

ROLE-TAKING: AN IMPORTANT PUBLIC RELATIONS PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Relationship building and maintenance are important concerns of public relations today. Two important streams of research – on public relations roles and on relationship quality – play an important part in the study of this realm. To date, these streams have focused on end products of role-taking while paying scant attention to the processes leading to those ends. Drawing on the literature of symbolic interactionism, this paper proposes increased focus on seven dimensions of role-taking as process in light of such current concerns as religion/political extremism and the “permanent campaign” in politics.

Key words: *role, relationship, political process, extremism, terrorism, dialogue, excellence in public relations, symmetry, permanent campaign.*

INTRODUCTION

It's been said that the journey often is more enjoyable and fruitful than arrival at a destination. This certainly is suggested by the much-discussed “excellence model” in public relations which emphasizes two-way symmetric – and asymmetric – communication (Grunig, 1992; Dozier et al. 1995; Grunig et al. 2002).

The symmetric approach, in particular, indicates that process – two-way communication with a goal of establishing and maintaining relationships – is central to effective public relations. Pure asymmetry, in contrast, focuses largely on end product – persuading people to accept a client's point of view and act accordingly.

TWO RESEARCH STREAMS

Two prominent streams of literature in public relations about roles and relationships have tended to focus on end products. This commentary argues that both streams could profit from emphasis on the process of role-taking suggested by symbolic-interactionist sociology.

First, studies of public relations roles have focused heavily on actual and expected behaviors associated with such roles as communication manager and communication technician (Chen & Culbertson, 1996; Dozier, 1998; Hon et al., 1992). Little attention has been paid to such process concerns as how much leeway practitioners have in playing roles or on how they are played at the level of inter-personal dynamics and role-taking.

Second, an important body of research on client-public relationships has looked at determinants of whether and why publics perceive clients as competent, trustworthy, responsive to public input, committed to serve one's community, and so on (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The processes involved in creating, maintaining, changing and acting on such perceptions seem to receive short shrift.

A focus on process seems especially important today in light of at least two phenomena that have been of great concern throughout the world in recent years.

TWO CONTEMPORARY PHENOMENA

First, the so-called "war on terror" seeks to deal with political and religious extremism – a widespread tendency to condemn enemies and alleged oppressors. This often seems to entail an assumption that the "good guys" are entirely right while others are totally wrong and beyond redemption. It follows that there is no room for compromise, no point in trying to learn from and understand the "bad guys." One must defeat or even obliterate them.

Tragic results include terrorist attacks and threats as well as intractable conflicts of the type found in today's Middle East. In Israel, for example, Jewish settlers have come to regard Palestinian shepherds as subhuman creatures who occupy land that Zionists claim as a result of God's ancient decrees (Gish, 2000: 353-356).

Second, experts bemoan what they call the permanent campaign that has come to dominate politics around the world. This argument portrays an ideal seen as guiding democratic political discourse that is said to differ greatly from current reality (Orenstein & Mann, 2000).

According to the ideal, a politician campaigns vigorously for several months prior to an election. During that time, the candidate seeks to persuade voters that he or she is the best qualified person for the job and possesses the best ideas and plans for moving forward.

Once elected, it is said, the office-holder should quit waging verbal war and start governing. He or she then can engage in dialogue, listening to people with diverse points of view before making a decision. Once the decision is made, the governor can sell and implement it secure in the belief that the pros and cons have been fully aired – and that the public understands and supports a policy despite arguments against it.

This, in turn, is presumed to create a loyal following, with support for government policy based on solid linkage between programs and arguments relating to them (Culbertson, et al., 1998). Such support, based on careful deliberation, should avoid allegations of misleading the public, lying, covering-up, and so on (Hecl, 2000).

Unfortunately, reality often differs from this ideal. Today's politicians feel compelled to campaign throughout their tenure, leaving little room for genuine dialogue and deliberation.

Take for example, President George W. Bush's conduct of the Iraq War. According to his disillusioned former press secretary, Scott McClellan (2008), and journalist Bob Woodward (2006, 2008), Bush decided early on that he would take out Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. He said little in his public pronouncements about powerful down-sides to invading and occupying a foreign country. He focused on alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq as a primary justification for going to war. When such weapons could not be found, he felt compelled to shift gears and focus on establishing democracy in the region as his primary goal.

