

## Critical discourses in the culture-public relations relationship

### Abstract

In this essay, we problematise some of the foundations of the culture-public relations relationship and then consider what insights and challenges may be gleaned for the discipline, research, and education. We employ the concept of discourse as a heuristic to aid insight into how culture and public relations intertwine in a dynamic, socially constructed process of meaning making. In identifying two prevalent discourses which inform thinking and writing about culture, we note how these highlight the complexity of the public relations-culture interaction, an aspect often under-estimated in research. We offer some final, tentative ideas concerning both the teaching of public relations and the doing of public relations research.

### Introduction

The complexity of the relationship between public relations and culture has been consistently overlooked or under-estimated in the public relations literature. We need only look at a few popular mainstream definitions of public relations to glean a sense of the normative understanding that public relations is a management discourse (Pearson 1990), interested in or charged with changing culture. For example, the Public Relations Institute of Australia states on its web site that public relations is ‘a management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest, and plans and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance (PRIA 2009). And Dozier’s (1995, ix) definition, now nearly a quarter of a century old, is still oft rehearsed: ‘the management of communication between an organization and its publics’. Historically, practitioners have sought through their activities to manipulate societal and organisational cultures by encouraging, for example, new patterns of consumption or altered visions of the future. In so doing, they have conceived of culture as a unified entity which can be induced to shift from one set of coherent values to another.

To some extent, this somewhat simplistic view of culture in its relationship to public relations has also informed much of the scholarly literature. Here culture (at societal, organisational or occupational levels) has been conceptualised as stable, unified and consistent in its beliefs, values, assumptions and their tangible and symbolic expressions. Often researchers have reduced culture to a few dimensions by drawing on the work of authors such as Hofstede in order to aid cross-cultural comparisons of the situational effects of culture on public relations practices and discourses, as well as the motivations and responses of publics to public relations messages.

While studies such as these have pursued how public relations is determined by culture, other research within a similar vein has investigated how public relations is a contributor to the development of culture (at a variety of levels including professional, organisational, industry and societal). For example, public relations has been conceived as an initiator of social change through its role as a 'cultural intermediary', with public relations messages considered to be capable of stimulating ideas, discourses and behaviours that become shared in a society or organisation. Scholarly work of this ilk aligns with practitioner interest in the manipulatory, even propagandist, power of public relations. Such a stance is problematic because, aside from the ethical issues that are raised, it is based on the naïve assumption that culture is a modular entity, ripe for and accessible to change or modification in the first place.

To date, there seems to be a reluctance to critique this conception of culture which is dominant in the public relations literature, despite alternative voices being raised from time to time within public relations (e.g. Moffitt 1994, Berger 1999, Curtin and Gaither 2007), and regularly in the sociological, psychological and critical management fields. The notion that culture is a unified entity underpins current notions of the public relations-culture relationship. We argue that failure to challenge this construct has consequences for theory development and for public relations research and practice. In any research, the definitions that researchers use influence the methodologies they employ in their investigations, the models they test, the theoretical propositions they

derive from their data, and the subsequent questions that are raised concerning professional practice. Importantly, they have repercussions for the discourse of an occupation such as public relations and how it is taught on university courses.

In this essay, we want to make a rather tentative stab at problematising some of the foundations of the culture-public relations relationship and then consider what insights may be gleaned for the discipline, for public relations research, and for public relations education.

### **A discourse of fixedness**

Theorising and writing about culture in terms of a static, monolithic and fixed entity (which we define as a discourse of fixedness) denies the heuristic potential of culture as a dynamic, socially constructed, and open process (a discourse of understanding). To explain this, we start from the premise that public relations is a meaning making activity (Heath 2001, Curtin and Gaither 2007) situated within particular social and cultural contexts. This provides a point of entry into a cultural framework, with culture defined as ‘More than language alone ... [it] includes the way a group of people live and live together, share experiences, materialize these in expressive symbols, and shape time and space around them’ (Drijvers, 1992, 195).

