

Measuring the Impact of Public Relations:
Using a Coorientational Approach
To Analyze the Organization-Public Relationship

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Introduction

Research has stressed that the quality of the relationship between an organization and its publics is an indication of public relations effectiveness (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Huang, 1999). While it seems intuitive that public relations should demonstrate its greatest impact on the organization-public relationship (OPR), early perspectives on the role of public relations within an organization did not always recognize this concept, focusing instead on one-way models of public relations. Probably due to the practitioner-focused research generated while the discipline was in its infancy (Ferguson, 1984), evaluating success in public relations consisted primarily of measuring the short-term, immediate results of a public relations program (“outputs”) or assessing the impact the program had on a target audience (“outcomes”). While it is necessary for public relations professionals to monitor these outputs and outcomes, focusing on these factors will only yield information about the success of an individual public relations program (Hon & Grunig, 1999). To gauge the true effectiveness of public relations over time, a long-term perspective needed to be taken, requiring not just a new way of measuring public relations impact, but a complete shift in the focus of public relations research and a new way of thinking about organizations and their publics.

This paper details the development of a new way of measuring public relations effectiveness. It focuses on the impact of public relations programming on the quality of the relationship between an organization and its publics by using established relationship measures within a coorientational framework. Unlike previous approaches, this paper outlines an integrated approach that will attempt to include both parties (the organization and the public) in an evaluation of the organization-public relationship (OPR) by combining the coorientational

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methodology advocated by Broom and Dozier (1990) with the relational dimension measures proposed by Hon and Grunig (1999). Applying these measures within the coorientational model will indicate the degree of agreement and accurate perception between organizations and their publics when assessing important relationship dimensions. This should generate a complete picture of the OPR. Furthermore, the strength of the OPR over time can then be used to help demonstrate the return on investment in public relations in order to illustrate the value of public relations to managers and clients.

Public Relationships

One of the primary hurdles practitioners and academics alike face in attempting to study public relations effectiveness is first determining what unit of analysis to use when measuring the impact of public relations programs. Should we use outputs (e.g., how many column inches of coverage were generated)? Should we use outcomes (e.g., increases in awareness among a target audience)? Should we focus on bottom-line financial results (e.g., did sales increase)?

Ferguson (1984) felt that the study of public relations should focus on finding a dominant paradigm, as well as a new unit of analysis, which public relations could call its own. The most promising candidate was the *relationship* that exists between an organization and its publics (OPR). Ferguson's content analysis of the journal articles in *Public Relations Review* over a nine-year period led her to propose that there was not only a need for further development of unique public relations theory, but that the study of relationships themselves should be the primary focus in public relations research. Ferguson states:

If I were to want to put my public relations theory development eggs in one basket, this would be it. It is difficult to think of any other field where the primary emphasis is on the

relationships between organizations, between organizations and one or more groupings in society, or, more generally, with society itself (p.16).

Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) extended Ferguson's (1984) research by conducting a content analysis of 748 articles in the three major public relations journals since their founding through 2000. While their results indicated that the total amount of work contributing to public relations theory development had increased significantly from 4% to 20% since Ferguson's study, not only had a dominant paradigm failed to emerge, but only 10% of the theory development articles focused on organization-public relationships, indicating the need for more research in this area.

This is not to say that the call for further development of the relational perspective has been abandoned; several scholars have pursued the investigation of public relationships and attempted to tie it to other areas such as measuring public relations effectiveness (Sallot et al., 2003). Ledingham (2001) has further developed the relationship perspective by suggesting a theory of relationship management that states "effectively managing organization-public relationships around *common interests* and *shared goals, over time*, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics [emphasis added]" (p. 190). Ledingham believed that relationship management could serve as a useful framework for organizing academic and applied endeavors in public relations. This raises the question - how does one identify and measure an organization-public relationship? What dimensions can be used to operationalize this phenomenon?

Relational Dimensions

Ferguson (1984) anticipated this question when she proposed that relationships should be the primary unit of analysis in public relations. She suggested that there are several dichotomous

dimensions that would help categorize relationships, including: dynamic/static, open/closed, and satisfactory/unsatisfactory. Ferguson also indicated that there are numerous other variables that would be useful in describing relationships, including the degree to which each party feels it has control over the relationship, the amount of power possessed by each party in the relationship, perception of shared goals, as well as understanding, agreement and consensus.

