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CONCLUSIONS ON THE COMPASS, CONTEXT, CONCEPTS, CONCERNS AND EMPIRICAL AVENUES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Øyvind Ihlen, Piet Verhoeven and Magnus Fredriksson

What should readers take away from the collective output of the essays in this book? It would be quite foolhardy to lump together the wide array of theoretical directions that have been presented here, and we are rather in awe of the sheer intellectual breadth that has been displayed by the theorists presented. A further caveat is that the task of summarizing and drawing parallels can hardly do justice to the sophisticated philosophical systems that underpin the different approaches. We also do not expect all of the Chapter 22 contributors to agree with our views in this respect. Nonetheless, we would like to suggest that five major conclusions may be drawn from the work of the social theorists presented here for public relations. These conclusions relate to (1) what *compass* or what knowledge interests scholars using social theory are guided by, (2) the importance of seeing public relations in its societal *context*, (3) what the central *concepts* for public relations are, (4) what important social *concerns* are brought to the fore by applying social theory to public relations activity and (5) the possibilities the presented approaches present for raising *empirical questions* about public relations. In the following, we elaborate on these five themes.

Compass: Expanding the Knowledge Interests of Public Relations Research

As a field of research public relations has a long history of scholars taking the organization as its point of departure. The map used to guide research is a map made up of concepts, models and theories with an ambition to explain and predict human behavior, be it managers, public relations practitioners, stakeholders or publics, and thereby understand how public relations is practiced, what kind of outcomes it can provide and how it can be improved. In this context, research

has been given a prescriptive role providing general models that can guide managers in their everyday activities, help them gain stronger positions in the organization they work for or as a profession and increase the societal understanding of how public relations works. This has been expressed in many different ways but few examples are as explicit as the following passage in the introduction to *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* where James E. Grunig (1992, p. 7) states that:

> A domain of scientific or scholarly inquiry, such as public relations, is held together not so much by agreement on theories as by agreement on the problems that theories used in the domains should solve. Public relations scholars and practitioners, for example, want to solve such problems as defining the contribution that communication makes to an organization, segmenting and targeting publics, isolating the effects of communication programs, gaining support of senior management for the communication function, understanding the roles and behaviours of public relations practitioners, identifying and managing issues, using communication to increase the satisfaction of employees, learning how public relations interact with marketing or defining how organizations should practice in the public affairs of a system of government.

This view is by no means exclusive for Grunig; instrumental research has dominated the field for long. In line with this mainstream literature have had a tendency to describe public relations as having evolved from more or less unethical publicity activities to today's ethical practice of communication management (Duffy, 2000; Moloney, 2000). Some of the literature seems to conflate the normative ideals of public relations with its observed day-to-day practice, or at least express optimism: it is for instance declared that public relations is "dedicated to truth and understanding" and that "dialogue represents a model with much closer correspondence to the lived reality of public relations" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 389) rather than a propaganda or monologue model. Such statements overlook the obvious fact that public relations for the most part has been looking out for the interests of powerful organisations, commercial as well as non-commercial.

This, on the other hand, has led some observers to portray *all* forms of public relations as sinister activities that work against the public interest (i.e., Beder, 1998; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Without taking into account that public relations can be put to work for causes and issues such as justice, the environment and health. Thus, the all-out, and sometimes unthinking, criticism of public relations is similar to the attacks on rhetoric. Those condemning rhetoric tend to forget that their criticism is in itself a form of rhetoric, just as those condemning public relations often use public relations techniques to gain publicity for their views. One question for the critics might be: can an organization *not* use public relations? Can it *not* communicate with its publics? The obvious answer that arises

from the social theories dealt with in this book is "no": just as individuals cannot *not* communicate (Watzlawick, 1976), organizations and social systems cannot *not* communicate, as one of their basic elements is subject-less communication (see Chapter 3 on Luhmann).

Turning to social theory, we would argue, can overcome the polarization between the two approaches describing public relations as something inherently good or something inherently bad. Few of the contributions in this book provide a programmatic view on what public relations *is*. Instead they offer tools that make it possible to analyze how it is practiced in different contexts without being tainted with normative presumptions of its motives, how it is practiced or what consequences it has. They therefore open up a number of new avenues for research and provide a wide range of approaches, tools and methodologies not frequently used in the field.

