View from the upper echelon: Examining dominant coalition members' values of openness and perceptions of environmental complexity and organizational autonomy

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Award submission: Institute For Public Relations Top Three Papers of Practical Significance

Abstract

Research has shown that decisions about how organizations practice public relations are ultimately the domain of the dominant coalition. However, scholarship has yet to fully examine the values and perceptions that influence dominant coalition members' public relations decisions. Drawing on insights from systems theory and research on relationships, this study identifies one value (i.e., organizational openness) and two perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decision making. The study adopts the upper echelons perspective from organization theory to examine the relationships among these variables. It also considers the impact of formal environmental scanning by a public relations department on dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. The population of interest for this study was dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States. Data were collected through a national survey employing a purposive sample of 201 dominant coalition members at three for-profit businesses, three government agencies, and four non-profit organizations. These organizations were from the West, Mountain West, Midwest, South, and Southeast regions of the U.S. Both online and paper-and-pencil surveys were used. There were 118 usable questionnaires (58.71% response rate). The results show that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to their perceptions of environmental complexity. Moreover, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. Finally, the frequency of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning was positively related to dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness and perceptions of environmental complexity.

Keywords: dominant coalition, openness, environment, uncertainty, autonomy, scanning

Purpose of the Study

Organizations today face the challenge of pursuing their missions and achieving their goals while maintaining positive relationships (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999) with a variety of stakeholder groups and publics that demand transparency (Rawlins, 2008), expect authenticity (Molleda 2010; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007), and are empowered through social media and other new media technologies to affect organizational reputation and behavior (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). In addition, organizations must deal with increased pressure from skeptical consumers, globalization, political polarization, and technological development (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012; Edelman, 2011). After reviewing the complex nature of the contemporary business environment, a report by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) concluded that "all of this makes the 21st century enterprise vulnerable at a wholly new level to unexpected developments that can damage brand, negatively affect employee commitment, undercut outside relationships and destabilize management" (p. 14).

A reality of this increasing complexity is that organizations must deal with a wide variety of stakeholders and publics, some seeking to limit an organization's autonomy and others attempting to enhance it. Practitioners and scholars have proposed that the public relations function contributes to organizational effectiveness by ensuring that an organization has sufficient autonomy to pursue its mission and goals (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). A loss of autonomy not only makes it harder for an organization to accomplish its goals, but also can result in significant financial loss as the organization is compelled to make costly changes to accommodate pressure from stakeholder groups (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992). However, stakeholder groups that support an organization and trust it to make decisions that benefit them typically allow that organization more latitude to pursue its goals. In other words, organizational autonomy is tied to positive relationships.

Practitioners and scholars agree that in order for the public relations function to assist organizations in maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders, public relations practitioners must do more than just communicate messages; they must play an integral role in shaping organizational policy (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002; The Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). Nonetheless, Edelman (2011) noted that "many organizations still determine policy and operating approach in a vacuum, and then hand it to the PR folks to explain" (p. 2). Similarly, scholars have developed a power-control perspective of public relations, which asserts that a group of the most powerful people in an organization (i.e., dominant coalition) makes decisions about how public relations will be practiced by an organization (Berger, 2005; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; L. A. Grunig, et al., 2002; Kelly, 1995; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). While this research has largely focused on what public relations practitioners can do to become part of the dominant coalition (Berger, 2005), scholars have yet to fully examine "how things work inside the dominant coalition" (Berger 2007, p. 229), which includes the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that influence their thinking and decisions about public relations.

The purpose of this study is to build theory about the values (i.e., organizational openness) and perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decisions about public relations. This study draws on research from public relations and organizational theory to identify and explore these values and perceptions. Specifically, research based in systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), including work by O. G. Mink, B. P. Mink, Downes, & Owen (1994) and Lauzen and Dozier (1992, 1994), identifies openness to the environment as a key value that should play a

role in how dominant coalition members interpret and respond to their organization's operating environment (Katz & Kahn, 1978). In addition, the upper echelons perspective (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) proposes that dominant coalition members' values serve as a filter through which they form perceptions the organization's environment, such as environmental complexity and organizational autonomy. According to public relations theory, these perceptions are likely to be influenced by the information practitioners gather and package through environmental scanning.

This study contributes to the power-control literature in public relations by incorporating insights from organization theory that had not previously been adopted. In addition, prior public relations scholarship assumes that organizational autonomy and openness to the environment are important dominant coalition variables; however, only a few studies have attempted to measure either concept. Finally, previous studies have typically used public relations practitioners to evaluate dominant coalition members' perceptions (e.g., Berger, 2005; Lauzen & Dozier, 1994; Okura et al., 2008). A few studies have examined the perceptions of public relations practitioners and dominant coalition members (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Plowman, 1998, 2005a). One recent study focused on dominant coalition members' perceptions of the strategic perspective of public relations managers and their participation in strategic decision making (Brønn, 2014). However, most of these studies have focused on the characteristics of public relations departments and have not fully examined the characteristics of dominant coalition members. Therefore, this study expands the perspective by measuring the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members directly.

Literature Review

Systems Theory

Public relations scholars have adopted systems theory to explain the role of public relations in organizations (Broom, 2009; Plowman, 2005b). Systems theory is based on the concept of interdependence, or the mutually dependent relationship of organizations and their external environments (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Because organizations are interdependent with their environments, interaction with and adjustment to the environment is required for organizational success and survival. Public relations is suited to play a boundary spanning role that can facilitate the necessary interaction and adjustment. However, organizations cannot completely abandon the mission and goals that define them in an effort to adapt to change pressures from their environments. In other words, too much adaptation can have a negative impact on organizational survival. Therefore, organizations must strike a delicate balance between being open to their environments and being selective about the parts of the environment to which they pay attention.

