

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: "THERE IS NOTHING SO PRACTICAL AS A GOOD THEORY," OR IS THERE?: PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC RELATIONS SCHOLARSHIP AND ITS USEFULNESS

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The purpose of this study was to better understand the disconnect between public relations scholars and practitioners from the practitioner point-of-view using qualitative in-depth interviews with 20 public relations practitioners. The study examines the extent to which they make meaning of public relations scholarship and its usefulness. Findings suggest that practitioners are largely unaware of public relations scholarship and generally do not find academic research useful. However, practitioners did consider academic research important for solving problems and thought it could become more useful if scholars translate it. This study identifies the importance of forging relationships between public relations scholars and practitioners. Practical implications include making academic research user-friendly and having public relations scholars provide outreach to practitioners.

“THERE IS NOTHING SO PRACTICAL AS A GOOD THEORY,” OR IS
THERE?: PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON
PUBLIC RELATIONS SCHOLARSHIP AND ITS USEFULNESS

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
2007

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank . . .

. . . Dr. Elizabeth Toth for your guidance, support, and encouragement. Your desire to better the field of public relations has been inspirational to me. You've made my time at the University of Maryland truly meaningful.

. . . Dr. Linda Aldoory and Dr. Shannon Bowen for your invaluable advice and feedback. You've both made my thesis experience a very positive one, and I've enjoyed working with you.

. . . my parents for your support and love—these are two things I have never had to doubt. We all know I would not be where I am today without both of you! Thank you for always encouraging me to do whatever it is I want to do in life.

. . . Maria for being the best friend, roommate, and personal cheerleader a girl could have. For the last several years, and especially the last two, you've listened to every complaint, consoled every tear, celebrated every success, and laughed at every joke. You will never know how much that means.

. . . Tiph for keeping me sane through my Master's degree. I feel so fortunate to have found such a dear friend while in school.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Problem

Public relations is a unique field of communication in that it is based on an industry that exists with or without the scholarly community; public relations was practiced long before it became a formal area of study in the academic world. Because of this, the field of public relations is often separated into that of practitioners and that of academics, often times with minimal overlap of the two. Many practitioners do not incorporate public relations theory into their work or might be using it without realizing it—some might not even be aware that public relations scholarship exists. On the other hand, many scholars develop their areas of research based on what interests them or popular research trends and not so much on what the needs of the professional industry are.

Although efforts have been made to bring the two sides together, the field still faces considerable challenges in uniting practitioners and scholars into a cohesive, amiable team that works together for the benefit of the industry. The purpose of this thesis is to better understand the disconnect between public relations practitioners and scholars, specifically from the practitioner perspective, to make public relations scholarship more useful for the practice.

Implications of the Study

I hope this study will become a useful tool for bridging the gap between public relations scholars and practitioners. By investigating practitioner views on public relations scholarship, I aspire to illuminate some of the discrepancies between the study and the practice of public relations. Once these issues are brought to light

and explored, it is my intent for scholars and practitioners to better understand each other, and if nothing else, at least find a starting point for engaging in conversation in the future. By asking those in the practice what they think, I hope that scholars and practitioners may be able to better address each others' needs, which would ideally make the field more cohesive and productive for everyone. This cohesion, in turn, would allow for more consistency in the field and a better understanding of what public relations is and what it stands for, thereby making the industry stronger.

Research Questions

This study seeks to better understand the disconnect between public relations practitioners and scholars, specifically from the practitioner perspective, to make public relations scholarship more useful for the practice. Thus, I will examine the following research questions:

RQ 1: To what extent do public relations practitioners make meaning of public relations scholarship?

RQ 2: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of the usefulness of scholarly work in their practice?

RQ 3: What are public relations practitioners' suggestions of how scholarly research can contribute to the practice of public relations?

To put my research questions into context, this thesis first presents a review of the literature that informs my research. The literature review examines: 1.) trends in public relations publications, 2.) the scholarly perspective on the disconnect between scholars and practitioners, and 3.) the practitioner perspective on the disconnect between scholars and practitioners. I will then explain my research questions,

followed by a discussion of the qualitative methodology I used, along with the sample and the data analysis procedures. Lastly, I will explain the results of my research and what they mean for the field of public relations. Important to note is that I have tried to take my newly acquired knowledge from my research to heart; based on what I have heard and learned from my participants, I have attempted to make this thesis clear, concise, and accessible so that I can be a first step toward lessening the disconnect between public relations scholars and practitioners.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Trends in the Literature

Anyone interested in assessing the interests and concerns of public relations scholars and practitioners needs only to examine the types of articles in current publications to see that a division between scholars and practitioners exists in the industry. At the date this was written, the most recent editions of the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review* include topics like applying the Excellence theory to public diplomacy (Yun, 2006), testing the transgression flowchart (Ion, Sallot, & Reber, 2006), rethinking power in public relations (Edwards, 2006), contingency theory (Shin, Cameron, & Cropp, 2006), and exploring symmetrical communication in terms of culture (Brown, 2006). The most recent *PR Tactics* and *Public Relations Quarterly*, on the other hand, include topics like the importance of mentors (Guiniven, 2006a), advice on pitching and working with the media (Mateas, 2006), the importance of good writing skills (Marken, 2006), how to be more ethical practitioners (Radman, 2006; Sowa, 2006), and feature stories on practitioners' experiences with Hurricane Katrina (Braud, 2006; Christian, 2006; Courtney, 2006). In looking at the topics, the first publications seem to be more concerned with theoretical ideas whereas the second publications are more concerned with practical ideas. Coincidentally, the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review* are considered the scholarly publications of the industry while *PR Tactics* and *Public Relations Quarterly* are more practice-oriented. This is not to say that these publications do not cross over into the realm of the other, but rather this example is meant to illustrate a clear division of interests.

Publications are important to consider because they are a leading source of reference for those in the industry. As such, some public relations scholars have attempted to analyze the major publications in the public relations field and determine how this literature reflects on the discipline. Broom, Cox, Krueger, and Liebler (1989) were some of the first to note the discrepancies between practitioner-oriented and academic-oriented publications. They determined that the *Public Relations Journal* (the predecessor to the Public Relations Society of America's current publication, *The Strategist*) only reflected practitioners' day-to-day concerns with how to do their jobs and included relatively little content on the importance of research in public relations programs, which more academic-oriented sources stressed.

More recently, Pasadeos, Renfro, and Hanily (1999) examined the public relations literature to identify the most influential public relations authors based on how many times scholars were cited in others' works. In doing so, they found a decrease in the number of academic citations in practitioner-oriented sources like *Public Relations Quarterly* and *Public Relations Journal* (the number of academic citations from 1975 to 1989 totaled 6.3% as compared to a total of 3.6% between 1990 and 1995). Although the authors made no judgments about the initial number of academic citations, the figures seem to speak to a lack of concern with academic writing on the part of practitioners beginning from the very inception of the publications. Interestingly enough, in the same article, even though academic citations within academic-oriented sources increased, the citations only totaled 9.9% from 1975 to 1989 and increased to only 14.1% from 1990 to 1995.

Sallot, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003) also examined the public relations literature but looked more specifically at the content of the articles. Of the 748 articles published between the inception of public relations journals and 2000, 39.5% of articles were introspective, looking inward at the state and status of various components of the industry. With only .5% difference, 39% of articles were about the practice of public relations, while 19.8% of the articles were about theory development.

Botan and Taylor (2004) characterized the old preoccupation of public relations research with practice as a functional perspective, or one that views public relations as a means to an organizational end. This functional perspective examined issues such as public relations techniques, production of message, and media relations. However, Botan and Taylor now believe that public relations research has shifted to a cocreational perspective, or one that takes into account publics as cocreators of meaning and communication. This perspective examines issues like relationships and creating dialogue and is more concerned with theory and less with practice.

The Scholarly Perspective

Due to the gap between scholars and practitioners, a natural way to organize the literature is to look at the perspectives of each side of the relationship. Important to note is that although several practitioners and scholars have commented on the topic in the past, little current research exists on the relationship between practitioners and scholars. Therefore, this literature review mainly reflects those earlier perspectives. Even though public relations may have existed as an industry before the

development of the scholarly discipline, the current research problem would not occur without the existence of scholarship. For that reason, I will first examine the scholarly commentary on the relationship between scholars and practitioners.

The Disconnect

Most scholars are not oblivious to the fact that they and practitioners are not always aligned in their interests. As such, some scholars have attempted to illuminate why this rift exists. Generally, the academic perspective seems to suggest that much of the disconnect between scholars and practitioners is based on perceptions of the role of research in the field.

J. E. Grunig (1979) noted that professionals think academic researchers pursue theory that has little practical relevance. On the other hand, academic researchers think professionals are too concerned with day-to-day problems and research that only applies to their problems, meaning they have little interest in theory-driven research that is broad enough for application to the entire field, not just one practitioner or one organization. The divided interests are further compounded by the fact that:

Academics generally frown upon applied research, which they define as research designed to answer a particular practical problem, and which has little relevance other than solving that particular problem. Academics argue that basic research is really more practical, because by articulating the laws of nature the basic researcher can help the practitioner to understand and to intervene in many problems explained by an abstract law—not just a single problem (p. 18).

Botan (1993) also observed an applied branch and a theory-based research and scholarship branch in public relations. He believed they overlap in that they share a common interest in how and why organizations use communication in public discourse. He contended, however, that the applied branch learns how to develop theory-driven practice while the theory branch grows out of, and largely because of, the applied branch. In this way, the two branches should be intertwined. However, basic premises continue to divide the two spheres: The applied branch embodies traditional business assumptions while the theory branch believes education and scholarship must address how public relations functions in society and then examine its role in supporting business.

In examining the characteristics of each branch more closely, Botan (1993) also determined that the applied branch looks at micro-ethical questions, while the theoretical branch examines macro-ethical questions that relate to how public relations is used and how it contributes to society. Dozier and Lauzen (2000) believed the bigger macro-ethical questions to be the foundation of public relations scholarship. They defined public relations intellectually as “the study of action, communication, and relationships between organizations and publics, as well as the study of the intended and unintended consequences of those relationships for individuals and society as a whole” (p. 4), as based on the work of J. E. Grunig (1992) and Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006). They defined professional public relations, on the other hand, as “the management of communication to build mutually beneficial, reciprocal relationships” (p. 4), as based on Dozier and Lauzen (1998).

As can be determined from the definitions, the intellectual definition encompasses a great deal more than the professional definition. As such, Dozier and Lauzen (2000) suggested that the intellectual domain should allow scholars to range wider and delve deeper, which should ultimately benefit the profession. They believed a forced attachment to the profession creates a myopia, a nearsightedness regarding alternative perspectives in the industry. They also find the reverse true, believing that “. . . the public relations practitioner is inadequately trained and ill-situated to prescribe the scholarly agenda in the intellectual domain of public relations” (p. 20). In other words, Dozier and Lauzen implied that practitioners are too entrenched in the industry and too preoccupied with technical tasks to be able to look at the overall goals and consequences of public relations, even though, like the work of Paisley (1972), they recognized that the field owes its entrance into social science to those who work in it. Rather, scholars can devote the time and effort while also having the distance from the practice needed to think about the philosophical fundamentals of the field.

The Role of Theory

Perhaps because of the rifts described above, many scholars and practitioners have very different ideas about what a theory is and what a theory should do. From the scholarly perspective, Long and Hazleton (1987) stated that a theory is an abstract way of describing reality. Although a theory must possess sufficient specificity and tangibility to permit description and prediction in the “real world,” a useful theory cannot be completely indicative of reality because of its abstract nature. Due to this abstractness, theory development and model building are based on probability, which

takes into account that exceptions occur. Long and Hazleton contended that naturally a theory will not be able to solve all problems, but because some problems will require theories to be modified, theory is continually improved and new knowledge is generated.

Similarly, Cornelissen (2000) suggested that practitioners fail to realize that knowledge is rarely ever used in its pure state and that scholarship is useful in that it provides general visions and frameworks that practitioners can adjust to their own needs. He proposed that practitioners must be active in interpreting, reframing, and adapting theory to their problems and presuppositions, a process he called the translation model, although the word translation does seem to suggest that some sort of conversation is required in the process. Moncur (2006), however, believed theory in and of itself is the way to provide the connection for scholars and practitioners, as it provides a common language and vocabulary that can be used by all to better understand the field.

Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) asserted that “. . . a framework is necessary for understanding, organizing, and integrating the many activities and purposes of public relations” (p.220). Ultimately, without general theory, the industry might become disorganized and disjointed. J. E. Grunig (2000) also touted the importance of normative theory in public relations, or theory that describes the ideal way to practice public relations, as a benchmark against which the industry can compare itself. Practitioners might have little motivation to continually improve themselves and their work if they had no ideal to strive toward.

Toth (2006) pointed out that scholars approach theory the way they do for particular reasons. Although some scholars may prefer to engage in theory that tackles specific problems of public relations, public relations journals are not given much credence in the academic community. In order to receive recognition, theory must be positioned in the larger context of the fields of communication, management, ethics, or history. Practitioners also might not realize that many times scholars do not get to decide their own research topics—when applying for grants, the donors dictate what must be researched and more often than not, the research does not include developing public relations theory. Moncur (2006) recognized similar difficulties in noting that if scholars do not extend theory, they are not promoted in academia, although he admitted that advanced theory often creates an accessibility problem for practitioners.

Cheney and Christensen (2006), however, suggested that theory will never be well-received until it tackles practical problems that relate its usefulness to practitioners—if scholars are to receive the support of practitioners, they must assist practitioners in solving problems they encounter. They suggested that current problems in the field that scholarly research could undertake would be creating a better public image for the entire field, taking better care of internal affairs, modes of representation, advocacy, communication as circular within public relations, creating genuine dialogue, and social engagement. Toth (2002) took the same position when she suggested that although theories are valuable for their perspectives and attention to philosophy, they must also have “cash value” for the industry.

Without theory, Watts (2006) worried that public relations will return to tactical media relations that is subsumed by marketing and advertising. If for nothing but practical reasons, public relations needs theory so that encroachment does not occur in the field. Similarly, without theory, everyone begins to say “in my experience,” and the industry will be based on one person’s word against another. Watts also noted that if a profession is to have overall greater knowledge than that of the individuals in the industry agreed upon, valid knowledge must be based on research.

Perceptions of Practitioners

Although some scholars have commented on the philosophical schism between scholars and practitioners, others have commented specifically on how scholars perceive practitioners or how practitioners should perceive scholarship.

J. E. Grunig (1992) asserted that practitioners are the soldiers on the frontline who must plan and defend public relations for organizations. When the function comes under fire, practitioners have little theory to guide them, predict the effects of certain actions, and explain why outcomes happen. Because of this, he believed theory should be of greater concern to practitioners than it is, and that in actuality many practitioners have a greater interest in theory than they realize:

Practitioners have “working” theories, which—among other things—tell them what to do when an organization faces a communication problem and the strategy that will be most effective. Like scientists, public relations practitioners would like to have evidence that their theories are “true” or

“proven,” assurance that a given strategy will produce predictable results in a specific situation (p. 7).

