Dialogue and two-way symmetrical communication in Public Relations theory and practice

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Abstract

Dialogue is often equated to "two-way symmetrical communication", and over the years the concept has been subsumed into the systems theory. Textbook authors make cursory references to "dialogue" and "conversation" while focusing mainly on achieving "symmetry" in the organisation-public relationship, suggesting that symmetry is the ideal state of public relations and that dialogue contributes to achieving this state. As a result they inadvertently perpetuate the myth that dialogue is not only the preferred mode of public relations practice but that it also leads to "agreement". Ironically, none—if any—provide practical guidelines as to how dialogue can be achieved. Scholars of dialogue often point out that dialogue requires not only a willingness to participate but also the suspension of control and focus on predetermined outcomes. In the practice of public relations, this appears to be an unrealistic goal to strive towards. As part of an ongoing study into dialogue in public relations theory and practice, this paper explores concepts and expectations in the dialogic process, highlighting the lack of clear definitions and principles communicated in popular Public Relations textbooks. It also reports on an exploratory survey among public relations practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region to identify prevailing views of the use of dialogue and guide further qualitative investigation.

Keywords

Dialogue, two-way symmetric communication, public relations

Introduction

The term "dialogue" is pervasive in public relations books but few—if any—define it or suggest practical steps that practitioners or potential practitioners can take to engage in it. In fact, there appears to be an assumption that dialogue, which is often alluded to as symmetrical engagement between two participants, is the ideal form of communication in Public Relations practice. There are also numerous mentions of dialogue in the rhetoric of Public Relations textbooks which presuppose the essential place of dialogue in Public Relations. However, there appears to be no singular definition of dialogue despite the apparent assumption that there is a shared understanding of its meaning.

The research focus of this paper is to investigate whether:

1. There is a clear understanding of dialogue and its use in Public Relations practice.
2. Dialogue or some other form of communication is considered to be "ideal" in practice. Is there an "ideal" method?
3. There are clear and identifiable merits of dialogue as espoused in theory e.g. does dialogue enhance creditability? How and why or why not? Is dialogue ethical? Does dialogue always lead to balance and symmetry in participants' understanding?
4. There are any disadvantages or pitfalls to dialogue.

This paper concludes by outlining some agreed notions of dialogue in practice and consequently affirms and challenges the theory of dialogue in Public Relations to incorporate industry input.

The methodology of this paper is two-prong involving firstly, a description of dialogue in the Public Relations literature and secondly, an analysis of an exploratory survey on practitioners' views and use of dialogue. The first is to establish some general definitions of dialogue and possible notions governing its understanding by practitioners. The second is to assess, first-hand, the understanding and application of dialogue in Public Relations practice.

For the purpose of investigation, surveys were sent to practitioners from various industries and roles (consultancy, in-house) in Singapore and New Zealand. There is no specific reason for the regions accept that there was convenient access and an expectation that the surveys may yield some differing responses to reflect regional dialogic practices of two culturally diverse regions. Factors such as respondents' roles, industries and years of experience were deemed to have some influence on the nature of responses. However, these were not analysed to invalidate the negative or positive responses towards dialogue. This research reports on and presents practitioners' own perceptions and experience of dialogue which should be heard and accounted for in any theory of dialogue in Public Relations.

At its simplest, "dialogue" is a talk between people. This simple definition is generic and can easily be confused with any conversation and exchanges between two people. While different theories and understandings of dialogue abound, there exist in the literature, a key and largely philosophical understanding of dialogue, in particular Martin Buber's notion of an I-you relationship rather than an I-it relationship. This form of dialogue is perceived as a meeting between people where control and focus on a pre-determined outcome are momentarily set aside in favour of a rare but meaningful encounter between human beings. Dialogue in this context is part and parcel of relationship building, and focuses on people rather on achieving equilibrium. This idea is often championed as "the ideal". Whether or not it is pragmatic and feasible for organisational representatives, and therefore public relations practitioners, remains to be seen.

In this sense, dialogue requires the suspension of control, a willingness to engage in dialogue, a commitment to the process, and engaging with participants as human beings and not just as representatives of interest groups. It also requires focus on listening and speaking, constructing

situations (environments) that allow, encourage and invite participants to speak from the heart rather than just uttering catchphrases (Pearce in Heath et al., 2006).

This understanding forms the grounding for this paper's exploration of dialogue in public relations practice. In reviewing the literature, it was notable that few authors—if any—defined dialogue or provided practical guidelines as to how conditions for dialogue could be created through communication planning. It was evident that the majority of textbook authors preferred to discuss the notions of two-way communication over the notion of dialogue (see e.g. Broom, 2009; Guth & Marsh, 2006; Lattimore, Baskin & Aranoff, 2004). While dialogue is touted as the most ethical form of communication, it appears that there is an underlying assumption that not only does "dialogue" have a universal meaning but that it is self-explanatory. The result is a concept that remains vague, and a lack of shared understanding of dialogue and principles for establishing dialogue is evident. In this sense, this paper would like to support Kent and Taylor's (2002) statement that "given the increasing ubiquity of dialogue as a concept in public relations, it is important to have some shared understanding of what the term means" (p. 21).

Dialogue, persuasion and symmetry in the literature

While there appears to be no shared understanding of dialogue in Public Relations theory, dialogue is nevertheless held up as the ideal towards which practitioners should strive, and the concept has become ingrained in public relations theory and thinking. Regrettably, in most cases it has been uncritically equated to two-way communication and two-way symmetrical communication (in particular Grunig and Hunt's four models). Kent and Taylor (2002) capture this trend when they state that "as public relations theory and research move toward a two-way relational communication model, many scholars and practitioners are increasingly using the terms 'dialogic' and 'dialogue' to describe ethical and practical approaches to public relations" (p. 21). They add that "philosophers and rhetoricians have long considered dialogue as one of the most ethical forms of communication and as one of the central means of separating truth from falsehood" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 22).

