

Power Over, Power With, and Power to Relations: Critical Reflections on Public Relations, the Dominant Coalition, and Activism

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Symmetrical public relations theory acknowledges primacy of the dominant coalition in making organizational decisions and influencing public relations practices but reveals little about this powerful inner circle. Drawing from interviews with 21 public relations executives, this article opens up the dominant coalition and reveals its complex power relationships and a matrix of constraints that undermine and limit the function, rendering it difficult for practitioners to do the “right” thing, even if they want to. If public relations is to better serve society, professionals and academics may need to embrace an activist role and combine advocacy of shared power with activism in the interest of shared power.

The dominant coalition is a pivotal concept in mainstream public relations theory. Membership in this powerful decision-making group advances the profession’s status and allows practitioners to help organizations solve problems and become more socially responsible (Broom & Dozier, 1985; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Plowman, 1998). A key assumption in this perspective is that practitioners will do the “right” thing once inside the dominant coalition—they will or will try to represent the voices and interests of others and to shape an organization’s ideology and decisions to benefit the profession, the organization, and greater society (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1989; L. A. Grunig, 1992).

Consistent with the theme of this special issue, I speak from the margins by challenging this assumption and “opening up” the dominant coalition. I argue that this assumption glosses complex power relations and structural practices and processes inside dominant coalitions that render it difficult for practitioners to do the “right” thing—even if they want to. Following a review of the literature I demystify the dominant coalition by examining who is inside it, where and how it operates, and the decisions and deliverables it produces. My analysis takes the form of six propositions—grounded in interviews with 21 public relations executives—that bear implications for practitioners and provide a framework for examining three relations of power in the dominant coalition.

Power over relations refer to a traditional dominance model where decision making is characterized by control, instrumentalism, and self-interest. Public relations is an influence variable in this view. *Power with* relations reflect an empowerment model where dialogue, inclusion, negotiation, and shared power guide decision making. Here, public relations is a relational variable. An ongoing, gendered dialectic is seen to occur between power over and power with relations inside the dominant coalition. *Power to* relations represent forms of resistance that public relations practitioners may use to try to counter a dominance model. Although little explored (Weaver, 2001), practitioner resistance and activism may offer best hope for professionals to do the right thing and to actualize the possibilities of a practice serving the interests and voices of many.

There is little doubt that public relations has effectively served capitalism and powerful economic producers for many years, but whether it has served or can serve stakeholders and society as well from inside or outside the dominant coalition is a contested issue (Motion & Leitch, 1996; Weaver, 2001). My critique suggests this is unlikely unless (a) public relations theory provides a fuller, more illuminating account of power relations; and (b) public relations professionals and teachers become more astute political players and engaged activists.

THE DOMINANT COALITION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS—THE LITERATURE

The dominant coalition has its roots in the work of organizational theorists (L. A. Grunig, 1992). Cyert and March (1963) first theorized that a coalition of individuals, including top management, set organizational goals, and the values of this group shaped organizational behaviors. Thompson (1967) used the term *inner circle* to refer to this group of influentials. Hage (1980) argued that the dominant coalition was an outgrowth of increased environmental complexity: Specialized teams and joint decision making were necessary because organizations and the environment were too large for one individual to control. However, the dominant coalition shaped organizational action more so than did the environ-

ment (Allen, 1979). Mintzberg (1983) constructed a typology of internal and external coalitions, including public relations as a support function whose source of power was its expertise in communications.

The dominant coalition reflects a power–control perspective in organizations (Child, 1972; Pfeffer, 1981; Simon, 1976). Members of the dominant coalition draw power from a variety of sources—authority, coercion, charisma, expertise, information, reward, and sanctions—to influence decisions (Bachrach & Lawler, 1980; French & Raven, 1959). Power holders compete to shape organizational decisions, resource allocations, and interpretations, and these ongoing conflicts produce organizational structure (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). On this view, power is an individual attribute or capacity, although it can be considered as departmental or organizational as well (L. A. Grunig, 1992).

Schneider (1985) incorporated this perspective and the dominant coalition into public relations research by linking the function of public relations to organizational environment (external stakeholders) and internal decision making (Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). Dozier, L. A. Grunig, and J. E. Grunig (1995) found that decisions of the dominant coalition influenced the practice of public relations in the organization. However, having identified the dominant coalition as a locus of organizational power, public relations theorists and researchers confronted a major problem: Practitioners were seldom members of the inner circle (L. A. Grunig, 1992).

This problem has been approached largely in two ways: Researchers have identified what practitioners need to do to gain a seat in the dominant coalition, and they have assembled arguments about the value of the public relations perspective in this role. Practitioners are believed to be excluded from the inner circle because (a) management does not understand or appreciate the public relations role (e.g., Burger, 1983; Strenski, 1980); or (b) practitioner skills, experience, and education are deficient (Dozier et al., 1995; Ehling, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 1992).

A major line of research in this regard has differentiated the technical versus manager role (Broom & Dozier, 1985, 1986; Dozier, 1983, 1984, 1992). As technicians, practitioners carry out production activities (e.g., writing and design work) but are not engaged in policy decision making. Managers possess similar technical skills but also have problem-solving and strategic-thinking capabilities and are accountable for results. Public relations professionals who possess such managerial skills, sufficient experience, and a managerial perspective are therefore more likely to make it into the inner circle.