Resource Dependence

Pfeffer and Salancik's (2003/1978) resource dependence perspective explores the complexities of interdependence. It proposes that organizations are engaged in a constant struggle for autonomy and survival because of their dependence on their external environments for resources. Because organizations need resources from their environments to survive, resource dependence proposes that an organization can be controlled by the constituencies that possess those resources. As a result, organizational behavior can only be understood in the context of the relationships that the organization has with other social actors. Public relations scholars have explained that these external constraints can result in costly adaptation for organizations that must bend to the pressure of activist groups, comply with government regulations, and meet employee demands or customers' expectations (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992). That is, organizations desire autonomy from their environments to "pursue their goals with the least interference from

the outside" (p. 67). Nonetheless, because organizations are interdependent with their stakeholders, they are never completely autonomous. They only attain a degree of autonomy by engaging and cooperating with the very groups that can limit or enhance their autonomy. Given this reality, L. A. Grunig and colleagues concluded that organizations give up some autonomy by cultivating relationships, but ironically, in giving up some autonomy, they maximize their autonomy from the environment.

Power-Control Perspective

J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) concluded that systems theory alone does not provide a sufficient explanation of public relations behavior. In establishing the theoretical framework for the Excellence Study, Dozier and L. A. Grunig (1992) and L. A. Grunig (1992a) turned to the power-control perspective to explain why research had not found a relationship between an organization's environment and its public relations behavior. According to this perspective, organizations do not adapt to their environments by selecting optimum structures for that environment because within the organization "there is no consensus as to what is being optimized" (Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 407). A key concept in the power-control perspective is the recognition of a *dominant coalition* within organizations, composed of individuals who have "power to influence decisions, set organizational goals, and decide how those goals will be met" (Dozier, 1990, p. 9). According to Berger (2005), the concept of a dominant coalition is important in public relations theory because "this group of powerful insiders makes strategic choices, allocates resources, and influences public relations practices" (p. 8). While the environment does not directly determine the structure or behavior of organizations, the power-control perspective holds that the environment plays a role in shaping the values and knowledge of constraints held by the dominant coalition (Child, 1972; Hage, 1980). Accordingly, Hage (1980) said that "if one knows the coalition's values — their preferences about utilities and performances — then one can predict what the organization will do" (p. 16).

Upper Echelons Theory

Research in organization theory has explained that organizations reflect the values and thinking of their top management teams (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The upper echelon perspective seeks to identify the factors that influence the decision making of top managers (Finklestein & Hambrick, 1990) and, thus, can provide insights about the values and cognitions of dominant coalition members and how those values and cognitions arise. According to Hambrick and Mason (1984), and as shown in Figure 1, managers' values and cognitions act as a screen between the actual environment and their perception of the environment. They assert that managers can only pay attention to certain aspects of an organization's environment because it is impossible for managers to pay attention to every aspect of it. In addition, managers only selectively perceive certain aspects of the environment within their narrow field of vision. And in the end, the information managers pay attention to is "*interpreted* through a filter woven by one's cognitive base and values" (p. 195, italics in original). This theory has been used predominantly to argue that the senior leaders of the organization "provide an interface between the firm and its environment, and are relatively powerful, and therefore their choices and actions are likely to have an impact on the organization" (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004, p. 753). Additionally, this theory is compatible with systems theory and resource dependence theory, which both recognize the enacted nature of an organization's environment.

Values of Openness to the Environment

Of the many values held by members of the dominant coalition, the value that potentially has the greatest bearing on how organizations practice public relations is the value of organizational openness. Public relations scholars have long made a connection between the degree of openness of an organization and its support of and reliance on the public relations function (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Public relations scholars have examined the consequences of organizations choosing to behave as open or closed systems using a variety of measures, however, little research has been conducted to understand the antecedents of openness. Specifically, Lauzen and Dozier (1994) examined the impact of dominant coalition openness on public relations. They found that outer-directed issues management and a participative organizational culture, both of which can be seen as an indication of a dominant coalition's values of organizational openness, had a mediating influence on public relations participation in organizational decision making and public relations manager role enactment.

Because of the inconsistency in approaches and measurement regarding values of organizational openness, this study adopts the Open Organization Model (OOM) developed by O. G. Mink et al. (1994) to explore these values among dominant coalition members. The OOM is based on systems theory and defines openness as full interaction among all the parts of the organization and with its external environment. It identifies three dimensions of openness that can be studied at any level of analysis: (1) unity, (2) internal responsiveness, and (3) external responsiveness. The model has been tested through the authors' consulting work with for-profit, government, and nonprofit organizations. The validity and reliability of the model also have been tested as part of a dissertation study (Stubbs, 2007). The current research will focus specifically on the openness dimension of external responsiveness, as this dimension is the most reflective of public relations thinking. Furthermore, the current study assumes that the dimension of openness can be measured at the individual level as a value held by dominant coalition members.

Perceived Environmental Uncertainty

Consistent with systems theory, resource dependence, and upper echelon's theory, public relations scholars view organizational environments as psychological constructions that are formed in the minds of organizational members as information comes into an organization (White & Dozier, 1992). According to Weick (1979), people in organizations pay attention to specific information from particular parts of the organization's environment while ignoring other information in a process called enactment. Furthermore, White and Dozier (1992) explained that the information to which organizations pay attention becomes "the perception of the external world upon which all subsequent decisions are based" (p. 92).

Public relations researchers have relied on Child's (1972) conceptualization of environmental uncertainty, which consists of three dimensions: complexity, turbulence, and threat. Environmental complexity as "the heterogeneity and range of environmental activities which are relevant to an organization's operations" (p. 3). Environmental turbulence is "the degree of change which characterizes environmental activities relevant to an organization's operations" (p. 3). And environmental threat is "the degree of threat that faces organizational decision-makers in the achievement of their goals from external competition, hostility or even indifference" (p. 4). Child recognized that the external environment constrains organizational action; however, he also proposed that top organizational decision makers have agency to make strategic choices independent of environmental conditions.