Dialogue is the basis for and a result of relationship building, which according to various authors is the key function of public relations (see e.g. Broom, 2009; McAllister-Spooner & Kent, 2009; Mersham, Theunissen & Peart, 2009; Sterne, 2008). As McAllister-Spooner and Kent (2009) suggest, "one of the most influential perspectives that has emerged is relationship management" (p. 223). Given this espoused trend, it would appear sensible that textbooks should have more in-depth discussions about dialogue, its principles and practical applications in public relations practice. Yet the voices calling for dialogue and dialogical theory remain sparse. Mersham et al. (2009) state that the internet is forcing practitioners to return to dialogue and conversation, and it is therefore not surprising to find that dialogue is chiefly mentioned in the context of the social media. Yet even then the focus remains on two-way communication rather than dialogue *per se*:

> Two-way communication principles, unlike one-way principles, are best for maximising the capabilities of e-mail and the internet, including Listservs, chatrooms, electronic

> bulletin boards, and discussion groups. By promoting dialogue and conversations rather than one-directional information flows – these new technologies help organisations create and continuously maintain ties to key publics. (Lattimore et al. 2004, p. 385)

In their 1998-article exploring the World Wide Web's capacity for dialogue, Kent and Taylor concluded that the "Web has great potential as a dialogic communication medium" (p. 331). This conclusion was drawn before the more recent evolution of social media, which arguably holds even greater opportunities for communication. Yet more than ten years after Kent and Taylor's statement, Grunig (2009) chastised practitioners for using the internet and social media as before: to create publicity (i.e. one-way communication). He cited the need for (and illusion of) control as a key factor. Thus, little progress appears to have been made in the realm of achieving the ethical ideal of engaging in dialogue with all stakeholders. The question arises whether this touted inability to use the internet to its full potential is the result of a lack of clarity surrounding the principles and practice of dialogue in public relations or an uncritical focus on achieving symmetry.

The two-way symmetrical model "focuses on two-way communication as a means of conflict resolution and for the promotion of mutual understanding between an organisation and its important publics" (Guth & Marsh, 2006, p. 9). In Tymson and Lazar (2006) two-way communication (there is no mention of dialogue in its index) is equated to "true communication":

> However, as shown in Grunig's *Four Models of Public Relations*…best practice public relations is evolving to Two-Way Asymmetric and, ultimately, Two-Way Symmetric interaction and relationship with target audiences or stakeholders. In a two-way model (true communication) emphasis shifts from simply disseminating information to persuading and creating understanding, which involve changing attitudes, awareness and/or behaviour. (Tymson & Lazar, 2006, p. 123)

Given the fact that when done purposefully, changing attitudes, behaviours and/or awareness is mostly the result of some form of persuasion—not dialogue—it can be deduced from the above statement that persuasion is not only an improvement on dissemination of information but that it is a precursor to relationship building.

One could argue that equating dialogue to two-way symmetrical communication has contributed to the current lack of discussion surrounding dialogue and dialogic principles. While it was a noteworthy attempt to move away from public relations as being solely persuasive in nature—according to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) own account—doing so has not been without its consequences.

A key result was the emphasis on harmony and balance between an organisation and its publics as being the most desirable outcome. Holtzhausen (2000) points out that the idea of symmetry has come to mean "consensus", leading practitioners to see agreement in the communication process as the ultimate goal. It is often forgotten that consensus does not automatically imply that dialogue has taken place. In fact, consensus is frequently the result of persuasion, or what Grunig and Hunt (1984) labelled "asymmetrical communication", a form of communication and public relations practice that is generally perceived as less desirable—perhaps because of the ethical issues that might arise (see

Fawkes, 2006). In reality, genuine (authentic) discussions can lead to disharmony and disagreement. Citing Peters (1999), Stoker and Tusinski (2006) point out that:

> [A]lthough many communication theorists would like to believe that true communication means reaching agreement or achieving an understanding, the reality is that communication is both a 'bridge and chasm', bringing people closer to agreement and exposing the disagreement lying in between. (p. 2)

The question then arises whether it is in the best interest of an organisation to expose such disagreement. Is dialogue truly the ideal towards which a public relations practitioner should strive?

While dialogue is held up as the ideal, it should be stressed that it is in the nature of human relationships to experience conflict and criticisms—constructive or negative—and it is not incidental in business communication models that conflict management strategies exist. Managing conflict is surely a persuasive approach and clearly asymmetrical where the process involves control by participants and its objective is to achieve an expected outcome: reducing conflict. Yet, dialogue with its tenuous connection to two-way symmetrical communication is perceived to favour both participants equally, and is incorrectly perceived as a cure-all. Lattimore et al. (2004), for example, optimistically state that:

> Using two-way communication, practitioners now hope that their communication efforts will result in knowledge gain, understanding, and other high-order cognitive effects that are more likely to underpin longer-lasting relationships. Because two-way communication principles involve each group or side understanding the other's point of view, the process is more likely to lead to negotiation, compromise, and a host of win-win outcomes for all. (Lattimore et al., 2004, p. 385)

Arguably, focusing on two-way symmetrical communication (systems theory) instead of dialogue (dialogic theory) has allowed various authors to emphasise balance, unintentionally reinforcing the myth that dialogue (and not persuasion) is *the* solution to an organisation's woes and that it will lead to harmony in the relationship.

It is ironic, then, that although the values of relationship-building and dialogue are espoused by various authors, public relations theory and practice does not appear to move any closer to the ideal of achieving harmony and balance through dialogue. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that persuasion is part and parcel of public relations practice. In fact, authors such as Broom (2009) and Lattimore et al. (2004) unequivocally underline that public relations is about being persuasive: "Much of the communicating that public relations do is both persuasive and purposive" (Lattimore et al., 2004, p. 7).

Achieving dialogue in public relations

Interestingly, Heath (in Heath et al., 2006) proposes that both the public relations industry and activists struggle to engage constructively in dialogue because they are focused on an outcome that favours them and their interests, and they therefore attempt to control the process rather than allowing it to evolve naturally. He argues that "one of the impediments to dialogue is the tendency for people to believe that they can guide, manipulate, and shape the process to achieve the outcome they prefer from the start" (Heath in Heath et al., 2006, p. 351). Yet dialogue is unique in that it does not have a pre-determined outcome nor should it be controlled although participants need to know they are engaging in dialogue and be willing to participate (Heath in Heath et al., 2006). Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest that the organisation must be willing to make "dialogic commitments to publics" (p. 24), implying that while the dialogue cannot make organisations behave ethically or respond to the publics, they must be prepared, willing and available to do so.

According to Pearson (1989) ethical public relations requires maintaining ongoing relationships between the organisation and its publics. He argues that this is needed for the survival of the organisation. In order to practice ethical public relations, he suggests that no topic should be excluded from discussions unless both the organisation and its publics agree not to discuss a particular topic, and that all types of communication should be considered as appropriate unless the participants have agreed otherwise. He also suggests that there should be opportunities during the dialogic encounter to question the appropriateness of the structure or system to engage in dialogue. No structure or situation is perfect but in order to reach the ideal, one must allow questions about its appropriateness to be raised (Pearson, 1989).

