

Paradigm Lost (and Found):

A historiographical review of the application of systems theory  
to public relations since 1975.

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Robert Hiscock  
Mount Saint Vincent University

Submitted to:

Supervisor: Dr. DeNel Rehberg Sedo

Thesis committee: Dr. Tess Laidlaw, Dr. Anthony Yue

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## **Abstract**

This study is a critical assessment of the application of systems theory to the study of public relations between 1975-2016. I devise and follow a grounded theory method to deconstruct a representative sample of academic literature, which in turn allows for thematic analysis of the texts. From this I develop a historical-critical periodization framework demonstrating how the early application of general systems theory has now evolved into a rich array of theoretical approaches that consider public relations as a social phenomenon. I document how researchers have assessed public relations from many vantage points, in particular the organization, organization-public relationships, and more recently a system-wide view, and conclude that the role of the individual has been undertheorized. Accordingly, I undertake a preliminary analysis of the individual as a system actor, arguing that the ability to reflect on the perspectives of other system actors is essential to effective systems thinking. The degree to which individuals actively demonstrate systems thinking will in turn determine the degree to which the practice of public relations can help balance an organization's pursuit of its strategic interests with its responsibility to consider interdependencies with other system actors. Finally, I present an updated conceptual model of the public relations system as a heuristic intended to reinforce these points.

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## **Systems Theory and Public Relations**

### **Research Problem**

Many different types of theory contributed to the understanding of public relations leading into the 1970s—communication theory, organizational theory, psychology, and others—however, systems theory arguably had the largest impact. General systems theory served as an important catalyst for the work of J. E. Grunig, who in turn greatly influenced how many scholars applied systems theory with a focus on developing public relations practice for the better part of two decades. Critical approaches eventually established a foothold on the research imagination and challenged this organization-centric perspective, and this in turn has led to more sophisticated and complex approaches to conceptualizing public relations through the lens of social theory.

Today, we appreciate that organizations operate in a multi-layered social system made up of many participants that interact and are in relationship with other system participants by means of communication technology and processes. This social system has become increasingly complex given the degree to which many organizations now operate internationally; the massive growth of communication systems and networks; and the prevalence of social media as a creator and enabler of fluid communities of interest. In addition, it is more evident today than ever before that the actions of organizations can have far-reaching impact: climate change is one example, where long term sustainability of many systems (economic, financial, biological) are threatened by a narrow focus on fossil fuel development. The role for public relations as a communication discipline is more important than ever, yet the dilemma of how to think and act strategically (i.e., communicating in the best interests of the organization) and at the same time ethically

(i.e., considering the potential effects on the system) remains a fundamental challenge. Applying systems theory to the study of public relations will not solve this dilemma, however systems thinking continues to offer insights that can illuminate the challenges inherent in the practice of public relations, and uncover means by which strategic and ethical action can co-exist.

A renewed consideration of systems theory offers a conceptual unifier that includes and encourages theorists to see functionalist approaches as complementary to sociological views. For practitioners, this type of thinking provides a more integrated rationale to support corporate social responsibility initiatives and policies rooted in ethical action, acknowledging that organizational health and sustainability depends upon the larger ecological, financial, and natural systems in which organizations operate. In general, systems theory encourages a more integrated approach to research and practice, and the prospect for developing more universally applicable theory accommodating all social, organizational and functional considerations.

Fundamentally, public relations is a complex social phenomenon, and valid objects of inquiry include individuals, organizations, organization-public relationships, and their interactions within the overall social context. These objects of inquiry are themselves worthy of focused research and represent the framework of the 'public relations system'. In this thesis, I will critically analyze how researchers in the field have utilized systems models to understand public relations, and provide a reflective interpretation as to what this means for ongoing theory development.

## **Research Questions**

The central question that guides this work is: What is the ongoing applicability of systems theory to the study of public relations? Supplemental questions used to support the inquiry are: How have different researchers applied systems theory to this field? What types of systems theory have been considered throughout the history of public relations scholarship? What trends are evident in how researchers have theorized public relations through the 'systems' lens? How has scholarship in this area evolved over time? What are the implications of a renewed emphasis on systems theory for contemporary public relations scholarship and practice?

## **Nature of the inquiry**

My inquiry is a qualitative analysis of academic literature related to the application of systems theory to public relations between 1975-2016. This timeframe encompasses a significant portion of the history of modern public relations scholarship. As a result, the literature sample is diverse, and articles will reflect the evolution of public relations practice and the social, cultural and technological conditions at the time each was published. Therefore, in the next section I provide some historical context on the period as a whole. In particular, I discuss how public relations definitions have evolved; how systems theory was originally introduced to the field; distinguish between historiographical and historical analysis; and document the paradigm struggles which have influenced practice and theory development.

## Historical Context

### Definitions of Public Relations

Rex Harlow (1975) traced the history and evolution of the practice of public relations, from the early days of press agency and publicists to a maturing view of the practice as an organizational function, undertaken by management and utilizing strategic communications to achieve organizational goals. The number and variety of public relations definitions grew significantly during the 1950s (1975, p. 56) as the practice became more professionalized and scientific. Harlow (1977) constructed the following comprehensive description of public relations practice, which reflects the accumulated body of knowledge about the field at that time:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems and issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. (p. 36)

Public relations began to be recognized as a legitimate academic discipline in the latter half of the twentieth century. One of the leading scholars responsible for theory development is James E. Grunig. Grunig & Hunt's (1984) *Managing Public Relations* established itself as one of the premier textbooks on the subject for many years and defined public relations simply as "*the management of communication between an organization and its publics*" (p. 6, emphasis in original). This concise definition captured the four main concepts incorporated in most other definitions—public relations

as a communications function; as a management-driven activity; undertaken by organizations; and directed to specific audiences of interest, or ‘publics’. Grunig went on to develop many important theoretical viewpoints of the late twentieth century, specifically the notion of symmetrical communication (Grunig, 1989, 2001), which emphasized the importance of two-way dialogue with an organization’s target audiences. This in turn evolved into excellence theory (Grunig et al, 1992; Grunig and Grunig, 2000), one of the major theories in the field.

A number of definitions are worthy of mention as a way of coming to terms with a working definition of public relations that will inform this study. Mary Ann Ferguson’s (1984) paper presented to the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) is generally regarded as establishing ‘relationships’ as the central concept of public relations. A number of articles assessing the state of public relations theory (Pasadeos et al: 1992, 1999, 2010; Sallot et al 2003, 2007) confirm the importance of relationships as a key theoretical concept for many theorists. James Hutton (1999) went as far as to say that “communication is a necessary but no longer sufficient foundation for public relations” (p. 212), and proposed that it be defined simply as, “managing strategic relationships” (p. 208).

American viewpoints had to this point dominated the discussion. European scholars Dejan Vercic, Betteke van Ruler, Gerhard Butschi, and Bertil Flodin (2001) concurred that the study of relationships is important for public relations managers, who must demonstrate sensitivity to broader societal issues and approach problems “with a concern for implications of organizational behavior towards and in the public sphere” (p. 382). This is significant in that it refocuses the critical lens from the organization to a

focus on both organization and society as interdependent. Lee Edwards' (2011) definition of public relations is consistent with this, and deliberately avoids organization-centric language in an attempt to elevate the discourse to a wider, societal frame. Edwards defines public relations as "the flow of purposeful communications produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous trans-actions with other social entities. It has social, cultural, political and economic effects at local, national and global levels" (p. 21).

Robert Heath's (2006) description of public relations as part of his 'fully functioning society' theory balances the views of practitioners with those of theory development. Fully functioning society theory (FFST) posits that social actors (individuals and collectives) make decisions based on mitigation of uncertainty and risk through enlightened information seeking (p. 99). This is achieved through dialogue and the exchange of shared narratives, and the cultivation of trusted relationships that are balanced in terms of power and control (ibid.). What is required, Heath argues, is a conception of public relations that allows it to be "capable of adding value to the full functioning of society, one that relishes research and reflective soul searching to define the ethical status of what public relations practice does but does not destroy its soul" (p. 95). Heath thus conceptualizes public relations "as a force (through reflective research and best practices) to foster community as blended relationships, resource distribution, and shared meanings that advance and yield enlightened choice" (p. 97, brackets in original). Heath's understanding of public relations is founded on a combination of systems theory, rhetoric and social exchange theory. Systems theory grounds the definition by acknowledging the primacy of society at large, consisting of "multiple

collectivities, people living and working in groups with varying degrees of agreement, permeability, trust, power, and interdependence” (p. 96), the humanistic rhetorical tradition interprets persuasive communications as “a way of understanding how people make decisions and engage in social influence” (p. 93), and social exchange theory illuminates a consideration of exchanges based on negotiated relationships, shared meaning, distribution of resources, and enlightened interdependency (p. 98). Heath’s description is in some ways as idealistic as other definitions; nonetheless it addresses the key concepts of communications, relationships, and mutually-satisfying exchange, while at the same time acknowledging perspectives that position public relations as a social phenomenon, as well as an organizational concern.

### **The Introduction of Systems Theory to Public Relations**

Researchers who have documented system theory’s impact on public relations commonly refer to natural scientist Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s general system theory as initially the most influential. von Bertalanffy was well aware that there were “many ‘system’ problems asking for ‘theory’”, (1972, p. 414, emphasis in original), and suggested that the term ‘general systems theory’ should be interpreted broadly by researchers in other fields. Kenneth Boulding (1956) also supported the application of general system theory to a wide variety of disciplines outside the natural sciences, noting its ability “to provide a framework or structure of systems on which to hang the flesh and blood of particular disciplines and particular subject matters in an orderly and coherent corpus of knowledge” (p. 208). Both Boulding and von Bertalanffy saw the potential for systems theory to be helpful to the social sciences. von Bertalanffy understood a social

system to be just as real as any other type of system, whether biological or mechanical, and that “social science is the science of social systems” (1968, p. 195). The strength of general system theory, noted Boulding, was its ability to assist researchers “by developing a framework of general theory [that would] enable one specialist to catch relevant communications from others” (p. 199).

Some of the first theorists outside of the natural sciences to take up systems theory were management scientists. Katz and Robert Kahn (1966) had popularized the notion of the organization as an open system characterized by input-output exchanges with the external environment. Russell Ackoff (1971), as well as Fremont Kast and James Rozenweig (1972), also considered a systems approach to be of particular interest for management scientists studying organizations as systems. Cristina Mele, Jacqueline Pels and Francesco Polese (2010) summarized the perspectives of management science, which view organizations as “socio-technical systems...comprised of a social component (people) and a technical component (technology and machines)” (p. 128, brackets in original).

During the past 40 years, a wide variety of different ‘systems’ ideas have been applied to public relations, including: general systems theory; social systems theory; autopoietic (self-referential) systems; and sociological approaches that consider the social world as a whole. Among public relations scholars in the United States, J. E. Grunig (1984) positioned organizational communications as the primary system to be analyzed, and his work greatly influenced many North American researchers (Broom, 1997; Sallot et al., 2007). European scholarship has lately encouraged a renewed consideration of public relations as a social phenomenon (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2007). In addition, as I

will make clear in my discussion and analysis, the term ‘systems theory’ has often been used in a very generic manner, that is, without a direct reference to the work of any specific researcher. For these reasons, my use of the term systems theory is inclusive of this wide spectrum of ideas.

## **Public Relations Historiography**

A distinction between historiography and history is relevant to my study. Researchers engaged in public relations historiography are focused on a critical, interpretive reflection on historical facts and events. Historiographic concerns include: how public relations has been defined; typologies employed as a means of explanation; attempts at periodization; and how dominant ideas of public relations theory, mostly from the U.S., have influenced understandings of public relations at the expense of other interpretations (L’Etang 2013). Gunther Bentele (2015) explains that public relations historiography “reflects, on a meta-level, the different objects of history (persons, organizations, social systems, societies, etc.), [and] their status, roles and developments in history” (2015, p. 21, parentheses in original). In short, “the object of public relations historiography is the history of public relations” (ibid.).

Historical scholarship has in the past been regarded as a specialized area compared to mainstream theoretical concerns, and was not a major area of inquiry for researchers in any significant way until the late twentieth century (L’Etang, 2015). This situation has changed in recent years; there now exists a growing body of literature that re-considers how public relations history has been presented, and argues for new interpretations. L’Etang credits the efforts of Tom Watson of Bournemouth University

for this groundswell of research. Watson initiated the “Special Issue on History of Public Relations” in the *Journal of Communication Management* in 2008, and in 2010 established an annual conference devoted to the research and appreciation of public relations history. *Public Relations Review* published annual special issues on public relations history in 2012, 2013 and 2014, each edited by Watson.

Early narratives of public relations history focused on a discussion of historical events, discussions of organizational use of public relations strategies, and ‘great man’ biographies that “over-emphasize the real influence of individual practitioners at the expense of broad social change” (L’Etang, 2008, p. 321). Moreover, Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models of public relations are presented as an evolutionary arc—from manipulative, one way press agency to the more enlightened, two-way symmetrical communications model of the modern organization—and therefore suggests a progressivist interpretation of how public relations has evolved. Grunig and Hunt themselves noted that “the history of public relations can be described in terms of the four models [and] our analysis of the four models should also help us understand the diversity of public relations practice today” (1984, p. 25, parentheses added). Although this interpretation of public relations history has been criticized as overly idealistic, it continues to be prevalent (Hoy, Raaz & Wehmeier, 2007). Pearson’s (1990) comparison of the work of five public relations historians was one of the first attempts to analyze and contrast the different ways researchers had articulated the growth of public relations as a strategic, organizational practice. He observed several different paradigms of historical explanation—public relations as an instrument of social progress; a tool that assists organizations to pursue self-interest in a market economy; and a rhetorical practice that

helps maintain corporate power structures. The latter stands in contrast to the others by adopting a critical perspective to public relations history.

More recent historiographic analyses generally identify three broad categories of interpretation, examples of which are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Categories of historical interpretation**

<i>Watson, 2012 U.K./International</i>	<i>Bentele, 2015 Europe</i>	<i>Raaz/Wehmeier, 2011 International</i>	<i>Vos, 2011 USA-specific</i>
<i>Reviewed 150 papers from PRR, JOCM and IHPRC between 2007-2013 *</i>	<i>Considered papers presented at annual IHPRC* conferences, along with a range of published literature.</i>	<i>Compared US, British and German PR histories.</i>	<i>Vos' own theory of 'logics of historical explanation' for PR as a social institution.</i>
<b>DESCRIPTIVE</b> Timeline-focused; Reconstruct the past (55% of articles) **	<b>NATIONAL HISTORY</b> Descriptive histories of how PR developed in different countries (30% of articles) **	<b>FACT-BASED</b> Descriptive; Facts and events; Not historiographic	<b>FUNCTIONALIST</b> Evolution of PR functions in organizations; Systems theory - functionalist logic
<b>ANALYTICAL</b> Trace events; Explore causal connections (35% of articles) **	<b>EVENT-SPECIFIC</b> Development of PR within organizations; Development of PR agencies (50% of articles) **	<b>PERIODIZING</b> Chronology and timeline; Developmental stages	<b>INSTITUTIONAL</b> Development of organizational practices & rhetorical strategies
<b>CRITICAL</b> Rethink ideas of PR history; Challenge understanding of power structures (10% of articles) **	<b>METHODOLOGICAL</b> Examine historical methodology applied; Meta-theoretical; Different approaches to periodization (20% of articles) **	<b>THEORY-BASED</b> Select and organize historical knowledge; Identify and understand historical objects that require differentiation	<b>CULTURAL</b> PR and cultural meaning systems; PR as a tool for meaning-making

\* **Journal abbreviations:** PRR – *Public Relations Review*; JOCM – *Journal of Communications Management*; and IHPRC - *International History of Public Relations Conference*.  
 \*\* **Estimates** - Prepared by authors.

Each theorist identifies three distinct categories of historical interpretation, and use different terms to describe them. Although I do not suggest that each researcher’s categories are identical, I find many similarities between Watson (2012), Bentele (2015)

and Raaz and Wehmeier (2011). To use Watson's terminology as a reference point, **descriptive** approaches are those focusing on narrative accounts and are not, strictly speaking, historiographical, since there is little attempt at critical assessment. Bentele's 'natural history' and Raaz and Wehmeier's 'fact-based' categories are similar in this regard. What Watson describes as **analytical** approaches trace key events, causes and connections between periods of public relations history, similar to Bentele's 'event-specific' and Raaz and Wehmeier's 'periodizing' categories. Finally, Watson identifies **critical** approaches as those that rethink public relations history and challenge existing narratives. For Bentele the critical lens is focused on a re-examination of methodological approaches to history, while Raaz and Wehmeier see historical facts as collection of objects that require differentiation. Vos' (2011) typology of 'logics of explanation' is harder to categorize, although his cultural logic of explanation seems best aligned with critical/theoretical approaches to history. Both Watson and Raaz and Wehmeier note that descriptive and analytical approaches were most common among the histories they examined (estimating roughly 80% of histories fitting into one or the other category), and both found that critical/theoretical approaches are least frequent.

