
Organisational legitimacy: The overlooked yet all-important foundation of OPR research

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Introduction

This commentary serves as a clarion call to scholars of public relations interested in the relationship construct in general and the relationship management paradigm in specific. In this commentary, we demonstrate the ways that organisational legitimacy (a meaning centric concept) is foundational to relationship and relationship management, but is often ignored in organisation-public relations (OPR) research and scholarship.

The term relationship and the general theory of relationship management dominate academic public relations research (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). In Ki and Shin's (2006) review of the organisation–public relationship literature, they found consistent, continual increases in the number of publications drawing upon general relationship management theories. Several years later, Huang and Zhang (2013) added to this finding; the authors analysed academic articles over the span of 12 years (2000–2011) from six leading academic journals known to publish public relations research (*Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journal of Communication*, and the *International Journal of Strategic Communication*) and found 40 articles using relationship management theory in some way. In short, relationship has become “a central focus of public relations scholarship” (Waters & Bortree, 2012, p. 123).

Relationship management's centrality to public relations scholarship, however, does not place it above scrutiny. Scholars are beginning to question the discipline's seeming blind allegiance to the relationship

management theoretical framework (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Heath, 2013; Waymer, 2013). Heath (2013) argued that we as scholars should not embrace relationship management frameworks uncritically. Drawing from the work of Boyd and Waymer (2011), Coombs and Holladay (2014) heed this call and argued “relationship” can be viewed as more than a research identity for public relations, but rather “relationship” can be treated as an ideograph—“an abstract term that calls for collective commitment and creates a powerful guide for behavior” (Boyd & Waymer, 2011, p. 484). So how can or has relationship become ideographic one might ask? Leading crisis communication scholars, Coombs and Holladay (2014) assert:

The relationship ideograph has narrowed public relations' field of vision. Research focuses on close relationships with little attention to weak ties, relational benefits to organizations are explored in detail while benefits to stakeholders are given cursory attention, and organization–public relationships are forced through an interpersonal lens rather than considering the utility of using parasocial interactions and parasocial relationships to analyze the connections between stakeholder and organizations. Public relations research and practice could benefit from a wide field of vision that includes weak relationships, stakeholder benefits from relationships, and an application of parasocial interaction and relationships. (p. 6)

A key point that emerges from this critique is that parasocial interaction (such as the

relationship and identification a fan has with a celebrity knowing that the fan will likely never meet the celebrity in real life) might be a better framework for exploring relationships in public relations than the interpersonal communication frameworks from which the relationship management theory in public relations is derived. This is a sage observation because scholars who study OPR often analyse large corporate entities—those with whom few members of publics actually have an interpersonal relationship (also take into consideration that organisations are inanimate).

Other critiques of the relationship management paradigm include Waymer's (2013) article in which he analysed, through the lens of OPR, President Clinton's apology to the survivors of the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments. Waymer (2013) found a prevailing assumption in the organisational-public relationship (OPR) literature (see Ledingham, 2003) "that issues in relationships must be allowed to run their life cycle, and if and when the cycle is complete, relationship management strategies can be employed and should be successful" (p. 329). The flaw with this assumption, Waymer argued, is that the notion of allowing issues to run their cycle rests on the foundation that maybe time does heal all wounds—despite the fact that researchers in psychology have found the opposite is true: time is not that powerful (Lucas, 2005). Thus, Waymer highlighted how certain publics—especially those that might have been harmed by an organisation such as African Americans after Tuskegee, Native Americans who historically have been terrorised and taken advantage of by the U.S. government, or even Japanese Americans who were shipped to internment camps following the attacks on Pearl Harbor—might distrust organisations and therefore choose to distance themselves from organisations they deemed have hurt them or have the potential to harm them in some way. Psychological and physical distance in these particular instances should not be deemed as trivial barriers, to be overcome communicatively, that are impeding the