Kent and Taylor (2002) add that it needs to be acknowledged that organisations and their publics are "inextricably tied together" (p. 25). Each participant has a certain position and should advocate this position while recognising that the other's point of view is as valid as one's own. This is not unlike Heath's (in Heath et al., 2006) assertion that advocacy is part and parcel of dialogue. But, as Kent and Taylor (2002) point out, it is not about winning or losing (or achieving a particular outcome) but rather, about making positions clear and collaborating. Stückelberger (2009) states that in public relations the "theories and concepts are often close to advocacy and campaigning in the sense that Public Relations looks at advocating the represented interests in an effective way" (p. 331). However, since advocacy is not free of persuasion, and symmetry is not free of asymmetry, it can be argued that dialogue in public relations is not as emancipating for the organisation as many authors espouse.

Dialogue must occur in a climate of support and trust because encounters involve risks. These include a change in the relationship or the risk that information may be misused by unscrupulous participants (organisations and publics alike). Dialogue is, after all, borne out of the relationship between the participants. While grounded in the present and constructing the future relationship, this relationship also has a history. Past interactions are not forgotten (see Kent & Taylor, 2002), and trust, credibility, commitment, forthrightness (authenticity) and respecting the diversity of opinions are all part and parcel of the dialogic process.

While it is clear that there is not necessarily agreement as to what dialogue is, Pearce (in Heath et al., 2006) suggests that all dialogue has certain common features: the inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible, engagement with the participants as human beings and not just as representatives of interest groups, focus on listening and speaking, constructing situations (environments) that allow, encourage and invite participants to speak from the heart rather than just uttering catchphrases, and commitment to the process rather than a preconceived outcome. Heath (in Heath et al., 2006) agrees, suggesting that a willingness to suspend the outcome and focusing on the process are starting points for effective dialogue.

Views of practitioners on dialogue, persuasion and two-way communication

In the absence of clear definitions of dialogue in Public Relations theory, it was deemed beneficial to investigate perceptions of dialogue among public relations practitioners in an exploratory study conducted among public relations practitioners in New Zealand and Singapore. It was assumed that the ill-defined description of dialogue in Public Relations textbooks would spill over into practice, and that while practitioners would strive to engage in dialogue, they would be hampered by needs of maintaining control, achieving a pre-determined outcome and institutional demands and/or by a lack of guidelines to establish dialogic moments.

Using the principles identified by authors such as Pearson (1989), Heath (in Heath et al., 2006) and Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) a survey questionnaire was constructed, consisting of fifteen statements regarding dialogue and two-way communication. Respondents were asked to rate these statements on a 5-point Likert scale to reflect their own views and those of their employers/clients. The means for these statements were calculated to show levels of self-reported agreement or disagreement. The respondents were also asked to provide baseline biographical data, such as years of experience, form of employment (in-house vs. consultant) and area of work (e.g. media relations, community relations). Variables such as age, gender and culture were not accounted for.

Approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEC) was obtained, and as representatives of the public relations industry in New Zealand, the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) was approached to participate in the survey. PRINZ conceded to place a link to the survey on their members-only site and include a link in their monthly e-update. Regrettably, this link generated very few responses (in total only 10 responses over a period of three months). Further to this, the survey was emailed to key people in the profession with the request to forward the link to colleagues and acquaintances in the industry (i.e. snowball convenience sampling). While using a snowball convenience sampling method affects the ability to generalise the findings, it allows for quick, inexpensive and convenient data collection that can be used for further qualitative research (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001). A similar approach was followed with Singaporean public relations practitioners, emailing the survey to a network of professionals. In total 78 responses were received and recorded. More responses are needed across both regions before significant points of varied practices can point to cultural contexts. Still, while statistically not necessarily significant, the results

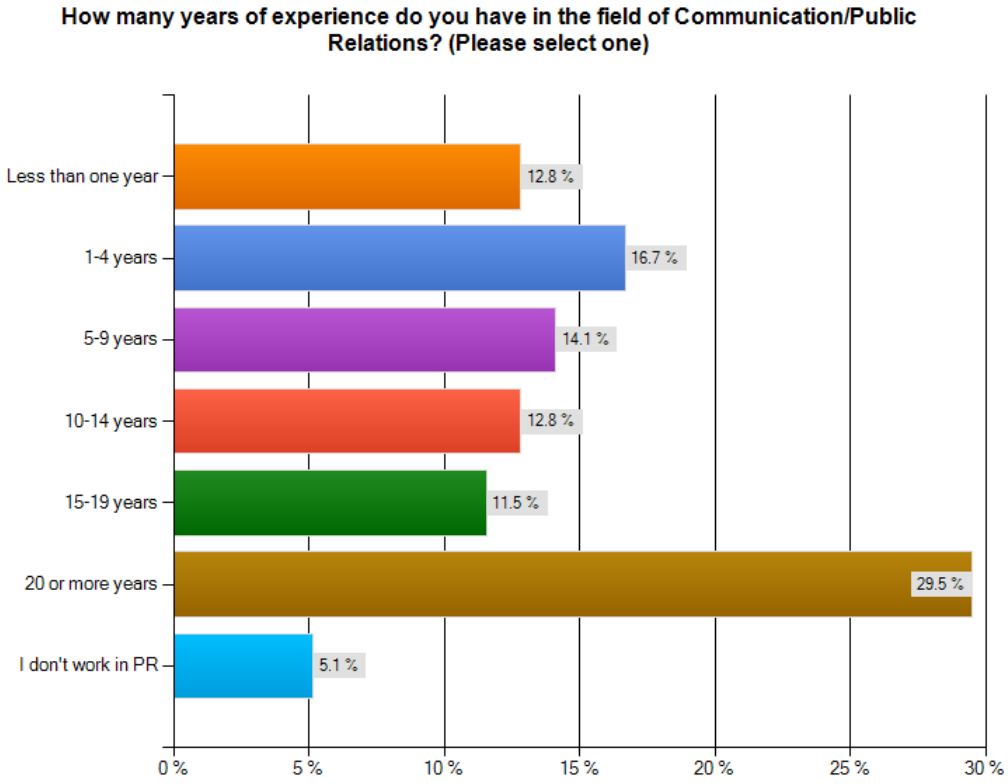
provided valuable insight, identifying potential trends to be explored through further qualitative research.

Biographical information

Forms of employment and years of experience

The majority of respondents were employed in-house (56.9%) while 43.1% listed themselves as being consultants. In terms of experience, the majority of respondents had 20 years or more experience in communication or public relations (see Graph 1) while the second largest group had 1-4 years of experience (16.7%; see Graph 1). A small percentage (5.1%) indicated that they "did not work in PR". These responses were not dismissed as many practitioners fulfil communication functions without necessarily perceiving themselves as working in "PR" (see Sterne, 2008).

