner and have started to examine relationship antecedents, concepts, and consequences in more depth using quantitative methodologies (Hon & Grunig, 1999; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Huang, 2001a, b). One of the reasons that scholars have enthusiastically adopted the relational perspective is that it provides public relations practitioners with the ability to “utilize quantitative evaluation methods to track relationship changes over time” (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999, p. 158). This is a welcome departure from previous quantitative evaluation methods such as counting press clippings, which has long been discredited mainly because of its failure to link media coverage to its possible effects, such as changes in the levels of awareness, public’s attitudes, and behaviours. However, as the methods employed are still quantitative they do not provide a rich description or understanding of the organization–public relationship, as would be the case if qualitative methods were used instead. The relational perspective with its quest to understand and describe organization–public relationships implies the need for qualitative methodologies.

The relational perspective has the potential to shift public relations practitioners away from using persuasive communication as a tool to manipulate public opinion toward building and maintaining mutually beneficial organization–public relationships. By effectively managing relationships with strategic publics, public relations practitioners are able to influence positively their attitudes and behaviours in the long term. It is the public relations practitioner’s role to identify strategic publics and manage the organization’s relationships with them in order to ideally achieve a stable equilibrium within the system or operating environment. To do this effectively each relationship must be viewed separately, and the elements of the relationship need to be evaluated in order to have an understanding of the present state of the relationship.

By effectively managing the organization–public relationship, the attitudes and behaviour of members of strategic publics can be influenced. Findings from Ledingham’s (2001) study of government–community relationships reinforce the thought that relationship management and the relational paradigm offer a useful way to understand and explain the behaviour of a strategic public. Social exchange theory was shown to be particularly useful in explaining the behaviour of the strategic public within the context of the relationship. Kovacs (2001) examined the strategies and impact of six activist groups on the British broadcasting policies and programming and found that their success over time was attributed to relationship building. She suggested that good relationship building and maintenance induced collaboration, producing a “win–win” situation for resolving conflict, which in the long term was more effective in producing behavioural change than confrontational approaches often used by environmental activist groups. Bruning’s (2002) investigation into the relationship–attitudes–behavioural outcome link examined the student–university relationship attitudes affect on retention rates. Bruning (2002) suggested that relationship attitudes are directly linked with behavioural outcomes and can be quantitatively measured.

Drawing from the literature reviewed from the disciplines of marketing, organizational theory, conflict resolution, and interpersonal communication, public relations scholars interested in the relational perspective have started to identify the antecedents, characteristics, or elements that when present together produce the constituents of a positive relationship. Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) identified reciprocity, trust, credibility, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding as being the most important. Hon and Grunig (1999) went further to identify a total of six attributes: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship. Huang (2001b) used trust, control

mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction as key relational features derived from Western literature and in dealing with cross-cultural relationships added the “face and favor” attribute as the fifth dimension, which reflected Chinese social psychology. Huang’s (2001b) “face and favor” relationship dimension was based upon Hwang’s (1987, cited in Huang, 2001b, p. 68) social psychology model of “face and favor” in the Chinese society. This model explained the use of personal social connections and networks in locating resources or obtaining favours from others in positions of authority or power (Huang, 2001b). Huang’s addition of a cross-cultural attribute is important as it highlights the necessity for considering cross-cultural attributes when identifying the elements of the relationship to be evaluated, as many relational elements such as transparency are culturally specific.

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) suggested that relationships are both formed and maintained by an ongoing process based upon mutual adaptation and contingent responses, which enable the relationship to reach homeostasis. It was also proposed that the relationships between an organization and key publics could be studied as distinct and separate from the perceptions of the state of the relationship held by the parties involved.

DIALOGUE AND TRANSPARENCY AS RELATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Whilst many relationship characteristics have been identified in the public relations literature, there appear to be some gaps in the lists of relationship characteristics, namely dialogue and transparency. Communication is touched upon in some of the literature surveyed on conflict resolution and interpersonal communication, but it is barely touched upon as a relationship characteristic with regard to public relations. Yet surely for a relationship to exist, there must be a level of communication occurring. Dialogue is a form of communication most applicable to building and maintaining relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002), and without it there is little chance of the relationship surviving, much like a relationship without trust. Kent and Taylor (2002) clarified the concept of dialogue in public relations and described it as “one of the most ethical forms of communication and as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood” (p. 22). The shift in public relations toward a relational perspective emphasises the use of communication as a tool for resolving conflicts and building and maintaining relationships with strategic publics. Kent and Taylor (2002) found that whilst dialogue is mentioned as a concept in public relations literature, what is actually meant by it remains unclear.