To be able to understand the reasons for this we have to go beyond the study object, public relations, and instead focus of the approach scholars have to science. In the field of public relations most scholars adhere to an approach driven by what Habermas (1978) coined as a "technical interest". That is, an axiomatic stance referring to nature and society as objects which can be "picked apart" by science that in turn can provide more knowledge about their properties and functions. It is knowledge production tied to empirical and experimental research where the study object is observed and controlled and with an ambition to provide testable general explanations and law-like explanation to how social life and nature function. Among the theorists presented in this volume there are few who adhere to this view on science even if some, for instance Robert Putnam, have prescriptive ambitions with their research. Most others are driven by other interests and in a few instances the very point of departure for doing research is a critique of the techno-administrative approach. As in the critical social science work of Bauman (see chapter 4).

To be able to describe the research agenda of the theorists presented in this book we have to pick up the other two research interests singled out by Habermas: the "cultural-hermeneutic interest" and the "emancipatory interest" that he introduced in order to better understand and help solve the problems between the technical rationality of the system world of science, the state and the economy and the communicative rationality of the lifeworld of the common people. Habermas thinks that dialogue between those two different rationalities is essential to save modernity, the modern project with its scientific rationality in the context of a liberal democracy. The three knowledge interests (technical, cultural-hermeneutic and emancipatory) are expressed in a certain type of scientific mode.

The cultural-hermeneutic interest gathers scholars interested in how humans conduct their lives and what meanings they attribute to their own and others' activities. It is about mutual and self-understanding and the cultural forms of life and how these interplay with each other as well as the natural environment. The

ambition is not to *explain* but to *understand* texts, practices, decisions from the subject's standpoint and put this in a historical, social, cultural, economic and/or political context. This means that the ambition is not to tell how things *are* but to tell how they are understood and what different understandings means for the subject and what she makes of it. A hermeneutic knowledge interest then brings scientific rigor to the small things of life.

In this volume, this knowledge interest is most evident in the work of Berger, Boltanski, Dewey, Goffman and Weber. What they all provide is a theoretical framework that can help us better understand why public relations is practiced as it is, what the mobilizing forces for public relations are in different contexts, the conditions under which public relations is practiced, what principles public relations practitioners, managers and other organizational members refer to when they do public relations and how rules, norms and ideas shape the conditions for public relations.

Habermas's third knowledge interest is emancipatory research. It brings up issue of rights, fairness and social justice and has as its outermost aim to overcome dogmatism, compulsion and domination and promote social change in order to share the benefits of a modernized society in more equal ways. It is research with an ambition to give voice to those who often are left out or hindered to take part in public life and give them possibilities to express their own experiences with their own words. Research is then one, out of several, methods to be used to empower marginalized actors. This makes power one of the central themes both in terms of what scholars study but also in terms of research in itself. As Giddens (1985) points out, power and access to resources is an aspect of all sorts of relationships.

In this volume, several scholars provide frameworks for this type of research including Habermas, Marx, Mouffe, Smith and Spivak. What they provide are theories for a normative stance on public relations where practice is scrutinized in regard to societal ideals. The aim might be to critically examine whether the use of public relations contributes, promotes, counteract and/or obstruct transparency, equality, participation and other values regarded as socially desirable. But it can also be to give voice to groups who are left out when practitioners as well as scholars set up priorities for their work. What Habermas's conceptualization of knowledge interests offers is an understanding of research being more than that and that hermeneutic as well as the emancipatory guided research is legitimate.

This edited volume and its predecessor is meant to be a further contribution to studies of public relations as a social activity, warts and all. Our hope is that readers will get ideas, tools and perspectives necessary to study and understand public relations as a social activity that is neither inherently good nor bad, but as one that lies at the heart of society and therefore constitutes one of the foundations of social communication. Rakow and Nastasia (Chapter 19) write that, the prime object of inquiry should be the *consequences* of public relations practice. Deliberation and research from different social theory perspectives will lead to a better

understanding of public relations practices and the consequences those practices have for society.