Many studies have sought to explicate the relationship concept through identification of relational dimensions. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) stressed a need for a common definition of the term “relationship” in order to facilitate the identification of descriptive dimensions. Their review of relationship theory in the fields of public relations, interpersonal relations, family relations, group dynamics, organizational relations, psychotherapy, and international relations found a lack of a common definition of what exactly is meant by the term “relationship.” In their opinion, this presented a barrier which would prevent scholars from measuring the actual relationship between an organization and its publics and instead continue to focus on indirect means of measurement that would only allow inferences about the relationship to be made (i.e., outputs and outcomes). Among their conclusions and suggestions for further study of relationships, Broom et al. make two important observations:

The formation of relationships occurs when parties have perceptions and expectations of each other, when one or both parties need resources from the other, when one or both parties perceive mutual threats from an uncertain environment, and when there is either a legal or voluntary necessity to associate...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 (p. 95).

All of these studies suggest four important points about the use of “relationships” as a unit of analysis in public relations:

1. Relationship quality can be viewed as a construct *independent* of other commonly used measures of public relations such as attitude change and behavior.
2. The concept of relationships is based in large part on the *shared perceptions* of both parties in a relationship.
3. Relationships *change* over time.
4. Relationships can be *measured*.

Measuring relationships between two or more parties has been attempted previously in the interpersonal and mass communications fields. Laing, Phillipson, and Lee (1966) developed an Interpersonal Perception Method for assessing the perceptions of husband-wife dyads. Their measurement items focused on the relationship between the couple, not on perceptions of the spouses themselves. Their model “operates under the assumption that paired individuals sharing experiences over time come to develop ‘reciprocal perspectives’” (O’Keefe, 1973). Again, this seems to indicate that one way of defining a relationship is through assessment of how the parties involved in the relationship perceive the relationship itself.

Public relations researchers have further explicated the defining dimensions of relationships within the literature in order to facilitate measurement of the construct. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) conducted a survey of local telephone subscribers in territories newly opened to competition from other phone service providers as a testing ground for several proposed relationship dimensions. They utilized Wood’s (1995) relational dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, investment and commitment. Wood had previously identified these dimensions as essential for successful interpersonal relationships. Ledingham and Bruning

concluded that a organization-public relationship positively evaluated using these variables illustrated the value of a quality relationship to an organization's bottom-line and could be used to illustrate the effectiveness of public relations.

Ledingham (2001) used the Bruning-Ledingham Relationship Scale to assess the public's perceptions of relationship quality between community leaders and citizens in a suburb of a major Midwest metropolitan center. Initially developed in Bruning and Ledingham (1998), the Relationship Scale is a multi-item, multi-dimensional scale that measures three types of relationships (personal, professional and community) across eight different dimensions (trust, openness, involvement, investment, commitment, reciprocity, mutual legitimacy, and mutual understanding). Ledingham provided additional support for the relational perspective and offered several observations for managing organization-public relationships, including the need for identifying *common points of interest* between organizations and publics, as well as the conducting of longitudinal studies that examine how OPRs *change over time*.

Other studies have focused on likely relational dimensions such as openness, trust, involvement, investment, and commitment (Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison, & Lesko, 1997). Most notably for the purposes of this paper, Hon and Grunig (1999) developed quantitative measurement scales for assessing six proposed dimensions of an organization-public relationship: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationships, and communal relationships. These scales have proven to be "good measures of perceptions of relationships, strong enough to be used in evaluating relationships" (p. 5). The dimensions are described below, each accompanied by a sample Hon and Grunig measurement item:

Control Mutuality

Control mutuality encompasses the extent to which the parties in the relationship agree as to who is authorized to exert power and control over one another. This construct recognizes that in many organization-public relationships, the organization typically has a more extensive pool of resources that will grant it a larger measure of control; however, a positive, healthy organization-public relationship will not be controlled purely by one party or the other – each party will be allowed to exercise some measure of power in the relationship. A sample item from the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale used to measure control mutuality reads, “This organization and people like me are attentive to what each other say” (p. 4).

