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Ethics as a precursor to organization–public relationships: Building trust before and during the OPR model

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Abstract: This study builds on the public relations theory of organization–public relationships (OPRs) by exploring the role of ethics as a precursor to building OPRs. We qualitatively explore the existing relationship variables in the context of ethical behavior as a precursor to building authentic, long-term relationships with publics that will eventually benefit an organization’s effectiveness and reputation. These variables have not yet been explored in terms of ethics. We conducted elite interviews with public relations professionals of North America, Europe, and Asia who were either: (1) chief communications officers at the top of responsibility in the public relations function or (2) highly placed public relations professionals involved in the agency world who are in charge of regions or the heads of independent consultancies. Prior studies show that trust is a crucial variable of OPR and building on that foundation, we examine how ethics and trust are interrelated as part of complex relationships. Our research contributes to the foundation of ethics in building trust in both OPRs and the excellence theory within public relations. This study provides analysis and implications for the public relations industry in the use of ethics as a precursor to OPR, to build relationships between organizations and publics.

Subjects: Communication Studies; Public Relations; Public Relations

Keywords: public relations theory; ethics; authenticity; transparency; strategic communication management; excellence theory; trust

1. Introduction

When Ferguson (1984) called for theory-building study of the relationships between organizations and their publics, the call was met by those from the strategic management school of public

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Shannon A Bowen, PhD, University of South Carolina; Chun-Ju Flora Hung-Baesecke, PhD, Massey University, New Zealand; and, Yi-Ru Regina Chen, PhD, Hong Kong Baptist University, all earned doctorates at the University of Maryland studying with James E Grunig, the progenitor of excellence theory. The models of organization–public relationships (OPRs) grew from the work of a team of excellence scholars and their doctoral students. Bowen specializes in ethics; Hung-Baesecke in relationship theory; and Chen in public affairs. This collaboration sought to understand the *trust* variable of ORPs and how trust is composed and enhanced with ethical constructs.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Organizations cannot survive without relationships with stakeholders (such as employees and investors) and publics (such as consumers and government regulators). Relationships between organizations and publics are complex things—they can be adversarial or beneficial, but are ever-changing and depend on communication and excellent public relations. We use the research of what components constitute good organization–publics relationships (OPRs) to examine the role of ethics in building trust that results in longer term, beneficial relationships. We find that ethics is a foundational concept in building trusting OPRs.

relations—excellence theory in particular (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 1992b; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This study builds on the public relations theory of organization–public relationships (OPRs) by exploring the role of ethics in building OPRs. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined OPRs as, “The state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity” (p. 62).

Although numerous studies have expanded our understanding of OPRs, as reviewed below, ethics was assumed to be part of the process and never studied explicitly in relation to what factors precede, build, maintain, and sustain relationships between organizations and their strategic publics. With that conception in mind, we explored the existing relationship variables in the context of ethical behavior and ethical values as precursors to authentic, long-term, relationships between organizations and publics that will eventually benefit an organization’s effectiveness and reputation. The authors posit that exploring ethics as a prior foundation for the other OPR variables is an oversight because ethics have the potential to form the very basis of other considerations in a relationship, such as trust—or to make that relationship impossible when ethics are omitted.

2. Posing an order for OPRs

This research could be conceived as attempting to understand an order, or process, for the creation of, building, and cultivation of OPRs. Necessarily we ask, “Where does that process began?” Reviewing prior literature on relationship management and relationship building from the systems theory perspective helps understand that process (e.g. Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2005). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified different dimensions of relationships, including trust, involvement, openness, investment, and commitment. The fact that they prominently situated trust among the dimensions naturally leads to the question of how trust is built. Other researchers have also highlighted trust as either part of the composition of an OPR (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) or as the indicator for effectively developing relationship online (Yang & Lim, 2009). In addition, Huang’s (2008) research on relationship indicators in a crisis context also showed trust to be one of the important factors in handling crises.

As the excellence study researchers (Grunig, 2000) later explained, ethics was assumed as a foundational concept underlying the theory that should have been explicated as a stand-alone principle of what makes public relations excellent (Vercic, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996). Grunig et al. (2002), noted that “Bowen (2000) has made great progress toward such an ethical theory” (p. 556), but that study and its successors (Bowen, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2009) failed to be incorporated into later studies using the variables of OPRs. The study at hand seeks to rectify that omission and adds to the body of knowledge a crucial variable of OPRs: ethics. We pose the idea that ethics is essential not only as a foundational element that underlies all transactions, but as an explicit variable and a precursor to the formation of authentic OPRs. Ethics must be present before authentic relationship can be built, otherwise they could be authentic but unethical, such as the case with Enron (Bowen, 2010a).

3. Trust as the fundamental OPR antecedent

Literature has suggested several antecedents to OPRs. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) proposed the following OPR antecedents: social and cultural norms, collective perceptions, perceived uncertainty in the environment, needs for resources, expectations, legal and voluntary necessity, and behaviors (p. 94). Since relationship management is an ongoing process, dimensions of relationship quality have been identified as OPR antecedents: trust, involvement, openness, investment, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001a; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Hung (2005) argued that relationship types serve as an OPR antecedent. Face, favor, and power were identified as OPR antecedents in Chinese society (Huang, 2001a; Hwang, 1987).

Trust is required between the parties to economic and social exchange where there is the inherent risk that benefits provided might not be returned (Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992). This need is supported by empirical research which has revealed trust as a fundamental antecedent to OPRs.

For example, trust plays a crucial role in building consumer–organization relationships in the e-commerce sector (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003; McKnight & Chervany, 2001–2002) and the organic food sector (Michaelidou & Hassan, 2008). When exploring the antecedents to citizens’ relationships with political parties, interpersonal trust in the political party was found to be a significant predictor for the formation of such relationships (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011). Bortree and Waters (2008) concluded that trust alone is not sufficient for the formation of non-profit organization–volunteer relationship, but it is vital for such relationship to exist.

