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Why Dialogic Principles Don't Make It in Practice— and What We Can Do About It

ANNE B. LANE

JENNIFER BARTLETT

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

This article considers the occurrence of Kent and Taylor's dialogic principles in contemporary public relations practice. The research concludes that the work of public relations practitioners takes place within situational constraints that make it difficult—if not impossible—to undertake communication that demonstrates Kent and Taylor's dialogic principles. Although this conclusion is not itself new, this article also identifies what these constraints are and proposes them as the foundations of a newly expanded theoretical conceptualization of two-way communication in which dialogue is distinguished as the normative ideal for pragmatic practice. In addition, the article suggests ways in which public relations educators and practitioners might be able to overcome the constraints that limit the conduct of dialogue in practice.

Keywords: dialogue, principles, pragmatic, practice, Kent and Taylor

Dialogue has been presented in the literature as a twice-idealized form of communication. First, its characteristics have been articulated as a set of ideals (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Second, dialogue has been positioned as an ideal form of communication for public relations, often because of its putative ethical superiority (Botan, 1997; Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Pearson, 1989a; Theunissen, 2014). Yet the research for this article demonstrates that contemporary public relations practitioners often do not conduct dialogue in their work because of the existence of numerous constraints and challenges. As a conclusion of this finding, this article suggests it is appropriate to re-theorize dialogue to acknowledge both its ideal form and the more practical and pragmatic approach to two-way communication adopted in public relations practice. Identifying the specific aspects of practice that inhibit the conduct of dialogue allows recommendations to be made on how to overcome them, although implementing these recommendations is not without its own challenges.

Anne B. Lane: a.lane@qut.edu.au

Jennifer Bartlett: j.bartlett@qut.edu.au

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Literature

The proposal that dialogue should consciously be defined as a form of two-way communication is not made lightly or without due consideration. *Dialogue* is one of those slippery terms that everyone thinks they understand in the same way as everyone else, yet it actually defies attempts to define it (Bokeno, 2007). It has been seen at various times in various disciplines and by various analysts as a tool (Lord, 2007; Morrell, 2004), a process (Blank & Franklin, 1980; Grönroos, 2004), and an outcome (Herzberg & Wright, 2006). By the mid-20th century, the concept of dialogue featured in a range of disciplines giving a wide variety of meanings to the word (Penman, 2000; Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2004), many of which changed according to the field in which they were used (Mifsud & Johnson, 2000). Johannesen drew a similar conclusion more than 40 years ago, stating, "As with the terms rhetoric, propaganda, and communication, the word 'dialogue' apparently means many things to many people" (1971, p. 373).

Dialogue has been studied for millennia (Anderson, 2003), back to the time of ancient Greek rhetoricians such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (see, for example, Barth & Krabbe, 1982; Zappen, 2004). A renewed interest in dialogue emerged in the latter half of the 20th century in the work of theorists from a range of disciplines, particularly Bakhtin (1981), Bohm (2006), Buber (1958), Gadamer (1980), and Rogers (1961). Other philosophers have considered the phenomenon of dialogue, but these five have taken the key perspectives on the topic from the past 50 years or so (Anderson, Baxter & Cissna, 2004). Bakhtin, Bohm, Buber, Gadamer, and Rogers all considered dialogue from slightly different perspectives (Buber from a neo-religious point of view, and Rogers from a clinical one, for example). However, they consistently positioned dialogue as a form of two-way communication: This is the justification for defining dialogue as two-way communication uniquely distinguished from other forms by its inclusivity, respectfulness, and mutual responsiveness of participants, leading to mutual understanding.

In the late 20th century, dialogue as a discrete phenomenon of interest began to emerge in scholarly writing related to the communication aspects of disciplines traditionally associated with the production and dissemination of knowledge (Phillips, 2011b) such as education and learning (Racionero & Padrós, 2010) and science (Holliman, Whitelegg, Scanlon, Smidt, & Thomas, 2009; Phillips, 2011a). This widespread interest in dialogue and the cross-disciplinary nature of its relevance led to this being labeled a social dialogic turn (Aubert & Soler, 2006; Escobar, 2009; Gómez, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2011).