Trust

The trust dimension is actually made up of several other concepts which include integrity, dependability, and competence. Integrity is defined as the perception by one party that the other party in the relationship is “fair and just.” Dependability is the perception that a party will follow through on its promises and do what it claims it will do. Competence is the perception that a party in the relationship has the resources necessary to do what it claims it will do. A sample item from the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale used to measure trust reads, “This organization treats people like me fairly and justly” (p. 4).

Satisfaction

Parties perceive a relationship as satisfying when the expected benefits of being in the relationship exceed the costs of being in the relationship. Satisfaction can also be achieved when the parties in the relationship feel that the other party is putting an adequate amount of effort into maintaining a positive relationship. A sample item from the Hon & Grunig (1999) scale used to measure satisfaction reads, “I am happy with this organization” (p. 4).

Commitment

The commitment dimension can be conceptualized in two ways. Continuance commitment refers to the belief that a party feels the relationship is worth maintaining through policy or action, while affective commitment refers more to the emotional energy that is expended in maintaining the relationship. A sample item from the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale used to measure commitment reads, “I feel that this organization is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me” (p. 4).

Exchange Relationships

In exchange relationships, each party interacts with the other for the purpose of receiving something in return. Effort is expended on the relationship because benefits are either immediately realized or there is an expectation that the other party will reciprocate at a later date. A sample item from the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale used to measure exchange relationships reads, “Whenever this organization gives or offers something to people like me, it generally expects something in return” (p. 5). This type of relationship is more descriptive of the superficial relationships fostered by advertising and marketing, not the long-term, meaningful relationships sought through symmetric public relations channels.

Communal Relationships

Public relations efforts, specifically those that place a premium on developing healthy organization-public relationships, should be more concerned with fostering communal relationships. The parties in communal relationships provide benefits to one another just as in exchange relationships. The difference lies in the expectations that are associated with the granting of benefits. In an exchange relationship, reciprocation is expected – not so in communal relationships. Benefits are granted because the parties in the relationship truly care

about each other, not because they are expecting something in return. Relationships that are communal in nature should exhibit higher levels of trust, control mutability, continuance, and satisfaction than demonstrated by exchange relationships. A sample item from the Hon and Grunig (1999) scale used to measure communal relationships reads, “This organization does not especially enjoy giving others aid” (p. 5).

Recognizing a Western orientation in the selection of the dimensions used to define relationships, Huang (2001) developed an OPRA scale which used four of these dimensions (control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment) while adding a fifth dimension that reflected Eastern culture (face and favor). Favor (or *renqing*) is a mode of conduct in which individuals stay in contact with influential parties, while face (or *mianzi*) is more of a resource (somewhat similar to the Western concepts of ‘pride’ or ‘respect’) which can be exchanged between individuals as a means of securing favors. This resulted in a multi-item scale that could reliably be used to understand perceptions of relationship quality.

While studies have applied these relational dimensions in a variety of contexts (Cameron & McCollum, 1993; Huang, 2001; Ledingham, 2001) they are typically limited to measurement of the public’s perception of the OPR while ignoring the other party in the relationship – the organization. Despite many researchers advocating its inclusion (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2001, 2003; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), the organization’s perceptions remain strangely absent from OPR research. One strategy for integrating both the public’s and the organization’s perceptions of the relationship has been suggested numerous times in the literature, but seldom applied in measuring organization-public relationships. This method is the coorientational approach.

Coorientation

Again, Ferguson (1984) proved to be forward thinking in this regard. Among the dimensions that she suggested could be helpful in quantifying the nature of organization-public relationships, she listed mutuality of understanding, agreement, and consensus, and noted that the “coorientational measurement model should prove quite useful in conceptualizing relationship variables for this type of paradigm focus” (p. 17). Broom and Dozier (1990) also suggested the use of a coorientational approach for generating a clearer picture of the organization-public relationship, although they proposed having the organization and the public make joint assessments of an issue of mutual concern rather than making assessments of the relationship itself.

