A Public Relations Identity for the 2010s

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Abstract

New voices are being heard and new questions are being asked within the field of public relations. However, in its present multifaceted state, public relations research is still struggling with recurring questions regarding academic and practical contributions. This position paper presents some common starting points for a public relations identity for the 2010s aiming to preserve both consistency and multiplicity. We argue that public relations should be studied as a social activity in its own right and that it must be understood in relation to its societal context. Furthermore, we point to some concepts (trust, legitimacy, understanding, and reflection) that are crucial to understanding public relations practice. We also argue that issues of power, behavior, and language have to be dealt with if public relations is to be taken seriously as an academic field. Building on these ideas we make some suggestions for empirical research. Finally, we propose, on a philosophical level, to develop a critical realist framework in order to study public relations scientifically.
Almost since its inception in 1984, symmetrical theory/excellence theory has been the dominant paradigm in public relations (e.g., Grunig et al., 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The field has not, however, been without competing perspectives. This is something that can be attested to by the publication of several research volumes (e.g., Botan & Hazelton Jr., 1989; L'Etang & Pieczka, 1996; Toth & Heath, 1992). However, these theoretical approaches have long been characterized as peripheral visions (see the special issue of Public Relations Review, 31[4]) or as perspectives from the margins (see the special issue of Journal of Public Relations Research, 17[1], 2005).

In the 2000s, more than ever, the field opened up to a wealth of different perspectives on the practice of public relations (e.g., Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Heath, Toth, & Waymer, 2009; Ihlen, van Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; McKie & Munshi, 2007). The latter publications address, among other things, traditions and literature from sociology, postmodernism, cultural theory, anthropology, rhetoric, critical theory, communication science, and communication studies. Alongside the established Public Relations Review (first volume in 1975), and Journal of Public Relations Research (first volume in 1989), and the “old” contenders Journal of Communication Management (first volume in 1996) and Corporate Communications: An International Journal (first volume in 1996), the field now has relatively new journals like PRism Online PR Journal (first volume in 2003), the International Journal of Strategic Communication (first volume in 2006), Public Relations Journal (first volume in 2006), and Public Relations Inquiry (first volume in 2012). In principle at least, this promises a richer and wider approach to the study and practice of public relations. With the number of perspectives, different venues and outlets, it is not likely, or even desirable, that another line of thought will inherit the position that the symmetrical theory/excellence theory held during the 1990s and into the 2000s.
The key question that will be pursued here is: How do we make sense of the discipline as it has branched out? Identity literature typically points out that some basic questions, such as “who or what are we?” or “who or what do we say we are?”, need to be answered (Jackson, 2010). Our main argument is that there is a need for public relations to come to terms with itself as a multi-paradigmatic discipline that can demonstrate its academic value, alongside the traditional emphasis on making recommendations for practitioners. In this connection, we maintain that public relations research should answer how public relations work and what it does “in, to, and for organizations, publics, or the public arena, in other words, society as a whole” [reference omitted, p. 2]. We hasten to add that this does not mean that we advocate a narrow approach to this task. The literature on corporate identity reminds us that it is important to recognize the value of having *multiple identities* (Leitch & Motion, 1999; Meijs, 2002). People often hold multiple and contradictory views of an organization, without being uncomfortable with this. Organizations need “to embrace diversity and variety and to balance the wisdom of its many voices with the effort to secure clarity and consistency in its overall expression” (Christensen, Fuat Firat, & Torp, 2008, p. 423). When discussing public relations identity, we are confronted with the same challenge of reconciling consistency with multiplicity. With this in mind we draw on what Van Riel (1992) has called the theory of common starting points. The theory denotes the central values that an organization uses, but does not necessarily attempt to make all communication from the organization uniform. Similarly in this paper, we are not looking to argue for one general theory of public relations. Instead we celebrate diversity in theories and methodologies, but we also propose what could be some common starting points for an academic public relations identity in the 2010s.