The study of dialogue, like public relations, traces back to philosophy, rhetoric, and psychology (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogue is considered to be the most ethical form of communication in that the “truth” of an issue has an opportunity to be heard. Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that today our concept of dialogue is based heavily on the work of the theologian Martin Buber. Buber viewed dialogue as being essential for a relationship to exist and that it required both openness and respect. Buber believed that dialogue required elements that have also been identified as relational characteristics: reciprocity, mutuality, commitment, and openness. Dialogue is not the means to an end but rather the end goal itself, with the relationship facilitating the process (Buber, 1982, cited in Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 324). Dialogic communication requires the parties involved to be willing to negotiate in order to reach a position that is mutually acceptable. By communicating back and forth in a symmetrical manner, both parties are able to construct a deeper understanding of the other’s position and discover “common ground” by not immediately rejecting the other’s position and increasing empathy for each other.

Whilst dialogue can change the type of organization–public relationship by shifting the focus onto the relationship and developing mutual understanding, it is unable to make the organization behave ethically towards its public or react to an issue (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Transparency is required for the realization of this outcome as it exposes organizational behaviour and encourages ethical decision making, which more likely to occur in organizations that operate in a transparent environment. It is because of the many benefits transparency brings to organization–public relationships that it has resulted in being hailed as the saviour against all corporate and government evils as its power lies in it being perceived as “an antidote to mismanagement and corruption” (von Furstenberg, 2001, p. 106). Governments, corporate conglomerates, and NGOs have all called for greater transparency in the operational side of things and reinforced the view that it is considered to be the universal cure for unethical practice and the only way to restore a damaged reputation.

Transparency Related Outcomes

Transparency is very important for organization–public relationships and can be viewed as a relational condition or variable that is a prerequisite for other relational elements such as trust and commitment. It provides the atmospheric conditions that allow trust, accountability, cooperation, collaboration, and commitment to flourish.

Trust, accountability, cooperation, collaboration, and commitment are all components of “positive” organization–public relationships. Transparency instills a level of trust that is crucial, especially for organizations that have experienced crises and need to rebuild their reputations. Transparency is necessary in order for publics to trust that ethical communication and decision making is taking place within the organization. As Grunig (cited in Center & Jackson, 2003, p. 14) proposed, decisions or policies often create problems and active publics, which lead to the emergence of issues and, without action, can turn into full-blown crises. However, if the organization–public relationship is “positive”, there will be transparency, communication, trust, cooperation, satisfaction, and commitment as well as other relational characteristics present. Increased dialogue with active publics feeds into the organization’s decision-making process, enabling it to deliver in what many cases is considered to be the “least-worst” possible option. Survival will often depend upon the organization’s ability to predict the consequences of such decisions or policies amongst its key publics.

Transparency is considered a necessity for public relations practitioners interested in opening up the decision-making process and ensuring accountability and in preempting issues and averting expensive crises. Decision making requires communication, information, and knowledge, which provide more choices. If the process is transparent, then publics are able to view the interaction and internal behaviour and can decide whether the organization actually does what it claims to be doing. This process feeds into corporate social responsibility (CSR), as transparency forces the organization to consider ethics and values in relation to its own operations as well within its entire supply chain.

Transparency can be defined as a relational characteristic as well as with regard to environmental conditions and organizational processes. Florini (1998, p. 50) defined transparency as being the opposite of secrecy in that the internal processes are purposefully exposed to the external world. As public relations practitioners collaborate and facilitate work in teams, internal transparency increases.

A more in-depth definition is provided in the IMF Code (1999, pp. 1–2, cited in von Furstenberg, 2001, p. 112) that defines transparency as being far more than simply releasing information into the public domain. It is also described as being an environmental condition

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that exists and within which the organization operates. Thus, transparency has an impact on both the internal and external processes:

an environment in which the objective of policy, its legal, institutional, and economic framework, policy decisions and their rationale, data (related to the proper exercise of agencies' functions), and the terms of agencies' accountability, are provided to the public on an understandable, accessible and timely basis.

Von Furstenberg (2001, pp. 107–108) traced the origins of the concept of transparency to positivist philosophy and classical liberalism as a rationalist promise to limit and reduce abuses of power. In this capacity, transparency acts to reveal abuses of power and show accountability. Transparency provides the economic and civil benefits resulting from predictability, trust, and credibility. These benefits raise transparency onto a moral and ethical platform, which is why from the Western perspective it should be applied internationally and across the board, with little regard to its incompatibility with other cultures.

Transparency contributes to the organization's reputation management through numerous benefits enjoyed by transparent organizations: increased trust, credibility, cooperation with key publics, reduced information and transaction costs, and lowered risk premiums. Von Furstenberg (2001, p. 108) acknowledged the good that transparency instills and credits it with reducing the levels of corruption and bad practice that flourish in opacity. When one organization commits to having a transparent approach, often its competitors will feel coerced into complying or else risk being perceived as "hiding something". Technological advancements have been crucial in extending transparency as interested publics can quickly and easily compare competitors. The Internet was partially responsible for the drive toward transparency in organizational behaviour. Information accessibility has forced organizations to rethink the potential outcomes of decisions and choices.

Transparency is a choice, encouraged by changing attitudes about what constitutes appropriate behaviour. Transparency and opacity are not either/or conditions; instead they represent the opposite ends of a continuum (Florini, 1998, p. 50) with perhaps a translucent category at the mid-point. Here the transparent organization is defined as one where both the internal and external processes are transparent. The translucent organization is one where either the internal or external processes are transparent, but not both, and the opaque organization is where both the internal and external processes are hidden or secret. It is likely that most organizations would be considered to be translucent given the above criteria.