In this context, I categorize my study as a historiography of public relations theory development, specifically a reflection and synthesis of the history of systems theory within public relations scholarship. I will reveal patterns of application, assess what those patterns tell us about how public relations has been conceptualized, and comment on how systems theory may continue to offer a productive mechanism to extend our understanding of public relations.

## **Paradigm Struggles in Practice and Theory Development**

To appreciate the context in which systems theory was first applied to public relations, as well as the implications of my historiographic analysis, a brief discussion of the perceptions of public relations in the United States prior to the 1970s is useful. This is relevant to my study for several reasons. First, the earliest attempts at applying systems theory to public relations appear to have originated from U.S. researchers. Second, the perception of public relations, among the general public as well as practitioners, influenced the work of noted researcher J. E. Grunig, whose ideas also owe much to his consideration of general systems theory. Finally, it allows me to introduce the concept of a ‘paradigm’ struggle as a relevant, historical antecedent to the application of system theory in public relations.

From the early part of the twentieth century through the 1960s, public relations practice grew significantly in sophistication and influence. Practitioners were often perceived as shallow communicators, working against the public interest in pursuit of organizational goals (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985). The work of professionals such as Edward Bernays portrayed the public relations counselor as a persuasive communicator whose goal was ‘engineering the consent’ of an unsuspecting public. This legacy continued to cast a large shadow across the profession for many years. As Priscilla Murphy (1991) reflects, “such a paradigm now looks both ethically untenable and ineffective, as the public [had] learned to receive this type of PR effort with suspicion” (ibid., p. 119). By the late 1950s, a growing concern from within the profession had resulted in calls for increased professionalism in the face of a “deterioration in public

confidence” (Bateman, 1958, p. 17). This debate continued through the pages of *Public Relations Journal* for some years.

However, as Marvin Olasky (1989) observes, many mainstream practitioners in fact rebelled *against* attempts to improve the perception of their profession, arguing that a time when public relations had become more powerful and profitable, “was no time to get self-critical” (p. 90). This sensibility was captured concisely by public relations counselor Andrew Lazarus, who in 1963 proclaimed that the goal of practitioners should be “to make money—for their management, their clients, and themselves” (Lazarus, in Olasky, p. 91). Active debate within the profession effectively subsided after that (Olasky, 1989).

Olasky refers to this as an ‘aborted debate’ within public relations, and interprets its significance through the concept of the ‘paradigm’, as introduced by Thomas Kuhn (1962) in *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Briefly, Kuhn’s notion of a paradigm describes a well-developed theory or school of thought that meets with near-universal acceptance within a particular field of study. Through the paradigm, researchers in that field understand the major problems and dynamics of their area of study. A paradigm can be very beneficial, as it documents a set of “presuppositions and frameworks to organize data” (ibid, p. 92), encapsulates a ‘worldview’ about the given subject area, and provides a structure for ongoing research. However, scholars will ultimately uncover new issues, problems, or anomalies that call the paradigm into question; as new ideas gather momentum they divide opinion in the field and can result in a ‘paradigm shift’, which in turn may lead to the establishment of an alternative paradigm. Kuhn suggests that knowledge in a given field of inquiry evolves through paradigmatic phases.

The notion of a paradigm is more typically applied to theories developed in scientific fields, however Olasky argues that Kuhn's concept explains the state of affairs in public relations at that time. The perception of the field as an organization-centric practice focused on corporate goals had effectively become the dominant paradigm, or worldview, within the profession. Practitioners who saw inadequacies in this paradigm argued for change, but their ideas did not gain sufficient momentum to create a shift. The paradigm of the materialistic, unscrupulous organizational communicator continued to be an underlying concern as academic interest in public relations began to expand in the 1970s. This perception had a direct influence on one of the early, leading theorists in public relations, J. E. Grunig, who was the first researcher of note to apply systems theory to public relations.

The search for a paradigm was also a consistent theme in early scholarship (Pavlik, 1987; Botan and Hazelton, 1989; Leeper, 2001; Greenwood, 2010). Researchers believed a unifying theory for the field would establish a common framework for ongoing theory development within what was then a very young academic field, and also provide a body of knowledge that would assist the work of practitioners (Botan & Hazelton, 1989). Numerous unifying theories were proposed, as evidenced in the 'Public Relations Paradigm' special issue featured in *Public Relations Review* in 1993. Systems theory was the first model to be considered a paradigm for public relations (Pavlik, 1987), and greatly influenced Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetrical/ excellence theory (Grunig, 1984; 1992); interorganizational relationships (Ferguson, 1984); game theory (Murphy, 1989); communitarianism (Leeper, 2001), complexity theory (Gower, 2006); dialogic theory (Kent and Taylor, 2002) and evolutionary theory (Greenwood, 2010)

have also been presented as an overarching field theory. Of these, Grunig's symmetrical/excellence theory has had the greatest impact on theory development (Botan, 2006; Sallot et al, 2007; Pasadeos et al, 2010), and his normative approach to measuring 'excellence' in public relations is very focused on the needs of practitioners. Yet it also lies at the nexus of what numerous researchers have identified as an ongoing paradigm struggle within the discipline (L'Etang, 2005; Sallot et al, 2007; Dühring, 2015; Pieczka, 2006; Greenwood, 2010). Lisa Dühring (2015) observes that current public relations research can be characterized as falling into one of three general categories:

- 'Public Relations', which she characterizes as research that "turns away from the Grunigian Paradigm" (p. 12) toward a more critical orientation that conceptualizes public relations as a social phenomenon and a discursive force that shapes society;
- 'Strategic Communication', which is aligned with management studies and an understanding of organizational communication functions; and
- 'Corporate Communications', which she describes as research that continues to be influenced by the positivist/functionalist approach (i.e., the 'Grunig paradigm'), with its practice-oriented emphasis on improving communication functions and processes.

Ultimately, certain ideas become more influential than others, and the history of any field is best understood through an understanding of the evolutionary pattern and impact of such ideas. Albert J. Mills (1990) applies the concept of 'juncture' to studies of organizational change, but encourages researchers to apply juncture to other types of historical analysis (ibid, p. 510). Mills describes a juncture as a "concurrence of events in time in which a series of images, impressions, and experiences come together, giving the

appearance of a coherent whole” and mark a significant break or change in the development of a given phenomenon. Alan Bryman, Emma Bell, Albert J. Mills and Anthony Yue (2011) point out that the concept of juncture is related to Foucault’s notion of episteme; both identify “a form of knowledge that characterizes a particular era” (p. 438). Mills contends that the application of junctures in historical analysis is a useful “heuristic for *making sense of* history rather than as a *representation of* history” (p. 510, italics added). I remained open to observing and explicating such critical junctures as part of my overall analysis.

## Research Design

### Worldview

Given the paradigm struggles that have characterized the field, it is natural to interpret different theories in public relations as offering mutually-exclusive views of the world. I believe that is the wrong approach. All researchers' perspectives have something to offer in terms understanding of public relations. No work is without merit, and a comprehensive understanding of public relations can only result from an inclusive, rather than exclusive, approach to theory development. Indeed, it is only by looking through a variety of theoretical lenses, developed over time, that one can begin to cultivate a more complete picture of social phenomena.

My philosophical worldview is aligned with the critical realist point of view, an approach most often associated with Roy Bhaskar. Critical realism offers a means by which to accept, for any given phenomenon, the validity of both empirical evidence as well as more qualitative epistemology. As Berth Danermark, Mats Ekström, Liselotte Jakobsen and Jan Ch. Karlsson (1997) explain,

the nature of society as an open system makes it impossible to make predictions as can be done in natural science. But, based on an analysis of causal mechanisms, it is possible to conduct a well-informed discussion about the potential consequences of mechanisms working in different settings (p. 2)

Critical realism is an inclusive way of thinking, and asserts that “both natural and social worlds consist in two levels: an underlying ‘real’ (or deep) level and the immediately accessible ‘surface’ level” (Crothers, 1994, p. 213, brackets in original). The surface level is observable and verifiable through empirical study, while “the underlying level exists

independently of human observers and of the particular views observers may have of it” (ibid.).

In an assessment of the status of public relations research, Øyvind Ihlen and Piet Verhoeven (2012) contend that a critical realist worldview is particularly appropriate for public relations because it is “a perspective that can offer a solution for moving beyond the deadlock between positivists (or realists) and social constructionists in the social science” (p. 170). A critical realist viewpoint offers a means by which functional-empirical research in public relations has a place alongside those attempts to explain public relations as a social phenomenon (p. 171).

## **Methodology**

This study is a qualitative inquiry, involving the identification, analysis, comparison and interpretation of a wide-ranging sample of academic literature. My own understanding and interpretation has informed the selection of the sample, analysis, and theory development. Given the personal nature of my study, research methodology must clearly establish reliability and validity. Nahid Golafshani (2003) argues that the terms ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ are more aligned with quantitative analysis, and must be redefined when thinking of qualitative research (p.597). Whereas quantitative studies aim for prediction, generalizability and causal determination, “qualitative researchers seek instead illumination, understanding, and extrapolation” (ibid. p. 600). For Golafshani, reliability and validity in qualitative research are replaced by concepts such as trustworthiness, rigour, and quality, which ultimately serve to “eliminate bias and increase the researcher’s truthfulness” about the social phenomenon under study (p. 604).

In order to achieve a study that meets this standard, I employed a rigorous analysis to provide readers with confidence of my trustworthiness in addressing the research questions. In this respect, my research methodology has been influenced by a grounded theory approach to systematic analysis and interpretation of texts.

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) originally developed grounded theory as a reaction against the reliance on quantitative approaches to sociological research—what Roy Suddaby (2006) calls the “extreme positivism that had permeated most social research” (p.633)—as well as the tendency for qualitative research to employ research methods that lack sufficient rigour. Glaser and Strauss conceived grounded theory as a general method of comparative analysis designed to develop theory from data obtained and analyzed using systematic research practices (p. 1). It is a blend of Glaser’s emphasis on systematic data collection and coding with Strauss’ emphasis on creative interpretation of how humans (as active social agents) engage in social action. Glaser and Strauss have since explored different interpretations of their original work, and other researchers have applied their own interpretations to the original guidelines.

My use of grounded theory represents one such interpretation. Most often, grounded theory methodology is used in social research involving the observation and collection of primary data directly from human subjects. In such cases, the data may include the results of qualitative surveys and focus groups, the researcher’s observational notes, texts elicited from research subjects, documented open-ended interviews, or transcripts from recorded interviews. Researchers are engaged directly in data collection and analysis, constantly comparing their own observations derived from the data as opposed to relying on preconceived hypotheses. One of the characteristics of Glaser and

Strauss' (1967) original formulation of grounded theory is that researchers are encouraged to delay a detailed literature review until after data collection and analysis has occurred (Charmaz, 2009, p. 6), which avoids the risk of prior knowledge influencing interpretations and subsequent theory development. Given that I use academic literature *as* the data to be analyzed and interpreted, the use of grounded theory methodology may appear problematic.

However, I contend that grounded theory is a most appropriate methodology for my purpose. Kathy Charmaz (2009) argues that the guidelines for grounded theory represent a “set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages” (p. 9), and states that grounded theory can be used for diverse studies. While classic grounded theory suggests that literature reviews serve a supplemental role in the analysis, it is unrealistic to assume that researchers bring no extant knowledge to their work. Roy Suddaby (2006) argues that it is a “common misconception that grounded theory requires a researcher to enter the field without any knowledge of prior research” (p. 634). In addition, Joost Wolfswinkel, Elfi Furtmueller and Celeste Wilderom (2011) point out that researchers generally do not offer clarity about how and why literature is actually selected for a particular inquiry, or adequately describe their approach to analyzing it (p. 1). Therefore, they contend that the principles and guidelines of grounded theory are very applicable to conducting a rigorous review of literature and the goal of “extracting the full theoretical value out of a well-chosen set of studies” (ibid., p. 2). In the next section I describe a multi-step process for the search and selection of the literature sample, as well as the methods by which I have deconstructed and analyzed the material.

## Research Methods

Wolfswinkel et al (2011) laid out a five-step process for applying the principles of grounded theory to a literature review study. These are:

- Define: the identification of a suitable data set and criteria for inclusion and exclusion of data;
- Search: the development of a thorough search process;
- Select: refinement of the sample to include articles most relevant to the inquiry;
- Analysis: review and documentation of core concepts through systematic coding; and
- Present: structure the paper and present the content in an effective manner.

A description of this method applied at each stage of my inquiry is outlined below.

**Define.** The research population for this study is defined as academic articles that examine public relations through the direct application of systems theory, or where the main focus is a consideration of public relations with respect to social systems. The timeframe for my analysis is 1975–2016, which represents a large segment of the overall history of academic scholarship in public relations. I selected a start date of 1975 as this approximates the early stages of modern public relations. I include contemporary material in order to understand how scholarly interpretations of systems theory have matured alongside wide-reaching evolution in communication technology, and social, cultural, economic, and political systems since 1975.

My article search focused mainly on peer-reviewed journals and academic collections edited by reputable researchers in the field. Initially, I had planned to exclude any source that might be deemed to be a ‘textbook’. However, the public relations canon clearly demonstrates an inextricable linkage between practice and theory, and research in public relations has been and continues to be greatly influenced by its origins in practice. Therefore, I remained open at the outset of my research to consider including relevant source material from textbooks. Journals or other sources focused *exclusively* on the practice of public relations were excluded. Book reviews, business magazines, newspapers, and other popular sources were also excluded.

**Search.** I deliberately searched for a wide range of material, to do justice to the breadth of scholarship on the subject, and to avoid reflecting only the dominant ideas within the field. My search process was as follows:

- I first developed an inventory of major journals in communications, public relations and mass communication using *Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory* and *JournalSeek*, an online database of academic journals. I supplemented this with Google searches on the following phrases: ‘academic journals in public relations’; ‘academic journals in communications’; and, ‘academic journals in systems theory’. This resulted in a list of 55 candidate journals, as outlined in Appendix A.
- I performed an online search of each journal individually, based on a number of search terms. I searched for “public relations” in combination with the terms

“systems”; “systems theory”; “social systems”; “general systems theory”; “theory development” and “research trends”.

- In addition to searching individual journals, I also performed database searches in order to ensure coverage of relevant articles published in journals outside my own list, and/or those published in less well-known sources. After consultation with library staff, I searched those databases with the most relevance to social science and public relations/communication material: specifically, Business Source Premier; SocIndex; ABI/Inform; ABI/Global; DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals); and JSTOR. The latter is a back-file database and reflects older material more effectively than the other databases.
- I also developed a list of 11 edited collections and two textbooks, as presented in Appendix B. These titles were selected based on frequent citation in numerous peer-reviewed articles.

**Select.** The search process generated a pool of approximately 140 articles with potential relevance. I reviewed all candidate articles once in order to determine appropriateness for the study. Generally, article titles and abstracts in peer-reviewed material provided good indications of potential article relevance. However, I read all articles to make include/exclude decisions. I then established a subset of these articles, approximately 40, and undertook detailed readings in order to understand and appreciate the potential range of theory represented and to select the final sample. From this I selected 30 articles for my final sample, as presented in Appendix C. Articles included in the final literature sample are good examples of:

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- the direct application of some form of systems theory to public relations; and/or
- an article that applies social theory to public relations: and/or,
- critiques of how researchers have used systems theory to theorize public relations.

The sample as a whole reflects a broad array of theory application. Highly-influential ideas within the field are represented, as are ideas that are less well known. I have included examples from researchers working in the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, not with a specific ratio in mind but to deliberately avoid a U.S.-centric sample. A number of comments are in order with respect to four of my sample selections:

- My final sample includes content from two public relations textbooks—J. E. Grunig and T. Hunt's (1984) *Managing public relations*, and S. Cutlip, A. Center, and G. Broom's (1985) *Effective public relations*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Both of these texts continue to be frequently cited by many researchers. Researchers often cite *Managing public relations* for its reference to systems theory and a summary of the four models of public relations (press agency; public information; two-way asymmetrical; and two symmetrical) that evolved from it. With respect to *Effective public relations*, Cutlip et al included an entirely new chapter in the 1985 edition which focused exclusively on the application of systems theory to public relations.
- I include a paper presented by Mary Ferguson (1984) at the annual conference of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Her paper is generally regarded as establishing 'organization-relationships' as the

central concept of study within the academic community (Pasadeos, Berger, and Renfro, 2010; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones, 2003). I sourced this paper from the author directly, as the AEJMC does not retain hard copies from some of its earlier conferences.