Context: Description of Society

Social theory in general is supposed to help us make sense of our lives by questioning the value and meaning of what we see around us. Most of the theorists in this book present diagnoses of contemporary society and use different labels to describe social change. The earliest analysis presented is that of Karl Marx, who saw society composed of those owning the means of production and those that were forced to sell their labor to the former. Civil society comprises a base and a superstructure, or ideology, that is dominated by the capitalists. In a Marxist analysis, public relations is typically seen as assisting in the keeping this order in place.

Another early analysis was presented by Max Weber, who predicted that society would be dominated by a rational order that would come into being through modernization processes. As Wæraas writes, a shift has taken place in "how human motivation had shifted from acting on the basis of traditions, values, or emotions in societies of the past, to acting on the basis of goal-oriented rationality" (p. 20, this volume). Myth and faith are replaced by rationality, that is, individuals, organizations and societies make decisions based on rational grounds. This rational decision-making process is at the heart of the narrative of modernity and has taken a central position in almost all spheres of modern societies, guarded by legal systems. Wæraas, and many others, however, argue that Weber's "iron cage of rationality" today thrives alongside an emotional and value-oriented order. This duality is part of what Lyotard (1979) called the postmodern condition, which is characterized by pluralism (e.g., Berger, Foucault), polycontextuality (Luhmann) and situated knowledge (e.g., Foucault, Smith, Spivak). Many theorists agree that conflict and dissensus are the central features of contemporary societies and that they are accompanied by all kinds of activism (Marx, Mouffe, Spivak). As argued by White (see Chapter 8), control and dialogue is intertwined and embedded in more general dynamics of social life. On the one hand, this postmodern situation is welcomed by some as a way of overcoming hegemony and dominance both locally and globally. Others, on the other hand, point to the different crises that have arisen in the past few decades. Several of these are encountered in this book: the crisis of knowledge and experts (Foucault, Smith, Spivak, Beck), the crisis of meaning (Berger) and the crisis of social cohesion (Putnam). The central issue that summarizes these crises is whether today's atomized individual who is bowling alone is able to make sense of his or her surroundings based on situated knowledge?

The theorists who point to these different circumstances do not usually label contemporary society as postmodern, but rather as a new phase of modern society. They use such phrases as "late modernity" (Giddens), "reflexive modernity" (Beck), "hypermodernity" (Lipovetsky, 2005) or "post secular" society (Habermas). The different methods that are proposed to handle the circumstances in society

range from accepting dissensus and conflict as the norm and studying them reflectively from a systemic point of view (Luhmann) to accommodating and solving conflicts through communicative action (Habermas) or through the "third way" of social instruments (Giddens) such as public relations. Still others state that we have never been modern at all (Latour) and that we should study the way in which our current non-modern condition is being constructed from scratch by all kinds of different actors and actants (see Chapter 6 on Latour).

The (social) constructivist perspective seems to dominate the way in which social theorists have described the process by which late modern society has come into being. For example, in the work of Berger, modern society is seen as a subjective construct shaped by individuals' conceptions and their interaction with social structures. Language is central in his social constructivist theory. Bourdieu focused on how the social world is structured, constituted, and reproduced through individual and collective struggle, particularly in relation to how reality can be legitimately defined (Bourdieu, 1990). Relations are the dominant factor here, and, with the three concepts of habitus, field, and capital, he constructed a type of sociology that he argued made the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism obsolete. At the core of human existence, however, conflicts and the relational production of difference remain. In Foucault's critical analysis of social institutions, power, knowledge, and discourse (understood as language and institutions together) are intimately intertwined. He considered that certain discourse coalitions produced modern knowledge and that these discourses express power at the individual and societal levels. This is made manifest in, for example, what Smith called the macro structure of gender and patriarchy and in Beck's concept of a risk society in which the production of knowledge about risks and the distribution of these risks are central.

Within this constructivist perspective, communication has acquired a central position at all levels of analysis (micro, meso, and macro). Communication is seen as central to the lives of individuals, groups, organizations, social systems, and societies. Using a dramaturgical perspective, Goffman looked to face-to-face interaction and interpersonal relationships and the way in which these reflect and add meaning and structure to social life. Through such concepts as impression management, framing and front- and back-stage behavior, Goffman showed how we act differently in different settings, thus demonstrating that society is neither static nor homogeneous. From this perspective, face-to-face interaction and interpersonal communication are the basis of social communication. Interpersonal communication also lies at the heart of the public sphere, as Habermas conceived of it in his history of the development and transformation of that sphere in Britain, France, and Germany. Citizens engaging in critical and rational discussions about political matters, either face-to-face or through communication media, constitute the public sphere. This public sphere functioned at first as a mediator between society and the state and facilitated ideals of equality, justice, and human rights. In the course of time, however, it

developed in the direction of serving the special private interests of political and commercial actors (see chapter 15).