With theoretical roots in Newcomb’s (1953) Symmetry Theory, coorientation proposes that the attitudes of two parties (A & B) toward an object (X) are influenced in large part by how they perceive each other’s attitudes toward the object. Symmetry theory posits that individuals will seek balance in their interactions, therefore “enabling two or more individuals to maintain simultaneous orientation toward one another and toward an object of communication” (Newcomb, 1953, p. 394). This is based on the idea that individuals seek *consistency*, or a tendency towards symmetry, in order to maintain an internal equilibrium and achieve balance. In order to achieve this balance, an individual may use communicative acts to change another individual’s attitudes or behaviors, or failing that, the individual may adjust their own attitudes and behaviors.

For example, consider two individuals in an interpersonal relationship (A & B) and their attitudes towards the President (X). Albert (A) likes Betty (B), but dislikes the President (X). Betty likes Albert, but does not agree with him regarding the President. Albert is then faced with

an internal inconsistency: how can he like someone who disagrees with him regarding the President? Albert has several options. He can try to sway Betty to change her mind. This will result in a balanced equation where Albert and Betty like each other and they both dislike the President. However, suppose Betty refuses to change her mind. In order to obtain symmetry, Albert must either change his attitude towards Betty (disliking her because she does agree with him) or change his attitude towards the President so that it is now acceptable to like Betty because they agree on their attitudes towards the President.

Previous work attempted to extend this interpersonal approach to communication between collectives (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973; Grunig & Stamm, 1973). McLeod & Chaffee reviewed interpersonal approaches to communication research including the coorientational model. Grunig & Stamm (1973) advocated a coorientation paradigm for communication between an organization and another social collective (i.e., public). Particularly striking is Grunig and Stamm's observation that "if a researcher uses a coorientation paradigm...he can focus his attention on the *relationship* of sender to receiver in the communication system [emphasis added]" (p. 567).

Again, these studies suggest important conclusions about the relationship between two entities; most notably that the relationship is a construct separate from measures of attitudes towards issues, people and other objects external to the relationship. For instance, in our previous example of Albert and Betty, the state of their relationship is a completely different construct independent of their assessments of the President. This is an important distinction for public relations researchers and practitioners to keep in mind because it suggests that two entities (e.g., an organization and stakeholder public) can hold similar attitudes about an issue of common concern, and yet the relationship between them can still be considered a "poor"

relationship (and vice versa). Also, the model again stresses the point that it's not enough to consider what one party in the relationship thinks, but that both parties have a say in defining the true nature of the relationship; the nature of the relationship rests on shared meaning. Using our simple interpersonal example above, Albert may like Betty, he may think that she likes him, and he may think that they have a healthy relationship, but if Betty doesn't like Albert, then their relationship is not healthy, regardless of Albert's perceptions. Simply put, the saying that it takes two to tango is directly applicable to public relations relationship measurement. Using a coorientational approach to the measurement of organization-public relationships directly addresses this problem of shared meaning and perception.

Coorientational Approach

A coorientational approach to measuring the OPR includes four points of analysis: (1) the organization's view of the relationship, (2) the public's view of the relationship, (3) the organization's estimate of the public's view of the relationship, and (4) the public's estimate of the organization's view of the relationship. The interaction between these variables creates three measures of coorientation. "Agreement" indicates the degree to which the organization's view matches the public's view of the OPR. "Accuracy" indicates the degree to which the organization correctly *estimates* the public's viewpoint, and vice versa. "Perceived agreement" (or "congruency") is the degree to which the organization's view matches its *perception* of the public's viewpoint, and vice versa. The coorientational model presented in Figure 1 is adapted from Broom and Dozier (1990) and helps to clarify the linkages among these concepts.

The coorientational model has been used in other fields such as interpersonal communication (e.g., O'Keefe, 1973; Purnine & Carey, 1999), employee communications (e.g. Jo & Shim, 2005), political science (e.g., Hesse, 1976), journalism (e.g., Jones, 1993) and

environmental policy (e.g., Connelly & Knuth, 2002), but even in these instances it is usually limited to assessments of one side's perceptions of the relationship or evaluations of an issue common to both parties. The model has also been applied to some degree within a public relations context, but its application has been either piecemeal (by ignoring the organizational perspective) or focused on issue or attitude assessment rather than relationships (e.g., Broom & Dozier, 1990; Stegall & Sanders, 1986). Cameron and McCollum (1993) used part of the coorientational approach to investigate internal corporate cultures and perceptions of the relationship between employees and their company. However, Cameron and McCollum only used employee perceptions of the relationship and organizational communication efforts in their analysis. They did not look at upper management (i.e., the organization's dominant coalition) perceptions of the relationship between themselves and their employees (i.e., an internal public). This is typical of the current state of incorporating the coorientational model into public relationship research. Study after study tiptoes around the coorientational approach without utilizing the perceptions of both the organization and its publics in measuring the relationship between them.