Christensen (2002) analyzed the notion of transparency as both an organizational condition as well as a business strategy and questioned whether transparency is a condition or adoptable strategy. He proposed that corporate communication is a result of transparency as a condition and that "contemporary organizations not only describe their communication environment in terms of transparency but also prescribe transparency in communications as the proper managerial response" (p. 2). This idea links back and connects with Grunig's (2001) symmetrical and ethical communication model by using transparency as an environmental condition in order to promote ethical decision making as the correct managerial response.

Christensen was critical of van Riel's (2000, p. 158, cited in Christensen, 2002, p. 163) assumption that transparency is a "basic requirement" for organizations operating today and questioned where this condition for operation originates and whether it is a preexisting condition or simply a survival strategy adopted during a crisis of trust. Christensen (2002, p. 163) argued that whilst transparency is often presented or introduced as an environmental condition that shapes an organization's communications, it is at the same time an "assumption necessary for organizations to pursue and justify their corporate ambitions." As a condition that shapes organizational behaviour, transparency can be viewed as part of a persuasive response-shaping

process, which is most effective when situations are radically new or when there is a new development within the organization's environment, which agrees with it being utilized as a survival strategy (Miller, 2002, p. 7). The organization is "socialized" to be transparent—otherwise the consequences are negative, relationships with key publics are destroyed, and its licence to operate is withdrawn.

Christensen (2002) differentiated between internal and external transparency. He argued that whilst the condition of transparency does not equate with self-transparency, where organizations are internally transparent, corporate communications with its overall ambition of coordinating and managing all organizational communication under one corporate identity has the underlying presupposition that the organization is self-transparent, which is seldom the reality (p. 166). With multiple realities the idea of one single perspective is impractical and unsustainable. Christensen argued that ambiguity can be far more productive as it allows the coexistence of multiple perspectives within an organizational entity. The more defined the identity becomes, the more difficult it is to manage. Also, as transparency increases there is also more exposure to pluralism and multiple voices as opposed to the corporate communications ambition of "one voice".

Organizational transparency is based upon the assumption that external publics have access to the information and are also capable of processing it. It also assumes that access to more information allows publics to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the organization and the complex issues it faces. Frombrun and Rindova (2000, cited in Christensen, 2002, p. 265) proposed that as information availability increased there was also an increase in trust and credibility and a decrease in the alienation of strategic publics; however, too much information is overwhelming. Also, there is the incorrect assumption that communication equals information.

Reducing communication to purely information is problematic. Some organizations and, more importantly, individuals and/or groups only understand communication with stakeholders as the way to send information, adopting a conduit metaphor where messages are merely transferred from the sender to the receiver based upon the Shannon–Weaver model of communication (Fawkes, 2001, p. 13). However, Christensen (2002, p. 165) suggested that reception theory is more relevant as it highlights the important point that receivers interpret messages in a creative and self-referential manner and are able to construct meaning that cannot be controlled or even completely determined by the sender. It is the publics' ability to process information and construct the resulting meaning (Iser, 1974, cited in Christensen, 2002, p. 165).

Literature on transparency tends to deal with economic concerns such as the necessity of financial transparency or with corporate social responsibility initiatives because of the cost-reduction paradigm as crises are expensive to weather and expose the organization to unnecessary risk. Because of the link between transparency, trust, and accountability, there is naturally a strong interest in it as a solution for instantly restoring confidence to the organization–public relationship. In cases where natural disasters have caused a crisis, if the organization is responsive and transparent about its actions they are usually supported and embraced by the community. Transparency enables organizations that have been faced with a "man-made" crisis to have the world witness that they are making up for their sins and are setting "right" what was perceived to be "wrong". It is required for repairing damaged reputations where trust is minimal or even completely lost. This restorative power or quality of transparency permits organizations to rebuild trust by exposing accountability. Whether it is increased confidence in the organization's environmental and labour policies/practice or increased investor confidence, transparency builds trust. Organizations are pressured into becoming more open by revealing the internal decision-making processes and operations to interested publics such as activist groups and nongovernmental organizations (Florini, 1998, p. 50). The recent lack of investor

confidence attributed to the exposure of illegal accounting practices, for example at Enron, has led investors to “put their money where transparency allows some predictability about the likelihood of returns. Thanks to globalization, they have a lot of options, creating a powerful economic incentive for ever higher degrees of disclosure” (Florini, 1998, p. 56). Organizations can no longer afford to be opaque, as transparency has related outcomes that claim to provide more benefit than cost.