The second approach has advocated the value of public relations expertise in dominant coalitions. Simply put, organizations benefit from including public relations managers in the dominant coalition because they possess conflict resolution skills (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1992; Plowman, 1998) that are growing in demand in a complex organizational world (Gossen & Sharp, 1987; Roloff, 1987). More important, public relations managers can help organizations practice the

two-way symmetrical model of public relations, which helps organizations balance self-interests with the interests of others through meaningful, dialogic relationships with publics (Dozier et al., 1995; J. E. Grunig, 1992, 2001).

Summarizing, then, the dominant coalition is a pivotal concept in public relations theory. This group of powerful insiders makes strategic choices, allocates resources, and influences public relations practices. Public relations managers therefore must be part of the dominant coalition if they are to favorably influence organizational choices, ideology, and practices (Daugherty, 2001). In doing so, public relations helps organizations manage their social responsibility obligations and build substantive relationships with others (J. E. Grunig, 2001).

Implicit in this theorizing is the assumption that public relations managers who ascend to the inner circle will operate on the basis of a relational or symmetrical (excellence) world view and do, or try to do, the right thing in the interests of the profession, organization, and society. As L. A. Grunig (1992) put it in more qualified language, "Presumably [public relations professionals] ... would appreciate the point of view both of their employers and of their relevant external publics" (p. 491). This assumption and the dominant coalition need to be opened up.

A CLOSER LOOK INSIDE THE DOMINANT COALITION

Rich in theorizing the value of public relations to the dominant coalition, the literature is meager regarding what happens in the group, how it happens, and what the implications are for public relations managers. For purposes here, then, let us imagine that a public relations manager has gained a seat in the dominant coalition and wants to do the right thing. What does the manager encounter in the inner circle? How do things happen there? What constraints on public relations exist, or, conversely, what opportunities for action are presented?

In the following sections I propose a set of answers to these questions, but it is important to first disclose my limitations in doing so. As a critical theorist, I am interested in the dominant coalition because it is a locus of organizational power and communication. I am especially interested in how power in this group both constrains, and creates opportunities for, public relations professionals to participate and try to do the right thing. I am also concerned with forms of professional resistance and political activism in the field. Like Cheney and Christensen (2001), I believe that "theoretical-practical reflection can and should be directed toward evocation, provocation, enlightenment and social betterment" (p. 168).

My interpretation of the dominant coalition and power relations reflects biases growing out of 20 years of professional public relations experience with two large corporations. With the first company I was sometimes involved in the dominant coalition, most often during crises. In the second corporation I was the senior public relations officer and a "regular" member of the dominant coalition. I cannot

fully set aside these experiences, but I can temper them with the views and experiences of others, and three books have been especially valuable in this regard.

Spicer (1997) provided a rare but important political perspective on public relations, one intended to help practitioners operate in their organizations' political networks. Jackall (1988) provided a fascinating if discouraging look at how public relations professionals and other managers manipulate meanings to serve the interests of their bosses, their organizations, and themselves. Bologh (1990), a sociologist and feminist, was not writing about public relations in this work, but her critique of Max Weber's political realism provided an important framework for considering gender implications of power over and power with relations.

I also turn to public relations executives who are insiders. Through my work and memberships in professional associations, I have discussed power issues with dozens of practitioners and conducted in-depth interviews with 21 public relations executives (17 men, 4 women) who are, or were, members of dominant coalitions in major corporations and who possess extensive experience in the field. Communication executives are centrally concerned with power relations in their organizations, and the interviews explored their perceptions of the dominant coalition; corporate power structures and relations; constraints on, and opportunities for, public relations advocacy; and forms of public relations resistance and activism, among other related topics. All executives participated in at least one interview of 60 min or more, while 6 executives completed two interviews, and 2 executives completed three interviews, for a total of more than 40 hr of in-depth interviews. The interviews provide a qualitative foundation for this article and help mitigate some of my biases.

In this section I draw from these interviews and the literature to open up the dominant coalition. I develop six propositions about dominant coalitions (in large, complex organizations) that bear implications for public relations professionals and practices. The propositions provide a more detailed picture of the dominant coalition and establish a framework for analyzing extant power relationships in the inner circle.

Proposition 1: The existence of a single, all-prevailing dominant coalition is a myth: Power relations occur in multiple dominant coalitions in large organizations.

According to public relations executives interviewed, multiple-dominant coalitions—defined as groups that make significant strategic and resource allocation decisions—operate in their organizations. The company's board of directors (BOD) was consistently identified as the "leading" dominant coalition. However, as several vice presidents (VPs) noted, this role may be more ceremonial than strategic because the BOD is seldom directly involved in day-to-day strategic decision making and often "rubber stamps" the recommendations of the chief executive of-

ficer (CEO) or president. None of the executives interviewed were members of the BOD, although most had delivered briefings to the group regarding crisis activities or various program initiatives.

According to the public relations executives, most of the decision-making struggles occur beneath the BOD level among multiple-dominant coalitions. These are the intersecting power groups—loosely or tightly coupled—where public relations managers seek and are sometimes active in strategic roles. Some of these coalitions or power groups are relatively fixed and formal in nature, whereas others are more ad hoc and contingency based. For example, one relatively formal dominant coalition generally reviews and approves annual budgets and plans. At the corporate level, this group is likely to include the CEO, chief finance officer (CFO), president, financial VP, and perhaps some functional leaders. The comments of one public relations VP of a large healthcare company reflect the sentiments of most of those interviewed about this particular coalition:

The budget and plan review committee has significant power because it decides, yea or nay, on budget requests and strategic plans. I'm always involved in this group in terms of presenting our proposal and advocating for it. But I have no real voting power over what ultimately does or doesn't get approved. Neither do most other functional heads. We present, we argue, we lobby after meetings, and then we mostly wait. The CEO, CFO, and maybe the financial VP, they take the numbers, decide how to bless them, and then we're told our allocation some time later. So, we have an advocacy position in the group, but we don't really have admission to that small decision-making group within the group.