Mediated and non-mediated communication has become, implicitly or explicitly, a central characteristic of social theory about contemporary society. Communicative issues in the democratic context are crucial in all of the theories presented: from dialogue and communicative action to the formation of discourse coalitions and narratives and communication processes without people on the level of social systems.

Reading between the lines in many of the chapters provides leads for the further development of a critical perspective on society and the role of public relations and professional communicators in society. For example, from her Marxist-feminist-deconstructivist perspective, Spivak sees society as basically unjust: there are "fundamental inequities bred by international divisions of labor and fed by the neoliberal projects of transnational capitalism" (Dutta, this volume, p. 375). These inequities not only play a role on a global scale, but also on national scales and in the communication between organizations and their publics. Hamelink (2006, July) raised a similar issue by pointing out the striking consistency between the results of a dialogue process and the position of the most powerful party in that dialogue. Questions about inequity and power connect to broader questions about society and the role of communication today. Using Mouffe, the distinction between politics and the political becomes important, and conflict is seen as what is constituting the political and society.

For public relations scholars, these broader questions about society and public relations can be clustered around four main social science themes, which are the same themes that Golding (2006, June) proposed for mass communications scholars: questions of power and the distribution of power in society, questions of equality and inequality in relation to communication, questions of identity-building through communication, and questions about social change and the role of communication in it. These four themes can also be derived from the social theories presented in this book. The different understandings of society, social order, and social change described above create the context for public relations and for research into it. These analyses have consequences for what can be seen as the crucial concepts of public relations and for what kind of social issues can be highlighted as important for public relations studies on different levels of analysis. The next section presents a discussion of these concepts, followed by a look at the issues.

Concepts: Trust, Legitimacy, Understanding, Reflection

Trust and legitimacy are key words in several of the chapters, as society has changed in a way that often causes people to question authority. Organizations now have to legitimize their decisions on a continuous basis. Such issues have indeed been the focal point of public relations for a long time, as illustrated by a

statement Arthur Page made in 1939: "All business in a democratic country begins with public permission and exists by public approval" (Griswold Jr., 1967, p. 13; see also Wæraas, this volume). Even earlier public relations pioneers such as Ivy Lee would probably argue along similar lines: you have to take into consideration what the public thinks of you to secure your continued existence (i.e., Hiebert, 1966). Various public relations scholars have touched upon the concept explicitly or implicitly since the scholarly field was established. The so-called excellence or symmetrical theory, for instance, sees public relations as a legitimate practice when it is built on the principles of symmetry and dialogue. Organizations and publics should adjust to others, rather than trying to control how others think and behave (Grunig, 2006). The rhetorical approach to public relations advocated by Heath (2000, 2001) sees organizations as gaining legitimacy by putting their ideas to the test in a public marketplace in which those ideas that are narrowly self-interested will not withstand public scrutiny.

In this book, we have gone to the roots of the concept of legitimacy, that is, to the original thinkers to see what they have to say about it and whether we can adapt some of their thinking to public relations. Critics have faulted public relations theory for not having a developed ontology (e.g., Cheney & Christensen, 2001), a fault we believe can be rectified using social theory. Although the use of the theoretical lenses presented in the previous chapters does not necessarily represent a paradigm shift, we would emphasize that the book offers valuable new theoretical insights that are grounded in social theory. Some of these theoretical points can be found in other publications by the contributors to this book, but we would also argue that their treatment in this collection enhances their overall theoretical value. Furthermore, we urge readers to look closely at the nuances on offer that make it difficult to conflate or subsume many of the theoretical points with current theories of public relations. We are offered several definitions of legitimacy in this book, spanning from the classic Weberian take of "the justified right to exist" to Luhmann's "generalized preparedness to accept decisions within certain boundaries of tolerance; decisions which are still undecided as regards contents" (Luhmann, 1969/1993, p. 28). Legitimacy in the work of Weber, however, is not the same concept it is in, say, Habermas. Whereas the latter would tie legitimacy to truth, Weber focused on the *beliefs* of the audience. As Aristotle argued about the ethos of a rhetor in *On Rhetoric* (trans. 1991), it is sufficient that the audience *believes* the rhetor possesses certain qualities such as loyalty and honesty. This, of course, is not to condone the absence of sincerity or truth, but rather it is a sobering analytical perspective on what works. Wæraas argues that organizations are bound by what the environment finds acceptable. Holmström argues that legitimacy defines the boundaries for decisions, which are seen as socially acceptable within a given time period.