The Dialogic Turn in Public Relations Literature

Given the synergies between the role of public relations (identifying, maintaining, and enhancing relationships between organizations and stakeholders for the benefit of all involved) and dialogue (two-way communication based on inclusivity, respectfulness, and mutual responsiveness between participants, leading to mutual understanding), it was not surprising that a dialogic turn became evident in the public relations domain. Pearson (1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1991) is most often credited with introducing the dialogic turn to public relations. His "work on dialogue as a practical public relations strategy is the earliest substantive treatment of the concept," according to Kent and Taylor (2002, p. 21; see also Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 653). Specifically, Pearson (1991) articulated a construct of dialogue that used respectful

and truthful two-way communication between organizations and stakeholders allowing public relations practitioners to achieve balance between "partisan" benefits for a client and "nonpartisan" mutual benefits (presumably mutual benefits for clients and stakeholders). Pearson (1989a) characterized dialogue as being ethical in its conduct and its outcome. This led him to claim that dialogue as he understood it was ethically superior to other forms of communication. In this, it is possible to determine echoes of the work of dialogue theorists on the concept of normative dialogue as discussed previously in this article. Indeed, Pearson (1989a) concluded that managing communication between organizations and stakeholders so it comes as close as possible to what could be construed as dialogue is "the core ethical responsibility of public relations from which all other obligations follow" (p. 128). In adopting this stance, Pearson perpetuated the attribution of normative status to such forms of public relations first mooted in the promotion of the two-way symmetric model by Grunig and Hunt (1984) (see also Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Pearson, 1991).

Other scholars (e.g., Leeper, 1996; Woodward, 2000) followed Pearson's lead and began to consider the place of dialogue in the context of public relations. Some, such as Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001), Kent and Taylor (2002), and Steinmann and Zerfaß (1993), also adopted Pearson's perspective on the ethical superiority of dialogue in public relations, again assuming the existence of attributes in this communication that are appropriate to the concept of normative dialogue. This prescriptive premise is a common theme running throughout much of the literature covering the connection between dialogue and public relations. For Pearson—and others of his school of thought—dialogue in public relations is understood holistically as two-way communication leading to one specific type of outcome: change by both participants leading to mutual benefit (although this perspective is not unchallenged: see, for example, Edgett, 2002; Stoker & Tusinski, 2006).

The positive and ethical characteristics ascribed to dialogue have made it very appealing to those involved with the theory and practice of public relations. Theunissen and Wan Noordin suggest that the word *dialogue* "has become ubiquitous in public relations writing and scholarship" (2011, p. 5). Stoker and Tusinski even went so far in 2006 as describing public relations as being "infatuated" with dialogue.

Kent and Taylor's Principles of Dialogue

In 2002, Kent and Taylor recognized the growing importance of dialogue to public relations and identified the challenge of its undertheorized status (a conclusion echoed by Pieczka, 2011). In response, Kent and Taylor issued a call to develop a dialogic theory of public relations and made an initial contribution themselves. They drew on existing literature to identify five principles or characteristics of dialogue in relation to the contemporary practice of public relations: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment.

The principle of mutuality covers the inextricably intertwined nature of the codependency between organizations and their stakeholders. It recognizes that changes made by either party can have effects on the other, which is very similar to Bakhtin's (1981) notion that the outcome of dialogue is change and involves accommodation by both parties. Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest mutuality leads to a need for collaboration, which in turn requires that participants in a dialogue respect the positions of

others. A spirit of mutual equality is also required so participants feel free to make their contributions to the dialogue without fear or favor.

The idea of joint change for mutual benefit closely echoes the outcome of dialogue described by Bakhtin (1981). In addition, if the mutual accommodation between organizations and stakeholders were shown to lead to the development of new ideas and content shared by both participants, then this would represent the type of outcome for dialogue espoused by Bohm (2006).

The principle of propinquity looks at the "process of dialogic exchanges" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 26). The first requirement is that dialogue must take place at a time before any decisions have been made so input from all parties can be taken into account. In this, it resembles Gadamer's (1980) perception that dialogue should be used to achieve shared understanding of an idea (or perhaps an issue, in the public relations context) before decisions on it can be made. Kent and Taylor (2002) argue that a dialogue underpinned by the principle of propinquity must take into account the history of the participants and provide the basis for future and ongoing relationships between them. Participants in dialogue should not try to maintain positions of neutrality but should instead be prepared to find themselves developing a fondness for the others. Finally, dialogue must be taken seriously and be adequately resourced. Kent and Taylor (2002) conclude that organizations that embrace propinquity in their dialogue can benefit from knowing in advance about likely issues with upcoming decisions (although whether this benefit results in the organization's being better prepared to persuade dissidents or being able to accommodate their objections is not specified). Although not specifically stated, the presumption behind the principle of propinquity must be that decision makers (arguably the organization in most public relations instances) are prepared to rescind—or at least devolve—their power in this regard to others.

The empathic principle of dialogue refers to the ability of participants in dialogue to show supportiveness and collegiality and to demonstrate confirmation of the voice of others "in spite of [their] ability to ignore it" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 27). Empathy is regarded as vital in building trust between participants. Kent and Taylor (2002) conclude that empathy and sympathy have been the foundations of the relational approach to public relations for years and suggest that a sympathetic orientation to stakeholders improves an organization's relationships with them. The significance of empathy between participants in dialogue is a major aspect of the work of Rogers (1961).