According to participants, other “formal” dominant coalitions that often involve public relations include crisis and safety committees, corporate foundation or philanthropy boards, and public affairs management teams. Most of those interviewed said that roles in these groups are reasonably well established and involve advocacy, recognized professional expertise, and some involvement in decision making. Nearly all of the interviewees indicated that public relations played an important role in most ad hoc dominant coalitions, especially crisis management teams. They indicated that such teams were central arenas for advocating effective public relations approaches that were highly sensitive to groups of stakeholders and incorporated the interests and perspectives of others. One VP described this role as follows:

I've always felt our executives pay a lot more attention to public relations during a crisis. Some of my colleagues say this is because they're looking for a scapegoat—and PR fits the bill. But during a crisis you have full executive attention, which is so hard to get otherwise, given the pace of our business. Your point of view may not always win out, but it will get expressed and listened to. And if the group takes your advice and it turns out well, your contribution isn't forgotten; you've accumulated some future influence.

Proposition 2: Venues for dominant coalitions shift back and forth from the formal to informal, making ongoing participation difficult.

Many of the public relations executives indicated that venues for dominant coalitions often shift from formal to informal settings, effectively closing out or reducing the participation of public relations or other functions in the coalitions. Formal venues refer to scheduled meetings at designated sites where all members of a dominant coalition discuss and attempt to resolve issues. Informal venues are unannounced meetings of only a few coalition members who meet alone or in out-of-the-way places to continue discussion and make decisions, for example, airplanes, closed video conferencing, golf outings, and so forth. As a result, decision making is highly fluid and renders effective participation more difficult. One public relations director in the computer industry captured this fluid nature of decision making in an anecdote about a product crisis:

The issue was a product defect ... how to communicate the defect, especially to Wall Street. So a group of us met—the CEO, CFO, marketing VP, legal, manufacturing, PR. I left the meeting thinking we'd come to a reasonable decision. But after the meeting broke up—and I found this out later—the CEO, CFO, and marketing VP met in the CEO's office. They then had a teleconference with the head of the manufacturing operation where the problem was discovered. Then, the CEO left for a business trip, and the CFO traveled with him to the airport. That evening the CEO called the CFO, who in turn contacted the lawyer, who was waiting for me in my office the next morning to tell me the whole approach had changed. So, while I was part of the central decision-making group, at least four other decision-making sessions were held later, and I wasn't part of them.

A former public relations executive in an industrial company characterized shifting venues as “moments” in a “long chain of discussions pertinent to decision making, and sometimes PR may not even know about some moments, let alone be in them.” The executives suggested two tactics to deal with shifting venues. First, practitioners who understand organizational decision-making practices might anticipate venue shifts and attempt to insert themselves into the process. Second, practitioners might try to create informal moments with key decision makers to advocate the role and position of public relations and “stay in the process.”

Proposition 3: The absence of a leading power broker (e.g., CEO, president) in a meeting of the dominant coalition is a troubling and powerful form of presence.

Without exception, the public relations executives said their company's CEO or president was the leading member of the dominant coalition, and he or she often was

the key decision maker for significant (and sometimes less significant) issues. Interaction with the top officer is therefore vital. The public relations executives also suggested that the absence of the CEO in key meetings presents other difficulties. The power of the CEO is literally present even when he or she is absent from such meetings in that the group's decisions or recommendations still need to be "run past" the CEO and "blessed." Often, the CEO will ask the president, CFO, or senior legal counselor to provide a briefing subsequent to the key meeting. As a result, this messenger to the CEO holds power to frame and interpret the group's views.

Those interviewed indicated they seldom were asked to play the messenger's role and felt this diluted the weight of their counsel. Two of those interviewed said the CEO in their companies was absent from key meetings so often that they believed it was a strategic move, one leading to "decision making in the shadows." A number of others, however, said this happened infrequently, although it was problematic when it did.

Proposition 4: From a public relations perspective, decisions by the dominant coalition are seldom final: There are subsequent check points on public relations power—everywhere.

Given the existence of multiple-dominant coalitions and shifting venues, the decision-making structure in large organizations is somewhat porous; that is, there are multiple points of entry into the process. On one hand this represents opportunities for individuals or functions to participate in decision making. On the other hand, and especially from a public relations perspective, this also means there are numerous checkpoints—for example, editorial reviews and document sign off procedures—on decisions and deliverables that flow out of this structure. Thus, final decisions are not always final, and agreed-on approaches are subject to change. Most public relations executives expressed frustration with this ongoing "tweaking" and "adjustment" process. As one VP of a large energy company put it:

Everything has to be reviewed: releases, story copy, speeches, Q & As, backgrounders, brochures, everything. And often several times. This leads to changes in texts, of course, and over time the original message or purpose may get tweaked so much you hardly recognize it. I think this is an ongoing political tactic used by others ... to press their views through review and approval stages and ultimately affect decisions or texts.