Burkart uses the work of Habermas to suggest a model that can be applied by practitioners to help further the understanding between organizations and their publics. This in turn might be a basis for legitimacy. He calls for more

studies of how trustworthiness in particular is created and for explorations of the way in which the different validity claims put forward by organizations are interrelated.

Burkart also focuses on the creation of understanding and places the public relations practitioner in the midst of the process. In her chapter on Boltanski, Lee Edwards points to hove justification and critique plays an important part in debate to reach agreement in society. Falkheimer too gives public relations a central role. Using Giddens, he argues that public relations is one of the main strategies that organizations implement when they try to handle development in a fast-changing society. Public relations is a reflexive social expert system.

Holmström presents a somewhat similar view, but distinguishes between a reflexive system (a rather self-obsessed, non-problematizing perspective) and *reflection*. Using Luhmann, she writes about how public relations is a functional system that has turned into a reflective practice that helps organizations to become more sensitive and to realize that their perspective is just one of many. This reflective turn is necessitated by the increased need for organizations to legitimate their existence and their conduct. Holmström poses reflection as the core demand on organizational legitimacy, and she sees it as a consequence of organizations acting out of enlightened self-interest. The crucial tasks of public relations are to increase reflection (the sensor function), integrate reflection (the leadership function), and communicate reflection (the communicative function) (Holmström, 2004a, 2004b, 2005). Nonetheless, some commentators have challenged the duality of reflexiveness and reflection, arguing that it leaves out the gray areas in between (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2007).

Despite the insistence on trust as a focus for public relations, research on the public's level of trust in the public relations industry tends to show rather abysmal results (i.e., Larsson, 2007). This negative public sentiment toward public relations, coupled with a descriptive perspective of its everyday practice, has led some commentators to argue *against* the close relationship between trust and public relations. Instead, public relations "should be redefined as the communicative expression of competing organizations and groups in pluralist states" (Moloney, 2005, p. 554).

A similar view is put forward by Ihlen in his adaptation of the work of Bourdieu, who sees struggle as being at the center of society. Ihlen argues that public relations should thus be seen as a practice that assists organizational actors in pursuing their interests. To be trusted and to be seen as a legitimate enterprise, that is, to have symbolic capital, can have a double function in this sense, as it can be both a means and an end. Similarly, the development of social capital can also be seen as a means and an end for public relations. For the most part, however, the main goal of organizations is to position themselves in what Bourdieu calls "fields."

Precisely this development of social capital is the focus of Luoma-aho's chapter on Putnam. She sees public relations as having a positive role to play as a vehicle to create social capital. Indeed, she would like to redefine public relations as "the

practice of creating organizational social capital" (p. 203, this volume). She operationalizes Putnam's social capital concept by using the concepts of reputation (centered on past history) and trust (focused on the future).

To sum up, many of the contributors to this volume see the purpose of public relations as the building of trust and legitimacy, either as an end in itself or as a means for organizational goals such as survival or expansion. It may be worth noting, however, that the ontological perspectives of the theories presented imply that communication, legitimacy, and trust are not necessarily something that can be *managed*. Many scholars would like to see public relations become a management discipline, and various definitions exist that describe public relations as the management of communication or the management of relationships. Other scholars point out the futility of this ideal. Wehmeier, for instance, argues that legitimacy is conferred upon an organization by different publics, and hence it cannot be managed (Wehmeier, 2006). Taking contemporary social theory on board means that the picture becomes more complicated, sometimes frustratingly so, but it still provides a more realistic grip. Public relations has to do with the negotiation of knowledge, meaning and behavior, and, in this sense, it also involves issues of power, as discussed in the following section.

