PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY

Edited by
Carl H. Botan
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Preface

This book evolved out of the belief that public relations can be best understood as a specialized kind of communication. If this assumption is true, we reasoned, it should be possible to study public relations as an instance of applied communication. We should be able to apply communication theory to explain and to predict public relations practice, and use public relations practice as a site for the development of communication theory.

In the spring of 1987 a conference on communication theory and public relations was held at Illinois State University. The authors wish to express their appreciation to Illinois State for support for this conference. Participants were selected for the conference on the basis of a competitive blind review of papers that addressed the topic of communication theory and public relations. Based on a desire to test the limits as well as the core of this approach to public relations, a broad definition of communication theory was used, allowing room for related social science theories to be included.

The participants met in a workshop format for 3 days using prepared papers as the basis for discussions that ranged across a wide spectrum of theoretical issues. These discussions fell into three categories: those addressing issues of metatheory, those addressing issues of theory, and those addressing issues or examples of application of theories. These three categories were later used to organize this book, although the chapters are substantially different from the original papers discussed at the conference. These changes, in part the result of conference discussion and in part the result of the editing process, have had the overall effect of putting the focus of the book even more clearly on communication theory.

Carl H. Botan
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ISSUES OF METATHEORY

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The Role of Theory
in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter lays a foundation for understanding the kinds of theory and how they are developed by addressing how metatheories effect theory development, providing a vocabulary of theory development, and assessing the prospects for theory development in public relations. The chapter concludes by warning against a premature commitment to any particular theory or methodology while urging a continued exploration of the boundaries of public relations.

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about public relations and public relations theory. The book seeks to identify and explain the theoretic roots appropriate to the study of public relations as a social science.

The book is divided into three sections. First, are issues of metatheory or world views that direct the focus of research and the practice of public relations. The chapters in the second section address particular theories or theory areas that are seen as relevant to public relations research and public relations practices. In the third section issues concerning the application of theories to practice are addressed.

This chapter lays a foundation for understanding the role of theory and kinds of theories so that the reader might employ the following

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chapters to best advantage. This chapter is organized into three parts. The first part addresses issues of metatheory and its influence on theory development. The second part suggests a vocabulary for evaluating and comparing theories. The schema provided draws heavily from the work of others, most noticeably Leonard Hawes (1975). Although this is only one possible schema among many, it is one that we find useful in our teaching and research. Finally, we examine the prospects for theory in public relations.

METATHEORY

Theories are fundamentally products of human endeavor, therefore theory construction may be studied like other forms of human behavior, such as communication. In fact, theory construction, as a social enterprise, is a communication-bound activity.

Influenced by points of view much like the one presented in the preceding paragraph, philosophers and practitioners of science (e.g., Kuhn, 1970; Polanyi, 1958) have argued that theory construction is not the dispassionate and objective process that it was once considered. Instead, theorists and researchers bring to this process fundamental assumptions or world views that direct inquiry and theory development.

As Grunig notes in chapter 2, the content of such metatheories, which he calls "presuppositions," may be considered "extra-scientific" in so far as they are not subject to direct observation and therefore may not be refuted easily. Presuppositions are assumed to be true. Because the obvious truth of these beliefs cannot and need not be demonstrated, they are seldom discussed; and their influence may not be recognized.

Hazleton and Cupach (1986) argued for the utility of a concept they call "ontological knowledge". *Ontological knowledge* refers to what communicators know about themselves and the world in which they exist. Such knowledge defines what a communicator assumes is possible or impossible in a given situation. A metatheory may be considered as a type of ontological knowledge, which by its self-evident nature, can blind researchers to certain paths for understanding and learning.

Pearce, Cronen, and Harris (1982) suggest two general questions, which when answered from different metatheoretic perspectives lead to different forms of research and to different theories. The first question is: "What counts as data?". The second question is: "What do data count as?".

Pearce and colleagues suggest that the first question, "What counts as data?", implies the following more specific questions:

1. "What is the appropriate unit of analysis?" Our own experience suggests that researchers and theorists disagree about the smallest meaningful unit of data. How researchers regard the often cited maxim that "meanings are in people not in words" may determine whether public relations scholars focus their study on symbols, messages, or message effects.