A study completed in 2003 by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Institute for Public Relations, however, after interviewing several public relations academics, reinforced that academics believe their practitioner counterparts are hesitant to draw on the experiences of academics and theoretical underpinnings of the field. The same academics also felt that practitioners are too worried about practical problems and how to get things done rather than establishing a sound theoretical background for handling those problems. L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) suggested that those practitioners who do take an interest in theory and the scholarly body of knowledge are usually more effective in producing excellent public relations and that excellent public relations practitioners continually read and update themselves on the field through the use of books and scholarly journals. These sources do not have to be limited to public relations, but could also include other areas like management and organizational communication.

Bridging the Gap

Some scholars have pointed out that commentary, although useful in identifying and understanding fundamental differences, is not enough in terms of lessening the division between scholars and practitioners. As such, action must be taken on both sides to rectify the problem.

J. E. Grunig (1979) noted that ideally, professionals and scholars should have a symbiotic relationship. In this relationship, public relations educators and researchers should be of service to the profession, conducting research that will

advance the profession and better train future practitioners. Professionals, then, must come to scholars with ideas that need to be researched and tested and voice their concerns. Noting that practitioners have to limit themselves to the problems of their organizations and must keep their research confidential in order to have competitive value, J. E. Grunig suggested that the only way scholars and practitioners will be able to work together is if the conventional definitions of basic and applied research are dropped and the field shares ideas that have practical application in both the professional and academic communities.

Another way to unite the two branches of research, according to Botan (1993), is to look at developing areas of public relations, like international public relations, that would involve scholars and practitioners. He suggested international public relations was especially ripe for collaborative work because not only are actual public relations practices examined and assessed, but so are the basic assumptions behind the practice.

An additional suggestion is to hold joint conferences for scholars and practitioners that would engage both in dialogue (Moncur, 2006). Doing so would help to eliminate the inaccessibility issues of theory and allow each side to understand the issues of the other. Moncur recognized that naturally practitioners and scholars would still not agree on every problem, but that healthy disagreement and debate shows an interest and concern in the issues that influence the field.

Paradigms

Although a disconnect is often glaringly apparent between public relations scholars and practitioners, those outside of the academic realm of the field may not

realize that a disconnect also occurs within the scholarly community. This disconnect is often present in the form of a paradigm struggle. Thomas Kuhn (1996), the author of the influential intellectual history book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, defined a paradigm as “accepted examples of actual scientific practice—examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together—[that] provide models from which particular coherent traditions of scientific research stem” (p. 10). In other words, paradigms are research areas that garner support and validity through accepted scholarship. This portion of the literature review is not meant to be an exhaustive examination of all paradigms in the public relations literature; rather, its main purpose is to draw attention to the fact that disagreement takes place not only between the professional and academic spheres of public relations, but also within. The constant debate and discussion that takes place between scholars illustrates the difficulty in arriving at a research agenda of what is valuable and worthwhile to study in the field of public relations.

Kuhn (1996) observed that some paradigms gain more status than others:

Paradigms gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors in solving a few problems that the group of practitioners has come to recognize as acute. To be more successful is not, however, to be either completely successful with a single problem or notably successful with any large number (p. 23).

The Excellence/management paradigm. Arguably, the current dominant paradigm in public relations, as based on the sheer quantity of published literature, is the Excellence theory with specific attention given to two-way symmetrical

communication and public relations as a management function (Long & Hazleton, 2006). From the perspective of this paradigm, public relations focuses on the role of the function in strategic management and the value of relationships with strategic publics to an organization. (See L.A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002 and J. E. Grunig, 2001). However, because public relations is a relatively young field, there has not been much time for other paradigms to develop. Long and Hazleton suggest that the Excellence paradigm is the first step in creating a paradigm struggle, which can be explained as the formation of alternate paradigms to the one that is deemed dominant.

As Kuhn noted above, a dominant paradigm is not necessarily completely successful, nor does it solve all problems. As such, other paradigms also exist that attempt to solve the problems the dominant paradigm cannot or has not taken into consideration. Scholars in public relations may use perspectives beyond the Excellence/managerial perspective such as symmetrical/systems, rhetorical/critical, feminist, and social science (Botan, 1993). Three of the alternate paradigms are touched upon below as based on their presence in the public relations body of knowledge.

The rhetorical paradigm. The rhetorical paradigm views public relations as important for its role in creating dialogue through which "ideas are contested, issues are examined, and decisions are made collaboratively" (Heath, 2000, p. 69). Ultimately, then, through the rhetorical paradigm, public relations adds value to society because of the rhetorical dialogue by which an organization and its public can create mutually beneficial relationships. These relationships then reinforce values on which a society operates (Heath, 2000).

The feminist paradigm. The feminist paradigm focuses on the issues of gender, power, and diversity in public relations (Aldoory, 2005), but also critique mainstream theory for its masculine assumptions (Aldoory, 2003). The paradigm also connects major tenets of feminism like cooperation, respect, nurturance, justice, equity, honesty, and others with normative effective public relations (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000).

The postmodern paradigm. Postmodernism developed as a reaction to modernism, which is more closely aligned with the Excellence/management paradigm (Holtzhausen, 2002). While such paradigms emphasize a single, dominant theoretical perspective, postmodernism stresses diversity and multiple perspectives, even going so far as to recognize no dominant perspective exists in its own paradigm (Holtzhausen, 2000; 2002). In the context of public relations, postmodernism places the function as a “social, cultural, and political phenomenon and not merely as an organizational practice” (Holtzhausen, 2002, p.79).

The importance of paradigms. As is evident from this variety of paradigms, no single viewpoint of the field of public relations exists. When examining the public relations body of knowledge, one realizes that no single definition of public relations exists either. A similar difficulty is determining a comprehensive definition of what it is public relations is supposed to do and what its function is within the broader context of society. Because a lack of common terms and definitions exist, many scholars suggest that before any paradigms are examined or assessed, everyone in the public relations field must be on the same page conceptually.

Heath (2006) noted that an understanding of the function of public relations is of particular importance for the field. He called for a paradigm that advocates public relations as a field that adds value to society and further examines the ethical value of public relations. Gower (2006) agreed, arguing that scholars must take the time to critically assess what it is public relations practitioners do and what the implications of the practice are for society. She asserted that no new theory can be developed until some sort of common ground is found, and until the field can actually decide on a common definition of public relations, we will not be able to produce research that is helpful to practitioners.

McKie (2001) was not necessarily critical of the content of the dominant paradigm, but instead contended that the field's approach to research needed alteration. He suggested public relations research has primarily been reductionist in manner by examining small aspects of the field rather than the larger problems, causing research to reinforce public relations as having a low academic and intellectual status and restricted responsiveness to changing environmental conditions.

Specifically focusing on scholars and practitioners, Hallahan (1993) asserted that scholars look at paradigms from a macrolevel while practitioners look at microlevel paradigms. Practitioners and scholars cannot agree on public relations as a managerial, journalistic, or communication-theory driven field, and even researchers come from different educational backgrounds (e.g., economic, sociology, communication) with different research traditions. Because of the eclectic mix of

people in the field, the unresolved basic issues must be considered before research will advance.

McElreath and Blamphin (1994) attempted to determine what research practitioners prioritize by examining the Public Relation Society of America's (PRSA) body of knowledge and other relevant literature. Their results concluded that sophisticated theories were available but were largely unused by practitioners, and thus they suggested a paradigm shift is needed for practitioners from logical positivism to "subjective, quasi-objective knowledge generation" (p. 88). The value of this conclusion is that it demonstrates differing paradigms between practitioners and scholars.

Although looking at paradigm struggle from a negative view is tempting because it creates factions in the field and sometimes pits colleagues against one another, Long and Hazleton (2006) suggested that paradigm struggle is advantageous because it creates dialogue and forces scholars to engage with one another. Without paradigm struggle, the field might stagnate and recycle the same ideas with little rigorous questioning of assumptions, which would hamper the development of public relations.

The Practitioner Perspective

While scholars spend a great deal of time philosophizing about the purpose of their scholarship and what their research contributes to the academic community, many practitioners have not been shy in expressing their own concerns about the very same issues. In order to present put both sides of the disconnect between scholars and practitioners, practitioner perspectives are now articulated.

The Role of Theory

The existing literature on practitioner perspectives show that theory has generally not been well received by many practitioners, as it is considered to be impractical, inaccessible, and too intensive. However, some practitioners do appreciate theory as beneficial to their professions.

Theory as impractical. The largest criticism of theory by practitioners is that academic work is inapplicable in the professional world (Lindemann, 1979), whether it be because it is too abstract, unrealistic, or difficult to use. Practitioners argue that academic theories are not specific enough to be applied to their daily problems and thus, they cannot take the time to make a broad theory specific enough. Tirone (1979) argued that behavior of humans cannot be reduced to law, so research would be more useful if it was “socially-relevant,” or research that takes into account societal conditions and problems. Others say that academic theories are too idealistic and cannot be implemented in the “real world.” For example, Miller and Rose (1994) criticized the Excellence theory principle that excellent public relations is a function separate from marketing by saying that a separate public relations function is too costly and takes too much time; rather, they believed that integrated marketing communication is more useful to organizations because it saves money and cuts down on the time needed to get work done. As such, practitioners interpret research as not seeing the reality of the industry.

Lindemann (1979) also made the case that the significance and validity of academic research can often be doubted, although he seemed to be referring to primarily quantitative research. He noted that while methodologies are sophisticated

and very thorough, many researchers use small samples that make the results questionable. To obtain results that are reasonable, however, Lindemann suggested that public relations researchers must do a better job of relating their individual academic work to other theories and research in the field of communication, although it must be noted this statement was made over twenty-five years ago before the field of public relations had much unifying theory.

Theory as inaccessible. Another problem practitioners encounter is the sheer intimidation of theory; many practitioners feel as though they do not have the knowledge or ability to grasp academic concepts. Lindemann (1979) noted that the sophisticated methodological techniques are often incomprehensible to practitioners and that without an understanding of how the research was conducted, practitioners place little faith in the results and also resist trying to apply the research to their own work. Furthermore, the language used to describe research is so inaccessible to practitioners that they often cannot make sense out of research results in the first place. Walker (1994) confronted the same issue after conducting a study to see how research was viewed within the professional industry. The findings suggested that practitioners do conduct research, both informal and formal, but that they do not always use the same language to describe it that scholars do. Thus, even though scholars and practitioners might be doing the same kind of work or even using the same theories, practitioners do not realize it because of the difference in terminology.

Theory as too time consuming. Another extensive criticism of academic work is that professionals primarily need to worry about technical skills and training rather than theory. Many professionals cannot manage strategically or “look at the big

picture” unless they take care of all the day-to-day issues the industry requires. A survey of 100 public relations employers revealed that a knowledge of public relations theory was placed last in importance in a list of 11 competencies, while writing skills and an understanding of media relations was rated most important (Fawkes & Tench, 2005). Neff, Walker, Smith, and Creedon (1999) found an unexpectedly large agreement between practitioners and academics regarding the training, experience, and expertise outcomes needed for career development in public relations; however, as expected, practitioners valued practical outcomes more while academics had a greater appreciation for the role of theory. Many practitioners criticize scholars for not valuing practice enough, especially since most students end up practicing public relations rather than studying it. Consequently, some practitioners think the academic world should support more opportunities for students to receive practical experience (Neff & Fitch-Hauser, 1998).

The lack of interest in theoretical knowledge is not unique to the United States, either. Van Ruler (2000) found that in the Netherlands, practitioners are well-educated, but that most have not been educated from within the field. Because of this, the practitioners generally have little theoretical background and have learned everything they know about public relations on the job. Similarly, van Ruler, Vercic, Butschi, and Flodin (2004) found that although European public relations practitioners said that they recognized the importance of a theory-based field, less than half of those surveyed actually prioritized this knowledge as an important element of the industry.

Benefits of theory. This is not to say that all non-academics have a vendetta against scholars—some give open praise for academic theory. Rawlins (2003), a public relations educator, suggested that theory identifies principles that can be applied to many different situations and is not limited to one specific situation. In this way, practitioners can take one main theory and apply it widely across their work rather than needing a different theory for each aspect of their work, which could become unwieldy and impractical. He also asserted that a valid theory could predict the behavior and responses of people, thus saving time and money by not experimenting with procedures that do not work. Lastly, Rawlins also believed that the presence of theory in public relations informs an organization what to do and how to do it, which elevates the public relations to a management function. Debreceeny (2006) agreed, asserting that practitioners must use “fact-based arguments” if public relations is to be a management function that is taken seriously, and that research is the avenue for finding facts.

Repper (1992) also suggested that theory expands practitioners’ minds by forcing them to contemplate issues they might not otherwise. Reading academic material may challenge practitioners’ beliefs and experiences, which, in turn, allows them to approach problems from different perspectives. Repper also touted the value of normative theory, as it is a benchmark with which practitioners can compare the effectiveness of their own communication programs. He asserted that the industry might not improve if practitioners had no defined goal to strive for—normative theory lets practitioners know what is possible and how they can evaluate their own current programs. Hon (2007), in interviewing former University of Maryland graduate

students that became practitioners, found that all participants acknowledged that an understanding of J. E. and L. A. Grunig's Excellence theory has been beneficial in their careers, whether through enhancing their credibility and professionalism, giving them ethical standards, helping their careers progress, garnering respect and esteem from colleagues, or increasing job opportunities.

Furthermore, Repper (1992) believed that scholars contribute to the practice by having a skill practitioners do not:

Scholars are paid to think and analyze—activities that precious few of us ever have the time or inclination to do . . .the contribution of academics, therefore, lies in their ability to conceptualize ideas and form them into theories that can be tested and evaluated. Scholars are searchers for the reason why, the foundation blocks that are needed so vitally and of such great concern to the practitioner (p. 110).

Although practitioners may criticize scholars for spending too much time thinking and not enough time doing, practitioners themselves do not have enough time to do both. As such, some separation of interests is inevitable, and perhaps even necessary.

Bridging the Gap

Not all practitioners wish to be disconnected from the academic world; some practitioners recognize the disconnect between the study and practice of public relations and have made suggestions as to how to fuse the two together to create a mutually beneficial relationship.

Lindemann (1979) suggested that academics should take the step to apply their theories to the professional world—if practitioners are unwilling to take the step

to connect theory and practice, scholars should do it for them. Some practitioners might just need a few examples to see the relevancy of theory. Then, once practitioners realize theory can be helpful in the industry, they will be more receptive to applying it and developing the connections between theory and practice on their own. Small group discussions between both groups could be a prime way to highlight these connections. Debreceeny (2006), chair of the Institute for Public Relations (IPR), had similar thoughts, arguing that scholarship must be more accessible and compelling for practitioners and that practitioners must provide feedback directly to scholars in order to have their questions answered and needs addressed. He maintained that organizations like IPR are a vehicle for allowing such interaction to place.