This switch seemed hypocritical to many and contributed to a public relations disaster. Bush has been ridiculed for winning the battle – quickly disposing of Saddam Hussein – but losing the war. Unfortunately for the president, it appears that cognitive support for the war was very thin. In a much publicized snafu, he appeared on an aircraft carrier and announced triumphantly the end of significant combat operations in Iraq. Today, popular MSNBC newsman Keith Olbermann signs off every evening by announcing this is the 1,950th day, or whatever, since the end of significant combat! But fighting continues.

This commentary argues that public relations scholars can profit from careful consideration of role-taking concepts as defined by symbolic interactionists about 40 years ago. Culbertson (1989, 1991) has reviewed these notions and suggested their applicability to public relations. Role-taking may be defined as the process of “psyching out,” understanding, or predicting another’s attitudes, behaviors, and points of view. We now use several dimensions or aspects of role-taking in explicating several current developments and issues.

DIMENSIONS OF ROLE-TAKING

1. Accuracy. This dimension scores high if one correctly grasps where another person or group “is coming from” and why. Logically, one can understand others like him or herself fairly well simply by assuming they think as he or she does where agreement is high. In cross-cultural communication, of course, agreement between client and public often is not present. In such cases, considerable effort is needed to learn about the other group or person. This points to a second dimension.

2. Breadth of perspective. This is defined as high accuracy despite low agreement. Obviously that requires considerable study and effort (Culbertson, 1989).

One recent project which has sought to enhance breadth of perspective has been the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Formed by President Nelson Mandela soon after he came to power in South Africa, the TRC devoted much time, energy, and money to helping victims and perpetrators understand each other. This seemed necessary to avoid civil war in the wake of Apartheid.

The TRC invited and publicized testimony from White and Black victims as well as perpetrators. Also, within the Black African community, it sought to promote understanding between bitter foes such as the Xhosa and Zulu peoples – as well as between African National Congress supporters who wished to cooperate with Whites and Pan-Africanists who wanted to get rid of them. The jury is still out on whether the TRC succeeded in its basic mission of reconciliation. But the process appears to have created some positive results (Shea, 2000:45-68; Gibson, 2004). Certainly there has been no civil war in a setting where many saw such

a conflict as almost inevitable 20 years ago.

Whether agreement is high or low, it must be assessed by the role-taker. This leads to consideration of a third role-taking concept.

3. Congruency or perceived level of agreement (Chaffee & McLeod, 1968). A great deal of literature suggests very high or low congruency is apt to have negative consequences. On the high end, simple projection of one's own view to the other usually leads to inaccurate perceptions because people always differ as to backgrounds and goals. In contrast, very low congruency seemingly entails polarization, which leads to ethnocentrism or egocentrism (Culbertson, 1983:8-9). This calls attention to a fourth dimension.

4. Method of role-taking. Projection, assuming high congruency, is one method. Another is reading and studying – an approach which seems likely to work where role expectations are highly codified and can thus be grasped from reading a manual. The author, a former U.S. Marine, found he could learn to play certain aspects of the Marine role by reading the steps required in close-order drill (turn left with a 36-inch step, at a thirty degree angle, immediately upon hearing the command "Column Left," for example). He could not get very far by projecting or reading a manual as a young professor when he was simply told to teach or do research well!!

A third method is to interact with those whom you seek to understand. The late U. S. Sen. J. William Fulbright (1966:167-177) grasped the value of this approach when he established the Fulbright Scholars program that made it possible for bright young scholars and future leaders to live and study abroad for a year or two. He reasoned that understanding among leaders is essential if we are to achieve peace and fruitful relationships across cultural barriers. He apparently felt this could not be accomplished simply by reading and hearing lectures!

Also devoted to interaction among diverse people are peace activists. For example, Christian Peacemaking Teams live in trouble spots such as Israel-Palestine and war-torn Iraq. They accompany children to school, providing protection because combatants know they are being watched and will be condemned for committing violent acts against – or in the presence of -- foreigners. CPT members seek through friendly, generally unstructured conversation, to help Palestinians understand things from the viewpoint of Israeli settlers, and vice versa. While somewhat controversial, CPT members seem to reign in violence to a degree (Gish, 2008; Gish, 2004).