2. "What is the appropriate unit of observation?" In public relations should we focus on individuals, groups, or institutions/organizations? Answers to such questions are not trivial. For example, it is possible to assume that annual reports are products of individual effort rather than a product of the organization. In the first case, a researcher would seek a representative sample of practitioners. In the second case, a researcher would seek a representative sample of organizations.

3. "What is the appropriate form of data?" The most obvious distinctions are between quantitative and qualitative methods. However, finer distinctions may be made within each of these alternatives concerning appropriate measurement. For example, in a quantitative study it might be arguable that the mean, median, or mode is the correct and appropriate measure of central tendency for summarizing message strategies across public relations campaigns. In a qualitative study, the question may be the number of examples that are adequate to support a claim or the extent to which summary claims and observations may substitute for particular examples that are the focus of concern.

The second question, "What do data count as?" is informed by answers to two additional questions:

1. "What does a statistical relationship indicate?" Is a particular finding indicative of a causal or associational relationship? Although Pearce et al. (1982) do not suggest the following, we would argue that this question is also relevant in qualitative research. For example, the qualitative researcher must consider whether particular observations are indicative of temporary or enduring phenomena. This extension is possible when you consider qualitative research as instances where $n = 1$ or some other small number not suitable for traditional statistical analysis.

2. "What is the relationship between the data and the theory?" Answers to this final question are reflected directly in the ways that theories are constructed and modified as well as in the initial theory choices that researchers pursue. Researchers infer different properties from a common observation depending on their interest in uncovering laws (e.g., Berger, 1977), discovering rules (e.g., Cushman, 1977) or specifying systems (e.g., Monge, 1977).

Fundamental disagreements of the type suggested above are not uncommon. For example, Gerald Miller (chapter 3) and James Grunig (chapter 2) disagree about the nature and ethical character of persuasion. Miller argues that public relations messages are a subset of the universe of persuasive messages. Grunig considers persuasion to be only one type of public relations message. Moreover, Grunig considers all persuasion as unethical, whereas Miller sees evaluation of means and ends as necessary to assess the ethicallity of persuasion.

At the root of this disagreement are different beliefs about the motivations of public relations practitioners. According to Miller, all public relations may be motivated by desires to understand or control the environment and to gain understanding from those in the environment. It is this motivation that is central to recognition of persuasion. Grunig argues that public relations may be motivated by desires for mutual understanding; messages generated by such motivations are not persuasion, and they are ethical.

This fundamental disagreement is, at present, unresolvable. Resolution would first require an unambiguous measure of the motivations of public relations practitioners. If public relations practitioners were found to be homogenous in their motivations to influence when communicating (even if only for the purpose of achieving understanding in their public), we would conclude that Miller is correct. If public relations practitioners were found to be heterogenous (exhibiting motivations to influence as well as motivations to understand), then we would conclude that Grunig is correct. It is doubtful that either author could propose a measure that both they and we would consider an unambiguous measure of motivation. Until such a measure exists, so that the disagreement may be resolved, we will continue to evaluate these theories based on our own presuppositions about motivations for public relations.

Poole and McPhee (1985) touched on another dimension of presuppositions when they discussed what they call the theory—method complex. They suggest a reciprocal relationship between method and theory. Their discussion indirectly suggests to us the need to consider the relationship between public relations practice and theory construction in public relations.

If Poole and McPhee are correct, for example, it would be unsound practice for public relations scholars to base their research on methods drawn solely from practitioners' experience. Their contention that "methods are one's [a researcher's] point of contact with reality" (Poole & McPhee, 1985, p. 101) suggests that a priori adoption of methods may have the same assumptive force as a world view.

It is reasonable to assume that practice as well as theory building may

be influenced by metatheories. Public relations practitioners bring their own world views to work with them and express these world views through their day-to-day activities.

This would lead us to argue for the need to train researchers and practitioners broadly, so as not to allow methodological assumptions to constrain productivity. In a field where creativity is a desirable characteristic, a broad knowledge of theories and methods will lead to the recognition of multiple, alternative solutions for practical as well as theoretical problems.