Adams (1993) suggested that practitioners should be more interactive at the educational level and become more involved on college campuses so that they can share their knowledge and experiences with college students. A primary method of achieving such an objective would be through speaking in classes or at Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) meetings. Practitioners could also serve on university advisory boards so that they can have input in the public relations curriculum and the issues that scholars face in the university setting. Similarly, joint workshops and panels, plus campus and work site interaction could help bridge gaps between public relations educators and practitioners, as this could open a dialogue to determining what each side expects and seeks from the other.

Walker (1994) proposed that the language used to describe research by scholars must become consistent with the language understood by public relations

professionals and other business managers. He concluded that this current dichotomy makes a case for the importance of professional education to ensure that everyone is speaking the same language and so that practitioners are enabled to connect common industry practice and the language of research that is based in social science. Neff and Fitch-Hauser (1998), however, were actually encouraged by the tension between practitioners and academics because disagreements usually create dialogue if nothing else. As long as practitioners and scholars are willing to speak up and express their opinions, the lines of communication will remain open.

Finally, Neff and Fitch-Hauser (1998) advised practitioners to invest in the field's future: If practitioners want to see a greater focus on the practical, they have to be more active in offering internships and co-ops for public relations students. Scholars cannot give students real-life experience, so practitioners are integral in rounding out the education of students. Wright and Turk (2007) warned that the same practitioners cannot be the only ones to do so; rather, new and many more practitioners must also take an interest.

Common Areas of Interest

Although some practitioners may seem to purposely distance themselves from the academic community, two scholarly research areas tend to spark an interest from those in the practice: education and professionalism. This interest is understandable, as the education and professionalization of future practitioners directly influences those already in the field, as well as the future of the entire industry. The practitioner interest in these areas, however, often leads to divergent ideas of what public relations education should entail and how professionalism should be conceptualized.

Education. The state of public relations education is frequently under scrutiny, which is understandable since educators and practitioners alike want to ensure that public relations students receive a comprehensive education that will benefit the field. Some argue that because public relations is a relatively new field, a common curriculum has not been formed regarding the range and content of courses, especially at the undergraduate level (Caudill, Ashdown, & Caudill, 1990; Sallot, Cameron, & Weaver-Lariscy, 1997, 1998). Brody (1985) asserted that public relations education is a hybrid of academic and professional influences with little consensus as to how best meet the needs of both scholars and practitioners.

Consensus across the field is important because without it, students do not receive uniform training across different public relations programs, which leads to confusion about roles and functions of public relations practitioners when they enter the workforce (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003). This confusion makes it hard to define exactly what public relations is and what it can contribute to organizations, leading to disrespect for the profession. As a case in point, a study by Bowen (2003) found that public relations majors often enter basic coursework without any knowledge of the management, strategic decision making, and research components of the profession. According to Pohl and Vandevetter (2001), both academics and practitioners agreed that students must have a firm idea of what public relations is, what it can accomplish for an organization, and the value of the practice beyond being a subset of marketing and advertising. Guiniven (2006b) noted that public relations programs are often disparate because those teaching the courses have different experiences and different knowledge bases; he argued that some level of consistency is needed to develop

common knowledge that is imparted to all public relations students. To find that consistency, a common curriculum must be developed.

A large area of debate in public relations education, however, is determining an appropriate mix of theory and practice. As Pohl and Vandeventer (2001) noted:

Although academics do not consider themselves responsible for job training or vocational rehabilitation, they must provide students with realistic skills and knowledge for ultimate use in the marketplace (p. 357).

Pohl and Vandeventer found that practitioners think public relations faculty is often unaware of how different their students' experiences as workers will be from those in the classroom. In other words, practitioners believe most faculty are unaware of the skills that students actually need to succeed in the workplace and that to be successful professors and institutions must reflect the realities of the professional world. Wright and Turk (2007) suggested that this disconnect partially occurs because faculty members are discouraged from networking with practitioners at conferences because of small departmental travel budgets.

Sparks and Conwell (1998) completed a study to determine what mix of practice and theory in public relations education would provide the most effective balance for developing the skills students need to work in the professional arena. The authors looked specifically at schools that had a PRSSA and at schools that did not. All programs across the board focused their attention on practical application of public relations principles, although PRSSA programs recommend a 50/50 split of theory and practice while non-PRSSA schools suggested a 30/70 split of theory and practice.

Vocate (1997) found that educators in professional schools agreed that students need communication theory because it creates critical and analytical thinking skills and provides students with opportunities to develop innovative mental strategies and to become aware of their own cognitive processing abilities. Communication theory allows students to formulate a method for determining what will be treated as truth in the field. Vocate also emphasized that a symbiotic relationship exists between thought and language, so writing and thinking are inextricable; as such, thinking deserves as much attention as writing in the educational system.

A study by Hornaman and Sriramesh (2003) surveying 155 public relations educators and practitioners showed that there is agreement among the two groups about the importance of which subjects and courses should be taught to college public relations students. The most commonly mentioned recommendations for improving the public relations curriculum include providing students with a broad liberal arts background; teaching management, research, ethics and theory; teaching writing and technology; and providing students with internship opportunities (Hornaman & Sriramesh, 2003). However, despite agreement on what should be included in public relations education, disagreement occurred concerning assessment of how well-prepared public relations graduates are to enter the field. Generally, the percentage of practitioners who felt that graduates were well-prepared to enter the profession was considerably lower than the percentage of educators. Guiniven (2006a) suggested that to better prepare public relations students, the curriculum must be toughened up to include more rigorous courses. He warned that the number of students enrolled might decrease initially, but ultimately, the quality of the field, both academically and

professionally, would improve. Wright and Turk (2007) suggested another approach to increasing the integrity of the field would be to focus undergraduate curriculum more on arts, letters, business, and sciences with only a few courses in communication and public relations. A more rigorous study of public relations could then be completed at the graduate level.

Another area of debate within the public relations curricula is where the area of study is situated within the academic institution. Haynes (1981) suggested placement in the school of communication or business administration as long as courses are available from both. As a last resort, he suggested placement in the school of journalism, as long as educators inform students about the differences between journalism and public relations. Some practitioners, however, have been very adamant in saying that public relations must not be placed in the school of journalism so that public relations is not perpetuated as simply publicity. Gibson (1987) also thought public relations needed to be in the speech communication department instead of in the school of journalism. He suggested this because public relations education in the past has overlooked social science theory and technique and management instruction, and that journalism emphasizes an objectivity that may not be applicable to public relations. Most recently, Guiniven (2006b) suggested public relations be removed from schools of journalism because the field has moved away from press agency; he suggests public relations might do better in a business school. Wright and Turk (2007) even suggested that public relations needs to become its own stand alone department within a college so that it will not feel the pressure of competing interests.

In an attempt to reconcile the differences between what educators and practitioners believe education should consist of, some researchers have interviewed those in the practice to let the industry speak for itself about its wants and needs. Guiniven (1998) interviewed public relations practitioners at Fortune 250 companies and found that senior practitioners had a surprising interest in education. They suggested that public relations education needs to incorporate more participation from the practical side. These practitioners recommended public relations programs should include advisory boards with practitioner seats and encourage practitioner guest lectures to encourage give and take between educators and those in the field. Practitioners could also be useful in career counseling. Because the interviewed practitioners placed a high value on critical thinking, they suggested that more case studies and seminars would be beneficial for students. They also suggested more exposure to business courses. Guiniven himself suggested more management be taught rather than just technical skills. Also, although new technological developments make the field constantly adapt, both Guiniven and the practitioners interviewed stressed that solid writing skills must also be emphasized within the curricula.

Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) found that workplace socialization provides practitioners with a less consistent definition of what comprises good public relations. This led the authors to assert that although on-the-job training is important, coursework is vital for students for a more thorough understanding of the field. Also, they believed that public relations education must be proactive and reactive, meaning

that not only should education focus on training future practitioners, but also reshaping and reeducating current practitioners.

A commission on public relations education by the Public Relations Society of America in 1999 found that educators need more resources and the practice needs a steadier flow of graduates prepared to enter the field. Current practitioners are encouraged to recognize the skills and knowledge new graduates possess instead of letting this knowledge be wasted. Practitioners could become endowed chairs in public relations academic institutions to provide their input into programs. Practitioners could also consider contributing financially to the institutions of their choice. Furthermore, if students recognize support from practitioners in the way of accreditation and certified public relations programs, students may be able to better connect scholarship and practice. Practitioner-funded scholarships and paid internships would demonstrate that practitioners take education seriously and are willing to invest in that education. More involvement in and support of the Public Relations Student Society of America would also develop a better relationship between academia and the practice.

The Commission also suggested that practitioners and scholars could team up on projects that are visible to the public, using topics that are of long-term significance to both. Scholars contribute legitimacy and credibility while practitioners can provide strategic input and resources. Similarly, research completed by scholars and funded by practitioners would enhance the relationship between the two while also contributing to the public relations body of knowledge.

Overall, there appears to be a lack of consensus among scholars, educators, and practitioners about the scope of public relations education, which has hindered the field's progress toward becoming a profession. For this reason, practitioner perceptions of professionalism will now be examined.

Professionalism. The nature of professionalism is nebulous to most individuals in public relations, regardless of academic and professional status, although a study by Sallot, Cameron, and Weaver (1997) found that educators have a clearer idea of professionalism than practitioners. Regardless, Hornaman and Sriramesh (2003) found that the least agreed upon area of public relations education was professionalism, but that educators and practitioners agreed public relations education is the best tool in helping public relations grow into a profession.

Some in the field believe public relations is an established profession (Jackson, 1988) while most seem to argue that public relations is not yet a profession (Cameron et al., 1996; Sallot et al., 1998). However, before anyone can agree on the status of professionalism in public relations, they must first agree on what professionalism is. Cameron et al. (1996) proposed that in order to reach professional status, the public relations industry must meet certain key characteristics that are basic to all professions.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) outlined the key characteristics of a profession as follows:

- a set of professional values,
- membership in a strong professional organization,
- adherence to professional norms,
- an intellectual tradition associated with an established body of knowledge, and

- technical skills acquired through long periods of prescribed professional education.

Grunig and Hunt determined that based on sociological research, professionalism is a certain set of attributes associated with an individual rather than with an occupation.

This means that some within an industry can be professionals while others are not.

For this reason, Grunig and Hunt concluded that “we can say that an occupation becomes a profession when a majority of its practitioners qualify as professionals” (p. 441).

The 1978 textbook by Cutlip, Center, and Broom also laid out professionalism standards. However, more recently, Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) have updated and revised the standards of professionalism to the following:

- a body of knowledge,
- production of a unique and essential service that is recognized as such,
- emphasis placed on public service and social responsibility,
- autonomy and personal responsibility,
- enforceable codes of ethics, and
- standards of performance.

Ehling (1992) suggested the above professionalism criteria are validated through social research and scholarly inquiry, but he also noted that public relations practitioners have confirmed and reinforced the criteria by creating professional organizations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). These organizations have worked diligently to establish codes of ethics, devise professional objectives and

norms, and create procedures for attaining accreditation, often recruiting the assistance of public relations scholars to make the entire industry more uniform.

But how uniform is the industry in reality? According to a study by Sallot, Cameron, and Weaver-Lariscy (1997), educators have a clearer understanding of what professionalism is, and another study by the same team (1998b) showed that educators are also more optimistic about standards in the field than practitioners are. However, the study also found that educators also tend to erroneously believe that they hold themselves to higher standards than their peers and practitioners in the field. In general though, public relations educators, like professionals in the field, are more professional and hold higher professional standards than they give their peers credit for (Sallot, Cameron, & Weaver-Lariscy, 1998a).

Van Ruler (2005) also found that educators are clearer on professionalism. She broke down understandings of professionalism by using historical models of professionalism from sociology and asserted that scholars usually think of professionalism in terms of a knowledge model, which is rationally-oriented. Practitioners, on the other hand, are more inclined to view professionalism emotionally, using the personality model. Further, associations like the PRSA tend to use the status model, which is a clear system of rewards and sanctions with the development of rituals and professional behavior characterized by licensing. Van Ruler, however, believed all the models need to be combined and integrated and all segments of public relations need to use the same model so that the field can create a “strong brand and valued expertise” (p. 13). For this to happen scholars and practitioners must be willing to accept each others’ ideas about professionalism,

which she admitted would be difficult because scholars will have to accept that rational knowledge and emotional knowledge can be combined.

Pieczka (2006), however, argued that professionalism needs to be better understood in terms of the distinctions between professional knowledge and professional action. She defined professional knowledge as theory and professional action as the ability to take knowledge and apply it, which is how she operationalizes profession: “[the] ability to apply abstract knowledge to real-life problems” (p. 299). Pieczka also cautioned that a disconnect often occurs between knowledge and action, and as such, professionalism cannot based itself on the two terms without finding a way to link them.

In order to enforce any sort of standards in professionalism, education must come into play. Educators have commented that certain areas of public relations professionalism, like writing, editing, advocacy, and accreditation, are well-established tenets of the field. However, Sallot, Cameron, and Weaver-Lariscy (1997) intimated that it is up to educators to prepare future practitioners for the high standards the field wishes to be held to:

In light of the relative youth of our profession, academic research can serve to nurture ideas and attitudes toward professional practice of public relations. Educators can play a role in preparing the future generations of practitioners to aspire to the high standards which may ultimately win the field the respect it craves and most often deserves (p. 198).

L’Etang and Pieczka (2006) endorsed this view by saying “It is our view that the responsibility of academics in the field of public relations is to define and unpack

concepts in use in practice and to identify the sources of ideas in order to reflect upon their significance to the world we inhabit” (p. 442). They go on to say that the educator’s role is to introduce philosophy, epistemology, sociology, communication, media studies, psychology, management, and marketing to students in order to introduce an aspect of professionalism that students would likely not receive elsewhere.

Taken together, the above literature demonstrates that a wide variety of opinions and viewpoints exists on nearly every aspect of the field of public relations, but most specifically on the roles and purposes of scholars and practitioners. However, rather than examining the validity and value of these varying arguments and using them in constructive ways, many individuals have chosen to continue on in accordance with their own philosophies. Perhaps a more useful exercise is to explore perceptions of the field and find a way to apply them.

Chapter 3: Method

Overview of Method

I used qualitative methods to gather and analyze the data of this thesis. Specifically, I gathered data by conducting in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners and then used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data. Although interviewing both practitioners and scholars would have been ideal, time constraints prevented doing so. I selected to interview only practitioners because I am most interested in how practitioners perceive the usefulness of scholarship.

Qualitative Approach

Potter (1996) argued that the qualitative approach to research is difficult to define because no single agreed upon definition of qualitative methods exists; this difficulty may stem from the fact that qualitative methods employ a number of different techniques such as interviewing, focus groups, ethnographies, and content analyses, among others, and that these techniques are constantly evolving. Qualitative research is not unique to the field of communication; rather, it draws from many other fields as well, such as anthropology, sociology, education, and social work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Regardless of the variety of techniques or areas of research within qualitative research, all qualitative research has something in common in that it tries to interpret how people make sense of the world. To that end, the following is a succinct definition by Denzin and Lincoln (2003) that guided my research:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the

world visible . . . qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (pp. 4-5).

