Asking the Insiders: An investigation into areas of meaning and perception convergence and divergence on practitioner and academic definitions of public relations in Australia

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Abstract

This paper forms part of wider doctoral research examining areas of meaning and perception convergence and divergence among Australian public relations academics and practitioners. While research has been conducted into how those outside the profession view public relations, very few have asked those within the industry (practitioners and academics) about their understanding of public relations in Australia, nor compared these findings to locate and analyse spaces of convergence and divergence of meaning. Where empirical research into the field has been conducted, researchers have tended to solely focus on the views of the practitioner. Comparative research between academics and practitioners in business related disciplines is justified due to the potential tensions that can arise between these sub-cultures.

Hutton asserts that public relations as a practice is suffering from an identity crisis. The primary intent of this paper is to present empirical definitional data gathered via administration of two online questionnaires and discuss findings in the context of related work by, among others, Gordon (1997) and Hutton (1999). Findings indicate that there is a significant gap between what people within the field say and what they do. Furthermore, this paper argues that claims of public relations as dialogic, where the central organising theme of public relations is ‘relationship management’, are due to the perceived ethical superiority of such models, and are not legitimate operational descriptions of the field in Australia.

Key words: public relations practice
Introduction

This paper is born of ongoing doctoral research of which the primary intent is to investigate areas of convergence and divergence between meaning and perceptions of public relations practice between Australian practitioners and academics. While research has been conducted into how those outside the profession view public relations (such as Jo's 2003 research into meanings and connotations of public relations in news stories), very few have asked those within the industry (practitioners and academics) about their understanding of public relations in Australia—or anywhere else, nor compared these findings to locate and analyse spaces of convergence and divergence of meaning. Where empirical research into the field has been conducted, researchers have tended to solely focus on the views of the practitioner.

Research into how 'insiders' understand the term 'public relations'—and thus the practice—can provide insights into the various faces of public relations in Australia, and help build an agreed understanding of its purpose, scope, and underlying principles. The findings of this research will facilitate discussion of ideas and theories that have been put forward by various authors surrounding a range of notions such as the maturity of the field, public relations education, and definitions of the field. The concept of definition is of central concern to this paper. Schiappa (2003) argues that central to public business is struggle over definitions. In this way, definition is an essential process that society engages to make meaning, and as such is worthy of scrutiny.

It is important to note at the outset that, as the author is in the preliminary stages of data analysis, this paper is predominately observational. Indeed, the purpose of this article is not to put forward another definition of public relations, but rather to comment on the content and nature of empirical definitional data gathered as part of the wider doctoral research project. In particular, findings reported here support the assertion that the way that both academics and practitioners define public relations does not reflect empirical description of the field.

Literature review

Hutton (1999) asserts that public relations has 'suffered from an identity crisis'—largely of its own making—and that 'in terms of both theory and practice, public relations has failed to arrive at a broadly accepted definition of itself in terms of its fundamental purpose, its dominant metaphor, its scope, or its underlying dimensions' (1999, p. 199). Lages and Simkin (2003, p. 298) identify public relations as an emerging social science discipline currently lacking paradigmatic and topic diversity and strongly influenced by practice. They go on to posit that a paradigm struggle exists due to the lack of any consensus as to what constitutes public relations, stemming from the diversity of the practice itself and from its constant adaptation to society's evolutionary change (p. 298).
Ehling (in Grunig, 1992, p. 458) underpins this sentiment as he discusses the problematic nature of defining public relations:

…even serious attempts to give public relations content that has intellectual substance, which can be defended ethically and made administratively viable, often have led to more difficulties than solutions. Efforts at defining public relations have not yet fully succeeded. Attempts to conceptualize public relations as some kind of socially oriented function frequently have resulted only in producing an outpouring of simple definitions that hardly get beyond that of slogans.