- I include a paper by Robert Heath, Judy Motion, and Shirley Leitch (2011) entitled ‘Power and public relations’, which was sourced online from the Institute for Public Relations (IPR: <http://www.instituteforpr.org/about/>). The IPR a non-profit organization dedicated to public relations research, and while its emphasis is on providing applied insights to practitioners it also encourages critical perspectives such as that presented by Heath et al. I believe it is noteworthy since issues of power in public relations have often been overlooked in applied public relations theory.

**Analysis.** Articles in the literature sample were then reviewed in detail through numerous close readings, in which I deconstructed each article by means of textual analysis. The use of open, axial and selective coding is commonly used in grounded theory (Corbin, J. and Strauss, A., 1999). Jennifer Attride-Stirling (2001) outlines an alternative but widely-used approach to textual review called ‘thematic analysis’ (p. 388), paralleling the goals of open, axial and selective coding processes but which I believe is a more useful approach for this study. Thematic analysis uncovers salient themes “in a text at different levels, and thematic networks aim to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes” (p. 387). The process systematizes

the extraction of: (i) lower-order premises evident in the text (Basic Themes); (ii) categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract

principles (Organizing Themes); and (iii) super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal metaphors in the text as a whole (Global Themes) (p. 388)

These are then visually depicted as ‘thematic networks’ that demonstrate the relationships between the thematic levels (ibid.). This approach was effective for my study, enabling a “rich exploration of a text’s overt structures and underlying patterns” (p. 386). I followed the specific stages and steps prescribed by Attride-Stirling for undertaking thematic network analysis (Appendix D). A discussion of my work during each stage is as follows:

***Step A: Deconstructing Text.*** I first devised a coding framework that identified a number of key terms, phrases, or concepts (Appendix E). These were derived from my research questions and from my initial review of articles. During close readings, I highlighted text segments that I felt were important and were generally aligned to the coding framework. All highlighted text segments were then typed into coding sheets, which I created using Excel. One coding sheet was created for each article. I examined the text segments and re-arranged them into common groupings of ‘basic themes’. Duplicate text segments or ideas were uncovered and removed. Identifying basic themes involved an iterative process of grouping the remaining text segments, reflection on those decisions, and making adjustments, until a finite and manageable number of basic themes emerged. From those I then derived a smaller number of ‘organizing themes’, statements that I felt reflected one to four (depending on the text) sets of basic themes. This process also required composing and then editing phrases used to describe the organizing themes. I often made small adjustments to the basic theme groupings during the process of deciding upon organizing themes. These adjustments were minor and involved moving a small number of text segments between basic theme groupings. After settling on

organizing themes, I derived between one to three ‘global themes’ for each text sample, depending on the complexity of each article.

In Table 2, I use four articles as examples of the degree to which text segments were extracted and turned into basic, organizing, and global themes. The range of original text segments extracted varied by article, from a low of 30 to a high of 77.

**Table 2: Deconstruction of text**

<i>Text</i>	<i>Text segments extracted</i>	<i>Basic Themes</i>	<i>Organizing Themes</i>	<i>Global Themes</i>
<i>Bell, S &amp; Bell S. (1979)</i>	42	15	5	2
<i>Brown, R. (2011)</i>	30	13	4	1
<i>Creedon, P. (1993)</i>	48	17	6	3
<i>Edwards, L. (2011)</i>	45	18	7	3

During this stage I also made notes in a separate journal. In these I captured ideas that occurred to me during text deconstruction. As I completed the text breakdown of subsequent articles, journal entries increasingly began to reflect potential connections between previous text samples. In many cases, I also found my journal entries ‘maturing’, in the sense that I began to document more complete ideas that influenced how I eventually phrased organizing or global themes.

**Step B: Exploration of text.** From my digital files, I then began to construct the thematic networks in final form through the process of transcribing (re-typing) the global, organizing and basic themes contained in the excel sheets into table format in Word. In doing so I experienced the content of each article again, this time through my own words; this enabled me to reflect on the themes I had uncovered and here again I made minor refinements to the thematic networks. On occasion, I re-checked the original text in cases where I was unsure if I had extracted the text segments correctly. In the event I had not, I

corrected the text on my worksheet. From this I created a thematic network table for each article (Appendix F, F.1 to F.30).

As an additional step, I composed brief, personal reflections about each text, of varying lengths but generally between 90-130 words. These are also contained in Appendix F. Each offers a short summary that restates what I feel to be key themes from each text, pertinent linkages to other theorists, and in many cases my own personal reaction to the overall text as well. I consider these to be an adjunct to the analysis and theory development sections, however they may be read separately: I do not cite or otherwise refer to the thematic network tables in my written analysis.

***Step C: Integration.*** The process of organizing the material and exploring themes and connections was an iterative one involving a consideration of Excel coding sheets, the thematic network tables themselves, and the process of writing the formal discussion and analysis section. In this regard, my own process was not as linear as that outlined by Attride-Stirling. I continued to write journal notes throughout this stage. These often took the form of diagrams or tables as a means of visualizing connections between the articles, which is a reflection of my personal learning style.

**Present.** The structure of the thesis evolved over the course of the project. I developed several potential thesis outlines, however these ultimately were revised with each submission of draft material. The final format for presentation became much clearer after completing the main discussion section and the completion of this section on research design.

The process of text deconstruction and theme development was time-consuming and laborious. The first half-dozen articles each took numerous hours to deconstruct, as the process was new to me. As a result, I completed the work described in this section over many weeks, and in phases. While initially frustrating, I learned to appreciate time spent away from articles, as it allowed me to reflect on both the texts and the process. Throughout my research, and particularly early on, I referred frequently to Attride-Stirling (2001) and Wolfswinkel et al (2011), in order to ensure I aligned my process as much as possible to their methods.

In the next section I undertake a detailed discussion of the themes uncovered through my deconstruction of texts and thematic analysis. I begin with a summary of a historical-critical periodization framework, followed by a detailed exploration of each phase. I then undertake a critical assessment in which I synthesize themes from all phases.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

This section presents my analysis of the literature sample identified in Appendix A.

### **Summary of Thematic Phases**

I propose a periodization model comprised of three distinct ‘thematic phases’ that outline the general arc of how systems theory has been applied to the study of public relations. Each period is distinguishable by a common theoretical approach. The time periods I have assigned to each phase are to be appreciated in broad terms and not as specific ‘start’ and ‘end’ dates. I refer to the initial phase as ‘*organization-centric*’, which is most evident from 1975 to the late 1990s. The second phase, between 1990 and the early 2000s, reflects a period of ‘*critical reflection*’. The third phase, beginning in the mid-2000s and continuing to the time of writing, I identify as ‘*the sociological turn*’.

Themes from the *organization-centric phase* are, not surprisingly, greatly influenced by the literature on management and organizational science. Systems theory has been presented as an effective metaphor for understanding business and organizations (Katz & Khan, 1966; Ackoff, 1971; Kast & Rosenzweig, 1971; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and this work would have been well known to public relations theorists. In the early 1970s, public relations was considered to be very much an organizational endeavour, and practitioners were typically those working in the communication departments of organizations or as external consultants in public relations or communications agencies. It is not surprising, therefore, that when public relations researchers began to directly apply systems theory, their perspective was informed by its close connection with organizational theory. Characteristics of theory development in this phase demonstrate a variety of common themes: public relations as an organizational subsystem; a

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communications subsystem reporting to a management subsystem; public relations as an intermediary system between the organization and its stakeholders; 'publics' described as stakeholders or groups which are defined by communication managers; and the consideration of an external social system in a very general manner, most often referred to simply as 'the environment'. Systems theory's value is its emphasis on process and structure; internal and external communications resources are seen as systems that process inputs received from other systems and the environment, and in turn distribute communication outputs to other systems within and outside the organization. The organization itself is implicitly placed at the centre of the system. The central unit of analysis is the organization, or in some cases the 'organization-public relationship'. Outcomes of public relations activities were assessed by their ability to help an organization reach strategic or operational goals. This phase contains a strong theme of scholarship focused on the needs of practitioners. Grunig's (1984, 1992) evolution of systems theory into a four-way communication framework and then 'excellence theory', represents the dominant theoretical paradigm arising from this phase.

The second phase reflects a variety of theoretical approaches that, as a group, call for a re-evaluation of this organization-centric paradigm. A common thematic link is evidenced not so much through specific theoretical ideas, but by a common theoretical *purpose*; in particular, a critical review of the presuppositions of earlier representations of systems theory. Theorists addressed a world of far greater complexity than had been presented by earlier researchers, and as a result they were able to identify weaknesses in the application of systems theory in trying to deal with a complex social world. The

narrow perspective of public relations as simply ‘managing communications between an organization and its publics’ was determined to be inadequate.

Some researchers in this phase did not completely reject the validity of organizational perspectives, but explored ways in which systems theory had more to offer. Ron Pearson (1990) questioned an overemphasis on strategic values and organizational goals at the expense of ethical values, the latter of which demand a greater awareness and appreciation of the organization’s place in the social system. He introduced ideas from European social theorists Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann into his argument, which was a significant departure from analyses that had to that point relied primarily on organizational or corporate sources. Pamela Creedon (1993) examined systems theory’s foundations from a feminist point of view, noting that the application of systems thinking may simply lead to entrenching existing gender, race and class norms. Mazda Pieczka’s (1996) view was reflective of the most critical interpretations, arguing that systems theory had been mis-applied and resulted in a practitioner-oriented, ‘hybrid’ theory.

The third phase completes a theoretical turn away from the dominant paradigm and toward a multiplicity of theoretical views. The common theme connecting literature in this phase is that public relations is conceptualized as a social phenomenon. Researchers have begun to explore this theme through the application of a wide range of social theories, many of which have not previously been applied to public relations. Research no longer seeks to adopt an organizational viewpoint; instead, the legitimacy of these assumptions is questioned. The social system as a whole, including actors at all levels, becomes the unit of analysis. Public relations is conceptualized as a

communicative force that impacts, and is impacted by, the social world in a recursive relationship. The work of more modern systems theorists, such as Niklas Luhmann, are applied to public relations in some depth. A wide range of social theories is also applied to public relations for the first time (Ihlen & Van Ruler, 2010; Edwards & Hodges, 2011). Definitions of terminology commonly used by earlier researchers and practitioners are also re-conceptualized. For example, Shirley Leitch and David Neilsen (2001) challenged organization-centric perceptions of ‘publics’ as objects to be defined by communications managers; instead, they present a more dynamic interpretation that acknowledges the power of new communication technology to enable individuals to fluidly form groups without the limitations imposed by geography.

Despite a reduction in the direct application of specific systems theories during this phase, I suggest that the application of social theory implicitly acknowledges the existence of a social system comprised of numerous system actors and stakeholders: the theme becomes ‘systems thinking’, as opposed to the more specific application of ‘systems theory’. Instead of speaking in terms of organizations, publics and the larger social environment, contemporary theorists applying social theory identify micro (individuals), meso (organizations), and macro (social system) levels of analysis. The analysis of power relations figures prominently, as well as a concern with the impact of public relations activities on the ‘public sphere’, are increasingly the focus of discussion.

## **Detailed Thematic Analysis**

The detailed discussion in this section is based upon my thematic analysis of each text in my sample. The articles are listed in Appendix A, in alphabetical order by researcher's last name. For each of the three phases I will make a number of detailed observations pertaining to the themes observed. My focus is on analyzing the different ways systems theory and systems thinking were presented in each phase. I analyze the texts at the thematic level, explore differences and similarities, and uncover underlying patterns. Although I will point out what I think to be strengths, weaknesses or insights arising from various approaches, I do not undertake a detailed criticism of each theory presented.

**Phase 1: Organization-centric.** An examination of themes in the organization-centric phase demonstrates a high degree of commonality in terms of the application of systems theory. Most researchers point to systems theory as having been introduced by organizational theorists. There is an emphasis on structure, whereby the organization is described as an open system comprised of a number of subsystems. Variations are evident in how these subsystems are described, though public relations is generally identified as a communication subsystem, working closely with the management subsystem. The primary roles for public relations are monitoring the environment (inputs) and communications with external audiences (outputs), although it is also acknowledged to have an internal communications role as well (Grunig, 1975; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The primary perspective is that of the organization operating within a loosely-defined 'environment'; few researchers define the term in any detail. Hazelton (1992) is one of

the few who addresses the matter to any degree. He views the organization as an open system, “consisting of a multi-dimensional environment and three subsystems” (p. 35). The environment is characterized as a ‘suprasystem’, comprised of five ‘dimensions’: legal/political (rules and laws); social (individuals and groups; ‘public opinion’), technical (knowledge systems), economic (financial resources); and competitive (other organizations). These in turn influence the organizational, communications, and target audience subsystems. As described, Hazelton’s approach combines structural and process considerations in what he calls the ‘public relations process model’.

Only four researchers out of 10 in this group specifically mention the influence of general systems theory—Grunig (1975, 1984); Pavlik (1987); Hazelton (1992); and Bivins (1992)—and even then, the references are quite general. Terms such as ‘general systems theory’, ‘systems theory’, and ‘systems’ appear to be used synonymously. There are only infrequent references to “social systems”, and I found such references only in Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) and Bivins (1992). Of the 10 articles in this grouping, two involve Grunig (1975) and Grunig & Hunt (1984). Of the other eight, five contain direct references to Grunig or some type of reference to symmetrical communications or symmetry. Overall, the impression of the group of articles is of a consistent, if general, application of systems theory: organizations are systems, and public relations is portrayed as an organizational subsystem with communication roles within and outside the organization. The concept of organization-public relationships is evident throughout.

The relative similarity of these theoretical analyses point to a degree of homogeneity within the field at that time, and of a strong Grunigian influence. Scholars do not agree with each other on all aspects of their respective analyses, however I observe

relatively consistent themes overall, with few if any of what could be described as significantly conflicting viewpoints. Only in Toth (1992) do we find even a mention of critique. She identifies Grunig as a ‘systems scholar’, and states that the “systems world view and the distinct rhetorical and critical world views of public relations practice have been extensively contrasted [but] have begun finding complementary contributions” (p. 4). Toth observes a common critical sensibility in each of these approaches, although she acknowledges that critical intentions may differ. Researchers applying systems theory to public relations “seem to use criticism to search for excellence in public relations” (p. 11). As an example, she points to Grunig’s statement that “communication systems and organizations may be captives to societal culture, [even though] they are also a critical tool for the recreation of culture” (ibid.). If we are to accept Toth’s characterization of excellence theory as a truly critical perspective, it is at best a modest one. Instead, it feels more like an attempt to introduce alternative theoretical viewpoints without directly critiquing the dominant (i.e., ‘excellent’) theoretical model.

For the most part, researchers in this phase conceptualize a system in general terms, as organization–public relationships taking place within a larger environment. Bivins (1992) stands out for proposing a ‘systems model for ethical decision-making’, in which he stresses the importance of human decision-making and the suggestion that “organizational goals should bear a striking resemblance to those individuals who make up the system” (p. 366). Bivins’ approach is focused on the organization and does not adopt a critical point of view, although his acknowledgement of the contributions of individuals in organizational decision-making is not evident in the work of other researchers during this period.

The work of Ulrike Röttger and Joachim Preusse (2013) is also notable. Their model is rooted in the conceptualization of public relations as a ‘boundary-spanner’— a functional role situated between the organization and its environment—although they do not use that term. That idea originated with Grunig and Hunt (1984) and their models of symmetrical communication. However, Röttger and Preusse also suggest that practitioners must deliberately adopt a reflective distance from the client so that they may better represent the perspective of external publics. Concepts such as ‘reflection’ and ‘perspective’ began to arise in the critical reflection phase, which will be discussed in the next section. I have categorized their paper as an example of the organization-centric view due to its use of systems theory to develop a model of public relations consulting. However, Röttger and Preusse’s integration of concepts characteristic of the critical reflection phase makes strict categorization within my periodization framework problematic.

**Phase 2: Critical reflection.** Critical theorists present a wealth of diverse themes with respect to the application of systems theory. I note three general categories of critique—direct critique of the organization-centric interpretation of systems theory; questioning the potential impact of systems theory’s application to public relations; and enhancing our appreciation of how system theory can be of theoretical value. I discuss each in turn.

***Direct critique.*** Robert Brown (2011) argues that the epistemological assumptions of the systems/symmetry approach make it inadequate to explain public relations. Among

his complaints is that it offers a much too mechanical, immensely rational approach which cannot deal with the complexity of the modern world (p. 91). Brown suggests that systems theory has been misunderstood by early theorists who he suggests make a number of incorrect assumptions: that the goal of mutuality can be aligned with the achievement of an organization's strategic goals; that the notion of symmetry implies ethical practice; and that there can be a true balancing of fairness and dialogue. Magda Pieczka (1996) notes similar concerns, but is more direct in her critique of Grunig's approach. She concedes that systems theory is more evident in his work than in other theorists, but contends that he interpreted important systems concepts incorrectly. For example, the symmetry model uses the term 'independence' to mean 'autonomy'; 'interrelationship' is understood to mean 'relationships with internal and external groups'; and 'boundary-spanning' is used to refer to the environment (p. 348-9). This results in a watering-down of core system concepts and ambiguity as to what type of systems model is being applied. Pieczka also observes that Grunig's interpretations are closer to professional discourse than theory (p. 356), in that they prioritize strategic intent as a means of exerting organizational power.

