

Can we all agree? Building the case for symbolic interactionism as the theoretical origins of public relations

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ABSTRACT

Only a fraction of scholarly work in public relations has been devoted to theoretical development, with scholars unable to agree upon any one single theoretical framework from which to view public relations. This literature review and analysis pose the case for symbolic interactionism as an appropriate theoretical origin for public relations, as initially suggested by Gordon (1997) and furthers a definition of public relations from the symbolic interactionist perspective. The paper specifically builds on Gordon's work by identifying some key shared concepts between public relations and symbolic interactionism (*communication, relationships, adaptation, shared meaning or substantiality, the creation of definition and social constructivism*), supporting Gordon's argument and strengthening the link. This work also builds on Gordon's definition of public relations and proposes that public relations is the intentional participation in the social construction of meaning to achieve organizational or brand reputation goals. By conceptualizing and positioning public relations within the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, the field can find more cohesion and also work toward a more universal definition.

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The academic study of public relations is fairly new compared to many disciplines. Research into the natural sciences stretches back centuries, with many of the social sciences having roots in 18th and 19th century philosophy. While it could be argued that the public relations process has been around since ancient times, for example St. Paul the Apostle promoted the teaching of Jesus Christ in the first century (Brown, 2003); and Ptah-hotep,

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an advisor to the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, wrote about audience relations and truthful communication as early as 2,200 BCE (Smith, 2011), the discipline that we acknowledge as “modern public relations” developed only in the 20th century largely in tandem with the rise of the corporation. Systematic documentation and scholarly study only began mid-century with the field’s first academic journal, *The Public Relations Journal*, which was first published in 1945. Early books in the field include *Public Relations Principles and Procedures* (Lesly, 1945), *The Public Relations Handbook* (Lesly, 1950), and *Effective Public Relations* (Cutlip & Center, 1952).

As a relatively new academic study, scholarly research has been somewhat haphazard and scholars have been unable to declare solid – and agreed upon – theoretical foundations for the profession. Indeed, in the absence of a theoretical basis, scholars have organized the study of public relations into time periods labeled, whether correctly or incorrectly, as a steady evolution of the field from dominance in non-strategic and unethical practices toward more strategic and ethical practices. Some scholars claim that this approach, and a lack of strong understanding of theoretical origins for public relations, may be impeding our understanding of the field (Lamme & Russell, 2010). According to a recent study, only about 20% of published works in the major academic journals *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and its predecessor, *Public Relations Research Annual*, have contributed to theory development for the field (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Ogata Jones, 2003). This lack of attention to strong, agreed-upon theoretical foundations may be part of the reason that public relations has been assigned hundreds of definitions over the years (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000) as well as why we find differing definitions in different regions of the world (Sheldrake, 2011, para. 27). Perhaps we have not been able to agree on a reasonable theoretical home for public relations, nor a widely agreed-upon definition due to academic fragmentation; for example, Beniger (1993) criticizes the field of communication for insulating itself too much from other disciplines by overly fragmenting itself into specialized sub-disciplines. Beniger proposes, rather, that researchers view communication more holistically – not as a specific subject of study but as a method or bridge that integrates other disciplines. He specifically encourages that the field of public relations be firmly established in and surrounded by the social sciences (1993).

This difficulty in recognizing theoretical foundations is not only a phenomenon of North American scholarship. In a study of the evolution of public relations in Great Britain, early “practitioners were unable to articulate any theoretical basis to their practice,” being much more focused on discussions of

practice and technique (L'Etang, 1999, p. 3).

The difficulty in identifying and agreeing upon a theoretical origin may also have arisen because public relations practice has often been discussed and characterized more often by what it does rather than what it is. "Practitioners define the field (as) a listing of activities that are included under the rubric of public relations: publicity, press agency, advertising, events management, media relations and so on," (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xi). Public relations is often described in terms of these component parts, or its tools; however, public relations is not publicity, press agency, advertising, events management, or media relations. These are merely tools of the trade, or examples of expressions of the underlying processes. Perhaps it is because of the focus on the expressions and tools of public relations that we have so many definitions of the field. But, we cannot define a field by its expressions or tools – it should be defined by how it operates, or by its underlying processes. The underlying processes of public relations have more to do with such functions as developing awareness, engaging in persuasion, shaping public opinion, changing attitudes, modifying behavior, enhancing communication, developing relationships, and negotiating, to name a few (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000). It is these processes and basic purposes that should lead us to an identification of theoretical origins for public relations – and a more fundamental definition.