To summarize our discussion to this point, metatheories are assumptions about the fundamental nature of the phenomena of interest. These assumptions are frequently unrecognized and influence choices of theory as well as method. Recognition of metatheoretic assumptions is necessary before other alternatives may be considered by theorists and researchers (Littlejohn, 1983; Pearce et. al., 1982).

A supposition that underlies our efforts in writing this chapter is: In order for communication to be effective, communicators must share or come to share a common set of symbols. To accomplish this end, the next section of this chapter defines the set of symbols that we use to talk about "theory."

THEORETIC VOCABULARY

Theories may be viewed as consisting of two basic types of content: concepts and statements about the relationships between those concepts. As a minima, a theory consists of at least two concepts and a statement explaining or predicting the relationship between those concepts.

Concepts are descriptive in purpose and function. They reference the fields of human experience. Concepts vary principally in their degree of abstractness. Level of abstractness is a function of the number of differentiated exemplars that constitute instances of a concept, as well as the extent to which exemplars are directly/indirectly observable.

For example, the concept "public relations" embraces a large number of differentiated exemplars, each of which may be seen as an occurrence of the concept. Behaviors as diverse as planning a communication campaign and writing a press release are readily recognized as instances of public relations. In the case of our current example, "communication campaign" and "press release" are also "theoretic" concepts. A theory of public relations should account for our earlier observation that both of these molecular concepts are indeed instances of the molar concept "public relations."

Relationships

Statements linking concepts in a theory are logical in character. Perhaps the most common type of relationship described in theories is the *conditional* relationship characteristic of hypotheses (If A then B). Other types of relationships are also possible, such as *conjunctive* relationships (Both A and B) or *disjunctive* relationships (Either A or B).

Both the conceptual content and the relational form of the statement contribute to our understanding of types of theories. Hawes (1975) identified two fundamentally different types of theoretic statements: synthetic and analytic. According to Hawes, synthetic statements are "empirical" in nature. Their validity is a function of the content of the concepts being related. Analytic statements are logical. Their validity is a function of form or structure. Analytic statements are more abstract and general than synthetic statements.

Different criteria are relevant to the evaluations of theories constructed from these two types of statements. Theories that consist principally of analytic statements are evaluated first in terms of their internal structure and consistency and secondarily in terms of their fit with human experience. Theories that consist principally of synthetic statements are evaluated first in terms of their fit with human experience and secondarily in terms of their internal structure and consistency.

Statements

Hawes (1975) suggested three dimensions applied to synthetic and analytic statements that produce seven unique types of theoretic statements from which theories may be constructed. The dimensions are scope of the statement, source of the statement, and validity of the statement. Types of statements are facts, hypotheses, propositions, postulates, axioms, theorems, and laws.

The first dimension, scope, refers to three levels of generality. Statements may be specific, general, or universal in scope. All analytic statements are universal in scope. Synthetic statements may be either specific or general in scope.

Four sources for statements are identified by Hawes. Statements that are primary and not derived in any way from other statements are said to be "assumed." Statements that are speculative and loosely tied to other statements are "inferred." Statements that are suggested by the empirical content of a prior statement are "derived." Statements whose logical validity is suggested by the logical structure of prior statements are "deduced."

The third dimension is validity of the statement. The validity of a

statement should not be confused with its truth. Validity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for truth. A statement is tautologically valid if the primary statement from which it is deduced is logically valid. All analytic statements are tautologically valid.

Three other classes of validity apply to synthetic statements and reflect the extent to which all or none of the theoretic concepts are presently observable. A statement in which all of the concepts are subject to observation is considered empirically valid. If only some of the concepts in a statement are presently observable it is considered semantically valid. Finally, a statement is syntactically valid if none of its concepts may be observed at present.

In summarizing Hawes, we find that seven types of theoretic statements are recognized from the application of these dimensions to the analysis of synthetic and analytic statements. A *fact* is a synthetic statement where the scope is specific, the source is assumed, and the validity is empirical. A *hypothesis* is a synthetic statement of general scope, derived from prior statements, and empirically valid in that a hypothesis proposes a relationship between two or more sets of facts. Facts and hypotheses are not properly parts of theory. They serve as a bridge between theory and the empirical world.