Holtzhausen (2002) is also concerned with how modernist interpretations of public relations privilege management perspectives as a means to exert power. Her critique of Grunig is that even if the two-way symmetrical model attempts to modulate organizational power and take other perspectives into account, practitioners themselves are tools of management (p. 255) and therefore cannot avoid taking an organization-centric worldview. Timothy Coombs (1993) also agrees that systems-influenced rationales do not address power imbalances that are weighted in favour of corporations

(p. 116). Coombs suggests one reason for this is the reliance by researchers on pluralist assumptions; that is, the notion that “all parties have equal access to and equal power in the policy making process” (p. 112) within society. By overestimating the ability of individuals to organize into groups as a means of modulating organizational influence, theorists applying systems theory are able, in effect, to shield public relations from criticisms related to power imbalances. Coombs suggests that systems theory must be applied in more complex formulations in order to fully address such criticisms.

***Questioning system theory’s impact.*** Pearson (1989) provides a clear challenge to organization-centric research, by pointing out that systems-oriented approaches to public relations can lead to one of two directions—a focus on strategic or ethical values. An emphasis on strategic values leads to a functional interpretation of public relations, an emphasis on organizational goals, and unbalanced communication (p. 227). An emphasis on ethical values leads to a focus on interdependence, and a corresponding concern for dialogue, mutuality, consideration of the practical and ethical aspects of interrelationship, and the avoidance of reductionism (p. 228). Leeper (2001) offers a ‘communitarian’ viewpoint, based on the contention that human community should be the primary unit of analysis for public relations, not the organization (p. 97). Leeper suggests that while Grunig’s two-way symmetrical communication model at least encourages an organization to engage in interactive behaviour, it does not stress community because of an undue focus on organizational processes. Leeper, like Pearson, also suggests that systems theory does not properly consider the significance of interdependence (p. 100) and therefore cannot truly focus on building community.

*Extending the application of systems theory.* Pamela Creedon (1993)

acknowledges that systems theory has value as a model for public relations, however is concerned that the application of systems theory with an organizational focus uncritically supports existing male-dominated privilege within public relations practice and organizational structure. The lack of a feminist lens omits a concern for gender balance and cultural diversity, thereby undercutting any potential achievement of excellent public relations. Like Pearson, Creedon feels that the danger in applying systems theory to public relations lies in an uncritical acceptance of established organizational norms and an unchallenged strategic focus.

Anne Gregory (2000) also sees value in applying systems theory, but argues that early theorists opted incorrectly to apply the biologic system model as a direct interpretation of von Bertalanffy; instead, Gregory points to Walter Buckley's (1967) model of complex adaptive systems as a better choice, since it is much more relevant to an analysis of social systems (p. 268). Gregory also points to a number of new developments in system analysis, and suggests these be explored for a more contemporary understanding. Specifically, Gregory points to autopoietic (self-referential) systems; organizational ecology; actor-network theory; as well as chaos/complexity theory as more contemporary, systems-influenced theory.

Whereas theorists had used systems theory as part of an attempt to develop a single 'unifying theory' for the field, Robert Heath (2006) suggests instead to combine systems analysis with social exchange theory and rhetorical theory. Heath expresses concern that as traditionally practiced public relations offers the "illusion of symmetrical

dialogue” (p. 95). He observes that systems theory alone does not provide enough of a societal perspective, and that by incorporating the perspectives of social exchange theory (with its emphasis on effective relationships) and rhetorical theory (communications aimed to create shared realities) a “more fully functioning society” (p. 96) will result. Heath acknowledges that European sociological analysis also has much to offer, in particular pointing to Suzanne Holmström’s (2004, 2007) concept of reflection as a means of encouraging organizational self-awareness and a greater appreciation of its place as a system participant, as opposed to its centre.

**Phase 3: The sociological turn.** The types of theory being applied to public relations in this phase are quite varied, and the common thematic link may in fact be the absence of a dominant theory and the pursuit of a multiplicity of viewpoints. Most researchers in this phase do not start from a comparison or critique of traditional views of public relations, as do the researchers in the critical reflection phase. When analyzing these texts, I sense that the field has now moved past any concern for debating the validity of the Grunig paradigm, or organization-centric viewpoints in general.

The most striking difference in theory presented in this phase as compared with other phases is with respect to its underlying worldview, which is that public relations should fundamentally be seen as a social activity and understood in relation to its context in society (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2010, p. 323). Communication plays an important role in the social system, but it is interpreted as a characteristic of the social system, as opposed to an aspect of strategic, public relations practice. There is a much greater use of social theory as opposed to attempts to apply newer systems theory. Niklas Luhmann’s systems

theory is reviewed in some detail by Suzanne Holmström (2004, 2007) and to a lesser degree Klaus Merten (2004). Øyvind Ihlen, Betteke van Ruler and Magnus Frederickson's (2009) collection features analyses of Giddens (Falkenheimer, 2009), Habermas (Burkart, 2009), Goffman (Johansson, 2009), Bourdieu (Ihlen, 2009), and Foucault (Motion and Leitch, 2009). I would not categorize these social theorists as systems theorists, however they all study a social system comprised of multiple system actors as the primary unit of analysis. The theoretical emphasis has now shifted away from the direct application of a specific *systems theory* to include a more general use of *systems thinking* applied to the concept of the social system.

I observe an influx of ideas that are very new to public relations. With this comes a marked difference in how concepts are described. Organizations are conceived of as 'performances' (Heath, Motion & Leitch, 2011); the adoption of a reflective stance allows organizations to 'legitimize themselves' (Holmström, 2005); and public relations affects the occupational field as well as the habitus of practitioners (Edwards, 2011). Depending on one's worldview, this sociological turn can be interpreted as either a long-awaited maturation of the field, or as describing a theoretical approach that neglects the world of the practitioner.

The application of social theory can be challenging, since the social system is such a large and unwieldy concept. Some form of abstraction of the social world is necessary to understand the practical value of the concepts, and in earlier theory development this abstraction is accomplished by focusing on observable components of a social system, such as organization-public relations or strategic communication processes. Grunig's normative approach to theory development has been criticized for its

practitioner focus, extreme idealism, and its depiction of a simplistic model of system interaction. However, in some sense the application of social theory presents us with a different form of idealism, in that the analysis is at the system level, making it difficult to establish logical connections to the daily work of the practitioner. For example, Habermas' public sphere depends on rational discourse and deliberation taking place in "structures of non-distorted communication" (Edwards, 2016); such concepts are not encountered in organization-centric theory development. Televised and webcast town halls may allow many millions of individuals to participate actively in the political process, however we can hardly describe such television events as a non-distorted form of rational discourse. Today's media society depends on and cannot avoid distortion of the message. As Merten (2004) points out, reality in modern communications systems is a contested concept, since information is presented through multiple levels of mediation, with the result that we experience the "substitution of the real by the fictional" (p. 49).

Here again we see the natural tension between the theorist and the practitioner: theorists focused on analyzing the effect of public relations on the social system can effectively apply the concept of the public sphere, but this does little to assist the practitioner to manage relationships in that space.

Within the work of researchers in this phase, several important sub-themes of analysis are evident: the public sphere (Habermas), communication within complex social systems (Luhmann); power relations (Bourdieu); and actor-network theory (Latour). I will summarize each in turn.

*The public sphere.* Julianna Raupp (2004) and Shirley Leitch and David Neilson (2001) both use Habermasian analysis in an attempt to integrate concepts from social theory with mainstream public relations terms. An overriding theme is a re-conceptualization of commonly-used terms, such ‘public sphere’, ‘publics’, and ‘public’. Raupp uses the term ‘public sphere’ as Habermas defined it: as a space of rational discourse to which everyone (in principle) has access. She defines ‘public’ as referring to the nation-state, as when a government communicates widely with ‘the public’. ‘Publics’ are conceived of as “groups of persons in the environment of the organization” (p. 310), which is consistent with how most practitioners would describe the term. She notes that public relations theorists focusing on society as the unit of analysis are focused on the public sphere, whereas practitioners and organizations focus on publics.

Leitch and Neilsen (2001) use a similar distinction between public and public sphere. From a systems perspective, the public is thought of as the political subsystem/state, while the public sphere is part of Habermas’ ‘lifeworld’ (p. 131). Organization-centric approaches to public relations treat publics as objects, whereas the organization is always assumed to be in the subject position. From the organizational viewpoint, publics only come into existence when an organization defines them. Publics and organizations are, in some cases, interchangeable terms since an organization can also be considered a public (p. 128). Leitch and Neilsen note some connection between Grunig’s symmetrical communication and Habermas’ theory of communicative action (p. 132) in that both encourage mutual discussion. However, they also point to a major distinction between a ‘system’ organization and a ‘lifeworld’ organization. In the former,

communicative action is something enacted by the organization, whereas in the latter, negotiated inter-subjectivity arises through public debate and discussion (ibid.).

Lee Edwards (2016) proposes to theorize public relations through the concept of deliberative systems, which emphasizes the value of societal debates. The focus is on systems of deliberation, and public relations reflects the dynamic tension that must exist for public debate to occur at all levels of the system (p. 73). These levels are described as the campaign level (a specific campaign for a specific purpose); the issue level (public deliberation across a range of organizations with respect to a specific issue); and the systems level (reflecting the aggregate impact of public relations activities, system-wide) (p. 71). Potential exists at all levels for both positive and negative side effects.

*Communication within complex social systems.* Although systems theorist Niklas Luhmann did not write about public relations specifically, researchers have begun to apply his ideas to the field (Merten, 2004; Holmström, 2007). Social systems are conceptualized as systems of communication: society and organizations are produced and reproduced within self-referential (autopoietic) systems. Holmström notes that Luhmann's theory "turns traditional notions of systems upside down— in relation to machine metaphors as well as to teleological thinking, conservative, legitimizing or functionalist ideologies" (Holmström, 2007, p. 255). Instead of discrete system levels comprised of actors, every social contact is considered to be a system, "up to and including society as the inclusion of all possible contacts" (ibid.). Whereas I have described organization-centric, practitioner-focused applications of systems theory as attempts to order the world and imply a measure of control over system interaction (for

example, by ‘managing organization-public relationships’), in Luhmann’s model systems rationality is not defined by the perspective of any system actor, but the perspective of the system as a whole. Holmström points out that society itself is ‘poly-centred’, which means it has no centre, identifiable hierarchy or privileged position. Since every social contact is a system action, organizations and groups are in fact special forms of systems that evolve as a reaction to system complexity (Holmström, 2005, p. 498).

Social systems are communicative filters and it is through these filters that the world is recognized. These filters are continually self-referential, and a system can select only from within the “system-specific horizon of meaning...and what is observed is reconstructed by systems-specific distinction” (Holmström, 2007, p. 256). In this context Holmström distinguishes the importance of *reflexivity* and *reflection*. Meaning derived from the actor’s system-level perspective is a *reflexive* reaction. For example, interpreting interactions only through one’s own worldview is mono-contextual (ibid.), and offers few behavioural options outside that worldview. However, by activating a *reflective* stance, that same individual or organization is able to see its own worldview as contingent on other system perspectives, and as a result new possibilities for interaction and interrelationship are possible.

The implication for public relations is to encourage a consideration of all perspectives within the system, both of the practitioner (as an individual) and the organization. While Holmström offers practical insights, the tension for system actors – for example, organizations and practitioners dealing with complexity, and balancing their own system view with that of other system viewpoints— remains a challenge, and simple distinctions of ethical versus unethical behaviour are not possible. Ironically, while

engaging in reflection provides systems actors with a means to deal with complexity and contingency, it can also lead to “hyper-irritation, feelings of powerlessness and indifference, to paralysation of decision processes” (2007, p. 260). In such cases, attempts to reduce complexity through reflection will be unsuccessful, and may lead back to reflexive behaviour as the only practical alternative.

Klaus Merten (2004) applies a social constructivist interpretation that conceptualizes public relations as a strategy for using communications processes to construct desired social realities. He observes the modern communications system as the latest of societal subsystems. Communication is an integrative force existing at and interpenetrating all levels of the social system (p. 45), which he describes as being comprised of a micro level (basic communications processes between individuals); a meso level (organizations and groups); and a macro level (social system). With its emphasis on structure and process, Merten contends that systems theory is the only theory that provides an effective means to study communications processes and their impact at all systems levels (p. 45).

Merten, like Holmström, is influenced by Luhmann’s systems theory, pointing out that it helps us understand the complexities of a modern society in which the communications/media subsystem grows and evolves much more rapidly than other societal subsystems, such as the economy and politics (p. 48). Merten observes that prior to the development of modern media forms our experience and interpretation of events in the social world was limited to first-hand observation. The growth of communications technology and digital networks has resulted in new processes and social structures. Media, journalism, and public relations have evolved as professions that create, report,

and effectively mediate reality for our individual consumption. The distinction between fact and fiction in media society becomes blurred, which leads to the importance of the creation and maintenance of image (p. 49). The development of professions such as journalism and public relations thus derive their influence from the construction of social realities through the substitution of fictional images in place of real events.

***Power relations.*** The dominant, organization-centric interpretation of public relations has minimized the issue of organizational power, and instead theorizes that symmetrical, two-way communication is an evolutionary step in the practice towards overall ‘excellent’ public relations. As I have shown, systems theory is perceived to have influenced these theories, and to promote the view that it is possible to effectively manage and balance mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.

Theorists focusing on the application of social theory observe power relations as residing at the core of social structure and relationships. Edwards’ (2011) analysis focuses on the interaction between public relations and society using Bourdieu’s concept of fields, capital and habitus (p.61). Bourdieu thought of fields as “systems of competitive relations between different agents in a particular sphere of activity” (p. 62), and positions within society and various fields are based on competitive relationships. An overarching field of power within society encompasses and influences all other fields; public relations is one such field. Edwards notes that public relations practitioners not only assist clients and organizations to compete in their own respective fields of power, but they also compete between and amongst themselves for influence within the field of

public relations (ibid.). Practitioners share a similar habitus (p. 69) with respect to their practice, which is also influenced by its 'doxa', or the set of rules, codes and guidelines that dictate the norms of effective practice. Seen in this light, I suggest that we can interpret Grunig's four models of communications as examples of presuppositions that influenced the habitus of practitioners and theorists alike, and his description of 'excellent' public relations as part of the doxa influencing public relations practice. The effects of public relations are felt within the very fabric of society. It impacts the habitus of all individuals, manifesting in a set of durable dispositions that influence our attitudes, value and beliefs, and ultimately "determine the way we comprehend our social environment and our role within it" (p. 67). Edwards notes that these impacts are not simply isolated incidents, but reflect the "systemic nature of the mutual effects of PR and society" (p. 70). In this way, the structures and power relations within the field of public relations reflect the structures of society.

Robert Heath, Judy Motion, and Shirley Leitch (2011) remind us that the concept of power in public relations has been thought of as problematic: "through linguistic relations, public relations engages in power resource management in ways that can make society more (or less) fully functioning" (p. 5, brackets in original). Public relations connects system actors with power structures on an iterative and ongoing basis, as structures connect to and with other structures in a process that results in society (ibid.). The central theme of their analysis suggests the importance of words "to create shared meaning that serves as and consequently defines the power resources of the society" (p. 3)

3) Power is theorized as a collective resource within the system, enacted through discourse.

***Actor-Network Theory.*** Bruno Latour's Actor-network-theory (ANT) has not been applied to public relations to any significant degree. Piet Verhoeven's (2009) paper is the most recent and comprehensive analysis on the subject, and he identifies Ian Sommerville (1999) as the only other public relations researcher who has addressed ANT. As I noted earlier, Gregory (2000) briefly identified ANT as one of the newer systems perspectives that "have relevance to the practice of modern-day public relations" (p. 270). The lack of direct interest in ANT by researchers and practitioners to date suggests otherwise, and I believe this is mainly due to the extreme complexity and esoteric quality of Latour's ideas. His focus on networks of association that include both human and non-human actors, as opposed to a social sphere comprised only of human actors, challenges most of the presuppositions of traditional public relations practice. Although Latour did not write specifically about public relations, he does identify 'public representation' as one of four important process loops occurring in society. This is an important process in that it supports the dissemination of knowledge (facts), a central theme in Latour's theory. Verhoeven interprets public representation to include activities we would call public relations (p. 173).