What is the basic, and broad, purpose and process at the heart of public relations? Verne Burnett, a former public relations agency chief executive officer, public relations pioneer, and an early editor of *Public Relations Journal*, called public relations the *human element* of an organization (Burnett, 1967). This basic and broad theme has persisted and reappeared throughout the past five decades. Lesly (1967) said, "It is the distinct role of public relations to deal with the human climate – to sense its turns, to analyze it, to adjust to it, to help direct it" (p. 4). L'Etang (1999) calls public relations the "*human factor* in industry" (p. 5). The first sentence of the first chapter in a popular public relations textbooks, *Effective Public Relations* by Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000), refines this notion by identifying a main goal of public relations as being "about building and maintaining relationships" (p. 1).

Scholarly fields that deal with the human climate, the interactions of human beings in society, and with relationships, lie within the domains of psychology, sociology, and social psychology. Both academics and industry professionals have acknowledged that public relations is closely linked to the social sciences. W. Philips Davison (1967), a former editor of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* and a former sociology professor at Columbia University said, "the

social sciences can be a useful supplement to the public relations practitioner. They can help to suggest new questions for situations... provide categories for codifying experiences... and assist in relating one body of experience to another" (p. 16). In 1964, Colin Mann, a leading figure in the British public relations industry, suggested that, "the public relations man of the future... is going to approximate closely to the ideas of... an applied social scientist" (Mann, as cited in L'Etang, 1999, p. 11). An early founder of modern public relations, Edward Bernays, also suggested that public relations could best be developed when viewed as an applied social science (Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, & Terrell, 1993). Beniger (1993) also suggested that public relations be established in the social sciences. Further, key scholars who worked in the field of early mass communication, from which public relations evolved, were sociologists or had ties to the Chicago school of sociology. For example, Harold Lasswell was a political scientist and early mass communication theorist who studied at the Chicago school of sociology. Paul Lazarsfeld was a pioneer of social research methods, developer of the two-step flow of communication model, and a leading American sociologist. Robert K. Merton, a colleague of Lazarsfeld, was also a sociologist and together they studied media effects and developed the research method of focus group interviews (Rogers 1994).

Considering public relations' sociological roots and in consideration of its purposes (versus its expressions or tools), what are the theoretical roots of public relations and what might be the most appropriate theoretical paradigm by which to view public relations? The answer to such a question can point toward a definition of public relations — one that is not constrained by contextual settings or culture.

Gordon (1997) proposed that the symbolic interactionist approach is the most appropriate to describe the field and proposed that "public relations is the active participation in social construction of meaning" (p. 64). Gordon's view was later supported by Hallahan (1999) in his treatise on framing. This research takes Gordon's ideas and builds upon them. In agreement with Gordon, it discusses symbolic interactionism in relationship to public relations; to further Gordon's work, it identifies some key linking concepts between public relations and symbolic interactionism to strengthen the argument. Lastly, there is a discussion of how symbolic interactionism's entered into public relations scholarship as impression management, framing, and agenda-setting.

Symbolic interactionism

Overview

Symbolic interactionism is more of a theoretical approach, or paradigm comprised of a family of theories, rather than a specific theory. Griffin (1991) calls it a “perspective or orientation” (p. 72). Even though it is more of a paradigm than a specific theory, it has some foundational concepts that will be discussed. Because of this specificity and this breadth, symbolic interactionism can address, encompass and absorb many aspects of public relations purposes and functions and serve as a useful paradigm by which to explicate, as well as to define, public relations.

The symbolic interactionist approach developed from sociologists and philosophers including John Dewey, C. H. Cooley, H. Blumer, G. H. Mead, W. I. Thomas, and others. Dewey (1909), as an evolutionist, posited that organisms and the environments they inhabit evolve through interaction. Mead (1934) built on Dewey’s work to provide the foundations of symbolic interactionism, although he did not develop the term, which was later coined by Blumer (1969).