Expanding on previous work [reference omitted to facilitate anonymous review] we will present views on (1) what the *domain* of public relations as an academic field should be;
(2) we argue for the importance of seeing public relations in its societal context; (3) we point to some central concepts for public relations; (4) we call attention to some social issues that are brought to the fore by applying academic theory to public relations activity; and, finally, (5) we discuss some possible empirical research avenues that spring from this discussion. These aspects are derived from each other, starting with the most general aspect of public relations theorizing, and unpacking the ideas in a step-by-step approach that becomes increasingly specific.

The originality of this paper does not lie in proposing these points individually, as some of them are relatively well rehearsed in certain parts of the literature. We maintain, however, that a different picture, indeed, a potential identity for the field, emerges when we put the different elements together. Furthermore, while many studies have addressed the concepts and issues we will discuss, they have not necessarily been geared toward a meta-discussion of a public relations identity. In addition, we discuss and elaborate on these themes in light of how the public relations field is demarcated in the state of the art publication *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations* (hereafter referred to as the *SAGE Handbook*) (Heath, 2010b). As stated above, there has been a wealth of valuable publications about public relations in the 2000s. However, we maintain that the *SAGE Handbook* (with its 773 pages, 50 chapters, and 64 contributors) is the best single place to get an overview of what goes on within the academic field of public relations. There is currently no other volume that comes close to it in terms of breadth and length.

**Domain: Warts and All**

What shall we study? Public relations textbooks typically portray the history of public relations as moving from dubious unethical origins in publicity seeking to a practice that recognizes the value of ethical behavior (Duffy, 2000). One historical account, for instance, points to five consecutive phases based on the way the public is treated: the public is damned
or ignored (1865-1900), the public is informed or served (1900-1918), the public is educated or respected (1918-1945), the public is known (1945-1968), and, finally, the public is involved (1968-today) (van der Meiden & Fauconnier, 1994). In the eagerness to legitimize public relations, there is a tendency for some writers to conflate normative ideals with current practice. However, unethical public relations practices still thrive. Public relations agencies still set up front groups. Public relations agencies still work for dubious clients just like the pioneers Edward L. Bernays and Ivy Lee did in their day (Ewen, 1996; Tye, 1998). The historical client list of public relations agencies includes dictators like Rumanian Nicolae Ceausescu, Haiti’s Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. Agencies have worked to put a better face on the military regime in Nigeria, the Chinese government after the Tiananmen Square massacre and the crack down on Tibetan protests before the 2008 Olympics (Pickard & McGregor, 2008; Stauber & Rampton, 1995).

Going back to the history of the profession, it becomes evident that it established itself as a business response to criticism, either from the media or from public interest groups. Public relations companies have also been engaged in the promotion of political ideas, primarily the sort that benefit corporations. During the 1970s the work for capitalism and free-enterprise democracy took on a more systematic character (Crable & Vibbert, 1995; Ewen, 1996). This type of work is continued to the present day. In the US and elsewhere, public relations have been used to protect the interests of major corporations (Miller & Dinan, 2008).

While some of the public relations literature has been known to gloss over such practices or portray them as irrelevant fringe activities that do not represent the “true” practice, many critics have a tendency to go in the opposite direction: all public relations is painted as sinister activity that works against the public interest (e.g., Stauber & Rampton, 1995). This criticism ignores the fact that public relations can be put to use for public causes
as well. Indeed, clever use of public relations has helped several public interest groups in their work. In terms of media relations, two conflicting tendencies can be noted: powerful sources have been able to consolidate their access to the media, but alternative sources have also been able to gain access (Davis, 2000). The paradox is that public relations critics use public relations to gain publicity for their views. In fact, neither the critics nor the organizations can avoid communicating; they cannot avoid using public relations.

We have argued that public relations should be studied like any other social activity [reference omitted]. Public relations in itself is not good or bad, but can be used for good or bad purposes. From this, we argue, follow that the administrative approaches to public relations should “be supplemented with societal approaches that expose what public relations is in society today, rather than only what it should be at the organizational level” [reference omitted, p. 5]. It is necessary to focus on the consequences of public relations as well as its effectiveness (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). We maintain that deliberation and research from different social theory perspectives will lead to a better understanding of public relations practices and the consequences those practices have for society.