Perhaps the closest that recent research has come to the using relationship measures in a full coorientational framework are studies by Shin & Cameron (2005) and Christen (2005). In Shin & Cameron (2005) the source-reporter relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists was analyzed using some of the Hon-Grunig measures in addition to other measures of conflict. However, this study looks at two distinct publics, the members of which are not unified in any sense beyond their choice of profession (e.g., the public relations practitioners didn't all work for the same firm). Evaluations were based on one profession's assessment of the other profession. The coorientational approach of relationship measurement

still has yet to be fully utilized within the context of an organization-public relationship in which the public in question is a stakeholder in the organization. Christen (2005) considered the use of measures of power and trustworthiness in moderating willingness to negotiate between groups; however, her study did not use the Hon-Grunig scales for measuring relationship quality. Additionally, the study used students in an experimental design in which they were to assume the identities of various groups and did not assess the perceptions of the organizations and their stakeholders directly.

Integrating the Coorientational Approach with Relationship Measurement

The remainder of this paper outlines a methodology for including both parties (the organization and the public) in an evaluation of the organization-public relationship by combining the coorientational methodology advocated by Broom and Dozier (1990) and others with the relational dimension measures established by Hon and Grunig (1999). Applying these measures within the coorientational model will yield assessments of accuracy, agreement, and congruency in order to generate a complete picture of the OPR. Though often suggested, the organization's perceptions of the relationship between itself and its publics have not been included in previous investigations of the OPR. Additionally, changes in the strength of the OPR dimensions can be tracked over time and then incorporated with other tools that measure return on investment (ROI) in order to demonstrate the impact of public relations efforts.

Adapting the Relational Dimensions for the Coorientational Approach

The first step is adapting Hon & Grunig's (1999) relationship measurement scale so that the same items can be used while surveying both the public and the organization. This is achieved by restructuring the questions so that they are more objectively worded. For instance, the first trust measure reads, "This organization treats people like me fairly and justly." While

this is appropriate for a respondent from a public sample (the sample frequently used in current research), it would be awkward when applied to a member of an organization. For example, if you were interested in the relationship between Organization A and Public B, the new objectively reworded trust measure would read, “Organization A treats Public B fairly and justly.” This statement would be appropriate for use with respondents from both the organization sample and the public sample.

Such objective wording would not only be consistent with the theory behind coorientational approach, but also with the goal of explicating the relationship as a construct independent of the parties in the relationship. First, both symmetry theory and coorientation conceive of the interested parties (A & B) evaluating another object (X), not necessarily just each other. By rewording the statements, we make them objective statements about the relationship between A & B – the “relationship” essentially becomes the “X” within the A-B-X framework. Secondly, by having the organization and the public evaluate objectively worded statements about the nature of the relationship, perceptions of the individual parties are explicated somewhat from the perceptions of the relationship between the parties, making for a more independent relationship construct. The reworded statements don’t ask a respondent how the organization or public treats the respondent per se, but now focuses on the dynamic between the organization and the public.

The final survey utilizes the Hon-Grunic (1999) short scale of relationship measures for trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment. In the interest of parsimony, the final two dimensions, exchange relationships and communal relationships, are dropped. These two constructs are really *types* of relationships and are therefore reflective of the other dimensions rather dimensions in and of themselves. Also, given that each respondent will rate every

statement twice (once for themselves, once for their estimate of the other party's response), dropping the nine items making up these two dimensions actually shortens the survey by 18 questions. Their removal should significantly reduce respondent fatigue and cut down on satisficing behaviors.

Sample

Defining, identifying, and recruiting representative samples for this procedure depends on the nature of the organization and the public(s) to be studied. In every application of the method, two perspectives need to be represented: the organization and the public of interest. Depending on the size and structure of the organization, either a representative sample of the organization would be drawn or a full census. In most situations, a random sample of the public of interest would be drawn.