Symbolic interactionism encompasses a family of theories that embraces man as having intention and motive, depicts society as a web of linking communications, and proposes that the development of meaning evolves out of social interaction. Its core premises are that people are intentional actors in a society; they need to co-exist in a society or context to interact, they give meaning to signs and symbols around them and react accordingly, and the meanings people assign to symbols come about through the interpretive process. *Symbols* are described as objects, people, or abstract ideas, and themes. *Action* is depicted as the result of one interacting and mindfully responding to symbols through the interpretive process (Hall, 1972). *Interaction* is described as the acknowledgement that the other person is doing the same thing – taking in the other’s gestures, interpreting them, and constructing a minded response (Hall, 1972). *Self* is defined as the object toward which a person relates to him/herself; the self emerges through interaction as a person internalizes the meaning that others bestow upon him/her (Hall, 1972). The *mind* is what emerges as a result of a person interacting with the self in internal dialogue. *Meaning* arises out of communication and social interaction. It is conferred or imputed from the outside: It is not intrinsic – it is more than a definition. It is, rather, *extrinsic* – it varies with time and culture and with the actor engaging

the symbol (Hall, 1972). *Society* is a web of communication that emerges out of the cumulative interactions; one does not precede the other. Society creates the person and the person creates society simultaneously (Stryker & Statham, 1985). Although one is born into a society that is composed of sets of existing interactions, the society and the person reference one another and act reciprocally, as two sides of the same coin (Cooley, 1902).

Significant work has been done in symbolic interactionist study with the concept of symbols. Symbols can be objects, people, or abstract concepts. Symbols are considered “condensational” in the sense that they can activate a whole network of thought patterns or schema (Sapir, 1934). *Significant symbols* are those that are connotative and carry meaning and significance to the actor (Mead, 1934). Collectively, through social interactions with symbols, we may thus create our social realities; and if social realities can be created, they may also be re-created (Berger & Luckman, 1966). This is called a constructivist approach or the social construction of reality, as people are actors in the society. Once these symbols come to mean generally the same thing to most of the society, we say we have symbolic convergence. Symbolic convergence theory, also a symbolic interactionist approach, was developed by Bormann (1985).

Gordon (1997) studied some popular definitions of public relations, noted their deficiencies and assumptions, and suggested that a symbolic interactionist conceptualization of public relations was more useful and universal. Gordon aligned public relations with symbolic interactionism on a fundamental level “because the ideals are consistent with our tradition of systems theory and our conceptualization that an organization’s survival is dependent on its interaction with other segments of society” (p. 64). While Gordon fell short of committing to a definition of public relations, the researcher did propose a more universal conceptualization of public relations as “the active participation in construction of social meaning” (p. 64). Gordon noted that such a conceptualization of public relations took away the constraint of setting, diminished the possibility of assuming any one world view or bias, and opened opportunities to reassess and redefine (p. 64).

Hallahan (1999) soon hearkened back to Gordon when, in his discussion of framing, he also conceptualized public relations as the construction of social reality. Heath (2001) also noted the value of symbolic interactionist approaches to the field of public relations (p. 125, 146-150).

This work builds upon Gordon (1997) and advances it by identifying some key, and multiple, linking concepts between public relations and symbolic interactionism, strengthening the argument.

Key linking concepts between symbolic interactionism and public relations

In examining the many definitions of public relations, common understandings of the public relations process and a general knowledge of symbolic interactionism, one can see many overlapping concepts. Some key linking concepts between public relations and symbolic interactionism are *communication, relationships, adaptation, shared meaning (or consubstantiality), the creation of definition, and social constructivism*.

Communication

The symbolic interactionist perspective has at the heart of its imagery, the picture of society as a web of communication (Stryker & Statham, 1985). Individual, group, and societal meaning all emerge, grow, develop, and evolve in this web through interaction and the process of communication.

The public relations process largely concerns the communication process between groups in society. "Public relations is a communication function of management through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals" (Hazleton & Long, 1988, p. 82). Philip Lesly, an early pioneer of public relations and creator of the first public relations handbook, recognized this.