In other words, culture is the means through which people communicatively create meaningful worlds in order to help them make sense of their experiences (author, 2000, 169). Public relations is therefore a cultural practice because practitioners seek to influence how focal stakeholders, who are members of a multitude of cultures, become aware of and make sense of products and services, ideas, issues, companies and their images, etc. Depending on the extent of political influence and other resources, public relations contributes to the development of societal, organisational, ethnic and occupational interpretations. When reproduced and perpetuated, these become cultural assumptions about the way the world works, or about what is effective, successful, or desirable, and so on. Such assumptions comprise meaningful worlds, which are

continually being worked out and negotiated discursively (Moffitt 1994). In effect, they are dynamic and socially constructed.

In this essay, we want to problematise some of the foundations of the culture-public relations relationship and then consider what insights may be gleaned for the discipline and practice of public relations.

Conceptualising culture as a static entity has an impact on how the culture-public relations relationship is interrogated in research, with a number of undesirable consequences. For the purposes of this paper, we limit our discussion to the level of the organisation.

***The stultification of meaning.*** The sensemaking process becomes stultified at a single point in time, with consensual meanings fixed and coherent. Berger (1967) describes culture from this perspective as, ‘An area of meaning carved out of a vast mass of meaninglessness, a small clearing of lucidity in a formless, dark, always ominous jungle’ (p23). Researchers seeking to grasp such patterns of clarity, therefore, expose those meanings that are shared by a group of people (e.g. Sriramesh *et al* 2007). The assumption is that once a bounded entity of stable, harmonised meanings has been identified, then it can be shaped and moulded into a more ‘effective’ entity through public relations. Culture is considered to be a totalising system that exerts a deterministic influence on passive stakeholders, including public relations practitioners who ‘do’ communication and publics who consume messages.

Problematic in the discourse of fixedness is the idea that the management position, or the discourses through which its views, activities and objectives are defined and articulated, can simply be circulated in order for their meanings, impacts and effects to be understood, accepted and acted on by stakeholders, according to the intentions of the public relations coalition. The last five decades in the field have seen the emergence of alternative models: of network systems and complexity theories and dialogic approaches, and an understanding of communication as a process of negotiated meanings and interpretive

effects; all these have served to undermine the validity of the traditional linear model of communication. Nonetheless, the language (derived from the transmission model) that we still typically use to describe the work of public relations perpetuates its alignment with that early model. We refer to the fact that campaigns are run, strategies implemented and key messages delivered. The messy, often unpredictable and complex aspects of the dynamic activity of communication can therefore appear deceptively straightforward when represented in this (inevitably) reductive way (and see Weaver, Motion and Roper 2006).

Ignored are the shifting patterns of provisional agreement or conflict that occur in organisations or societies when meanings are negotiated through collaborative or competitive discourses, often in response and resistance to public relations messages. Furthermore, a discourse of fixedness is not sensitive to discourses which transcend (and influence) organisations and societies, such as the global, professional, media or community with which citizens of today are often engaged on a daily basis. It ignores how people demonstrate subjectivity in their sensemaking by drawing widely on meaning sourced beyond the organisation or beyond the nation, selecting some aspects, resisting others and even imaginatively ‘mashing’ elements in their desire to interpret messages and experiences.

For example, the culture of a public relations consultancy in France, while a product of the sensemaking activities of its members, is also influenced by the cultural values of the occupation of public relations, and of those embedded within French society. Viewed in this way, culture is unbounded and inseparable from wider cultural influences. But what must be remembered at this point is that this cultural context (at whichever focal level is being researched in relation to public relations) only exists as a social construction not as an objective social fact.