The principle of risk acknowledges that dialogue is perilous for participants, as it involves making oneself vulnerable through disclosure; that it can result in unanticipated consequences; and that it requires the acknowledgement of others who might otherwise be regarded as strange or undesirable. The idea of dialogue generating positive outcomes from tense and potentially hostile interactions was also addressed in the work of Freire (1990), who noted—from the perspective of the marginalized—that this interaction was highly desirable and allowed input from informed but largely ignored contributors. Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest that this dialogic risk is acceptable to organizations, as it can "create understanding to minimize uncertainty and misunderstandings" (p. 29) and thus improve relationships between organizations and stakeholders.

The final principle proposed by Kent and Taylor (2002) is commitment. They describe commitment as being built on foundations of genuineness (being honest and forthright), commitment to mutual benefit and understanding between all participants, and a desire to understand the other and reach mutually satisfying positions. These characteristics echo those espoused by Buber (1958) in his I–thou interaction, and by Bohm (2006) and Rogers (1961) in their respective philosophies of dialogue. Kent and Taylor (2002) suggest that commitment like this is also something familiar to public relations practitioners, who “often [have] to negotiate relationships with publics holding diverse positions” (p. 30).

The five principles were presented as a contribution toward the development of a dialogic theory of public relations. Kent and Taylor suggested three ways in which they believed these principles could be enacted by organizations in their communications with publics. However, there has been little subsequent application of these principles to the actual practice of public relations. Such an application is required to demonstrate the occurrence of the principles—and hence the relevance of any resulting theory—to practice, which is a crucial element in advancing theoretical development (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Broom, 2006; Kuhn, 2002).

Determining the occurrence of Kent and Taylor’s (2002) principles of dialogue in the contemporary practice of public relations requires research. The five individual principles and their subprinciples provide a framework for this research, guiding the articulation of the following research questions:

- RQ1: Do public relations practitioners demonstrate the dialogic principle of mutuality in their work? Why or why not?*
- RQ2: Do public relations practitioners demonstrate the dialogic principle of propinquity in their work? Why or why not?*
- RQ3: Do public relations practitioners demonstrate the dialogic principle of empathy in their work? Why or why not?*
- RQ4: Do public relations practitioners demonstrate the dialogic principle of risk in their work? Why or why not?*
- RQ5: Do public relations practitioners demonstrate the dialogic principle of commitment in their work? Why or why not?*

The meaning of each principle and its characteristics as articulated by Kent and Taylor (2002) provide the analytical framework through which the answers to these questions can be identified. Separating out the principles allows researchers to identify instances when one or more attributes of dialogue can be seen in practice, even if the full suite of dialogic principles is not evident. In this way, it is hoped that insights might be gathered into the reasons some principles might be missing. The approach to gathering suitable data for analysis and its interpretation is discussed in the following section.

Research Approach

To identify the occurrence of the principles of dialogue in the practice of public relations, it was necessary to gather data on practitioners' experiences. These experiences were then analyzed through the lenses of the dialogic principles. Because discerning the characteristics of the principles required identification of subjective perceptions (for example, identifying empathy requires an understanding of how practitioners feel about dialogic partners who are strange or other), a qualitative approach to data gathering and interpretation was adopted. Qualitative approaches to research allow researchers to identify and explore shades of meaning and perception among participants (Berg, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Silverman, 2004). Insights into such subjective feelings and interpretations of situations were key to understanding whether Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles of dialogue were apparent in the day-to-day reality of public relations practice.

Sample Selection

Contemporary Australian public relations practitioners (male and female) with varying levels of experience across a range of practice contexts were invited to participate in the research. A purposeful convenience approach (Russell & Gregory, 2003) to selecting these participants was determined to be acceptable given the exploratory nature of the research: The resultant caveat is that findings might not be generalizable but will still provide reliable and valid insights into the topic of study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Coyne, 1997; Golafshani, 2003). The researcher obtained ethical clearance from her university before the interviews began.

Seventeen interviews were conducted, each running from 60 to 85 minutes, depending on the content of the discussion and the availability of the research participant. Although it is acknowledged that the number of interviews is relatively low, they resulted in 82 separate examples of contemporary public relations practice across all the interviews, providing more than the 20 hours of interview data recommended by Kvale (1996) as being required for analysis that results in meaningful conclusions (if not generalizability).

Data Gathering

The researcher conducted individual semi-structured interviews to discuss participants' experiences of dialogue in their work. Participants were encouraged to reflect on these experiences, the researcher subtly prompting them to comment on aspects recognized as relating to any of the five Kent and Taylor principles. Although this process may be seen as introducing bias into the research, this was offset by the interviewer's prior development of a table of the characteristics of the principles in practice. The table was used to develop objective indicators of the types of comments that practitioners would make if they were behaving in ways or demonstrating attitudes that were antithetical to the conduct of dialogue.