Public relations started as publicity... because, as it became harder for people with different backgrounds to understand and know about each other, the first necessity was for one group to tell others about itself. (Lesly, 1967, p. 3)

The goals of public relations are accomplished through communication processes and it accomplishes its goals utilizing communication tools. In Great Britain, as early as 1951 with the inception of public relations as a profession, organizers agreed that "public relations... was simply communication" and "that [it] encompasses a great many functions, concepts, and techniques" (L'Etang, 1999, p. 3). Public relations scholars, both past and present, acknowledge that the public relations function has a great deal to do with the management of communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Symbolic interactionism describes society as a web of communication

(Stryker & Statham, 1985). Individual, group, and societal meaning all emerge, grow, develop and evolve in this web through interaction and the process of communication. In public relations, as a practitioner identifies and plots organizational publics, it becomes apparent that the organization is part of a web of communication. The organization's many publics emanate out from the central organization in a web, with some publics linking to each other, but with the organizational unit at the center.

The communication process in symbolic interactionism is greatly concerned with the role of signs and symbols and with intentioned communication. Man, as a symbolic creature capable of language, is able to deliver words and phrases that are loaded with meaning, whereby the simple mention of or exposure to a certain symbol, word, or phrase can trigger a whole range of schema in the receiver to elicit a desired response. This is *intentioned communication*. In public relations, strategic communication is the goal of an effective public relations practitioner with strategic communication being guided by "solid and informed reasoning that draws on the science of communication" (Smith, 2013, pg. 2). Symbolic interactionism holds that man is purposeful and intentioned in communication. The desire by public relations practitioners to achieve specific outcomes from their communication shows motive. The public relations process involves motive and is, therefore, a strategic and intentioned process. In strategic communication, messages are carefully crafted to elicit desired outcomes. There is *motive and intent toward a desired goal* (research and planning), *interaction* (implementation and campaign communication), and the *gauging of reaction* (feedback, evaluation). These public relations concepts are foundational concepts to symbolic interactionism.

Public relations is concerned with efficient, powerful communications that deliver desired responses. Communication campaign objectives are concerned with targeting specific publics and speaking directly and specifically to them, in the most efficient manner possible, for particular measurable outcomes (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000). Significant symbols can be used to trigger desired thought patterns and responses. Part of the formula for effective communication in public relations includes the use of "effective verbal cues" and "salient information" (Hendrix, 2001, p. 36), which are aspects of symbolic interactionism's concept of significant symbols.

Relationships

The symbolic interactionist image of a web of communications (Stryker

& Statham, 1985) has a purpose and a structure. The communication web of symbolic interactionism serves the purposes of action, interaction, and relating. The web is a structure, or picture, of relationships. The implication is that while communication is the process, at the end of each thread in the web are people. They are communicating and interacting and, in the process, engaging in the process of relationship-building, whatever the nature of those relationships.

While communication is a function of public relations, in keeping with symbolic interactionist thought, it contributes to a broader purpose. Public relations is not just the "generation of messages as an end in themselves, a perpetual motion machine, squirting ink" (Broom 1986 in Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p. xi). Relationships and relationship-building are important components of public relations and the public relations process. This has been acknowledged by even the earliest of scholars and industry representatives.

Public relations is involved in all human relationships... The manager of an enterprise may have a successful career behind him in factory management, in finance, in marketing, in law, purchasing, or science. But if he is not trained in public relations, he needs someone at his elbow to clarify and temper his thinking and policies regarding human beings... he should know some of the fundamental public relations principles and techniques if his enterprise is to enjoy long-term success. (Burnett, 1967, p. 39)

... you have to be concerned not only with qualifications but also with qualities ... it is necessary to have certain qualities ... of understanding and sympathy [to] become a public relations man. (L'Etang, 1999, p. 3)

Early public relations was concerned more with persuading a public to the organization's point of view (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000), but then developed from a strict persuasion paradigm to a more relational paradigm when Ferguson (1984) posited that perhaps public relations ought to look at the relationship as the unit of analysis. Ehling (1992) called this shift "an important change in the primary mission of public relations" (p. 622). This spawned a whole stream of research that positioned public relations as relationship management. Broom and Dozier (1990) explored a co-orientational approach to measure organization-public relationships, and Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) constructed a model for the development of theory surrounding relationship management. Dozier (1995) recognized that communication in public relations was "a strategic management function