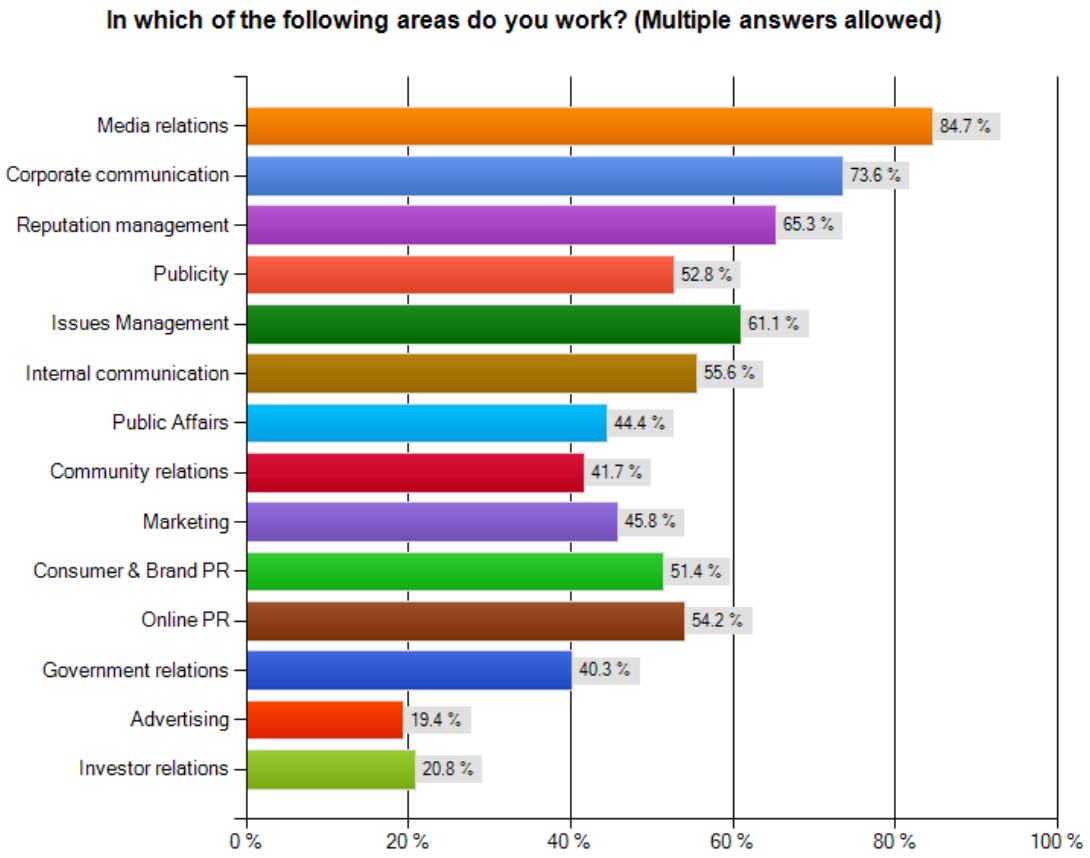
Graph 1: Years of experience



Area of work

Most of the respondents were responsible for media relations (84.7%) with corporate communication as their second most important responsibility (73.6%). This was followed by reputation management (65.3%), issues management (61.1%), internal communication (55.6%), online PR (54.2%) and publicity (52.8%; see graph 2). These findings were similar to the findings reported in the PRINZ Trends Survey (2009), which showed the majority of practitioners working in media relations, corporate communication and reputation management and very few working in investor relations, advertising or government relations. However, unlike the PRINZ survey, respondents in this particular survey were allowed to indicate multiple areas of work because in practice many practitioners fulfill several roles.

Graph 2: Areas of work



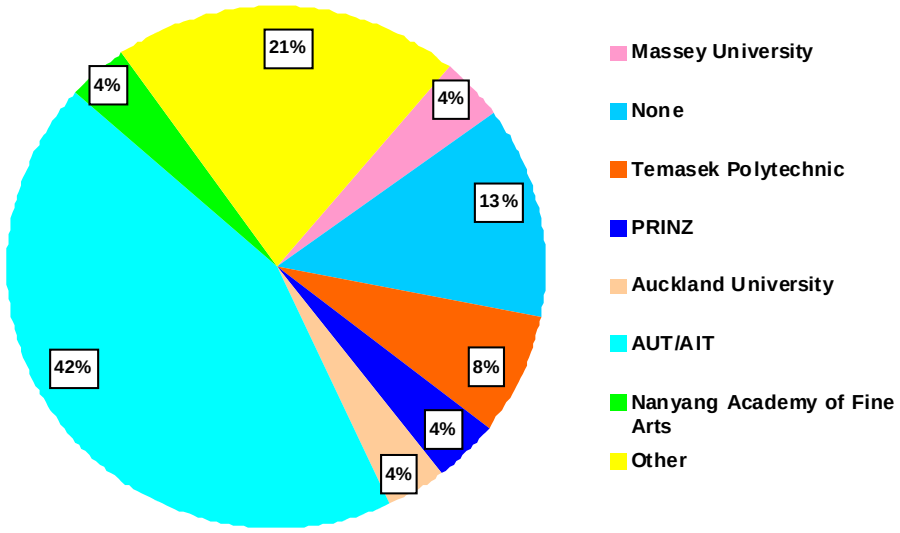
It was postulated that practitioners' institution of learning would impact on their perceptions of the role of the public relations practitioner, and therefore one of the questions asked at which institutions the respondent had achieved their communication/public relations qualification and in

which country. Although nineteen respondents skipped the question, the remaining responses provided useful insight.

The majority of respondents achieved their communication qualification at AUT University (or Auckland Institute of Technology as it was once known). A further 8% achieved their qualification at Temasek Polytechnic in Singapore, and the rest of the respondents were divided between Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Massey University, PRINZ and Auckland University (although one respondent indicated that he/she did not achieve a communication qualification from this university but a law qualification instead). The remaining 13% all had qualifications from various institutions across the world, ranging from Waikato University to Boston University in the US. Most interesting was the respondent who indicated that they had their communication training through a FaceBook workshop. A surprising 13% indicated that they did not have a public relations qualification at all.