To illustrate how the sampling process would be governed by the situation, two examples are provided. In our first example, suppose an organization was interested in the relationship between management and an internal public such as its employees. The organizational sample could be composed of all upper-level managers while the public sample could be composed of either all employees (in the case of small company) or a random sample of employees (in the case of a large company). The sample could also be stratified to focus on different types of employees such as full-time, part-time, new hires, etc. In the second example, suppose an organization was interested in the relationship between the organization as a whole and an external public, such as customers. The organizational sample could be constructed to represent both management and lower-level employees (or focus solely on the dominant, decision-making coalition) while the public sample could be a constructed from a random sample of customers

(again, with the option of stratifying the sample to isolate new customers, long-term customers, etc.)

Survey Administration

Alternately worded versions of the questionnaire should be administered to respondents from the public and the organizational sample. While the same objectively worded relationship items would be presented in both the public and the organization versions of the survey, each survey should include directions that are worded with the appropriate respondent type (organizational or public) in mind. Also, there would be some variation in the type of demographic questions used. For example, asking members of the organization how long they had been with the organization while asking members of the public how long they had been customers, advocates, activists, etc.

In both the organizational and public version of the surveys, the 21 items representing the four relationship measures are presented twice. In the first presentation, each respondent should indicate their personal response to each item. In the second presentation, the respondent would be instructed to estimate how a member of the other party (either organization or public) would respond to the same item. Following Hon and Grunig (1999), the questionnaire should ask respondents to use a seven-point Likert scale to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with statements that measure the four dimensions of control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. While Hon & Grunig (1999) used a nine-point scale, studies of survey research response options have indicated that respondents find five- or seven-point scales easier to utilize (Groves et al., 2004).

This process would yield a data set for each of the four coorientational elements: (1) the public's view of the relationship, (2) the organization's view of the relationship, (3) the public's

estimate of how the organization views the relationship, and (4) the organization's estimate of how the public views the relationship.

Broom and Dozier (1990) also point out that using the coorientational approach before and after public relations activities could help illustrate the effectiveness of those efforts, thereby fulfilling one of the promises of the relationship management perspective – pointing to the value of public relations. Therefore, the coorientational assessment should be completed at two points in time. For instance, Time 1 (T_1) would measure the OPR prior to a public relations campaign while Time 2 (T_2) would measure the OPR after the campaign.

The surveys should include additional demographic measures and other items that gauge exposure to internal or external organizational communication and public relations efforts. Again, the exact nature of these measures would depend on the specific relationship under study. For example, if the relationship being measured is between the organization's management and its employees, then employees should be asked questions such as “how long have you worked for this organization?” and “how often do you read the company newsletter?” Researchers utilizing this method should work closely with the individual organization to craft appropriate items that answer the questions that are of interest to the organization and capture the nature of the specific relationship being evaluated.

Additionally, measures of investment in public relations by the organization and measures of public relations activity could be considered. This would include tracking public relations campaign expenditures, tracking public relations outputs (e.g., amount of earned media placements) via a content analysis of stories mentioning the organization to capture the tone of the coverage over time, and tracking target public behaviors of interest (e.g., purchases, membership, public opinion, voting, etc.). Again, the specific measures to be included would be

dictated by the specific type of organization-public relationship being investigated, the type of organization (e.g., service, manufacturing, governmental, etc.) and the type of public (e.g., constituents, membership, employees, consumers, etc.). Again, these measures would also need to be made at multiple points in time (T_1 , T_2 , etc.).

Data Analysis

Data analysis begins by calculating mean scores for the four relational dimensions within each of the four coorientational elements. Broom and Dozier (1990) recommended two methods for making comparisons between the coorientational elements. The first consists of calculating correlation coefficients between mean scores for the public and the organization. The other method requires the calculation of difference scores between means for the public and the organization. While a combined approach can be utilized, Purnine and Carey (1999) felt that the correlational method produced superior results. However, Purnine & Carey's study focuses on making comparisons between paired individuals who were married. Such an approach wouldn't make sense within the context of a single organization-public relationship. Since most practical applications of this method will only be focusing on one organization and one public of interest (either internal or external), the best strategy would be to calculate mean scores for each relational dimension for both the organization and the public of interest and then compare the means for significant differences between the organization and the public. Aggregate level scores on the various relationship items could be used to determine fluctuations in the measures over time.