The next four types of statements, *propositions, postulates, axioms,* and *theorems* may be either synthetic or analytic depending on the type of theory containing them. Synthetic propositions are general in scope, their source is assumed, and they are empirically valid. Analytic propositions are universal in scope, their source is assumed, and they are tautologically valid. Synthetic postulates are general in scope, their source is assumed, and they are semantically valid. Analytic postulates are universal in scope, their source is assumed, and they are tautologically valid. Synthetic axioms are general in scope, their source is assumed, and they are syntactically valid. Analytic axioms are universal in scope, their source is assumed, and they are tautologically valid. Synthetic theorems are general in scope, their source is inferred, and they are empirically valid. Analytic theorems are universal in scope, their source is deduced, and they are tautologically valid.

Laws are the final type of theoretic statement examined by Hawes. Laws are analytic statements that are universal in scope. Laws are deduced, and they are tautologically valid.

Types of Theories

Although the potential for laws concerning public relations is likely to be a hotly debated issue (depending on the metatheoretical presuppositions to which researchers and theorists adhere), the formal, analytical concep-

tualization of theories proposed by Hawes appears to be useful for organizing theories into a limited number of types. Each of these types is defined by a common set of characteristics. Hawes (1975) identified four types of theories.

Type I theories, according to Hawes, are likely to be presented in a literary style. The primary statements of the theory are axioms. None of the concepts expressed in the theory are presently observable, although they may be empirical in character. Type I theories are characterized by a large number of statements and are the least parsimonious of substantive theories.

In order to be tested empirically, postulates must be added to the Type I theory. Theorems can be inferred from valid postulates, and hypotheses may be derived from the resulting set of statements. Facts may directly support theorems and indirectly support postulates. Most rhetorical theories, including the theory in chapter 8 by Cheney and Dionisopoulos, are Type I theories.

Type II theories consist of at least two postulates. From the postulates a theorem may be inferred, and at least one hypothesis can be derived from the theorem. Facts may directly test the theorem and indirectly test the primary postulates of a Type II theory, therefore "negative results cannot be interpreted as falsifying the primary statements" (Hawes, 1975 p. 58). The number of theory concepts subject to empirical observation influences the adequacy of any observation as a theory test.

We argue that in many respects the application of coorientation theory to public relations presented in chapter 14 by Johnson is characteristic of Type II theories. Whereas this theory is generative of useful and informative hypotheses, failure to support a particular hypothesis in a particular study may be more indicative of the inability of research methods to adequately observe the theoretic phenomena than as a direct test of the adequacy of the theory.

Type III theories consist of at least one propositional statement from which a hypothesis may be derived. Facts that support the derived hypotheses directly test the proposition. Type III theories are the most parsimonious of substantive theories. In this book, theories of persuasion Gerald Miller identifies in his chapter are most representative of Type III theories.

Type IV theories are formal rather than substantive theories. Primary statements in Type IV theories are analytic rather than synthetic. A formal theory consists of at least one analytic proposition, postulate, or axiom from which at least one analytic theorem can be deduced.

The utility of formal theories is their generality. They are models of structures on which a variety of observations can be tested for goodness

of fit. The theory of games presented by Murphy in chapter 10 is a formal theory, or Type IV theory. She argues that the general structure of games, expressed mathematically and logically may be used to explain public relations behavior and as a guide to planning public relations.

If theory construction is to serve the advancement of knowledge concerning public relations, then we must be able to compare and contrast alternative theories. We suggested earlier that an understanding of metatheoretic presuppositions may contribute to such an analysis. In addition, the typology of theories identified in this section of our essay is useful in categorizing theories and research. However, neither of these directly addresses issues of practical utility. In the next section we suggest criteria that are useful in comparing alternative theories.

Comparing Theories

Direct comparison of theories is only desirable when two or more alternative theories address the same problem area or domain of investigation. Theories may be viewed as functional solutions to problems, and it is the extent to which theories contribute to solving the problems associated with understanding, teaching, or practicing public relations that will determine their worth.