Graph 3: Summary of institutions where qualifications were obtained

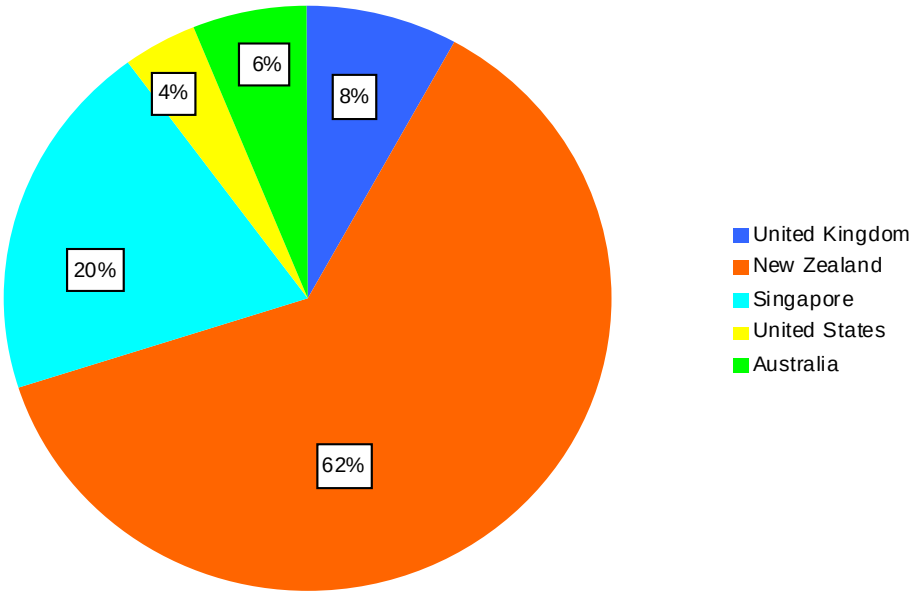
Country where qualification was obtained



Institutions were further categorised into countries of origin to determine the influence of various countries and institutions on the practice of public relations in New Zealand and Singapore. While it is to be expected that a country's cultural and social values would have considerable influence on its professional practice, it was noteworthy (although not surprising) that other countries that had indirect influence on the practice of public relations in New Zealand and Singapore included the UK, Australia and the United States. While 62% of the respondents achieved their qualification in New Zealand, another 20% received theirs in Singapore, and a further 8% obtained their communication qualification in the UK, 6% in Australia and 4% in the US. Whether or not these numbers have an influence on the practice of public relations remains debatable, however, as the research was unable to pinpoint definite quantitative correlations. Regardless, it remains undisputable that cross-

pollination of ideas and influences are likely to take place in the industry especially if individuals have achieved a high level of influence in the local industry.

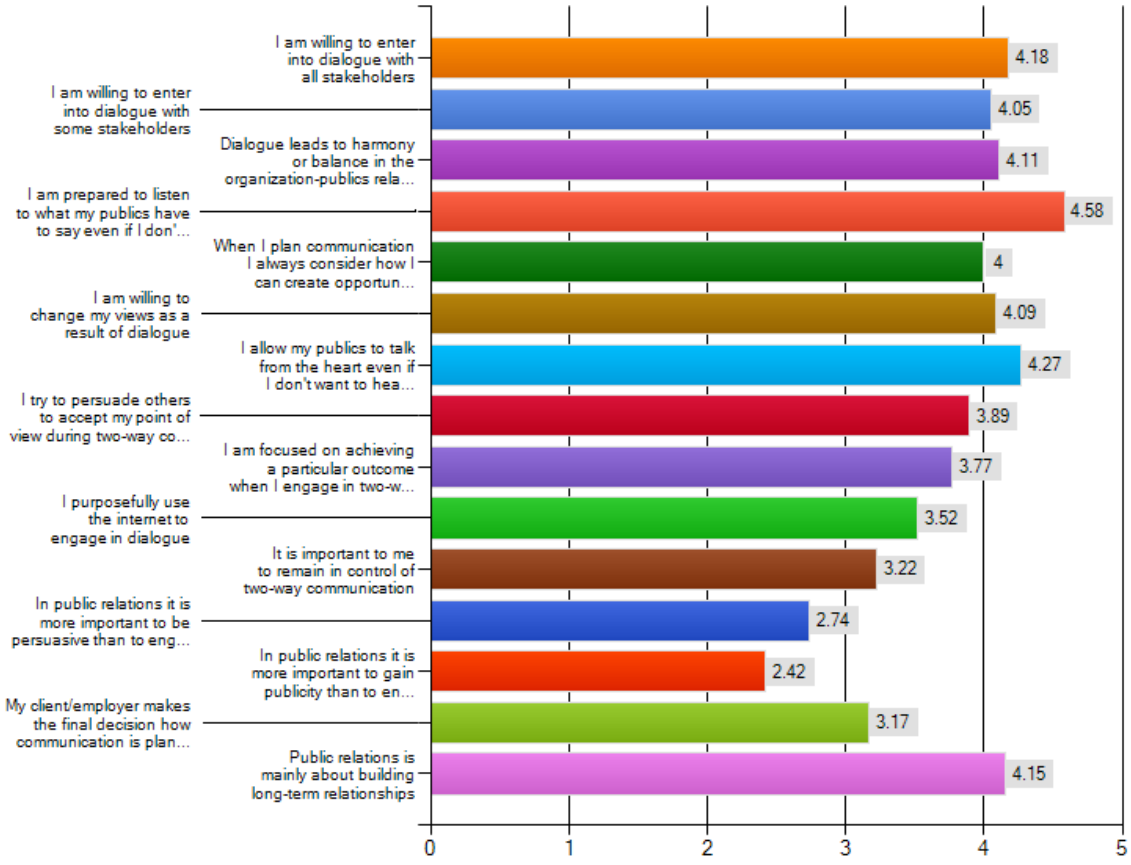
Graph 4: Country where qualification was obtained