In the context of employee–organization relationships, trust of employees in the organization (i.e. in management and in peers) directly led to employee loyalty and satisfaction (Matzler & Renzl, 2007). A similar linkage between trust and employee commitment was found in the context of employee–organization relationships in China (Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004). However, Chinese employees were affected more strongly by the trust in their managers than their Western counterparts (Hui et al., 2004). Chen (2008) found keeping organizational credibility to be an effective strategy for non-Chinese multinational corporations to cultivate relationships with the Chinese Government.

Besides these studies on OPR in the Asian context, studies in Eastern Europe also demonstrated trust to be an important factor in the relationship between publics and organizations. For example, Seiffert, Bentele, and Mende (2011) found that the discrepancies between communication and actions of German corporations led to loss of public trust and the behavioral changes of German publics (e.g. termination of economic exchange with the corporations) toward the corporations. Taylor (2004) performed a study on public relations in Croatia, and the results showed interpersonal and relational communication to be the essential parts in public relations practices. Specifically, her research highlighted that *trust* was the foundation in relationship development, and “when missing from a relationship, interactants cannot communicate or cooperate” (p. 156). Furthermore, other studies in Eastern Europe provided additional information on the importance of trust: in the totalitarian states among Eastern European countries where the level of trust was low, people had to rely on their immediate set of family and friends (Gibson, 2001; Vercic et al., 1996).

Hon and Grunig (1999) identified the three dimensions of trust: integrity, dependability, and competence. As competence is assumed as part of excellent public relations, we focus particularly on the dimensions of integrity and dependability. Integrity is about whether an organization treats publics fairly and justly, with good intention and ethical awareness. Doing so establishes ethical behavior on the part of the organization. In addition, the dimension of dependability expresses whether organizations’ words conform with their behaviors, and implies the consistency that comes with regularly employing an ethical framework in decisions. Thus, it is whether an organization is genuine in keeping its promises to publics which confirms Molleda’s (2010) view on authenticity: how corporations communicate with publics should be consistent with what they actually offer to publics.

With the discussions above on the OPR research in Asia and in Eastern Europe, findings have been consistently showing trust to be an important factor for developing quality relationships, and how publics would be willing to communicate with their small circles of friends and family. We believe that trust warrants study in more depth as ethics and ethical behavior are the basis for trust. This paper argues that ethical behavior is a necessary condition before trusting relationships can exist. Ethical considerations must be used at the decision-making core of an organization before authentic relationships can be built.

3.1. OPR outcomes

Much research has been conducted on OPRs. The relationship outcomes constituting OPRs were defined by Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000). They include: control mutuality or a mutual feeling of having some control over the relationship and its decisions; commitment to an ongoing relationship; satisfaction with the relationship and its outcomes; and trust on behalf of both the organization and publics. Researchers postulate that the more well-reported the OPR variables

are, the better the long-term outcomes for the organization in terms of efficacy, relationships, and reputation (Yang & Grunig, 2005).

Numerous types of relationships have been cataloged by Hung (2005), Hung-Baesecke and Chen (2013) as well as the quality of those relationships, assisting in organization when it is under duress, such as in a crisis. Relationship quality and outcomes have been well documented. Perceived trust in an organization is normally one of the indicators that positively affects its relationship with publics, but the ethics necessary in order to create trust have not been explicated.

Although the relationship outcomes identified by Hon and Grunig (1999) have efficacy in modeling the construct constituting a relationship between the organization and public, the authors of this study argue that these outcomes should be expanded to include the concepts of ethics and authenticity inherent in the integrative decision-making of issues management by the CCO. Studies by Heath (2005), Taylor (2010), and Kent and Taylor (2002) have argued that public relations fits best within the rhetorical paradigm in which a rhetor argues on behalf of an organization, creating dialog, as the basis for relationships. Grunig's (2006) symmetrical model of communication seems to encapsulate that idea alongside the management approach. Both approaches incorporate an assumption of ethics; that idea needs to be researched, expanded upon, and made explicit in our understanding of OPRs.

Ethics is an inherent component of symmetrical communication, but we believe that it should be studied in more depth as ethics and ethical behavior are the basis for trust. This paper argues that ethical behavior is a necessary condition before trusting relationships can exist. Ethical considerations must be used at the decision-making core of an organization before authentic relationships can be built.

4. Ethics as the basis of trust in OPR

In discussing the idea that ethical decisions must be made at the core organizations before authentic OPRs can be built, we must examine the concept of organizational ethics. According to ethicists Neher and Sandin (2007) "Ethics refers to a systematic method for making judgments concerning voluntary actions of people" (p. 6). Ethics is rooted in moral philosophy as the study of right and wrong, justifying actions in an objective or systematic manner, having moral autonomy or a choice about those actions, and intentionally deciding upon one course of action based upon some rigorous means of analysis. Ethicists use moral analysis frameworks as means of creating consistent, well-analyzed moral decisions that can be understood and defended, and are based on an organization's ethical belief system and core values. It is hard to imagine trust being enhanced without a basis of ethical behavior.

Goodpaster (2007) explained that ethics must be oriented, institutionalized, and sustained in a corporate culture, meaning that an organization operates with ethical values as a very central part of its consciousness. By orienting values, institutionalizing them throughout the organization's culture, and sustaining them through discussion and reward systems, consistency is built with regard to how an organization handles its responsibilities. That consistency becomes the basis of trust among publics because when an organization operates in a manner that is consistently in line with its values, it can meet expectations among publics, in those publics who in turn build trust, realizing that the organization is operating in a manner consistent with its values. Consistently, ethical behavior can be viewed as the basis of trust in organization relationships.

