



# Tracking public relations history in 1960s' Turkey: The prevalence and reflections of development discourse



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## ABSTRACT

This study is based on a historical research, which focuses on the institutionalization of public relations in Turkey during the 1960s, and interprets this process in the frame of planned development discourse. Primary written sources collected from archive research and oral narratives generated from fourteen semi-structured interviews conducted with the pioneers in Turkey are analyzed through categorization and thematization. Findings of the historical research indicated that similar themes and orientations guided public relations practices in public and private sector in this period. Accordingly public relations education provided necessary intellectual background and human resources.

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1960s' Turkey, several public institutions started to establish public relations units with clearly defined duties, authorities and responsibilities; for profit organizations have appreciated the contribution of public relations in setting and realizing long term objectives and policies, thus they invested in in-house strategic work units or professional consultancy services. University level education in the field was also initiated during these years. Although its origins fall back to much earlier years, public relations programs have gained a scientific basis and have been carried out as systematic and planned activities since the 1960s in Turkey. The term has become prevalent both in practice and discourse starting from these years as well. Actually, since the first years of the Turkish Republic, activities that might be associated with public relations or persuasive communication that prioritize public relations practices had been employed especially in the process of nation building. There had also been some "PR-like activities" (Watson, 2013, pp. 208–209) during the Ottoman Empire (Kazancı, 2006). Before 1960s' Turkey, individual events were not recognized in their own time as public relations activities and were not carried out within organized structures or to achieve certain communicative objectives.

During the period between 1960 and 1980, which can be entitled as the years of the institutionalization of public relations in Turkey, public relations is defined within and through organized structures (Aktaş Yamanoglu, Gençtürk Hızal, & Özdemir, 2013). The political, economic and social environment of the 1960s not only marked the conceptualization of public relations, but also supported its development in the academic milieu, as well as in the public and private sectors around similar

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principles and concepts. The same conditions shaped the public relations activities, thus they gained *sui generis* content, meaning and role in this period.

Given that public relations is a notion and practice that varies according to its historical context, it has inevitably followed a different path of development in different countries due to the local social, political, and economic setting. Hence the urgency, meaning and role of public relations may take distinct forms in different temporal and spatial contexts. The historical development of the understanding and the practice of public relations have mutual bonds with the structures that shape the historical context. Public relations are not only the product of these structures, but it also acts as an agent of their continuation, reproduction or transformation (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Edwards and Hodges (2011, p. 3) mention that “public relations is fundamentally about producing, sustaining and regulating cultural meanings”. These meanings are taken up and reproduced to ensure the continuity or transformation of the structures. In this relational process, the practices of public relations might be articulated with the dominant discourse and also embody the ongoing discussions, tensions, and conflicts within the structures (Edwards & Hodges, 2011).

In Turkey, public relations first came to the agenda of the public sector as an outcome of the vision of planned development in the relatively emancipatory climate of the 1960s. It has gained importance as a tool to ensure the mindset and to implement the policies of this period. Academic institutionalization of public relations in these years might be considered an extension of this understanding with the contribution of the same international organizations that actively took part in the development vision. Many multinational companies that pioneered public relations in the private sector strategically utilized this development theme and emphasized in their public relations activities as well.

This study focuses on the emergence of public relations as an institutional practice in 1960s' Turkey and interprets this process in the frame of planned development discourse, which has a significant emphasis on the extensive political, economic, social, and cultural transformation during this period. The journey of public relations in the public and private sectors in addition to its academic milieu is analyzed to uncover the reflection of the context on the structures, understandings and practices of public relations. The contribution of public relations activities to the construction and dissemination of the development discourse is evaluated to identify the roles of public relations in facilitating the social changes.

## 2. Method

This study based on a historical research attempts to interpret the complex relationship between the structures and agents rather than simply describing and listing events in chronological order. Accordingly, doings of the actors, institutions and organizations are associated with the economic, social and political structures, and their interrelationships are explicated. In this study, historical research is oriented toward “thematic questions” (Gardner, 2006, p. 135).

Oral narratives generated from semi-structured interviews, historical documents and texts were analyzed and interpreted to unfold the emphasis of the planned development discourse on the formations and structures of public relations activities, and public relations contribution for facilitating social transformations. Written materials and oral narratives are regarded as “tools” to explore and interpret the historical case.

The data for this historical research were collected from primary sources. Berg (2001, p. 214) describes primary sources as “oral or written testimony of eyewitnesses”. Historical research's originality lays the use of primary sources exclusively. Thus this research was carried out through the identification of various oral and written resources, and then examination of extracted data through categorization and thematization.

In the early stage of the study, preliminary research was conducted to identify the pioneers of Turkish public relations in academia, public and private sectors. For this end, the first academic and popular texts on public relations, meeting minutes of the first public relations seminars and panels were examined; archives of major institutions and newspapers were scanned using public relations and related terms as a key word. Semi-structured interviews conducted with identified pioneers, led to reach some other names. The founders list of Turkish Public Relations Association was another source to recognize the pioneers of the field.

Pioneers of Turkish public relations were identified among those who gave lectures at universities and produced academic works, were employed in public relations units of public institutions, and carried out the first defined public relations practices in the private sector. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with those who were accessible: Prof. Nermin Abadan Unat, Prof. Metin Kazancı, Prof. Nuri Tortop, Assoc. Prof. Birkan Uysal, and Prof. Yücel Ertekin from academia; Altemur Kılıç and Birten Gökyay from the public sector; Ayşegül Dora, Ahmet Ramazanoğlu, Canan Reeves, Betül Mardin, Sancar Maruflu, and Ergüder Tırnova from the private sector; and Prof. Alaeddin Asna, who has experience in the academia, public and private sectors.

Face to face interviews took three to five hours and conducted in Ankara, İstanbul and İzmir between January 2012 and April 2013. Three telephone interviews had to be conducted due to the restrictions of some pioneers. These interviews took approximately one hour. An interview guide, structured around three main parts, was followed. First part of the inquiry concentrated on the personal and professional experiences, second part covered institutional practices; third part was formulated to find out general approach to public relations in Turkey during the institutionalization period.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed thoroughly. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed through categorization with reference to concepts and themes (such as modernization, democratization, public education, development) related to planned development discourse. The mode of interview analysis was “focusing on meaning” (Kvale, 2007, p. 104). In these type of analyses, researcher deals with the meaning of “what is said”, rather than language or linguistic forms.

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