(to) manage relationships with key publics that affect organizational missions, goals, and objectives” (p. 85). Hence, the broader purpose of public relations has evolved to a process of building and managing the relationships of an organization and its publics (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). These relationships are managed strategically and proactively along a continuum of advocacy for the organization and accommodation for publics (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot & Mitrook, 1997). Communications are meant to accomplish organizational goals and objectives designed to persuade, negotiate, advocate, defend, ingratiate, detract, minimize, or frame, among others. Communications are intentional and the purpose is to successfully manage relationships through strategic communication with publics toward desired organizational outcomes.

It seems clear that the symbolic interactionist process is at the heart of the communication process in public relations. Communication processes are implemented through a web of communications with motive and intent, and a by-product of communications is the establishment of relationships.

Adaptation

The symbolic interactionist approach and the public relations process also share the notion of adaptation. This is a foundational concept from the early thoughts of Dewey (1909), who had an evolutionary perspective of organisms and environments evolving through interaction to modern symbolic interactionists who viewed society as dynamic (Stryker & Statham, 1985). “Society doesn’t exist; it is continuously created and re-created as persons act with reference to one another” (p. 314).

In the use of communication for relationship management, public relations is concerned with adaptation. Sometimes organizations must alter or adapt in reference to outside forces in order to maintain social permission to continue their existence in the marketplace or social space. While early public relations efforts were largely viewed as persuasive and for the benefit of the sender group (whether that was an organization, business, or government entity), there has been growing recognition that often, in the interests of maintaining key relationships, senders must also be willing to make concessions and adjustments in the interests of building and maintaining strategic relationships with key publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In other words, an organization must not act in isolation, but must act in reference to its environment and its publics. The need for organizational adaptation is a recurring theme

in public relations definitions. "Public relations is a communication function of management through which organizations *adapt to, alter, or maintain* their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals" (Hazleton & Long, 1988, p. 82). The current and most widely held definition holds that "public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2000, p. 6). An early definition from the first public relations handbook says "public relations is helping an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other" (Lesly, 1967, p. 4) and that "public relations should help bridge the chasm between an organization's management at one end and the organization's publics at the other end" (Burnett, 1967, p. 40).

The centrality and importance of mutual adaptation in the public relations process is evidenced in the popularly cited excellence theory study (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) which posits that communication between parties must be balanced and bi-directional and that sometimes a company or organization must give up some of what it wants in order to get what it ultimately needs. Originators classify this concept as the two-way symmetrical model of public relations in contrast to the one-way symmetrical and one-way asymmetrical models. One-way/two-way is indicative of the direction of communication, and symmetry/asymmetry is indicative of the balance in the communication. The excellence theory holds that best public relations practices are two-way and symmetrical, where communications are bidirectional and are balanced between the two parties/publics. The excellence theory is the most widely cited piece of public relations scholarship (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Ogata Jones, 2003).

Consubstantiality and Shared Meanings

"Public relations centres on ways in which people share meaning" (Culbertson, et al, 1993, p. 6). Symbolic interactionism implies a constructivist approach to meaning. Through the communication, people come to shared meanings, or commonality. Kenneth Burke (1969) calls this consubstantiality. Burke was a contemporary to Mead who also took a symbolic interactionist approach. Burke purported that consubstantiation is a key to understanding human behaviour because as we recognize commonalities and shared meanings, we develop identification with each other. Burke believed that greater identification leads to greater consubstantiation and greater

consubstantiation, leads to greater identification in a spiraling or snowball effect to form the basis of social integration. "Consubstantiation" or "commonness" is experienced along three dimensions: material possessions, ideals (attitudes, feelings, values), and formal roles or stations in life (mother, husband, employer). Burke believed these shared meanings are "overlaps" in cognitions. The fewer the overlaps, the more agreement exists.