Much ambiguity surrounds the term ‘public relations’. Tymson and Sherman (1996, p. 3) suggest that public relations is difficult to define due to the diversity of philosophies and techniques it encompasses. It is perhaps for this reason that the vast majority of definitions highlight a functional perspective of public relations. Grunig (2001, p. 2) supports this observation when stating that public relations is ‘defined more by its techniques than by its theory’. Johnston and Zawawi (2000, p. 6) exemplify this position when defining public relations as ‘the organisational function that, by recognising the importance of internal and external publics to the functioning of an organisation, provides the means for these publics to be best managed’.

Key themes within the above definition are supported by McElreath (1996, p. 3) when he situates public relations as ‘a management function that uses communications to facilitate relationships and understanding between an organisation and its many publics’. Finally, and perhaps most simply, Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995, p. ix) refer to public relations as ‘the management of communication between an organization and its publics’.

It is evident that each of these contemporary definitions is underpinned by several shared premises. In particular, modern public relations is widely considered to be a management function, involving communication with organisationally constructed publics, and having the central aim of developing and maintaining effective relationships with these publics.

More recently, Hutton, Goodman, Alexander & Genest (2001, p. 248) cite a number of public relations definitions and metaphors that have been put forth including:


Hutton et al (2001, p. 248) see the ongoing introduction of new terms, such as reputation management, as merely further complicating a field already suffering
‘a serious identity crisis, in terms of public relations’ ability or willingness to define itself in a consistent manner’.

Hutton (1999) developed a three-dimensional model with which to analyse various definitions of public relations. He identified six distinct orientations of public relations practice: ‘persuasion, advocacy, public information, cause-related public relations, image/reputation management, and relationship management’ (1999, p. 203). He linked alternative metaphors of public relations to each of these orientations, and argued that only the ‘relationship management’ orientation had ‘the power to both define and serve as a paradigm (organizing philosophy or model) for the field’ (Hutton, 1999, p. 204). Hutton (1999) posits that the lack of research exploring the fundamental ‘dimensions’ of public relations is a barrier to reconciling a definition of public relations.

The Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) defines public relations as ‘the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation (or individual) and its (or their) publics’ (PRIA 2006, p. 34). As evidence of the ongoing definitional problems surrounding the field in Australia, the PRIA then goes on to offer three more definitions of public relations:

… the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

… helping an organisation and its publics adapt mutually to each other.

… the management function concerned with effective communication. It includes research to understand issues and public attitudes which have an impact on an organisation; planning and implementing communication activities to effect change; and evaluating outcomes.

It is interesting to note that while the PRIA positions public relations as ‘the key to effective communication’ (PRIA 2006, p. 34), of the four above noted definitions, only the last actually contains the word ‘communication’. In her 1997 article, Gordon reviewed popular definitions of public relations as presented in eight public relations texts, and discussed ‘shared elements and assumptions inherent in these definitions’ (1997, p. 57). In particular, Gordon found that three elements (management, organisation, and publics) were repeated in the definitions, with ‘public relations[…] either presented as a management function or the management of communication’ (1997, p. 59). It is clear that many scholars remain engaged in defining the discipline, its boundaries, and central themes. The research reported on here adds an empirical Australian perspective to this body of work by reviewing definitions put forward by approximately 40 Australian academics in the field and 105 practitioners.
Research methodology

This study relies primarily on administration of two online questionnaires. This data source was selected as it allows national input from many sources, and is cost effective and time efficient. To date, this method of data collection has been used by various researchers within the public relations and related fields with diverse results (see Hewitt 2006; Werder 2005; David, Kline & Dai 2005; Grunig & Hung 2002).