Sometimes original decisions or texts are altered significantly, as Jackall (1988) described in his account of a large container corporation and the production of an environmental report by a public relations agency. The company wanted the agency to produce a study demonstrating that consumers were more interested in economic growth than in environmental protection. The agency did the research

and found that consumers did want economic growth but not at the cost of environmental protection. The company was furious when the report reflected these findings. As a result, the agency scurried to produce a series of increasingly blander reports until one less-than-accurate but acceptable report was crafted.

From a public relations perspective, then, various checkpoints following decision making may erode the power of public relations counsel and render somewhat elusive notions of honesty and integrity in communications. As several executives pointed out, however, the checkpoints also can be used by public relations personnel to attempt to counter or modify misleading texts or questionable decisions.

Proposition 5: The dominant coalition may value the strategic counsel of public relations, but it inevitably demands a set of deliverables (texts) that highlight technical skills.

Spicer (1997) contended that organizational decisions have both instrumental and symbolic functions. The *instrumental* function refers to a concrete action taken, or the result of a decision; the *symbolic* function is the meanings that may be conveyed to publics, or received by publics, through communication or enactment of the decision. A plant closing, for example, is an instrumental function of a decision, but what is communicated about the closing, and how it is communicated, are symbolic functions. Spicer focused on problems that develop when symbolic and instrumental functions of decisions are not complementary.

The public relations executives also spoke to such disconnects, often in the sense of how members of the dominant coalition, following a decision, would then turn their attention to symbolic aspects of the decision, raising such questions as, “What’s our public posture going to be?” “How should we position this?” or “How can PR help us convince key publics that this is the right decision?” Interviewees felt these questions separated actual decisions from the public relations or symbolic aspects of them.

The executives also called attention to two products flowing out of dominant coalitions: *decisions*, which translate into actions and values, and *deliverables*, which are usually texts of one form or another that are delivered to, or enacted with, publics. The text deliverables—news releases, speeches, position statements, newsletter copy, announcements—represent symbolic products, and critical discourse analysts see public relations practitioners as “discourse technologists” who shape discourse through the production and dissemination of texts (Fairclough, 1995; Motion & Leitch, 1996).

Although not using this terminology, many public relations executives spoke about text deliverables, linking relationships between decisions and their managerial or strategic role, and text deliverables and their technical roles. Even though the executives are members of dominant coalitions, they often feel more valued for

their technical role than for their strategic role. One VP of a financial services company said:

We argue, negotiate, compromise, advocate in decision making. We wear a strategic hat in these discussions. But once a decision is reached, attention turns to deliverables—our position statements for the press, our speeches to Wall Street. So we put our technical hats back on. Sometimes we're partners in decision making in the eyes of others: *always* we are technicians and wordsmiths, we prepare and deliver messages. You can't escape these roots; they're a big part of your identity, at least in my company.

Proposition 6: Public relations professionals are not immune to pressures of organizational compliance.

A former colleague often spoke of the “golden handcuffs” that organizations attach to those who ascend the ranks. The handcuffs increasingly tighten members to the organization and achievement of its goals. However, the handcuffs are golden in that the organization, in turn, provides generous salaries, excellent benefits, and a position as a power broker. As a result, large corporations are to some degree closed, self-referential environments marked by managerial allegiance to a system where existing culture, rules, historical practices, and power benefits constrain actual or perceived discretionary power (Spicer, 1997). Jackall (1988) suggested that such bureaucratic structures require professionals in any function to be especially attentive to the demands and whims of senior executives. Public relations professionals, he contended, must meet these same bureaucratic demands and “above all satisfy his clients’ desires to construct the world in certain ways” (p. 170).

Thus, the pressures of organizational compliance and corresponding material and social benefits that accrue to public relations managers in the dominant coalition may render doing the right thing even more difficult. A handful of public relations executives spoke candidly about these pressures. One VP of a food retail operation said:

My former boss told me there were two important things about an executive position: the position and what it brought to the individual, and the individual and the experiences, ideas, and values he or she brought to the position. The position gives you power, status, and monetary benefits, which create social status in the company, community, and professional circles. Who doesn't like these things? But my boss said there's always tension between the position and the individual. He was pessimistic because he believed power stays in the position; individuals come and go, but the power stays. So, bottom line, you can't take it with you, so take advantage of it ... and don't mess it up.

Another VP at a chemical company spoke of the ongoing pressures of organizational compliance using an unusual comparison of cowboys and farmers:

Organizations often say they want rugged individuals and people with unique perspectives: you know, cowboys who ride alone, live on the land, and win the gunfights. But what they really want are farmers—folks who mind their own business, tend their land, respect those fence lines. I don't think public relations cowboys make it into the dominant coalition, farmers do. And farmers don't become cowboys once they're there.

There may be studies demonstrating that public relations professionals are more immune than others to the pressures of organizational compliance, but I am not familiar with them. This is not to disparage practitioners or highlight the dark side of practice, as Jackall (1988) had done. Rather, this section critiqued the dominant coalition and through six propositions traced out some of the constraints on public relations managers who seek to do the right thing. These include the presence of multiple coalitions, shifting coalition venues and roles, multiple checkpoints on public relations power through review processes, the separation of instrumental and symbolic functions in decision making, and pressures for organizational compliance.

The extent to which these constraints influence the role and power of public relations may vary based on the expertise, experience, and values of the public relations manager; organizational type, size, culture, and historical practices; and the world views and values of others in dominant coalitions. Nevertheless, the six propositions suggest that doing the right thing is difficult for public relations executives who make it into inner circles. In addition, the role and legitimacy of public relations may be undermined due to another factor that surfaced in the interviews—a gendered dialectic between power relations in inner circles.