Lauzen and Dozier (1992) found that public relations practitioners' perceptions of environmental complexity and turbulence were related to manager role enactment. Lauzen and

Dozier (1994) reported that practitioner's perceptions of complexity and turbulence were positively related to their perceptions of dominant coalition openness. Okura et al. (2008) studied all three dimensions of environmental uncertainty and concluded that practitioners' perceptions of the organization's environment did not have a direct influence on organizational decision making; however, they did find that formal environmental scanning mediated the relationship between perceived environmental uncertainty and use of scanning research in organizational decision making

Perceived Organizational Autonomy

Ultimately, the perceptions that dominant coalition members have formed about their environments will shape their perceptions of their organization's freedom to operate. This is because information about an organization's environment contributes to dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's interdependence with stakeholders in its environment. Most public relations scholarship has focused on the autonomy of the public relations department rather than the autonomy of the organization (e.g., Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). Few public relations scholars have examined the impact that public relations has on organizational autonomy. J. E. Grunig (1984) found that organizations with high and low degrees of environmental constraint used asymmetrical public relations, while organizations with moderate constraints used symmetrical public relations. L. A. Grunig (1987) reported that mechanical organizations (large scale, low complexity) had the most autonomy and the most cooperative relationships, while organic organizations exhibited the least autonomy and the most competitive relationships. Kelly (1995) attempted to measure a charitable nonprofit organizations' propensity to forfeit autonomy in exchange for gifts. She concluded that she actually measured accountability to donors and, as a result, proposed that autonomy and accountability are two ends of a continuum. Similarly, Wilson, Rawlins, and Stoker (2013) studied the impact of paradoxical tensions, resulting from simultaneous pressure exerted by both poles of the relationship paradox (autonomy and dependence), can influence the decision-making process in organizations. They reported that when managers fail to recognize that their organization is dependent on (i.e., accountable to) stakeholders to achieve organizational goals, paradoxical tensions can focus decision making on exerting autonomy and, ultimately, have a negative effect on the organization.

While public relations scholars have identified organizational autonomy as a key concept in explaining the value of the public relations function (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992), they have not provided a concise conceptual definition of the construct. Following Kelly's (1991) approach to defining autonomy, the current study examined the construct and its dimensions using the scholarly literature from higher education, nonprofit and government, organization theory, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior. As a result, this study adopted Stainton's (1994) definition of organizational autonomy: "the organization's freedom from both internal and external constraints to formulate and pursue self-determined plans and purposes" (pp. 21-22). This definition is broad enough to describe the perceptions of autonomy held by decision makers at a variety of organizations. Further, this definition takes into account potential constraints from stakeholders inside and outside the organization, reflecting the range of stakeholders with whom public relations practitioners are typically concerned. In addition, as the literature from multiple disciplines consistently differentiates between substantive and procedural autonomy, this study adopts the two dimensional structure of autonomy (e.g., Berdahl, Altbach, & Gumport, 2011; Lumpkin, Cogliser, Schneider, 2009). Substantive autonomy is the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities. Procedural autonomy is the

power of an organization to determine the means by which it will pursue its mission, goals, and objectives, and implement its policies and priorities.

Environmental Scanning

Scholars have defined environmental scanning as a public relations function that detects changes or problems in an organization's environment (Dozier, 1990; Okura et al, 2008). According to White and Dozier (1992), information provided by boundary spanners, such as public relations managers, can be crucial to dominant coalition members because their perceptions of the organization's environment are only as accurate as the information they have received about it.

Research about the environmental scanning activities of public relations practitioners has found two types of scanning activities: formal and informal. Formal environmental scanning uses rigorous social scientific research methods such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses (Dozier, 1990; Dozier & Broom, 2006). On the other hand, informal environmental scanning reflects "informal 'gut' feelings about 'what is going on' and 'what works'" (Dozier, 1990, p. 7). While research has demonstrated that public relations practitioners use both types of scanning activities (Dozier, 1990; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), Broom and Dozier (2006) noted that scanning research is not useful to the dominant coalition unless "the practitioner can translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions" (p. 153). According to Okura et al. (2008), formal environmental scanning incorporates the idea of translation because its activities involve "packaging scanning information into the numeric rhetoric of management" (p. 57). Lauzen (1995) reported that formal environmental scanning allowed organizations to track a greater number of external issues in a shorter amount of time. Additionally, Okura et al. (2008) reported that formal environmental scanning mediates the relationship between perceived environmental complexity (as evaluated by a public relations practitioner) and use of scanning research in organizational decision making. Based on these findings, the current study assumes that public relations can have an influence on dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment through formal environmental scanning.

Hypotheses

Based on upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), this study proposes that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness serve as a filter through which they form their perceptions of the organization's environment, which can be influenced by formal environmental scanning by the public relations function. In turn, dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's environment should affect their perceptions of organizational autonomy. This assumption is based on the resource dependence notion that because of interdependence with their environments, organizations seek autonomy to pursue their goals (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003/1978). Subsequently, dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy likely impact their values of organizational openness to the organization's environment. This assumption is based on the OOM conceptualization of values as "beliefs based upon our most fundamental understanding of our world" (O. G. Mink et al., 1994, p. 21). Based on these assumptions, which are diagrammed in Figure 1, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The more dominant coalition members value organizational openness to the organization's environment, the lower their perceptions of environmental uncertainty.
H2: Dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty will be negatively associated with their perceptions of organizational autonomy.

H3: The lower dominant coalition members perceive the autonomy of their organization, the less they will value organizational openness to the organization's environment.
H4: The more public relations conducts formal environmental scanning, the more dominant coalition members' will perceive uncertainty in their organization's environment.
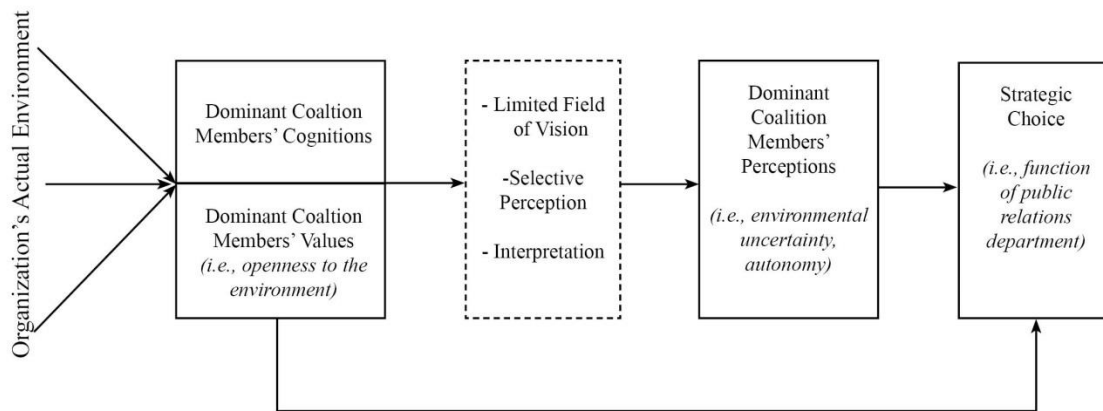

Figure 1. Upper Echelons model, adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984), applied to public relations management.

Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to test its hypotheses. This method was deemed appropriate because surveys allow researchers to examine how participants respond to phenomena in their natural settings, gather a large amount of data from large and diverse populations, and include responses from participants who are geographically distant (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). All of the scales used interval measurement, specifically 5-point Likert-type scales as researchers have generally recommended that such scales range from five to nine points (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1991).

Population and Sample

The population of interest for this study is dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States that employ at least one full-time public relations practitioner. Dominant coalition members from these three types of organizations, representing the three primary sectors in the United States, were selected for study because different goods produced by each sector (i.e., private, public, and common; Lohmann, 1992; Kelly, 1998) are expected to result in variance among dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. There are no lists of all dominant coalition members working in for-profit businesses, government agencies, or tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States. Furthermore, members of this population are only likely to participate in research where the study is approved and valued organizationally. For these reasons, drawing a random sample of

the population of interest was not feasible. As a result, this study employed a two-stage purposive sampling procedure. The first stage involved the identification of organizations from each sector with at least one full-time public relations practitioner. The second stage focused on identifying members of the organizations' dominant coalition for each organization.

Organizations were identified in the first stage of sampling based on the researcher's prior experience working in the public relations field and his membership in professional associations for public relations practitioners. The researcher made a conscious effort to include a variety of organizations from different industries and subsectors, as well as different geographical regions of the country. The first stage of sampling resulted in 32 prospective organizations: 19 for-profit organizations, five government agencies, and eight nonprofit organizations. The researcher contacted either the chief executive officer or the senior public relations manager at each of these organizations by sending a research invitation letter. Ten organizations agreed to participate: a public biomedical company in the Southeast (For-profit A), a private health and fitness company in the Southeast (For-profit B), and a public energy company in the Midwest (For-profit C), a school district in the West (Government A), a state government agency in the Mountain West (Government B), a convention and visitor's bureau in the Southeast (Government C), a public university in the Mountain West (Nonprofit A), a public broadcasting (PBS) network in the Midwest (Nonprofit B), an art museum in the Northeast (Nonprofit C), and a hospital in the South (Nonprofit D).

After recruiting organizations to participate, the researcher worked with contact people at each organization on the second stage of sampling. Working directly with contacts in each organization allowed the researcher to identify those individuals who were part of the dominant coalition due to their formal position in the organization, as well as those individuals who participated in decision making by exercising informal power. This approach is consistent with the public relations and upper echelons literature. The researcher instructed each organizational contact person to identify the dominant coalition by including the top two levels of management, members of the organization's board of directors or trustees, if appropriate, and individuals who were outside of these formal structures of power but who still had considerable influence on decision making in the organization. Following this process, the researcher produced a sampling frame of 201 dominant coalition members from the 10 organizations participating in the study.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire for this study included measures of the four concepts of interest as well as questions to gather demographic information. It was pretested by six public relations and management experts. These experts included senior public relations officers at a large healthcare organization, a private university, a regional utilities company, and a government transportation agency. The other two experts were a former public relations officer for large corporations and an assistant chief financial officer of a Fortune 500 company. Following the pretest, a pilot study was conducted to further refine the questionnaire. The researcher secured the approval of a utility company in the Southeast to administer a Web-based version of the questionnaire to 60 of the organization's senior managers.

Values of organizational openness to the environment. This study measured dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment by adopting 10 indicators from the external responsiveness scale from the OOM (O.G. Mink et al., 1994). External responsiveness is defined as a continuous free flow of information "in and out of the organization so its products, services, and systems can adapt readily to changes in its social, economic, and technical environment" (p. 18). The 10 items adopted for this study represent the

organization's openness to its environment. This subscale is one of three that form the overall measure of external responsiveness. The other two subscales measure the openness of individuals to each other and the openness of work groups to each other within the organization. The adopted subscale is the only one of the three to focus on the adaptability and openness of the organization. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each statement generally applied in their organization. Stubbs (2007) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91 for this specific scale. The pilot study produced an alpha of 0.94.

Perceived environmental uncertainty. This study measured dominant coalition members' perceived environmental uncertainty using a scale developed by Okura et al. (2008), which encompasses three distinct dimensions: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The original scale developed by Okura et al. (2008) asked respondents to rate six different publics: (1) consumers/clients, (2) stockholders/investors, (3) media, (4) government/regulatory agencies, (5) community members, and (6) labor organizations. Respondents rated each public based on one attribute that reflected each of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty. The current study added a seventh public that traditionally has been important to public relations—employees. By adding this public, the measure of environmental uncertainty used in this study captures the influence of internal and external publics on the uncertainty faced by dominant coalition members. As a result of this addition, environmental uncertainty was measured using 21 indicators, seven publics on each of the three dimensions.

Perceived environmental complexity was measured by asking respondents to "rate the importance of the following publics to the survival and growth of your organization" (Okura et al., 2008, p. 59). Perceived environmental turbulence was measured by asking respondents, "How often do the attitudes or behaviors of the following publics change in a manner that affects the survival and growth of your organization?" (p. 60). Perceived environmental threat was measured by asking respondents, "To what degree do the following publics pose an immediate or potential threat to the survival and growth of your organization?" (p. 60). Okura and colleagues reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 for an index created from all three scales. The pilot study produced an alpha of 0.70.