Other steps to promote interaction among diverse people include symposia, role-playing exercises, and efforts to empower disadvantaged groups so they can speak for themselves effectively in public.

A fifth dimension of role-taking – appreciated by savvy campaigners but seldom studied systematically – involves the implicit messages conveyed in communication about the sender and receiver.

5. Deference and demeanor. For example, the author tries to send thank-you notes promptly when he receives a gift. In doing this, he labels the gift-giver a valued person – an implication which sociologist Erving Goffman (1956) would call positive deference. He also shows that he himself is a thoughtful person, suggesting positive demeanor.

As the author writes this, U.S. presidential candidate John McCain appears to have grasped negative deference implications of certain recent pronouncements. McCain's campaign has questioned opponent Barack Obama's patriotism and has condemned him for associating with a 1960s radical named William Ayers. Recently, McCain has called for a halt to such statements, apparently recognizing they implied he was desperate. This negative bit of demeanor suggested he felt he was losing, a view that no candidate wants to cultivate!

We now turn to a sixth dimension.

6. Standpoint as defined by sociologist Ralph Turner (1956). Here we consider only one standpoint – that of interactive effect. A role-taker considers the impact of his prediction or understanding of another's views along with his own behavior in light of that prediction. Two examples illustrate the need for such assessment.

First, many observers bemoan a tendency toward negative campaigning in the modern political scene. This is seen as contributing to a discouraging tendency -- winning battles but losing wars. Obviously strategists believe negative campaigning helps win elections or they would not do it. However, they seem willing to achieve such short-term gains at the expense of reducing long-term respect for politicians and institutions as a whole. The author recalls that, 40 or 50 years ago, U.S. institutions such as the presidency or General Motors often received favorable trust ratings from at least 60 or 80% of survey respondents. These days, one is lucky to reach 20 or 30%.

Second, public ownership of companies sews seldom-recognized seeds of discontent. The shareholder is king. Companies feel compelled to enhance stock prices at all costs in order to benefit those who own the stock. However, in today's investment structure, most shareholders own stock through mutual and other funds in firms they've scarcely heard of! The author really has very little knowledge about several firms he has invested in -- he has left such decisions to a certified financial planner. He feels little involvement with such companies except for their impact on his own wallet.

In contrast, employees who have created a product often get laid off because of a need to maximize profits. Their dedication to the firm often is not recognized or rewarded in today's "throw-away society." Small wonder they feel marginalized and left out (Boje, 1997).

We now turn to a seventh and final dimension.

7. Followership vs. autonomy. Once a person has taken the role of a public, does he or she follow that viewpoint in making decisions? Or does he or she autonomously make decisions based on what he or she believes the audience needs – whether or not it wants it?

The question of followership vs. autonomy seems to be at the core of many key communication decisions. The appropriate point on this continuum surely varies from case to case. However, it does seem reasonable to suggest a middle course in many instances. Very high autonomy implies authoritarianism and autocratic leadership. When a leader gets too far ahead of his followers, he seems likely to lose them. At the other extreme, very high followership (low autonomy) can amount to pandering. Politicians who appear to do this are often accused of shifting with the political winds and waffling rather than truly leading on the basis of a core set of goals and values (Culbertson, 1983:8-9).

A CHALLENGE FOR RESEARCHERS

No doubt the lack of attention to role-taking in public relations research stems in part from the difficulty of measuring the dimensions. Subtle, nuanced inter-personal processes doubtless occur largely without conscious awareness. As a result, self-report measures may be suspect.

At a basic level, role-taking involves gauging similarity or difference between perceptions of the role taker and those of the person or persons whose perceptions or behaviors are being estimated or predicted. And identical marks on a sheet of paper do not always denote identical thoughts and perceived motives by two people. Furthermore, the process becomes even murkier when the "role-takee" is a large group of people rather than an individual. There is bound to be variation within such a group. Thus an average (mean, median, or mode) does not describe the group as a whole adequately. Someone once said that a famous river is, on average, about 10 feet deep. However, the river is 30 or 40 feet deep at some points, just a few inches deep elsewhere. The average does not really define the whole river.

Such issues pose a challenge. But researcher should strive to meet it. Perhaps it is better to measure important concepts rather crudely than to study trivial ones with precision.

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