desired organisational communicative outcome—for this distance is a part of the publics' (cultural) heritage that unites them and might serve as a warranted survival mechanism (Waymer, 2013). In these instances, no amount of communication savvy is likely to bridge those divides. Thus, the issue for the organisation in question (the U.S. government) is not its use of communication strategies or how well those strategies might be employed, but rather a question of whether the organisation is deemed legitimate by its publics. Meaning matters, and the public relations relationships research on relationships "largely ignores meaning" (Coombs & Holladay, 2014, p. 6). Thus, the goal of this commentary is to further serve as a corrective in that regard by demonstrating how legitimacy (a meaning centric concept) is foundational to relationship and relationship management, but is often ignored.

Literature review

Legitimacy, strategic issues management, and corporate social responsibility

A primary way that organisations can demonstrate their legitimacy to their publics is via their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. This belief is so prevalent that CSR has become the most common phrase used in business communication practice and in academe (Ihlen, 2009). Underpinning CSR, however, is the foundational construct of legitimacy (Heath, 1997). Heath (1997) argued that legitimacy is foundational to strategic issues management, which includes organisations' corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and initiatives. He further argued that CSR is the notion that organisations are to be held accountable for addressing at least a portion of issues and concerns that are important to the communities in which they operate. When organisations do not meet these publics' or societal expectations, a gap in legitimacy is present (Heath, 1997; Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Sethi, 1977).

Preceding Heath by two decades, Rex Harlow (1976), a United States public relations visionary, sought to refocus public relations by

championing an issues approach to public relations and CSR:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. (p. 36)

This statement reflected the prevailing incentive to examine every aspect of society; the private sector was examined under the microscope. At the same time, Sethi (1977) and others in management programmes—emphasising reinvestigation of political economy—explored the standards the private sector needed to meet to enjoy the right to operate and be deemed legitimate. Discussants noted that conflict occurs if a legitimacy gap exists between how key stakeholders expect organisations, especially businesses, to operate and how they actually perform. This legitimacy gap became the subject of numerous studies that addressed broadly the harmony between business, ethics, and society (see Post, 1978, 1979, 1985; Post & Kelley, 1988; Post, Murray, Dickie, & Mahon, 1983; and Buchholz, 1982a, 1982b, 1985, 1988). Critics questioned whether companies could operate as they preferred or whether they should be guided by or defer to stakeholder expectations. These questions, rooted in concerns over legitimacy, were the rationale for the development of an extensive body of literature on corporate social responsibility. For example, Ihlen, Bartlett, and May (2011) edited an extensive volume on CSR, and several of the chapters in some form

addressed CSR and legitimacy concerns including Heath and Palenchar's (2011) chapter that demonstrates that issue management, legitimacy, and CSR are invariably linked:

Legitimacy at the heart is a measure of the extent to which the artificial citizens (the legal status of business and other organizations) operate and depends on whether and how well it [business] serves the public interest. Their willingness and ability serve to justify their legitimacy. When CSR standards are at odds with the CSR preferences and expectations of one or more stakeholder groups, organizations are expected to defend the policies, operations, mission, and vision or change to adopt and implement higher CSR standards in order to achieve legitimacy (p. 321).

Other chapters that specifically addressed legitimacy in some capacity include but are not limited to: Bartlett's (2011) chapter that highlights public relations' central role in CSR and legitimating organisational action via communication; Ihlen's (2011) chapter that demonstrated the significance of rhetorical theory to our understanding and analysis of the ways corporations attempt to enhance their credibility and gain further legitimacy when they communicate about their CSR involvement and activities, and L'Etang, Lugo-Ocando and Ahmad's (2011) chapter that used a critical lens to shed light on issues of organisational ethics and CSR, calling for transparency in CSR promotions and activities. Golob and Podnar's (2011) chapter examines the functions and roles of dialogue in the process of demonstrating CSR while Bartlett and Devin's (2011) chapter demonstrates that CSR can be viewed as a strategic communicative activity in which organisations "may enhance their legitimacy through the disclosure of information regarding their performance on social or environmental issues" (p. 52).