***Homogenising.*** Closely related to the notion that meaning is stultified within in a discourse of fixedness is the problem of homogeneity whereby culture is considered to be monolithic, held consistently across a particular setting and applicable equally to anyone

in that context. Conflicts, ambiguities and differences that are a natural part of life, especially those that manifest when people endeavour to make sense of novel or contradictory ideas and discourses, are ignored (author, 2000). Similarly overlooked is the role of agency and the way in which individuals actively appropriate cultural aspects and discourses, reproducing or creating new cultural realities (author, 2005). Therefore, it denies the possibility of an active engagement with stakeholders because it is insensitive to the sensemaking activities of individuals or groups who coalesce into publics through ‘an ongoing process of agreement upon an interpretation... through ongoing representations and within a universe of discourse, different communities arise upon partial agreements’ (Botan and Soto 1998, 38).

An assumption is that there is a distinct subject (public relations) that can act on or directly influence an easily identifiable object (culture) according to its whim. At a basic level, one can of course argue that there is a distinct management group within an organisation whose brief it is to manage or ‘do’ public relations (or corporate communications or whatever). However, like the very culture whose specific context helps to determine the identity of public relations, PR is less a subject or even an agent, and more a complex and dynamic meaning-making process involving a number of often amorphous and disparate groups (more on this below). Public relations thus involves communicative interaction through engagement, collaboration and agreement as well as resistance, refusal, denial: in other words, internal (and external) stakeholders’ conversations, arguments, debates, and even silences, in response to public relations strategies, initiatives and campaigns. This view suggests a greater significance than is often granted for the dispersed, conflicting and inconsistent meanings generated by public relations activity in an organisation. Such meanings are (in different ways) attended to (or ignored), interpreted, modified and transformed by the various (and often competing) collective groupings or interests that make up an organisational culture. By extension, such a view casts doubt on the potential of management-directed communications produced and circulated to shape and modify organisational culture independently.

### **A Discourse of Understanding**

If the notion of culture as a static entity is unhelpful for analysing the interplay between culture and public relations, then perhaps the idea of culture as a more open, fluid process holds greater utility. We argue that the concept of discourse is a productive means for understanding the relationship interactions between public relations and culture. As Motion and Weaver (2005) have demonstrated through their work in the field, 'in public relations, discourse is deployed as a political resource to influence public opinion and achieve political, economic, and sociocultural transformation'. Put simply, discourses are the means by which we come to know, understand and value the world, and our place in it. By extension, discourse places us in the world in particular ways, as Fairclough explains: 'Discourses are diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned – differently positioned social actors "see" and represent social life in different ways, different discourses.' (Fairclough 2001). Discourse also works to organise and mediate social (asymmetrical) relations of power (Fairclough 1995). Thus, discourse is the language practices, the knowledges, ideologies, beliefs and values and the institutional, economic and political structures that produce, sustain or contest particular orientations to and understandings of society, people, and their (personal, social and commercial) relationships with one another.

An organisational culture might be recognised as what Porter (1992) defines as 'a discourse community', though such a community is 'intersected by multiple discourse communities' (p.106). In other words, the larger organisational community may comprise different employee groups, such as management and staff, different discipline or professional groups, such as engineers and designers, differently geographically located groups such as head office and regional staff, etc., each group having different affiliations, orientations and what Porter calls 'discursive habits', both within the organisation and with clients and other external stakeholders (p.106). Thus, such a culture 'is involved with an entire complex network of discursive interrelationships' (p.107). As well, however, each discourse community (or co-culture) within an organisation will comprise individuals with their own differences, marked, for instance, by ethnicity, or social or political distinctions or interests.

The concepts of discourse, discursive practices and discourse communities alluded to here help us understand the ways in which the notions of pattern and regularity, convention and habit obtain in or partly characterise communicative practices and exchanges. However, each also alerts us to the potential for dissonance, disruption and contestation in processes of communication, processes which help to constitute and sustain, or challenge and transform, the identity and stability of a given culture.

What does all this mean for public relations as a communicative practice, and as a means of establishing or modifying relationships (interactions) with others, through meaning-making activities, in culture? Typically, (corporate) public relations is aligned with the management group (or discourse community) in an organisation, and it is therefore unsurprising if, assuming the organisation is a commercial enterprise, public relations' discursive proclivities prioritise (in internal and external communications) the language and interests of the market and profit, control and regulation. Presumably too, the discourse(s) of the organisation's professional/specialist concerns and associations will be imbricated in those other discourses, as will, in the contemporary context, the discourses of employee relations, corporate social responsibility, and the environment.