Non-probability sampling techniques including purposive, snowballing, and self-selection sampling were employed in this study. A purpose built distribution list of 166 e-mail addresses of professional communication academics at Australian universities running PRIA accredited courses was compiled by searching for e-mail addresses contained on those institutions’ websites. Public relations practitioners were targeted through notification of the questionnaire via the online monthly PRIA newsletter, and a link to the questionnaire from the PRIA homepage. Following poor response numbers, another purpose built distribution list of practitioners was compiled by sourcing approximately 340 addresses through the PRIA website, Yellow Pages online, and the Government Online Directory. An initial and two follow up invitations were sent to all distribution lists between October 2006 and January 2007.

The questionnaires themselves represent a self-completion method of data collection, where the research instrument is an embedded URL in an e-mail. Respondents clicked on the hypertext link contained in the e-mail message or PRIA newsletter or article on the PRIA homepage, which evoked their web browser and presented the web-based questionnaire (located at www.praustralia.net.au). Each questionnaire comprised six sections, with multiple questions in each section. Participants answered questions by typing in free text boxes, selecting an option from drop down boxes, or ranking responses with number and radio button options.

Due to the sampling methods employed, it is not possible to report a response rate, however 40 academic and 105 practitioner responses were received. It should be noted that, as was their choice, not all respondents chose to respond to all questions, and as such the number of valid responses may vary from question to question. With these considerations in mind, the author acknowledges the limitations of this study.

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed in this study. As the research seeks to describe and analyse phenomena, and is primarily interested in convergence and divergence of conceptualised meanings of public relations within the industry, such a combination is desirable. Qualitative analysis was supported by NVivo (an information management software package designed for use in qualitative research), and SPSS was used to conduct quantitative analysis.
Findings and discussion

Participants were asked to define public relations when asked, ‘From your perspective, what do you understand by the term ‘public relations’?’ Responses were broad, ranging from simply ‘communication’ (Respondent P76), to ‘[…] brand management’ (Respondent P41), to ‘management of relationships that are essential for the success or failure of the organisation’ (Respondent A5).

Overwhelmingly, responses from both academics and practitioners echoed the literature. Initial thematic analysis identified a range of variables (Figure 1), with several elements (communication, management, organisation, relationships, and publics) appearing most frequently.

FIGURE 1: Public relations definitional variables

Note: The term ‘parent’ denotes the identified relationship between concepts.

For example, if a given definition situated public relations at all, it was always situated within or on behalf of an organisation.

Communicating the needs/messages of the organisation you represent […] (Respondent P9)

It is ensuring that organisations get their messages out to the public (Respondent P20)
Asking the insiders

Building relationships with target publics with a view to improving those relationships so the publics willingly support the organisation (Respondent A3)

The management of communication between an organisation and its publics (Respondent A8)

In comparison, only six of these ‘situated’ definitions stated that public relations could also be undertaken on behalf of individuals. No academics explicitly recognised that public relations can be conducted on behalf of something other than an organisation.

Public Relations means the way you, your business or your product is perceived by the public (Respondent P47)

The relationship between an individual or organisation with the broader community and how that is communicated (Respondent P83)

As another example, more than 40% of valid responses to this question explicitly referred to the notion of ‘relationships’ when defining public relations, with many others clearly inferring it through language supporting notions of mutuality and two-way communication. Indeed, the term ‘relationship/s’ was used as many times as the term ‘publics’, highlighting the centrality of these notions to contemporary Australian public relations.

Building relationships between organisations and publics for organisational success (Respondent A18)

Creating two-way, mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and its publics (Respondent A24)

Public relations is the management of the relationships between an organisation and its publics, or key stakeholders. It is a boundary-spanner role, informing the organisation of the values, attitudes and beliefs the publics hold about them (Respondent P35)

Public relations is about developing open two-way communications with one’s ‘publics’ and building strong, mutually beneficial relationships with them (Respondent P57)