Perceived organizational autonomy. A review of the research on autonomy from higher education, nonprofit and government, organization theory, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior did not find a measurement scale that could be adapted easily to suit the purposes of this study. Therefore, a new scale was created to measure dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy following the eight steps identified by DeVellis (1991). Using Stainton's (1994) conceptual definition of autonomy, the researcher made an initial selection of 20 items, 10 to measure substantive autonomy and 10 to measure procedural autonomy. These items were adopted and modified from existing autonomy measures from a variety of disciplines. This procedure was used successfully by Lumpkin et al. (2009) in producing an index to measure autonomy in an entrepreneurship context. Each of the items was modified to reflect the concerns of public relations scholars about an organization's ability to determine and pursue its mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities.

To ensure that the autonomy scale assessed the overall autonomy of the organization, both dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy were measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each of the 20 items applied to their organization. In addition, respondents were asked to consider the combined impact of all organizational stakeholders (e.g., consumers and employees) in their responses to each item. The pretest and pilot study allowed the research to refine this scale. Exploratory factor analysis and reliability

analysis enabled the researcher to reduce the scale to eight items, four for substantive autonomy and four for procedural autonomy, which loaded on their intended factors. The substantive autonomy subscale had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 and the procedural autonomy subscale had an alpha of 0.88. The overall perceived organizational autonomy scale had an alpha of 0.90.

   Perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning. Perceived use of formal environmental scanning was measured with the six-item scale used by Okura et al. (2008). This scale rates participants' agreement about how often public relations practitioners engage in formal environmental scanning behaviors. Formal environmental scanning differs from informal methods because it entails "*translating* or *packaging* scanning information into the numeric rhetoric of management (p. 57, italics in original). In the Okura et al. (2008) study, the scale was administered to individual public relations practitioners. In the present study, the scale was administered to dominant coalition members, therefore, the wording of the instructions was adapted to reflect this change. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the public relations department in their organization is involved in the activities described by each of the items. Okura et al. (2008) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 for this scale. The pilot study produced an alpha of 0.81.

Questionnaire Administration

   This study gathered data based on the survey administration preferences of the participating organizations. Namely, the choice was between a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and an online questionnaire. The researcher adopted this approach because of the difficulty in gaining access to and getting survey responses from this study's elite population. As the researcher worked with his organizational contacts to identify dominant coalition members, he asked each contact person to choose the type of questionnaire that would yield the highest response rates for that particular organization. In all, two organizations (Government B and Nonprofit D) chose the paper-and-pencil questionnaire, while the remaining eight organizations chose the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered during the months of January through March 2014. A total of 118 usable questionnaires were collected by return United States Postal Service (USPS) mail or through the online survey database. This represents a response rate of 58.71%.

Results

Demographic Profile

   The 118 total dominant coalition members' responses included seven (5.93%) from For-profit A, seven (5.93%) from For-profit B, four (3.39%) from For-profit C, 21 (17.80%) from Government A, 38 (32.20%) from Government B, seven (6.03%) from Government C, 13 (11.21%) from Nonprofit A, six (5.08%) from Nonprofit B, nine (7.63%) from Nonprofit C, and six (5.08%) from Nonprofit D.

   Not uncommonly, a few of the respondents who returned usable questionnaires did not answer all of the demographic questions. There were 74 (63.79%) male respondents and 42 (36.21%) female respondents. Two respondents did not provide information about their gender. Turning to race/ethnicity, a large majority of the respondents were Caucasian ($N = 107$, or 92.24%). Asian American respondents ($N = 4$ or 3.51%) and Hispanic American respondents ($N = 4$, or 3.45%) were equally represented. In addition, there was one (0.86%) Native American respondent.

   With regard to education, 117 respondents provided information about the highest level of education they attained. There were 8 (6.84%) who had some college, 39 (33.33%) who

received a bachelor's degree, 50 (42.74%) who earned a master's degree, one (0.85%) who had a Juris Doctorate, and 17 (14.53%) who had doctoral degrees. More than half of the respondents (N = 68, or 58.12%) held a graduate degree, including MA, JD, and PhD. Two of respondents selected the "other" category.

       A related question asked respondents to indicate their college major if they had completed at least some college. Among the 113 participants who provided information about their college major, 26 (23.01%) majored in business, 12 (10.62%) majored in engineering, 14 (12.39%) majored in social science, 14 (12.39%) majored in journalism/communication, 17 (15.04%) majored in natural/physical science, two (1.77%) majored in computer science, and 16 (14.16%) majored in humanities/liberal arts. There were 12 (10.62%) who selected "other."

       Regarding the past job experience of the 115 dominant coalition members who answered this question, 36 (31.30%) reported general administration, four (3.48%) human resources, two (1.74%) legal, four (3.48%) research and development, 10 (7.83%) finance, four (3.48%) accounting, and nine (7.83%) marketing. Almost half (N = 46, or 40%) of the respondents selected the "other" category in answer to this question. Their responses included the following categories: (1) academics, (2) administration/secretarial, (3) education, (4) healthcare/medicine, (5) hospitality, (6) information technology, (7) journalism, (8) natural resource management, (9) nonprofit/arts management, (10) operations, (11) production, and (12) sales.

       In terms of the participants' current positions, the questionnaire asked two different questions. First, the respondents were asked if they were a board member or trustee of the organization. A total of 8 participants indicated that they were board members or trustees. Out of these 8 responses, 4 (50%) participants indicated that they were board members or trustees, while the other 4 (50%) selected the "other" category. Next, if respondents indicated that they were not a board member or trustee, they were asked about their current position. Among the 107 dominant coalition members who answered this question, 16 (14.95%) were in the C-Suite (i.e., a chief officer in their organization), 52 (48.60%) were senior managers, 25 (23.36%) were middle managers, and six (5.61%) were supervisors. There were 8 (7.48%) respondents who selected the "other" category.

       In addition, all respondents were asked their age, the number of their direct reports, the number of years they had worked at their current organization, and the number of years they had been employed in their current position. The average age (in years) of the respondents was 50.47 (SD = 9.75), and ages ranged from 27 to 71. The average number of direct reports of the respondents was 17.27 (SD = 53.29). The responses to this question fell between a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 380. The average number of years that respondents have worked at their current organization was 13.98 (SD = 9.57). Finally, the average number of years that respondents have been in their current position was 6.41 (SD = 7.38).