The interviews were transcribed professionally, and the resultant documents coded using NVivo software, which was also used to collate the data and facilitate the researcher's interpretation (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Coding frames were developed around the five Kent and Taylor principles, and hence the

five research questions. These frames were applied to the individual interview data, and then reports were run identifying patterns and themes in the coded data (Bazeley, 2007).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis and interpretation of data were undertaken in a series of iterative loops, searching for practitioner comments that could be related to the characteristics of the dialogic principles articulated by Kent and Taylor (2002). As discussed previously, each principle was coded as a node in NVivo (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Interviewee comments were coded to those nodes where examples of practice demonstrated the occurrence of one or more of Kent and Taylor's dialogic principles. Some comments were coded at more than one node, as they were interpreted as relating to more than one Kent and Taylor principle, suggesting both the interconnectedness of the characteristics and their overlapping nature. Data were also coded to relevant nodes where they contained comments that indicated behavior or attitudes contrary or antithetical to the Kent and Taylor (2002) principles. In all cases, the researcher sought to discover in the interview data the reasons for these variations in practitioners' experiences and what these meant for the theory and practice of dialogue in public relations.

Mutuality

Eight of the public relations practitioners interviewed provided examples that indicated the relevance of mutuality to what they perceived as dialogue. Interviewee P provided an example of actively seeking community input into an advisory committee because of both the concern the practitioner had over the impact of a project on the neighborhood and because of the respect the practitioner had for the community's knowledge and experience. Similarly, interviewee H acknowledged the importance of their stakeholders to the organization and described how the organization's not participating in dialogue could upset those stakeholders.

The data indicated that while public relations practitioners recognized the mutuality of their relationships with stakeholders, they also saw that mutuality as a problem—real or potential—that dialogue could defuse. Interviewees described how the codependent nature of the relationships of their organizations and the stakeholders with whom they believed to have dialogue meant the stakeholders could cause problems for the organizations. The public relations practitioners perceived that inviting these stakeholders into dialogue would placate them and therefore lessen the likelihood of their causing problems for the organizations. Interviewee D commented about entering into dialogue with stakeholders because, if this didn't happen,

they [stakeholders] will go to the media. They'll go and complain to somebody, the media will be given the incorrect information, then they'll print a story about it, and that will—a whole other bunch of community members will be like, what? Hang on, that's happening? It's not even correct. You get yourself into a bigger problem than in the first place.

Multiple practitioner interviewees also noted that their primary motivation for entering into dialogue was to achieve benefits for their employers, although not to the detriment of stakeholders. Interviewees commented that their employers' attitudes sometimes presented a significant challenge to undertaking dialogue in a way that demonstrated mutuality. Interviewee D summarized this perspective, describing the practitioner's role

to be that middleman between our client and the developer and the community. There's a lot of principles and protocols and integrity and things like that that come to be a public participation practitioner in that we still need to fulfill our own requirements as practitioners to not—even though our client is paying us—to still fulfill that role to benefit both parties. So to benefit the community and the client. That is often a very difficult situation, getting buy-in from the client. So saying you need to commit to actually listening to what these people are saying and implementing some of the things or reporting back to them.

Other interviewees described situations in which dialogue occurred between participants whose prior history precluded them from undertaking communication based on mutuality. Specifically, interviewees commented that the presence or absence of trust between participants—often deriving from their previous encounters—affected the achievement of mutuality in dialogue. Interviewee M summed up this perspective:

Once you have the trust of the person that you're working with, dialogue becomes a lot freer and a lot easier and no hidden agendas. I find hidden agendas are the things that kill our relationships and will stop. And our consultancy has done it many times where we won't work with people or [organizations] because the trust can't be built and therefore the dialogue can't work and therefore our mutual benefits that we're trying to both achieve are too hard to reach.

Response to RQ1: Do Public Relations Practitioners Demonstrate the Dialogic Principle of Mutuality in Their Work? Why or Why Not?

Not all of the examples interviewees provided of contemporary public relations practice displayed the principle of mutuality as defined by Kent and Taylor (2002). Some of the interviewees' comments indicated a strong awareness of the importance of stakeholders and organizations to each other. However, examples framed this mutuality negatively, perceiving it as meaning that organizations had to deal with stakeholders as a powerful obstruction to achieving organizational outcomes. Dialogue was positioned as a tool public relations practitioners used to help organizations negotiate a path through stakeholder objections—actual or potential—to achieve these outcomes. Although this could be construed as demonstrating an appreciation of the interdependence of organizations and stakeholders, it does not appear to accord with the mutual respect and trust of Kent and Taylor's (2002) principle of mutuality.