A functional analysis of theory considers at least four goals. First, theories may be seen to perform a descriptive function. They provide a vocabulary for studying and talking about public relations. The goodness of fit between theories and our experiences with the phenomena they seek to describe is one way of comparing alternative theories. Here the adequacy of the concepts to model public relations is the primary focus.

The primary emphasis of the Public Relations Process model Long and Hazleton (1987) proposed is description. Its goal is to identify general concepts and variables that apply to all instances of public relations. Little attention is paid to specifying the relationships between those concepts identified in the model. The proposed model may be compared to other models and/or it may be assessed for goodness of fit against experience. The psychographical profile Scott and O'Hair propose in chapter 12 is also descriptive.

A second function of theories is to promote understanding. In addition to telling us what public relations is (description), a theory may tell us why public relations exists (understanding). The degree of satisfaction with the explanatory power of a given theory may be a function of the theory's correspondence or adherence to the auditors metatheoretic presuppositions. For example, constructivist theorists find the attitude-change research influenced by logical empiricism lacks explanatory

power because meaningfulness is a concept central to constructivist research but not to logical empiricism (see Delia, 1975; O'Keefe, 1975).

Prediction and control are also useful criteria for assessing and comparing theories. These two criteria are different but complimentary. Prediction refers to the ability of theories to anticipate the future value of concepts from current or past observations of those concepts or related concepts. Control refers to the ability of theorists to systematically intervene and influence outcomes predicted by theory. Prediction may be considered as a necessary but not sufficient condition for control.

In public relations, the general effects of favorable and unfavorable publicity upon stock price is predictable. Favorable publicity is likely to produce an increase and unfavorable publicity is likely to produce a decrease in the price of a referenced stock. A theory that suggests how practitioners could intervene in the communication process so as to determine the valence, favorable or unfavorable, of publicity would allow for the control of stock prices. Stock prices can be controlled through collusion between practitioners and the media, however such behavior is both illegal and unethical. (We also note that collusion is a concept studied within the theory of games [see Hazleton, 1977] and theories about illegal and unethical behavior might be derived from game simulations or analogous situations.)

Finally, we consider the heuristic function of theory. The heuristic function of theory refers to the tendency to generate research and additional theory. We suggest two factors that may be related to the heuristic function. First, theories that deal with problem domains considered central to a field are likely to receive more attention than theories that deal with peripheral problem domains. Second, the availability or lack of available methods for observing theoretic concepts appears to influence research activity. It is our experience, for example, that method-bound theories appear to generate less research than theories that are not method bound.

Heuristic theories also are likely to be controversial. They attract opponents as well as proponents. In psychology, dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) not only generated research by Festinger's students, it generated critical attention from other theorists, including Bem (1967).

As a summary, we observe that "better" theories describe adequately the activities and processes that constitute public relations. They enhance our understanding of the rationale and purpose underlying public relations practice and effects of those practices. They make accurate predictions about the influence of various environmental factors on relevant publics and suggest how, within ethical and legal boundaries, practitioners might control the outcomes that derive from public relations

.activities suggested by theory. Finally, a better theory elicits research activity in public relations and theory building.

In this section of our chapter we provide our own theory of theories. We identify and define a basic vocabulary useful for talking about the basic elements of theories and constructing those elements. We show how, from these elements, various types of theories can be constructed. And finally, we suggest extra-theoretic criteria useful for comparing and evaluating theories. In our final section we consider the prospects and promise for public relations theory.

PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY

Public relations is a rapidly emerging social science discipline. Central to the maturation of public relations as a profession and an academic discipline is the development of a body of theoretic knowledge that differentiates public relations from other professions and other academic disciplines. The academic roots of this discipline are clearly found in departments and schools of journalism and the empirical and humanistic social sciences concerned with the study of communication.

Journalism and public relations have been viewed traditionally as crafts to be learned from skilled practitioners. This may result from two historical influences. First, early public relations practitioners were principally ex-journalists who naturally brought with them many perspectives and values from their professional training and experience. Second, in the past, public relations has been taught largely in departments of journalism (although this is no longer the case, see Neff's chapter) so that beginning practitioners often start with the values and perspectives taught for the journalistic profession.