Interestingly, all but three academic responses contained the term ‘relationships’. This overarching focus on relationships as central to public relations was echoed in participant responses to another question which asked people to rank, in order of most representative, the six orientations of public relations practice identified by Hutton (1999) who suggests that public relations as persuasion, advocacy, public information, cause-related public relations, reputation management, and relationship management. When considering all valid responses from both academics and practitioners, ‘relationship management’ was most frequently ranked first. Table 1 summarises the most frequently rated orientation for each ranking option (i.e. first ranked, second ranked etc) by type.
Table 1: Public relations orientation of practice
Frequency of descriptor rating by rank and type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>TYPE</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First ranked descriptor</td>
<td>Relationship mgmt</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%within TYPE</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second ranked descriptor</td>
<td>Reputation mgmt</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%within TYPE</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>31.9%</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third ranked descriptor</td>
<td>Public information</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%within TYPE</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>27.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth ranked descriptor</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%within TYPE</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth ranked descriptor</td>
<td>Cause-related</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%within TYPE</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth ranked descriptor</td>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%within TYPE</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: Data is only summarised here and as such columns should not add up to 100%. The maximum a row can equal is 100%.
Public relations as ‘persuasion’ was considered overall the least representative orientation of practice in Australia. This finding is reflected in the definitions of public relations put forward by respondents, with only one explicitly linking public relations to persuasion:

[Public relations is about] encouraging people to orient their understandings from certain perspectives […]. The present iteration of this field could be best described as persuasive communication (Respondent A19).

While very few define public relations as merely media relations, publicity, promotion, or spin doctoring, when asked about agreement on the term ‘public relations’ within the field, many respondents refer to other practitioners that do define it as such, and as a consequence do not understand and/or agree with public relations true purpose and opportunities.

There is significant discrepancy in the practice by ‘non pr’ people that operate in other disciplines such as marketing and advertising. Many still attribute the core skills to publicity (Respondent A5)

The notion of ‘spin’ as an essential part of PR is also very common (Respondent A39)

Practitioners have different interpretations from spin doctors to selfless, totally objective communicators (Respondent A40)

Looking beyond the media release is still a challenge for many practitioners and agencies (Respondent P80)

[…] PR becomes confused with events management, promotion, glitz and spin doctoring (Respondent P88)

Indeed, the vast majority of respondents position themselves away from these deviant ‘other’ practitioners by implicitly commenting on their lower professional standing and questionable ethics.

Many do it for the money. For the glamour. Not many do it for the good of people (Respondent P4)

You still see consultancies practicing ‘stunt PR’ on a regular basis purely for media coverage but at the other end of the scale you see some really well practiced relationship management […]. I also think lots of new practitioners think PR is more about the material they produce […] than whether meaningful dialogue is taking place with their publics (Respondent P21)

I believe that many practitioners see public relations as a persuasion and influencer role and are not concerned with building meaningful and two-way relationships with the publics of their organisation. It’s from this perspective that public relations is synonymous with ‘spin’ in the minds of many including the media (Respondent P35)
For some people it is fashion and champagne, and I dislike that association. Others see PR as 'spin' and I also think this is doing PR a disservice (Respondent P37)

I view it as ‘glamour PR’ versus ‘professional PR’, and usually it’s the university educated pr practitioners that are the ‘professional’ ones. The glamour PR tends to be more focused on marketing and sales, whereas professional PR is about communication, relationship management and tends to be quite separate from a sales environment (Respondent P56)

All of the above quotes are taken from respondents that self identified as practitioners. As the majority of these particular practitioners indicated that they hold university level qualifications in public relations, it could be argued that academics are forming the practitioners’ views and they are therefore inclined to argue for university trained practitioners. That said, earlier research, including Dozier & Lauzen’s 2000 notion of ‘invisble clients’ and Barley’s 1988 work into the degree of acculturation between academics and practitioners, suggest that over time academics tend to move towards the practitioner point of view while the latter group displays little influence by the former. Either way, these ideas will be further considered as part of the author’s wider doctoral research.