Preliminary Data Analysis

       Before testing the hypotheses of this study, a preliminary data analysis was conducted using SPSS 20.0. Variables were computed for each the scales by calculating an average score for each scale. Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, and Pearson correlations among the variables used in this study. The means of the variables ranged from 2.77 to 4.34, and the corresponding standard deviations were between 0.40 and 0.89. Reliabilities ranged from 0.74 to 0.92. The correlation coefficients were between from .05 to .26.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations for the Study's Four Variables

Variables	Descriptive Statistics			Pearson Correlations		
	M	SD	α	1	2	3
1 = Values of openness to the environment	4.34	.55	.89	1		
2 = Perceived environmental uncertainty	3.30	.40	.74	.26* (n = 93)[a]	1	
3 = Perceived organizational autonomy	4.01	.56	.86	.17 (n = 113)	.05 (n = 96)[a]	1
4 = Perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning	2.77	.89	.92	.25** (n = 114)	.27** (n = 96)[a]	.23* (n = 117)

Note. [a]An analysis of missing data revealed that responding to perceived environmental uncertainty index was difficult for some participants. Twenty-two (18.64%) of the 118 respondents did not respond to one or more of the indicators for this index. As a result the number of participants in these analysis are lower than the sample total. $^*p < .05.$ $^{**}p < .01.$

Table 2

Pearson's r *Correlations of Three Dimensions of Environmental Uncertainty and Two Dimensions of Autonomy with Values of Organizational Openness to the Environment*

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Values of organizational openness to the environment	1				
2. Perceived environmental complexity	.43*** (n = 98)	1			
3. Perceived environmental turbulence	-.004 (n = 105)	.09 (n = 99)	1		
4. Perceived environmental threat	.14 (n = 104)	.02 (n = 98)	.34*** (n = 105)	1	
5. Perceived substantive autonomy	.05 (n = 114)	.30** (n = 102)	.05 (n = 109)	-.07 (n = 107)	1
6. Perceived procedural autonomy	.24** (n = 113)	.11 (n = 102)	-.16 (n = 108)	-.06 (n = 106)	.59*** (n = 117)

$^*p < .05,$ $^{***}p < .001$

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. In other words, as dominant coalition members' value of organizational openness increases, they will perceive less uncertainty in their organization's environment. This hypothesis was tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. As shown in Table 1, there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = 0.26$, $n = 93$) that was significant at the $p < .05$ level. This hypothesis was also tested by calculating correlation coefficients among dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and the three dimensions of

environmental uncertainty: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 2, revealed that there is a moderate positive relationship between dominant coalition members' openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental complexity ($r = 0.43$, $n = 98$) that was significant at the $p < .001$ level. The relationships between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness and the other two dimensions of environmental uncertainty were small and not significant.

While these tests found a statistically significant relationship between values of organizational openness to the environment and perceived environmental uncertainty, the results are contrary to the direction stated in the hypothesis and demonstrate that as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increase, they perceive more uncertainty in their organization's environment. Specifically, as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increase, they perceive more complexity in their organization's environment. Therefore, although the relationship has theoretical value, H1 was not supported as stated.

The second hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy. This hypothesis also was tested using Pearson correlation analysis. As reported in Table 1, there was a small but non-significant positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = 0.05$, $p > .05$, $n = 96$). This hypothesis also was tested by calculating correlation coefficients among the dimensions of environmental uncertainty (i.e., complexity, turbulence, and threat) and dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. Whereas there were no significant relationships between either perceptions of environmental turbulence or perceptions of environmental threat and perceptions of organizational autonomy, there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = 0.24$, $n = 102$). This relationship was significant at the $p < .05$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members perceive more complexity in their organization's environment, they also perceive that their organization has increased autonomy. While this relationship was significant, it was in the opposite direction than that predicted in the hypothesis.

A final test of this hypothesis used Pearson correlations to examine the relationships among the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty and the two dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 2, indicate a relatively moderate positive relationship between perceptions of environmental complexity and perceptions of substantive autonomy ($r = 0.30$, $n = 102$) that was significant at the $p < .01$ level. In other words, as dominant coalition members' perceptions of complexity in their organization's environment increase, their perceptions of substantive autonomy also increase. Again, this relationship was in the opposite direction than predicted. No significant relationships were found between the other dimensions of both variables. Therefore, although the relationship reported in this analysis has theoretical value, H2 was not supported as stated.

The third hypothesis predicted a positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy and their values of organizational openness to the environment. Again, this hypothesis was tested using Pearson correlation analysis. As shown in Table 1, there was a small but non-significant positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy and their values of organizational

openness to the environment. This hypothesis was also tested by calculating correlation coefficients among the two dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy (i.e., procedural and substantive) and dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment. Table 2 shows that there is a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of procedural autonomy and their values of organizational openness to the environment ($r = 0.24$, $n = 113$) that was significant at the $p < .01$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members' perceptions of the procedural autonomy of their organization decrease, their values of organizational openness to the organization's environment also decrease. There was no significant relationship between perceived substantive autonomy and dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness. Therefore, based on these correlational analyses, H3 was partially supported.

Table 3
Pearson's r *Correlations of Three Dimensions of Environmental Uncertainty with Perceptions of Public Relations Use of Formal Environmental Scanning*

	1	2	3
1. Perceived environmental complexity	1		
2. Perceived environmental turbulence	.09 ($n = 99$)	1	
3. Perceived environmental threat	.02 ($n = 98$)	.34*** ($n = 105$)	1
4. Use of formal environmental scanning	.33** ($n = 102$)	.003 ($n = 109$)	.22* ($n = 107$)