Communication demonstrating the principle of mutuality was most likely to occur when practitioners expressed respect for stakeholders and a genuine appreciation of their contributions to

organizational success. Mutuality was less likely to be displayed by practitioners who saw stakeholders as obstructions to organizational success who could be placated through their participation in dialogue and in instances with a lack of trust between the participants, perhaps because of previous negative experiences with each other.

Propinquity

One of the most prevalent and recurring themes in the data was the idea of dialogue occurring within the boundaries determined, prescribed, and maintained by organizations. Interviewees repeatedly referred to what they saw as dialogue taking place on topics that had been approved by organizations. Approved topics were those on which the organizations felt comfortable receiving feedback, often because they were in positions to respond without jeopardizing the overall achievement of their objectives. Such responses were generally seen as making concessions to stakeholders on details of projects or decisions to secure their approval: Interviewees described these as “negotiables.” Other aspects of projects or organizational decision making were regarded by organizations as having the potential to disrupt the achievement of their goals: Interviewees described these as “non-negotiables.”

What constituted (non-)negotiable aspects was sometimes determined by technical or legal considerations, but otherwise, it was most often determined by organizations based on their willingness or ability to make changes. Interviewee T described how important it was to the understanding of dialogue to clearly articulate to stakeholders what was negotiable and what was nonnegotiable in their interactions. Interviewee T felt that delineating the limits of community influence—“what can the community do nothing about”—helped stakeholders provide meaningful and useful contributions to the dialogue.

Drawing lines around the areas for inclusion in dialogue is contrary to the tenet of propinquity (Kent and Taylor, 2002), which states that dialogue should occur on any topic of interest to participants at points in the decision-making process where it can have meaningful impact. Restricting what can be discussed or seeking input at a tactical micro-level of the implementation of a previous decision challenges the relevance of propinquity to the contemporary practice of public relations.

The final theme to come out of the data coded to propinquity was that in everyday public relations practice, dialogue is used instrumentally to facilitate organizational decision making. In each example, one participant (most often the organization) was ultimately responsible for making decisions rather than allowing them to be generated organically out of the dialogue. This pragmatic approach to the use of dialogue in organizations reflected the fact that it often takes place within tight timelines, dictated by legal or logistical considerations. It also suggested that organizations might be reluctant to hand over control of decisions that affect them unless constrained to do so by legislation.

Response to RQ2: Do Public Relations Practitioners Demonstrate the Dialogic Principle of Propinquity in Their Work? Why or Why Not?

Propinquity did not appear to be a characteristic of what public relations practitioners regarded as the practice of dialogue in their work. This was because those practitioners regarded dialogue as being used primarily to provide organizations with information for their decision making. As such, organizations

sought to engage stakeholders in dialogue only when the organizations were willing and able to accommodate any feedback they received. To achieve this, organizations instructed public relations practitioners to undertake dialogue only on negotiable aspects of their decision making.

Empathy

Comments relating to empathy between public relations practitioners and stakeholders were coded across a range of data in this research. Interviewee S, for example, described being moved to tears when engaged in dialogue with community members.

Interviewee H, among others, talked about the difficulty of reconciling empathy for stakeholders with the perceived duty to achieve desirable outcomes for the employer organization (as noted previously).

So it [dialogue] is countering, I suppose, in a compassionate way, things that they might have concerns about; and being mindful of the fact that it is a very emotional issue. So try and, as I mentioned before, just be human and approachable in that discussion. But I guess it's a difficult thing, but it's part, I think, of our process to try to encourage acceptance of a project. (Interviewee H)

Terms such as *compassion* and *understanding* appeared in data provided by all interviewees, including in examples where practitioners positioned themselves as targets of stakeholder hostility. Anger was often seen as an expression of stakeholders' frustration when faced with nonnegotiable aspects of organizational behavior (as noted previously). The public relations practitioners who commented on this also tended to express personal empathy for the stakeholders' situations. However, this empathy was tempered—and arguably constrained—by the practitioners' need to adopt an organizational persona in their dialogue with these stakeholders.

Well, I guess, particularly when you're speaking with people on the phone and they're telling you their concerns, you've got to be very careful with the wording that you use. You don't want to say you understand where they're coming from because that can either irritate them more. They'll think, how can you understand? You don't live here; it's not your livelihood that's being affected—or this or that, or whatever. You don't want to seem to be taking sides either, so you have to be very careful with that. (Interviewee A)

Other interviewees commented that stakeholders' emotional behavior and lack of clearly articulated logical arguments made it hard to empathize with them. Four interviewees mentioned a lack of time as being a particular impediment to engaging more empathetically with stakeholders in dialogue.