To me, qualitative research emphasizes the quality of experiences people have and the meanings individuals give to those experiences. By conducting research with this approach, I sought answers to the questions “that stress *how* social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 15). Also important is that these experiences are examined in natural settings with a focus on naturally occurring events rather than using experimental design (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Miles and Huberman (1994) noted that a major feature of qualitative data is “their richness and holism, with strong potential for revealing complexity; such data provide ‘thick description’ that are vivid, nested in real context, and having a ring of truth that has strong impact on the reader” (p. 10). In other words, qualitative data allow a more nuanced, thorough understanding of people’s experiences. The data Miles and Huberman refer to come in the form of words, and as such, conversations were necessary to obtain my data.

Procedure

This research consisted of in-depth interviews, a procedure used for obtaining interviewee’s interpretations of their experiences and their understanding of the world in which they live and work (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). This method emphasizes the importance of having participants describe and explain their own experiences in their own words; however, the researcher must also play an active role in the interviewing process and as such “. . . the interview produces situated understandings grounded in

specific interactional episodes” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 48). To make the most of these interactional episodes, I will now discuss the intricacies involved with interviewing.

Protocol. Before beginning the interview process, I created an interview protocol, which is a formal conversation guide written out in full prior to the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) (see the appendix for my interview protocol). However, although I had delineated the questions I wished to ask, I conducted the interview in a semi-structured manner. This approach allowed me to ensure my primary research questions were answered but also allowed me the freedom and flexibility to probe and add additional questions as I saw fit. Rubin & Rubin (2005) suggest doing so with main questions, follow-up questions, and probes; I developed some probes before interviewing and developed others spontaneously to pursue interesting and relevant ideas as they emerged. Conducting a semi-structured interview also allowed me to adapt my interview to the person with whom I was conversing—many people have different conversational styles and I tried to make them more comfortable and at ease by remaining flexible.

I arranged the questions in the protocol in such a way as to help the interviewee answer most easily; I began with an introduction and asked broad, easier questions, followed by my main questions, and then ended again with easier questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I also attempted to incorporate as many open-ended questions as possible so that participants did not feel limited in their answers. Similarly, I tried to avoid leading questions so that I did not bias the participants’ answers (Potter, 1996). After creating the protocol, I pre-tested it on three people

before interviewing participants. One volunteer was a colleague in the field and two volunteers were friends and family. I asked these volunteers the questions on my protocol and invited them to respond to them. I then modified the protocol based on the comments they provided in regards to wording, placement, transitions, or relevancy of the questions asked. Similarly, throughout the interviewing process, I noticed some questions that were not working as well as I had hoped or I thought of additional questions I wanted to ask all of my participants. For this reason, I modified the protocol throughout the data collection period. During the actual interviews, I also presented my participants with a short article on a public relations theory, “How to Measure Relationships? Grunig/Hon Study for Institute Measurement Commission Lays Groundwork” (1999), to obtain feedback on a concrete example of scholarship. The purpose of including this article was to have participants comment on a piece of academic research. I chose this article primarily for its length so that participants would not spend the bulk of our interview time reading. Lastly, I elected to send my participants a list of the major questions in advance so that they could spend some time thinking about the questions prior to the interview and not be caught off guard or at a loss for words.

Participants and recruitment. My only requirement for participants was that they were public relations practitioners (those who practice public relations). I initially located participants by consulting the Public Relations Society of America’s membership directory and contacting individuals in our regional area (Pennsylvania, Maryland, Washington, D.C., and northern Virginia). I feel that PRSA was an especially viable resource for interviewees because of the association’s recognition of

the importance of education in public relations; I reasoned that practitioners in PRSA might be more willing to take the time to be interviewed by a student. I am also a member of the Public Relations Student Society of America, which gave me something in common with those I interviewed. Beyond those I initially contacted from the PRSA directory, I used the snowball technique in which I asked those I had already interviewed to recommend others I could possibly interview, thereby expanding the initial list of interviewees (Potter, 1996). In a few instances I also asked personal colleagues to refer me to people they knew in the industry.

Once I had contacted a participant and confirmed an interview, we worked together to decide on a convenient, safe location to conduct the interview in person. In most cases I met participants at their places of business, while a few interviews were conducted at a coffee shop or café. I conducted one interview over the phone due to inclement weather that prevented me from driving to meet the participant. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour, as this amount of time is generally the most people can talk at length.

My research was a purposive convenience sample, as I chose my participants based on the convenience of interacting with a particular audience who demonstrate a particular characteristic (Potter, 1996). I interviewed 20 participants, which allowed me to reach the saturation point. The saturation point is where I began to hear the same concepts and themes cropping up in the interviews (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). My participants ran the gamut in terms of experience, education, and industry. Ten participants were male and ten participants were female. Their experience in the industry ranged from 3 months to 35 years through entry level, mid-level, and senior-

level positions. Ten participants had Bachelor's degrees, seven had Master's degrees, and three were currently working on obtaining their Master's degrees. One practitioner had completed some doctorate work. Academic backgrounds varied with only seven practitioners coming from a traditional public relations or communication major or minor. Other majors and minors represented were journalism, business, sociology, psychology, government, economics, philosophy, education, history, marketing, public affairs, international affairs, and arts, letters, and science. The practitioners were from either corporations, various sized agencies (this mix occurred accidentally and was not sought out), or a consulting business and represented many industries including cable, utilities, healthcare, social issues, defense, finance, universities, education, and technology. The variety of participants was helpful in securing diverse perspectives.

Consent and confidentiality. Before beginning data collection, I submitted all appropriate paperwork to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval for my research, I asked the participants to sign a consent form that affirmed his or her participation in my research, guaranteed confidentiality, and gave me permission to audiotape the conversation. Per IRB guidelines, I have all recordings and paperwork in a locked drawer in my home.

In order to guarantee confidentiality, I did not use the participants' names in my writing and removed any identifying information that could match their comments to their names. Instead, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and described generically. I also allowed the participants the right to look over their

interviews and the final manuscript before finalizing the study, which is what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) refer to as a member check.

Data Analysis

Notes and transcripts. At the conclusion of each interview, I made notes that summarized the session, largely in case my recording device failed to record the conversation, but also to make note of anything of importance that took place (i.e., general themes and findings). This proved to be invaluable, as portions of two interviews did not record. Shortly after the interviews took place, the sessions were transcribed. I used a transcription service due to time constraints. After receiving the transcripts, I went through them to format them and make sure everything was recorded correctly. I then made copies of all transcripts in case of an accident.

Observer comments. After a transcript was returned to me, I inserted observer comments (OC's) that reflected emerging themes, suggestions for future interviews about my own interviewing skills or the protocol, and problems that surfaced in the interviewing process. OC's were also a space for me to reflect on my thoughts and feelings during an interview, such as reactions to participants and my own biases that surface. I also periodically wrote memos to myself (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) as a more formal, lengthier way to reflect on the research process. Within this space I reflected on my own mental process (e.g., judgments, stereotypes, questions, uncertainties).

Transforming the data. Wolcott (1994) suggests three areas of consideration in deciding what to do with data: description, which is preserving the form, content, and context of the data; analysis, which is trying to make sense of the data; and interpretation, which is theorizing about what everything means when taken together.

For the analysis portion of my research, I used a grounded theory approach. In grounded theory, researchers do not begin with a theory and deduce hypotheses to be tested (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Potter, 1996). Instead, the researcher begins with research questions to pursue and then allows the theory to emerge from the gathered data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The idea behind developing theory this way is that theory derived from data is more likely to reflect “reality” than is theory derived from speculation. The hope is that grounded theory will offer insight and deeper understanding of a phenomenon.

To find emerging theories, I read through each transcript thoroughly and generated initial categories to suggest themes. I then compared themes across transcripts to see which were most common. This is what Strauss and Corbin (1998) termed “open coding.” The idea behind open coding is that closely examining the data “for both similarities and differences allows for fine discrimination and differentiation among categories” (p. 102). The second step in data analysis was then to use axial coding to determine how themes were related to each other. In axial coding, themes are related to sub-themes to form a fuller explanation of a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It also uses codes to form connections between similar codes to reduce the number of codes and to identify overarching themes more easily (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). To keep my codes organized, I made a list of codes, assigning each code a letter and color.

I then went back and coded the transcripts, marking the transcripts where ever the theme was present (Potter, 1996). After coding all the transcripts, I sorted the data by grouping all of the data with the same code into a single computer file; I then

found the themes that had the most support and discarded the ones that had little support. I also looked for significant outlying themes that were not common across the interviews but that had relevance to my research questions.

After analyzing the data in the aforementioned way, I completed the interpretation. To do so, I synthesized all of my results and placed them in the context of the extant research in the literature review to theorize what their ultimate meaning was, as based on my research questions. I also offered my own solutions and opinions at this point to suggest how the research could influence the practice of public relations.

Validity and Reliability

Regardless of methodology, issues of validity and reliability inevitably arise. Kvale (1995) defines validity as “the quality of craftsmanship in an investigation, which includes continually checking, questioning, and theoretically interpreting the findings” (p. 27). In other words, validity is the extent to which the research instrument accurately measures the value of what it is examining (Wolcott, 2005). In quantitative research, the instrument might be related to experimental design or a survey, but in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument (McCracken, 1988).

Referring back to Kvale’s definition of validity, craftsmanship then becomes important for the qualitative researcher. In order to show solid craftsmanship, transparency is helpful. Transparency means that someone reading a report is able to see the process behind the research, such as how the data is collected and analyzed (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To achieve this, I attempted to make my research as

transparent as possible by communicating my research honestly and openly. After I conducted the research, I included summaries of my own biases and difficulties in my thesis. I also devoted a section of my writing to my participants, meaning that I provided descriptions of those I interviewed. As mentioned earlier, I used member checks to make sure I was interpreting my participants' thoughts and ideas accurately. Lastly, I have tried to walk my readers through every step of the research process so that they could clearly understand how I proceeded and how I made decisions about my research.

One particular concern regarding validity in this thesis was the effect of social desirability in which participants sometimes answer researchers' questions in the way they feel the researchers would want them to answer. I attempted to reduce social desirability as much as possible by emphasizing that no right or wrong answers exist; rather, I stressed that I was interested in my participants' personal opinions. I also tried to make the questions I asked as open as possible as to not lead participants' to any particular answer. I do realize, however, that as a researcher from a research university, social desirability was most likely not eliminated, especially in regard to comments about the positive aspects of academic research.

Relatedly, reliability is the extent to which research will develop the same results every time the same study and instrument are used (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). However, qualitative research is unique in that it does not expect to have replicated results; rather, qualitative research examines unique experiences of different people in different settings and also recognizes the fact that these experiences are constantly changing and shifting.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important part of the qualitative interviewing process because it accounts for the investigator's role in the research, and it sensitizes him or her to the reality of the interview's context (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This can be especially important in interviews, as recognizing biases, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds can allow the researcher to listen to answers that may affect the way the interviews and data are perceived (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Potter (1996) suggests this can be done in three ways: by articulating the decisions a researcher makes, which should be apparent in my methods section; by consciously reflecting on the research as it takes place, which should be apparent in my observer comments and memos; and by illuminating biases, which I will do next.

Following these recommendations, I will now reflect on my perspective and position, as well as my personal interest and potential biases in conducting the proposed research. I am a white, twenty-four year old female who has only studied the field of public relations since entering the Master's program at the University of Maryland. Previous to entering the program, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in English with a minor in business and completed two public relations internships. I felt as though my previous education and experiences would provide me with sufficient knowledge and skills to enter public relations. Upon beginning my coursework at the University of Maryland, however, I realized I did not know nearly as much about public relations as I thought I did, nor had I realized the existence of a theoretical foundation to the field. When I talk to friends and relatives about my field of study, they are also surprised to learn of the academic underpinnings. In fact, at

times I have been a little skeptical about how all of the theoretical education I am receiving will apply to the “real world”—this is where my interest in my research topic began. The more I have studied, the more I have come to appreciate the value and necessity of the theoretical knowledge I am receiving and now I am curious how others in the professional world view it.

After receiving my Master’s degree, I am joining the professional world, where I hope to apply my theoretical knowledge. I am interested in knowing how I can best communicate my public relations knowledge in a way that is understandable and also appealing enough that other practitioners and/or management will see and appreciate its value. We often talk about elevating the status of the field, and I hope to be a practitioner that can do so.

Finally, throughout this study I have struggled with my position in the academic community. As a Master’s student, I do not pretend to have an intimate understanding of the inner workings of academia. I only know what I have experienced, witnessed, and learned during my brief time in the university setting. To that end, I do not expect my voice to be a representation of the scholarly community of public relations at large.

Chapter 4: Results

Overall, the practitioners interviewed made meaning of public relations scholarship and its usefulness in a number of ways. For the most part, practitioners were not aware that public relations scholarship existed and could only talk about their experiences with academic research in general. Although a few practitioners found academic research helpful in their careers, the general feeling toward academic research was that it is important as an avenue for solving problems, but that it is not useable in its current state because of visibility, inaccessibility, and application issues. Finally, practitioners thought that research could be useful, but that research will have to become more user-friendly, scholars will have to reach out to practitioners, and scholars will have to accept help from practitioners before research is well received.

RQ 1: To what extent do public relations practitioners make meaning of public relations scholarship?

When I began the interview process, I initially asked participants what their understanding was of public relations scholarship. I soon found that “scholarship” was a difficult word for people to make sense of and that the phrase “academic research” was more meaningful to my participants. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will refer to scholarship and academic research interchangeably. I also had to be careful to specify academic research or practitioners assumed I was referring to market research such as materials testing with focus groups. On the whole, however, most practitioners did not know about public relations scholarship and very few had a clear idea of what it was. All participants had some knowledge of or experience with

general academic research, but associations with scholarship were both negative and positive.

“Professors do research on public relations?”

Unawareness of public relations academic research. Most of the practitioners I interviewed were not aware of the existence of academic public relations research. When I asked what the academic research of public relations meant to them, most practitioners stated that the concept did not mean anything, as it was the first time they had heard of it; they had never considered the idea that professors who teach public relations might also be engaged in researching various aspects of the field. Those practitioners who were unaware of public relations research seemed to have no frame of reference to make sense of the area of study. Referring to public relations research, Bo, one of the senior-level practitioners said, “Right now, I don’t see it, I don’t know what it is, or how to get it.” When asked to guess what academic public relations research might entail, many practitioners were at a loss for words and simply said something along the lines of, “I’m really not sure.” A few participants even initially declined my request for an interview because they felt they did not have any knowledge of the topic and would not be useful for my purposes. I had to assure my participants that not knowing about public relations scholarship was a valid perspective and that it contributed a great deal to the research. Participants were also relieved to hear that other practitioners were also unaware of public relations academic research.