Views of dialogue in public relations/communication

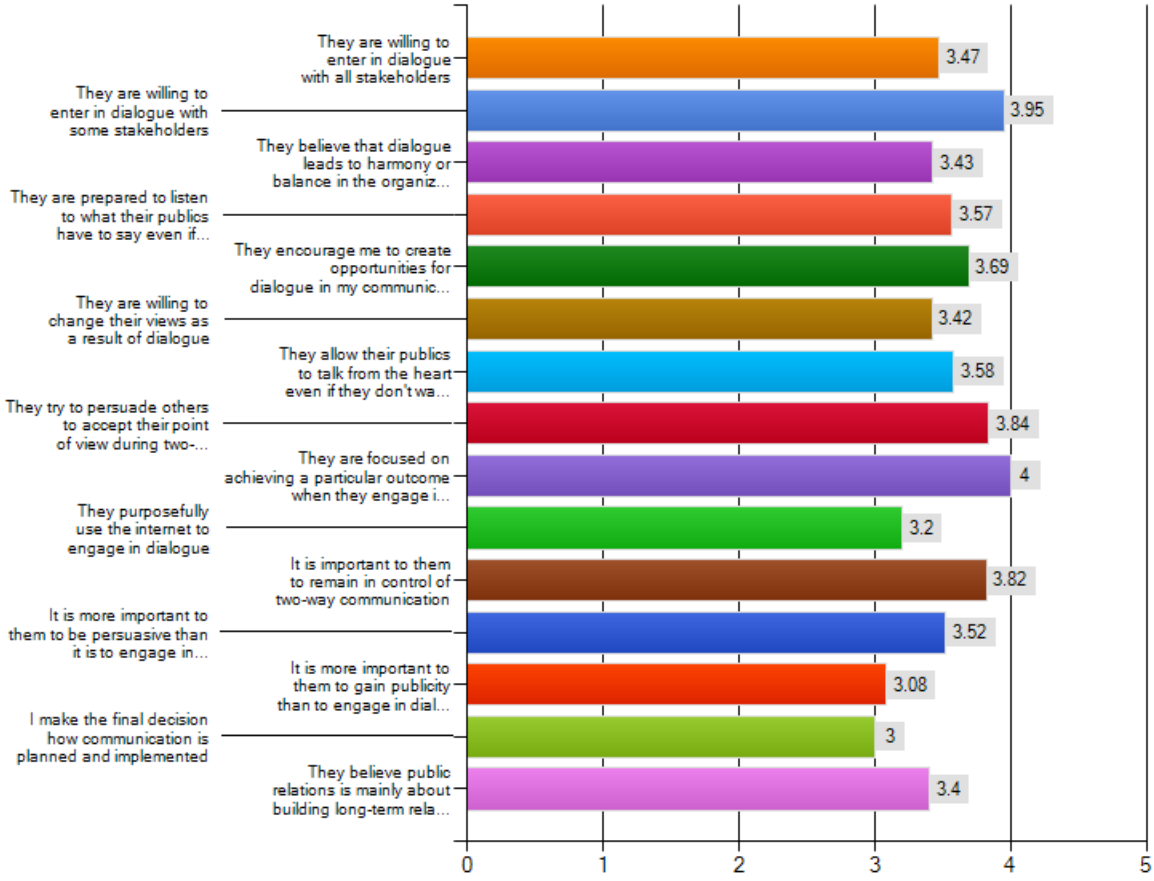
The main purpose of this exploratory survey was to establish public relations practitioners' views on dialogue, and thus they were asked to rate fifteen statements relating to dialogue and two-way communication on a Likert-scale of 1 to 5 (1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement). Statements focused on their willingness to engage in dialogue with all or some stakeholders and preparedness to listen to stakeholders' views even if they didn't want to hear it, whether practitioners intentionally created opportunities for dialogue in their communication plans, and whether they tried to persuade others of their point of view during two-way communication. They were also asked to indicate if they focused on achieving a particular outcome when engaging in two-way communication and if it was important to them to remain in control of the communication process. In some statements the term "dialogue" was purposely replaced with "two-way communication" in order to determine whether they engaged in asymmetrical or symmetrical communication (i.e. persuasion or dialogue). Questions as to the relative importance of persuasion to dialogue and publicity to dialogue were also asked. Further to this, they were asked whether they perceived public relations to be mainly about building long-term relationships. Graph 5 provides an overview of the means for respondents' self-reported views.

Graph 5: Views of respondents



In order to be able to identify discrepancies between practitioner's views and that of their employers/clients, respondents were asked to rate their employers'/clients' views of the same. Graph 6 provides an overview of the means for respondents' perceptions of employers'/clients' views, and graphs 8 and 9 provide visual comparisons of the calculated means of respondents' self-reported statements and the perceptions they hold of their clients'/employers' views of the same.

Graph 6: Perceived views of employers/clients

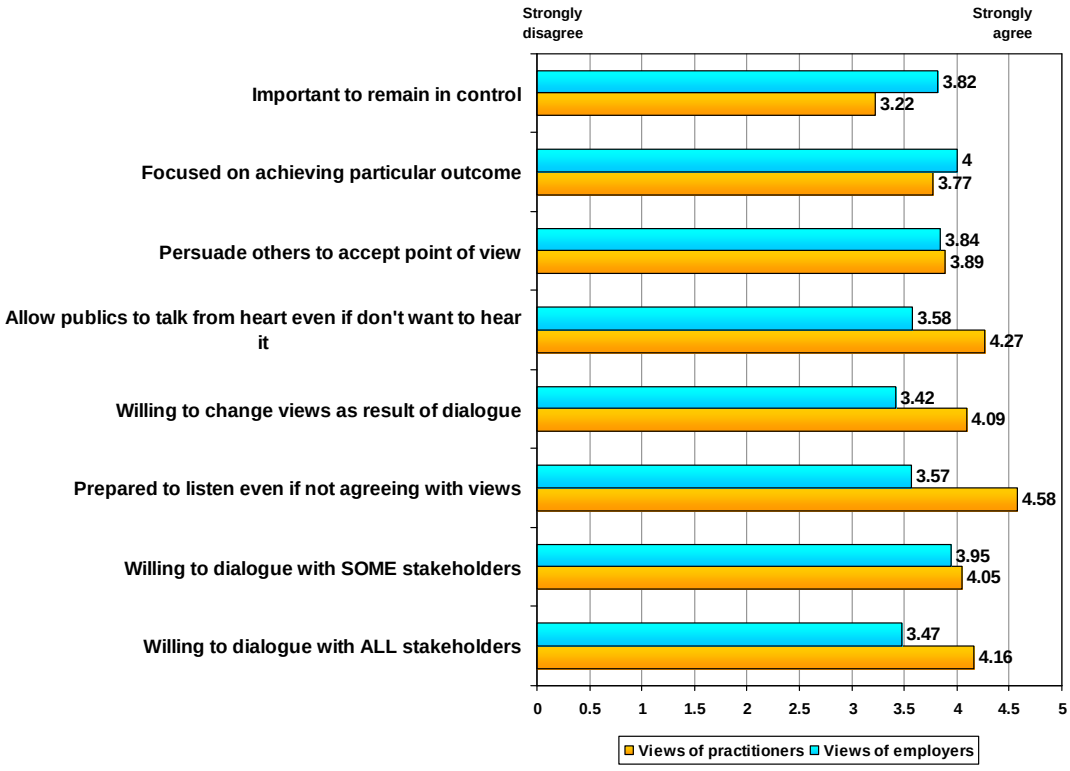


Willingness to engage in dialogue/two-way communication

Respondents generally indicated that they were willing to engage in dialogue. Not only did they perceive themselves as being prepared to listen to what their publics had to say even if they (the respondents) did not agree with their views (mean of 4.58) and that they allowed their publics to talk from the heart even if they didn't want to hear it (mean of 4.27) but they also indicated that overall, they were willing to engage in dialogue with all stakeholders (mean of 4.18). Here it was interesting to note that while they were willing to engage with *all* stakeholders they also indicated that they were willing to engage with *some* stakeholders (mean of 4.05). Thus, the one statement did not preclude the other. It may be possible that they interpreted the latter statement as meaning that if they were willing to engage with all stakeholders they should also be willing to engage with some stakeholders—especially if they were committed to the notion of dialogue. However, the two are semantically different. In order to practice ethical public relations in the vein of Pearson's (1989) findings, it would be expected that practitioners should be willing to engage with *all* stakeholders and not just some. Thus, it appears that some philosophical and theoretical understanding of dialogue may be missing.