Although incorporating ethical values into the culture of an organization is an ongoing process and heavily rooted in the communication function, it is also the domain of the dominant coalition, especially the CEO. Goodpaster (2007) argued, "it is the leader who must ultimately make ethical awareness 'happen' when the values and behavior of the organization are at stake" (p. 7). For that reason, this research, as explained in the later methods section, centers on elite executives who are decision-makers for their organizations worldwide or responsible for an entire region. Although CEOs

are key in leading the ethical values of an organization, they cannot do so in a vacuum. They rely on the public relations and internal relations functions to help create a culture centered around ethical values. Often, ethical counsel is sought from the top public relations officer on ethical issues, sometimes called ahead issues manager, for his or her insight into the ethical values of strategic publics and their potential responses to organizational decisions (Berger & Reber, 2006; Bowen, 2008).

4.1. Ethics in public relations

Recent conceptualizations of ethics in public relations have framed public relations as a normative good that creates dialog within society, facilitating relationships between organizations and publics (Bowen, 2010b) and creating a civil society (Taylor, 2010). Parsons (2004) explained, “the truth is that as a profession, we provide a service to society” (p. 61). Determining the debated role of public relations in society is a difficult task, beyond the scope of this paper, but we do know that the role involves a significant ethical component and very real ethical responsibilities to communities, organizations, and publics (Curtin & Boynton, 2001; Leeper, 2001).

Many of the common approaches to ethics from moral philosophy have been studied in public relations (Culbertson & Chen, 2003; Wright, 1989). Situational ethics (Bivins, 1980), ethical relativism (Pearson, 1989), codes of ethics and professionalism (Huang, 2001b; Parkinson, 2001), and moral pluralism (Kruckeberg, 1993) have all been heavily critiqued in public relations in favor of a more strategic (Botan, 1997) or systematic (Bivins, 1992) approach to ethics. Wright (1985), studying the moral development of public relations professionals, concluded that although young practitioners may begin their careers using a utilitarian and/or public interest framework of ethics, as their level of responsibility in years in the field increases, they are most commonly found to use a deontological or duty-based approach to ethics. Similar findings have been reported by Bowen (2002, 2006), McElreath (1997), Berger (2007), Tilley (2005), and Parsons (2004). As public relations matures as a discipline (Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010) that has moved from a trade-based practice to a profession, it still reveals a somewhat conflicted identity (Fawkes, 2015).

Public relations identity as an emerging profession is underscored by responsibility and reflectiveness (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013), so it should be no surprise that the moral development of public relations professionals has continued to evolve, along with their responsibilities to Kohlberg and Candee’s (1984) the highest level or the autonomous level (De George, 2010) of moral development. Autonomous reasoning leads to the more advanced and more difficult means of moral analysis employing a duty-based framework, as opposed to one based on social norms or societal convention. As the profession progresses and practitioners turn into professionals, they began to use the more advanced frameworks of ethics: justice ethics and Kantian deontology (Curtin, Derville-Gallicano, & Matthews, 2011). Kantian deontology has been studied extensively in relation to excellence theory (Bowen, 2007; Bowen & Gallicano, 2013) and relationship management (Curtin, Derville-Gallicano, & Matthews, 2010); it is a natural and tested way to extend ethics as a precursor for OPR. Additionally, the concept of consistency is germane to the public’s ability to know what to expect of an organization, and to the organization’s ability to meet the expectations of publics. Consistently meeting expectations rather than engaging in capricious, haphazard, or biased decision-making allows for an ongoing relationship between the organization and its publics.

4.2. Authenticity

Authenticity means having consistency between the inside and the outside of an organization (Bowen, 2010b). It is seen as a key relationship outcome by the Arthur W. Page Society, a group of thought leaders comprised of chief communications officers (CCOs) and leading academics. Scholars contended that perceived authenticity helped determine the quality of OPRs (Henderson & Bowley, 2010; Molleda, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012).

4.2.1. Development of the authenticity concept

According to Giddens (1991), authenticity was seen as acting on one’s true intentions while striving to maintain good relations with the society. Edwards (2010) contended this contrasted with reality

in a society where morality gave way to consumerism. MacCannell (1973) viewed that commercialization had created “staged authenticity.” This led to Grayson and Martinec’s (2004) term *indexical authenticity*, where a degree of originality or genuineness is measured against an objective and absolute criterion. In contrast, Cohen (1988) and Grayson and Martinec (2004) contend that an individual’s personal experiences affect the perceived authenticity which is socially constructed (*iconic authenticity*). Wang (1999) proposes a third type, existential authenticity, which included “personal or subjective feelings activated by the liminal process of activities” (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006, p. 483)

The types of authenticity (especially iconic and indexical authenticities) were adapted to the brand and marketing discipline. In psychology, authenticity has been mainly discussed from two approaches: Deci’s (1980) self-determination theory and Rogers (1961) view on a fully functioning individual. From the viewpoint of self-determination theory, an authentic individual is autonomous and self-determining. The fully functioning individual is considered to be an authentic, fully in charge of his or her own life, with the autonomy to make decisions with sincerity (Trilling, 1972).

4.2.2. *Synthesis*

At the individual level, authenticity is found in one’s searching for the true self while maintaining good relations with society. In a commercial context, it is about how a product/brand’s actual features experienced by consumers (indexical authenticity) relate to consumers’ perception of the product/brand itself (iconic authenticity). In applying these discussions in developing a trusting and authentic OPR, an organization needs to develop the genuineness and sincerity of the messages consistent with the behaviors it shows.