Transparency increases the level of trust in an organization. As publics are demanding ethical behaviour from organizations, transparency becomes a necessity in order for the organization to gain the trust that it is doing what society expects of it. Trust is built when publics are able to discern that what the organization says is actually true. For many organizations, transparency translates into open accounting practices and CSR. Corporations such as Enron and WorldCom provide recent examples of organizations that effectively lost their license to operate mainly due to the lack of transparency involved in their accounting practices and triggered the demand for transparent operations globally. Transparency has become critical for trust to be maintained in relationships between publics and corporations. Revelations regarding Enron, whilst shocking, were also portrayed as an exception. However, with Xerox, WorldCom, and, more recently, Shell, the threat is very real and is not just confined to one particular area. Trust in the corporate world is decreasing and cynicism is increasing. Without transparency there is little trust, which is important for both cooperation and collaboration to occur. Trust is also the foundation of a positive relationship.

Along with increasing trust, transparency also increases the level of accountability in an organization. Many different publics have a vested interest in encouraging organizations to embrace transparency. Financial investors both demand transparency from publicly listed companies and are required to be transparent themselves after recent allegations and court cases regarding conflict of interest as financial analysts promoted IPOs (initial public offerings) whilst their colleagues at the same financial institutions were responsible for those floatations. Coombes and Watson (2001) found in a McKinsey survey on corporate reform in the developing world that greater transparency or disclosure ranked most important amongst reforms within a company’s control. As the recognition of the importance of transparency increases, there are obvious implications for public relations practitioners working in the areas of investor relations or financial public relations, where publics are already demanding transparency. Pressure from financial analysts and shareholders for increased financial reporting regulations indicates that there is a strong suspicion that appropriate information is not being disclosed (Ho & Wong, 2001). Global business and investors require the uninterrupted free flow of information, making transparency a necessity. Ethical funds continue to gain interest with fund managers and investors, as shareholders are more informed and concerned about corporate social responsibility issues along the entire supply chain.

As transparency increases the level of trust, this in turn has an effect on the level of collaboration and cooperation in organizations (Parks & Hilbert, 1995, cited in deCremer & Dewitte, 2002). Transparency is very important for collaborative work, which requires the involved parties to trust that what is being done is being done to the agreed standard. Because transparency makes it clear where accountability lies, people are more inclined to do a good job. If individuals and organizations are required to be accountable for their decisions and actions, then it is likely that they will conform and cooperate if cooperation is perceived to be positive. Once it is clear where accountability lies, cooperation is more likely to occur, as a level of trust exists. Because transparency increases trust, it is key for determining levels of cooperation. Organizations and publics regularly are required to cooperate in mixed-motive situations. De Cremer and Dewitte (2002, p. 542) stated that expectations concerning reciprocity may

ultimately influence the level of cooperation. A high level of transparency and trust will lead to a high level of cooperation. Opaque organizations do not promote high levels of trust; in fact the reverse tends to be the result, which may lead to a negative downward spiral of low trust leading to low levels of cooperation just when it is crucial for the organization to survive a crisis situation. Without trust collaboration is minimal, as people do not want to work with untrustworthy colleagues or institutions. Transparency rebuilds trust where it is lacking and provides an environment where collaboration can exist, as it exposes what is going on and therefore increases the level of trust.

The Dark Side of Transparency

Transparency is often viewed as a “quick fix” solution that makes accountability abundantly clear by providing a scapegoat and thus exonerating an organization from its crimes or misdeeds. The drive for corporate and organizational transparency has been fuelled, and largely made possible, by the advances in communication technology and specifically the Internet (Florini, 1998, p. 52). Transparency enforces the maintenance of standards via the underlying coercive threat of exposing bad practice: regulation by revelation. In this way it is similar to “self-censorship” where individuals and organizations censor themselves, thus ensuring that society or the government does not do the censoring for them. However, this only works when there is enough interest in what is revealed to spark or “kick-start” a reaction of some sort—for example, boycotts or a drop in share value—and it focuses only on the observable behaviour and not the actual intent that lies behind it.

In addition to not being transparent at the source, there are other negative consequences regarding transparency. Whilst the IMF promotes transparency, it also acknowledges that there is a cost in that it can lower the decision-making quality: “[T]he rationale for limiting some types of disclosure arises because it could adversely affect the decision-making process and the effectiveness of policies” (IMF, 1999, pp. 1–2). Unsavory or difficult decisions may be put off or not even made for fear of the media and the ensuing public outcry when in reality those decisions might be better for the survival of the organization in the long term.

Transparency becomes easier to establish if it is done in a climate of reciprocity, or otherwise organizations may feel vulnerable regarding competitors (von Furstenberg, 2001, p. 113). Individuals are also likely to censor what they say or may perceive what others say in a negative light by adding value judgments contributing to possible organizational depression, which affects individual and group performance. Political correctness could negatively influence transparent behaviour and lead to the inhibition of creative and innovative outcomes, or worse, to social conformity. Therefore, transparency operating in a climate of political correctness could be highly oppressive and possibly lead to, or result from, behaviourist approaches to leadership rather than constructivist ones.

Florini (1998, p. 60) emphasized that because transparency only exposes behaviour and does not shed light upon the actual intent behind the behaviour, hidden agendas remain undisclosed. This relates to criticisms regarding sender–receiver models where the connotative meaning of the message is undisclosed and therefore inhibits appropriate interpretation and the construction of meaning.