By making these comparisons between the four coorientational elements, it will be possible to determine the accuracy, agreement, and perceived agreement (congruency) between the organization's and the public's views of the relationship. This interaction of the perceptions

of the relationship between the parties will yield a clearer picture of the relationship and is quite possibly as close as one could get to measuring such an intangible construct as a “relationship.”

OPR measures should also be correlated with the public relations activity and investment measurements at T_1 and at T_2 in order to determine the strength of association between the quality of the OPR and investment in public relations activities. By comparing the strength of association at T_1 and at T_2 , it would be possible to see how this association changed over time.

The Value of the Coorientational Approach

This approach has several practical applications for the profession. Not only can it be used as a measure of public relations effectiveness, but it can also help support academics and practitioners in their effort to prove the value of public relations to their organization’s management or to their clients. Heath (2001) notes that there are “cost-reduction paradigms” and “revenue-generation paradigms” that are used to justify the value of public relations. That is to say, one way of looking at the value of public relations is that it isn’t necessarily tied to the bottom-line, that there isn’t always an immediate financial benefit. Grunig et al. (1997) state that effective public relations helps an organization by reducing the costs, stress and strains experienced by the organization due to conflict, legislation, and litigation. For instance, good crisis management programs may not generate revenue for an organization, but they can certainly help the organization prevent the loss of revenue by avoiding litigation. Public relations programs can also help an organization weather tough times by building strong relationships with publics prior to a crisis occurring. In this perspective, the bottom-line isn’t the end all be all indicator of the value of public relations – other units of analysis, such as outputs and outcomes are more often relied on, but as we saw earlier, these measures may not be the best barometers of the long-term relationship building goals of public relations. However, despite

ongoing calls for better measures of public relations effectiveness, the predominant means of assessing public relations impact continue to center on outcomes and outputs (see Xavier, Johnston, Patel, Watson, & Simmons, 2005 for a concise review of the literature on program evaluation).

In this regard, the coorientational method outlined above may provide a better measure of effectiveness by going beyond simple outputs and outcomes and yielding information about the relationship between the organization and the public itself. As has been noted in previous literature, outputs, although popular measures among practitioners, can be weak indicators of effectiveness. Just because a program obtained a lot of media placements doesn't mean the placements had the impact desired. The coorientational relationship measure also goes beyond simple outcomes. Commonly utilized outcomes (such as awareness of an organizational offering) focus more on the results of a particular public relations program, while the coorientational relationship measure is a gauge of more long-term and stable results. Put another way, consistently positive program outcomes should eventually lead to positive relationships. But even this fails to capture the dual-sided nature of the relationship by focusing on the effects of program outcomes on the target audience's perception of the relationship. The coorientational relationship measure provides a snapshot of the whole organization-public relationship in the form of shared perceptions and gaps in perception between the organization and publics, thereby facilitating diagnosis of the relationship and suggesting possible prescriptive actions to improve the relationship if need be.

By making comparisons between the four coorientational elements, it will be possible to gauge the state of accuracy, agreement, and perceived agreement (congruency) between the organization's and the public's views of the relationship. Based on these comparisons, one can

determine whether the relationship between the organization and the public is based on true consensus (accurate perception of strong agreement between views), dissensus (accurate perception of strong disagreement between views), false consensus (inaccurate perception of agreement), or false conflict (inaccurate perception of disagreement).

For example, use of the coorientational method of relationship measurement might reveal that there is strong agreement between the true viewpoints of the organization and the public, but due to poor articulation of the organization's viewpoint, the public inaccurately perceives that the organization's views are incongruent with its own. In that case, a state of false conflict exists between the organization and its public. Armed with this information, public relations programs targeted at this public might highlight the areas of true agreement between the organization and the public in an effort to strengthen the accuracy and congruency dimensions of the relationship.

Looking at the relationship between the OPR measures and public relations activities will indicate the effectiveness of these activities in actually changing the relationship that exists between the organization and the public. By looking at individual dimensions, it will be possible to identify exactly which aspects of the relationship were affected by public relations efforts. For example, the public relations campaign may have increased trust between the organization and the public but failed to affect commitment.