4.2.3. *Authenticity in public relations research*

Scholars have also applied the concept of authenticity in public relations (Baker & Martinson, 2002; Bowen, 2010b; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Rawlins, 2007; Stoker & Rawlins, 2010). An authentic organization can create successful organization–public relationships (OPRs) that ultimately, to varying extents, help accomplish organizational goals.

Public relations scholars and practitioners also have developed different views on the relevance of authenticity to public relations. The Arthur W. Page Society defined authenticity as “conforming to fact and therefore worthy of trust, reliance, or belief” (2007, p. 15). It is significant that trust prominently figures as one of the main concepts in OPRs (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Molleda (2010) undertook a comprehensive literature review on authenticity from a multidisciplinary perspective and proposed an index for measuring authenticity for messages, actions, and perceived authenticity from the stakeholders’ viewpoints. He advocated for the consistency between the nature of corporate communication and offerings as this consistency determined the effectiveness of reaching active publics and how organizations perform ethically and transparently.

Several authors note that if the public relations discipline hopes to achieve trust and credibility, it must embrace authenticity and encourage integrity (Edwards, 2010; Molleda, 2010). Stoker and Rawlins (2010) linked authenticity with good character, and sincerity, and moral autonomy. They explain, “Public relations achieves authenticity when it gains the strength to eliminate or reduce the disconnections between the personal and the professional and achieve moral congruity among internal beliefs, conscious commitments, and external actions” (p. 67). It is clear that they view authenticity as linked to ethics.

In examining the nature of good inherent in the field, Bowen (2010b) uses the creation of authenticity as a core construct underlying the ethical nature of communication. Bowen (2010b) defines authenticity as, “Being the same on the inside as one appears to be on the outside, in the sense of a genuine and true relation” (p. 579). She divides authenticity into three general concerns: transparency, genuineness, and truthfulness—underpinned by the core concepts: veracity, honesty, and

credibility. Those concepts, Bowen (2010b) argues, could be combined with consistency over time and ethical leadership to create an authentic organization.

Edwards (2010) extensively discusses the problems of authenticity in the organizational context in commercial settings. She argues that one of the major problems is the organization-centric mindset in controlling what is called authentic communication. Similar to Kant's approach, Edwards contends that authenticity requires that organizations "examine their actions, cultures, and motivations in relation to their stakeholders" (p. 203). In addition, ignorance of the problems incurred in reaching true authenticity could result in ethical and moral issues.

The concept of authenticity is linked not only to genuineness, but also to transparency (Rawlins, 2009). Transparency indicates open communication and how business is conducted, meaning that operations are visible rather than opaque, and understandable to external publics. Shen and Kim (2012) have identified truthfulness (being truthful to oneself), transparency, and consistency to be the three components of perceived authentic organizational behaviors.

Moral philosophers understand authenticity as a construct constituting only a part of morally worthy behavior. Without an ethical conscience to guide authentic organizational behavior, such behavior can be authentically unethical, i.e. despite relying on authenticity, it is not morally worthy. Without the core construct of ethics, the meaning of authenticity is lost. Authenticity alone cannot consist in a mediating variable between symmetrical communication and relationship outcomes without a preexisting foundation of ethics.

4.3. Ethics and the CCO

The chief communication officer (CCO) is placed within the executive level of an organization, normally reporting directly to the CEO. The CCO should be a member of the dominant coalition or the five–seven key decision-makers at the top of an organization (Grunig, 1992a). He or she is intimately involved in issues management, meaning the identification of potential problems, and creating proactive solutions to those issues before they damage the organization or its reputation. The CCO is expected to advise the CEO on any number of potential problematic issues and the possible resolutions to those issues. Reporting directly to the CEO is the ideal case for the CCO or head issues manager, although as many as 30–35% of public relations professionals say that they do not have access to the CEO on a regular basis (Berger & Reber, 2006; Bowen et al., 2006). Regular access to the CEO in an advisory or counseling position within the dominant coalition strengthens the ability of the public relations function in building strong OPRs. More often than not, the issues involved at this level include an element of ethics, require ethical decision-making, or constitute an ethical dilemma between competing interests and loyalties.

As chief issues manager or problem-solver, the CCO uses integrated decision-making to help the organization resolve potential conflicts with both internal and external publics. Often, he or she works to include those publics in the organization's decision-making process in an integrative or collaborative manner. Integrative or collaborative decision-making is thought to be inherently ethical because it allows people to share in creating their own decisions rather than simply implementing outcomes dictated by other decision-makers. Those types of decisions further enhance the relationship building between an organization and its publics.

Integrative decisions, or agreements which integrate the interests of others, have proven to create more enduring and satisfying decisions longitudinally than those made from a top-down or one-sided perspective (Lewicki, Litterer, Saunders, & Minton, 1993). Integrative decisions are arrived at through a process of collaboration in which dialog is used to discuss common goals and values, thereby creating ethics "in and through communication" (Jovanovic & Wood, 2006, p. 389). By creating ethical rectitude, the CCO's use of integrative decision-making processes helps support and build long-term relationships between an organization and its publics.

5. Trust and authenticity

Trust, together with control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment, constitutes the outcomes of OPRs defined by Hon and Grunig (1999). Trust means the confidence of one party that the other party can be open and honest. There are three dimensions, namely: integrity (parties in the relationship exhibit integrity, fairness, and justice), dependability (whether the behaviors of parties in the relationship conform their words), and competence (whether the organization has the ability to achieve what it promises). Control mutuality refers to whether parties in the relationship have the rightful power to influence each other. Commitment measures whether both the organization and the publics find it worthwhile to expend time and effort to maintain the relationship. Satisfaction explains whether parties in the relationship have positive feelings toward each other (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Among these relationship outcomes, trust has showed in various studies to be an important factor in establishing mutually beneficial relationships (e.g. Huang, 2008). From Edelman's annual Trust Barometer study (Edelman, 2014), trust has been found to be increasingly important and relevant for global business. Related to the public relations discipline, organizational trust has emerged as one of the predictors for enhancing employee work engagement (e.g. Ugwu, Onyishi, & Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2014), job satisfaction (Lee & Teo, 2005), and profit and organizational survival (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis, & Cesaria, 1999).