In the preface of the SAGE Handbook, Robert L. Heath declares that the big difference between this edition and the first edition is that “the literature shift[s], from making organizations effective to making society effective” (2010, p. xiii). Public relations should be “goaded by the incentive to make society a better place in which to live and work” (2010, p. xiv). Heath has previously used the phrase “the fully functioning society”:

To help society to become more fully functioning, managements of organizations (for profit, nonprofit, and governmental) must demonstrate the characteristics that foster legitimacy, such as being reflective; being willing to consider and instrumentally advance others’ interests; being collaborative in decision making; being proactive and responsive to others’ communication and opinion needs; and working to meet or
exceed the requirements of relationship management, including being a good

corporate citizen. (Heath, 2006, p. 100)

While certainly laudable in one sense, this normative ambition on behalf of public
relations seems to shun some important questions: Functioning for whom and in who’s
interests? As Heath himself points out, relationships are not always “something that is good
and enduring” (2010, p. xiii). Several of the chapters in the SAGE Handbook do, in fact,
discuss problematic issues of the practice (e.g., L'Etang, 2010; Leitch & Motion, 2010).
However, the opening chapter formulates the civic role of public relations in a distinctly
positive manner: “Public relations’ role in society is to create (and re-create) the conditions
that enact civil society [original italics]” (Taylor, 2010, p. 7). Again, this is a fine normative
ambition, but we would argue that it is hardly a fitting description for what goes on in the
world of public relations. The field still has issues to tackle. Leitch and Motion (2010), for
instance, state that: “a key aim of public relations is to achieve or resist change by
persuasively advancing and potentially privileging particular meanings and actions” (p. 103).
To us, this seems to be more in line with the warts and all view advocated above.

Context: Description of Society

The call issued in the previous section is also a call to see public relations in its social
context. That is, it is a call to use social theory to make sense of the practice by questioning
the value and meaning of what we see around us. A general feature of social theory is that it
offers diagnoses of contemporary society and social change. Using the work of Weber, for
instance, Wæraas points to how humans are now “dominated by goal-oriented rationality
instead of acting on the basis of traditions, values, or emotions” (2009, p. 302). The narrative
of modernity points to how rationality has taken a central position in almost all spheres of
modern societies. More recent social theorists have, however, pointed to how an emotional
and value-oriented order exists alongside the order of rationality. What Lyotard (1979) called
the postmodern condition is characterized by pluralism, polycontextuality, and situated knowledge. There are, at least, two views of conflict and dissensus. Either they are something that produces social crises and the status breakdown of knowledge and expertise, meaning, or social cohesion. Or they are something that helps to overcome hegemony and dominance [reference omitted].

Social theory proposes different remedies for perceived social problems or crises, ranging from acceptation and communicative action to the use of social instruments such as public relations. The perspective of the fully functioning society or the enacting of civil society, mentioned in the previous section is an example of this. Others argue that we should study the way in which our current non-modern condition is being constructed from scratch by all kinds of different actors and actants and draw lessons from this (Verhoeven, 2009).

Versions of a social constructivist perspective seem to dominate the way social theorists have described the process by which late modern society has come into being. This privileges a focus on language, communication, and relations. Bourdieu (1990), for instance, focused on how the social world is structured, constituted, and reproduced through individual and collective struggle. At the core of human existence conflicts and the relational production of difference remain. Similarly, Foucault (1972) thought that certain discourse coalitions produce modern knowledge and that these discourses express power at the individual and societal levels. Such power relations are expressed in the macro structure of gender and patriarchy as well as in risk distribution (Fredriksson, 2009; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). From societal diagnoses like these, calls are made to address the issues regarding injustice that public relations help to perpetrate. For example, from her Marxist-feminist-deconstructivist perspective, Spivak points to fundamental inequities that are bred by international divisions of labor and fed by the neoliberal projects of transnational capitalism (as cited in, Dutta, 2009). Inequities are found on the global scale, but also in the communication between
organizations and their publics. Hamelink (2006, July) has pointed to the striking consistency between the results of a dialogue process and the position of the most powerful party in that dialogue.