However, the craft approach to public relations education and training does not produce the unique body of theoretical knowledge necessary for the development and advancement of a profession. For example, engineering is a profession derived from physics and the other natural sciences rather than in the construction trades. Medicine was practiced in barbershops until it was linked to the sciences of biology and chemistry. So we look toward the humanistic and empirical traditions of social science to develop public relations theory.

Both empirical and humanistic traditions are reflected in this text. The works of Cheney and Dionisopoulos (chapter 8) and Pearson (chapter 7) are examples of theory and research in the humanistic tradition. Chapters by Murphy (chapter 10); Hamilton (chapter 19); and Cline,

McBride, and Miller (chapter 13) reflect an empirical orientation. Currently, little data suggests the superiority of one tradition over the other.

The metatheories and theories that comprise the first two sections of this text must be tested through research in laboratories and field. The third section of this text is concerned with application of specific theories or the potential application of theories to research and practice.

Our personal experience with professional and academic organizations (including the International Communication Association, the Public Relations Society of America, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and the Speech Communication Association) is that there has been little of public relations research that is theory driven. However, there is an apparent, increasing commitment to theory-driven research as evidenced in part by this book.

In this formative stage of social-science based public relations research, premature commitment to a particular theory or methodology is inappropriate. Merely substituting a new set of restrictive assumptions for an old set would deny public relations the opportunity to explore its boundaries and develop analyses which can allow it to both draw on, and make contributions to, the vast area of human endeavors studied by the social sciences.

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Symmetrical Presuppositions as a Framework for Public Relations Theory

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ABSTRACT

Public relations theorists have borrowed theories from communication science and other social sciences, but few have developed unique theories of public relations. Scientific disciplines always have borrowed from one another, but they do not advance unless they build original theories from the borrowed concepts. In this chapter, Grunig maintains that public relations theorists must examine their presuppositions about public relations before they borrow concepts and build theory. All theories are derived from presuppositions. Unless theorists recognize the effect of presuppositions, they will blindly follow the prevailing worldview of the field. The prevailing worldview, Grunig argues, sees public relations as persuasive and manipulative. As a replacement, he proposes a symmetrical view of public relations that sees the purpose of public relations as managing conflict and promoting understanding.

This chapter focuses on presuppositions and their role in theory building, especially in building a theory of public relations. In chapter 1, Hazelton and Botan described different types of theories that have been developed in communication and explained the role of metatheory in theory building. This chapter, then, examines the effects that metatheory has had on public relations. In the past, public relations theory has ignored metatheory, but I believe that we must understand it if we are to improve both the ethical quality of public relations and its chance for success in resolving practical public relations situations.

Presuppositions are the essence of metatheory. They influence all four types of theory described in chapter 1. They consist of assumptions about the world and values attached to those assumptions. Presuppositions define the problems researchers attempt to solve, the theoretical traditions that are used in their research, and the extent to which the world outside a research community accepts the theories that result from research.

The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated Galileo for his presuppositions when he claimed that the earth was not the center of the universe. Presuppositions have produced lawsuits when evolutionary theory has differed from fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible. I maintain that presuppositions about the nature of public relations have steered research and theory in the field in a direction that I consider to be both ineffective and ethically questionable. I then suggest an alternative set of presuppositions that I believe will produce a theory of public relations that helps organizations be more effective. I also propose a theory more ethically acceptable to people outside the public relations profession than are the current principles that guide our practice.

Public relations is an infant scholarly field, although it has been practiced for at least 100 years and perhaps for thousands, depending on how tightly we define the origins of the field (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 13–46). One can think of many theories that apply to public relations, but it is more difficult to think of *a* public relations theory (one that has not been borrowed from another discipline). Public relations as a scholarly discipline, therefore, appears to be fragmented and not unique as a discipline.

The professional practice of public relations appears to be equally fragmented; practitioners have no common body of knowledge nor even a common set of skills. Yet one can argue that the practice is guided by a single mindset, or paradigm as Kuhn (1970) called it, that dominates the field. Such a mindset defines public relations as the use of communication to manipulate publics for the benefit of organizations. "Persuade" is a softer word often substituted for "manipulate," but changing the word does not change the mindset. Practitioners with a social conscience often convince themselves that manipulation benefits publics as well as their organizations. Again, however, the mindset remains the same.