**$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Hypothesis four proposed an inverse relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' formal environmental scanning activities and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. The correlation matrix in Table 1 shows a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = 0.27$, $n = 96$). This relationship was significant at the $p < .01$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members' perceptions that the public relations uses formal methods to scan the environment increase, their perceptions of environmental uncertainty also increase. Specifically, Table 3 illustrates how perceptions of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning are related to the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The correlation coefficients show that perceptions of the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning have a significant, positive relationship with perceived environmental complexity ($r = 0.33$, $p < .001$, $n = 102$) and perceived environmental threat ($r = 0.22$, $p = .02$, $n = 107$). In other words, as dominant coalition members perceive that the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning increases, their perceptions of environmental complexity and environmental threat increase. Table 3 also shows that the relationship between perceptions of the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning and perceived environmental turbulence was small and non-significant. Therefore, based on the results of the Pearson correlations, H10 was not supported because the results were significant, but in the opposite direction than was predicted by the hypothesis. While not a hypothesis of this

study, it is worth noting that dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' formal environmental scanning activities were positively related to dominant coalition members values of organizational openness ($r = 0.25$, $p < .01$, $n = 114$). As a result, an increase in formal environmental scanning by public relations can also increase dominant coalition members' values of openness to the organization's environment.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to build theory about the values (i.e., organizational openness) and perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decisions about public relations. An in-depth understanding of dominant coalitions is critical to public relations because scholars have adopted a power-control perspective that focuses on the central role of the dominant coalition in determining how organizations will relate to their environments (e.g., Berger, 2005; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) and practice public relations. While previous research has provided hints about the factors that shape the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), it has yet to explain "how things work inside the dominant coalition" (Berger, 2007, p. 229). Understanding the dominant coalition is an important endeavor for public relations managers because if public relations managers know the dominant coalition members' values and perceptions they will be able to predict the decisions the dominant coalition will make (Hage, 1980).

In an effort to examine the factors that influence dominant coalition members' values and perceptions that could impact the management of public relations within organizations, this study adopted upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This theory provided a framework that was used to conceptualize the relationships involved in shaping dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. Specifically, this study proposed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness would serve as a filter through which they would form perceptions of environmental uncertainty, or the complexity, turbulence, and threat faced by the organization. Subsequently, these perceptions of environmental uncertainty would influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. The results of this study support the theoretical propositions drawn from upper echelon's theory.

First, the results showed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to environmental uncertainty. Further analysis revealed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively correlated with only one of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty: environmental complexity. It should be recalled that openness to the environment was defined as the continuous free flow of information "in and out of the organization so its products, services, and systems can adapt readily to changes in its social, economic, and technical environment" (O. G. Mink et al., 1994, p. 18). In addition, environmental complexity was defined as "the number of external forces or influences that the organization must attend to pursue its objectives" (Okura et al., 2008, p. 56). Therefore, this relationship signifies that the more dominant coalition members value the free flow of information for the purposes of adaptation and change, the greater their perception of the number of stakeholder groups the organization must attend to as it pursues organizational goals.

This result is in line with previous theoretical assumptions drawn by J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) that dominant coalition values would play a role in the model of public relations employed by an organization. Specifically, they proposed that liberal political values,

external values, and innovativeness would be related to symmetrical communication, which represents an open-system approach to public relations. The current study's finding also corresponds with the results reported by Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron (1999), who found strong support for the relationship between dominant coalition enlightenment about maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders and individual characteristics of dominant coalition members, including open-mindedness.

This study's results also demonstrated that dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. In other words, information about an organization's environment contributes to dominant coalition members' perceptions of their organization's interdependence with stakeholders in its environment. Moreover, detailed analysis found that dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of substantive autonomy, which was defined in this study as the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, and priorities. Therefore, this relationship signifies that as dominant coalition members perceive a greater number of stakeholders that their organization must attend to pursue its objectives, the more they will perceive that their organization has power to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, and priorities.
On the surface, this relationship appears to be counterintuitive. It seems more reasonable that as an organization must attend to an increased number of stakeholders, constraints imposed on the organization by these stakeholders would result in decreased organizational autonomy. However, the results of the current study seem to indicate that environmental complexity is not a reflection of constraint but a recognition of interdependence with stakeholders and publics who have a relationship to the organization "whether they [the organization or its publics] want such relationships or not" (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992, p. 69). In fact, the results obtained in this study support Pfeffer and Salancik's (2003/1978) contention that the great irony of interdependence is that organizations must surrender some of their autonomy to "gain some control over the activities of another organization" (p. 261).

L. A. Grunig et al. (1992) explained this irony in terms of an organization's relationship with publics. While they theorized that relationships limit autonomy generally, they noted that positive relationships with publics "make organizations more effective because they allow organizations more freedom—more autonomy to achieve their missions" (p. 69). This idea is also supported by results from Kelly's (1995) research about fundraising and organizational autonomy. She reported that larger nonprofit charitable organizations were more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model of fundraising because their broad base of donors allowed them to "be more flexible in meeting donors' needs and interests" (p. 129) without giving up control of the organization. Based on this logic, an increase in the number of quality relationships with organizational stakeholders equates to an increase in the autonomy of an organization to choose its mission and goals. In other words, organizational autonomy does not appear to be a finite organizational resource that is divvied up among stakeholder relationships until it is exhausted. Rather, it seems that organizational autonomy is a renewable resource that arises from relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, organizations have much more to gain than they have to lose by opening themselves to relationships with multiple stakeholders in a complex environment.

Moreover, the study found that dominant coalition members' perceptions of procedural autonomy were positively related to their values of organizational openness to the environment. This finding supports Katz and Kahn's (1978) linkage of autonomy with a system's degree of

openness to environmental input. In the current study, procedural autonomy was conceptualized as the power of an organization to determine the means by which it pursues its goals and objectives. Therefore, when dominant coalition members perceive that they have great latitude in determining the methods they will use to accomplish organizational goals, they will also place a high value on the free flow of information between an organization and its environment for the purposes of adapting and changing the organization. Conversely, when dominant coalition members have little latitude in determining the methods they will use to accomplish organizational goals, they will not be as interested in exchanging information with the environment in order to adapt and change. The conclusions seem to indicate that organizational decision makers do not want to be forced into or constrained to adopt a particular course of action. Their openness to the environment is contingent on stakeholders not overstepping their bounds to dictate the way the organization should go about pursuing its goals and objectives. This relationship was first reported by J. E. Grunig (1976) who found that organizations closed themselves off from the environment when they had high internal and external constraints, while organizations that faced few constraints opened themselves up to the environment. In addition, this finding supports L. A. Grunig's (1992b) contention that changes in an organization's environment that threaten the power of the dominant coalition can lead members of a dominant coalition to try to control their environment rather than adapting and adjusting to it.