Questions like those above are necessarily related to the role of public relations in society. Four main social science themes, which are the same as those Golding (2006, June) proposed for mass communications scholars, can be discerned: questions of power and the distribution of power in society, questions of equality and inequality in relation to communication, questions of identity-building through communication, and questions about social change and the role of communication in it. The SAGE Handbook addresses these questions in varying degrees and proposes several different analyses of society. There are chapters based on social constructionism (Tsetsura, 2010), systems theory (Holmström, 2010), complexity theory (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010), and intersectionality theory (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010), to name a few. However, looking at the author index, it becomes evident that general social theory is not a central focus of the contributions in the book. References are made to, for instance, Bourdieu, Durkheim, Foucault, Giddens, Goffman, Habermas, Luhmann, and Mead, but the numbers of times these authors are mentioned is strikingly low. There are, for instance, only four entries for Habermas, despite his being much discussed in public relations (e.g., Burkart, 2009). The broader role of public relations in society is addressed in some chapters (e.g., Bentele, 2010; Leitch & Motion, 2010; McKie, 2010; Taylor, 2010). Even so, we would still like to call for even broader engagement with social theory in this respect. The different understandings of society, social order, and social change described above create a context for public relations and for research into it. Critics have criticized public relations theory for not having a developed ontology (e.g., Cheney & Christensen, 2001). We believe that this fault can be rectified using social theory.

Concepts: Trust, Legitimacy, Understanding, Reflection
As pointed out above, some of the most profound social changes are related to the downfall of social authorities. Decisions have to be legitimized on a continuous basis. From this, we argue, stems the idea that trust, legitimacy, understanding, and reflection are crucial concepts for public relations [reference omitted]. We use the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy definition of concepts; namely, “the constituents of thoughts” (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concepts/#ConAbi, accessed August 23, 2011). We see a concept as an abstract idea that structures knowledge and is structured by knowledge. For us, then, concepts are helpful when attempting to understand the most fundamental parts of public relations activity.

As posited by Ivy Lee, you have to take into account what the public thinks of you in order to secure your continued existence (as cited in, Hiebert, 1966). Scholars working with symmetrical theory, as well as rhetorical theory, have continued to argue along similar lines (Grunig, 2006; Heath, 2001). Social theory offers several definitions of legitimacy, spanning from the classic Weberian take of “the justified right to exist” to Luhmann’s “generalized preparedness to accept decisions within certain boundaries of tolerance; decisions which are still undecided as regards contents” (Luhmann, 1993, p. 28). There are, of course, differences among the different conceptions: Habermas, for instance, tied legitimacy to truth. Weber, for his part, focused on the beliefs of the audience. Translated into public relations: Organizations are bound by what the environment finds acceptable (Wæraas, 2009). Using Habermas, Burkart (2009) suggests a model that practitioners can apply in order to help further understanding between organizations and their publics, which in turn might form the basis of legitimacy. Using Giddens, Falkheimer (2009) argues that public relations is a reflexive social expert system and one of the main strategies organizations use in their attempt to manage in a fast-changing society. Expanding on the work of Luhmann, Holmström (2009) has argued that public relations is a functional system that has turned into
a reflective practice on behalf of organizations. This change is, in part, necessitated by increased demand for legitimacy. Incidentally, Holmström (2010) has a chapter in the *SAGE Handbook* presenting the so-called reflective approach to public relations.

Bentele (e.g., 1994) has proposed a theory of trust. However, others, like Moloney (2005), have argued against a close relationship between public relations and trust. Instead, it is proposed that public relations is “redefined as the communicative expression of competing organizations and groups in pluralist states” (Moloney, 2005, p. 554). A similar view is found in work building on Bourdieu. Ihlen (2009) maintains that public relations is a practice that assists organizational actors in pursuing their interests. The main goal of organizations is to position themselves in what Bourdieu calls *fields*.

