



Public relations' "Relationship Identity" in research: Enlightenment or illusion



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ABSTRACT

Public relations' identity in research sets parameters that can limit or illuminate the field. In this paper we consider how public relations have been developing a "relationship identity" in research. General public relations research, as opposed to sub-disciplines such as crisis communication, is dominated by a relationships approach. The focus on relationship was designed to enlighten public relations research and even improve the practice. But has the emphasis on relationships and focus on the organization–public relationship (OPR) as an outcome really enlightened public relations research? This paper explores four concerns about the application: (1) problems associated with applying a concept from interpersonal communication to public relations, (2) how identities affect the formation of close relationships, (3) the value of close relationships for publics, and (4) the parasocial nature of organization–public relationships. While of some heuristic value, the relationship focus should not be embraced uncritically. Public relations researchers should be cautious about concentrating on close relationships between organizations and publics and seek appropriate re-formulations and alternatives that more accurately depict organization–public connections. We should consider the value of weak relationships and parasocial relationships if we are to maximize the value of a relationship approach to public relations.

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1. Introduction

Discussions of representations of public relations must consider the identity of public relations that is being cultivated in the academic research. Public relations' identity in research sets parameters that can limit or illuminate the field. In this paper we consider how public relations has been developing a "relationship identity" in academic research and the implications of that identity. In 1984, Ferguson suggested that "relationship" should be the central focus of public relations research. It was not until the late 1990s that her call was heeded. In 1997, [Broom, Casey, and Ritchey \(1997\)](#) argued for public relations to be defined as relationship management while in 1998, [Ledingham and Bruning \(1998\)](#) advanced what would be called relationship management theory. From the end of the 1990s there has been a steady increase in utilizing the "relationship" in public relations research. This includes the assessment of organizational–public relationships (OPR and OPRA) as an outcome variable.

More recently, the application of the term "relationship" has been bolstered by the burgeoning growth and importance of social media in public relations. The interactive potential and widening use of social media have resulted in public relations talking about "joining the conversation." The idea of an organization and publics being "in a conversation" reflects the idea of interpersonal communication in a relationship. "Relationship" has permeated the practitioner realm as well. The Public

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Table 1

Citations for seminal public relations relationship research.

Author(s)	Type of research	Year	Number of citations
Ferguson	Paper	1984	262
Broom, Casey, and Ritchey	Journal article	1997	309
Ledingham and Bruning	Journal article	1998	357
Hon and Grunig	Paper	1999	505
Ledingham and Bruning	Book	2000	296
Huang	Article	2001	219
Ledingham	Article	2003	272

Note: Google Scholar was used as the source for citation counts. Data were collected until December 2013.

Relations Society of America's crowdsourcing effort to define public relations produced the following: "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (Elliott, 2011). We posit that "relationship" has become the de facto identity for general public relations research but not necessarily for some of the narrower specialty areas of public relations.

The focus on relationship was designed to enlighten public relations research and even improve the practice (e.g., Broom et al., 1997; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). For example, Hon and Grunig (1999) argued that relationship outcomes demonstrate the value of public relations to organizations and society. But has the emphasis on relationships and the focus on OPR as an outcome really enlightened public relations research? This is the central question that drives this paper. To answer this question we pursue four lines of thought about the relationship focus that raise their own central questions. First, there are concerns any time a theory from one discipline is applied to another. We consider the issues that arise when a concept from interpersonal communication (relationship) is applied to connections between organizations and publics. To what extent are relationships between organizations and the public commensurate with relationships between people? Second, close relationships are premised on shared identities between the organization and the publics. How do the ideas of identity and identification affect OPR? Third, a relationship approach assumes that public desire relationships with organizations and that those relationships should be close. Do people want and benefit from close relationships with organizations? Finally, we must consider the possibility that organizational–public relationships are primarily *parasocial* – one-sided relationships much like fans form with celebrities they like. Do organizations cultivate the idea of relationship to mask the reality of parasocial relationships with publics?

This paper addresses the central questions for each of the four lines of thought after a quick review of the dominance of the relationship focus in academic public relations research. The lines of thought are then integrated to address the larger question of whether public relations' "relationship research identity" is a means of enlightenment or an illusion.

2. "Relationship" dominates academic public relations research

"Relationship" has entered the consciousness of public relations in two ways. First, relationship management theory is offered as a general theory of public relations that can guide research (Ledingham, 2003). One of the functions of theory is to generate research and public relations researchers continue to explore relationship management theory. In 2010, Pasadeos, Berger, and Renfro's (2010) citation analysis of the public relations literature identified relationship management as the second most cited theory. The most frequently cited theory was Excellence Theory. There is considerable overlap between Excellence Theory and relationship management theory because Excellence Theory adopted the organization–public relationship as a key outcome variable, a point we shall consider in more detail shortly (e.g., Grunig & Huang, 2000). As noted in Table 1, the three most popular sources for relationship management theory have been cited over 1000 times.

Second, relationship has become the dominant outcome variable in general public relations research. The idea of "mutually beneficial relationships" is an unquestioned outcome for public relations (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985). Excellence Theory holds that public relations add value to organizations through relationships (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 2011). "If it develops good relationships with strategic publics, an organization is more likely to develop goals desired by both the organization and its publics and is more likely to achieve those goals" (Grunig, 2006, pp. 158–159). Through the use of OPR, OPRA, and other relationship measures, researchers link close relationships between organizations and publics to many other outcome variables such as customer retention (Ledingham, 2003) and organizational effectiveness in general (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The connections to other specific and desired outcomes are used to reinforce the value of close relationships. The logic holds that if close relationships lead to other important outcomes, close relationships themselves and the public relations efforts used to facilitate them are both valuable (Grunig & Hung, 2002). The value of public relations to an organization becomes predicated on the ability to cultivate and to maintain close relationships (Grunig, 2006). We feel the evidence supports the claim that the academic public relations research has developed a "relationship identity." The term identity is used to denote the distinctive characteristics of an entity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Ki and Shin's (2006) review of the organization–public relationship literature showed a continual increase in the number of publications drawing upon relationship management. Huang and Zhang (2013) inventoried articles appearing in the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Communication*, and *International Journal of Strategic Communication* from 2000 to 2011

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