Concerns: Power, Behavior and Language

In one way or another, several of the chapters in this book deal with the issues of power and language. Public relations has to do with the negotiation of meaning, but also with the negotiation of behavior. Public relations obviously aims to influence how an organization acts, not only how these acts are interpreted. It is, however, very difficult to separate these domains: "Symbolic and behavioral relationships are 'intertwined like the strands of a rope'" (Grunig, 1993, p. 121). How can one's act not be interpreted in one way or another? How can the public be given a voice in management decisions without meaning being created? How can a dialogue be created with publics without communicating why this is beneficial for the publics and the organization? A call for studies of how meaning is created in such instances is not a call for public relations to abandon studies of other types of organizational acts or indeed the aspiration to influence such acts. The so-called behavioral approach and the interpretive approach are not mutually exclusive, although they are sometimes treated as if they were. Indeed, several of the theories presented in this book explicitly or implicitly talk about speech acts.

Referring to Goffman, Johansson writes about face-to-face interaction and the impressions that public relations practitioners and individual managers consciously and unconsciously create and communicate in different organizational settings. How are these impressions managed at the front and back stage? What impressions are apprehended and perceived by different audiences or publics? Using a distinctly interpersonal approach, Johansson argues that, at the core, public relations is about relationships with individuals who, in turn, make up publics. She

demonstrates the way in which the interpersonal relationships in a meeting are expressions of power that can be usefully analyzed via the concepts of framing, face and footing.

One of the resounding insights originally presented by Berger and Luckmann (1966) posits that reality is a social construction. Truth is seen as inseparable from discourse, that is, it is inseparable from the way in which we use language and interact with one another. This view is seen as opposing that of realists who think that objective knowledge is obtainable. Looking at the field of environmental sociology, it has been argued that because most scholars acknowledge elements of the others' positions, *weak realism* and *weak constructionism* might better describe their positions (Nørbech, 1997).

Exceptions do exist, but such epistemological concerns seem to have gained scant attention in public relations. It is often implied, for example, that information about the environment is something that the public relations practitioner collects when he or she engages in boundary-spanning on behalf of an organization. The belief seems to be that there exists an objective world out there that remains to be discovered and that the more information the practitioner makes available, the clearer the picture of that world becomes. Human existence and the sense-making process are thus over-simplified (Pieczka, 1996, 2006).

As discussed by Heide, Berger requests that, to gain a better understanding of public relations as an institution, we look behind and inquire into how public relations functions as the producer of certain dominating realities in society. These constructed realities also have a cognitive dimension, just as the public sphere has. Public relations, therefore, also plays an important role in the construction of knowledge and in the "tribunals of reason" (Latour, 1987) that take place before data become established knowledge or facts in society. Public relations *produces*, rather than reveals, knowledge about the products and services organizations offer or the issues they deal with. One area in which this cognitive dimension of public relations' contribution to the construction of reality can easily be studied is that of risk and crisis communication. Risk and safety have, in Beck's risk society, become largely communicative constructions. Risks are decided upon, produced by industry, and calculated by industry. Some risks have become predictable and are statistically safe, whereas others are too big and too difficult to calculate. Risk has thus become a knowledge problem, and communication plays an important role in the establishment of that knowledge. Taking the sub-discipline of crisis communication as an example, Heide also shows us the importance of a social constructionist perspective. He questions the separation between risk and crisis communication and draws attention to the sense-making process of individuals. He faults the literature on crisis communication for assuming that a crisis is an "objective" phenomenon that hits an organization. In reality, crises are much more complex phenomena, and studying them from a social constructionist perspective provides better insight into their origin, progress and decline.

Verhoeven suggests that the way public relations practitioners construct reality can be fruitfully studied with the help of Latour's Actor-Network-Theory, for instance, by looking at the associations they form. Public relations plays a part in dealing with the uncertainties surrounding the nature of groups, actions, objects, facts, and the study or production of the text itself. For White (see Chapter 8), dealing with uncertainties is *the* main issue which necessitates communication. For Meyer (see Chapter 9), the cultural embeddedness of organizations helps us understand the practice and leaves rationale choice out of the picture.