Interviewee G noted that sometimes stakeholders were not empathetic or respectful in their dialogue with each other. This interviewee described devising and implementing terms of reference for a specific instance of dialogue because of a lack of empathy between stakeholders. Interviewee G's

comments indicated a belief that empathetic behavior in dialogue could be encouraged through the use of structures and rules; however, this would appear to be contrary to the free and unstructured approach encapsulated in the principle of propinquity.

A final set of comments coded as being contrary to the node of empathy revealed the tensions interviewees experienced when they engaged in dialogue with stakeholders and others whom they found to be difficult or unreasonable. Interviewee A commented about finding it hard to enter into and sustain dialogue with stakeholders perceived as being "bizarre people." Interviewee H found it difficult to empathize with stakeholders who made illogical or flawed arguments, particularly when those stakeholders were not open to reason.

Only one interviewee—interviewee A—made any reference to public relations practitioners being the recipients of empathy from other participants in dialogue.

Response to RQ3: Do Public Relations Practitioners Demonstrate the Dialogic Principle of Empathy in Their Work? Why or Why Not?

Kent and Taylor's (2002) principle of empathy was found in examples of dialogue provided by all interviewees. Empathy was experienced particularly strongly when public relations practitioners felt some degree of personal connection to participants; empathy was challenged in some cases by the cool detachment the interviewees felt was required of their professional role. A lack of time was also perceived by interviewees as impeding their ability to develop and express empathy with stakeholder participants in dialogue.

Risk

Comments that were coded as being applicable to the concept of risk featured strongly in the data for this research. Interviewees repeatedly commented on their perception that entering into dialogue—particularly with stakeholders—could minimize the risk that organizations would encounter problems. That risk minimization occurred because dialogue gave the organizations chances to identify and attend to stakeholder objections to organizational behavior or decisions.

Interviewees commented on the risks they felt they encountered in undertaking dialogue. Interviewee N, for example, described feeling a constant need for self-censorship when participating in dialogue to avoid making comments that could cause problems later:

That's what the human side of me wanted to say—but that would probably generate a complaint against me, I could lose my job . . . You operate within certain parameters, and I think some of them are imposed by your organization and some of them are imposed by your own standards and what you feel comfortable with. But yeah, there's quite often situations where I'd like to say something that I can't.

Interviewee G expressed similar sentiments:

I think that there are some instances whereby spontaneity and dialogue is not something that's good. Sometimes you do need to think more or research or prepare more so that you can give an answer which is either correct or suitable for that particular client.

Interviewee H noted sometimes feeling uncomfortable with the risk of transparency posed by dialogue:

We know people won't be happy so we just hope that we can just do this softly, softly. We hope there won't be a huge influx [of input]. We're prepared if there is and we've got resources in place to manage that; but I think a lot of the time it's a good thing if we can just do our thing, do it quietly.

Other interviewees, including interviewee P, described instances of dialogue that involved participants who appeared to have been selected by organizations. Picking and choosing participants might be seen as going against the principle of risk with its requirement that all perspectives be considered. However, closer consideration of the data showed that in most of these instances, the predetermination of participants occurred in situations where government had mandated the conduct of dialogue. In these cases, specifying those who were required to be involved might, in fact, have encouraged organizations to promote participation among otherwise disempowered groups.

Interviewees provided insights into how they thought organizations perceived the risks associated with dialogue. A few comments mentioned the risks of dialogue being balanced against the new perspectives and information from stakeholders it elicits. Most comments, however, indicated that public relations practitioners thought organizations saw dialogue as being excessively risky. The perception of risk arose because of the likelihood that dialogue would result in organizations' having to share potentially sensitive information with others who might not have their best interests at heart. Interviewee D's experience was that organizations were unwilling to enter into dialogue because giving stakeholders such information was akin to providing them with weapons to use against the organization. This negative perception did not match interviewee D's personal feelings about dialogue, however: The resulting lack of organizational support meant interviewee D did not get to undertake dialogue as often as the practitioner would have chosen.

Those interviewees who did undertake dialogue often referred to the steps they took to minimize the risks they perceived. These steps included preparing material to respond to likely questions and comments and to avoid certain types of dialogue. Interviewee D, for example, counseled the employer against public meetings because of the risk that the dialogue could become confrontational in this setting. Interviewee D's preference was to enter into dialogue with community reference groups in more formal environments, which the practitioner felt would reduce the possibility of "things getting out of hand."

Risk avoidance was attributed not just to organizations involved in dialogue. Interviewee H, among others, noted that stakeholders could—and sometimes did—avoid entering into dialogue because they too were averse to engaging in communication that might require them to change their behavior.

Response to RQ4: Do Public Relations Practitioners Demonstrate the Dialogic Principle of Risk in Their Work? Why or Why Not?

Risk—and its avoidance—presented a recurrent theme in the data for this research. Most interviewees saw dialogue as being an inherently risky form of communication, and for many of them, that risk outweighed any potential benefits. Kent and Taylor's (2002) principle of risk as a positive characteristic of dialogue was therefore not clearly demonstrated in the examples provided by research participants.