Olasky (1984) traced this predominant mindset to the introspective psychological theories of public relations developed by Edward L. Bernays in the 1920s and called it the "Bernays paradigm." Jackall (1986) described the same mindset and argued that it differs little today from when it guided the practices of the press agents of the 1800s.

Roughly described, the dominant mindset defines public relations as the manipulation of public behavior for the benefit of the manipulated

publics as well as the sponsoring organizations. The mindset carries with it a number of obvious presuppositions about the nature of human beings, the nature of social responsibility, and the nature and purpose of communication. It also suggests the relevance of some obvious communication theories, most notably theories of attitudes and persuasion. I call this mindset the *asymmetrical model of public relations* and suggest an alternative I call the *symmetrical model of public relations,* which has a different set of presuppositions and calls for a different kind of theory.

Before describing these competing mindsets, however, I introduce some concepts from the philosophy of science that help to explain the nature of scientific theory and the role that presuppositions play in its development.

PROBLEMS AND DOMAINS IN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

During the last 20 years philosophers of science have abandoned the idea that the purpose of science is to discover truth or to discover theories that accurately describe the real world. Instead, they have come to the conclusion that the purpose of scientific research is to build theories that solve the most relevant problems to researchers working in a scientific domain. Two terms are important in this statement and require further explanation: *problems* and *domain.*

Researchers do not, as so many of our methodology textbooks assert, formulate theories and try to falsify them with data.[1] Rather, they choose problems that researchers working in a domain believe to be important. After choosing problems, researchers develop primitive theories— vague, general hunches—about how to resolve those problems. If research provides hope that these first hunches offer promise of solving the problems, researchers pursue the theories further and gradually revise and expand their theories so that they resolve more and more problems.

Domain is a term that was coined by Shapere (1977). His concept of domain is similar to such concepts as research programs (Lakatos, 1970), disciplines (Toulmin, 1972b), research traditions (Laudan, 1977), or paradigms (Kuhn, 1970). Shapere, like these other writers, was trying to define the fields or areas of interest that can be identified within a science. What is common among these writers is the notion that common

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[1]This antiquated explanation of science is usually called logical positivism or logical empiricism (see, e.g., Feigl, 1969). The idea that the purpose of science is to falsify conjectured theories was developed by Popper (1959, 1965). For a discussion of what the "new philosophy of science" means to public relations, see J. Grunig (1979).

problems hold these fields together. Public relations can be described as a scientific domain within the broader area of communication, although it is certainly one of the least-developed communication domains.

Scientific Domains

According to Shapere (1977), domains cannot be identified by single theories or by research traditions. Likewise, domains cannot be explained sociologically as a community of scholars, as Kuhn (1970) argued, for example. Rather, domains consist of a set of "items" that have some deeper unity: phenomena to be explained, facts and observations that have been made about these phenomena, and theories that have been used to explain them. Thus, in Shapere's view, scientists use theories to do more than explain observations. They also use them to explain other theories or simply to find a idea that unifies the domain.

It is difficult even to identify the items in the public relations domain. What are the famous studies, the competing theories, the typical methodologies? In contrast, the persuasion and attitude-change domain consists of many observations of effective and ineffective communication campaigns, thousands of experimental results, learning theories, functional theories, stimulus–response theories, cognitive consistency theories, and cognitive–response theories.

The constitute a domain, according to Shapere (1977, p. 525), the items must be related in some way. In addition, there must be something problematic about the domain (something not well understood); the problem or problems must be important; and science must be ready to deal with the problem.

Scientific Problems

Problems that scientists agree are important, therefore, constitute the core of a domain. Shapere (1977, p. 533) defined three types of scientific problems. *Domain problems* relate to "the clarification of the domain itself." The other two kinds of problems relate to the need for a "deeper account of the domain": *theoretical problems* "inasmuch as answers to them are called 'theories,'" and *theoretical inadequacies,* because the problems are with the theories themselves.