The purpose of public relations can therefore be viewed in different ways. Some views single out trust building and legitimacy, either as an end in itself or as a means to realizing organizational goals. By adopting a social theory perspective, however, it becomes clear that it is not necessarily possible to manage communication, legitimacy, and trust. Legitimacy, for instance, is conferred upon an organization by different publics, and hence it cannot be managed (Wehmeier, 2006). This leads to the conclusion that public relations has to do with the negotiation of knowledge, meaning, and behavior. Similar thoughts are also presented in the *SAGE Handbook*, not least through a discussion of what is called the cocreational approach (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2010). Here, publics and groups are considered as cocreators of meaning. Other chapters in the *SAGE Handbook* discuss the relationship between publics and public relations (and point to the challenges of multiplicity, resistance, and engagement) within a discourse framework of public relations (Leitch & Motion, 2010).

Taken together then, we argue that trust, legitimacy, understanding, and reflection are concepts that are tightly intertwined with the above description of society as dominated by
change and the disruption of the social order. These concepts also articulate ideas about what public relations practice is or could be about, ideas that largely spur on or are spurred on by certain issues.

Issues: Power, Behavior, and Language

Issues can be defined as *matters of discussion* or, as Latour (2005) has put it, *matters of concern*. Put differently, issues are facts in the making, discussed in often controversial public debates. For us, issues are not only something negative, but rather points where scholars have conflicting opinions. Issues can lead to creative and fruitful discussions. In that respect, issues may overlap with concepts, but we use the term issues to point to crucial debates that appear in part as a result of involving the concepts above in public relations research.

Three overarching and intertwining issues arise from the literature about the theoretical state of public relations. The first issue is power in the broadest sense of the word, ranging from the power of public relations practitioners in organizations to the power of corporations in society. The second issue, behavior, is closely related to power but also to responsibility, as expressed in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and attention to the ethics of public relations as a communication process (Pearson, 1989). The third important issue is related to language and communication, phenomena that cannot be separated from the technological and social development of the media environment on a global level since the 1990s. The rise of digital and social media and its use by organizations and individuals raises questions about their consequences for public relations. These overarching issues from the literature are also recognizable in the top five most important issues for the profession in 2013, according to European communication professionals (Zerfass, Tench, Verhoeven, Verčič, & Angeles, 2010). Coping with the digital evolution and the social web is seen as the most important issue, followed by linking business strategy and
communication and, dealing with sustainable development and social responsibility (Zerfass, et al., 2010). These issues show a remarkable fit with a civic role for public relations as proposed by Heath (2010) and Taylor (2010) in the *SAGE Handbook*.

Meaning creation is at the heart of public relations and closely related to the concepts of organizational sense giving and sense making (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). With sense giving organizations try to impose their interpretation of a phenomenon on others, often by means of one-way communication such as propaganda or public information. Combining sense giving and sense making in two-way communication processes makes room for multiple interpretations of and negotiation about the meaning that is produced in the communication process.

Another resounding insight, originally presented by Berger and Luckmann (1966), is that reality is a social construction. Truth is seen as inseparable from discourse, that is, it is inseparable from the way in which we use language and communication to interact with one another. This view is seen as opposing that of realists who think that objective knowledge is obtainable. To gain a better understanding of public relations as an institution in society, we have to look behind it and inquire into how public relations functions as the producer of certain dominating realities in society (B. K. Berger, 1999; Heide, 2009).

Processes of sense giving, sense making, meaning construction and reality construction have enormous implications for issues of power. They make public relations political: it is seen as a discursive meaning creation process by which it establishes and/or reinforces particular truths, hence its link to power (Motion & Leitch, 2009).