Von Furstenberg (2001, p. 107) argued that transparency is a relational variable that is culture bound and derived from 300 years of European and American social philosophy and is therefore not applicable given the impact of globalization on organizations. Like Florini (1998), von Furstenberg (2001) was concerned that transparency only reveals the behaviour and not the intent behind it. Organizations such as the EU, IMF, and donor countries can impose transparency upon “weaker” or more vulnerable cultures as a form of “cultural imperialism”

by pretending it is for their own good, whereas in reality there is another opaque vested interest at work. Organizations are forced into transparency, except perhaps for NGOs and organizations with good reputations as it is assumed they are ethical and that they are doing good work. Von Furstenberg's main argument against the popular uptake of transparency is that the actual term "transparency" has been overused and as a result has become watered down and meaningless.

Von Furstenberg warned that transparency comes at the cost of privacy and control (2001, p. 108) and that it is important to keep in mind the vested interests behind it. Because of the inherent dangers involved, it is crucial to determine who gives transparency, who benefits from it, "and up to what point the benefits to one side exceed the costs to the other" (p. 108). There may also be a point where too much transparency, as mentioned earlier, actually hinders the purpose by watering down the decision-making quality. This may be heavily influenced by developments and access to technology where information overload, without the possibility of discriminating between what is relevant and what is noise, confuses and hinders the construction of meaning or—even worse—prevents it, resulting in social apathy. A possible role for public relations practitioners could be to help filter information, which enables others to construct meaning, energizing the social engagement.

For practitioners interested in increasing or decreasing transparency within the organization's internal and external processes, the public relations catalyst model, depicted in Fig. 4.1

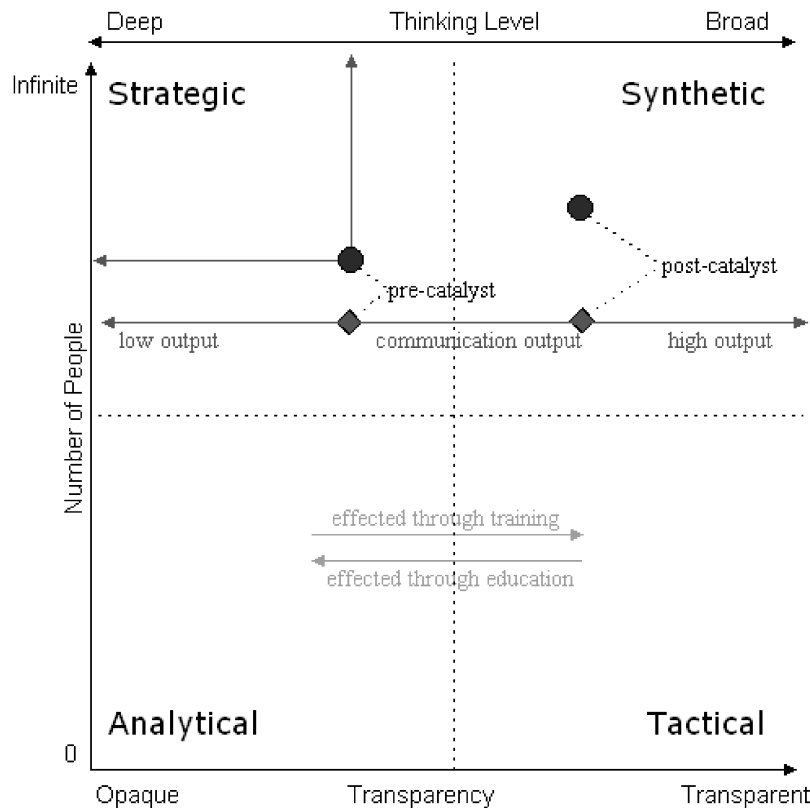


FIG. 4.1. Public relations catalyst model (Jahansoozi & Koper, 2004). The blue circles denote the organization.

(Jahansoozi & Koper, 2004), provides a pragmatic and descriptive approach. By simply increasing the number of people involved in an activity and increasing the communication output, transparency increases. If the organization considers itself to be too transparent, it can decrease collaboration and the number of people involved.

This model is concerned with thinking levels and the differences between analytical and tactical thinkers. Communication in this example is used as a catalyst to instigate the change toward strategic and synthetic levels of operation. For example, if an organization such as an engineering company found itself to be highly analytical in its approach toward problem solving and relationship building, it would be operating in the lower left-hand quadrant of the diagramme. In order for the problem-solving activities to become strategic, more people need to be involved, which increases the level of internal transparency and moves the organization into the top left-hand quadrant. The organization is translucent at this point as only the internal processes are transparent whilst the external processes remain opaque. To remedy this communication output needs to be increased, moving the organization away from the analytical/strategic side toward the tactical/synthetic side, where both the internal and external processes are transparent.