ANT rejects the premise that nature and society are distinct entities. Instead, "nature and society are constructed in one process of attributing meaning... phenomena are to be explained by the *process* by which they are made and the strength and length of the *network* in which they are embedded" (p. 168). Latour essentially flattens notions of social structure or hierarchy, proposing instead a "sociology of associations" (p. 172) that bears resemblance to Luhmann: both acknowledge the presence of system actors but

eschew the presence of stable system levels or hierarchy. Understanding phenomena from an ANT perspective entails a process of studying all actors (human and non-human) in the *process* of associating and interacting with each other (ibid.) For example, a traditional, organization-centric public relations perspective reflecting on or dealing with a conflict about an oil spill will focus on the human actors—the oil company, environmentalists, residents, and customers. From an ANT point of view one would also consider all non-human actors (or, ‘actants’) to develop a more complete understanding of the process and resulting associations, including: the oil spill, the sea, the ship, and the machinery that failed (Somerville, 1999; Gregory, 2000).

Latour’s model is challenging and unlike traditional conceptions of social systems or systems theory. Its focus on tracing the process of associations between actants within nature and society (sentient and non-sentient, animate and inanimate, mechanical and biological) suggests a tacit acceptance of the importance of interrelation and interdependence, however there are no “micro- or macro-level[s] in society, no inside or outside...only transformations, displacements, and difference of scale produced by actors” (p. 170). Arguably, ANT is at the very edge of what I might interpret as systems theory. Nonetheless, Verhoeven identifies three broad areas where ANT may be applicable to the study of public relations.

- It provides a rich, analytical perspective to study public relations process and people in action (p. 173). It aligns to the over-arching theme within the sociological phase to explore a wide variety of new theory.

- ANT analysis illuminates a discussion of the tensions between the interests of many actors, and how these “tensions...are created and handled by public relations people” (p. 175).
- It supports an analysis of how public relations practitioners create and contend with public representation, including ideas of openness, transparency, public opinion and democratic process (ibid.).

Verhoeven believes that applying ANT to public relations practice is problematic; however, by extending and challenging our analytical perspective it can be of great theoretical value to the field (p. 182). It provides a richer and more complex understanding of public relations than that available through normative or traditional theory, and can ultimately make the study of public relations a more reflective process (ibid.).

### **Critical Assessment and Observations**

In this section I outline a number of relevant observations about the literature sample as a group, instead of discussing each phase on its own. Together, the phases of theoretical development can be combined to represent a collection of academic thought on this subject. I do not privilege any particular phase of theoretical development over another; like any system, we can appreciate the entire system when we consider the perspectives of participants at each level, yet also recognize that they exist only in relationship to each other. Literature from the organization-centric phase, for example, continues to have something to teach us, not only on its own merits but perhaps more importantly in reflection and synthesis with ideas in later phases. My objective is to

connect perspectives about how systems theory has been applied to public relations over the entire timeframe on which I am focusing. The analysis in this section will also point to a potential way forward in terms of my own theory development, and uncover possibilities for future study.

**Systems theory and systems thinking: assessing applicability.** It is not surprising that public relations researchers in the US were influenced by how systems theory had been applied to organizational theory and management science. As a result, public relations and communications were observed to be subsystems within an organization and thought of in terms of structure and process. Early theorists started from the work of von Bertalanffy's (1968) general systems theory, which originated in biology. Numerous public relations researchers discussing systems theory background their analysis by noting three general types of systems: mechanical, biologic, and adaptive (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Pieczka, 1996; Gregory, 2000). Terms used for each may differ slightly but the overall presentation is consistent. Mechanical systems are self-contained in terms of operations, have low tolerance to system change, and are effectively closed to environmental influences. Biologic systems are generally thought of as open systems; that is, they obtain valuable resources from the environment (energy, information) and use these inputs to maintain a relatively stable overall system. These systems have some dynamic capacity, but overall the goal is to maintain a relatively stayed state—homeostasis and equilibrium are critical. Adaptive systems are capable of, in fact depend on, adaptation and evolution based on their interaction with a wide variety of system influences (Pieczka, 1996, p. 335). A number of researchers suggest that an

adaptive systems model is more applicable to the study of complex social environments (Pearson, 1990; Pieczka, 1996; Bivins, 1992) and all specifically mention the work of Walter Buckley (1967, 1968) as an important theorist. One would expect that Buckley's ideas would have generated more interest within the field, yet it is not clear that any researcher has meaningfully applied Buckley's model to public relations. Instead, Grunig and Hunt (1984) and others applied a very general form of systems model. Ultimately, their goal became the development of original theory from within public relations, designed to help organizations and practitioners. I feel these researchers did not fully acknowledge that systems participants do not fully exist except for the relationship they have within the overall system, and that all participants impact and are impacted by system interactions. In this sense, I believe that Grunig undertheorized systems theory. It appears that he did not adapt his thinking on public relations to systems theory, but instead adapted systems theory to an organization- and practitioner-centric perspective.

**Systems theory and symmetry as synonymous terms.** Grunig's concept of two-way symmetrical communication is often observed to be the foundation of an 'excellent' approach to public relations. To his credit, he does encourage organizations to take into account the needs of stakeholders and publics and seek a mutually-beneficial relationship. His ideas have been hugely influential, and the terms 'symmetry' and 'excellence' are used as short-form references to his work. Many other researchers, whether commenting on Grunig's theory or developing their own ideas, often employ the phrase 'systems/symmetry' as if these two terms are synonymous. For example, Carl Botan (1993) compares "rhetorical/critical and social scientific models on the one hand and the

symmetric/systems model on the other” (p. 109). Robert Brown (2011) offers another example, stating that “the assumption of PR as a ‘function’ emerges from systems-symmetry’s mechanical perspective” (p. 94, quotes in original); and Timothy Coombs (1993) noted that “the systems perspective, as used in public relations, is based upon the idea of symmetrical public relations” (p. 114). These types of expressions conflate two distinct terms and encourage them to be viewed as synonymous. Several issues arise from this. First, a large and separate body of systems theory is consigned to the role of descriptive adjective of a larger idea (symmetry). Second, any distinction between systems theory and Grunig’s own formulations is eliminated. Third, criticism of the Grunig paradigm (represented by the term ‘symmetry’) also implicates systems theory.

**International influences.** The literature in my sample representing the organization-centric phase is exclusively the work of U.S.-based researchers. I have observed the organization-centric perspective of many early U.S. researchers, who wrote without apparent regard for public relations theory elsewhere in the world. The critical reflection phase includes examples of researchers writing from around the world, including the U.S. Most of the examples of the sociological perspective of public relations are from Europe and the U.K. Overall, we now see a large increase in the number and variety of ‘systems-influenced’ public relations theory, and this is beginning to encourage cross-pollination of research around the world.

**System level analyses.** Many of the analyses represented in the literature sample provide contextual background on the nature of systems and system actors, however they

direct most of their focus to one identifiable unit of analysis. For example, early theorists emphasized the organization as the central concept (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Pavlik, 1987; Bivins, 1993). Other concepts were also taken up as the central focus for analysis: publics (Heath, Motion & Leitch, 2011); communications (Grunig, 1975; Hazelton, 1992; Merton, 2004); relationships (Ferguson, 1984; Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997); community (Leeper, 2001); public sphere (Raupp, 2004; Edwards, 2016); practitioners (Röttger & Preusse, 2013); and society (Edwards, 2011). Individually, they add much to our understanding of systems in the context of public relations. Taken as a group, they address all the core concepts that are included in most definitions of a system.

Specific analysis of each system level on its own is absolutely essential, since talking about a system as a single concept is impossible without reference to its component parts. These components are the first-level abstractions of the larger idea, and explication of these concepts is required for a full application of systems theory. Some of the examples in the latter phase (sociological turn) seem to be mindful of this. For example, Juliana Raupp's (2004) analysis of public relations and the public sphere identifies and considers communication at all levels— the general 'public' (comprised of individuals), 'publics' (comprised of groups and organizations), and the 'public sphere'. Øyvind Ihlen and Betteke van Ruler (2011) similarly describe micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of analysis, which correspond, respectively, to individuals, organizations, and society. Merten, who acknowledges Luhmann's systems theory as the most relevant, identifies communications contacts occurring at individual, organizational/group and societal levels.

Holmström does not fit this model, since she pointed out that the concept of ‘an organization’ does not exist in the traditional sense but is instead the result of communications decisions in the system as a whole. ANT also is an outlier in that it conceives of a network of associations involving human and non-human actors, without identifying an enduring system structure. A comparison of selected texts from my literature sample indicates a wide variety of ways of acknowledging and conceptualizing the presence of a social system (Table 3).

**Table 3: Comparative descriptions of system levels/hierarchy (by year of publication)**

<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Focus of analysis</i>	<i>Social units of increasing size and complexity</i>		
		←—————→		
<i>Grunig, J. E. (1975)</i>	Organization subsystems	Functional subsystems	Organizations & publics	‘The environment’
<i>Broom, G, et al (1997)</i>	Relationships	Interpersonal	Organizations & publics	Social systems
<i>Ferguson, M. (1984)</i>	Relationships	Organization	Publics	‘The environment’
<i>Pearson, R. (1990)</i>	Strategic and ethical values	Micro domain (Individual, family, community)	Meso domain (Political systems)	Macro domain (Mankind)
<i>Hazelton, V. (1991)</i>	Communications process	Micro (organizational subsystems)	Organization	Macro (environmental suprasystem)
<i>Creedon, P. (1993)</i>	Organization	Infrasystem (individuals and organizations)	Subsystems (in the organization)	Suprasystems (economic, technical, political)
<i>Merten, K. (2004)</i>	Communication systems	Individual communications	Organizational & group communication	Societal communications
<i>Raupp, J. (2004)</i>	Social system	Public (All individuals)	Publics (groups of persons in the environment)	Public sphere
<i>Holmström, S. (2007)</i>	Social systems	Society is poly-centred with no centre or privileged positions. Every social contact is a system; society is the inclusion of all contacts.		
<i>Ihlen, O. (2009)</i>	Social system	Micro-level (Individuals)	Meso-level (Organizations)	Macro-level (Society)
<i>Verhoeven, P. (2009)</i>	Actor-networks	No micro- or macro-system in society. System participants include human, technical, and natural ‘actants’, intermingled in one network.		
<i>Edwards, L. (2011)</i>	Power	Practitioners	Organizations	Public sphere
<i>Edwards, L. (2016)</i>	Deliberative systems	Campaign Level (Micro)	Issue Level (Macro)	System Level (Public sphere)

In earlier research, there is less direct acknowledgement of the full range of system participants. For example, Grunig and Hunt (1984) generally refer to participants other than organizations and publics simply as ‘the environment’. A more transparent example is found in Ferguson (1984), who stated that “the unit of study should not be the organization, nor the public, nor the communication process. Rather, the unit of study should be the relationships between organizations and their publics” (p. 40). Despite her suggestion that researchers should not focus on the organization, Ferguson’s analysis can be characterized as organization-centric since she is interpreting these relationships from the organization’s point of view. In my view, to suggest that any system analysis *is able to* focus only on one central concept is problematic, and overlooks the interdependence of multiple actors. Clearly, relationships are important to identify and study—systems theory depends on interconnectedness and interdependence, which “makes it unavoidable that one focus on interorganizational or intergroup (i.e., intersystem) relationships” (Pearson, 1990, p. 224). It is also useful to reduce complex problems to manageable units of analysis, however one must be mindful of the challenges of reductionism, by which I mean the assumption that a particular feature *of* a system can represent, or is sufficient to explain, the system itself. It therefore seems like an oversight to identify relationships as the core concept—relationships imply that participants exist in relation to each other; a method of exchange is required (communications, energy) for participants to activate, assess and maintain relationships; and relationships are required for us to identify larger societal entities (a public, community, the public sphere). In fact, one of the characteristics of the organization-centric phase seems to be an assumption that the organization is at the centre of the public relations system, not simply an integral part of

it. The result is that any system object that does not directly impact the organization is of reduced theoretical interest.

**The individual as system actor.** The previous section observed that research applying systems to public relations has considered a variety of system viewpoints, however I found no evidence of research focused primarily on the one system perspective that is essential to all others—the individual—as the central unit of analysis. Generally, the presence of the individual is assumed; that is, we all understand that any organization is comprised not only of technology, bricks and mortar, but also people. The presence of an individual in public relations is evident mainly in the form of the practitioner: the subject, object and intended audience for much of the theoretical development of that phase. Heath (2006) goes further by suggesting that the discourse within the field of public relations is influenced by the socio-economic presuppositions of corporate culture. He suggests that a corporate role for communications is “the essence of modern public relations” (p. 94), and that as a result, the “corporate (organizational) role has replaced single individuals in citizenship roles of the fully functioning society” (ibid.). The economic system in the US is pro-business and pro-marketing—arguably more so than elsewhere in the world—and corporations have the same legal rights as individuals. From this perspective, an organization-centric interpretation of public relations can be interpreted as a presupposition influencing public relations practitioners and organizational managers.

Certainly, most theorists implicitly acknowledge the physical presence of individuals, for example, as members of the general public (Raupp, 2004) or, as in Ihlen

and van Ruler (2011), as the micro level of analysis. Researchers focusing on a discussion of organizational communication generally do so without reference to the individuals that make up the organization. Equally, researchers speaking about targeting external publics do not consider extending the analysis to the individuals that comprise the public being discussed. The aggregation of individuals into a defined 'public' is an attempt to simplify analysis. However, publics themselves cannot be said to 'act' except insofar as they represent the collective results of the actions of individuals. By not addressing the presence of the individual there are missed opportunities in terms of theory development.

Creedon's (1993) argument for the acceptance of an organizational infrasystem encourages a more inclusive approach to gender, race, class and sex norms, and is an example of the value of considering the individual in more depth. For Creedon, the infrasystem is "the foundation of institutional values or norms that determine an organization's response to changes in its environment" (p. 160). As I interpret this, Creedon is arguing for more than just numerical diversity in the organization or public relations agency, but for the need for acceptance of the 'interior dimensions' of the individual. It would make little sense to achieve a workplace that is representative of the social world in terms of the number and types of individuals who work in organizations, without also then internalizing the perspectives, views, and opinions derived from the interior world of the diverse group of individuals who make up the organization system. Reaching gender equality in terms of total staff complement within an organization (or community, government, etc.), equal presence within management and other power structures within an organization, and equal treatment in terms of compensation and

employee benefits for all, are decidedly important. However, they would be meaningless if the result is simply the entrenchment of existing male-dominated modes of behaviour or socio-cultural norms that are expected within the organizational system. Creedon's work is compelling for its emphasis not simply on the presence of individuals within an organization, but for the recognition of the importance of the interior dimension of these individuals.

It can be argued that systems theory in general does not typically generate much theoretical value with respect to a discussion of the inner world of individuals. Diane Witmer (2006) suggests that the traditional, systems-based approach to public relations "underestimates the communicative interactions by which publics are formed" (p. 365). American philosopher Ken Wilber (1996) observes that the focus of systems theory is understanding the dynamics of social integration, with an emphasis on *functional fit*; the systems theorist is not interested in any interior meaning but rather in functional relationships within the system as a whole (p. 107). The complexity of the modern world also makes it difficult to observe system insights through the lens of the individual. Suzanne Holmström (2004, 2007) has extensively considered Niklas Luhmann's systems theory with respect to public relations. Although Luhmann never theorized directly about the field, "his theories enable identification of frames for understanding public relations in interrelation to society's overall coordination process" (Holmström, 2007, p. 255). Luhmann sees social systems as systems of communication (ibid., p. 256), which continuously manifest themselves through self-referential circuits of communication (Holmström, 2004), and are sometimes criticized for completely omitting any consideration of the individual. However, Holmström argues that Luhmann's theory is

not intended minimize the role of human beings; rather, “society has reached such a level of complexity that you cannot analyze its dynamics by reference to individual actors, but by reference to systems” (2004, p. 497).

Holmström also acknowledges that *individual consciousnesses* are connected with communicative social systems and are in fact a precondition of them (ibid.). An important part of the sociological perspective concerns itself with the role of meaning-making through discussion within the public sphere, which itself is “a social construction of mankind” (Ihlen & Van Ruler, 2010, p. 10). Pearson (1990) notes that the “goals of systems are not interpreted simply in terms of systems self-preservation but are based on rational discussion” (p. 231). Pearson draws from Habermas’ notion of the public sphere, interpreting this as complementary to Buckley’s (1967) explication of complex adaptive systems. In Buckley’s approach, the social system is a self-regulating entity where “decision-making is seen as the exemplar...of the sociocultural system, of the general selective process occurring in every adaptive system” (p. 79). Society is essentially an “organization of meanings” (p. 92). I suggest that meanings involve both interpersonal (message creation and distribution) and intrapersonal (sensing, deciphering and interpretations) systems processes.

It is true that most systems theory deals with assessments of external processes, structures, and relationships that define those structures, and does not explore the interior mechanisms. Yet, social systems rely on communication as a means of activating and maintaining these relationships, and public relations is in the communications business. Communication is also fundamental to human experience, and to the relationships that

define and sustain us. A dedicated examination of the individual as a system actor would be an interesting and valuable addition to the literature.

