



Do the ends justify the means? Dialogue, development communication, and deontological ethics



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ABSTRACT

Despite being a frequently discussed topic in the public relations literature, dialogue is often misunderstood as simply two-way communication and seldom examined in practice. While international development organizations frequently claim to use dialogic and participatory methods, development communication remains a relatively unexplored area in public relations. To further clarify public relations' understanding of dialogue as well as its potential in development practice, this study examined how a USAID-sponsored international development project adopted participatory communication practices to encourage Bolivian farmers to switch from coca to coffee. Drawing from public relations and development literature on dialogue, the article juxtaposes the approaches to “dialogue” used in the project against normative concepts of the theory. The article argues that using genuine dialogue is a matter of differentiating deontological, means-based approaches to communication practice, from consequentialist, ends-based orientations.

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1. Introduction

Despite the seeming prominence of dialogue in public relations theory, [Piecicka \(2011\)](#) has noted, “the field has a very poor understanding of the concept” (p. 109). In recent years, the public relations literature has increasingly been flooded with examples of organizations using “dialogue.” However, as [Theunissen and Wan Noordijn \(2012\)](#) have argued, while many of these works claimed to study dialogue, most have articulated the concept in a manner quite distinct from the *theory* of dialogue, and thus “do not sufficiently contribute to developing a clear philosophical understanding of the theory” (p. 5). Hence, a closer examination reveals that very few cases meet the standards of genuine dialogue—a problem that [Tuftes and Mefalopoulos \(2009\)](#) ascribed to the development communication literature as well—while many organizations claim to be using dialogic approaches. This article takes up the challenge of broadening and deepening the understanding of dialogue in public relations.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, as many public relations studies have failed to adequately differentiate dialogue from other forms of communication, this article explores the parallels between dialogue and deontological ethics. Articles claiming to study dialogue in public relations are common (e.g., [Bortree & Seltzer, 2009](#); [McCorkindale & Morgoch, 2013](#); [Men & Tsai, 2012](#); [Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010](#); [Waters & Jamal, 2011](#)). Because much of the scholarship in the field takes the term dialogue at face-value, claiming dialogue is occurring when in actuality none exists, more research is needed that clearly explains the difference between genuine dialogue and self-serving dialogue, or “dialogue in name only.” We

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argue that when the rationale for communicative behavior is based on the preconceived outcomes of communication, the behavior is not dialogue, as dialogue is inherently concerned with the *means* of communication, as well as the *ends* (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Contemporary treatments of dialogue could therefore be clarified by associating the concept with that of deontological ethics—a philosophy that privileges duty and responsibility in decision making over the ends achieved.

Second, the article works to further integrate the public relations and development communication literature. Both development communication and public relations scholars have independently proposed approaches to international communication based on dialogue as alternatives to one-way communication practices designed to achieve measurable outcomes (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2011; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). As Sriramesh (2012) pointed out, “Communication for development is a field in which public relations has played a significant role, but that role has not been studied with much depth and included in the body of knowledge” (p. 19). The limited research on development communication in public relations implies that examining development communication practices should be considered opportunities to add depth to our understanding of international public relations (Sriramesh, 2012). Examining the use of “dialogue” in development practice would therefore enhance our understanding of the potentials and pitfalls of dialogue in international settings, as well as strengthening the connection between the two disciplines.

In order to achieve both goals, of explicating dialogue as a duty or responsibility rather than as an ends-based tool, and exploring dialogue as a component of development communication, this article examines the use of dialogue in a development project in Bolivia sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). USAID (2012) believed that dialogue was a key component of the project’s success, yet, as the article will show, intentional and goal-based practices were enacted under the guise of dialogue. The article begins with an overview of public relations dialogue and deontological ethics.

2. Clarifying public relations dialogue and deontological ethics

Perspectives on dialogue have considered dialogue as an ethical ideal (Buber, 1970; Freire, 1970), as well as a set of procedural steps (Pearson, 1989a,b; Pearce & Pearce, 2004; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Heath et al. (2006) have argued scholars must recognize that “dialogue embodies particular practices and goals and that these differentiate it from other forms of communication” (p. 365). Thus, before interrogating the use of dialogue in development communication practice, a more detailed discussion of dialogue is needed.

2.1. Defining dialogue

Dialogue refers to a “communicative give and take” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325), wherein both parties relinquish control over the outcome of discussions. That control is relinquished does not mean that parties in a dialogue must agree with one another. Rather, those in a dialogue should respect differences and listen to the concerns of others. Thus, Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested that dialogue should not be viewed as a means to an end, but as an end state in-and-of-itself. Botan (1997) observed that “dialogue manifests itself more as a stance, orientation or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique or format” (p. 4). The “product” or realization of dialogue, according to Kent and Taylor (2002), is reified by five interrelated principles: (1) *mutuality*, or an acknowledgment of the interdependency of organizations and publics; (2) *propinquity* consulting with publics on matters of concern to them; (3) *empathy*, or sympathy for the positions of others; (4) *risk*, or the notion that real relationships are inherently risky; and (5) *commitment*, a dedication to achieving mutual understanding of an issue.

There is a range of “dialogic theories” that include person, family, and feminist-centered approaches, such as Buber’s (1970) I/Thou relationship, Noddings (1984) family and relational approach, community-based approaches (cf. Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994), and philosophical approaches such as Freire (1970) and Etzioni (1993). Prescriptive theories of dialogue also exist, such as those offered by Pearson (1989a,b) and Pearce and Pearce (2004). The perspectives on dialogue are foremost concerned with the attitudes held by each party in an interaction. Drawing on Buber, Kent and Taylor (2002) stated that dialogue recognizes the value of the “other,” and sees communication partners as equals (I-Thou) rather than as mere recipients of messages (I-It). Botan (1997) explained that dialogue “elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization” (p. 196) as opposed to segmenting and responding to publics as in approaches like two-way symmetrical communication (cf. Porter, 2010).

However, as Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested, the *potential* for dialogue does “not equate with dialogue” (p. 32), but dialogue may be facilitated through “systems” of interaction (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Pearson (1989b) stressed the importance of determining “what kind of communication system maximizes the chances competing interests can discover some shared group and be transformed and transcended” (p. 206). Pearson also saw dialogue as something that the more powerful use to treat those with less power more fairly. Pearson advised that, in practice, dialogue should not exclude certain topics from discussion, that no kind of communication be considered inappropriate, and that the rules governing exchanges be planned in advance. Thus, dialogic structures must often be agreed upon beforehand as dialogue “rarely happens accidentally” (Anderson et al., 1994, p. xxi). Dialogue can take the form of episodic discussions over a long period of time (Wierzbicka, 2006), or more lengthy interactions over a shorter, more intense period of time. Ultimately, dialogue participants need to feel safe and believe that their opinions are valued (Theunissen & Wan Noordijn, 2012). As this article is interested in expanding

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