Given that public relations as ‘persuasion’ was earlier rated as the least representative orientation of practice in Australia, it is perhaps unsurprising that few practitioners would here articulate an association with ideas linked to that notion, such as promotion, marketing and sales. An initial review of the explicitly definitional data indicates that reoccurring themes identified in both academic and practitioner respondent definitions of public relations are broadly consistent. There appears considerable overlap in not only these definitions and the central orientation of public relations practice (i.e. public relations as an organisational communication function concerned with the management of relationships with publics), but also overlap among practitioner and academic thinking. These findings support many of the assertions put forward by other authors attempting to define the field both here and overseas.

It is curious then that (when asked if they believe there is agreement about the meaning of the term public relations within the field, 61.2% of all valid responses state (many emphatically) that there is none.

By the different practices and responsibilities it appears there is no clear agreement (Respondent A18)

No. The ethical parameters of PR are (rightly) a subject of much debate (Respondent A23)

Absolutely no! Australia seems to be facing [an] identity crisis […]. Given the variety of public relations areas of specialty, there is little governance or definition within the industry (Respondent P38)
Asking the insiders

From my experience no – generally the profession seems to battle internally about definitions and roles (Respondent P99)

There are several factors supporting this belief in an ‘identity crisis’, most notably dissonance of those within the field. This identity dissonance is brought about by divergence between definitions of public relations those within the field themselves provide, and their reports on the reality of practice within the field in Australia. Other factors supporting the maintenance of this confusion may include differing academic and practitioner notions of professionalism, and the unproblematised absence of a unifying concept for public relations. Said differently, what people say does not reflect what people do.

Early analysis of findings associated with practitioner access to senior management, autonomy over budget, and approval processes, suggests that practitioners may indeed be reasonably powerful within the organisations/clients with which they serve. As such, positioning public relations as a ‘management function’ in Australia may indeed be appropriate.

That said, there are some clear differences between the central themes within the definitions under consideration here and practice within the field. For example, the vast majority of definitions restrict public relations to an organisational setting, when it is well known that many celebrities and politicians engage public relations practitioners to promote a positive reputation and favourable relationships for themselves. Turner, Bonner and Marshall (2000) explicitly links public relations practices to celebrities, the celebrity event, and management of who and what enters the public discourse. In addition, the PRIA website identifies ‘constituents of a politician’ as a potential public, and as such the PRIA recognises that public relations practices may be undertaken on behalf of a politician. Likewise, public relations can be targeted to individuals (Gordon 1997).

While variance between the ‘defined’ organisational setting and any other setting for public relations may appear to cause only slight identity dissonance within the field, significant differences between the primary purpose and/or orientation of public relations as defined and then described (that is, defined as fostering relationships and then described as persuasion) would clearly limit identity building within the field.

The concept of relationships is central in the theory and practice of public relations. That said, many authors (such as Center & Jackson 1995; Cutlip, Center & Broom 1994; Grunig, Grunig & Ehling 1992; Broom & Dozier 1990) appear to assume knowledge of and agreement with the concept without actually defining it. Broom, Casey & Ritchey (1997) attempted to explain the nature and attributes of relationships. While unable to propose conceptual or operational definitions of organisation-public relationships they put forward a variety of tentative propositions, including:
Relationships consist of patterns of linkages through which the parties in relationships pursue and service their interdependent needs.

Relationships are the dynamic results of the exchanges and reciprocity that manifest themselves as the relationships develop and evolve, but they can be described at a given point in time.

Relationship formation and maintenance represents a process of mutual adaptation and contingent responses (Broom et al. 1997, p. 95).

Through the use of terms such as ‘patterns of linkages’, ‘dynamic results of the exchanges and reciprocity’, ‘process of mutual adaptation’, these propositions clearly link the notion of relationships to Grunig & Hunt’s (1984) contested two-way symmetric model of communication. While not one respondent attempted to define the term ‘relationship(s)’, participant responses clearly imply this linkage between notions of relationships and two-way communication oriented towards the publics interests.