However, important to point out is that just because the practitioners were not aware of public relations research does not mean that they held inherently negative

attitudes toward it. After Bo said he was unaware of public relations research, he continued on to say, “Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t value it if I were exposed to it, but I’m not. I just don’t know what it is.” Similarly, most practitioners indicated indifference toward research because of their unfamiliarity with it. As part of the interview process, I had my participants read a short article on a public relations theory and comment on its value and usefulness, and several practitioners commented that they thought the article was interesting and beneficial to the practice of public relations, but that they had not known such materials or resources existed.

Confusion with higher education. A few practitioners thought that anything having to do with public relations in the university setting was related to education, mostly in an undergraduate sense. Tracy, a senior-level practitioner, said she thought that the academic research of public relations was “. . . the classroom. Giving the students the foundations they need to practice public relations. Probably good writing skills and how to formulate a press release. And maybe the history of public relations.” Participants painted imagery of teachers lecturing in big classrooms, disseminating information that students feverishly jotted down to memorize for tests. Other practitioners also believed that public relations scholarship had more to do with coursework and the mechanics of the profession, although one person suggested that the philosophies behind public relations were also probably covered in the classroom.

Confusion with university relations. Relatedly, a few practitioners supposed that the academic research of public relations was research that a university was conducting on behalf of its own public relations function. They assumed that tasks like fundraising and recruitment of potential students would be the biggest area of

concerns in this kind of research. The practitioners seemed to agree that “. . . universities are more about business than education these days,” so public relations would be necessary to raise the visibility of the institution. Two practitioners, Bob and Paul, also said they automatically thought about the pressure on universities to publicize their sports teams, especially when schools are large and have a notable athletic history. However, those participants that worked in university relations did not interchange academic research and university relations.

Public Relations Scholarship as an Exploration of the Field

Only two practitioners, Lisa and Chris, both Masters educated, felt confident that they knew what the academic research of public relations was. They understood public relations scholarship as researchers trying to explain the phenomenon of what happens in the field of public relations, but also understanding what public relations is, what public relations does, and what public relations should be. Lisa and Chris also felt that professors were uniquely situated to answer these questions because of the nature of their career as intellectuals.

Other practitioners that were not sure what the academic research of public relations was tried their best to guess what it might entail. They imagined that public relations scholars largely explored the state of the field by assessing what practitioners’ jobs really consist of, what trends and changes are present, and how social issues like gender, race, ethnicity, and equality affect public relations. Some practitioners also suggested that public relations scholars are concerned with best practices and how practitioners can do their jobs better. Yet other practitioners speculated that professors were trying to learn more about particular types of public

relations, such as political, health, and crisis communication, while also examining broader topics such as ethics and how to demonstrate the value of public relations.

Positive Associations with Academic Research

Because so many participants were unsure of what public relations academic research was, I probed further to ascertain their understandings of academic research in general, which was a topic everyone felt they had enough knowledge of to comment on. On the whole, most participants thought that academic research had a positive connotation because they equated academic research with new ideas, discoveries, more complete understandings of the world, and technologies that could improve the quality of life. This pursuit of knowledge also made them view universities as leaders in innovation and forward thinking.

Academic research is credible. A few participants noted that they thought people find academic research reliable because it is thought to be less biased than research that is corporate-sponsored or completed by a politically charged group. Bob, a former reporter, noticed that “When someone has a Ph.D. behind their name, people buy what they have to say. It’s all about where the info is coming from. People worry about that kind of stuff.” Kathy, an owner of her own agency, said that people are more likely to believe academic research because everyone can assume that those doing the research are well-educated individuals who have been through rigorous schooling. The participants also noted they did not have to worry about the quality of the research because they assumed that any research coming from a university would be conducted properly and would not be fraudulent or falsified.

Academic research is helpful. Another positive association with research was the idea that by its nature, research is meant to be helpful. Ben, a practitioner who had recently received his Master's degree, said that he had no excuse not to use research if it would help him do his job better. He asked, "Isn't the purpose of any research to solve problems? If the problem I'm having is already solved, what a waste if I wasted my time trying to reinvent the wheel." Ben also mentioned that academic research can be used as support when he is trying to demonstrate the importance of an idea to his bosses or to their clients because it substantiates points or arguments that he is trying to make and justifies his decisions.

Academic research is necessary. In a similar vein, several practitioners mentioned that without academic research, many problems in the world would remain unresolved. Speaking more broadly than just the field of public relations, Dwayne mentioned that research in an area like pharmaceuticals can actually save people's lives. He continued on to say, however, that research in a field such as communication is also necessary because it improves how people interact and connect with each other and that communication is something that affects everybody. Another practitioner, Alisa, expressed that she thought academic research is necessary because academics can spend their time on problems that the everyday world does not get time to stop and think about.

Negative Associations with Academic Research

Even though many practitioners found the idea of generating knowledge to be positive and necessary, they also largely felt that academic research is problematic.

Most practitioners reported that they held negative perceptions of academic research because of one or more issues that spoiled their otherwise positive views.

Academic research is disconnected from the real world. A commonly articulated thought was that academic research does not reflect what happens in the “real world” or the professional world. Andy, a practitioner who had recently entered the field while concurrently working on his Master’s degree, said, “. . . I feel like academics will get esoteric and decide to pursue things that have no practical value.” Many other practitioners had the same opinion, believing that academic researchers get so caught up in abstract theory and philosophy that their work does not consider how average people think and behave. Also, many practitioners said they felt the research was “out of touch” because it explored obscure topics that very few people care about or could use. Another practitioner, Jon, noted that experiments in a laboratory do not adequately simulate what happens in everyday life.

Those doing academic research do not have real world experience. Beyond the perception that academic research in and of itself is disconnected from the professional world, several practitioners commented that they believe researchers have no practical experience. For that reason, the practitioners were less inclined to accept what researchers had to say as reliable or accurate. Bo, a senior-level practitioner said:

[Practitioners] are all about what works, and they know what works, so they’re just going to do what works. And they imagine that people doing the research don’t actually know what works because they haven’t tried to do it.

So [practitioners] have a chip on their shoulder about “well *I* know what’s effective, I’m going to do what really works.”

Another practitioner, Bob, mentioned that he thought most practitioners think that “those who can’t do, teach.” He explained that this belief might lead practitioners to think academicians had resorted to the academic community because of their inability to practice public relations well. Similarly, Annie, a practitioner working on her Master’s degree, described experiences with communication professors who were ineffective communicators, which consequently decreased their credibility with their students.

Academic research is not innovative. Another perception of academic research was that researchers are not exploring novel or original topics; rather, academics are recycling or merely criticizing each others’ ideas. Lisa, a practitioner with a Master’s degree, said:

I would read these articles and it’s like you’re reading them and they are saying nothing. These studies are in journals or somewhere and you know somebody put in a lot of time and that’s great, but they’re just building on what somebody else said and nobody’s really saying anything of their own and nobody’s really making their own assertions.

For this reason, Lisa felt that she was disengaged from academic research. Kathy, another practitioner, said she felt that academic research was all the same and that no one was willing to take risks or try revolutionary approaches.

The topics covered by academic researchers are too narrow. Some practitioners noted that the academic research they had come across was so specific that they felt it was unusable. Tracy, a director of a mid-size agency, stated that:

I just feel there's a really big gap between what you might see in an academic setting, where you do have to limit things when you do research. I understand it has to be a somewhat narrow, but it just seemed it was so narrow that it was unrealistic.

A few practitioners also commented that they envision professors studying a single minute topic their entire lives without stopping to think about the value of the topic they are researching. Bob, who had a Master's degree, gave the example of a literature professor who spent most of his career studying a few select paragraphs from one particular novel. Bob felt that limiting research to something so specific was harmful for academic research in general because it makes the topic isolated and unable to be connected with larger ideas.

Academic research is too time-intensive and lags behind the industry. A common belief amongst the practitioners interviewed was that academic research takes a long time to conduct. Tracy, a director, noted that an agency could never take so much time to complete research or the client would become frustrated, so she often did not understand what took academic researchers so long to reach conclusions.

Other practitioners noted that the time-intensive quality of academic research made it lag behind real-time practice. Tess, a mid-level practitioner, commented that, "This is a cutting-edge business every day and I'm not sure universities move that speed." She went on to say that because of the difference in pace between business

and universities, she did not think academic research was the best resource to use because recency is of prime importance to her. Other practitioners echoed the sentiment, saying that they could appreciate what universities were trying to do, but that they took too long to actually complete the research, rendering the research irrelevant or outdated.

Academic research is condescending. A few practitioners, especially those who had completed graduate educations, noted that they thought professors thought of themselves as “superior” to or smarter than non-academics. Further, two practitioners, Annie and Lisa, commented that because of their graduate school experiences, they felt removed from academic research. Because of this belief, those practitioners were uninterested in, and actually opposed to seeking out academic research. Lisa specifically stated that:

There seems to be a very snobbish quality associated with the way [academics] spoke about the research of legitimate academicians who wrote books that were easily digested by other people. So there seems to be this dichotomy between “we’re doing all this wonderful research to help people,” but then we’re completely opposed to putting it into a form where average people will actually use it.

Annie further expounded on the idea by saying that she felt academics thought practitioners were not educated enough to understand elite ideas and that academics had no intention of wanting laypeople to understand their work so that “[academics] can continue to live in their ivory towers.”

Academic research is boring. A few of the words that first entered practitioners' minds when hearing the phrase academic research were "dry," "boring," "stodgy," and "dull." Several practitioners related academic research back to their college educations and being forced to read information they were not very interested in. Other practitioners said they remembered academic research being written in a long, drawn-out fashion that made the act of reading tedious. All practitioners remarked that they had little time for reading, and a few mentioned that since they only had time to pick a select few reading materials, they were not going to reach for something that was uninteresting and unenjoyable like academic research.

RQ 2: How do public relations practitioners make meaning of the usefulness of scholarly work in their practice?

After determining how public relations practitioners made sense of academic research, I explored how useful practitioners find public relations scholarship to be. For the most part, practitioners did not find public relations scholarship useful, although a few found it vital to their careers. The reasons for these opinions are explained below.

Public Relations Scholarship Is Useful

Similar to the reasons practitioners had for holding positive associations with academic research, some practitioners thought that public relations scholarship is useful in their careers. Essentially, these practitioners said they value public relations scholarship in their day-to-day work because it helps them to do their jobs better and makes them more effective practitioners.

“Professors can tackle what I can’t.” Dan, a practitioner with a Master’s degree, commented that because of the requirements of his job, he does not often get to think about the “big, long-term questions.” He provided the example of philosophical questions on topics like ethics that he said he wished he had more time to contemplate, but that the nature of his job does not allow for. Instead, he said, he is more than happy to let intellectuals ponder those questions and then peruse their thoughts later.

Academic research demonstrates value. A topic that was of great importance to many practitioners was how to prove the importance of public relations to their organizations. Repeatedly, the participants remarked on the difficulty of demonstrating the bottom-line value of public relations and how their programs got cut first if the organization was facing budgetary problems. For this reason, some practitioners commented that public relations scholarship can provide support in their quest to legitimize the public relations function. Dwayne, an in-house practitioner, said that:

If I hear about it and I read about it, there is likely a 100% chance that it would be of tremendous value to me. And I walk down the hall to my boss and say “Hey, boss! Guess what I learned today?” and then if that is something that is of phenomenal value to my organization, my boss is happy.

Another practitioner, Ben, mentioned that his ability to think in terms of correlations and statistical significance not only helps him to determine if research is useful for a client, it also shows his management that he can think critically and on the same terms as analysts in the organization that seem to garner a great deal of respect.

Academic research validates practice. Another way that academic research is useful is that it confirms best practices and reinforces good decision making. Mike, a senior-level practitioner, said “. . . it helps to validate the practices that we might do in the professional world or add to our own professional practices.” Other practitioners commented on the same idea by saying that public relations scholarship shows they are not acting haphazardously or making decisions without thinking through them thoroughly. In essence, public relations scholarship is evidence they are doing the “right thing” and is a credible resource they can show to management.

Academic research eliminates ineffective practices. Beyond showing best practices, public relations scholarship can also show what practices do not work, which a few practitioners thought was very powerful. Jen, a media relations specialist, noted that she always learns more from what has failed on a project than from what has succeeded. Correspondingly, she also noted that her boss is always focused on saving money, so if she knows that a technique will not work in advance, the whole organization is going to benefit. Paul, the owner of a small agency, agreed, saying that, “In practice, I think a lot of us waste time on things that don’t work.” He emphasized having a shortage of time and the idea that “time is money,” meaning that failed projects result in a loss of money. Paul credited research as a tool that keeps him on the right track.

Public Relations Scholarship Is Not Useful

Although a few practitioners found value in public relations scholarship, most practitioners said they felt that scholarship was not useful to them and their jobs. Furthermore, when I asked my participants about their perceptions of how much the

industry and other practitioners value academic research, all practitioners said they believed the industry places little to no significance on incorporating scholarship into the practice of public relations.

Scholarship is too impractical. Perhaps the most commonly-mentioned theme was that scholarship is too unrealistic. Practitioners felt that theories created by public relations scholars did not take into account the realities of actually working in the industry. They said they could understand what professors wanted to achieve but that because of limitations like time and money, no one can implement such “pie in the sky” ideas.

Another complaint about scholarship was that some of the issues examined do not have practical value. Chris, for instance, said that when a research topic gets too philosophical, he does not have a use for it because the research does not inform him how to do a media pitch more effectively or interact with clients more professionally. Some found this particularly true when trying to find academic research on the business world because they viewed the business world as being more centered in action rather than in the process of thinking about action.

“Most of this stuff doesn’t apply to me.” Besides scholarship being too impractical, several practitioners found particular aspects of scholarship to be of no consequence to their jobs. A few practitioners noted that they work in very industry-specific areas that require specific skills and knowledge. Because of this, they find the bulk of public relations literature to be irrelevant to their needs. For instance, Mike, a senior-level practitioner, said that he thinks a lot of focus has been given to how changes in technology have affected the field, but “those issues have not been as

significant to me in my daily work, so I don't explore them as much." He stated he was sure those issues were important to people who helped to design websites or podcasts, or to those who were pitching the media, but those were not tasks he performed. Diane, a consultant, said she found much of the literature was focused on public relations in an organization and trying to be accepted by management, but as a consultant, those topics were not germane to her.

The industry trusts those who have experience. Similar to the results mentioned in Research Question One, several practitioners said they instinctively believe that those who have experienced what they are talking about are more trustworthy when advising others what to do. Bo felt this way, disclosing that, "Inside the academic world your credentials may be great, but someone like me being told how to manage a crisis by someone that hasn't actually done it, I question." Other practitioners supported this idea by explaining that someone who has not gone through an experience can never really know that something works, regardless of what their surveys and calculations say. Many of the practitioners also assumed that public relations scholars do not have professional experience, believing that those in the academic community probably went right through their schooling without any time in a professional environment.