However, while respondents perceived themselves as being willing to engage with stakeholders, they perceived their employers/clients as less inclined to do so (see Graph 7). With regard to the statement "I am willing to enter into dialogue with *all* stakeholders" the mean for practitioners was 4.18 compared to 3.47 for perceived willingness of their employers/clients to engage with all stakeholders.

Graph 7: Comparison of perceived views of dialogue and two-way communication



There seemed to be a discrepancy between the practitioners' willingness to listen and that of their employers'/clients'. Responses to the questions: "They are prepared to listen to what their publics have to say even if they don't agree with their views" (mean of 3.57) and "They allow their publics to talk from the heart even if they don't want to hear it" (mean of 3.58) indicate a potential point of conflict between the perceptions of practitioners and those of their employers/clients. Thus respondents believed themselves to be more willing to engage with stakeholders than their employers and/or clients in general. While this particular input by practitioners may be deemed to be a projection of their employers' reactions rather than a fact, we contend that as practitioners, the respondents' roles include identifying and anticipating their employers' attitudes, reactions and communication expectations. As such, their responses are deemed to be valid.

Control

Regardless, respondents' willingness to engage in dialogue/two-way communication could potentially be constrained by their ability to make the final decisions about how communication is planned and/or implemented. While respondents indicated that they generally considered opportunities for dialogue in their communication plans (a mean of 4.00, leaning towards agreement) their employers/clients were in many cases the final decision-makers of how communication was planned and implemented (mean of 3.17). Thus, while a number of employers might give respondents freedom to plan and implement the communication plans, other respondents were restricted by their employers'/clients' final decision. Should this employer/client not have a similar point of view than they regarding dialogue, it would likely impact on how (and *if*) dialogue was practised. Area of work, experience and whether they worked in-house or in a consultancy appeared to have little impact on who was going to make the final decision. However, it was interesting to note that a cross tabulation between areas of work and views appeared to show a weak relationship between those working in publicity and having the final say about the communication plan. This group leaned towards disagreeing that their employers/clients made the final decision. A similar trend appeared among those working in issues management.

Regardless of who made the decision, respondents generally did not rate themselves highly as needing to remain in control of the dialogue/two-way communication process (mean of 3.22). The mean did not indicate strong agreement, and interestingly, some areas of work and experience levels appeared to influence these responses. A cross tabulation of form of employment with views indicated a higher frequency of in-house practitioners remaining neutral about needing to remain in control as opposed to consultants who generally agreed they needed to remain in control. Equally, those with 20 years of more experience tended to disagree that it was important for them to remain in control compared to those with less than one year or 1-4 years of experience. However, these findings remain inconclusive and will be explored in further qualitative research. As with the need to achieve an outcome and making provisions for dialogue in their communication plans, respondents remained divided as to whether control was needed or not. The demand to remain in control contradicts the philosophical underpinnings of dialogic theory (see Pearce in Heath et al., 2006).

Achieving a predetermined outcome

Employers/clients were perceived as being more focused than respondents on achieving a particular result during two-way communication. The statement: "They are focused on achieving a particular outcome when they engage in two-way communication" elicited a mean of 4.00 while the statement "I am focused on achieving a particular outcome when I engage in two-way communication" elicited a 3.77. Nevertheless, the level of agreement to these statements was marginally higher than the need to control two-way communication. Not surprisingly, respondents were also more willing to change their views as a result of dialogue (mean of 4.09) as opposed to their employers/clients (mean of 3.42; see graph 8). It is difficult to change views if participants enter the communication process with a specific result or outcome in mind (see Heath in Heath et al., 2006). In cases such as these, more persuasion would be required, and dialogue in its philosophical sense is not achieved. It was interesting to note that a cross tabulation between form of employment and personal views

showed stronger viewpoints among consultants who appeared more focused on a particular outcome.

Persuasion

Given the need for a pre-determined outcome, it was not surprising to find respondents were not adverse to try and persuade others to accept their point of view during two-way communication. The statement "I try to persuade others to accept my point of view during two-way communication" elicited a mean of 3.89, which leaned towards agreement. Thus, while respondents were prepared to listen to stakeholders' views and engage in dialogue, they also evidently engaged in persuasion. This finding supports Stückelberger's (2009) argument that the nature of public relations is to represent the interests of their clients effectively.

It was interesting to note that there appeared to be no substantial difference between the views respondents held of themselves and how they perceived their employers/clients. The statement "They try to persuade others to accept their point of view during two-way communication" elicited a mean of 3.84 (see graph 6). Thus, while there was some perceived discrepancy between respondents and their employers/clients views in terms of maintaining control, focus on an outcome and willingness to participate in dialogue, there appeared to be consensus on a personal level regarding the need to persuade during two-way communication.