5.1. How trust and authenticity insulate an organization

Holt (2002) and Gustafsson (2006) have thoroughly discussed the link between brand trust and authenticity. Holt considers that requests from consumers on brand authenticity no longer focus on how "cool" the brand is. He contends that in the postmodern branding paradigm, brands are being exploited as marketers intend to separate brands from corporations so as to avoid taking responsibility for corporate behaviors. Holt discusses the term "consumer resistance" in describing the phenomenon of rejecting brands for being too colorful in disguising organizational doubtful behaviors, such as corporations being sweatshops, and questionable bonus systems (Holt, 2002). Consumers resist a brand when negative organizational performance contradicts brand value, and the brand then is considered not authentic.

In the modern age, authenticity for many consumers means trustworthiness: organizations should act in line with brand values and behave as a corporate citizen for the community (Gustafsson, 2006). That is, brand authenticity should consist in the brand's value aligned with transparent corporate behaviors (Holt, 2002). To achieve this consistency, Gustafsson (2006) contends that developing trust should be part of corporate strategic development. As a result, building trust with a link to brand authenticity is not just something to be considered in the marketing realm. Organizations should build trust with all the different sectors around the organization in the business environment.

From the discussion above, we can summarize that real authenticity is established when an organization's behaviors are responsible and conform with the brand value. Organizational behaviors should be ethical, transparent, and demonstrate good intentions to stakeholders. It is when publics perceive authentic behaviors on the part of the organization that trust can be developed on both sides of the relationship.

6. A complex confluence of concepts

In summary, the literature reviewed above only scratches the surface of an exceedingly complex concept at the intersection of communication, public relations, and relationships. Admittedly, the OPR model and the relationship variables themselves are simplifications of an interrelated web of interactions, thought, beliefs, emotions, and communications of many kinds. However, the beauty of simplicity is needed to theorize about the interlinkages of how these concepts work together to form a relationship. We assume that the OPR model is roughly correct, based on the large number of

studies examining these concepts. However, despite being assumed as part of a general “ethics” concept, trust is insufficiently examined. But where does it come into play? How is trust built?

According to the findings of numerous studies reported above, we can conclude that ethics is central to an organization acting with integrity and consistency, and those constructs help build trust. The literature reviewed above argues that long-term, enduring OPRs need trust to survive and flourish. Where ethics and trust enter this complex confluence of variables is little understood, this exploratory research seeks to add insight and understanding on how ethical behavior relates to trust, and how trust enhances OPRs.

6.1. Research questions

Based upon this review of literature, OPR, we sought to explore the role of ethics in expanding the model of OPRs. Because this research is exploratory and qualitative in nature, we do not offer hypotheses, but explore broad research questions that can shed light on the order of factors in the complicated processes of forming relationships, and how trust is involved. We pose the following research questions:

RQ 1: In the complex process of building authentic relationships between an organization and its publics, how is trust involved?

RQ 2: Where does trust stand—qualitatively—in relation to ethics and the quantitative variables discussed as OPR antecedents?

7. Method

We conducted 24 in-depth interviews with 2 types of public relations professionals: (1) elites: CCOs at the top of responsibility in the public relations function and (2) senior public relations professionals involved in the agency world, a professional development workshop, or the heads of independent consultancies, sometimes CEOs. These elite interviews were specifically designed into the method as a way to access those with the most and highest level experience in the public relations industry. Their roles as leaders and thought leaders offered valuable insight into what those at the pinnacle of the profession deemed important with regard to relationships, ethics, trust, and how they saw the complex interplay of ethics and communication between organizations and publics. These data are therefore not generalizable to a larger population, but are indicative of what the elite thought leaders in the field see and do with regard to OPRs.

Interview participants were sourced using a convenience sample generated from the membership of the Arthur W. Page Society, leading public relations agencies, and the referral of interview participants in a snowball sample manner. Participants were located in North America, Europe, and Greater China, the latter because of recent involvement in modern competitive business. Some cultural variations existed, as we discuss below. The elite nature of the participants in this research resulted in limited data collection in terms of the number of interviews collected, but the rare access to the executive-level insight offered is thought to be a worthy trade-off in collecting data. Elite interviews are particularly well suited to exploratory studies which seek to understand how and why, as well as process questions, as argued by scholars who specialize in elite research (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Hertz & Imber, 1995).

Because part of our participant group is a convenience sample of leaders in the field, we do not make claims of generalizability, although we occasionally use the quantitative term “variable” when describing concepts in our qualitative study of OPR variables and antecedents. We relied heavily on our personal contacts to generate an elite level of participants in this study, valuing the detailed and high level of knowledge to be gained from these elites (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). As thought leaders in the agency and corporate areas of public relations, we believed these elites, defined as those at the highest levels in their field, will give us valuable data on the role of ethics in building OPRs.

In-depth interviews continued until we reached the point of theoretical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), when no new information is revealed by continuing additional interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, and participants were offered confidentiality. Interview duration range is 31 min to 1 h 30 min. The researchers designed a semi-structured interview guide using a funnel approach (Lindlof, 1995). The researchers conducted all interviews, and they were conducted in person, via telephone, or Internet VoIP (using Skype). Transcribed notes, professional transcriptions, and interview audiotapes were coded by theme and pattern matching. Using qualitative data coding and analysis methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we compared and contrasted resulting views and beliefs as described in the interviews about where ethics falls in the building of relationships in the participants' professional experience. Using open, axial, and selective coding, the researchers were able to distill results into main thematic areas.