**Fundamental tension between public relations and systems theories.** Evident in Pearson’s work is the appreciation of a natural tension between strategic values (organizational goals) and ethical values (intersystem relationships). This dynamic continues to confront practitioners and theorists alike. Other researchers acknowledge this tension in a variety of ways, as depicted in Table 4, below. I describe this as the tension between a ‘system-wide perspective’ and a ‘system-level perspective’. The common characteristic in each is a recognition of the tension between the perspective of the participant at their level of the system, versus a systems perspective that includes other participants and the system as a whole. This tension is at the very centre of public relations, whether observed from an organization view or from a sociological, systems-wide view. It is not a problem to be solved, but rather a fundamental part of social system formation, in terms of structure, power relations, and relationships.

<i>Table 4: Competing perspectives within systems</i>		
<i>Researcher</i>	<i>System-wide perspective</i>	<i>System-level perspective</i>
<i>Bell and Bell (1976)</i>	Functional public relations <i>Advisory capacity: influence the organization’s ability to adapt.</i>	Functionary public relations <i>Follow dictates of management, maintain system status quo.</i>
<i>Grunig &amp; Hunt (1984)</i>	Two-way symmetrical <i>Communication that takes mutual benefit and end results into account.</i>	Two-way asymmetrical, Public information, Press agency <i>Prioritizing the organization view, and/or one-way communication.</i>
<i>Cutlip, Center, Broom (1985)</i>	Open systems thinking <i>Considers publics in the environment; open to adaptation.</i>	Closed systems thinking <i>Not open to change based on environment.</i>
<i>Pearson (1990)</i>	Ethical values <i>Focus on intersystem dependencies.</i>	Strategic values <i>Focus on organizational goals,</i>

<i>Bivins (1992)</i>	Counsellor role <i>Objectivity: analyze client goals and advise among alternatives.</i>	Advocate role <i>Subjectivity: work in the interests of the employers/clients.</i>
<i>Holmström (2007)</i>	Reflection <i>A poly-contextual view of the system and actors at each level.</i>	Reflexivity <i>A mono-contextual view of the actor at its own level.</i>
<i>Röttger/Pruesse (2013)</i>	Systemic consulting <i>An advisor: assists client in reflection, stretches the organizational-only perspective by advising of options.</i>	Classic consulting <i>A problem solver: directs client, with tactics based on acceptance of organizational goals.</i>

Organization-centric viewpoints suggest that this tension is to be minimized or negated through ‘excellent’ practice. Normative theory attempts to describe ways to reduce the tension by engineering a mutual understanding between organization and public, usually to the organization’s benefit. Researchers who have adopted a critical perspective acknowledge the tension between the dominant, organization-centric view and the problems or issues it creates for practitioners and theorists. Some deal with these issues by extending the interpretation of systems theory (Creedon, 1993), by applying other theory (e.g., rhetorical and social exchange theory) to complement the use of systems theory (Heath, 2006), or by pointing out the relevance of more complex types of systems theory (Gregory, 2000). Postmodern views suggest a role for dissensus-driven, rather than consensus-driven, models of interaction, and encourage diverse views to be heard in order to control and re-calibrate power relations between organizations and publics. Likewise, sociological views that consider the social system as a whole must acknowledge specific systems-level perspectives as well, because it is the very tension created between and among system actors that gives a system its energy and adaptive capability.

**‘Juncture’ and the influence of Ron Pearson.** On the basis of my literature sample I have identified three broad periods depicting the evolution of public relations theorized through the lens of systems theory. These are not intended to delimit or restrict our understanding of each phase. I have identified several researchers within the *critical reflection* phase who offer significant insights into the application and relevance of systems theory. I contend that we may view this critical reflection phase as a period of ‘juncture’ (Mills, 2010) within the context of the study of systems theory in public relations. Mills used the concept of juncture to understand how an organization may be understood over time, however believed it could also apply to a variety of other applications (p. 510). A juncture occurs when “there is a concurrence of events over time in which a series of images, impressions, and experiences come together, giving the appearance of a coherent whole that influences how an organization is understood” (ibid., p. 509). In this case, I am referring to the academic field, and the common experience is the questioning of the dominant paradigmatic view and the opening up of theory development. Mills notes that the concept of juncture is particularly applicable in cases where time periods are employed as a heuristic “for making sense of history rather than as a representation of history” (ibid., p.511). My analysis fits this category as my periodization is intended as a heuristic as opposed to a demarcated timeline.

While it is difficult to identify any one paper or a single researcher as a specific turning point of historiographic explanation, the work of one researcher, Ron Pearson, comes closest to being the primary catalyst for this juncture, and for a marked change in the direction of academic thought on this subject. His contributions to the field were, sadly, cut short by his untimely passing in 1990. Pearson’s (1990) ‘Ethical values or

strategic values? The two faces of systems theory in public relations', is particularly relevant and well-known in the field. His critical and theoretical impact related to this study is evident in three important respects.

**1) Critical assessment of the dominant paradigm.** Consider the context at the time Pearson published his influential paper. J. E. Grunig was by then established as the pre-eminent researcher in the field. He had an extensive record of publishing and consulting, and had become well known for his consideration of general systems theory and its application to organizational communications. Grunig and Hunt (1984) had introduced the still-popular four models of communications model in *Managing public relations*. Grunig had begun his multi-year 'excellence' study in 1985 through funding from the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and by 1990 this study was well underway. His research reflected a clear focus on the practitioner and a privileged view of strategic, organizational objectives, and was considered the dominant paradigm in the field (Pieczka, 1996).

While other researchers put forward a variety of competing unifying theories for the field (Greenwood, 2010), historiographic (i.e. critical historical) scholarship in public relations had not yet taken hold in public relations scholarship (L'Etang, 2015). In this context, Pearson's work represented an emergent critical re-assessment of the application of systems theory, effectively arguing for a re-evaluation of the fundamental presuppositions upon which much of the theory development in public relations to that time had been based.

Pearson did not reject the relevance of pursuing strategic objectives, but questioned them as the sole purpose of public relations. Fundamentally he saw the concepts of interdependence and interrelationship as critical components of systems theory, which therefore made interorganizational relationships paramount (p. 224). From this, he categorized relationships as both strategic and ethical in nature. Prioritizing *strategic values* alone would lead to a “narrow, functionalist perspective... while prioritizing *ethical values* would lead an appreciation of the humanist implications of global interdependencies” (p. 227, emphasis added). His distinction succinctly captures the underlying and ongoing tension between public relations theory and practice.

I have intentionally drawn attention to his use of the word ‘values’ as I believe it to be significant. Carl Botan (1993), writing a few years after Pearson, stated that public relations was at that time at the beginning of a paradigm struggle, where the field “is faced with choices between the assumptions and *values of various paradigms*” (p. 108, emphasis added). Pearson’s ability to see the importance of values-based application of theory is markedly different than how other researchers were approaching theory development.

**2) *Appreciation of social system models.*** Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan (1979) observed that a functionalist paradigm had dominated sociology and organizational studies at that time; Pearson suggests this criticism applies equally to public relations (p. 229). Burrell and Morgan argued that open system approaches had not been discussed in any depth, and that “more than anything an open systems approach had been interpreted as a call to take heed of the environment, and little else” (1979, p. 60).

This is true with respect to the general approach taken by organization-centric approaches, where ‘the environment’ is never explained in detail. Pearson was not the first theorist to be aware of Walter Buckley’s (1967, 1968) theory of social systems; Cutlip, Center & Broom (1985) had acknowledged it in their updated edition of *Effective public relations*. However, Pearson saw the applicability of Buckley’s social system as a model for public relations, in that “decision making is seen as the exemplar, in the sociocultural system, of the general selective process occurring in every adaptive system” (Buckley, in Pearson, p. 231). This is a much more sophisticated perspective than the assumptions of mechanistic and biologic system models, which do not address human agency in systems decision-making.

**3) *Early consideration of social theory.*** Decision-making in a social system depends on communication. For Pearson, a group of human decision makers depends on communicative contact; “a meeting for instance, or a speech community, which can examine the needs it often takes for granted and discover that they are not always natural or inevitable” (p. 231). In biologic systems, the goal is often described as self-preservation or ‘system maintenance’. This is not the case in a social system, where the adaptive process depends on “rational discussion among systems members” (p. 231). Pearson draws a direct connection between Buckley and Habermas, and the latter’s focus on communicative processes in the public sphere. He also acknowledges the debate between Habermas and Luhmann about the role of the social subject in a “society that functions as a self-regulating system” (p. 226), contrasting Habermas’ belief that rational discussion and critique is essential to the workings of any social system, with Luhmann’s

view that to place an emphasis on enlightened decision-making in an ultra-complex modern system is naïve (ibid.).

Another Pearson article, published in 1989 —not selected as part of the literature sample for this study, as its focus was not primarily systems theory—supports his leadership role in establishing linkages to social theory. He argues that systems (or organizations) which promote two-way symmetrical communication are, effectively, engaged in a communication practice known as dialogue, which he traces to Plato (p. 71). Symmetrical communication is characterized by “equal participants in a communication process that seeks mutual understanding and balanced, two-way effects” (Pearson, 1989, p.71). He acknowledges that Grunig’s work has much in common with Habermas’ formulation of an ideal communication situation, which exists “when there is complete symmetry in the distribution of assertion and dispute, revelation and concealment, prescription and conformity, among partners of communication” (Habermas, 1970, in Pearson, 1989, p. 72). Pearson is not drawing extensive parallels between the two researchers in other respects. However, by connecting the two theorists he is both honoring the value of this aspect of Grunig’s systems-influenced work, and introducing concepts from social theory.

In summary, Pearson’s approach to the analysis of systems theory with respect to public relations was markedly different from other researchers at that time, and opened up new lines of inquiry. His critical approach questioned the strategic presuppositions of the dominant paradigm at the time; he considered a more relevant systems model for public relations than had been pursued to that point; and his consideration of social theory presaged the work of later researchers.

In the next section I will undertake my own theory development, which proposes a further conceptual abstraction designed to serve as a broad framework as opposed to a detailed theory. I will refer to this as an appreciation for *systems thinking*. This concept accredits many types of theory with equal status and validity, regardless of the level of complexity. Systems thinking relies on a number of core concepts that are relevant to many systems-aligned approaches: the recognition of system actors, interdependence and interaction, flexible structure and outcomes, and an acknowledgement of communications as the most vital system resource. I will apply systems thinking to an exploration of an under-theorized level of social systems—the individual. In particular, I will present the notion of ‘perspective’ as the foundation for effective systems thinking, and a cognitive capacity of the individual that, once engaged, encourages productive system interactions.

## **The Ongoing Relevance of Systems Theory**

Leading up to the 1970s, theory development in public relations was influenced by many different disciplines—management science, communication theory, organizational theory, psychology, and systems theory—the latter of which has had the largest impact. Beginning in the mid-1970s, organization-centric interpretations of systems theory resulted in an idealized picture of the role of public relations, and dominated the public relations research agenda for the better part of two decades. Critical theorists challenged the functionalist presuppositions of this worldview, and considered the impact of public relations in the context of the larger social system. I have argued that Ron Pearson had a significant impact in leading this critical reflection phase, and thereby helped open up new streams of theoretical development. In recent years, the application of a wide range of social theory has further enriched the field, opening up exciting new ways of conceptualizing both theory and practice.

We are presented now with a much more complex but realistic picture of modern public relations. As technology continues to mediate and pervade all aspects of social life, and therefore social relations, the role of practitioners will continue to be critical but problematic. Traditional applications of systems theories now appear inadequate to deal with such complexity, while the challenge of applying modern social theory is to frame insights in ways that are relevant to the practitioner. Numerous areas of congruence are evident between theoretical approaches from all three phases, and I do not advocate privileging any one theory or thematic approach. I believe that we can find meaningful insights, and continuing relevance to the field, through an appreciation of the common thematic link between them.

## **Thinking in Systems**

Underlying the many approaches analyzed in my paper is a clear recognition of a social system. While we cannot refer to all these ideas as system theories, we can observe that all of the ideas share a common linkage in that they attempt to confront, and perhaps re-imagine, the reality of the social world—a world in which there are individual actors, organizations, publics and other groups characterized by varying degrees of durable form, communities, and larger societal aggregations. Generally speaking, a collection of system actors is always implied: smaller social units forming larger and larger groups. These groups take a myriad of forms, some long-lasting and others more ephemeral, but they are all composed of actors (individual or group) based on a shared set of attributes. It is impossible to describe the complexity and intricacy of overlapping associations, relationships, and interdependencies that exist in the social world, yet it is undeniable that system relationships are a central and important concern. Communication, in all its various forms, is simultaneously the energy, input and output that connects actors in social relationship, which we then perceive as social structure. Therefore, we must retain the ability to *think in terms of systems*, not presented as meta-theory or paradigm, but as a recognition of a fundamental reality of human society. Acknowledging this allows us to glean insights from the widest range of theory, each of which is seen as illuminating different aspects of the same reality. An acceptance of the general term ‘systems thinking’ is the key to finding continuing theoretical and practical value in the systems metaphor. I conceive of systems thinking as an individual accountability, predicated on a commitment to understand and appreciate multiple system perspectives, thereby leading

to action that balances what Pearson (1990) viewed as the tension between strategic and ethical values.

### **The Individual as System Actor**

Collectively, researchers whose work is represented in my inquiry have identified various aspects of the social system as their primary unit of analysis: organizations as systems (Grunig, 1975, 1984; Hazelton, 1991); organization-public relationships (Ferguson, 1984); relationships (Broom et al, 1997); power in relationships (Edwards, 2011; Heath et al, 2011); publics (Leitch and Nielsen, 2001); community (Leeper, 2001); communications (Merten, 2004); public sphere (Raupp, 2004; Ihlen, 2009); and the social system writ large (Holmström, 2007). We speak of organizations communicating with publics in order to persuade those publics to adopt certain behaviours, the implication being that organizations can communicate and publics can receive and process information. However, the individual is the basic meaning-making and decision-making unit in society; in Pieckza's (2006) words, "it is the human being that acts as the information-processing unity, and therefore the whole process has to take account of human sense-making strategies" (p. 350). Organizational communication, action and cultural dynamics are therefore not a function of the organization as such, but of the collective actions of individuals making up those organizations, which we then interpret as organizational behaviour. Practitioners and researchers often speak in terms of target publics, though Leitch and Nielsen (2001) point out that the term publics used in this way simply objectifies what is, more accurately, a collection of individuals. We deduce that a

consumer group exists as a social actor based on our observation of many individuals engaging in a similar action, for example, the purchase of a certain product.

Most of the theoretical texts I analyzed acknowledge the presence of individuals, but omit the concept from further detailed discussion in the context of system analysis. Broom et al (1997) draw on research from interpersonal communication theory to observe that “social relationships must be defined in terms of the individual’s viewpoint” (Duck, 1993, in Broom et al, p. 87), however at the same time they argue that the organization-public relationship should be the central unit of study for public relations. Leeper (2001) suggests that community should be viewed as the central unit of analysis in public relations, but asserts that while the individual may be considered as “prior to association... the individual is not prior to community; community is seen as necessary to the development of the individual” (p. 97). In both these examples, the individual is acknowledged but essentially serves as a catalyst for theory development of other system-influenced ideas.

I agree with Leeper that it is through community that individuals are able to reach their full potential as individuals. However, the individual provides a community with its very potentiality: the idea of community is possible only when individuals come together through sustained interaction. It would be more accurate to observe that individuals and community are interdependent concepts, engaged in an act of co-creation. This acknowledges the concept of interdependence, a key concept in systems thinking.

Individuals figure somewhat more prominently in other types of public relations research. Looking outside my literature sample, the concept of the individual is evident in the work of researchers who focus on the role of the practitioner. Terence Flynn (2014)

provides a discussion and analysis of the individual competencies, skills, and knowledge required of public relations practitioners in the twenty-first century (p. 361). Many of these attributes are functional in nature: communication skills; business acumen; facilitation; proficiency with communication technology; media literacy; and flexibility. However, he also notes the growing importance of soft skills and competencies such as emotional intelligence, cross-cultural fluency and *systems thinking* (p. 367, emphasis added). Kevin Stoker and Megan Stoker (2012) argue that practitioners should act as if they are “members of a human community in which communication . . . plays a critical role in human inquiry and development” (p. 42). They do not see this to be in conflict with a practitioner’s client or organizational obligations, arguing instead that practitioners can best fulfill their role of acting in the public interest by combining their “individual superior interests” (ibid., p. 31) with enlightened moral reasoning, such as that found in John Dewey’s (1927) public philosophy. In this sense, a “moral approach to the public interest recognizes that publics must have the freedom and democracy to determine their own interests” (Stoker and Stoker, p. 42). This reasoning focuses attention of the practitioner as an individual who must engage in complex reasoning and balancing of organizational and public interests.