Again, this information can be used to evaluate and refine ongoing and future public relations efforts. It would also be a means of demonstrating the return on investment in public relations to a client by illustrating that public relations activities influence not only the amount of earned media, etc., but more importantly, how public relations impacts the actual relationship between and client organization and its publics. .

Of course, this may not satisfy clients and managers who adopt the “revenue generating paradigm” and continue to define public relations effectiveness in terms of dollars. In this perspective, public relations should be impacting the bottom-line business results of an organization, such as increasing sales. Even if the client or organizational management insist on adopting this viewpoint, then the coorientational approach to measuring relationships still has value, especially if it is integrated into other methods of determining return on investment. For example, Kim (2001) developed a two-stage model that illustrated the impact of public relations expenditures on corporate reputation, which in turn was correlated with market share. Coorientational relationship measures could be utilized in a similar fashion by determining the amount of money budgeted for public relations program at T₁, T₂, T₃, etc., linking expenditures to the relational measures (via mean or mean difference scores) over time, and then in turn connecting this to market share at T₁, T₂, T₃, etc.

The relationship measures could also be utilized in market mix models. Proctor & Gamble is but one company that is using marketing mix tools to illustrate the value of public relations versus advertising (Neff, 2005). The coorientational relationship measures between an organization and publics segmented by geographic region and time could be incorporated into these models along with expenditures on public relations, advertising, direct marketing, and other marketing communication expenditures as well as sales data. Along similar lines, overall metrics representing the strength of the relationship or mean score differences of the individual measures could be incorporated into an organization or firm’s existing ROI tools, such as Ketchum’s ROI Lab (Rockland, 2005) in order to clarify the link between public relations expenditure, public relations impact, and bottom-line business results.

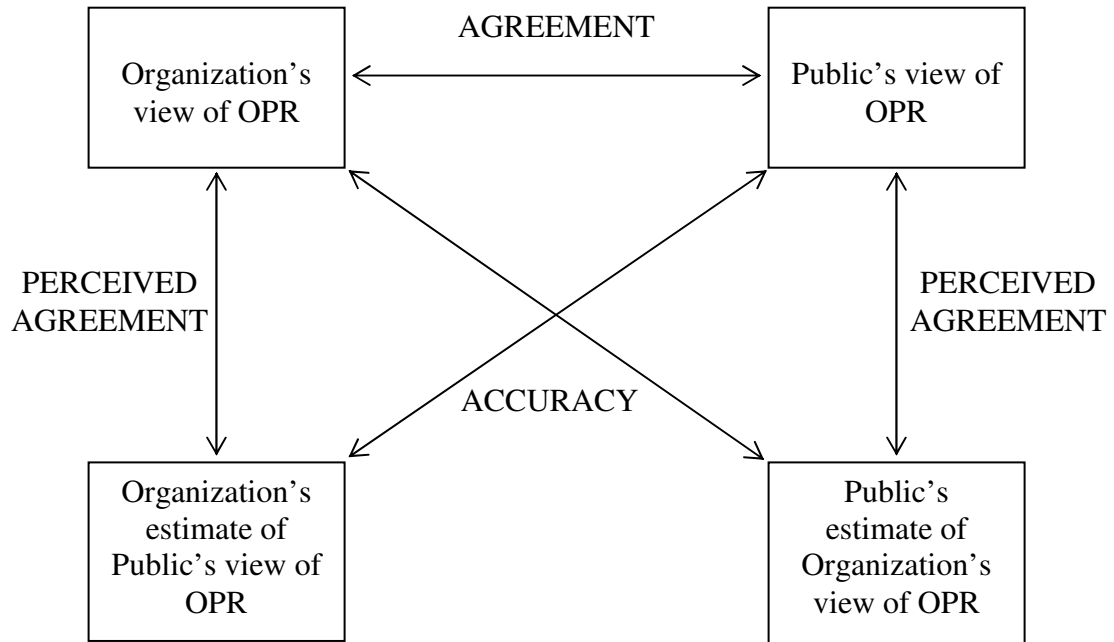


Figure 1. The Coorientational Model of Relationships (adapted from Broom & Dozier, 1990).

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