"What we do is good enough." A related theme was that practitioners only trust what they already know to work. For example, Eliza, a manager, expressed some resentment toward the idea of scholars telling her what she should do because she has developed and implemented campaigns on her own that were successful. Mike, another manager, recognized that many practitioners probably feel as Eliza does

because “. . . we tend to think the work we’re doing is the most important and that we’re the best at it.” However, Mike then criticized the idea by saying that practitioners should be more open to taking advice and understand that everyone always has areas upon which they need to improve.

“I think a lot of it’s common sense.” One practitioner who had not come from a traditional public relations background, Tess, was adamant about saying that she thought communication is common sense, so she does not need to seek out research. Tess also thought that studying public relations in college was unnecessary because the skills needed to perform public relations effectively can be learned on the job. She felt that as long as one could write a press release, he or she did not need to know the history behind press releases. Other practitioners thought that as long as they took the time to think critically and logically about what goals and objectives they wanted to achieve, they would be able to deduce the best course of action without needing an expert to tell them how to do so.

Research is useful only for those right out of school. Because many of the participants I interviewed had been in the public relations industry for some time, they felt that their distance from the academic community had caused them to forget about public relations scholarship. Bo, a senior level practitioner at a large firm, observed, “I think [practitioners] are less and less honed in on the academic world as times goes by so they think of it much less and work more. I definitely see younger people trying to use academic research more.” A few of the more seasoned practitioners also noted that when they were in college, a public relations major was not offered, so they were never exposed to public relations literature in the first place.

Bo further commented that because of the age of most current high level executives, their whole generation was likely removed from viewing public relations in an academic, as opposed to professional, sense.

A similar theme articulated by several more experienced practitioners was that only practitioners without experience need to rely on public relations scholarship. These practitioners reasoned that once an individual has worked in the industry for awhile, he or she has picked up enough on the job to get by. Tess said she felt that a college education does not provide practical skills, so young practitioners have to rely on their textbooks until they have “figured things out,” at which time they can fall back on their past experiences.

Using academic research is not rewarded. Other practitioners mentioned that they have been discouraged in using academic research in their work. Annie mentioned that, “I’ve been working on my Master’s for 3 years and my boss has never asked once what I am doing or studying.” She also mentioned that she has tried to use her paper assignments in class to benefit her at work, but that her boss did not show an interest in reading the paper when she offered it to him. Likewise, Paul noticed that citing public relations academic research in any type of content or collateral is not considered beneficial, so the industry itself is reinforcing the idea that research is not important.

Scholarship is too hard to find. Nearly all practitioners said they do not come across academic research in their daily work, which they thought spoke to the fact that such work is not readily available to them. They then suggested that public relations scholarship is not useful to anyone if no one can find it. Dwayne used the

following analogy to clarify the conundrum: “If you do a research study in a forest, and you don’t hear a tree drop, it’s of little to no value for somebody like me.”

Another theme surrounding accessibility was that not only do practitioners not come across academic work, but they also do not know how to locate it. Diane, a consultant working out of her home, expressed that she did not know where to find academic research even if she wanted to: “Where would I even look? I guess I’d have to go to a library and look up a book?” Ben, a recent graduate, realized that although he still had access to his alma mater’s library website and research capabilities, most practitioners do not. Furthermore, he presumed that small agencies would not have the budgets to buy access to similar research databases.

Academic writing is hard to understand. The biggest barrier to incorporating academic research into the practice of public relations seemed to be the academic style of writing. After I had each participant read the short article on a public relations theory and comment on its usefulness, I continued by asking them what would make the article more helpful for them. Every practitioner said the jargon needed to be toned down. For example, the phrase control mutuality in the article was defined as, “the degree to which parties agree who has rightful power to influence one another. Tho [*sic*] some imbalance is natural, stable relationships require that org’ns & publics have some control over the other” (Grunig & Hon, 1999). Every practitioner noted that a simpler, more common term could be used to express the idea of “power in relationships.” Beyond the case of that particular article, however, practitioners said they always find that academic research has too much jargon, or, as Andy said, “. . .they tend to use big words, you know, or six words when two could do the same.”

Practitioners did not understand why academic research could not be written in layperson's language.

Another writing element that practitioners took issue with was the organization of academic writing. Many practitioners commented on the fact that when reading through academic research, they have to wade through an entire article before reaching the main point, whereas they think putting the most important point first is more logical. Andy related this issue to how public relations professionals would approach the problem:

So why would something that's being sent to the public of public relations practitioners not follow the same rules that we ourselves follow when trying to engage the public? . . . I would put the most important information upfront in a hook, just like I would in a press release I was sending out, and I would make the information as clear as possible and direct me to further resources if it was something I was actually interested in.

Other practitioners agreed, saying they need to know the gist of something before they decide to spend the time to read it.

Reading research is too time-consuming. Practitioners routinely commented on the fast-paced, deadline-oriented nature of public relations. When I asked my participants what a typical day was like, most responded that they did not have a typical day because they are doing so many different things every day. Tracy summarized the time-consuming nature of the profession by saying:

. . . it's difficult when you're out here in the real world working on a day-to-day basis, you don't have the time to think of bigger-pictures issues a lot of the time. You're focused on the next press release.

The other practitioners reinforced this response by saying they always have some work-related responsibility to attend to, so spare time for supplemental reading is a luxury they do not have. When I asked the practitioners what resources they refer to regularly, most said they always read the major newspapers like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* and will sometimes read *The Bulldog Reporter* or the PRSA-produced publications when they have the time. No practitioners said they read academic journals.

Further, Lisa explained that reading public relations scholarship “[is] not an intelligence issue, it’s a time issue.” She felt that academicians probably think practitioners are not using research because they do not understand it or are not smart enough, when in actuality most practitioners just run out of time to read everything they would like to.

Practitioners are overwhelmed with information. Related to the theme of time, some participants mentioned that they feel they are overloaded with too much information. Because of the quantity of information they have to read, practitioners felt that could not devote time to any materials they do not immediately know the value of. Jen said that unless she could tell why reading a piece of literature was beneficial, she would move on to the next without a thought. A few practitioners said they would like to read more academic research, but that they get caught up in environmental scanning for clients, staying on top of the news, and returning emails

and phone calls. Tracy said she had to do a cost-benefit analysis to decide what information to give her attention to because:

I would say [the biggest problem is] just trying to get a handle on information and prioritizing it. . . I don't think it's a lack of interest, I just think it gets to be difficult to be truly proactive in seeking out new information unless you have a professional reason for doing so.

Jon noted that he receives so many mailings from so many different sources that he cannot keep them straight, so they end up becoming a stack on his desk that inevitably gets thrown out. In other words, many practitioners seemed to feel that they just have too much to read.

Academic research is too expensive. Finally, a few of the practitioners that were self-employed commented that academic research is costly. Kathy, the owner of a small agency, asserted that her experience with academic journals were that they cost hundreds, if not thousands of dollars, and that any type of publication in such a price range was out of her budget. She said she also declined expensive popular trade publications because they were "not worth the money." Diane, a consultant, also said if she was going to commit a large amount of money to any resource, she had to be absolutely certain that the resource would be worth the money in the long run by increasing her productivity or clientele. She was unsure that academic research could assure such a return.

RQ 3: What are public relations practitioners' suggestions of how scholarly research can contribute to the practice of public relations?

Because so many practitioners found public relations scholarship to be unhelpful, I asked them to give as much feedback as possible on what would make them turn to academic research as a viable resource. Practitioners were glad to give this feedback, because they felt research is most valuable when it helps practitioners become more effective. Practitioners seemed to believe that academic research could be valuable, but that some changes need to be implemented before it is viewed as such. These changes included making academic research user-friendly, reaching out to practitioners, and accepting help from practitioners.

Make Academic Research User-Friendly

The most common major theme among practitioners was the idea that academic research in itself is not worthless, but that they cannot use it in its current state. The practitioners felt that research is “packaged poorly,” which is a barrier to its use in the practice of public relations. Explained below is how research could be presented in a more user-friendly format.

Translate research. Several practitioners mentioned that the ideas underlying research are probably very valuable, but that research becomes unhelpful when it becomes entrenched in what one practitioner called “research-ese,” an insular way of explaining ideas that only intellectuals can understand. Ben said that he had found “. . . people don’t know how to look at academic research and actually decode it or understand what it means.” Other practitioners felt the same way, saying that they just

wanted to know what the research meant once it was boiled down to its simplest level.

Diane asked that researchers keep in mind that the people who can use their research the most are *not* researchers and that practitioners do not necessarily have the same level of education; therefore, Diane suggested the onus is on public relations scholars to make the effort to translate their research. Jen said she realized research sometimes has to use highly specific methods and data analysis, and although she does necessarily need to know the intimate details on how research was conducted, she would like to know why those methods were chosen, or even why the research was conducted in the first place. Several practitioners said that if research was understandable, it would then become useable, and consequently, the industry might take a different perspective on its value.

Write clearly and simply. As mentioned in the results of Research Question Two, practitioners felt that academic writing was filled with too much jargon. A few practitioners said that when they read the short theory article, they could not focus on everything because they were constantly trying to remember what specific terms meant. Bill suggested that, “Write this all down so the average Joe walking down the street could figure out what you’re saying.” Eileen asked academic researchers to remember that not all practitioners have Ph.D.s, so they should adjust their writing styles to be more easily understood by people with varying levels of education.

Practitioners also suggested that creating terms or using big words complicated the message rather than clarifying it. Other practitioners also noted that the academic writing style tends to be filled with long, complex sentences and

suggested that practitioners should work diligently to find the simplest way of saying what they want to communicate. Jon commented that, “I realize professors are probably good, classically trained writers, but we don’t want to see press releases written in iambic pentameter, so there has to be some sort of middle ground in writing style.”

Write concisely. Besides wanting to see different words chosen, many practitioners wanted to see fewer words in general. Annie noted how most of the research papers she had read in school ranged from 20 to 35 pages, which took a significant amount of time to read. She said she could not devote that kind of time to reading any one non-work-related source when on the job. Tracy agreed, giving the following instruction to public relations scholars: “Recognize the constraints PR practitioners are continually under, namely time constraints, so help use our time efficiently.” Tracy also emphasized she was not against reading research, it just had to fit into her crammed schedule, so the research must be short and sweet.

Other practitioners also commented that they would not have the time to read through long documents, and they found conciseness to be a virtue of any writer, academic or not. A few practitioners explained that they find people generally have short attention spans, so getting out a message in the least amount of words is imperative if a message is to be heard by anyone. These were their philosophies behind how they as practitioners composed their own materials such as press releases and press advisories, so they felt public relations scholars should keep the same rules in mind.

Make research relevant. Associated with the theme of writing concisely to save time, practitioners also want to see how a topic is pertinent to them, and they want to see that pertinence communicated quickly. Paul suggested that academic researchers “Write so that immediately the headline lets me know what is the benefit to me, why should I personally care about this? Why should I read this?” The practitioner seemed to connect the need for relevant research with the finding in Research Question Two that they are overwhelmed with information. Because they are short on time and have too much to read, a direct statement of relevancy would allow practitioners to decide if an academic article is worth the investment of time reading it would take.

Provide examples and application. Every practitioner said the inclusion of examples would make academic research more relevant to them. As mentioned earlier, practitioners felt that research needed to be translated, and they thought examples would be an excellent way to make that translation personally relevant. As Tracy explained:

I realize some ideas are conceptually very difficult, but those are especially the kinds of ideas practitioners are going to have problems using. Why don't [researchers] give us an example or two so we have something to relate to and something that we can look at and say, “Hey! I remember when I was in the situation” or “My colleague Bob was just talking about that problem the other day.”

Other practitioners echoed this sentiment, saying that examples really drive the point home because they can imagine themselves in hypothetical situations like the examples provided and see how the research is of value to them personally.

Several practitioners provided business case studies as an exemplar of what public relations scholarship should strive for. They noted that business also has theories, but that the theories are practically based and that the case studies explicitly show the connection between theory and practice. Diane thought that making those connections was critical because they demonstrate that researchers really are thinking about the practice of public relations and not “sitting in their ivory towers.” She felt that as soon as practitioners saw real-world application, they would be more willing to accept academics as credible.

Make research visible. Every practitioner also mentioned that they needed to be able to find public relations scholarship in order to use it. Again emphasizing that they are inundated with information to sort through and tasks to complete, practitioners stressed that academic research would have to be easily visible. Chris said he was not going “to jump through hoops to find this stuff.” Instead, he reported that he needed the research to come to him. Practitioners’ views on how to make research more visible are reported below.

Reach Out to Practitioners

Once more reemphasizing the time commitments of their jobs, practitioners said that they honestly felt public relations scholars would have to reach out to them in order for practitioners to begin to incorporate research into their practice rather than vice versa. In addition to increasing research visibility, several practitioners

viewed the need for academic outreach as good public relations practice. Bo summarized this idea in saying:

The public relations academic community needs to practice public relations with the practitioners. They must develop relationships with their own methods. It has to be relevant to the practitioners and if you can do that, I think you can develop a very good relationship.

To practitioners, the lack of visibility of academic research was not just an issue of locating journal articles, but rather a complete breakdown of communication and relationship building. A few practitioners suggested that public relations scholars need to think of themselves as an organization and practitioners as their public and treat the relationship just like they would if they were practicing public relations. The following suggestions are thoughts on how such relationships could be formed.

Create a listserv or monthly email. A suggestion repeated numerous times was the idea of putting together some sort of electronic alert system that would report new academic research right to practitioners' inboxes. Jen said she reads every single email she gets, so a listserv like that would catch her attention. Practitioners thought the beauty of this idea was that the main finding or conclusion of the research could be summed up in a sentence or two. Practitioners could then decide if the study was personally relevant and then click on a link if they wanted to learn more about the particular research. Jon suggested email would also reduce clutter since:

I'm not going to get a subscription to 10 different PR journals and search through to find something that may or may not have an effect on me

personally whereas if it were presented to me in a short, easily readable format, I would read it. And then I could click delete if nothing applied to me. In fact, most practitioners said they preferred email because they attend to their email more quickly and more consistently than anything they receive by traditional mail.

Create a website with a research database. Some practitioners also commented that having a resource they could access at will would also be helpful, such as in the form of an online repository of research. Eileen noted that creating a website would be ideal because it would not be another hardcopy volume that takes up space on a desk; rather, whenever she had a question, she could just go online and find the information she needed. Eileen also commented that websites are great resources because they can be constantly updated without having to print new materials. Other practitioners also indicated that websites would help to decrease the lag time between the completion of research and when it is published. They thought such a website could keep public relations researchers on the cutting edge.

Make use of pre-existing professional organizations. Practitioners did realize, however, that they would have to learn of such resources somewhere. Most suggested that a pre-existing professional organization would be the perfect place to get the word out because so many organizations are well respected and already established. The most commonly mentioned organizations were PRSA and IABC, although I recognize that some of my participants may have been biased since I initially contacted PRSA members to locate interviewees. However, regardless of the specific organization, practitioners felt that public relations scholars aligning themselves with

professional organizations would give them credibility and a good springboard for getting their work noticed.