The way meaning is created and the type of meaning that is created have huge implications for issues of power. With the help of Foucault, Motion and Leitch help us to see that public relations is not solely found in the discourse domain of business, but also in the discourse domain of politics. Public relations is seen as "a discursive meaning creation process" (p. 344, this volume). It establishes and/or reinforces particular truths, hence its link to power. Why is something accepted as truth? As Berger (1999) points out, public relations can be seen as "a process intended to construct [an] ideological world view" (p. 200).

The work of Foucault alerts us to the importance of discourse, and Ihlen quotes Bourdieu in this sense: "linguistic relations [are] always relations of symbolic power" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 142). Language similarly structures our perspectives on the world, and it is the medium by which these understandings are communicated. Language is a form of symbolic power; it is a weapon, but at the same time a battlefield.

Public relations research has often taken the position of the corporation, as witnessed by such a title as *Managing Activism: A Guide to Dealing with Activists and Pressure Groups* (Deegan, 2001). Ihlen argues that it is obvious that activist groups also use public relations, and he would like to see studies of this practice also become a "natural" part of public relations.

Rakow and Nastasia point to a different type of exclusion from public relations, namely that based on gender, and they discuss this exclusion in relation to power. Using the work of Smith, they point out that public relations has mostly been "working from models in which people respond to the needs of the institutions" and that there is a need to develop theory that "contrast[s] women and men in positions of power to people outside of circles of power" (p. 354, this volume). Power is typically held by "the circle of men", and, as Smith has pointed out, "women have not participated [in] the construction of knowledge in the social sciences, and . . . women's ways of constructing knowledge about the social world [are] different from those described and canonized by sociologists" (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009, p. 264). This is also a call for the study of power in individual relations, as well as in the macrostructure in which certain powerful institutions produce meanings and hierarchies.

Dutta points to yet another form of exclusion. Taking up the postcolonial theory put forward by Spivak, he argues that public relations often helps to strengthen the neo-imperial agendas of globalization politics by recirculating

dominant configurations and minimizing opportunities for resistance (Dutta, 2009). Again, attention is directed toward representations and how, for instance, the Third World is portrayed as a primitive space that needs to be opened up for such "ultimate goods" as the market economy and democracy. With the help of Spivak, Dutta also helps us to see that dialogue is not necessarily a neutral tool, but rather that it is something that may obscure politics and thus something that either props up the status quo or furthers dominant interests.

In the preceding sections and in our discussion of the domain, context, concepts and issues of public relations, we have also established a basic framework for the empirical investigation of public relations. In the following section, we elaborate on this framework.

Empirical Avenues: A Research Program for Public Relations

Our step-by-step discussion of the compass, context, concepts, and concerns of public relations lays the ground for a basic framework for empirical research on public relations. The essays on social theory and public relations presented in this book give new theoretical perspectives on public relations. They also produce a wide range of analytical-level insights into public relations and individuals, organizations and the broader society. These analyses show clearly that we need social theory to understand what is happening in the professional field of public relations and how it influences other areas of society. They also open up the possibility of formulating empirical questions and hypotheses within the framework of the social theories presented here. This empirical research can lead to further theory building about public relations.

Drawing on social theory to analyze public relations opens up a wealth of possibilities and for formulating empirical questions and hypotheses. Social theory is necessary to describe, understand, and explain what happens to whom in the realm of public relations and with what consequences (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009). The most fundamental and shared premise would be that an empirical research program incorporates insights from what has been called the communicative, linguistic, or discursive turn. A constructivist starting point would entail micro studies of individual action to macro perspectives of system theory (Holmström, 2010; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). A social theory perspective in this manner can help fill the gap between the descriptive and normative studies in the managerial paradigms and the individualistic psychological studies in the behavioral paradigm. Public relations can be seen as different forms of communication, ranging from symbolic, interpersonal and social communication to the non-personal communication function in system theory. It is possible to distinguish between mediated and non-mediated communication on the micro, meso and macro levels.