Several challenges arise for public relations, as a result. One is for the public relations coalition to assert the compatibility between this range (and hierarchy) of discourses and the culture established or envisioned for the organisation. But as we have argued, culture, like public relations, is not a stable or objectifiable entity. As well, culture comprises several overlapping but most likely also dissonant or contestant discourse communities, communities whose individual members also claim specific discursive sympathies, preferences and values, within and without the organisation. Therefore, there can be no certainty about the degree to which particular or combination of discourses will resonate within and between various groups at a given time.

The public relations coalition is accountable to management and, being thus more closely aligned to management-led discourses, may well be, by implication, less open to other



versions of culture (or cultural/community discourses); public relations' discursive possibilities are thereby limited by its position in the management group. Of course, this limitation is true for all discourse communities. However, holding a position of relative power as public relations will, as an arm or representative of management, it can at least attempt to reinforce, legitimise and reiterate certain discursive positions and to resist, ignore or suppress others. The risk of alienation between public relations as discourse community and other discourse communities is therefore obvious here – which doesn't stop culture 'being' or 'doing' but which can result in its dysfunction and fracture.

Given its fraught position in organisational culture, then, it is unsurprising if the PR coalition is nervous about, or fails to identify and make explicit, the sites of discursive struggle or contradiction (Berger 1999). This is really a failure to see culture as a dynamic assortment of diverse discourse communities *in process*; and a failure to see the value of a commitment to acknowledging openly contradictions or differences and the creative, productive ('mashing') possibilities that might arise from cultural difference, from being involved with stakeholders in sensemaking. It is worth teasing this idea out a little further.

Public relations strategies and communications in an organisation necessarily (and often heavily) rely on the objective (patterned, conventional, normative) dimensions of discourse, and of the cultures that discourses constitute and sustain, in order to realise public relations goals or objectives. Indeed, this is understandable, since part of the task of public relations is to make proposed actions or desired attitudes broadly accessible and acceptable: to generalise the particular and to earn legitimacy from its constituency. The risk, however, is that, in so doing, public relations discourse may become frozen or stultified. It may lose its capacity to invoke the dynamic relationship between its objectifying descriptions of naturalised practices and orientations and their interpretation as particular social meanings and impacts by other discourses and discourse communities.

For example, during a period of change management in a given organisational culture, how a public relations group understands and practises 'communicating change' is

particularly revelatory. Does the communicative approach adopted by the public relations coalition enact change as a rational endeavour promoted *by* one group *to* another through carefully designed strategies and tactics? Are processes of consultation with stakeholders designed to elicit anxieties about and resistance to the proposed changes in order the better to quieten them (Johansson and Heide 2008, 292, 296)? Is it believed that keeping stakeholders ‘informed’ will result in a ‘successful change program’ (Johansson and Heide 2008, 293)? By contrast, is the discursive approach to ‘communicating change’ alert and responsive to the multiple, complex and often conflicting range of discourses valued and endorsed by different stakeholder groups in their process of making sense of management-led changes? And does such responsiveness encourage the public relations group to recognise and acknowledge the subjective, processual involvement of stakeholders with their own discursive realities? Does this, in turn, provoke public relations to grapple with the dissonances between its own and others’ discourses, to engage with the question of ‘why certain groups do not seem to be able to talk to and understand each other’? (Johansson and Heide 2008, 297).

By adopting the former, rationalist stance – encapsulated within a wider discourse of fixedness - the public relations group and its constitutive discourses are likely to be similarly reduced to pejorative objectification by internal and external stakeholders: labelled as ‘spin doctors’, as a self-interested, expediency-fixated entity. Here, the implication is that PR is not fully engaged, involved, in contact with the lifeworld, the meaning-making processes of those whose best interests it claims to represent.