RELATIONS OF POWER—A GENDERED DIALECTIC?

Actual public relations practices may grow out of three power relations at play in the dominant coalition. In the power-control perspective, power is located in the interactions between people (Spicer, 1997), and these interactions are referred to here as *power relations*. Power over relations refer to a dominance model, that is, an instrumental and controlling orientation in decision making and discourse. This model is reflected in an asymmetrical world view in the public relations literature (J. E. Grunig, 2001), in several longer theoretical lines (e.g., traditional Marxism and Weberian conflict theory), and in actual capitalist management structures and discourse practices (Deetz, 1992; Weaver, 2001).

Power over relations are today more often conceptualized as “hegemony,” a noncoercive form of domination in which “subordinated groups actively consent to and support belief systems and structures of power relations that do not necessarily serve ... those groups' interests” (Mumby, 1997, p. 344). Existing dominance structures and organizational practices and discourses produce a world view

that is “acceptable” to both the powerful and the relatively powerless (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). On this view, public relations supports such power relationships through the production of persuasive texts and strategic attempts to influence discourse (Gandy, 1992; Leitch & Neilson, 1997; Weaver, 2001). Juliet Roper (2005/*this issue*) provides an insightful, in-depth treatment of such hegemonic discourses and practices.

An alternative approach, power with relations, refers to shared power and collaborative decision making (Kanter, 1979; Rakow, 1989). The ideology of shared power highlights the values of interaction, dialogue, cooperation, and relationships rather than power conceptions (Bologh, 1990; L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Hartsock, 1981; Rakow, 1989; Shepherd, 1992). Similarly, the two-way symmetrical model of excellent public relations emphasizes shared power with stakeholders that is achieved through dialogue, negotiation, collaboration, and substantive relationship building (J. E. Grunig, 2001).

Bologh (1990) contrasted these power relations in her critique of Max Weber’s political realism. Simplifying, she argued that Weber sees the world as a site of ongoing conflicts where actors struggle to impose their will and view on others and where relationships grow out of dominance and coercion. These power over relations represent a distinctly masculine world for Bologh, one that contrasts sharply with her feminist view wherein noncoercive relationships and organizational forms are possible and dialogue, mutual recognition, and empowerment are valorized. Life may be characterized by self interests, coercion, and conflicts, but Bologh contended that life also involves our “responsiveness to and respect for the other” (p. 215) and our essential “rootedness in relationships” (p. 216). Weberian thinking is flawed because it fails to “take an interactive, relational perspective” (p. 288) with others.

If we extend Bologh’s (1990) argument to public relations, and substitute business competition for conflict, and business organizations for political or social institutions, then we may identify similar sets of power relations in dominant coalitions in organizations. On one hand, power over relations are manifest when coalition members advocate or support decisions that are self-interested, exclude or restrict other points of view, are nondialogic, and view public relations primarily as an influence variable. On the other hand, power with relations are in play when members advocate or support decisions or decision-making processes that are noncoercive, self-reflective, inclusive of other points of view, and consider public relations to be an important relationship variable.

I suggest there is an ongoing dialectic between these two relations of power, which are not stable, permanently fixed, or necessarily associated with particular individuals or functions. Power over relations are not restricted to the CEO or CFO, for example, and power with relations are not the exclusive province of public relations or human resource managers. Power over relations may characterize decision-making, goals, and resource allocations in many capitalist corpo-

rations (Weaver, 2001), but the presence of instrumental power also creates space for power with relations and may stimulate power to relations or forms of resistance.

Thus, as much as public relations practitioners struggle to gain entry into the dominant coalition, once there they are likely enjoined in an intensified dialectic of power relations, which might also be seen as gender loaded. A number of feminist scholars have theoretically and empirically addressed inequities and difficulties women confront in the work place and profession (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2001; Rakow, 1989). Other researchers have suggested that two-way symmetrical public relations approaches are associated with a feminine world view, whereas instrumental orientations in practice may be rooted in male values (Kanter, 1977; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000). Drawing from this work and Bologh (1990), I suggest that the dialectic of power relations in the dominant coalition may be a gendered dialectic.

Most members of the dominant coalition in large corporations are men, and it is possible that these men (or even women holding such perspectives) consciously or unconsciously equate two-way symmetrical approaches and shared-power ideology with feminist viewpoints. In the dualism reflected in the dominance perspective—power and powerlessness, winners and losers, strength and weakness, rational and irrational—women represent weakness, irrationality, powerlessness, and emotionality (Bologh, 1990; Rakow, 1989). Does symmetrical public relations, or shared-power ideology, whether advocated by female or male practitioners in the dominant coalition, represent similar “weaknesses” in the eyes of some power brokers?

Most of the executives interviewed suggested that the function is seen as weak and irrational by some power brokers. When asked to describe the types of resistance to shared-power advocacy they encountered in dominant coalitions, the executives identified a handful of cliched perceptions about the profession: Public relations is a soft science—nice to do but of no measurable economic value; inclusive approaches do not make sense in an us-against-them, dog-eat-dog business world; relationships are nice but we are not in the relationship-building business; and emotional responses are detrimental to the bottom line. One public relations director provided this gendered description of power relations in the dominant coalition:

Sometimes there are multiple camps in these committees, but usually two. One wants to open issues up, get others involved, be more open and candid in communications, while the other is adamantly opposed and thinks such approaches are cop outs, or ways of avoiding tough decisions. I mean, here we are, all married together in these committees, but it's like there's inevitably an impending divorce. The bottom line view of public relations? Hey, can't live with them, can't live without them. What's that sound like!