However, in terms of public relations interpreted from a system point of view, the primary actor is generally viewed to be the organization, as we see in Grunig (1984), Hazelton (1993), Pavlik (1987), Bell and Bell (1976), and others. There is no question that the pull toward an organization-centric viewpoint is strong. David Cox (1949) points out that as organizations and their respective markets grow in size and scope, direct relationships between individuals are marginalized. Customers become too numerous and

geographically dispersed, and this demands formal channels of communication and delegated authority around business functions. The result is that a structure (i.e., an organization), is “substituted for a person [and causes] the displacement of inter-personal relationships by inter-group relationships” (p. 126). This is self-reinforcing in that individuals begin to find meaning and identity as members of social groups and organizations. Despite the fact that Cox is writing in the middle of the twentieth century his words ring true today, and his observation reflects a resilient pre-supposition of our understanding of strategic communications. As Heath (2006) observes, “the corporate (qua organizational) role in public relations is the essence of modern public relations where organizations have replaced single individuals in the citizenship roles needed for a fully functioning society” (p. 94, parentheses in original). Systems-influenced research under-theorizes the individual as a systems actor due to the pre-supposition of public relations as an inter-organizational phenomenon. Researchers applying social theory to public relations also tend to under-theorize the individual, but for a different reason, which is that the complexity of analysis at the system level is a barrier to application at the individual level.

## **A Way Forward**


In this section I undertake a preliminary discussion and analysis of the individual within a systems context. I argue that effective systems thinking is influenced by the ability of the individual to adopt multiple perspectives and factor this into their decision-making. I also argue that systems thinking is fundamentally ethical in nature, and suggest a new approach to interpreting the concept of ethical action in terms relatable to

practitioners. Finally, I develop a conceptual model as a heuristic designed to reinforce these points.

Perspective is a term used frequently in the public relations literature. I distinguish three separate but related meanings that are relevant within the context of systems analysis. A common use of perspective generally refers to an expressed opinion or point of view. My opinion on a given subject is referred to by others as my perspective. Communication is a fundamental mechanism by which we express our own individuality, and at the same time engage in relationships with other social actors.

Another use of the word is relational in nature; that is, how things look (or appear) when viewed from a particular position or vantage point. This implies an acknowledgement of relative position between one thing and another. In the context of visual experience, our vantage point influences how we see things and therefore how we interpret them. In this sense, our vantage point generates our perspective. My interpretation of an event will differ from that of someone who views the same event from a different (i.e., their) perspective. In terms of the social world, a better phrase to describe this form of perspective might be worldview, the set of factors that influence how we perceive the world and our position in it. This in turn influences perception, interpretation, and in turn our point of view, on a given subject. The perspective of a CEO running a large oil company is very different than that of the communications director of an environmental action group. The customer's perspective about their expectation of service may be different from the organizational perspective of that same transaction.

The third interpretation of perspective is less well known, but offers an important insight to our understanding of individual actors and their importance in the social system. I will refer to this as our ability to perceive and reflect on *self and other* in the social world. In Table 5, I summarize the ideas of four researchers who have discussed this concept.

<b>Table 5: Perspectives of self and other</b>			
<i>Turner, R. (1956)</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> – person standpoint Individual identifies only with own role. <b>Non-reflexive.</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> – person standpoint Individual able to assess own role and that of others. <b>Reflects on how to act.</b>	‘Interactive effect’ standpoint Individual considers joint effects of own role and multiple others. <b>Reflects on possible effects of interaction.</b>
<i>Wolter, L. &amp; Miles, S. (1983)</i>	The ‘I’ force Modern PR. Right/wrong assessed against own view. <b>Focused on narrow goals of the individual.</b>		The ‘We’ force Postmodern PR. Acknowledges self and others. <b>Public relations should benefit the public.</b>
<i>Wilber, K. (1998)</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> - person perspective Individual recognizes only their own perspective. <b>No reflection.</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> - person perspective Individual acknowledges their own perspective, <i>and</i> those of others close to them. <b>Reflection, but limited to those close to self. (e.g., family, group members).</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> - person perspective Individuals able to consider multiple perspectives-self, group, and community/society. <b>Able to reflect on multiple perspectives as an input to decision-making.</b>
<i>Culbertson, H. (1984)</i>	‘Breadth of perspective’: “variety of responses one calls to mind before tackling a problem” (p. 3) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Inclined to take views of others into account</li> <li>* Appreciates ramifications/arguments for viewpoints opposed to own (reflection)</li> <li>* Awareness that more than one conclusion can be valid</li> </ul>		

Sociologist Ralph Turner (1956) begins by considering ‘role-taking’, which is the “basic explanatory concept in relating acts of the individual to the social contexts of his actions” (p. 316). An individual enacts a role in society, and in so doing perceives or anticipates other people’s behaviours “in the context of a role imputed to that other” (ibid.). Here, a ‘role’ is understood to mean a set of displayed behaviours, as opposed to a job or set of functional tasks. Turner identifies two concepts as fundamental influences on social role enactment. The first is *standpoint*, by which he means the ability of an

individual to assess and appreciate factors influencing the role-taking (or, behaviours) of another person. The use of standpoint in this sense is closely related to worldview. The second concept is the ability to engage in *reflexive* behaviour, meaning the ability to consider and assess one's own actions in the context of a relationship with others. (Turner's meaning of the word reflexive is similar to Holmström's use of the word reflection.) The combination of standpoint *along with* the ability to reflect on what it may mean for the enactment of one's role, results in perspective.

A complementary idea is found in Louis Wolter and Stephen Miles (1983), who articulated the ideas of 'I-force' and 'We- force' in relation to public relations practice. They observe the 'I-force' as a characteristic of modern public relations, or the expression of the practitioner's point of view and pursuit of strategic requirements on behalf of the organization. In contrast, a postmodern interpretation of public relations represents a more enlightened approach, and results in communication programs that reflect an appreciation for the interdependence of the public and the organization. Pearson (1990) interprets Wolter and Miles' idea as one that balances strategic and ethical concerns, in that "no entity exists except in relationship with other individuals as part of a whole" (p. 222).

American philosopher Ken Wilber considers perspective from the point of view of human development. The process of moving from 1<sup>st</sup>- to 2<sup>nd</sup>- to 3<sup>rd</sup>-person perspectives is a reflection of cognitive growth and maturity. When we are young (or immature in terms of psychological development) we are more or less focused only on ourselves, and this is called a 1<sup>st</sup>-person perspective because we can't effectively consider the perspectives of others. Individuals able to engage in 2<sup>nd</sup>-person cognition can consider

their own perspectives and those of groups with which they share an identity, for example their family. An individual capable of a 3<sup>rd</sup>-person perspective is able to take the views of many others into consideration, and then act with a greater degree of responsibility, informed by reflection.

Hugh Culbertson (1984) built on sociologist Leon Warshay's (1962) concept 'breadth of perspective', noting its relevance to public relations. Breadth of perspective means the ability of an actor to call to mind numerous responses to any given problem before deciding on their own course of action. This requires that individuals take other views into account and assess the ramifications of many different scenarios. Displaying breadth of perspective is important because "conflicting perspectives often are found to be at the heart of public relations issues (p. 9).

Of researchers in my sample, only Holmström's (2007) analysis touches on this concept specifically. Since she is interpreting public relations through the lens of Luhmann's social theory, specific social actors (i.e., 'individuals' or 'organizations') are not directly identified. Instead, the social world is the result of communication decisions arising from social contacts: each social contact is considered to be a system on its own, and society is the sum of all possible contacts. However, Holmström notes that "a system can observe that other systems perceive the world from quite different perspectives" (Luhmann, 1995a, in Holmström, p. 256). Reflection is the process that facilitates this poly-contextual worldview (p. 256).

## **Systems Thinking in Public Relations**

Professional associations and organization-centric research in public relations have long suggested that the responsibility of the practitioner is to help the organization achieve its strategic goals while also serving the public's interest (Bell and Bell, 1976; Cutlip et al, 1985; CPRS). This serves as an aspirational goal and promotes a positive image for the field. However, it is highly impractical because it prioritizes two concepts that at best cannot easily be rationalized; or at worst, are in direct conflict. Systems thinking puts this into context:

- It is a false premise that the public interest can be ascertained at all. Often, the public interest is contradictory, given the multiplicity of perspectives embedded in society.
- There is no persistent advocate for the public interest. Laws, regulations and government policies are designed to serve this purpose by modulating the behaviour of organizations, but it is a cumbersome governance model. Activism is also a societal reaction, and an important one. However, there is often a significant power imbalance that works against activist organizations when they attempt to confront large corporations or governments.
- The debate between organizational needs versus system needs is often positioned as an ethical debate— 'right' versus 'wrong', based on the distinct perspectives of many system actors. Given the multiplicity of actors and perspectives, there are few, if any, universal ethical standards. There are only actions and a range of possible outcomes based on decision-making and roles enacted by system actors.

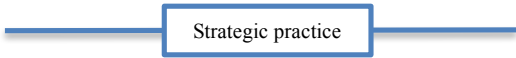
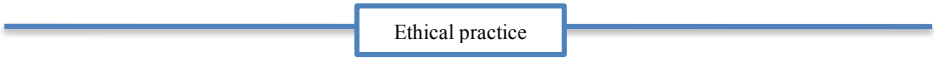
- The social system as a whole is so complex that it is difficult to understand all of the system impacts for any given organization.

Systems thinking encourages a more focused understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence. Appreciation of the perspectives of an environment comprised of interdependent actors broadens the organization's ability to think creatively about available responses. It can also encourage reflection about whether potential actions are of strategic necessity (i.e., related to long-term organizational survival), or simply of practical necessity. In the latter case, intersystem considerations must be taken into account. In this context, systems thinking is an important mechanism to encourage both practitioner and organization to engage in "a more thorough exploration of the obligations and options inherent in ethical decision-making" (Bivins, p. 381).

Pearson (1989) acknowledges the work of Albert Sullivan (1965) as introducing values into a discussion of public relations ethics; in particular, by identifying the tension in public relations practice as one between partisan values and mutual values (p. 58). Partisan values are central to the relationship between practitioners and the organizations they represent. Partisanship requires loyalty and commitment to the organizational perspective—the practitioner serves an organization and its interests (p. 56). Mutual values, on the other hand, "take into account the viewpoints, interests and rights of others" (p. 57). Sullivan noted that the ethical challenge in public relations is one where partisan and mutual values intersect. Partisan values are not wrong, because practitioners and other employees have a right (and obligation) to focus on goals relevant to the organization. However, decision-making must be balanced by a consideration of mutual

values. The ability to see this is encouraged through systems thinking along with deliberate attempts to take the perspectives of others into account. In Table 6, I illustrate the connections between these ideas.

**Table 6: Mapping perspectives to values in the public relations system**

<i>Perspective</i>	1st –level perspective	2 <sup>nd</sup> – level perspective	3 <sup>rd</sup> – level perspective
<i>Focuses on...</i>	Individual	Individual <i>plus</i> organization	Individual <i>plus</i> organization <i>plus</i> other system actors
<i>Value orientation (Sullivan, 1965)</i>	Partisan values <i>Practitioner and organization share a focus on organizational interests</i>		Mutual values <i>Interests, viewpoints and rights of others in the system are considered</i>
<i>Systems theory influence (Pearson, 1990)</i>	Strategic values		Ethical values
<i>Public relations practice</i>			
			

### The Public Relations System, Re-considered

I believe that representing an idea visually is an effective way of complementing descriptive text. Therefore, I have proposed a public relations systems model of my own design in Figure 1, below. The model emphasizes the role of the individual, and is intended to serve as an aid to describing and fostering an appreciation of system thinking. Several aspects of the model are worthy of discussion.

When I refer to the individual, I am speaking primarily in terms of organizational leaders, public relations practitioners, and members of any organization engaged in public relations activities. Leaders not only influence communications strategies and responses, but organizational decision-making as a whole, including strategy, goal-setting, tactics, policy and deployment of resources, financial and otherwise. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, leaders are role models in organizations and set the tone for corporate culture, values, and norms of behaviour. An important organizational resource related to communication is an atmosphere where honest dialogue and reflection are encouraged, and leaders are instrumental in fostering this organizational norm.

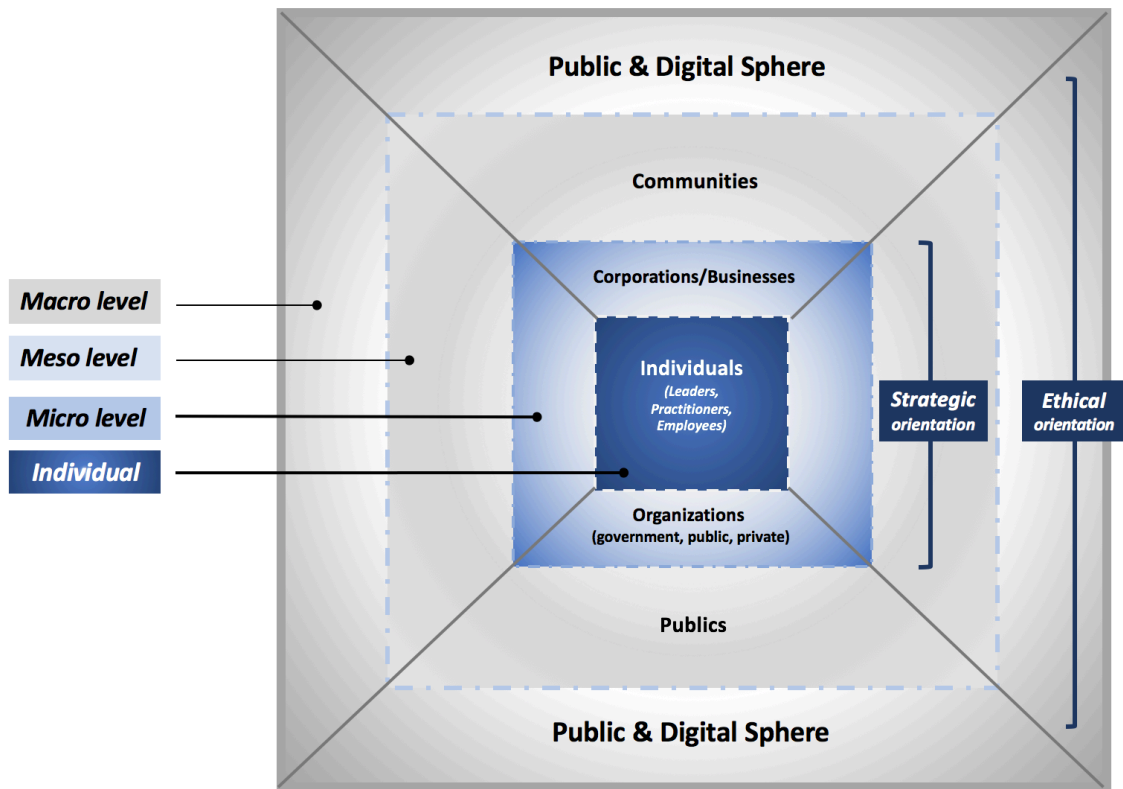


Figure 1: Public relations systems model

Practitioners are those individuals directly involved in strategy and execution of communication campaigns. They are expected to be attuned to stakeholders and other

influences outside and inside the organization. Ideally, they are also closely connected to important organizational decisions. Practitioners operate at the nexus of internal and external forces, and they should be expected to represent a balanced perspective to leaders. Therefore, a detailed appreciation of systems thinking is required on their part.

It is also important to consider other individuals in the organization because even if they are not directly involved in the development of communication, their perspectives are important in the context of what they bring to their roles, including the influence they can have on the implementation of corporate decisions and their ability to engage in dialogue with (and gain insights from) customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders.

To identify system levels I have used the simple distinction of ‘micro’, ‘meso’, and ‘macro’, employed by both Pearson (1990) and Ihlen (2009), which communicates a sense of increasing scale and complexity common to systems. However, I have introduced the individual as a new system level and placed this at the centre of the model. This recognizes the individual as a distinct system actor, worthy of specific analysis.

Colour coding is used to distinguish levels of the system for ease of reference and analysis, however this is not to imply each is in reality separate and distinct.

Conceptually, individuals can be thought of as existing at all system levels, at all times. Arthur Koestler (1967) presents a model of open hierarchical systems, which is based on the observation that any form of organization with some degree of coherence and stability is hierarchically organized (p. 47). Koestler is not suggesting that all systems have a hierarchical *structure* in a physical sense, but is pointing out the inherent interconnectedness of units of increasing size and complexity. This applies to biology, living organisms, language, processes, and social systems. He conceived of the term

‘holon’ as a means of explaining this idea. A holon is anything that is a whole unto itself yet also a part of another unit. Each holon therefore has a dual ontology, existing as itself yet also *simultaneously* as part of a larger unit. All social units exhibit two main drives—a self-assertive drive (expressing individuality) and an integrative drive (joining with others in larger social units), and therefore a social holon is constantly weighing and balancing these two drives. As such, the terms ‘whole’ and ‘part’ do not exist as discrete concepts. This idea is consistent with the concept of system interdependence. A human is a social holon, existing as an individual yet at the same time is a member of (i.e., plays a role in) any number of social units, each of which in turn may also be considered to be a social holon and part of a still-larger social unit. Therefore, individuals exist at all systems levels, simultaneously. As a recognition of this I have used dotted lines between system levels.