When the purpose of public relations communication is to persuade, negotiate, or re-negotiate meanings, the public relations process is engaging in Burke's process of consubstantiation is attempting to find areas of agreement. Public relations practitioners, when attempting to gain social acceptance or greater acceptance for a concept, product or idea, need to expand the areas of agreement in the minds of targeted publics. In other words: greater the consubstantiation, means more agreement and acceptance on the part of publics.

The Creation of Definition

Symbolic interactionist thought and public relations both deal with the creation of definition. Symbolic interactionist thought states that "situation(s) must be defined and the resultant definition of the situation serves to orient and to organize behavior" (Stryker & Statham, 1985, p. 322).

Hallahan (1999), who also views public relations in a symbolic interactionist perspective, says that, "public relations counselling involves defining reality for organizations" (p. 206). Public relations practitioners are called upon to define situations to publics, in order that publics will accept their definition, particularly in crisis management. As a result of this interaction with publics, practitioners are hoping to construct a version of reality that is favourable to the organization they represent, because they know that "those that are able to define situations are able to control them" (Hall, 1972, p. 54). Lyman and Vidich (1988) earlier suggested that societies "have no fixed predetermined or system-generated shape. They are and become what people define them to be or become" (p. 56-57).

These concepts of individuals and groups interacting in an environment reciprocally to create meaning and come to a common definition are addressed by Goffman (1959), who discussed the process of negotiation, interaction, and how participants maintain a definition of the situation.

One over-all objective of any team is to sustain the definition of the situation that its performance fosters. This will involve the over

communication of some facts and the under-communication of others . . . in other words, a team must be able to keep its secrets and have its secrets kept. (Goffman, 1959, p. 141)

One way that practitioners engage in creating definition is by getting their message out first (Duhe & Zoch, 1994). The public relations practitioner is particularly concerned with defining the meaning of a situation in order to control reactions, particularly in the event of a crisis.

Constructivism

In purporting that meanings are created as a result of interaction, the symbolic interactionist perspective is “constructivist.” The social constructivist position is that “what we know about the world is coloured by our social interactions with the other, the naming, defining, and altering of our own personal realities” (Johnson Cartee, 2005, p. 2). The constructivist approach to communication draws from symbolic interactionism—that people’s behavior is a result of interaction and the use of symbols to create meaning. Or, what Lippman (1922) referred to in his book as “the pictures in our heads” and not the “objective reality” (p. 3). Hallahan (1999) argues that public relations practitioners are essentially constructivists and utilize communication techniques such as framing to shape those pictures in our heads in order to construct a reality (Knight, 1999). Indeed, such constructivist techniques have been symbolic interactionist’s pathway into public relations scholarship.

Symbolic interactionism’s pathway into public relations: Impression management, framing and agenda-setting

Impression Management

Symbolic interactionism has found its way into the public relations literature through the gateway of *impression management*, synonymous with terms such as corporate image, public image, public personality, and reputation management. Impression management studies commonly cite Goffman (1959, 1974) who calls this a process of self-presentation that involves the deliberate control of information and presentation of images or symbols in order to create a particular impression on others and elicit a desired response; this is

an approach within the symbolic interactionist perspective. Schlenker (1980) defines impression management as “the conscious or unconscious attempt to control images that are real or imagined in social interactions” (p.6). Impression management also focuses, in part, on an actor’s motives, which is also a concept from the symbolic interactionist tradition, as has been discussed.

Impression management came to the field of public relations via psychology and theories of management. Impression management was, firstly and largely, referred to in the context of personal exchanges. Studies emerged in organizational contexts and were published in management literature (Allan, 1966; Arkin & Shepperd, 1989; Gardner & Martinko, 1988). Studies also emerged in the communication literature (Van der Zanden, 1981; Leathers, 1988; Watkins & Caillouet, 1994; Allen & Caillouet, 1994) and it has also directed some mass communication research (Dominick, 1999).

Impression management emerged in public relations scholarship in the mid-1990s (Avenarius, 1993; Moffit, 1994; Bostdorf & Vibbert, 1993; Caillouet & Allen, 1996) and it continues to be a vital and growing area of study with Berger (2004) discussing the image of CEOs in the press and Sallot, et al. (2003) evaluating the public’s impression about public relations.