Commitment

Comments from 12 interviewees indicated that they believed honesty was important in their work, especially in situations where the discovery of dishonesty would have a negative impact on their reputations or those of their organizations. The idea of honesty in some examples included ending a dialogue when a stalemate was reached. Interviewee K, for example, described sometimes ending dialogue "where there is no agreement that is met and both parties walk away and it's a lose-lose," contrary to the principle of commitment.

Interviewee M noted the existence of conflict in relation to commitment when advising the employer to enter into dialogue but the organization refusing. Other interviewees also described similar experiences: For these practitioners, a lack of organizational commitment to dialogue overrode their personal or professional preferences. Without organizational support and resources, practitioners could not undertake dialogue. In one instance, interviewee A described an intense feeling of frustration that resulted from being unable to involve an organization in dialogue, describing the situation as being "very challenging" to be the "middle person" between that organization and its stakeholders.

Other challenges to the principle of commitment in dialogue were presented by what interviewees saw as the unreasonable expectations of stakeholder participants (as mentioned previously). Interviewee D commented:

Sometimes there are things that just can't be done. Things that are just beyond the scope of what a community will have a say in or due to legislation or planning or legal reasons that just can't be done . . . Sometimes people have extremely unrealistic and ridiculous requests and complaints. Sometimes they just can't be dealt with and there's nothing you can do about it.

Response to RQ5: Do Public Relations Practitioners Demonstrate the Dialogic Principle of Commitment in Their Work? Why or Why Not?

Many examples of public relations practice in this research were coded to the dialogic principle of commitment; however, in most cases, this was because the interviewees' comments indicated challenges to the principle in practice. These challenges or limitations resulted from practitioners' primary imperative to achieve often predetermined organizational outcomes. Going into dialogue with such predeterminations is antithetical to Kent and Taylor's (2002) interpretation of commitment.

Discussion and Conclusions

The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this research is that public relations practitioners do not understand what dialogue is. Despite being asked to focus on dialogue in their work, the examples the practitioners provided consistently did not actually involve two-way communication demonstrating mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Those who commented directly on their understanding of dialogue referred only to their perception that it involved two-way communication, interpreting the *di* of *dialogue* as indicating the bilateral nature of the interaction. If the profession is serious about wanting their practitioners to undertake the sophisticated and complex interaction that is dialogue—and that has been shown to underpin the existing relational perspective of public relations and the emergent co-creational school of thought—we need to provide better education and training to allow the development of clearer understanding of what that means.

However, the conduct of two-way communication that demonstrates all of Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic principles is contingent not simply on practitioners knowing what it means. The data from this research demonstrated that although each of Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles did occur in the contemporary practice of public relations, no examples from interviews demonstrated all of the principles—that is, there were no examples of pure or normative dialogue in practice. Aspects of the principles appeared episodically across the examples, but no one example displayed all of them, and none of the principles appeared consistently across all examples.

Analysis of the research data showed scattered examples of the individual principles in the conduct of dialogue in public relations but many more attitudes and perceptions among the participants that ran contrary to the Kent and Taylor (2002) principles. This suggested the existence of factors that facilitated the conduct of Kent and Taylor's normative dialogue and other factors that challenged and constrained their implementation. These factors are discussed in the sections that follow, concluding with an analysis of their implications for the theory and practice of dialogue in public relations.

Factors that Facilitate the Operationalization of Dialogic Principles

The data for this research showed certain situational factors that could increase the likelihood that one or more of Kent and Taylor's dialogic principles could be operationalized. One factor that clearly inclined public relations practitioners to undertake dialogue that demonstrated multiple dialogic principles was time. Interviewees repeatedly commented about feeling that a lack of time, or the need to adhere to strict deadlines, prevented them from carrying out dialogue in a more empathetic, committed way. Situations with longer deadlines to conclude the dialogue—or no deadlines at all—should therefore logically result in dialogue that displays more of the normative principles positioned in the literature as being desirable.

The existence of trust between participants was another factor that increased the likelihood that dialogue displaying normative characteristics could be carried out. However, the interview data also indicated a catch-22: Practitioners felt participants were unlikely to have trust without good dialogue first.

Other situational factors were seen to limit or prevent the conduct of dialogue presenting Kent and Taylor's (2002) principles.

Constraints and Challenges to the Operationalization of Dialogic Principles

The previous section of this article acknowledged that a lack of time and the need to work to deadlines provided a consistent challenge for those practitioners who might otherwise wish to enter into dialogue with stakeholders. Examples in the research data also indicated that practitioners faced logistical problems finding mutually convenient times for participants to meet and undertake dialogue.