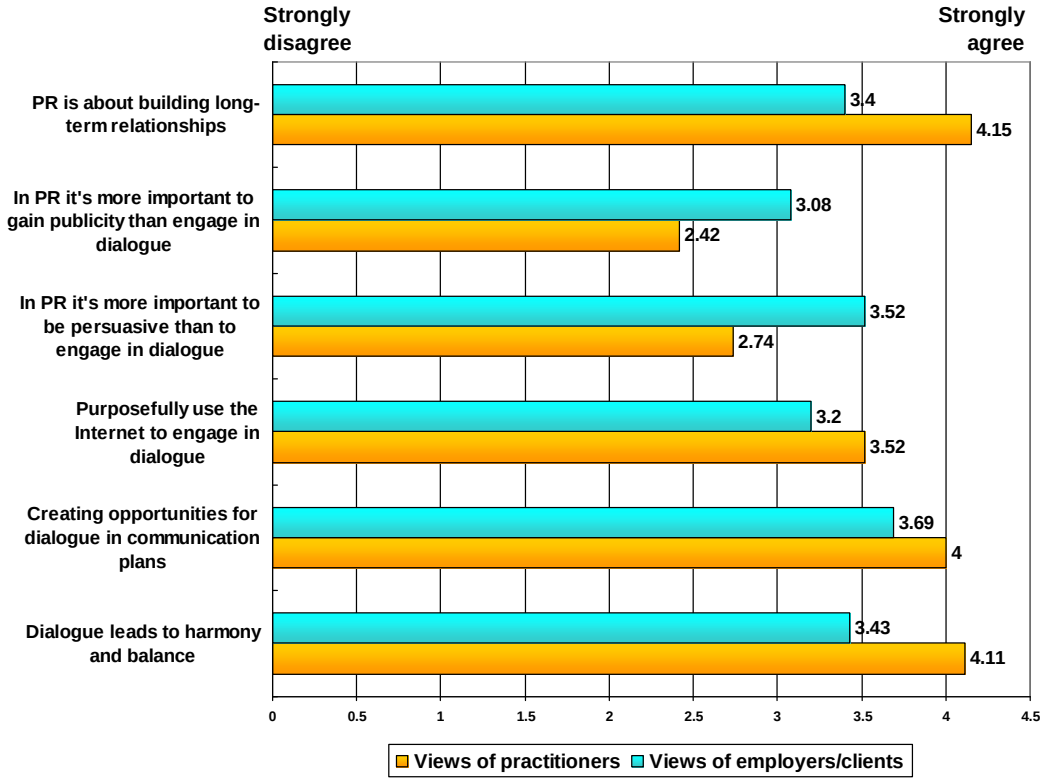
Regardless, respondents tended to disagree with the statement: "In public relations it is more important to be persuasive than to engage in dialogue" (mean of 2.74; see graph 8). But they did perceive their employers/clients as not sharing this view. The statement "It is more important to them to be persuasive than it is to engage in dialogue" elicited a mean of 3.52.

It would therefore seem that while persuasion is part and parcel of public relations practice, respondents appeared to be reluctant to link "persuasion" to "public relations" or acknowledge explicitly the role it plays in public relations practice, which is not unlike the themes that emerged in Public Relations textbooks. Dialogue is generally deemed as more important than persuasion and publicity. The question remains, however, whether this is merely accepted rhetoric or reality.

Relationship-building, harmony and balance

Respondents agreed strongly that Public Relations was mainly about building long-term relationship-building (mean of 4.15) while they perceived their employers/clients as not quite sharing that view (mean for employers' views was 3.4 – see graph 8). This appears to contradict Sterne's (2008) assertion that in New Zealand there is a "strong emphasis on relationships built on open communication over the long term" (p. 38) but having said this, the findings in this study are only indicative and may not indicate substantial disagreement but rather a greater need for constructive discussions between practitioners and their employers/clients to facilitate understanding about the role of public relations. In addition, this research was not limited to New Zealand and included respondents from Singapore. Regrettably, no significant comparisons between the two countries could be made.

Graph 8: Views on publicity, persuasion and relationship-building in public relations



Most telling was that respondents strongly agreed that dialogue leads to harmony and balance (mean of 4.11) as opposed to perceived views of employers/clients (mean of 3.43). Given the fact that dialogue does not always lead to harmony and balance, one would almost be tempted to argue that practitioners have fallen victim to their own rhetoric, perpetuating a view that does not necessarily reflect reality and therefore is not readily accepted by practitioners' employers/clients.

Similarly, respondents generally disagreed with the statements that persuasion was more important than dialogue (mean of 2.74) or that publicity was more important than dialogue (mean of 2.42). While there was no significant correlations between perceptions and area of work (other than those working in publicity agreeing that dialogue was more important than publicity itself), years of experience appeared to have an impact on views. Those with more years of experience appeared to believe that dialogue was more important than persuasion or publicity. These findings are, however, inconclusive and require further investigation.

Interestingly, respondents perceived that their employers/clients value publicity more than dialogue in public relations (mean of 3.08) and that clients felt it was more important to be persuasive than to engage in dialogue (mean of 3.52). This finding appears to contradict Sterne's (2008) suggestion that business people were more interested in building relationships than public relations practitioners, and that public relations practitioners were perceived as being predominately interested in gaining media coverage. He suggests that there is "a strong rejection of one-way communication in favour of two-way interaction" among business people (Sterne, 2008, p. 39) because relationships are "needed to do business" (p. 28) although he contends that business's view is more business oriented than

based on an actual symmetrical approach. Again, it is possible that there is a mismatch between practitioners' expectations and their employers'/clients'.

Conclusion

Textbooks promote dialogue as the ideal and most ethical form of public relations practice without providing any definition or guidelines as to how practitioners can create environments in which it can thrive. At the same time, many scholars acknowledge that persuasion is needed and provide advice on how to change attitudes and behaviours while referring explicitly to creating "symmetrical" communication (which is essentially dialogue) without doing the same. This discrepancy and lack of clarity appears to have spilled over into practice. A key reason for the inconsistency between espoused values and enacted values lies in the fact that public relations is essentially process-driven with an apparent lack in a strong philosophical basis for theoretical understanding of practice. Systems theory is promoted in the majority of popular textbooks with little attention being given to dialogic theory, relationship theory or any other theories that might not have immediate practical applications.

The myth that dialogue is the most ethical form of communication and a panacea for all the ills in the world still exists—and is perpetuated in textbooks and by practitioners themselves, often adding to further confusion with conflicting ideas of persuasive control in a setting where there should be free-flowing ideas. In that sense, these preliminary findings appear to reflect Holtzhausen's (2000) accusation that public relations have become "part and parcel of the maintenance of metanarratives and domination in society" by having given "preference to public relations as a management function of capitalist organizations" (p. 100), and that public relations has become an ideology in itself—one that is resistant to change.

While the findings are inconclusive, preliminary findings suggest that whereas practitioners are willing to engage in dialogue and listen to diverse views, they are not necessarily creating environments in which dialogue can thrive. Practitioners have indicated a need to maintain control over the communication process, and that persuasion is central to their two-way communication and those they represent. It may very well be that "dialogue" in the most ideal sense—one that allows change, and is free of control and persuasion—is an unrealistic goal for the practice of public relations. Although the notion of relationship-building is evidently embraced, there appears to be a practical need to control and persuade. Perhaps the role of persuasion in relationship-building should be more explicitly recognised. Perhaps too, dialogue exists momentarily and suspension of control and desired outcomes by participants in the communication process, though genuine, is short-lived.

It is important that authors and practitioners alike recognise that in their quest for gaining professional recognition and status within a process-driven business environment, the increased focus on results, outcomes and control over the communication and relationship-building may have become hurdles for engaging in authentic human communication. Consequently, dialogue in public relations is practiced with a specific outcome and result in mind, akin to negotiation. It appears thus

unlikely that a dialogic encounter in public relations can change the participants or the organisation. The question remains whether achieving dialogue is possible or even desirable, and whether textbooks account for reality or perpetuate an idealised, propagandistic view of dialogue in public relations practice.

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