### **Implications for education and research**

So what are the implications of these ideas for the discipline and the practice of public relations, particularly in terms of public relations education?

First, let’s reiterate our argument for a moment. We have suggested that culture and public relations are intertwined in an evolving process of meaning making. Certainly coherent patterns of meaning do congeal, and these may be influenced by public relations, which is just one amongst a number of influences ranging from historical norms to global

discourses. So while public relations may be one source of meaning cohesion, such stabilised meaning exists simultaneously with ambiguity and contested/negotiated multiple meanings. This is because people are not passive receivers of public relations, nor are they robotic replicators of culture; they are always involved in active creation or re-creation of culture – and this, of course, involves individual PR practitioners too whose own interpretations and understandings change over time. Culture therefore is both a stable and cohesive entity but also a socially enacted, dynamic process.

Conventional approaches to public relations education are commonly aligned with an industry focus and agenda, and a contemporary environment that prizes regulation and control. Mirroring the rationalist-instrumentalist bias attributed to PR itself, public relations education is interested - implicitly or explicitly - with providing techniques for manipulating culture in order that it might 'better' serve the purposes of the organisation, industry or of management. Units such as 'PR Strategy', 'PR Principles and Practice', 'PR Techniques' offer templates for creating 'excellent' communication, for designing aims, objectives and how to evaluate PR achievement, for content analysing media coverage and assessing its impact, and so on. Students enter public relations programs with the expectation that they will graduate with the skills and techniques at their fingertips that will guarantee them jobs in PR. And indeed many do go straight onto careers in the public relations sector. But what are the disadvantages of designing and delivering courses from within a discourse of fixedness? The subtlety and complexity of PR praxis is entirely ignored and, therefore, discourse and other critical approaches become the interesting, the quirky, the esoteric add-ons to the commonsense, naturalised (instrumentalist) approach. When some years after graduating students telephone lecturers to complain about how difficult it is to implement strategy because of organisational politics, or that despite their best efforts to follow guidance on how to 'do' change communications, employees resist or ignore their activities, then one only has the discourse of fixedness to thank for those limits on their learning.

What might be an alternative? If public relations education is to introduce students to a discourse of understanding, then courses will need to integrate both approaches (culture

as stable entity and culture as dynamic process). Teaching materials will need to assist students to be able to scrutinise the types of discourses favoured by all stakeholders in order to better understand where their respective values, interests, affinities and aims lie. As an example, the unit entitled New Activism, Communication and Citizenship is taught by critical public relations scholar, Kristin Demetrious, in Australia. The unit encourages students to consider diverse approaches to public communication from the perspective not only of state and business organisations but also of civil society including activists and activist organisations. Students examine how social, cultural and political changes contribute 'to how we understand truth, citizenship, empowerment and democracy society and construct 'knowledge' about it' (Deakin University, 2009).

Lecturers should be encouraged to revitalise conventional PR course content with perspectives based on their own research, critiquing and challenging where a discourse of fixedness has become embedded in course design. It is when lecturers as researchers take account in their lecturing and in their research of the complexity of the culture-public relations relationship, with its stability *as well as* its differences and evolutions, that both we and our students will be better equipped to engage more actively in the discourse of understanding. To that end the culture of public relations will be greatly enriched.

Finally, we see interpretive research, especially that which employs a grounded approach, as offering a more sophisticated understanding of the complexities of the socially constructed – and public relations influenced - nature of culture. Ethnographic and phenomenological orientations are likely to provide insights into different discourses and their transient nature. Interviews, observations (especially inside organisations and different cultural contexts), projective techniques and document analysis will all provide in-depth, richly contextual, non-linear explanations for interpretive study (Eisenberg, 1986). There are an increasing number of exploratory studies of this nature (one of the most recent being Johannssen and Heide (2008) which indicate that public relations researchers are becoming more appreciative of the nuances that work of this nature might reveal. We hope to develop this paper eventually through this type of primary research.

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