While the results of the current study seem to indicate a natural tendency for dominant coalition members to devalue openness to the environment when faced with a loss of procedural autonomy, both Kelly (1995) and Wilson et al. (2013) explained that autonomy is only one side of a two-sided coin, and that both sides of the coin —autonomy and accountability— must be considered simultaneously. The very nature of interdependent relationships suggests that relationship partners are autonomous from, but at the same time responsible to each other. Therefore, when inevitable infringements on autonomy occur in imperfect relationships between organizations and publics, Wilson et al. (2013) explained that tensions can arise that cause organizational decision makers to ignore responsibility (i.e., become closed to the environment) in order to maintain a high degree of organizational autonomy. Moreover, both Kelly (1995) and Wilson et al. (2013) noted that public relations should seek to assist the organization in finding a balance between autonomy and accountability through two-way symmetrical communication, an approach to public relations based on openness to the environment.

Finally, the current study proposed that public relations could influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment through the use of formal environmental scanning. The results show that dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' use of formal environmental scanning were positively related to their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. That is, as the public relations' use of formal environmental scanning increases, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty increase as well. An in-depth analysis of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty discovered that formal environmental scanning was positively related with dominant coalition member perceptions of environmental complexity and threat. This means that formal environmental scanning activities help dominant coalition members understand the degree of complexity and threat in the organization's environment. As discussed earlier, perceptions of higher environmental complexity are related to perceptions of higher substantive autonomy. Therefore, formal environmental scanning is one avenue through which public relations departments can help maximize the autonomy of their organizations. In addition, formal environmental scanning can help dominant coalition members understand and anticipate potential threats in the

organization's environment. This result supports the contention of Okura et al. (2008) that environmental scanning can serve as "an organization's early warning system that detects problems in the organizational environment" (p. 53). It is also in line with open-systems thinking about the role of adaptive subsystems (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Implications for Public Relations Practice

A number of implications for public relations practice can be drawn from the results of this study. First, the descriptive statistics indicate that the dominant coalition members in the 10 organizations studied have low evaluations public relations' use of formal environmental scanning ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.06$). In addition, dominant coalition members' who participated in this study reported a high familiarity ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.75$) with the public relations function in their organizations. Therefore, it appears that these low scores are not the result of dominant coalition members lacking awareness of the activities of their public relations departments; rather, they seem to indicate that the dominant coalition members are not that impressed with the formal scanning activity of their public relations departments. Therefore, these findings seem to suggest that in the eyes of organizational managers, public relations practitioners are still lacking in skills and abilities related to formal environmental scanning, which include the use of rigorous social scientific research methods, such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses, to collect and package scanning data.

Second, public relations can influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment and values of openness through formal environmental scanning. When public relations departments conduct formal research to track the reactions of stakeholders to the organization, they are able to have an impact on the values and perceptions that shape the decisions of dominant coalition members. Therefore, when public relations departments use formal environmental scanning to "translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions" (Broom & Dozier, 2006, p. 153), departments can influence dominant coalition members to see increasing complexity in their environments, leading to an increase in substantive autonomy as well as, potentially, in their values of organizational openness to the environment. From the power-control perspective, it seems that formal environmental scanning is an important factor in moving an organization toward two-way interaction and communication with publics.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study contributed to public relations theory by examining the relationships among dominant coalition members' values and perceptions, there were several limitations that should be acknowledged. Moreover, these limitations can be seen as opportunities to further test and examine the ideas and relationships reported in this research. The first limitation of this study relates to its external validity. This study had high ecological validity (i.e., the research was conducted in the natural setting of the participants rather than in a laboratory); however, the purposive sampling method used in the study limits the generalizability of the findings. While the demographic composition of dominant coalition members in the current study's sample did not differ noticeably from the characteristics of senior executives reported in other studies (e.g., Cook & Glass, 2011; Lantz, 2008), the number of dominant coalition members sampled in this study from the three primary types of organizations were not equal. Also, the sample contained an underrepresentation of board members who, theoretically, are considered to be the most powerful members of an organization's dominant coalition. In this study, there were only four valid responses from board members. On the other hand, low representation of board members may indicate perceptions of low power among board members or high power among an

organization's paid employees. In addition, the purposive sample seemed to reflect responses of dominant coalition members working for organizations that valued openness to the environment. The high mean score ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.55$) for respondents on the openness index indicates that the organizations, and subsequently, the dominant coalition members who agreed to participate in this study likely did so because they were open to sharing information about themselves and their organizations with someone from outside the organization. Future research could address issues of external validity and dominant coalition membership by using random samples of dominant coalition members. One way this might be accomplished is by focusing on one type of organization, such as nonprofits, and generating a random sample of organizations that employ at least one public relations practitioner from the membership lists of professional associations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). A senior leader from each organization could then be randomly selected to represent the dominant coalition.

Conclusion

Public relations scholars and practitioners have defined the value of public relations in terms of its ability to protect and enhance organizational autonomy. Because of the complexities of the current business environment, organizations must deal with a variety of stakeholder groups and publics, some seeking to limit an organization's autonomy and others attempting to enhance it. However, little research has been conducted to understand the factors that influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's operating environment and its autonomy. This study addressed this gap in the research by examining dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty and organizational autonomy. In addition, it examined the role that formal environmental scanning plays in the formation of dominant coalition members perceptions. Specifically, this study found support for the upper echelons perspective that dominant coalition members' values act as a filter through which they form perceptions about their organization's environment and their organization's place in it. Moreover, this study found that public relations can play a role in shaping dominant coalition members' values and perceptions of their organization's operating environment through the use of formal environmental scanning. This means that public relations managers need to be adept at using rigorous social scientific research methods to collect scanning data and package it in a way that will be meaningful for dominant coalition members in order to help their organizations become more aware of and open to their complex environments.

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