The issue of power and public relations is also addressed in the *SAGE Handbook*. Smudde and Courtright (2010), for example, define power as having three dimensions: hierarchical, rhetorical, and social. Hierarchical power is based on a person’s rank and position in an organization. Rhetorical power concerns the skills that are necessary to be
effective with language and symbols. Social power binds the other two forms of power together; people acting together through communication to produce organizations and societies.

All three forms of power are important in public relations. Hierarchical power in an organization is still an issue because results from research on the power of public relations professionals in organizations and how well they are connected to the dominant coalition (Grunig, 1992) are mixed. European research shows that not all practitioners are seated at the management table (Zerfass et al., 2010).

Public relations and rhetoric are widely discussed, often in the context of spin control about the reality of organizations (see e.g., Ewen, 1996). In the SAGE Handbook Toth (2010) defines a rhetorical paradigm as one of the research paradigms for the future of the field. Others in the book also address rhetoric and public relations, for example, from an anthropological perspective (L'Etang, 2010) and with regard to crisis communication (Coombs, 2010). Ihlen writes about the “cursed sisters” (2010, p. 59) of public relations and rhetoric. He argues that despite the curse, “public relations needs its big sister: the grand dame of communication studies” (2010, p. 66). Researching questions about rhetorical power and public relations certainly belong to this research paradigm.

The social power of organizations and public relations is also widely discussed regarding, for example, gender and race. The practice of public relations has become a gendered profession and this connects to the amount of power public relations professionals have in organizations. European research shows that female professionals in most of Europe perceive their influence to have less impact on the strategic decision making and planning of their organization than do male professionals (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010). Also, despite the popular belief that there is no glass ceiling in public relations, research shows that issues such as salary inequity, a lack of women in higher management, and work-life balance questions
have far from disappeared (Wrigley, 2010). The *SAGE Handbook* speaks about a feminist paradigm for public relations (Toth, 2010). Other questions about social power concerning race (Edwards, 2010; Waymer, 2010), class, and sexual orientation (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010) are also addressed in the book. Similarly, more general questions about social power and publics (Leitch & Motion, 2010) and activism (Bourland-Davis, Thompson, & Brooks, 2010; Smith & Ferguson, 2010) are also addressed.

Responsibility is an important aspect of the power organizations have in society. From the perspective of distributive justice Donaldson and Preston (Donaldson & Preston, 1995) describe a pluralistic theory of property where property rights are inextricably linked with responsibilities. Various groups have a moral stake in the corporation, which is the foundation of the stakeholder theory (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Property rights go together with responsibilities, as well as with responsibilities for stakeholders.

The connections among power, behavior, and responsibility are in the background of De Bussey’s (2010) stakeholder orientation model (STAKOR), which is built on dialogue. The notion of responsibility for others and/or society seems to gain ground in the profession of public relations, considering for example the rise of the acceptance of corporate social responsibility as a subdiscipline of public relations. The European Communication Monitor 2010 shows that public relations professionals consider CSR and sustainability communication to be a field of practice that will gain importance until 2013. CSR is expected to rank fourth behind corporate communication, marketing communication, and internal communication (Zerfass et al., 2010). CSR is not a very prominent topic in the *SAGE Handbook* and is only discussed in relation to corporate branding (Brønn, 2010), community relations (Heath & Ni, 2010), and race (Waymer, 2010).

Language and communication have always been key to all public relations issues and activities. Today it has become an issue in its own right due to the digitalization of
communication, the changing media landscape, and the rise of social media. Interpersonal and mass communication are becoming intertwined and the active public now has its own language and communication. A piece of interpersonal communication in society has become mediated. A former invisible part of interpersonal communication has become visible using new communication channels and platforms, resulting in all kinds of consequences for public relations. It is for good reason that practitioners think that coping with digitalization and the social web will be the most important issues the profession has to deal with in the coming years (Zerfass et al., 2010). Nevertheless, only one chapter of the SAGE Handbook is devoted to social media. Kent concludes that public relations professionals and scholars should step past the idea that social media technologies, such as Facebook and Twitter, are marketing and advertising tools, and “embrace them as tools capable of solving problems and engaging publics in real-world issues” (2010, p. 655). Hallahan (2010) presents an integrated public relations media model, where social media are an integral part of the public relations media mix. Social media stand between the mass communication of the public and organizational media on the one hand and the personalized communication of events and one-on-one communication on the other. Media use, says Hallahan, “shapes the nature of the practice itself” (2010, p. 639). This moves media and communication to the center of research on public relations, and is therefore providing ideas for empirical research avenues.