According to the executives, then, a number of organizational constraints and a gendered dialectic in dominant coalitions curb their abilities to advocate effectively and do the right thing. Some suggested that more education and experience mitigate such constraints (Dozier et al., 1995; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, Dozier, 2002), and the executives agreed, emphasizing the value of political experience in organizations and the importance of longer term relationships with other members of dominant coalitions. In addition, they spoke to an important third set of relations—what I refer to as power to relations—subsumed in the dialectic in dominant coalitions.

POWER TO RELATIONS—FORMS OF RESISTANCE

Power to relations refer to approaches, processes, and resources that public relations managers (and others) may use to try to counter or resist a dominance model. These political resources, or forms of resistance, may be classified broadly as *sanctioned* and *unsanctioned*. Sanctioned forms of resistance are seen as working “within the system” and are therefore acceptable in the organization. Such approaches are more often presented or described as ways to enhance advocacy and advance the function and role, rather than as forms of resistance. They also may appear to represent pathways toward greater organizational compliance or co-optation of the function (Rakow, 1989). However, these approaches can be characterized as forms of resistance to the extent that they are used to counter a dominance model in the interests of others and not used as approaches to advancing one’s career or to carrying out instrumental directives more successfully or efficiently.

Perhaps the most obvious form of sanctioned resistance in public relations is enhanced professional skill—education, knowledge, and experience—that may translate into more effective advocacy of shared-power in the dominant coalition (L. A. Grunig, 1992). Related to this is what Spicer (1997) referred to as the “power of performance” (p. 151), or performing at high levels, documenting and communicating results, and adapting the best practices of other professionals and organizations. Spicer suggested that the power of performance is an increasingly important power base that practitioners can use to “win” in the dominant coalition. A third and established form of resistance is to build alliances with other individuals, groups, and functions. A VP described the formation of such a coalition in her company:

It started out as an informal group of six women. In the beginning, we mostly shared our frustrations and agreed to work together to help other women and to monitor company actions regarding opportunities for women. Over time, several men joined the group. We had some differences, but we found common ground in that we all believed in more dialogue. So at every opportunity, each of us in our different functions advo-

cated for increased dialogue, more transparency, in decision making. We did this by closely tracking and challenging significant committee memberships and meeting agendas. Several secretaries helped us gain access to agendas and minutes.

A fourth form of sanctioned resistance is to construct highly rational arguments based on substantive evidence, that is, to develop data-based claims of superior weight. Because corporations often use an economic calculus in decision making, public relations managers also can legitimate claims by using such calculations. One reading of current intensive research into relationship and reputation measurement is that such attempts seek to document the economic advantages of two-way symmetrical public relations and relationship building in a rational manner that “fits” the economic calculus utilized in the dominant coalition. One public relations director at a consumer electronics firm provided an interesting corollary to this approach:

It took me a long time to learn the value of advocating the risks of *not* doing something. So much of the time, and we are taught to do this, our plans highlight the benefits of doing something, or the need to do something. But in several board meetings I attended, it seemed the CEO mostly described the dangers inherent in not doing something. I began to use this type of fear appeal with some success. At least it captures attention.

An encompassing fifth form of sanctioned resistance refers to enhancing political astuteness or becoming a more effective player in the political infrastructure of the organization. Drawing from interviews with public relations practitioners, Spicer (1997) characterized the politically astute organizational member in this way:

The politically astute organizational member has knowledge of the formal and informal decision-making process: He or she knows how to use the system to his or her advantage. Knowledge of the process of decision-making is grounded in being able to identify the key players and knowing their strengths, weaknesses, penchants, hidden agendas, personal likes and dislikes, and their degree of political astuteness. Political astuteness demands that one be aware of human nature, of the strengths and weaknesses of those with whom one interacts. (p. 145)

If political astuteness is important, then public relations educational approaches bear examination. Current undergraduate programs focus on mastering technical competencies but pay little attention to organizational politics or political astuteness. We could benefit from case studies and seminars that provide greater insights into political dimensions of the job, and Spicer’s (1997) text is a good starting point. Knowing what public relations managers should accomplish in the dominant coalition is important; knowing how to do so is no less significant.

Unsanctioned Resistance

Unsanctioned forms of resistance refer to actions or approaches that are “outside the system” and unacceptable to the organization. For practitioners these more radical forms of activism may challenge allegiance to the organization, represent real career threats, and pose difficult ethical dilemmas. We know little about unsanctioned resistance in the profession and associated issues and dilemmas. Identifying various forms of radical activism, however, may raise awareness and increase dialogue about such issues and their implications. Four broad categories of unsanctioned forms of resistance are briefly detailed here: covert actions, alternative interpretations, whistleblowing, and association-level activism.

Leaks and counterculture actions may be the most common forms of covert resistance. Leaks refer to the delivery of sensitive information to key outside parties, for example, reporter or government official. I am not referring to proprietary information such as product specifications, patent data, or strategic marketing information so much as to information that corrects or contradicts “misleading” information that is directed for official release. One retired public relations VP, for example, described how information was deliberately leaked to a local reporter regarding a company media program touting career opportunities for minorities:

I didn't support the program because I felt it was a false campaign, another fashionable program of the month. So I gave some data to a reporter I'd known for a long time and encouraged him to contact an EEO official for more information. I'm embarrassed to say I did this through pay phones, real cloak-and-dagger stuff. The upshot was a critical story appeared, the company scaled back the program, but did hire two minority candidates. I can't say I'm proud of what I did, but I felt good about it. Does that make sense?

