A Multilevel Approach to Research in Public Relations

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Public relations is defined as the strategic management of communication between an organization and its publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This definition implies that if there are no organizations, public relations cannot exist. Because of this unique characteristic of public relations, public relations research calls for more precise and elaborate methodology. According to organizational researchers, (e.g., House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995), organizations are hierarchically nested systems. Organizations are multilevel by their very nature (Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994). This multilevel nature of organizations implies that researchers should consider levels issues when they conduct research on organizations.

Dozier and Lauzen (2000)'s definition on the intellectual domain of public relations reflected the multilevel nature of public relations well. They noted that the intellectual domain of public relations is a specialized area of the behavioral or social science that operates at multiple levels of analysis around the focal variable of the practice of public relations, its practitioners, and its function in organizations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

A multilevel approach, combining micro and macro perspectives in designing, collecting, and analyzing data, provides a more integrated science of organizations. House et al. (1995) suggested the term meso because it captures the sense that organizational science is both macro and micro. Multilevel theory building presents a substantial challenge to public relations scholars trained to “think micro” or to “think macro” but not to “think micro and macro” not, that is, to “think multilevel.”

Organizational psychology and organizational communication researchers have examined the macro-micro and levels problems and offered new resources for theory development. Organizational psychology scholars have witnessed the evolution of multilevel frameworks that have well-developed conceptual foundations and associated analytic methodologies (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Also, substantive theoretical advances in organizational communication have been achieved by progress at multilevel analysis (McPhee & Poole, 2001). However, levels issues have not surfaced in public relations research. Recalling Klein et al.’s (1994) convincing argument that no construct is level free
in organizational research, the author came to realize that many public relations studies, especially the ones which deal with internal public relations cannot avoid being the subject of multilevel analysis. To fill the identified gap, this paper takes an example of public relations research that did not consider levels issues, the Excellence study, and tries to provide a critique of the research from a multilevel perspective.

A Critique of the Methodology of the Excellence Study

In critiquing the methodology of the Excellence study, the author focuses on the chapter eleven of the new Excellence book (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) because the chapter was dedicated to examine interactions of public relations with internal groups and processes. The paper suggests some points to which the researchers of the Excellence study should have paid more attention when they conducted the research. Because the overall methodology of the Excellence study was proper and rigorous, the paper concentrates only on weaknesses of the study.

Chapter eleven of the new Excellence book. In the chapter eleven of the new Excellence book, “Inside the organization: Culture, structure, systems of internal communication, gender, and diversity,” L. Grunig et al. (2002) conceptualized the organizational context for public relations in five main ways: culture, structure, internal communication, employee satisfaction with organization, and status and treatment of women. According to the researchers, the analysis of several questions in the survey of employees resulted in reliable indexes of each of these concepts. The interrelationships among the constructs provided strong support for the general theory of excellence.

In brief, the culture of the excellent organization is participative, rather than authoritarian. Participative culture usually is found in an organization that has a decentralized, deformedalized, destratified, and complex structure. Such a structure, which organization theorists call “organic,” promotes extensive and open communication. The system of internal communication is two-way and symmetrical. Symmetrical systems of internal communication typically increase the likelihood that employees will be satisfied with their individual jobs and with the organization as a whole. Symmetrical communication also has a reciprocal relationship with participative culture: The more symmetrical the communication the more participative the culture; and the more participative the culture the more symmetrical the system of communication. Finally, the workforce of the effective organization is diverse in both race and gender, allowing the organization to understand adequately the heterogeneity of its environment and to maximize the value of all employees.

A multilevel perspective. The Excellence study is a typical example of multilevel research in that it gathered and summarized individual-level data to operationalize unit-level constructs. For example, five main constructs of chapter eleven are culture, structure,