Empirical Avenues: A Research Program for Public Relations

Our step-by-step discussion of the domain, context, concepts, and issues of public relations lays the ground for a basic framework for empirical research on public relations. Seeing public relations from the perspective of social theory produces a range of analytical-level insights into public relations’ relationship to individuals, organizations, groups and society. Social theory is necessary to describe, understand, and explain what happens to whom in the realm of public relations and with what consequences. This also opens up the
We argue that the basis of empirical research on public relations is the communicative, linguistic, or discursive turn that has dominated social theory and the philosophy of science for some decades. For public relations it means a fundamental constructivist starting point ranging from micro studies of individual action to macro perspectives of system theory. This constructivist starting point fits empirical research within a reflective paradigm of public relations research (Holmström, 2010; van Ruler & Verčič, 2005). Public relations research based on social theory will be useful as a counterpart to the research from managerial or behavioral paradigms that dominate the field for the past few decades. It can fill the gap between the mainly descriptive and normative studies in the managerial paradigms and the individualistic psychological studies in the behavioral paradigm. A social theoretical reflective paradigm that informs public relations research is also very much in line with the civic function of public relations suggested by Heath (2010) and Taylor (2010) in the SAGE Handbook.

A reflective paradigm is also moving communication theory to the center of public relations research. First, communication can be seen as an abstraction of the interaction that takes place among individual participants, among groups, and among discourses or social systems. Public relations can then be conceptualized as different forms of communication, ranging from symbolic interpersonal and social communication to the non-personal communication function in system theory. Second, in such a paradigm it is possible to distinguish between mediated and non-mediated communication on the micro, meso, and macro levels. It also creates space for the increasing importance of mediated communication, for example via social media, for public relations in societies that are connected by a global media system. Third, it makes it possible to feed public relations theory and research into
communication studies and communication science, acknowledging the roots of the
discipline in mass communication theory. After all, in many countries today communication
science is one of the most important social sciences, if not the most important.
Communication studies and communication science can provide an umbrella for the different
paradigms of study presented in the *SAGE Handbook*: crisis communication, critical theory,
feminist, rhetorical, strategic management, and tactical (Toth, 2010).

In the empirical avenue of social theory/communication and public relations,
questions can be raised about the domain of public relations as an academic and professional
field, the societal context of public relations, the central concepts of the field and the social
issues that surround public relations activities. We especially think of raising questions about
the effects of public relations; what are the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral effects of
public relations activities on different publics. These questions can be studied with the
instrumentation of communication science, for example from the theoretical perspectives of
framing (Entman, 1993; Hallahan, 1999), agenda setting and priming (Scheufele, 2000), uses
and gratifications (Ketelaar & van der Laan, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000), public opinion dynamics
and formation (van Ginneken, 2003), cultural indicators (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, &
Signorelli, 1994), spiral of cynicism (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), the reception gap (Zaller,
1996), or new media theories about computer mediated communication (Neuman &
Guggenheim, 2011) to name a few. We suggest an analytical-empirical focus on the effects
and consequences of public relations. A first step could be to conduct meta studies about the
effects of the numerous studies that have been conducted on this in the last 25 years. The
*SAGE Handbook* includes a chapter on research methodology (DiStaso & Stacks, 2010);
methodologies that can be used in a communication science perspective to answer empirical
questions in the field of public relations. Research that can provide answers about the identity
of public relations in today’s society.
Conclusion

Reflecting on chapters in the *SAGE Handbook*, Heath concluded that the public relations discipline: “Is still derivative. It is still searching for its center. But it is searching” (Heath, 2010a, p. 709). This dovetails with the basic questions we raised at the outset of this essay, “who or what are we?” or “who or what do we say we are?” The answers for these questions form the basis of a public relations identity for the 2010s. By building, critiquing, and expanding on previous research, we have argued for a public relations identity based on five particular notions or five common starting points:

1. Public relations research should not be limited by an insistence on its applied nature, but acknowledge that the practice should be studied like any other social activity; good or bad.