Counterculture actions come in various forms but often involve initiating communications and formulating interpretations that oppose those in formal communications. Several VPs mentioned that the grapevine was not only a source of rumors and information but also an outlet for planting rumors and information. One VP described a situation in which the local dominant coalition decided to formally position the loss of a major business contract as a product quality problem for which operational employees were responsible:

The reality was, we lost the business because we took too long to respond to a customer bid. It wasn't a product quality issue at all—it was a decision-making problem. But my protests were overruled and I was given my directives, which I carried out. But I also shared the real story with a friend in production, who spread the rumor on the grapevine, and someone, maybe him, posted anonymous memos with the story on bulletin boards. Within 24 hours management was retreating, and the incident became an important marker in future communication decisions.

Groups often construct their own interpretations of formal communications and actions. Many of the public relations executives indicated they were usually candid with their employees and peers in reporting developments in dominant coalitions and in providing alternative interpretations. Creating and sharing alternate interpretations may be a common form of resistance. It is unsanctioned in that one tacit rule governing those in the dominant coalition is that members are expected to mouth the party line, even if they disagree with it. This represents team playing at high levels. One VP in a manufacturing company said:

Championing a bad party line has always been difficult for me, especially with my own people. When they ask me what really happened in some meeting, or why the company made such-and-such a decision, I tell them flat out. We discuss the issue and what it really means and develop some common understanding. And then they go out and share this interpretation with their friends in the company, who tell others. The irony is, we do this even as we carry out the approved communication activities.

This comment resonates with Mumby's (1997) reading of Scott's (1990) discussion of subordinate groups' resistance to hegemony, wherein groups use low-profile resistance practices to construct interpretations and shared meanings that run counter to the dominant discourse. Like the public relations group previously, "subordinate groups can outwardly or denotatively express acquiescence to the prevailing order, while simultaneously and connotatively defying it" (p. 363). One wonders if practitioners, highly competent in crafting dominant corporate discourses, might be equally capable of constructing dissident discourses.

Whistleblowing, or reporting legal or ethical violators, can occur internally or externally. All of the executives interviewed indicated their companies had ethical codes and mechanisms for reporting violators, but few could recall actual use or enforcement of such codes. None of the executives interviewed had used this form of resistance, and they felt it was little used by other public relations practitioners for reasons highlighted in this comment by one VP:

I can't visualize PR people doing that. I mean, look at the PRSA code of ethics. It's been around for decades, but what have there been, maybe 50 violations reported? If we don't snitch on professionals who are doing something wrong, I can't imagine we would report our own executives. Ratting people out just isn't very acceptable in most contexts.

Association-level activism represents another potential form of resistance, though there is little evidence that the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), International Association of Business Communicators, or similar organizations have carried out or are interested in activist approaches, given their penchant for skills development to improve practitioners' service to executives and

organizations. What might such associations do to advocate power with relations and resist a dominance model? Small steps might include devoting conference sessions to political astuteness, preparing case studies of public relations and power issues inside the dominant coalition, and establishing working groups to address such topics.

More radical forms of association activism might include issuing statements or staging demonstrations to protest deplorable corporate or public relations practices, for example, handling of the Exxon Valdez case or the more recent frauds perpetrated by officials at Enron, WorldCom, and other corporations. Why has PRSA not taken a sharper stand on these recent developments? At the least, public relations managers in these companies were unknowingly complicit in constructing corporate images and discourses that were at odds with underlying practices and ethics. With the integrity and reputation of executives and corporations under fire on many fronts today, there may be no better time for practitioners and academics to mobilize and press their organizations for greater social accountability and transparency. Such activism might help legitimate the profession, provide a mechanism for organizational learning and self-reflection, and more closely align private–public values and norms (Jensen, 2001).

DISCUSSION

Symmetrical public relations theory emphasizes a relational orientation characterized by dialogue, compromise, and shared power. This normative framework represents doing the right thing in practice but, perhaps caught up in its own relational logic, neglects power considerations that influence practice (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Although theorists acknowledge the dominant coalition as a locus of organizational power, they have revealed little of the dynamic power relations at play in this inner circle. As a result, there are gaps in the literature between what ought to be done, what prevents it from getting done, and how it might get done.

This article has reflected on these gaps. My critique of the dominant coalition, formulated in six propositions, surfaced a matrix of constraints on practitioners. I then described a dialectic between power over and power with relations in the dominant coalition and suggested this dialectic is gender loaded. If this is so—and the idea was not fully developed here—public relations advocacy of shared power is likely to be equated with a feminine ideology and therefore dismissed by some power brokers as ineffectual in a “world seen to require” a masculine ideology and corresponding relations of dominance rather than mutuality or cooperation. Finally, I outlined some forms of resistance that practitioners might use to try to mitigate some of these constraints and strengthen power to relations.