Practitioners did not limit the relationship with professional organizations to what they referred to as mere publicity. Rather, they suggested that perhaps public relations scholars could write a monthly column in an organization's trade publication, which would be great exposure because so many practitioners read publications like PRSA's *The Strategist* and *PR Tactics*. Other suggestions were giving organization-sponsored seminars and sitting on advisory committees. In essence, though, practitioners repeatedly wanted to emphasize that such a partnership would increase visibility and increase credibility of both the organization and public relations scholars.

Hold brownbag lunches or seminars. Regardless of if academics made use of professional organizations, participants felt that academic researchers needed to connect interpersonally with practitioners. Tracy mentioned that once a month her agency does a professional development lunch where they talk about problems they are facing and how to solve them. She thought having a public relations scholar come in to present relevant research would be an excellent way to extend that program. Other practitioners also mentioned that agencies would be very receptive to holding brownbag lunches where they could spend their lunch listening to what public relations scholars are studying.

Besides lunches, practitioners also indicated that they would be interested in seminars held by public relations scholars, although they qualified this statement by saying the research would have to be relevant to their jobs. They said they would also

like to see academic researchers make themselves available for general speaking engagements, like conferences or corporate events. However, practitioners did underscore the fact that they would certainly be willing to take up any scholar who offered such a service, but that they would probably not proactively seek out someone to bring in.

Ask practitioners what their problems are. Finally, practitioners thought that the industry in general would be more welcoming of public relations scholars if they talked to practitioners about how they could serve them. Dan asked, “If they’re doing research to figure out what problems we’re having, why don’t they just interview practitioners and find out what they want or need?” Because public relations scholars would not have anything to study without the practice of public relations, practitioners commented that scholars aligning themselves with practitioners was of the utmost importance. Hearing what practitioners’ needs are would also demonstrate that public relations scholars do truly care about the industry and that they want to make a difference in the field.

Similarly, another thought on increasing scholars’ credibility was to have them partner with corporations to conduct research. Ben suggested that doing so could increase research budgets and manpower, although he realized some people might think the research was not as “pure” or that it might be biased in the corporation’s favor.

Accept Help from Practitioners

Another concern expressed was that academic researchers are hesitant to include practitioners in their work. Diane said that if public relations scholars are

worried about their credibility because people think they do not have professional experience, why not create research teams and put practitioners on them. She equated a team of researchers and practitioners to the system of checks and balances found in government; each person could bring their strengths and knowledge to the research, but not overpower it.

Several practitioners also said they knew a colleague who was an adjunct professor at a university and wondered how they could do the same. They thought the value of becoming an adjunct professor would be that they could bring their real life experiences to the classroom. Additionally, they could ask scholars for advice and guidance with their problems from an academic perspective and public relations scholars could also bounce ideas off of them.

The last suggestion practitioners had on working closely with practitioners was to take their feedback and suggestions to heart. Dan cautioned that if scholars are going to seek out the needs of practitioners, they must be willing to accept what practitioners have to say and not write them off as unimportant or silly. Although practitioners may not think as intellectually, their needs and concerns are also legitimate. Relatedly, practitioners thought that public relations scholars have to make a concerted effort to keep their hand in the professional world. As Mike said:

If the academic community really wants to help the profession, then it needs to get its hands dirty. They need to get out there and experience what's going on and not fool itself and have those rose-colored glasses on . . . I think once that happens that's going to move things forward, and I think the real world can benefit from what the academic community can bring to them, if they get

more grounded as opposed to being in this lofty tower thinking they know the way it should be.

Practitioners seemed to indicate that doing so would make public relations scholars and practitioners a more cohesive team, working together to better the field.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study used qualitative methods to explore practitioners' perspectives on the disconnect between public relations scholars and practitioners. Twenty practitioners varying in experience, education, and industry were interviewed to gain insight into how they understand public relations scholarship and its value for the practice. Results reveal that practitioners are largely unaware of public relations academic research. However, they felt the concept of general academic research was valuable, although problematic largely because of its isolation from the professional world, both conceptually and in implementation, such as how research is written. The aforementioned factors (unawareness of public relations scholarship and disconnect from the professional world) resulted in most practitioners finding academic research not useful in the practice of public relations. In spite of this, practitioners thought that public relations research could become useful if it was made more user-friendly, if scholars reached out to practitioners, and if scholars accepted help and input from practitioners. I will now situate these results within the existing body of knowledge.

Theoretical Implications

Although many position papers exist where public relations scholars and practitioners assert their personal opinions on the practical value of public relations scholarship, little research has been conducted to gain fuller, more thorough understanding of the topic. This study has extended what is known about practitioner perspectives on public relations scholarship by exploring the subject in an in-depth manner. In doing so, not only are pre-existing perceptions confirmed or disconfirmed,

but greater nuance and detail is added so that we can understand not only what practitioners believe, but why they believe it.

The Practitioner Perspective

The results of this study confirmed many previously established attitudes surrounding public relations scholarship. Lindemann (1979) and J. E. Grunig (1979) suggested that the largest criticism of theory by practitioners is that it is not applicable in the “real world,” and the practitioners I interviewed seemed to agree. The practitioners articulated that academic research has a tendency to get too abstract, but they also expressed skepticism about those conducting the research. Many practitioners assumed that academic researchers have no professional experience, which lowered the credibility of the research in their eyes. This finding highlights a need to increase the credibility of scholars.

The practitioners also agreed with Lindemann (1979) and Walker (1994) that the inaccessibility of academic language is a huge, if not the largest, barrier to integrating scholarship into the practice of public relations. The practitioners elaborated on the difficulty of academic language by noting that not only do they find the writing too jargon filled, but they also find it overly long and poorly organized. Practitioners simply said they cannot spend the time to read long journal articles, especially when the most important information is not placed in the very beginning of the material. Another important finding, though, is that practitioners do not think research is inherently useless and that they do think the current packaging problems with research could be fixed. This finding speaks to the fact that although

practitioners will not incorporate research into the practice of public relations in its current state, they are willing to consider using it in the future.

Several practitioners also reinforced the idea that professionals primarily worry about their day-to-day tasks and practical outcomes rather than big picture issues (Fawkes & Tench, 2003; Neff et al., 1999), but most practitioners attributed this preoccupation to time limitations and overloads of information. As one practitioner noted, the problem is not that practitioners are not intelligent enough to understand philosophical issues, it is that the fast-paced nature of the industry does not allow them the time to slow down and analyze them. This understanding sheds light on this concern by again showing that practitioners would consider using research, but that it needs to be clear, concise, and made relevant in order for them to take the time to read it.

However, the results of this study also reinforced some of the positive aspects of public relations scholarship. Rawlins (2003) and Debreceeny (2006) found theory useful because it can eliminate wasteful practices and elevates the field to the management function, which a few participants echoed. Several practitioners mentioned they would like to have proof of their legitimacy to show to their bosses or clients. Specifically, practitioners expressed a desire for research that demonstrates the bottom-line value of public relations. Having such resources would give them more credibility within an organization, more freedom in decision making, and ideally even a larger budget.

As far as bridging the gap, the practitioners whole-heartedly supported Lindemann's (1979) argument that academics need to apply their theories to the real

world. By doing so, practitioners felt they could better understand what public relations scholarship is trying to accomplish. They also echoed Debreceeny's (2006) call for accessible and compelling scholarship that takes practitioner needs into account. Practitioners explained this call as a matter of making research easier to use in their daily lives. Because so many practitioners did not know that public relations scholarship existed, they had no idea where to find it. If the research was made readily available, several practitioners said they would be interested in investigating what it had to say. Similarly, and again related to time constraints, practitioners wanted to see the main implications of research boiled down so that the importance of the research is explicitly expressed. Once these factors are accounted for, practitioners commented that they do not have a reason *not* to use research.

The Scholarly Perspective

Refining theory. Van Ruler (2005) previously attempted to create a typology that explains the disconnect between public relations scholars and practitioners, although hers relates specifically to an understanding of professionalism. This study extends that typology to an understanding of academic research in general. However, this study also complicates her models. Van Ruler suggested that public relations scholars belong to the knowledge model, which is based on rational intelligence and applying abstract knowledge. Practitioners, on the other hand, fit in the personality model, which is based on emotional intelligence that uses general knowledge that is gained through experience. For the most part, van Ruler implied that there is little to no overlap between the two models. She indicated that for scholars and practitioners to collaborate, scholars have to admit that rational and emotional knowledge need to

be combined. She did not mention the role of practitioners, but one can assume that practitioners would need to accept the same as true. Although several practitioners seem as though they would fit into the personality model, the inherent positive attitude toward research by practitioners shows that overlap may already exist between the knowledge and personality models; these models may not be as cut and dry as van Ruler initially asserted. Research into the perceptions of public relations scholars could identify if this is the case on the other side of the equation as well.

Furthermore, van Ruler (2005) suggested that to have scholarly work accepted by practitioners, personal experience and motivation are needed to interpret and apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. She proposed that practitioners and scholars must be willing “to meet, to discuss their ideas and work together on a professional identity that stipulates parameters but leaves scope for the width and the dynamics of the practice” (p. 14) and that this discussion would best take place within professional organizations. My study confirmed that practitioners agree that professional organizations would be an excellent location for finding common ground between themselves and public relations scholars.

Because literature has expressed that practitioners are not particularly interested in applying theory, Van Ruler (2005) also wanted to know “. . . why practitioners seem to be ignoring the scholarly work that has been carried out and why senior practitioners and CEOs still hire practitioners without any public relations oriented education” (p. 9). This study shows that practitioners are ignoring scholarly work for two main reasons. The first reason, and perhaps the most important, is that the practitioners interviewed generally do not know that public relations scholarship

exists. Making assumptions about practitioners without realizing the limited extent of their knowledge on public relations scholarship is dangerous and could create unnecessary tensions. How can anyone be expected to use a resource that he or she is not aware of? What should be encouraging, though, is that several of the practitioners interviewed said they would be open to using academic research, or at least would consider using it, if they became aware of it. This current visibility issue may speak to the fact that the academic community has not done everything within its power to make academic research available to practitioners, which is a paradox in and of itself. This lack of a concerted effort to reach out to practitioners seems to beg the question of who is doing public relations for public relations.

The second main reason that practitioners are not using scholarly work is that they do not know how to use it. Cornelissen (2000) suggested that practitioners fail to realize that knowledge is rarely ever used in its pure state and that certain efforts must be taken to interpret, reframe, and adapt theory to make it practical. Cornelissen proposed that practitioners must be active in doing the aforementioned, using what he coined the “translation model.” What Cornelissen failed to take into account is that practitioners need guidance in learning how to do so. Many practitioners commented that academic research has to become understandable before it can become useable and that they need assistance in understanding it. Like Lindemann (1979) suggested, the practitioners in this study wanted to see academics take the first step in applying their theories to the professional world. If examples are given and the importance of a particular research area is communicated clearly, practitioners might better see the value of academic research. Then, once the value of research is established,

practitioners will be better equipped to connect the dots and determine their own application of future research. Practitioners emphasized that because they do not have the same extensive educational backgrounds as public relations scholars, they place the onus on scholars to make initial efforts to translate their work.

The need to teach practitioners how to understand public relations research is especially important in light of the finding that many practitioners think their experiences are enough to guide their work. As Moncur (2006) said, although personal experience is important, when everyone begins to say “in my experience,” the industry becomes based on one person’s word versus another. Knowledge of public relations scholarship is one way to help standardize the field. As the descriptions of the participants showed, most of the practitioners interviewed did not come from a traditional public relations background, so encroachment is a very real possibility. Making public relations scholarship accessible and easy to understand is one way to ward off inconsistent knowledge.

This study also might be helpful in answering van Ruler’s second question about why senior practitioners and CEOs still hire practitioners who do not have public relations education. An interesting and unexpected finding of this study was that many senior-level practitioners commented that they went to school when public relations education was not offered. Because these practitioners did not enter the industry with an extensive public relations education and were unfamiliar with public relations scholarship, it is not surprising that they would not place as much emphasis on others having done so. Also, some senior-level practitioners felt that those right out of school use theory because they do not yet have experience to guide their

decision making. If such an assessment does indeed hold true, senior level practitioners are not guided by theory and might assume that knowing theory is not important because new practitioners will learn as they go, just like they did.

The role of scholarship. Scholars like Cheney and Christensen (2006) and Toth (2002) asserted that they do not think public relations academic research will be well received until it tackles practical problems and has “cash value” for the industry. On the other hand, scholars like Dozier and Lauzen (2000) believe that a forced attachment to the profession of public relations is harmful because it does not allow scholars the distance to independently assess and contemplate the larger, more philosophical fundamentals of the field. I am not convinced that the two perspectives are incompatible. Although this study largely confirmed that practitioners seem to prefer applied research that focuses on day-to-day tasks (Botan, 1993; J. E. Grunig, 1979; Hallahan, 1993), this issue is not as black and white as it may seem. In discussing the value of general academic research, several practitioners commented that research is how the world’s problems are solved. One practitioner, Dan, explicitly stated that he was indebted to scholars for being able to think about the problems his job does not give him the time to consider. What practitioners really emphasized was that they want to understand the importance of research and why it is relevant. This relevancy does not necessarily need to be the validation of best practices (although such research also has its place)—the relevancy of research could also be communicating why thinking about the social consequences of public relations is important. Because practitioners are so unaware of what public relations scholars are studying, letting practitioners know what scholars care about and why

they care about those issues seems to be a natural first step in establishing any sort of working relationship. Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) showed that learning about public relations on the job makes for a great deal of inconsistency within the industry, so if practitioners are to have any type of standardized knowledge of the field, they must share basic understandings of public relations.

As is evident from the results, practitioners do want to be involved in the research agenda of public relations scholars, which Dozier and Lauzen (2000) caution against. However, because the study of public relations is based on the practice, some overlap with practitioners is unavoidable. As the practitioners of this study noted, if public relations scholars are to practice good public relations with practitioners, they must hear what concerns practitioners have and treat those concerns with respect. Then, based on what they hear, scholars can make the most informed decisions about what research areas to pursue. Scholars do not necessarily need to feel obligated to comply with all of practitioners' requests because, as Dozier and Lauzen (2000) mentioned, sometimes practitioners are so far entrenched in the industry that they cannot see certain issues, and scholars might see an issue that practitioners do not. Some scholars might also have to prioritize practitioner requests and decide which are most pressing. Regardless of what research agenda decisions scholars make, the key seems to lie in explaining to practitioners what those choices are and what the implications are of those choices for the industry.

Why should we be concerned about wanting to keep practitioners informed about the activities of the academic community? According to Hornaman and Sriramesh (2003) and Pohl and Vandevetter (2001), without a consensus on what

public relations is and what it stands for, practitioners become confused about their roles and practice public relations in disparate ways. Furthermore, the excellence study suggested that the most effective practitioners are the ones who take an interest in theory and the scholarly body of knowledge (Dozier, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 2002). If the ultimate goal of the study of public relations is to improve and enhance the field, the academic community should want to see public relations practitioners be the best practitioners they can be. One would think that even critics of the field would like to see what they are critiquing improve over time. As one practitioner, Lisa, said:

If this research is to have value, then I would argue that you want as many practitioners as possible to absorb it, to work to embody it, the qualities that make it most effective—make them the most effective practitioners they can be.