2. We maintain that society is characterized by increased complexity and large-scale social change against which the practice of public relations must be understood.

3. Among the most crucial concepts of public relations, are trust, legitimacy, and reflection given the centrality and description of the social context.

4. Issues of power, behavior, and language become important.

5. Public relations should be investigated using macro-level empirical research questions building on a constructivist perspective that involves theories of communication and an interest in agency and structure.

We see these aspects as interlinked and as being derived from each other, more or less in the fashion of a Russian doll. While several of these points can already be found in the literature, we think that there is a need to pull them together in order to form an identity for the field. As with every other academic field, public relations needs to be able to say why it can actually be called a field. Our suggestion is a combination of the elements presented. We state that present scholarship has rarely taken such a wide view while simultaneously
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attempting to address the identity question utilizing the theory of common starting points. Present scholarship has, as Heath (2010a) argues, not really answered the identity question satisfactorily. A case in point is the call for papers that was issued by the international public relations conference Barcelona Meeting Com#1:

The old center has not held and a diversity of opinion that is less insular, and more socially concerned, continues to emerge. These newer voices differ on perceptions of present, past, and future – not only are there disagreements on what public relations is now, but on what public relations has been, and on what public relations might be. (http://www.uoc.edu/symposia/meetingcom2011/presentacio_eng.html, accessed August 23, 2011)

In this paper we have tried to sift through what public relations is, has been, and might be. To bring coherence a step closer we suggest the development, on a philosophical level, of a critical realist framework for studying the multiple identities of public relations. This has already been done in other fields, for example with the so-called ‘Realist Turn’ in organization and management studies (Contu & Willmott, 2005; Reed, 2005). A critical realist framework seems very suitable for public relations since it is considered a perspective that can offer a solution for moving beyond the deadlock between positivists (or realists) and social constructionists in the social sciences. It is a realistic alternative for modern and postmodern analyses because it acknowledges the social construction of reality on the one hand and the existence of a reality independent of our interpretations on the other hand. Critical realism proposes to explain social phenomena at the real/deep level of the structures and mechanisms that underlie them (see e.g., Bhaskar, 1978, 1979, 1986). In a critical realist framework all the elements proposed in this paper can be combined in an effort to explain public relations as a social phenomena.

A research agenda for public relations in a critical realist framework does not impose
a particular methodology or a compulsory engaging of all scholars with all the mentioned issues or concepts. It also does not aim to produce one general theory of public relations, it opens up questions on different levels of analyses: from impressions, perceptions and sensations, events and states of affairs to the real/deep structures and mechanisms in the field. It can also account for one glaring omission in this paper; namely, the role of culture, which deserves more attention and could fruitfully be integrated in a critical realist framework. This aspect has been discussed in other recent volumes (e.g., Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Edwards & Hodges, 2011), as well as in the SAGE Handbook (i.e., Wakefield, 2010). The development of a critical realist framework for public relations is a task for future studies.

In our critique of the state of public relations, we have relied mainly on the snapshot provided by the SAGE Handbook. This obviously has the weakness that we rely on the vision of one particular editor. We do acknowledge that several other volumes, for instance the two mentioned above, have been published where other voices are heard and other perspectives are forwarded. Still, we maintain that the notions described above are sufficiently wide, but also specific enough, to function as common starting points for an academic public relations identity in the 2010s. Our belief is that public relations as a whole needs to demonstrate its academic worth through a pursuit of the matters discussed above. Several chapters in the SAGE Handbook touch upon this, but we argue that more is needed.
References


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