A recurrent theme in the examples was the difficulty of facilitating dialogue between participants who had pre-existing attitudes (particularly negative ones) toward each other or toward the process of dialogue. Practitioners indicated that it was impossible for participants to put these attitudes to one side to provide the blank canvas required to undertake dialogue that consistently demonstrated the normative principles under discussion. Equally challenging to the implementation of normative dialogue were participants' prior agendas or predetermined outcomes.

At the root of many of these challenges and constraints were issues of power, particularly where public relations practitioners perceived tension—either their own or that of other participants—in the implementation of dialogue. Multiple occasions were identified in the data that indicated that public relations practitioners felt empowered participants (most often organizations) had undue influence over the form and function of dialogue. In these situations, the public relations practitioners commented that they were not in a position to enforce the conduct of dialogue in a manner they might otherwise prefer.

The conclusion of this research is that the conduct and implementation of dialogue is situational, varying according to numerous factors identified in previous sections of this article. These factors are, for the most part, beyond the direct control of public relations practitioners. This conclusion has significant implications for both the theory and the practice of dialogue in public relations.

The research findings in this article indicate that public relations practitioners cannot undertake dialogue that consistently demonstrates Kent and Taylor's (2002) normative principles. The unique combination of participants' attitudes to each other and to the process of dialogue required to operationalize these principles is unrealistic in practice. There are two possible responses to this conclusion: Either public relations practitioners should be given training and resources to overcome the constraints they experience in undertaking dialogue, or the concept of dialogue itself needs to be re-theorized to acknowledge its position as an unattainable ideal.

Improve Practitioner Training and Resourcing

Given that the most obvious theme to emerge from this research is that practitioners do not actually understand what dialogue means, then the most obvious solution is to improve their training and resourcing so that they do understand and can overcome the constraints they face in implementing dialogue in their work. Some aspects of this solution are relatively straightforward: incorporating explicit

content on the theory and practice of dialogue into college curricula, for example. This approach is based on the premise that equipping practitioners with more knowledge and skills will allow them to overcome the challenges to undertaking dialogue in their work. However, some of the factors constraining the operationalization of dialogue in public relations practice could be beyond the control of individual practitioners. As an example, practitioners commented on the problems they faced due to time pressures and the difficulties they encountered in undertaking time-consuming dialogue when organizations were seeking quick answers to questions. Extending the time for reaching conclusions is often beyond the ability of practitioners in the real world.

Even more significantly, placing the emphasis on the training and resourcing of practitioners implies this would result in more dialogue happening in public relations, yet dialogue in the public relations context is, in fact, generated out of the interactions of three sets of participants—public relations practitioners, organizations, and stakeholders. Up-skilling public relations practitioners in the conduct of dialogue would not necessarily resolve the constraints they face as a result of the attitudes and behaviors of other participants. As indicated in the research findings presented earlier, public relations practitioners perceive that organizations and stakeholders come to what could be the dialogic table with preconceptions, agendas, and attitudes toward each other and the process of communication that are antithetical to the conduct of dialogue. How would enhancing practitioners' skills and knowledge of dialogue resolve these issues to facilitate the conduct of dialogue? Ironically, even attempting to persuade other participants to change their attitudes and behavior could be construed as being un-dialogic, as the purpose of dialogue is to understand each other in difference rather than to seek uniformity. Scholars and practitioners will need to debate and consider this conundrum further before appropriate changes could be made to the education and training of practitioners.

Develop a New Approach to Theorizing Dialogue

Although the practitioners interviewed for this research did not demonstrate an academic understanding of the meaning of dialogue, their experiences nonetheless indicated the existence of factors constraining the operationalization of normative dialogue. The findings of this research therefore suggest that a new approach to theorizing dialogue is required to reflect and incorporate the realities of practitioners' daily experiences. Models of pragmatic two-way communication demonstrating one or more dialogic principles could be developed that more accurately reflect the reality of carrying out dialogue in public relations. This approach would strengthen the connection between theory and practice, making the theory more relevant and the practice more informed.

The proposed pragmatic approach to the theory and practice of dialogue does not preclude the existence of a normative, idealized form, though. Having an aspirational model that is arguably unattainable in practice as part of the mix of disciplinary theory and practice is not without precedent. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way model of public relations has been criticized almost since its first claim to normative status for its lack of relevance to the realities of practice. Grunig's (2001) response was that difficulty in implementing a normative form of communication was no excuse for discounting or discarding it: This perspective could also be applied to normative conceptualizations of dialogue.

Future research might usefully replicate this study more widely and with a larger sample to determine the general relevance of its findings. Further studies might also be conducted internationally to allow comparisons of the experiences of practitioners conducting dialogue across cultures and contexts. Such research would allow academics to delve more deeply into what facilitates the achievement of each principle and how they might be operationalized in public relations practice.

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