STAKEHOLDER FATIGUE SYNDROME

As practitioners become more interested in managing the organization's relationships with its publics and invest resources into engagement activities, there is also the risk of overengagement. Initially the targeted public may be flattered and intrigued by the attention; however, when they start to feel inundated with communication and relationship-building activities, "stakeholder fatigue" may set in. Stakeholder fatigue occurs when organizations solicit too much contact with key publics. The organization's keenness to build and maintain "positive" relationships with these key publics results in the actual mismanagement of the relationship. The magnitude of communication activities becomes overwhelming and leads to disengagement. Many publics are interested only in specific areas of the organization's operation and prefer to obtain information on a "need-to-know" basis. Communication that deals with peripheral operations is most unwelcome and leads to relationship fatigue.

Christensen (2002, p. 165) argued that there is an implicit assumption in the literature that external publics both want and demand organizational transparency, which is established via communication. Communication is readily equated with information, and hence the reasoning that external publics want more information. However, there is a backlash occurring as publics are overwhelmed by the amount of communication and information sent their way (e.g., Shell's Athabasca Oil Sands Project—"stakeholder fatigue syndrome" was a result of strategic publics being overwhelmed by the organization's well-meaning attention).

Some of the assumptions that lead and shape organizational strategies for coping with transparency as an environmental condition are linked with society's expectations regarding democracy and a free marketplace. But do publics really want unrestricted communication? There is no empirical evidence for this assumption and terms such as stakeholder fatigue indicate the mismanagement of organization-public relationships where publics have been overwhelmed by the amount of communication and attention they have received. Christensen proposed that the cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001, pp. 145-199) should not be mistaken for interest in organizations by external publics, and that except for a select few special interest groups who construct their own meaning, most external publics

simply want assurances that the organizations they interact with are behaving in a socially acceptable and responsible manner.

RECENT PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH ON EVALUATING RELATIONSHIPS

In the last 5 years interest in evaluating the organization–public relationship has increased. A number of quantitative studies have been conducted that use various scales that measure many of the relational elements or characteristics previously outlined. However, the studies reviewed all evaluated the organization–public relationship solely from the perspective of the particular public involved. None of the studies so far have included both the organization’s perspective as well as the public’s perspective and very little qualitative research on the organization–public relationship has been conducted, resulting in a major gap in this area. As public relations falls within the domain of social research, particular research questions require specific approaches. Quantitative methods are singularly useful for identifying factors or variables that may influence an outcome or in enabling a level of prediction (Cresswell, 2003, pp. 21–22). However, qualitative methods are best for understanding a new concept or phenomenon, such as the actual organization–public relationship, as this research approach is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand and describe the actual relationship. To understand an organization–public relationship, it is crucial that the relationship is the phenomenon that is explored from both the perspective of the organization and the particular public.

Research conducted by Ledingham, Bruning, and Wilson (1999) found that the longer the organization–public relationship existed the more expectations the public had regarding the organization and its responsibilities, which is congruent with interpersonal relationships and intuitively is what one would expect. Bruning and Ledingham (1999) developed an organization–public relationship scale and used it to determine the status of a relationship. The relational elements of trust, openness, involvement, investment, commitment, reciprocity, mutual legitimacy, and mutual understanding were included as part of the survey instrument, which they found could measure the influence that perceptions of the organization–public relationship had on consumer attitudes. The results supported the idea that organization–public relationships were multidimensional in that there were professional, personal, and community relationship dimensions. Each dimension had different expectations from the public, which translated into different strategies that could be employed by the organization to maintain or improve the relationship. For example, the professional relationship required the organization to invest financially in the relationship, personal relationships required trust between the organization and the public and that the organization was willing to invest time and be emotionally engaged with the public, while the community relationship needed the organization to be open with the community, invest in CSR programmes, sponsor events, and in general engage with the community and its development.

Further quantitative research conducted by Bruning and Ledingham (2000b) using the same scale and data set examined the ways in which relationship attitudes affected satisfaction evaluations. The research indicated that satisfaction with the organization was influenced by the key public members’ perceptions of the relationship, which would be expected, as satisfaction is a relational element and if the relationship was perceived to be unsatisfactory then it would be rather odd if the public was still satisfied with the organization. However, as the research was meant to explore the attitude towards the relationship in order to assess whether it affected satisfaction levels, a qualitative approach would have yielded a more in-depth view, and if

there were areas in which levels of satisfaction towards the organization were low the reasons why this was the case could be explored, described, and understood.

Again using the Bruning–Ledingham Relationship Scale, Ledingham (2001) carried out a further study, which looked at the perceptions of public members. Despite a low response rate (17%) for making generalizations, Ledingham concluded that the scale was an effective tool for assessing relationship quality and predicting the behaviour of a strategic public. Bruning (2002) provided additional evidence that a positive organization–public relationship influences the public’s behaviour, which provides further support for the utilization of the relational perspective by practitioners interested in changing or reinforcing behaviour. Bruning, Langenhop, and Green (2004) again found that the public’s perception of the organization–public relationship influenced their behaviour towards the organization.