The management of two-way communication and relationships to build and maintain alignment between organisations and their publics (i.e. key stakeholders). Key words being ‘two-way’; ‘management’ and ‘alignment’ which entails orientation and co-orientation (Respondent P72)

Public relations is the managerial function which develops and facilitates relationships between organisations and the many and varied publics, on which, that organisation’s success depends upon (Respondent P84)

Acting as a medium between an organisation and its publics […] Creating two-way, mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and its publics (Respondent A24)

A planned strategic approach to communicating between an organisation and its publics to mutual benefit (Respondent P29)

Put simply it’s the ability to effectively communicate with one’s publics and generate open two-way communications with those that can affect and be affected by one’s organisation, and to develop strong relationships (Respondent P44)

In a later section of the questionnaire, participants were asked to describe various dimensions of public relations in Australia by plotting their responses on a five point rating scale. Practitioners were asked to answer based on their personal experiences within the field, while academics were asked to respond based on their general perceptions of the field in Australia.

The dimensions chosen to describe Australia’s public relations climate in the questionnaire were based on Hutton’s 1999 theorising. He cites Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) ‘four models’ typology, which focuses on only two dimensions of 1) direction of communication, and 2) balance of intended effects (asymmetric
versus symmetric), as discriminatory of many other public relations theories and practice philosophies (1999, p. 202). Hutton supports Cancel et al.’s (1997) questioning of the discrete nature of the four models put forward by Grunig and Hunt, and suggests ‘that a continuum is a more appropriate framework’ (1999, p. 202). Interestingly, Rhee’s (1999) research indicated that while one-way and two-way variables fit into a single continuum, symmetrical and asymmetrical practices did not—thus indicating that these practices are not mutually exclusive. This finding also supports Murphy’s (1991) mixed motive model, which purports that advocacy (asymmetry) and collaboration (symmetry) can effectively work in parallel. Hutton presents a three-dimensional framework of ‘interest, initiative, and image’, but also notes several other candidate dimensions to ‘represent the underlying critical dimensions of public relations theory and practice’ (1999, p. 202). These are: ‘perception vs. reality, short-term vs. long-term goals, degree of honesty, amount of research, number of stakeholders (and the specific stakeholders selected), internal vs. external orientation, image vs. substance, level of effect (awareness vs. attitude vs. behaviour), and level of initiative (reactive vs. proactive)’ (1999, p. 202).

The nine dimensions selected as points of interest for this study included the usual degree of interactivity between an organisation/client and its publics, and the usual degree to which public relations activities are intended to serve a client’s interest versus the public’s interest. Findings here were inconsistent with definitions put forward earlier. Not one academic and few practitioners completely identified or agreed with the two-way communication option. Instead, the majority of respondents selected the second option, indicating that in their experiences one-way communication was most prevalent within the Australian public relations industry. Similarly, when asked to plot the degree to which public relations activities served either the client’s (seen as asymmetric) or public’s interest (seen as symmetric), the majority of both academics and practitioners again selected the second option, indicating a strongly asymmetrical or client-centric balance of intended effects.

Both of these findings directly oppose the notion of public relations as relationship management (seen as linking to Grunig and Hunt’s two-way symmetrical model), and rather position Australia public relations closer to Grunig and Hunt’s press agentry model of communication. Furthermore, in a later question, participants were asked to rank the top two disciplines they considered most relevant to public relations. Both groups ranked ‘communication theory’ as the most relevant discipline, with academics selecting ‘business management’ second, and with practitioners overwhelmingly selecting ‘marketing’ as the second most relevant discipline (Figure 2).
Again this high ranking bestowed upon marketing conflicts with earlier findings that self-consciously distance public relations from marketing related themes such as persuasion, sales, and promotion. It is evident that respondent definitions of public relations are normative and do not describe public relations as per their personal experiences and beliefs. Grunig (2000, p. 24) asserts that his model of two-way symmetrical public relations is normative and that

Normative theory cannot be falsified by positive research showing that public relations often is not actually practiced in the way normative theory specifies. In other words, the fact that public relations often is practiced differently from the normative theory does not mean it cannot be practised in that way.

