

Public relations excellence: A behavioural perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, the author explains why theoretical public relations scholarship is necessary to focus on the impact of behaviour in three areas: socio-cultural studies on internal business culture; organization-public relationship (OPR) focused on publics' perceptions; and functional integrative stratification in the context of an organization to its society and in the evolution of public relations practice. Research in these three areas stand to enhance internal collaboration, facilitate quality relationships with publics, build organizational acceptance in society, and outline the evolution of public relations—all of which establish excellence in the field of public relations.

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Public relations researchers, Plowman and Wakefield (2013), make the point that “the most effective communication changes behavior” (p. 165). Understanding what shapes behaviour is an important factor in generating communications strategies, and is foundational to public relations scholarship. Individual and collective behaviours can have an impact on a triple bottom line: people, planet, and profit (de Beer, Steyn & Rensburg, 2013). Researching behaviours inside and outside of organizations will improve public relations strategies and the field's overall reputation. Grunig's (2006) theoretical edifice frames public relations within a legacy of excellence. Public relations scholarship should provide the canvas for this frame and focus on the impact of behaviours in three key areas. These next important research priorities for public relations should include: socio-cultural studies on internal business culture; organization-public relationship (OPR) focused on publics' perceptions; and functional integrative stratification in the context of an organization to its

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Every research methodology endeavours to pull data to make visible the unseen variables at play that contribute to a particular outcome. These research efforts defined by Yin (2013) as causality are critical because they contribute greatly to our understanding of outcomes. When considering that “an organization’s participative internal culture facilitates public relations excellence” (Sriramesh, Rhee & Sung, 2013, p. 112), it becomes necessary that public relations scholarship focuses on how behaviours inside the organization impact participation. Individual and collective behaviours inside an organization have ramifications that contribute not only to its culture but also to its performance and operating efficiencies.

Diversity in a workplace — age, cultural, ethnic, gender, political, racial or social — has always existed. Diversity brings multiple perspectives to any environment. It is noted by Sriramesh et al. (2013) that to build public relations strategies, “recognition of one’s own culture and acceptance of other cultures are the best approach” (p. 116). The opportunity to recognize and accept the diversity of perspectives within organizations creates potential for public relations excellence. Research has shown that when public relations strategy considers the principles of diversity and respect in unison, public relations is best equipped to uphold the internal sociocultural dimension and enhance ethical practices (Sriramesh et al., 2013). The resulting synergy among employees in these environments can encourage a culture of participation and lead to maximizing organizational effectiveness and minimizing operational redundancies. “Employees with good quality relationships volunteer to identify strategic information, such as new trends, ideas for business innovations (strategic opportunities), and potential risks and problems (strategic threats), and circulate it within the organization” (Kim & Ni, 2013, p. 133). An awareness of what contributes to a culture of collaboration can ultimately lead to organizations achieving their goals — one of the contributions that an excellent public relations function delivers (Grunig, 2006). Thus understanding how behaviours are shaped inside organizations will make a significant contribution towards public relations excellence.

Socio-cultural factors have been a focus of public relations research but more towards globalizing the practice by enabling general principles in practice to fit into different sociocultural environments (Rhee & Sung, 2013). If the

goals of public relations include “building and fostering mutually beneficial relationships” (Sriramesh et al., 2013, p. 113), the process of achieving this capacity begins inside the organization first. Socio-cultural research as it relates to internal organizational culture can contribute significant value to the field of public relations on two levels: first, it can be best positioned to maximize collaboration and efficiencies inside the organization, and second, it can be poised to communicate more effectively with diverse audiences.

“Excellent organizations nurture symmetrical internal communication to cultivate an organic, inclusive culture; and they nurture symmetrical external communication to cultivate trusting relationships with groups” (Verčič & Verčič, 2013). The Excellence Theory brought with it a shift that defined public relations as a “bridging activity” where an organization’s objectives are tied to the needs and expectations of its publics (de Bussy, 2013). The most researched part of this concept has been symmetrical communications. Hung-Baesecke and Chen (2013) point out that organization-public relationship (OPR) studies neglect two key strategy areas: what motivates organizations, and publics’ attitudes. A lack of research in these two areas is a major oversight for a field that “involves communication in the public sphere” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013, p. 284).

Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2013) analyzed theoretical approaches for communications and concur that “one of the most glaring exclusions is the body of knowledge from consumer behaviour” (p. 285). Though the dialogue has long been around how public relations can build trust between an organization and its publics (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013), public relations scholarship needs to ask what affects individual and collective behaviours outside the organization and to what extent this impacts quality relationships with organizations. Quality relationships with publics not only help organizations in meeting their mandate but also reduce costs in areas like reputation management and regulatory reporting (Likely & Watson, 2013), heightening the importance of OPR research from the public perspective.

This research focus that looks at internal organizational input against external outcomes with publics was pursued further by Kim and Ni’s (2013) evolution of Grunig’s situational theory of publics into a more general theory of communications. The situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) and communicative action in problem solving (CAPS) as conceptualized by Kim and Ni (2013) seeks to define communication behaviours. This area of public relations study continued with Hung-Baesecke and Chen (2013) in the area of OPR types and quality. Hung-Baesecke and Chen (2013) flagged two OPR areas that were under-researched: what motivates organizations in choosing

relationship strategies, and how publics perceive an organization's intentions to relationship-building efforts. These behavioural variables both impact relationship outcome and need further study. This research focus reinforces the public relations domain as one that involves relationships and communications strategies in those relationships.

Another critical relationship for organizations is the one they have with society. Society's values, norms, and expectations reflect a contemporary environment at any moment in time. How individuals behave in that society is framed by those rules—philosophical and legal. The societal norms that outline acceptable and unacceptable behaviours impact every facet of society. This remains true in a business context as legitimacy is attained “when organizational practices are congruent with the broader social system” (Gregory, Invernizzi & Romenti, 2013). Therefore if an organization wants to be accepted as part of the fabric of society, it must behave in a manner that is acceptable to society.

With evolution in society comes an evolution in societal norms and accordingly in individual and collective behaviours. Understanding this evolution is an area of public relations scholarship that needs illumination for two reasons: first, an organization's relevance to its society will impact its viability, and second, understanding the way communications evolved from a sociological perspective will provide a solid foundation for public relations scholarship.

Public relations historiography problems have continued to contribute to the ambiguity around the entire field of study and practice. Researchers and historians have attempted to recount factual events or delineate a theory-based approach, but neither has led to a comprehension of the roots and evolution of public relations (Bentele, 2013). If public relations is to establish its prominence in research and practice, it is essential to understand its historical context. Bentele (2013) introduced functional integrative stratification to rectify what factual events and theory could not. This concept, as Bentele (2013) explains, considers the assimilation of layers (strata) over time as an evolutionary approach to understanding public relations history. “Stratification as a development principle can be useful in reconstructing social-communicative developments” (Bentele, 2013, p. 253). Understanding communications styles, patterns, and systems of the past provides a meaningful context for how contemporary societies communicate, making it another critical area for public relations research.

Ongoing research in functional integrative stratification will provide much-needed insight into the how and why of public relations practice of

today and yesterday. "Organizations create and distribute "bodies of text" that, over time, contribute to the construction of social reality. Ongoing attempts to create meaning through texts and channels have the ultimate goal of enacting power" (Berger & Reber, 2006 p. 182). To enact that power it must be sanctioned by society, in other words, the organization must gain social acceptance. Research into functional integrative stratification can root public relations in time, space, and theory, releasing all ambiguity and skepticism that has encircled public relations to date. These two points highlight the importance of further functional integrative stratification research.

The values of creating a culture of collaboration, building quality relationships between an organization and its publics, and maintaining an organization's ability to be part of the fabric of society will undoubtedly contribute to a legacy of public relations excellence and free public relations professionals of the need to defend the profession's reputation once and for all.

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