To overcome the relativistic perspective that has gotten hold of some areas of scholarship and practice of public relations, the link between constructivism and

realism should be restored. Constructivism and social constructivism are often labeled as the postmodern form of anti-realism or idealism; the century old idea that there is no reality independent of the observation of the human mind. Against that idea, realists have defended the idea that reality does exist independent of our human observation. In his *Manifesto of New Realism,* the Italian philosopher Ferraris (2014) calls for a post-post modern stance on this issue. According to him the natural world is not construed by the human mind and is real independent of our observations. The social world on the other hand can be viewed as construed by humans, but it gets real (independent of our observations as well) through various forms of so-called documentality; (digital) recordings and documentation (Ferraris, 2013, 2016). In other words, many ideologies, policies and messages are socially constructed in or by public relations but in the end these constructions are resisted by a reality that exists and cannot be denied. Empirical research based on this foundation can shed realistic light on what is happening in public relations and how it is labeled good or bad and by whom.

Some of the questions raised by social theory would stem from the discussion in the previous sections and relate to the effects of public relations: what are the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on different publics? Such studies can be conducted with the help of, for instance, theoretical perspectives of framing (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999), agenda setting and priming (Scheufele, 2000), uses and gratifications (Ketelaar & van der Laan, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000), public opinion dynamics and formation (van Ginneken, 2003), cultural indicators (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorelli, 1994), spiral of cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), the reception gap (Zaller, 1996) or new media theories about computer mediated communication (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011) to name a few. A first step could be to conduct meta-studies about the effects of the numerous studies that have been conducted on this in the last 25 years.

Using social theory on public relations can help to understand how such a position is legitimized. Such an undertaking goes beyond the administrative approaches found in many of the communication journals. Elsewhere (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2009) we have posited a critical realist framework (Contu & Willmott, 2005; Reed, 2005) for this purpose. It is considered a perspective, like the new realism discussed above, that can offer a solution for moving beyond the deadlock between positivists (or realists) and social constructionists in the social sciences. It is a realistic philosophical alternative for modern and postmodern analyses because it acknowledges the social construction of reality on the one hand and the existence of a reality independent of our interpretations on the other hand. Critical realism proposes to explain social phenomena at the real/deep level of the structures and mechanisms that underlie them (see e.g., Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1986). In a critical realist framework, all the elements proposed in this chapter can be combined in an effort to explain strategic communication as a social phenomena. A research agenda for public relations in a critical realist framework does not impose a particular methodology or aim to produce one general theory of public relations. It opens up

questions on different levels of analyses: from impressions, perceptions and sensations, events and states of affairs to the real/deep structures and mechanisms in the field. It can also account for the role of culture.

A critical realist philosophy gives the opportunity for the field to develop both interpretative research programs in the cultural-hermeneutic and emancipative tradition and more objectified research in the technical evidence-based tradition. Combining these two research perspectives gives the best guarantee to overcome relativism and subjectivism in the field. Qualitative and quantitative research that can complement each other are necessary. The vast territory of social theory gives a lot of possibilities to investigate the causes, content and consequences of public relations.

Final Words

To summarize, we argue that (1) public relations has great influence in society and that it can be used for purposes that are both good and bad, public and private. Although it is not inherently ethical or unethical, we believe it can and should be studied like any other social activity. In other words, the academic discipline of public relations should not be limited to a technical knowledge interest or an insistence on its applied nature only. (2) The contributors to this book suggest that society is characterized by such traits as increased complexity and large-scale social change and that the practice of public relations must be understood in its societal context. (3) The latter point has implications for what are seen as the crucial concepts of public relations, and many of the contributions in this book single out trust, legitimacy, and reflection as the most important. (4) A societal perspective on the practice brings issues of power, behavior, and language to the center and invites investigation into how public relations creates meaning. (5) Using social theory in the practice of public relations offers a particular research program that opens up to macro-level empirical questions. A common starting point could be a new realistic constructivist perspective that involves theories of communication and an interest in agency and structure.

From the above comes the main conclusion that the core questions for public relations research are *how does public relations work and what does it do in, to, and for organizations, publics, or the public arena, in other words, society as a whole.* Again, however, we are not looking to argue for one general theory of public relations. Instead, we are celebrating the diversity of methodologies in the widest sense. It is also worth repeating that although the contributors to this volume have mined the works of "their" social theorists thoroughly, there is more to be had from these theorists, as well as from others who are not included in the book. Social theory can indeed be said to provide a rich source of material for research endeavors into the consequences of public relations in society.

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