The interest by public relations in impression management arises out of the public relations function to craft a positive public persona or image (Cheney, 1992). Public relations people are often referred to as “image makers” or “spin doctors,” for this very reason – they highlight or downplay information in an attempt to create a desired image, persona, or impression. Practitioners are called upon to select appropriate words, symbols and images engaging in strategic communication to achieve desired responses in the minds of publics that would protect or enhance the organization or a person. The purpose of managing impressions is to communicate particular aspects of a situation with a view to a selected response from a set of acceptable responses in effort to control the situation. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, the impression management process of public relations suggests that practitioners put themselves in the role of an audience or public, anticipating and rehearsing the consequences of courses of action, anticipating certain responses, and attempting to shape the situation so that the desired response can be elicited. The presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959), a symbolic interactionist concept, is also linked to impression management (Littlejohn & Foss, 2010).

Framing and Agenda-setting

The symbolic interactionist approach is also represented in current public relations literature as framing and agenda-setting. Impression management, framing, and agenda-setting are closely related. All cite Goffman (1959) for theoretical roots. Framing theory concerns itself with the processes of inclusion, exclusion, or emphasis of pieces of communication (Hallahan, 1999). The essence of framing is best described by Entman (1993):

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Frames, then, define problems – determine what a causal agent is doing and costs and benefits usually measured in terms of cultural values; diagnose causes – identify the forces creating the problem; make moral judgments – evaluate causal agents and their effects; and suggest remedies – offer and justify treatments for the problem and predict their likely effects. (p. 55)

Hallahan (1999) proposed framing theory as an umbrella theory for public relations because he recognized that framing theory, unlike other theoretical frameworks such as rhetorical and critical theory, “is conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgments, and to draw inferences about the world around them” (p. 206). Framing studies have been very popular in public relations research (Hiebert, 2003).

A related concept to framing is agenda-setting (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997). Agenda-setting posits that the media plays a key role in defining an agenda for the public. The media may not necessarily dictate an opinion to the public, but media have power to determine what the public will think about (Cohen, 1963) and thus media have power to shape or construct social realities (Lippmann, 1922). The relationship between framing and agenda-setting is so close that often they are difficult to differentiate (Scheufele, 1999).

Conclusion

Much of public relations research has concerned itself with the techniques and tools of communication – the outer trappings. Very little attention has

been paid to the underlying purposes and theoretical underpinnings that give public relations as a discipline its foundations, or its reason for being, and which can aid in universal definition-building.

The symbolic interactionist tradition serves as a useful paradigm for public relations because it encompasses much of what public relations is about. There are some key shared concepts between symbolic interactionism and public relations as have been discussed here (communications, relationships, adaptation, shared meaning, the creation of definition, and social constructivism). These core foundational concepts suggest that the field of public relations is inherently rooted in the theoretical paradigm of symbolic interactionism and that a universal conceptualization, such as the one initiated by Gordon (1997), can be developed and shared, bringing more continuity and cohesion to the field and perhaps a more universal definition. If public relations were more closely tied with the social sciences, the nature of the research could reflect stronger theoretical points of reference, gain more academic credibility, become more academically focused, and advance more quickly.

Symbolic interactionism seems to be a theoretical orientation upon which scholars can reasonably agree. Gordon's (1997) definition of public relations as "the active participation in the social construction of meaning" (p. 64), although somewhat broad, offers a view of public relations practice that reflects how public relations works and not just how it might express itself. Such a definition has the potential to offer universality across borders and cultures. It also is a way to incorporate the aspect of persuasion into public relations "as a naturally occurring and ongoing phenomena of social interaction" (Gordon, 1997, p. 64).

Public relations people, as actors in society, are more than simply active participants, though. They are strategically intentional, carefully crafting messages, selecting media and targeting audiences toward specific ends. In this sense, public relations is not only active participation, as Gordon purports: Public relations is the intentional participation in the social construction of meaning to achieve organizational or brand reputation goals. Such a definition encompasses intentionality, persuasion, and communication. It also encompasses any context whether corporate, non-profit, government entity, or simply a personal brand. It is also transferable across cultures. This is the kind of definition that public relations needs; however, it must be tested in scholarly arena and survive the test of scholarly debate and refinement to build upon the work.

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