What is particularly interesting here is why the field itself perpetuates this normative two-way symmetrical stance of Australian public relations, as opposed to more descriptively legitimated definitions. It appears that relationship management as the central organising theme of public relations has been granted ethical superiority in a quest to demarcate and professionalise the field.

Gordon (1997) argues that the dominant Marxist paradigm positions persuasion as inherently unethical, as those with societal power are able to dictate meaning to others. Within this paradigm, “public relations that is practiced in forms other than [the] two-way symmetrical model (in forms that attempt persuasion of others while disallowing reciprocal persuasion of the self) is an agent of domination and, therefore, unethical” (Gordon 1997, p. 61).
Leitch and Neilson (1997) discuss the ethical superiority of practitioners that support dialogic approaches within public relations, and argue that debates about communication ethics arise due to inadequate distinction between the concepts of ‘organisation’ and ‘publics’ within Grunig and Hunt’s four influential models. In which the difference between organisations and publics is purely one of perspective and as such these notions are presented as interchangeable. Leitch and Neilson (1997) argue that positioning organisations and publics as equivalent entities is misleading and can lead to conflation. Indeed the authors note that the very ‘notion that public relations ethics is rooted in textual form has gained dominance precisely because of the inadequacy of existing theories’ (1997, p. 30).

But while we are all desperately attempting to distance ourselves from persuasion, it is difficult to get away from. Even Grunig and Hunt used the term to denote reciprocal influence within the two-way symmetric model.

If persuasion occurs, the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization’s management to change attitudes or behaviors as the organization is likely to change the public’s attitudes or behavior. Ideally, both management and publics will change somewhat after a public relations effort (1984, p. 23).

Indeed, more recently Grunig and Grunig have argued that the symmetric model is no more inherently ethical than the other three (1992, 1996). As Leitch and Neilson (1997, p. 26) observe, ‘[i]n public relations theory the form of the relation has taken precedence over the function or purpose of the relational strategy’. Surely consideration of the ethical parameters of the function/purpose of the communication is just as justified as the relational form.

Conclusion

Either way, dominant current thinking on communication ethics limits opportunities for legitimate factual definition-building for public relations in Australia, as the field’s identity remains in a prescriptive and rhetoric-driven holding pattern whereby ethical, and as such professional, superiority is gained solely through espousing conformation to idealistic dialogic norms and subsequently shaming and/or denying the field’s ‘relationship’ with persuasion.

Schiappa (2003, p. 3) promotes the ‘rhetorically induced’ nature of definitions in an attempt to highlight the ‘persuasive processes that definitions inevitably involve’, and in particular ‘the ethical and normative ramifications of the act of defining’. In our quest for definition, it appears that the field does indeed agree on key normative themes underlying definition of its scope, dimensions and purpose. But it is perhaps due to the ethical superiority imbued to this normative definition, in contrast to a more descriptive empirical definition, and the significant gap that exists between these, that limits our ability to feel a sense of confidence and robustness towards the field’s identity. If we, as Schiappa
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(2003,) suggests, remain mindful of the tendency to approach definitions with a ‘natural attitude’ we are less likely to succumb to ‘metaphysical absolutism’ that blinds us to the normative and political, as opposed to legitimately descriptive, intent of definitions.

While still in the preliminary stages of analysis, this study already confirms the existence and nature of public relations' self-professed ‘identity crisis’. Findings indicate that there is a clear gap between widely held definitions of public relations in Australia and empirical description of the field. Further analysis will flesh out these findings and, through consideration of a multi-dimensional model of public relations, provide a starting point to create an evidence-based definition of public relations in Australia.

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