My critique bears at least two implications for theory and practice. First, any public relations theory is deficient to the extent it fails to account for power relations and structures in organizations. This is not a new claim but rather one further legitimated here through in-depth interviews with 21 public relations executives. Power is not something “out there” beyond the practice but instead constitutive of practice in shifting relations of power that both constrain and create opportunities for choices and actions. As the executives indicated, power ebbs and flows and moves through various venues and moments of decision making so that practice seems inevitably bound up in relations of power. If we are to illuminate public relations practice and elaborate its possibilities we need more sophisticated theories that incorporate power relations and their manifold influences on public relations practitioners, practices, and strategies. The six propositions presented in this article may be used as hypotheses for testing in this regard.

Second, to more fully understand the pressures on and performance of public relations professionals, it also seems necessary to consider the group, organizational, and social contexts of practice as well as the professional background and orientation of the practitioner. Judy Motion and C. Kay Weaver (2005/*this issue*) provide a substantive analysis of the political, economic and social contexts of public relations practices and discourses in their case study of Life Sciences Network. They argue that understanding such contexts is essential to analyzing and theorizing the practice.

I have focused on the dominant coalition as a central decision-making group in the organization but paid scant attention to the social contexts of practice or the orientations and values of individual practitioners. Although the public relations executives identified a number of very real structural and power relations problems they confront on the job, this web of constraints is nevertheless only one level of complexity that should not mask a deeper and perhaps more fundamental level of complexity, that is, the essential dissonance in the practice itself. Whom do practitioners serve? Their own career interests? The organization? The profession? The interests of others in the margins? The larger society? Moreover, who is defining that service (Rakow, 1989)? Is it the practitioner? The professional association? The CEO or other top manager? A journalist or community official outside the organization?

These conflicting interests and perspectives create tension in practitioners and highlight the importance of roles taken on in practice, which cannot be separated from whom or what one serves or how one is defined. Those serving their own interests will adopt roles that best accommodate achievement of self-interests. Those who serve the organization and achievement of its financial and market objectives are likely to take on roles wherein they carry out instrumental directives as efficiently and effectively as possible. Those who seek to serve the interests of the organization and greater society are likely to find their roles to be complex and constrained. Diverse definitions of roles and interests, found even among profes-

sionals working in the same public relations team or function, render even more difficult the determination of what public relations will be and how it will be used in an organization.

Currently the literature characterizes or defines two roles for public relations professionals: technician and manager. However, limiting our practice field to these two roles may have defined us into a conundrum. Technicians play an important production role but this credential is insufficient to gain admission to the dominant coalition. Managers possess stronger professional portfolios that increase the likelihood of admission. However, there is no guarantee that managers who make it into inner circles will either be able to or want to do the “right” thing. Some will find themselves seriously constrained in their attempts due to existing power relations and organizational structures and practices. Others may be perfectly content inside the inner circle to serve only themselves or their organizations.

Such complexities suggest that it is time to consider a third role for public relations professionals—that of activist. This role grows out of power to relations, or forms of resistance to a dominance model. In the activist role, a practitioner must go beyond advocacy of doing the right thing to carrying out actions to support and supplement advocacy in the organization and larger social system. This article has sketched out a few forms of activism and resistance, but a great deal more research is necessary to clarify a repertoire of sanctioned and unsanctioned forms of resistance and to examine in depth the significant ethical questions and practice implications that accompany this role and these forms of resistance.

One area of opportunity may lie in greater activism on a national level through the combined efforts of thousands of practitioners, teachers, and students who constitute a potentially large and influential activist community. Through new agendas in current associations, or more likely through formation of alternative coalitions, members might combine advocacy of shared power with activism in the interest of shared power. Here we can learn from and use some of the tactics of social movement groups, for example, routinely providing an activist perspective on current events to media outlets; advocating directly or indirectly with organizational leaders through letters, advertisements, or alternative Web sites; or staging special events to garner attention. Can we imagine 1,000 or 10,000 public relations practitioners and academics marching, demonstrating, and lobbying enthusiastically—in the glare of media spotlights—in the interests of shared power and greater organizational transparency?

Although it may be difficult to hold this image, can we nevertheless not envision the possibility sketched out by Frank Durham (2005/*this issue*) of public relations professionals playing the role of “potentially powerful social actors” rather than, or in addition to, the roles of technicians and managers who help maintain and are simultaneously constrained by the organizations they serve? Furthermore, if doing the right thing in public relations is important, and if symmetrical public relations is itself not simply a hegemonic discourse, then before

we comply with the status quo or dismiss the possibility as foolishly idealistic are we not obligated as professionals, teachers, and researchers to take up some forms of resistance that will move us forward from claims and advocacy in our relatively obscure journals and trade publications to more engaged activism in the public world?

At the least, contemplating an activist role for public relations will force us to render more transparent the realities of power relations in dominant coalitions and other organizational structures and processes that touch the practice from virtually every side, at every turn. Acknowledging the power that organizations hold over public relations practices and possibilities, as well as the pressures for conformity and complicity in the exercise of this power, seems an important step on the way to opening up and realizing alternative public relations conceptions and possibilities (Rakow, 1989).

An activist public relations role also might begin to subtly alter relations of power inside dominant coalitions as well as influence perceptions of the practice in the general public. Although some forms of resistance may seem modest, or even futile, it is important to remember that the choices and actions of those who challenge prevailing power structures do influence those structures and relations of power, even as they are influenced by them (Conrad, 1983; Giddens, 1979; Lukes, 1974). If definitions of issues and roles help define power relations, as Stone (1988) suggested, then changing definitions of the roles of public relations may help move us along the path toward changing power relations and doing the “right” thing.

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