Explicating the construct of legitimacy further, we draw upon the work of Boyd (2009) who made the case that legitimacy has at least two dimensions, namely *utility* and

responsibility. Discursively, the norms of legitimacy centre on how useful an organisation is to some societal end and how responsible it is in achieving such ends. By that logic, legitimacy is inherently normative. For example, when an organisation meets the expectations of key stakeholders, it is judged to be legitimate and acting in the interests of those stakeholders—as well as its own interests; thus, legitimacy is a matter of normative behaviour. The norms honed to the service of an organisation's mission and vision are judged to be legitimate, or not, by other key players in society. Such normative behaviour can be voluntary, forced, co-defined, negotiated, and co-enacted. It is the fodder of legislation, regulation, and litigation. It becomes the rationale for how and whether any organisation deserves rewards and avoids sanctions by conforming to community expectations (see for instance, Bartlett & Devin, 2011). Conceptualised this way, legitimacy is a matter of cost/reward generalised among and in the context of organisational and stakeholder interests. Defined by those whose interests are at stake, CSR standards, built upon the foundation of legitimacy, are contestable matters, unfinished business, and problems of community interest—the heart of strategic issues management. In short, to be deemed socially responsible, managements of organisations (for profit, non-profit, and governmental) must “demonstrate the characteristics that foster legitimacy, such as being reflective; being willing to consider and instrumentally advance others' interests; being collaborative in decision making; being proactive and responsive to others' communication and opinion needs; and working to meet or exceed the requirements of relationship management, including being a good corporate citizen” (Heath, 2006, p. 100).

With these principles in mind, especially the notion that relationship management is a vital aspect of organisations being deemed legitimate, the next section examines OPR's connections to the ways that organisations demonstrate their legitimacy via CSR efforts.

Legitimacy, OPR and corporate social responsibility

OPR advocates reason that effective relationship management can enhance organisational reputation (Hung, 2005; Yang, 2007). It could be argued, but rarely is, that an organisation's legitimacy derives from how well it manages its relationships. On this point, some OPR advocates have loosely connected CSR and OPR (Hung, 2005; Wang & Chaudhri, 2009). Hung (2005) argued that when asked about the importance of building communal relationships with publics the managers of Chinese and Taiwanese multinational companies were quick to mention aspects of community relations and/or corporate social responsibility. An OPR advocate, Ledingham (2006) observed, “the relationship perspective of public relations suggests that balancing the interests of organizations and publics is achieved through management of organization-public relationships” (p. 465).

OPR advocates test and engage a long list of relationship variables; these highlight communicative styles and strategies organisations can employ to foster, manage, and maintain beneficial relationships. The list includes reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, mutual understanding, investment, commitment, comfort with relational dialectics, control mutuality, positivity, openness, access, sharing of tasks, networking, as well as communal and exchange relationships (J. Grunig, 1992; Grunig, L. Grunig, J. & Ehling, 1992; Huang, 2001; Hung, 2005; Ki & Hon, 2006; Ledingham, 2006; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

Although many authors in a recent string of published OPR studies mention relationship, mutual benefit, and overall enhancement in relationship quality in their discussions of public relations (see Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Waters & Bortree, 2012), the systematic research of this topic has drawn on a formulary approach to interpersonal communication. Marital communication (typically the work of Canary and Stafford, see for instance Canary and Stafford, 1992, 1994) is often used as a

paradigm to identify and model the key variables needed to differentiate relationship quality. The logic essentially has become that antecedent conditions call for variables that then serve as independent and/or mediating variables predicting relationship quality, as a dependent or outcome variable (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997).

To understand the status of this topic, Huang and Zhang (2013) reviewed 40 articles to identify and model the variables that define relationship quality as a foundation for excellent public relations. The consensus is that OPR is multi-dimensional in how it is conceptualised; therefore, it requires a multi-indexed approach to the definitive measurement criteria, such as “relationship dimensions”, “relational features”, “relational outcomes”, and “relationship quality indicators”, which continue to be elusive (Huang & Zhang, 2013, p. 87).