Huang (2001b) developed a cross-cultural multiple-item scale, the Organization–Public Relationship Assessment (OPRA), similar to the Bruning–Ledingham Relationship Scale for measuring the organization–public relationship but which included a cultural variable. Initially Huang used a pilot survey to test the OPRA scale and then conducted qualitative in-depth interviews in order to assess the validity of the scale, which she then refined to include a Chinese cultural variable called “renqing” [“favour”] and “mianzi” [“face”] and again used as a survey to measure a public’s perception of a particular relationship with an organization. The OPRA was found to be a reliable and valid scale for measuring the organization–public relationship in Taiwan. Whilst Huang’s study employed a qualitative method, the research design was primarily quantitative in its approach.

The key weaknesses in the quantitative research conducted so far is the fact that it is still very much a one-sided analysis using predetermined instruments that provide statistical data. This type of data does not provide a description of what the relationship is like and what it means for those involved in it. For a comprehensive relationship analysis, a qualitative co-orientational approach that assesses all the actors in the relationship and their perceptions of it would provide a more holistic view (Broom & Dozier, 1990).

ANALYZING THE ORGANIZATION–PUBLIC RELATIONSHIP USING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Broom and Dozier (1990) were amongst the first in public relations academia to discuss ways in which it is possible to analyze the relationship between a particular public and an organization and built upon and promoted McLeod and Chaffee’s (1973) coorientational model. As a starting point, it becomes necessary to first know what it is that the public knows about the organization as well as what the organization knows about the public—and in particular about the issue that may have created the public—for example, an environmental issue. This feeds into audits that research the position of the organization and its public. Individual members of the public are surveyed to find out their position, and the distance between the organization and the public’s position can then be calculated. This type of audit is referred to as a “gap analysis”. Broom and Dozier (1990) criticised this approach, as it is only useful if the public relations objective is that of changing the public’s position. It finds out how far removed the public’s views are on an issue from those held by the organization, in order to close the “gap”, usually by changing the views of the public. The coorientational approach, however, provides a more holistic view as it measures both parties’ perceptions of the relationship.

Once the perceptions of the organization and the particular public are analyzed, it is possible to calculate the coorientational variables, which McLeod and Chaffee (1973, pp. 483–488, cited in Broom & Dozier, 1990, p. 37) referred to as agreement, accuracy, and perceived agreement.

Agreement is understood to refer to the degree that the organization and public agree or at least have similar views regarding the particular issue. Accuracy is understood to refer to the degree that one side is able to correctly estimate the views of the “opposing” side. Finally, perceived agreement refers to the degree that one side’s views match what they perceive to be the other side’s views. These three variables also provide room to consider inaccurate perceptions, true consensus, dissensus, false consensus (when an organization “pretends” to hold the same views as the public and even provides evidence in the form of actions and policies when in reality this is just done to “fool” the public), and false conflict (when both sides agree but one side inaccurately perceives the other side’s views as being different).

Until Verčič and Tkalac’s (2004) research on the communication behaviour between the Slovenian and Croatian “general” publics, very few studies employed the coorientation approach, which is surprising as it exposes the different perceptions of the coorientational indicators (as defined by McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, cited in Broom & Dozier, 1990, pp. 82–83). This again highlights the fact that although public relations is positioned as being interdisciplinary, models such as the coorientation model which hail from the interpersonal communication domain have largely been ignored.

In analyzing the organization–public relationship, it is also important to remember that the organization’s environment contains multiple publics. As Springston and Keyton (2001) pointed out, most public relations models focus on one-way and two-way communication scenarios. However, these models are inadequate to explore the complexities found in relationships with the organization and conflicting publics. The organization’s relationship with one public will have implications for its relationship with other publics, and depending upon the relationship between the publics related to the organization, managing these relationships in harmony (or a state of equilibrium) might not be possible. It also needs to be recognized that many publics have relationships with each other that may be completely independent of the particular organization. Also, it is possible that an organization’s relationship with another organization could create conflict and hostilities from a public that previously it had no relationship with. For example, the Royal Bank of Scotland was targeted by animal rights groups because of its relationship with Huntingdon Life Sciences, an organization that uses animal testing practices. Just as organizations do not operate in isolation, neither do publics and stakeholders. The implications are that stakeholder groups and publics are connected whether or not they realise it. The organization’s relationship with one stakeholder will have an affect on another and the same goes for identifiable publics. Relationships do not occur in isolation or sterile bubbles.

Springston and Keyton’s (2001) public relations field dynamics (PRFD) provides another method for understanding the complexities of the multi-public environment. Based on group dynamics theory, PRFD measures the organization and its publics at a particular point in time, or across the entire development of an issue. PRFD is able to assess types of coorientation as it describes the publics’ perceptions of the current situation, the best possible scenario, and the worst-case scenario, which makes it valuable for scenario planning exercises. PRFD provides another useful instrument for assessing the perceptions of multiple publics towards each other as well as towards the organization.