Laudan (1977) has provided further clarification of the nature of the scientific problems found at the core of a domain. In *Progress and Its Problems,* he described science as a problem-solving enterprise. He defined a scientific problem as something that is ambiguous or irregular,

and said that "the function of a theory is to resolve ambiguity, to reduce irregularity to uniformity, to show that what happens is somehow intelligible and predictable" (p. 13). Laudan (1977) proposed two theses about the nature of theory:

> Thesis 1. The first and essential acid test for any theory is whether it provides acceptable answers to interesting questions; whether, in other words, it provides satisfactory solutions to important problems.
>
> Thesis 2. In appraising the merits of theories, it is more important to ask whether they constitute adequate solutions to significant problems than it is to ask whether they are "true," "corroborated," "well-confirmed" or otherwise justifiable within the framework of contemporary epistemology. (pp. 13–14)

Like Shapere, Laudan (1977, pp. 15–31) elaborated further on the types of problems that could be found in a domain (although Laudan did not use the term *domain*). According to Laudan, problems may be either *empirical* or *conceptual*. An empirical problem consists of an experiment or other kind of observation that provides a test of a theory.[2]

Conceptual problems occur with a theory itself. When they occur, scientists pay more attention to such problems than to empirical problems. Conceptual problems may be *internal*: an inconsistency in the logic of the theory. They also may be *external*: They may be incompatible with a theory from another domain, with prevailing methodologies, or with prevailing nonscientific beliefs. Laudan called incompatibility with nonscientific beliefs "worldview" difficulties—difficulties that occur when scientific theories conflict with the prevailing worldview of nonscientists. "Worldview difficulties," I believe, describe the problems of Galileo, evolutionary theory, and of public relations.

Laudan (1977, p. 71) maintained that scientists do not evaluate theories by testing them against facts or data, as most empirically oriented communication researchers assume, but by comparing them with other theories. Theories can be compared if they address similar problems. The best theories, Laudan (1977, p. 66) said, are those that solve the most empirical problems and have the fewest conceptual problems and anomalous empirical problems. Such theories are the hallmark of advanced domains.

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[2]Laudan defined three kinds of empirical problems. *Unsolved problems* are those that no theory has solved. *Solved problems* are those solved by one or more theories. *Anomalous problems* are those that one theory can solve but that one or more competing theories cannot solve.

Mature and Immature Sciences

Many philosophers of science have attempted to describe the differences between primitive and developed sciences. Obviously, public relations is a primitive science. In primitive science, according to Shapere (1977), "obvious sensory similarities or general presuppositions usually determine whether certain items of experience will be considered as forming a . . . domain, this is less and less true as science progresses" (p. 521). In primitive science, scientists work directly with phenomena and, at times, empirical generalizations. As a domain matures, scientists develop deeper theories to connect and explain relationships among the items in the domain. Nickles (1977) added that a single theory begins to dominate a domain as it matures, and "as one theory succeeds another the domain is modified and usually enlarged" (pp. 583–584).

If public relations were a more advanced domain, we would be quarreling about whose theory best solves Laudan's conceptual problems and anomalous empirical problems. Instead, we seem to have few public disagreements, probably because we have few theories to argue about. We have few theories because we have not defined the important problems in the domain. Our first task, then, is to solve Shapere's domain problems, which means that we must clarify the domain itself.

Good Theories Are Underdetermined by Data

As philosophers of science have recognized that the purpose of science is to solve problems rather than to explain phenomena, they also have begun to realize that results of research do not have to match theoretical hypotheses perfectly, or even well, to be useful. Too often in a primitive domain like public relations, we pay great attention to the empirical accuracy of research and do not ask whether our research is related to important problems or contributes to the building of deep theories.

Laudan (1977) argued that theories seldom predict empirical results closely and that researchers, instead, search for enough confirmation of their hunches to proceed to develop a theory:[3]

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[3]Lakatos (1970, p. 138), similarly, claimed that researchers ignore anomalies at the beginning of a research program, when anomalies abound, and search for enough verification of the theories to suggest that the theory warrants further development. Suppe (1973, p. 147) added that "there is no question whether the theory is empirically true—it's known to be false." But, he added, researchers still use such a theory "because it conveniently yields incorrect predictions, which are close enough for the purposes at hand."