Broadly, although it is not always so proposed, it can be argued that those organisations with qualitatively better relationships are more legitimate. For example, Ni and Wang (2011) examined OPR across cultures by conducting an online survey of a U.S. university’s international student population (246 participants from 32 countries). This project investigated cultivation strategies: Access, positivity, openness, assurance of legitimacy, networking, and sharing of tasks (the latter being a key theme of marital communication and equity theory). Cultivation strategies are independent variables that are used to predict outcome or consequences of relationship cultivations. These are trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction and relational commitment. Legitimacy in this case is operationalised as acknowledgement that various publics’ concerns are valid and as such those persons are “entitled in the organization’s decision-making process” (Ni & Wang, 2011, p. 271). Other than this connection, terms such as CSR or legitimacy play little role in this model and the OPR body of literature at large, but OPR researchers assume broadly that given antecedent conditions, cultivation strategies

can foster favourable consequences and mutual benefits. This limitation is an area of future development, growth, and promise for OPR research.

For example, the OPR framework seems to presume that the organisation is empowered to make such decisions as long as publics’ concerns are considered in that decision-making process. Such analysis presumes that cultivation strategies include allowing publics “access” to organisations’ decision-making processes (Ni & Wang, 2011, p. 271). Also relevant are the positive measures the organisation uses to make the relationship pleasant. Openness equals disclosure of the organisation’s feelings and thoughts about the publics. Networking entails building relationships with the organisations with whom the publics network. Finally, “*sharing of tasks* is mutual involvement of problem-solving processes in the areas of interest to the organization, the public, or both” (p. 271). How such problem solving occurs and whether it is relevant to CSR is unclear. Further exploring the meaning dimensions of relationship offers great promise for scholars interested in relationship management and dialogue. Take for example the following:

1. Wang and Chaudhri (2009) suggested that stakeholder relationships “are at the heart of the CSR and public relations functions” (p. 247). In making their case, they do not employ the OPR model mentioned above but rather see relationships as connected to issues of “communication outreach, education, occupational health and safety, and environmental protection” (p. 247) as master narratives.

2. Johansen and Nielson (2011) take a discursive approach to stakeholder relations. When organisations show their commitment to CSR concerns and take appropriate management responses then relationships become more positive. As such, CSR is based on social obligation and, perhaps, equity theory. Reflective business practices and effective communication might overcome the suspicion publics have toward why organisations act as they do, and consequently, relationships can be conceptualised as an organisation’s

commitment to community well-being (Roper & Weymes, 2007).

Thus, by looking more closely at these studies, it appears that the rationale for connecting CSR and relationship management is not so much how the organisation communicates, the style it adopts, what it communicates, or how it adjusts itself to key publics, but rather its ability to demonstrate its commitment to community well-being and useful collective engagement. As much as that requires communication, it even more presumes reflective management by which an organisation can foster its legitimacy by demonstrating that it is willing and able to meet prevailing societal CSR expectations and engage in dialogue regarding what those expectations are, the origins of those expectations, and how those expectations might be met.

Discussion

The literature suggests that OPR can be limited to the communicative strategies and styles employed by an organisation to foster rewarding relationships without regard to CSR. OPR is not issue oriented, nor is it fully grounded on principles relevant to the assessment of organisational legitimacy. Yet, as illustrated above via Waymer's (2013) work, if there is a deep-seated issue that serves as an impediment to the OPR, then better communication strategies will not resolve the issue. How does one truly measure if publics trust an organisation? How does one measure the strength of an OPR if publics do not deem the organisation legitimate? OPR tends not to have at its core a focus on matters of organisational performance expectations and organisational compliance to those expectations. This might be the result of the fact that OPR is not founded on propositional discourse. As such, as currently constituted, OPR cannot offer much in the way of a management or issue-oriented solution to the legitimacy quandary as Waymer (2013) demonstrated in government-public relations (a special type of OPR).