8. Findings

RQ 1: In the complex process of building authentic relationships between an organization and its publics, how is trust involved?

Ethics is a core, foundational concept of organizations: "In the organizational DNA."

Numerous participants described ethics as foundational to the organization, a basic part of the fabric of why it exists, the core of a belief system, or in terms of the values the organization holds and how these add to society. Termed as DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid, the basic building block of all living organisms) by many interviewees, ethics were described as the building block of their organizations and relationships with internal and external publics. One current CEO of a consultancy used the term as part of the active creation of culture saying: "You need to embed ethics into the fabric of the company DNA." One CCO explained: "So it's always been part of our DNA. I don't know if we have a big push that says, there is ethics; we do have ethics training, mandatory training for people that are new and come into the organization. But ethics is part of the everyday value chain." Another CCO explained: "One has core values and this notion of beliefs that helps drive to what, you know, is organizational purpose. So we did go through a recent codification. Nobody looked at those and said how or where did this come from, because it was very simple, it's in our DNA." Another explained, "Everybody has to own the ethical constructs that they apply; there is a functional DNA that goes along with senior-level positions." One CCO elucidated, "Ethics is more embedded, it comes up when something does not feel right, it is just part of our DNA." Participants in Greater China clearly stated that being ethical allows the possibility of OPRs. As a participant said, "(To) be ethical is a given." Under this general agreement, some elaborated on the role of ethics in relationship building as "core value for our group, not just the external rules."

Several participants posed a time-order question about which concept under study here must come first in order to build OPRs. A principal of her own firm explained using a visual analogy: "Ethics is the core beliefs of right and wrong so that is like the foundation of a house; whereas authenticity is the framing; and, character is the whole house." Similarly, one CCO said: "The core foundation is strong ethical behavior, and an ethical foundation means that you can meet all these other challenges." Another CCO added, "if there is one concept that must come first, I would say ethics because if you were just using authenticity, what are you being authentic about?" Another explained, "Conventional wisdom says ethics comes first. It gives the sustainability of authenticity to protect the brand." Another argued ethics is always first, but they are often intertwined with authenticity because "they are inextricably tied together." Another elucidated the interrelations of the concepts in a holistic view: "Ethics starts with the CEO and permeates your management model and it is how you get things done. Trust is the outcome." Because ethics appears to be a foundational concept, its importance at the beginning of a causal chain in relationships cannot be overstated. One CCO echoed this point by arguing that ethics or core values lead to building a competitive advantage.

8.1. Consistency is a desirable outcome of ethics

Many participants mentioned consistency: consistency of implementing ethical behaviors and of communicating about ethics as a main part of their functional responsibilities. One CCO elaborated on consistency in this way:

I see our commitments in terms of behaviors and values. What are the explicit and implicit promises you made to stakeholders? How well do I keep that promise? You have to fulfill that relationship with consistency or you can damage the organization and get into trouble.

Another CCO elaborated on the idea of consistency as what he termed a “transcendental principle” and the value that he brings to the job. He explained: “My consistency is in knowing the organization itself: to be on the look for all of the functions and behaviors that do not connect with the overall mission of the organization.” Another CCO noted that “actions following on words is important, you have to be consistent” and one CCO explained: “I view ethics as how we are behaving; the organization has to have consistency with multiple stakeholders.” A number of others seemed to agree with one CCO who stated “consistently ethical behavior allows the business to prosper and grow.” As a result, having ethical guidelines enhancing consistency could help build trustworthy and responsible communication.

8.2. Ethics is often confused with compliance or lumped together with the legal department

A very rough estimate would conclude that about 40% of the participants in this study mentioned the legal department frequently in regard to ethical matters, and tended to use the terms in combination: “ethics and compliance.” Rather than separating ethical and legal matters, it seems that many organizations, perhaps in response to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which was implemented by the US Congress to protect investors from fraudulent practices on the part of corporations, see moral obligations and legal requirements as synonymous or at least closely related. Several participants echoed something similar to the sentiment, “the legal department has information about ethics and compliance—they handle this.” It was common for some participants to talk about compliance and penalties for infractions, bribery, insider trading, and other legal issues. Some CCOs explained that ethical infractions were rare because they were dealt with seriously, as illustrated by the following observation: “Violations of the code of conduct come with some fairly clearly outlined repercussions.” Most participants had an ethics hotline and routine affirmations of the code of ethics.

Because a great deal of confusion seems to exist between codes of conduct, compliance, legal standards, and ethical counsel, several CCOs used the interview to complain about such misunderstandings. One explained, “We have to look out for our core values because our Return on Investment (ROI) is trust. The legal team is not so worried about that,” and another problematized the issue in the following terms, “This is a slippery slope because legal is not always the answer; it can be valuable, but how do you get them to take the blinders off?”

Agreeing that ethics should play an essential role in relationship building, some participants, however, argued that ethics is only something “minimal” in the standards, such as the codes of conduct or compliance training mentioned above. One participant perceived that discussing ethics in engaging with stakeholders amounts to “passive behavior.” She argued that such discussions all focus on informing practitioners on the “Don’ts” while, a proactive approach should advocate “Dos” that strengthen public relations values.

Two Asian participants considered it not so important to explicitly talk about ethics, inasmuch as they believed that whatever they were doing should comply with all the ethical rules. Agreeing with the compliance approach, one interviewee from a multinational computer company in Beijing said, “If it is something unethical, we will not do it. So, why talk about it?” Another said, “We don’t think of

ethics and compliance as a separate function, we think about it as something we do as a business team.”

