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The origins of distant voicing: Examining relational dimensions in public diplomacy and their effects on megaphoning

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ABSTRACT

Extant literature has discussed the similarities between public relations and public diplomacy. This study seeks to contribute to existing research on the application of organization–public relationships (OPR) to public diplomacy by further exploring relational dimensions in public diplomacy and empirically testing them based on a model consisting of antecedents (i.e., political, economic, interpersonal, cultural and corporate interactions), relational dimensions (i.e., interactional bilateralism, power mutuality, trust, empathy, relational satisfaction, relational continuation, relational attentiveness and relational curiosity), and consequences (i.e., positive and negative megaphoning). A total of 490 respondents from the United States were recruited on Amazon M-Turk to respond to survey items regarding China and Mexico. Confirmatory factor analysis and regression analysis were conducted. The findings indicate: (a) positive associations between the antecedents and the relational dimensions, (b) positive associations between the relational dimensions and positive megaphoning, and (c) negative associations between the relational dimensions and negative megaphoning. (148 words)

1. Introduction

Similarities between public relations and public diplomacy have been extensively discussed in the literature since the early 1990s (e.g., [Signitzer & Coombs, 1992](#)). [Grunig \(1993a\)](#) discusses the roles of public relations in international affairs as well as the effects of international public relations on diplomacy. Similar to public relations, public diplomacy does not have one single definition but is often discussed in association with the concept of relationships (e.g., [Fitzpatrick, 2007](#); [Ki, 2015](#); [Yang, Klyueva, & Taylor, 2012](#)). Despite this, it is also understood as “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an effort to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies” ([Tuch, 1990, p. 3](#)) or instruments used by nations to understand cultures, attitudes and behaviors, build relationships, and influence perceptions and actions ([Gregory, 2011](#)). Public diplomacy has been criticized for being self-interested, seeking to advance a nation’s own interests without seeking to achieve mutual understanding and mutual benefits between the nation and its foreign publics ([Comor & Bean, 2012](#)). Hence, [Fitzpatrick \(2017\)](#) proposes a reconceptualization of public diplomacy in line with public interests by promoting an understanding of foreign publics, reconciling a nation’s interests with those of its publics, and facilitating collaboration amongst publics to inform policy decisions and actions.

To further understand the application of public relations to public diplomacy, existing research has called for empirical testing of

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relational constructs in diplomatic contexts (Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2015), extending the measurement of outputs to outcomes (Banks, 2011), and measuring relationship quality between a nation and its foreign publics (Lee & Jun, 2013). Unlike image management, the relationship approach to public diplomacy focuses on mutual understanding and co-creating meanings and values (Szondi, 2010) as well as mutual influence between a nation and its foreign publics (Grunig, 1993a). In light of this, this study explores the concept of relationships and empirically tests it using relational dimensions developed based on the Organization–Public Relationship Assessment (OPRA) scale (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001a) and literature on international relations and intercultural communication. It also tests possible antecedents to relational dimensions based on Kim and Ni's (2011) conceptualization of public diplomacy, as well as megaphoning behaviors, as possible consequences of relational dimensions based on Kim and Rhee's (2011) conceptualization of communicative behaviors.

2. Antecedents to relationships

Public relations and public diplomacy are both strategic communication processes with a strong focus on relationship building (Fitzpatrick, 2011; Signitzer & Wamser, 2006). Strategic communication serves a significant function in facilitating dialogue and mutual respect and promoting understanding in public diplomacy (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). According to Yun and Kim (2008), the concept of attraction (cf. coercion) in soft power can be broken down into two dimensions. The affective dimension is rooted in the life experiences and social learning of individual members of an ethnic group, whereas the evaluative dimension refers to the quality of the relationship between two countries in terms of their performance in the other country's domestic governance. In addition to an individuals' own experiences with and knowledge about a foreign country, their evaluation of the relationship quality between their home country and the foreign country also plays a role in influencing the extent to which they are attracted to the foreign country.

Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) define antecedents of relationships as “perceptions, motives, needs, behaviors, and so forth that are posited as contingencies or causes in the formation of relationships” (p. 94). Public diplomacy faces a challenge in attributing public diplomacy successes or failures to particular antecedents because there are a host of factors affecting foreign publics' relationships with or attitudes towards a nation, many of which are not affected by public diplomacy efforts alone, such as changes in political leadership (Banks, 2011). The integrated approach to public diplomacy proposes that there are three types of public diplomacy efforts: nation branding, mediated public diplomacy, and relational public diplomacy (Golan, 2015). Existing research has empirically examined certain public diplomacy efforts as antecedents to relationships in public diplomacy, such as publics' relationships with embassies (Lee & Jun, 2013) and student exchanges (Yun, 2012).

Although relational public diplomacy efforts, such as educational and cultural exchange programs, are considered to be the most critical and influential component in public diplomacy, through which publics gain first-hand experiences in interacting with people in other countries (Yun, 2012; Yun & Vibber, 2012), most publics do not have an opportunity to engage in them (Golan, 2015). These efforts are *relational* because they facilitate direct interactions between people in two countries; these direct contacts matter more than mediated public diplomacy in bringing about attraction (Yun & Toth, 2009). Public diplomacy efforts should be designed to facilitate interactions and promote mutuality and reciprocity. Kim and Ni (2011) suggest that cultural public diplomacy, which often results in a unilateral influence from one country to another, should be redesigned to seek bilateral influence and a mutual-gaining of soft power between countries.

Based on the aforementioned literature, this study conceptualizes that there are a host of factors affecting publics' relationships with a foreign country. Kim and Ni (2011) propose a normative model of public diplomacy and soft power, presenting institutional and non-institutional interactions as antecedents to the extent of soft power held by a country. Institutional interactions refer to the political and economic interactions between nations, whereas non-institutional interactions refer to the interpersonal and cultural interactions between nations. This study extends Kim and Ni's (2011) model by proposing the addition of corporate interactions to the model to reflect the increasingly influential roles of multinational corporations in influencing public opinion and policies in the countries in which they operate (Goodman, 2006; Kochhar & Mollada, 2015).

While acknowledging the many possible antecedents in public diplomacy, this study proposes to test antecedents of relational dimensions in public diplomacy as individuals' evaluations of a country's political, economic, cultural, interpersonal and corporate interactions with other nations. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. There is a positive association between *political interactions* and (a) *experiential relationship quality* and (b) *reputational relationship quality*.

H2. There is a positive association between *economic interactions* and (a) *experiential relationship quality* and (b) *reputational relationship quality*.

H3. There is a positive association between *cultural interactions* and (a) *experiential relationship quality* and (b) *reputational relationship quality*.

H4. There is a positive association between *interpersonal interactions* and (a) *experiential relationship quality* and (b) *reputational relationship quality*.

H5. There is a positive association between *corporate interactions* and (a) *experiential relationship quality* and (b) *reputational relationship quality*.

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