Research using the coorientational approach has analyzed the relationship between the organization and public whilst referring to a particular issue. Minimal research has been done using the coorientational approach to assess the actual quality of the relationship, focusing on the relational elements of trust, satisfaction commitment, control mutuality, dialogue, and transparency. Using PRFD it is possible to triangulate the coorientational approach by assessing the relationships between the publics as well as the organization to see if it agrees with the assessment of the organization–public relationship.

IMPLICATIONS

Public relations has struggled with an identity crisis and has failed to adopt an accepted definition of what it is nor agreed to what it does. While public relations is interdisciplinary, it remains blinkered to developments in related fields and neighbouring disciplines such as marketing with its emerging relationship marketing paradigm. Ferguson's (1984) challenge to academics and practitioners to take a fresh approach to public relations and focus on the organization's relationships with its publics instigated interest in identifying relational elements and quantitative instruments to measure them. If public relations practitioners want to gain recognition from senior management, they will have to prove they can offer strategic advice relating to the continued survival of the organization. Instead of being used as a promotional aid for marketing, public relations should be responsible for identifying key publics and stakeholders and managing relationships with them in order to reduce conflict situations. By doing this practitioners will move towards a "revenue generation" model by increasing goodwill and understanding between the organization and the publics who grant its licence to operate.

Whilst relational elements such as trust, commitment, mutual satisfaction, and control mutuality have been identified (Hon & Grunig, 1999), relational elements such as dialogue and transparency have been neglected in recent research on organization–public relationships—and yet both are central for the grooming, developing, and maintenance of important relationships. The shift in public relations toward a relational perspective emphasizes the need to use dialogue to resolve conflicts whilst building and maintaining relationships with strategic publics. Transparency provides conditions that allow trust, accountability, cooperation, collaboration, and commitment to grow but can also act as a coercive force. Publics and stakeholders are demanding transparency as a result of bad corporate practices that have had an impact on the social and economic environment. Transparency verifies that an organization is behaving ethically both locally and internationally and actually doing what it says it is doing. Social and environmental change has forced organizations to reevaluate their business practices as various crises have led to a lack of trust in organizations and increased cynicism regarding organizational behaviour. Organization–public relationships are now considered to be very important for the organization's ability to successfully meet its mission objectives and they are ignored at the organization's peril.

Evaluating the organization–public relationship has recently been the focus for a number of studies. Quantitative methodologies have almost solely been utilized for examining and exploring organization–public relationships and yet the relational perspective implies a need for qualitative work. Academics and practitioners should want to understand how organizations and strategic publics perceive the relationship they have with each other in order to be able to diagnose the health and survival of the relationship. It is important to understand what the relationship actually means, how it is perceived, and how meaning is constructed and what that meaning is for those involved. It is all well and good to be able to quantitatively measure a relational element such as trust and assign it a number on a scale but what does this really mean, why is this the situation, what was the reason for this to happen, and so on. The relational approach to such an in-depth interest in the phenomenon appears better served by qualitative research. By utilizing a coorientational approach, differences in agreement, accuracy, and the perceived agreement of the other relational party exposes inaccurate perceptions each side has of the other side's views. This analysis allows practitioners to zone in on where perceptual differences exist and are therefore in a position to resolve issues by addressing the cause before it develops into a crisis.

The relational perspective of public relations is key for future theoretical advancements and also for defining the field and setting up its jurisdictional boundaries. If public relations continues to fragment and divide into specialist areas such as public affairs, corporate social responsibility, investor relations, and so on, then it is likely that it will not survive as a distinct discipline. The relational perspective fundamentally unites the specialist areas together, as regardless of the area of practice or context the focus remains on the organization–public relationship.

The relational perspective allows public relations to draw upon other disciplines also interested in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, such as marketing and interpersonal communication, without being subsumed by them because of the unique organization–public relationship focus that only public relations offers. Practitioners need to be aware of developments in neighbouring fields and also to recognize and adopt skills that are of great benefit for developing and maintaining relationships such as negotiation, conflict resolution, and counselling skills. The relational perspective allows academics and practitioners the room to explore the organization, its publics, and the relationships they all have and share with each other in order to gain a holistic view and understanding of the actual environment the organization operates in. This overall view enables practitioners to understand the relationships between different groups and the organization and to prioritise them according to the level of importance and impact upon the environment. It also allows for the development of proactive strategies for grooming, developing, and maintaining organization–public relationships, which are critical for the organization's survival.

The relational perspective increases organizational effectiveness by building and maintaining critical relationships with the organization's strategic publics. By facilitating and maintaining "positive" relationships with key publics, public relations practitioners are able to proactively position the organization, reduce the risk of conflict, and avert costly crises. The relational perspective also contributes directly reputation management. By managing the organization's relationships with important groups, there is far less likelihood that a "man-made" crisis will develop and harm the organization's reputation. Current research has ignored qualitative approaches, creating a major gap, and therefore future research should initially focus on qualitative approaches before further replication of the multiple dimension organization–public relationship scales is done in other sectors and cultural contexts. As public relations continues to evolve, it is clear that there is far more to it than simply managing the communication between an organization and its publics and that the relational perspective is really the only way forward for the discipline.