As currently constituted, OPR may be more relevant to reputation management and integrated marketing than to issues management. It can, for instance, predict that if an organisation employs specific communication styles and is positive, nice or generous it will enjoy the fruits of relationship quality. However, having a favourable reputation with some publics is not synonymous with being deemed legitimate by other stakeholders. As Deephouse and Carter (2005) concluded, "legitimacy emphasizes the social acceptance resulting from adherence to social norms and expectations whereas reputation emphasizes comparisons among organizations" (p. 329).

CSR and issues management are linked in the regard that they both demonstrate how organisations are resource dependent. Organisations' right to resources depends on how well they narrow the legitimacy gap by demonstrating that they know the contextually relevant standards of legitimacy (and CSR) and are willing and able to engage in discursive contest, as needed, to help forge agreement as to the standards.

Although links between OPR and CSR tend to be based on the argument that positive relationships are the key to organisations being perceived as being ethical and committed to the interests of its publics, for OPR to become relevant to legitimacy in general and CSR in specific, it must become based on a discursive, social construction rationale, whereby matters of power (see L'Etang, Lugo-Ocando, & Ahmad, 2011; Waymer & Ni, 2009), performance standards, and ability to add value to society are socially constructed—co-created and co-negotiated among multiple involved parties (see Johansen & Nielsen, 2011).

Implications

Practical implications

Efforts continue to be made to create a theoretical and practical rationale for helping societies to improve themselves through discussions of CSR and legitimacy. As a prevailing theoretical public relations framework, the authors argue that the future of OPR should more directly address issues of

legitimacy—for without legitimacy some might argue that there is no relationship. Others might argue that, at most, without legitimacy a good, quality OPR cannot exist. Relatedly, Heath (2013) cautioned that due to “robust interest in relationship as a public relations paradigm, it is important to pause periodically to re-examine assumptions basic to its conceptualization” (p. 426). In this commentary, the authors have done just that.

The authors, via a review of literature, demonstrated the problems associated with applying a concept from interpersonal communication to public relations and that OPRs are more akin to parasocial relationships than interpersonal relationships upon which the theory was established (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The authors have also demonstrated that relationship management research should take into account publics’ (non)desire for a relationship—for publics and their desires constitute a portion of the OPR equation that cannot be modified by behavioural adjustment tactics (Waymer, 2013).

Social Implications

If public relations is to live up to its normative ideal of helping societies become more fully functioning (Heath, 2006), conversations about what public relations is and how it should be practiced/implemented must occur in the boardroom and reflectively shape corporate budgeting rather than corporate budgeting shaping public relations initiatives including CSR efforts. Likewise, such conversations must assume the useful potential of others’ ideas and preferences (not just the organisational view). As the literature review above illustrates, to be most effective the management of OPRs should presume multiple voices in decision-making processes.

A discursive approach to relationships would presume the importance of judging the nature and relevance of the language constructions that define relationships in CSR terms, or vice versa. As much as relationships are variable dependent, a case can be made that those variables become more meaningful when framed discursively.

Conclusion

Society is made up of a network of organisations and publics. People compose organisations, and as such organisations should serve people in meaningful ways. That is the essence of the CSR ideal. The authors’ intention is to develop theory that is useful to the analysis of CSR and its role and impact on the quality of communities big and small. To that end, they have suggested how OPR could play a more important role in establishing and building upon legitimacy by adopting a discursive, or a more discursive analysis. Legitimacy is foundational to relationships, yet it is often overlooked. This call to scholars to make legitimacy a central component of relationship in public relations research is apropos because it seems oxymoronic that the framework with relationship in its name (OPR), as currently constructed is not adequately able to address the complexities of CSR—which by its nature is the study of more wholesome relationships among an organisation and its myriad publics.

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