8.3. Ethics in action, across relationships, and storytelling

Numerous participants explained that ethical behavior should be enacted, modeled, and lived in the organization and conveyed through storytelling. One CEO explained: “I think it is important to use ethics as a learning moment, the essence of change management is to create experiences to emulate.”

Several participants related ethical actions to protecting the reputation of an organization or client. One interviewee considered that ethical behavior is not only about how ethical one individual acts. The view was shared by a multinational public relations firm in Hong Kong. Because of the constant requests from journalists about paid coverage in China, he said, “... in Asia, we have to advise clients about transparency, awareness of social media, bribes, and gift giving.”

Numerous participants mentioned the role of narrative, or storytelling about ethics, as how often they communicate about ethical values. One CCO offered:

I think part of how we perpetuate a culture of ethical behavior and a culture of doing the right thing is by the stories that we tell. We do have an example of employees who really made a great decision or put the customer first or did the right thing. . . We really try to celebrate that and tell the story throughout the organization. So that people will see that ethics is something that we value and helping others is something that we value.

RQ 2: Where does trust stand—qualitatively—in relation to ethics and the quantitative variables discussed as OPR antecedents?

8.4. Trust

Almost all participants commented that trust is “central in communications,” “trust plays a huge role,” and “is a main driver” of OPRs. One CCO explained, “I think the core values enterprise-wide we emphasize are around being trusted. I mean clearly that this is important and in a highly regulated industry, as well.” Participants had different views on the timing of relationships and trust. Many CCOs offered opinions similar to the following: “trust is only earned over time, and is not based on outputs or products.” One explained, “It starts with an ethical CEO and board, and that allows for trust and reputation to form.” Another CCO declared, “Absolutely everything in an organization starts with a set of values; they give direction to decision-making and shine a light on policy, doing the right things and doing them correctly, being sensitive and empathetic to multiple entities—then you are going to start seeing trust.”

One participant claimed that, “Saying you can just create trust is a joke. Ethics from a PR standpoint needs to be constantly vigilant before we can claim to establish trust.” Contrary to that position, a CCO from a multinational company in mainland China commented that trust is the first step in developing relationships: “building trust is not easy. But it is the first step. You need to develop different programs to earn trust. Once you’ve earned trust, you can start developing the relationships.”

An Asian participant explained the relationship between ethics and trust by pointing out the subjective nature of trust: “even with good products or services and ethical behaviors, it does not mean people will necessarily trust you. Trust contains a level of favoritism...it is the basis for credibility (word-of-mouth or reputation) that leads to brand loyalty and relationships.” Another CCO in China argued that having “values” is basic for establishing trust. This participant’s view reflected the social exchange perspective on trust (Blau, 1964): The so-called “value” means “keeping in mind what is good for the publics and how to satisfy and entertain them.” It is only when the publics are satisfied and consider that the organization feels for them that they will be willing to trust it. Furthermore, in

the relationship building process, trust is “absolutely critical,” inasmuch as, without trust, one interviewee considered the situation would be “volatile and the organization would not be able to last long.”

There are clear cross-cultural differences in how the concepts are enacted, with most Western participants claiming that trust must be earned and built over time. Therefore, earning and building trust on the basis of consistent ethical actions and value inside an organization are foundational to the OPR model, according to the comments of many participants.

8.5. Authenticity

Almost all of the participants agreed that authenticity means “being true to oneself,” “trustworthy,” “believable,” “being true to stakeholders,” “being true to the public community,” “credible,” and “having good will.” One CCO described, “Being authentic is being true to your roots and the heritage of the brand, and ethics is being true to yourself.”

Several other CCOs emphasized that ethics must drive and confine authenticity. One explained, “To be authentic, you do not necessarily have to be ethical. You can look in history to see that, unfortunately.” Another added: “You can be in a position where ethics and authenticity are not the same, such as Bill Clinton said ‘this is who I am,’ so he was authentic. But he was not sure about his ethics.” One of the key authors of the Page Society’s *Authentic Enterprise* participated in this study and offered this view: “Ethics and values are the absolutes that come first, authenticity is relating based on those beliefs, and if you go down that road the ROI is trust.”

Authenticity was common in the interviews, but was not seen as arising before ethical behavior or trust when participants were asked to determine a time order for these concepts. In fact, authenticity was argued by many to be “an end game” or “the outcome of ethical behavior.” Some argued that authenticity could only be examined over time, and others commented that authenticity required “proof” or “bearing out” or “walking the talk of ethics” with “deeds not just words.”

CCO and CEO members of the Arthur W. Page Society often mentioned authenticity, as that concept is a core component of the society’s belief system. It was less common for authenticity to arise naturally in the Asian interviews because authenticity is, as one CCO explained, “something probably many of the practitioners have been doing without consciously articulating the concept...” This CCO acknowledged the positive side of opening discussing about the concept of authenticity so that practitioners could better define the parameters or how communication should be authentic. One interviewee in Hong Kong contended: “We will never use an unacceptable message frame in the eyes of the audience.” One CCO notes, “Authenticity goes beyond transparency and requires organizations to not only inform the public about what has been done but also explain how the decision has been made.”

When relating authenticity to being true to oneself, several participants recognized a possible gap between personal beliefs and organizational messages in reality. However, even if such a gap exists, the bottom line is that behavior (including those of the top management) must follow the organizations’ ethical standards.