If the public relations academic community wishes to see the above materialize and to see the integration of public relations scholarship into the practice, we owe it to ourselves to genuinely consider the insights practitioners offer.

Practical Implications

As was stated in the conclusion of the literature review, varied opinions exist concerning the disconnect between public relations scholars and practitioners. However, rather than spending time finding a compromise, many have continued to focus on their own ideas. At this juncture, I think it is important to discuss how the findings of this thesis could be implemented to lessen the disconnect between practitioners and scholars. Also, it is not my intention to put the entire onus of outreach on academics; however, practitioners do have a point in that they are the

source of our academic field, so I will discuss how their requests can be best addressed. Furthermore, if the academic community does not reach out to practitioners, practitioners will continue to practice anyway, so why wouldn't academics want to help them to be the most effective practitioners they can be? Perhaps once research has been conducted on the scholarly perspective of the disconnect, suggestions from both sides can be integrated.

Make Research Visible

The first barrier that must be removed is the inaccessibility of research. If we want practitioners to use our research, we must make it available to them. However, I also realize we cannot simply post journal articles and book chapters on websites, as copyright issues come into play. This ultimately means that scholars are going to have to devote some time and effort to reorganizing some of their work. Practitioners were most interested in electronic modes of communication, so a website or listserv might be the best location for some sort of database of research. Practitioners would like to read synopses of research, so perhaps a succinct summary of a scholar's research could be displayed, followed by a link to a fuller explanation of the research that is a modification of published materials. This way practitioners can pick and choose what they want to read.

However, having each public relations scholar create and maintain a website or listserv would quickly become unwieldy and disparate. The idea of partnering with pre-existing professional organizations, then, makes a great deal of sense. As several practitioners noted, they are overwhelmed with information, so they do not want to receive numerous emails from different scholars. Plus, forming any new sort of

organization might just dilute the effectiveness of those that already exist. Instead, professors could team up with pre-existing organizations like PRSA, IABC, IPR, etc. Doing so might enhance the credibility of scholars because it shows a vested interest in the professional world. Although I realize several academic researchers already do this, their collaborations might need to be more public. The organizations might consider publicizing these partnerships more heavily. This could be accomplished through their publications, their websites, their emails, and their mailings. Beyond the previous suggestion of having an electronic database of research (which organizations like IPR already have, so we need not reinvent the wheel), perhaps a monthly column could also be written by various academics and placed in organizations' publications to showcase important research. Similarly, some people might prefer to have more interpersonal interaction with scholars. Professional organizations could sponsor seminars and panels with scholars so that organization members have the opportunity to interact with scholars in a person-to-person format.

I do realize, however, that not all practitioners are affiliated with professional organizations. This does not mean that those practitioners should not have access to public relations scholarship. Because a lot of time could be invested in collaborating with professional organizations, scholars do not need to overextend themselves with additional outreach to individual practitioners. Instead, I think the situation simply requires that public relations scholars make themselves available to the public. This could easily be accomplished by making contact information for professors available on university websites. The idea is to create public relations scholars who are similar to cooperative agents where the public can contact them to ask questions or voice

concerns. Even if a scholar cannot help, he or she might be able to direct the practitioner to someone who can, thereby creating a positive association with the public relations academic community.

Make Research Understandable

The second biggest barrier that must be removed is the inaccessibility of academic writing. Some aspects of academic research are not likely to change any time soon: the length of journal articles, the organization of articles, particular terminology, etc. So, per the practitioners' requests, why not take published materials and revise them? The real challenge in doing so is to maintain the integrity of the research while making the writing easy to understand. The hallmark of a good communicator should be communicating difficult material into an easier to understand form, so let's be exemplars in doing so.

Scholars need to remember that practitioners are not unintelligent—many are just not used to the academic writing style. When revising previously conducted research, scholars should keep in mind the need to write clearly and concisely. What is trying to be said and how can it be said in the least number of words? Including an example or two of how the concept applies to the public relations industry would also be helpful so that practitioners can see academic research does have value for the industry. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, researchers need to succinctly explain from the very outset of a piece of writing what the value of their research is. Answer the question, “Why should I care about this?” I think academics are already attempting to do so via abstracts, but when writing for practitioners, be as explicit as

possible. Tell them why academic research is vital to their careers and how it can help them.

Build Relationships

One way practitioners will become more invested in scholarship is if their concerns and needs are addressed. As one practitioner noted, asking practitioners what problems they have that need to be solved would increase the credibility of public relations scholars with practitioners. And, just as is the case in practicing effective public relations, mere lip service will not suffice. Public relations scholars need to take practitioner concerns seriously. As was mentioned in the theoretical implications section, scholars will not be able to research all areas practitioners might like to see examined, but scholars can tell practitioners why they have chosen not to research a particular area. The important element, though, is to regularly check in with practitioners and stay abreast of what is happening in the field. Doing so will establish a relationship that shows public relations scholars are not isolated in their ivory towers.

Another way to reach a similar end is to get practitioners involved with research. The PRSA Public Relations Education Commission (1999) suggested that practitioners and scholars team up on projects that are visible to the public, using topics of long-term significance to the industry. What better way to have practitioners understand the research process than to have them be active in it. Teaming up on projects is also mutually beneficial. Public relations scholars might be able to gain access to practitioners they would not be able to otherwise and their credibility in understanding the “real world” might be increased just by the presence of

practitioners on the research team. Practitioners, on the other hand, get the opportunity to help solve major problems of the field and offer insight into the purpose, design, and implementation of a project.

Implementation

The suggestions I have proposed are extensive, and some academic concerns must be taken into account. Like Toth (2006) noted, scholars approach theory the way they do for particular reasons. Often public relations research has to be positioned within the larger fields of communication and management. Similarly, Moncur (2006) noted that scholars are not promoted within the academic community if they do not extend theory and publish frequently. So how will any scholars have the time to reach out to practitioners if they must first worry about the progression of their academic careers? At this point in time, it seems to me that the more seasoned, tenured scholars will have to take the lead in lessening the disconnect. Of course tenured scholars also have their fair share of publishing and researching to do, but they are in a better, more secure position to broaden their interests. Seasoned scholars can allow more time to focus on reaching out to practitioners than can a young scholar who must worry about job security. Then, perhaps after a period of outreach by tenured public relations scholars, the relationships between scholars and practitioners will be more valued and esteemed, thereby allowing all public relations scholars to participate.

Limitations

This study contained some inherent limitations, primarily relating to the participants. First, due to time constraints, I was only able to interview public relations practitioners. To paint a fuller picture, talking to public relations scholars as

well would have been ideal. Doing so would have been helpful in understanding both sides of the disconnect as opposed to only one side. Talking with scholars would have given the research a more complete representation of the problem in its entirety.

Another limitation regarding participants was the limited types of practitioners interviewed. Although I was able to interview practitioners that had different levels of experience, different educations, and different industry affiliations, only practitioners from corporations, agencies, and personal consultant businesses were represented. To more fully understand how practitioners make meaning of public relations scholarship, interviewing practitioners from non-profit and government organizations would have been helpful.

The last issue surrounding participants is that I initially recruited participants from the PRSA membership directory. Although PRSA members only accounted for seven of the interviews, these participants may have been biased toward academic research in a different way than participants who are not members of PRSA. Members of professional organizations may be more likely than other practitioners to try to keep abreast of current topics in the field and seek out supplemental public relations resources, although the findings revealed the PRSA members were still unaware of public relations scholarship. Nevertheless, PRSA members may have had characteristics that made them unique from other practitioners.

Finally, the way in which the interview protocol changed over time may have also biased the results. During the first few interviews I conducted, I asked first about practitioners' understanding of public relations scholarship before probing about their understanding of general academic research when it became apparent they were

confused. When I realized that participants were having a difficult time making sense of the study of public relations, I then revised the protocol to first ask more generalized questions about academic research and then narrow it down to public relations academic research. Although I did my best to counter this variation by conducting member checks and contacting participants with follow up interview questions, the ordering of questions may have influenced how participants understood and responded to the rest of the interview questions.

Future Research

Participants

The research area that most obviously needs to be pursued is conducting the same research with another group of participants—public relations scholars—to understand how they perceive the disconnect between themselves and practitioners. This study was only able to examine one side of the equation and as such, the perspective of scholars has yet to be explored. Interviews with public relations scholars could examine what their perceptions are of the usefulness of academic research in the practice of public relations and also how scholars perceive their relationships with practitioners.

Because this study was conducted qualitatively, the results may not be replicable in the future. However, empirical testing could evaluate the extent to which some of the themes found in this research are generalizeable. Public relations practitioners could be surveyed countrywide, or even worldwide, to explore if all practitioners face similar difficulties with public relations academic research and its

usefulness. The results might give more support for changes that need to take place in the presentation and application of public relations scholarship.

Finally, as mentioned in the limitations, no practitioners from non-profit or government organizations were interviewed. Conducting interviews with these types of practitioners would give voice to more practitioners' experiences and understanding of academic research, therefore including more perspectives.

Further Understanding of Scholarship and Its Usefulness

Several interesting findings emerged during this study that further research might elucidate. First, several older practitioners commented that they think academic research is only useful for practitioners who are recent college graduates.

Interviewing both practitioners who are in their first year of professional work and practitioners who have been in the industry for several years would shed more light on whether experience is a factor in determining the usefulness of public relations scholarship.

Relatedly, a few senior-level practitioners mentioned that they never received formal public relations education because it was not offered when they attended college. They thought this lack of education might have been why they were unaware of public relations scholarship. I offered this observation as a possible answer to van Ruler's (2005) question about why senior-level practitioners and CEOs do not place importance on hiring practitioners who incorporate academic research into their work. Because a public relations undergraduate degree is currently very popular, determining what significance current senior-level practitioners place on the value of public relations scholarship and what significance future senior-level practitioners

will place on the value of public relations scholarship in 25 years could make for an interesting comparison to see if formal public relations education makes a difference in the use of academic research.

Another extension of this study could be to gain a more nuanced perspective on how level of education affects the perception of public relations scholarship. The only practitioners in this study who were aware of public relations scholarship held Master's degrees. Initially surveys could be administered to see if this finding holds true among a wider sample of practitioners. Then, interviews could be conducted to see how the level of knowledge (or lack of knowledge) affects how practitioners practice public relations. Implications of such research could be important for helping public relations educators reevaluate what needs to be included in undergraduate and graduate curricula and for reiterating the importance of continuing education for public relations practitioners.

Finally, for scholars to value the suggestions practitioners gave on how to make public relations scholarship more useful, conducting follow up research on how practitioners receive scholarship after their desired changes are implemented would be useful. Doing so would ensure (a) that practitioners concerns have been adequately understood and addressed and (b) that the implemented changes do actually make public relations scholarship more useful. If relationships are to be built between scholars and practitioners, we must gauge that the relationship is on the right track.

Implications of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the disconnect between public relations scholars and practitioners, specifically from the practitioner point-of-

view. I conducted this study qualitatively by interviewing 20 public relations practitioners to understand how they make meaning of public relations scholarship and its usefulness. Although previous research has suggested practitioners do not use scholarly work, the findings of this study contribute to the field of public relations by revealing why research is not used. First of all, practitioners are not aware of the research that takes place in the academic community and as such, they are not using it. Furthermore, practitioners view academic research as having little utility because of the manner in which it is presented. Finally, practitioners do not find academic research inherently useless; rather they suggested that it could be made more user-friendly, primarily through outreach by scholars.

This study also suggested that public relations scholars should be concerned with how practitioners perceive academic research because scholars should want practitioners to be more effective. Both scholars and practitioners alike should have a vested interest in elevating the status of the field of public relations and those that work in it, so scholars should consider implementing suggestions that will help scholarship become more valuable in the practice of public relations. It is especially important at this point that scholars take the first step in initiating communication with practitioners because practitioners expressed little interest in taking on the initiator role. Although taking this step requires more effort on the part of scholars, building relationships with practitioners to create mutually beneficial partnerships will hopefully create a shared appreciation of academic research that practitioners will reciprocate. Then practitioners can also become more actively involved with outreach as well.

Appendix

Interview protocol

Rapport:

The purpose of this interview is to gather information from you regarding your perspectives on the relationship between public relations scholarship and the practice of public relations. I am going to ask you a series of questions to gather this information. It is important for you to be honest and as accurate as possible in answering the questions. Keep in mind there are no right or wrong answers.

With your permission, I would like to audio tape this interview. (Present the participant with the IRB FORM—the participant should fill out and sign the consent form before beginning the interview.)

Protocol:

1. What is a typical day at work like for you?

Probe: What is your position?

Probe: What responsibilities does your position include?

2. What does your educational background consist of?

Probe: Did you take any public relations coursework?

Follow up: If so, what kind of public relations courses did you take?

Follow up: How do you think taking this coursework has influenced the way you practice public relations?

3. How do you define public relations?
4. What types of issues in public relations are important to you right now?

Probe: Why are these issues important to you?

5. To what extent do you try to keep updated on what is happening in the field?

Probe: Why?

Probe: How do you do so? Do you use any specific sources? Which sources?

Follow up: Why do you choose those sources?

Transition: Just so we are on the same page, I now want to ask a few questions about your understanding of the academic community.

6. What do you think of when you think of public relations and universities?

Probe: Anything else?

Probe: What makes you think of it in this way?

7. What does academic research mean to you?

Probe: What makes you think of academic research in that way?

8. What does the academic research of public relations mean to you?

Probe: What makes you think of it in that way?

9. To what extent are you aware of what is going on in the academic community of public relations?

Probe: If no, why do you think you are unaware of what happens in the academic community of public relations?

Probe: If yes, how are you made aware of these happenings?

10. What types of issues do you think are important right now to academic scholars who research public relations?

Probe: Why do you think these issues are important to scholars who study public relations?

11. To what extent do you think the public relations industry values academic research?

Probe: Why do you think that is the case?

Probe: What instances or experiences have demonstrated this to you?

12. To what extent do you value public relations academic research?

Probe: What specific reasons or instances make you feel this way?

Probe: How do you use academic research in your work?

Follow up: What experiences do you have that illustrate this?

Follow up: Why did you decide to use academic research?

Please take a few minutes to read this article on a public relations theory.

13. How relevant do you find this theory to the practice of public relations?

Probe: Why do you feel this way?

14. What would make this article more relevant to the practice of public relations?

Probe: Why?

15. How do you think academic public relations research could be more useful to you?

Probe: Why would this make scholarship more useful for you?

Closing:

That's all the formal questions I have for our interview, but can you think of any questions I should have asked and did not? Is there anything you would like to add at this point? Is there anything we have not covered that is important for me to know?

Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed. May I contact you just in case I need to clarify something from the interview or ask a follow-up question? Also, would you be interested in receiving a copy of this study when it is completed? Lastly, could you suggest one or two other public relations colleagues that I could contact for an interview?

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