9. Discussion and themes

We found support in this research for extending the OPR model to include ethics or values as a foundational construct or as a “precursor” to OPR that is linked to the variable trust. Building trust is assumed to be a correct component of the OPR model, based on the research reviewed earlier, but we asked where and how that trust was generated. Ethical behavior and consistency arose in numerous interviews with these elites as to how trust is earned, created, or enhanced, whereas authenticity was seen as a later outcome of a time-tested ethical approach. Support for this finding extended cross-culturally and included concepts such as integrity, consistency, authenticity, narrative, and modeling ethical behavior. Therefore, the theoretical framework for understanding OPR should be

extended to include the foundational variable of ethics as central to building the relationship component, trust.

RQ 1: Ethics as a precursor

There was wide agreement among participants that ethics was a formative construct for building good OPRs. Many participants elaborated that ethical values should be defined, codified, focused, modeled, and understood by all parties before attempting to create OPRs, so that these relationships could be enduring and create trust.

9.1. Ethics at the core

There was wide agreement among participants that ethical values must drive organizational behavior from the very core or foundation of the organization. Many participants saw ethics as so vital to an organization that they explained it as “in the DNA” or the most vital building block of an organization. We can conclude that ethics preexist relationships, and should be considered a precursor or foundational variable of OPR.

9.2. Consistency is a valued outcome

Participants described how, using ethical values, reliable and consistent decisions could be made. Publics could then know the organization, and the organization could understand how to meet the expectations of publics. Further, consistency was linked to reputation as a way to enhance both relationships and the organization’s reputation among publics.

9.3. Ethics and legal compliance are different

In many organizations, there was a tendency to lump ethical decision-making with legal compliance and compliance training, and the potential to have ethics designated the domain of the legal counsel and department. In those instances, ethical consideration is at a very low level of moral development and is not analyzed in its own right. Because ethical concerns are based on moral philosophy and legal concerns are based on operational laws and regulations, we recommend that these functions be separate within an organization so that ethics can best be used to enhance OPRs.

9.4. Ethics must be active

Ethical behavior should be discussed, modeled, enacted, and lived within the organization in order to maintain it as a vital part of an organization’s culture. Some ways of making ethics more active include dynamic leadership on ethics, particularly from the CEO, follow through on words with actions, and storytelling about ethical decisions and processes in the organization.

RQ 2: Trust and Authenticity

In this qualitative study, we did not find enough widespread agreement supporting research question two to offer a definitive explanation of where trust stands in relationship to authenticity and the other OPR variables. In fact, the term authenticity or authentic OPRs as a normative goal was not used by the Asian CCOs and introduced confusion over the concept. The US participants saw authenticity as an outcome of ethical behavior and trust that is built over time, but these findings are not definitive. The role of authenticity, trust, and ethics, as related to OPRs, should be explored in future studies, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to help further contextualize trust and authenticity.

9.5. Trust, agreement, and ambiguity

Trust is a widely respected concept that almost every participant mentioned as vital to OPR. Creating trust, however, generated some disagreement among participants. In general, Western participants thought that trust should be earned over time, was slow to build, and was linked to ethics and credibility being demonstrated. Eastern participants seem to agree that public relations professionals

could establish trust, then seek to enhance relationships. Westerners clearly see trust as an outcome of ethical relationships, while public relations professionals in Asia see it as a starting point.

9.6. Authenticity, confusion, and disagreement

Disagreement existed among participants as regards their understanding of the concept authenticity. It seems that most participants offered widely varying definitions and understandings of the term authenticity. The attempt to elicit explanations from participants on the sequential order of the variables, ethics, trust, and authenticity, was problematic. Participants generally held quite different views on which of the following should come first: ethics, trust, or authenticity. They held some internal debate over the ordering of variables, and several participants explained that separating the variables was difficult because of their interrelated nature. When pressed on the topic, many defended that core values and ethics should drive authenticity and trust, but some participants placed emphasis on trust and commitment as ways to build authenticity.

9.7. Future research is needed

More research is needed to understand how public relations executives view the exact variables in OPR theory and models. Perhaps due to cultural understandings, use, definitional issues, and level of experience, much confusion exists among the related concepts of ethics, trust, and authenticity. For example, one CCO said authenticity should be the precursor of ethics because ethics is “a defined set of standards or a behavioral guideline.” However, others claimed the opposite, such as in the following examples: “You can’t have authenticity without examining your own values first” or “Authenticity is an outward demonstration of ethics, and how you interact with publics must be based on your ethical beliefs.”

10. Theoretical conclusions

Our first research question was successful in offering ethics as a precursor variable for OPRs: ethics is the foundation upon which trust can be built and flourish. We offer ethics as a precursor of OPR in order to more fully contextualize the excellence theory and OPR models to include the existent and core ethical values of an organization that drive its decision-making. Whether codified and systematic, or existing as a more informal belief system, ethical values will impact on the behavior of an organization and will therefore drive its behavior and relationships with publics, either intentionally or unintentionally. We offer ethics as new precursor variable to the current model of OPR to more fully align our understanding of relationship with the nature of reality and the expectations of stakeholders. Quantitative studies should be undertaken to further understand the foundational role of ethics in building trust.

Our second research question was unsuccessful in determining a definitive order for the concepts supported by ethics: trust and authenticity. The researchers note that cultural influences impacted data collection in this area and offered a wide range of opinions and contradictions in the data. Although trust was widely supported, a model order could not be established; hence, we recommend continuing to pursue the variable trust as the desired normative relationship outcome. We recommend contextualizing the term “authentic” OPRs as a desired outcome until further research can be completed on the cross-cultural understanding of the term authenticity.

We encourage future researchers to include ethics as a precursor variable, a foundation from which an organization moves forward in building excellent OPRs. The addition of an ethics variable as foundational to OPR has the practical implication of allowing organizations to better hone in on their ethical values, mission, understanding, and decision-making processes in order to enhance integrity, responsibility, and consistency, ultimately cultivating more trusting relationships with publics.

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