The micro level in my model represents those entities that are most likely to engage in public relations activities. I specifically distinguish between corporate interests and organizations, the latter being most often interpreted in public relations research to refer to corporate interests. I prefer to be specific in my reference to corporations and businesses, and employ the word organization to refer to the wide variety of other entities that may employ public relations but whose collective worldview may be much different—charitable foundations, universities, government departments, institutes, activist organizations, associations, and more.

I have placed both communities and publics in the meso level. Both include individuals organized (formally or loosely) around shared interests, and are generally identifiable by some form of geo-location. These groups may engage in public relations

activity, but more often they may be viewed as target audiences. As Leeper (2001) noted, the concept of community is of critical importance, and I have explicitly identified it in the model. I use the word ‘publics’ as a broad term to encompass aggregations of consumers, but also groups of individuals who find shared interests in cultural activities, social or political causes, and leisure pursuits. These can also be thought of as forms of community.

The macro level in systems analysis is often referred to as the ‘environment’, or ‘society’. Most often these terms are left undefined, however the implication is that they represent the widest possible aggregation of social activity in which all other social phenomena exist. There is an implied physical dimension in references to the environment and society, however I don’t believe that most individuals experience society in that way: for most, a community is the largest social unit with which one has a direct experience—physically, socially and culturally. Society is experienced by the individual more through technology. I use the term ‘public & digital sphere’ to refer to this overall environment. Individuals do indeed experience a sense of belonging and societal connection through participation in communication being transacted within the social system. However, our understanding of the public sphere has effectively been redefined by the increasing intervention of mediating technologies: Skype, Facetime, social media channels and video conferencing are but a few examples. The nature of public discussion and debate is also being redefined, as social and political discourse increasingly takes place via digital media and social platforms. In some ways, the more opportunities there are to connect online the more isolated individuals become. The term

‘public and digital sphere’ may be incomplete, but I believe it has greater analytical value than ‘environment’ or ‘society’.

### **Summation**

Individuals are the foundation of the social system. They enact roles in numerous social formations of increasing size, interdependence, and complexity. Public relations is a communication discipline, primarily practiced by businesses, organizations, and groups. It is produced by, and influences the interactions between, individuals and the social units they collectively form. Communication initiates and fuels interaction between social actors. Relationships are recursively re-created through communication, and the outcomes of decisions made by actors are perceived as social organization and system structure. Accordingly, the concept of the system is an appropriate root metaphor for public relations.

Systems thinking is a term that promotes an active acknowledgement of this metaphor, and brings together the insights of research applying specific systems theory, critical perspectives, as well as social theory. Perspective is an important cognitive orientation and behavioral competency for leaders, practitioners and individuals who participate in, or who may influence, public relations activities. The degree to which individuals actively demonstrate systems thinking, as individuals and as members of organizations engaged in public relations, will determine the degree to which those organizations will be able to effectively balance strategic and ethical interests in their relationships with publics, communities and other system stakeholders.

## **Suggestions for Further Study**

The preceding discussion is a preliminary attempt to demonstrate the value of a systems-influenced analysis that focuses on the individual. A detailed study would be valuable, and should include an in-depth review of the relevant literature, particularly research focused on the role of the practitioner. Given the increasing emphasis on the application of social theory to public relations, it would be worthwhile to also explore social theory which focuses on the individual. As an example, Catrine Johansson (2009) has published an interesting analysis of Goffman's theories of impression management, framing, footing, and face as they relate to public relations, as a means of building a deeper understanding of communication processes between practitioners and organizational leaders. Thomas Scheff's social bond theory could also be relevant. Literature on inter-personal relationships, not exclusively from the public relations field but more generally, should be included. Such a study might lead to a theory of 'practitioner-organization' relationships—in contrast to 'organization-public' relationships. The dynamic between the practitioner and the organization is critical, since the degree to which organizations balance their own strategic and ethical decision-making is directly related to the ability of individuals to successfully enact and encourage systems-thinking in the organizations in which they work.

I also see two possible areas of research related to the teaching of public relations: public relations history and ethics. With respect to the former, a growing body of literature on critical-historical studies has developed over the past decade, led mainly by researchers from Europe and the United Kingdom. U.S.-centric perspectives have tended to present an overly positive perception of the field, whereas international perspectives

tend to consider the discipline more critically, viewing historical interpretation of the impact of public relations as contested terrain. I believe this debate is important context for practitioners and theorists alike. Is public relations history being taught in graduate and/or undergraduate programs in North America? If so, is this approached from a historiographical (i.e., critical) point of view, or do more idealistic narratives from U.S. researchers dominate? Courses(s) specifically focused on historiographic analysis would contextualize the discipline as a whole to the benefit of all students.

There is a significant body of literature with respect to ethics in public relations. Public relations associations continue to use definitions that describe a dual accountability for practitioners—a commitment to meeting organizational goals while also serving the public interest (CIPR; CPRS; PRSA). I believe this dynamic tension is at the nexus of public relations ethics. Two-way symmetrical communications (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and excellence theory (Grunig et al, 1992) are both described as being inherently more ethical forms of managing organization-public relationships, yet as we have seen this interpretation has been criticized by researchers who feel it overlooks power imbalances. Issues management, crisis communication and corporate social responsibility all deal with ethical behaviour to some degree, attempting to find a balance between organizational and system interests. The importance of ethical communication is reflected in Ron Pearson's (1989) theory of public relations ethics, as well as Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor's (2002) dialogic theory. It would be a useful exercise to catalogue and compare ethical theories. In particular, I would be interested to understand the degree to which ethics has been theorized as an individual responsibility. One example is Fitzpatrick and Gauthier's (2001) professional responsibility theory of ethics.

Another, from my literature sample, is Röttger and Preusse's (2013) use of systems theory to develop a 'systemic' approach to public relations consulting. They conceptualize the practitioner's role as one of maintaining a reflective stance from the client in order to advocate for and encourage client reflection and consideration of other system actors. In his application of systems theory to a model of ethical decision-making in organizations, Bivins (1992) acknowledges the importance of "the interrelationships of cognitive (thinking) systems— human beings" (p. 366, brackets in original). From my experience, ethical situations in public relations do indeed rest on the behaviour and choices made by individuals, and therefore it seems to me that ethical action should have a strong focus on personal accountability, interpersonal relationships, intraorganizational dialogue, and reflective techniques. A study documenting how ethics in public relations is being taught would be valuable, beginning with a study of Canadian undergraduate and graduate programs. More seasoned practitioners will have, through experience, an appreciation for the many ethical challenges that arise. Students embarking on public relations education today have little to no personal experience of how public relations as a communications function has developed with the evolution of digital media forms, and thus have minimal context from which to reflect on the ethical challenges inherent in these newer communications practices and technologies. A positive step would be to have that discussion of ethics integrated into the curricula of all undergraduate and graduate programs, including individual courses.

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## Appendix A – Journals Searched

1. Asian Journal of Communication
2. Asian Pacific Public Relations Journal
3. Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
4. Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies
5. Communication, Culture & Critique
6. Communication Monographs, 1976-current (Speech Monographs, 1934-1975)
7. Communication Review
8. Communication Theory
9. Communication Research
10. Continuum
11. Convergence
12. Corporate Communications: An International Journal
13. Critical Studies in Media Communications, 2000- current (Critical Studies in Mass Communication 1984-1999)
14. Cybernetics and Human Knowing
15. Discourse in Society
16. Electronic Journal of Communications
17. European Journal of Communication
18. Feminist Media Studies
19. Global Media and Communication
20. Human Communication & Research
21. International Communications Gazette
22. International Journal in Communications Studies
23. International Journal of Communication
24. International Journal of Strategic Communication
25. Journal of Applied Communication Research
26. Journal of Business Communication
27. Journal of Communications
28. Journal of Communications Inquiry
29. Journal of Communication Management
30. Journal of Communication Studies
31. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communications
32. Journal of Intercultural Communication
33. Journal of Media and Communication Studies
34. Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism
35. Journal of New Media and Mass Communication
36. Journal of Professional Communication
37. Journal of Public Relations Research (PR Annual from 1989-91)
38. Journalism and Communications Monographs
39. Journalism and Communications
40. Journalism and Mass Communication
41. Journalism and Mass Communication Educator
42. Journalism and Mass Communications Quarterly (Journalism Quarterly prior to 1994)

***Appendix A (continued)***

43. Management Communication Quarterly
44. Media and Communication
45. Media, Culture, and Public Relations (Croatian/English content)
46. New Media and Society
47. Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies
48. Prism Online Public Relations Journal
49. Public Opinion Quarterly
50. Public Relations Inquiry
51. Public Relations Journal
52. Public Relations Research and Education
53. Public Relations Review
54. Review of Communication
55. Women's Studies in Communication

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*Ulrich's Periodicals Directory (54<sup>th</sup> ed.)*

JournalSeek: online database of communications journals.

*Google searches:*

'Academic journals in communications'

[https://www.google.ca/search?q=academic+hjournals+incommunications&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws\\_rd=cr&ei=z9ehWL\\_JBqbHjwTl1pDwAQ#q=academic+journals+in+communications](https://www.google.ca/search?q=academic+hjournals+incommunications&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws_rd=cr&ei=z9ehWL_JBqbHjwTl1pDwAQ#q=academic+journals+in+communications)

'Academic journals in public relations'

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_public\\_relations\\_journals](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_public_relations_journals)

'Academic journals in systems theory'

[https://www.google.ca/search?q=academic+hjournals+incommunications&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws\\_rd=cr&ei=z9ehWL\\_JBqbHjwTl1pDwAQ#q=academic+journals+in+systems+theory](https://www.google.ca/search?q=academic+hjournals+incommunications&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&gws_rd=cr&ei=z9ehWL_JBqbHjwTl1pDwAQ#q=academic+journals+in+systems+theory)

## **Appendix B – Public relations texts/edited collections searched**

1. *Effective Public Relations, 6<sup>th</sup> edition.* (1985). Cultip, S., Center, A., and Broom, G.
2. *Handbook of public relations.* (2001). Heath, R. L. (Ed.).
3. *Managing public relations.* (1984). Grunig, J. E. & Hunt, T.
4. *Public relations and communication management in Europe.* (2004). van Ruler, B. & Vercic, D. (Eds.)
5. *Public relations and social theory.* (2009). Ihlen, O., van Ruler, B., & Fredriksson, M. (Eds.).
6. *Public relations, society and culture.* (2011). Edwards, L. & Hodges, C. (Eds.).
7. *Public relations: critical debates and contemporary practice.* (2006). L'Etang, J. & Pieckza, M. (Eds.).
8. *Public relations theory.* (1989). Botan, C. & Hazelton, V. (Eds.).
9. *Public relations theory II.* (2006). Botan, C. & Hazelton, V. (Eds.).
10. *Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations.* (1992). Toth, E. and Heath, R. L. (Eds.)
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## Appendix C – Literature sample

<i>Year</i>	<i>Researcher</i>	<i>Text</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Source</i>
1976	Bell, S. & Bell, S.	PR: functional or functionary?	OC	Public Relations Review
1993	Bivins,	A systems model of ethical decision-making in PR	OC	Public Relations Review
1997	Broom, G., Casey, S. & Ritchie, J.	Toward a concept and theory of organization-public relationships	OC	Journal of Public Relations Research
2011	Brown, R.	Epistemological modesty critical reflections on public relations thought	CR	Public Relations Inquiry
1993	Coombs, T.	Philosophical underpinnings: ramifications of a pluralist paradigm	CR	Public Relations Review
1993	Creedon, P.	Acknowledging the infrasystem: a critical feminist analysis of systems theory	CR	Public Relations Review
1985	Cutlip, S, Center, A. & Broom, G.	Adjustment and adaptation: a theoretical model for public relations	OC	<i>Effective public relations</i>
2011	Edwards, L.	Public relations and society: a Bourdieuvian perspective	ST	<i>Public relations, society, and culture</i>
2016	Edwards, L.	Role of public relations in deliberative systems	ST	Journal of Communication
1984	Ferguson, M.	Interorganizational relationships as a public relations paradigm	OC	Assoc. for Education in Journalism & Management and Communications
2000	Gregory, A.	Systems theory and public relations practice	CR	Journal of Communication Management
1975	Grunig, J	A multi-system theory of organizational communication	OC	Communications Research
1984	Grunig, J. & Hunt, T.	The concept of public relations (Chapters 1, 3, 5, 13, & 18: selections)	OC	<i>Managing public relations</i>
1992	Hazelton, V.	Towards a systems theory of public relations practice	OC	<i>Ist Public relations eine wissenschaft?</i>
2006	Heath, R.	Onward toward more fog	CR	Journal of Public Relations Research
2011	Heath, R., Motion, J. & Leitch, S.	Power and public relations	CR	Institute for Public Relations
2007	Holmström, S.	Luhmann: contingency, risk, trust and reflection	ST	Public Relations Review
2002	Holzhausen, D.	Towards a postmodern research agenda for public relations	CR	Public Relations Review
2009	Ihlen, O. & van Ruler, B.	Applying social theory to public relations	ST	
2001	Leeper, R.	In search of meta-theory for public relations: an argument for communitarianism	CR	<i>Handbook of public relations</i>
2001	Leitch, S. & Nielsen, D.	Bringing publics into public relations	ST	<i>Handbook of public relations</i>
2004	Merten, K.	A constructivist approach to public relations	ST	<i>Public relations and communications management in Europe</i>

APPLICATION OF SYSTEMS THEORY TO PUBLIC RELATIONS

*Appendix C (continued)*

1984	Pavlik, J.	An emerging paradigm general systems theory	OC	<i>Effective Public Relations</i>
1990	Pearson, R.	Strategic Values or Ethical Values? The two faces of systems theory in public relations	CR	Public Relations Review
1996	Pieczka, M.	Paradigms, systems theory and public relations	CR	<i>Critical debates in public relations</i>
2004	Raupp, J.	The public sphere: a central concept of public relations	ST	<i>Public relations and communications management in Europe</i>
2013	Röttger, U. & Preusse, J.	External consulting in strategic communications: functions and roles within systems theory	OC	International Journal of Strategic Communication
1992	Toth, E.	Case for pluralistic studies of public relations: rhetorical, critical and systems perspectives	CR	<i>Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations</i>
2009	Verhoeven, P.	Actor-network-theory (ANT) and public relations	ST	<i>Public relations and social theory</i>
2006	Witmer, D.	Overcoming system and culture boundaries: public relations as structuration	CR	<i>Public Relations Theory II</i>

CODE	PHASE	# OF TEXTS
OC	Organization-Centric	10
CR	Critical reflection	12
ST	Sociological Turn	8

## Appendix D – Steps in text analysis and thematic networks

<p><b>ANALYSIS STAGE A: REDUCTION OR BREAKDOWN OF TEXT</b></p> <p><b>Step 1. Code Material</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(a) Devise a coding framework</li><li>(b) Dissect text into text segments using the coding framework</li></ul> <p><b>Step 2. Identify Themes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(a) Abstract themes from coded text segments</li><li>(b) Refine themes</li></ul> <p><b>Step 3. Construct Thematic Networks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(a) Arrange themes</li><li>(b) Select Basic Themes</li><li>(c) Rearrange into Organizing Themes</li><li>(d) Deduce Global Theme(s)</li><li>(e) Illustrate as thematic network(s)</li><li>(f) Verify and refine the network(s)</li></ul> <p><b>ANALYSIS STAGE B: EXPLORATION OF TEXT</b></p> <p><b>Step 4. Describe and Explore Thematic Networks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(a) Describe the network</li><li>(b) Explore the network</li></ul> <p><b>Step 5. Summarize Thematic Networks</b></p> <p><b>ANALYSIS STAGE C: INTEGRATION OF EXPLORATION</b></p> <p><b>Step 6. Interpret Patterns</b></p>
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Source: Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). p. 391

## Appendix E – Coding framework

I developed the following list of words and used them as a guide when identifying text segments in each article.

<i>Terms of interest in text review</i>
adaptation
change
communication
community
critical theory
environment
ethics
feedback
framework
goals
groups
hierarchy
individuals
inputs/outputs
interdependence
maintenance
meaning
metatheory
organizations
paradigm
practitioners
process
publics
relationship
social structures
social systems
paradigm/ metatheory
society
social structures
subsystems
systems theorist/ social theorist
systems theory/ social theory name

## Appendix F – Thematic networks and summaries

### F.1

Bell, S. & Bell, S. (1976). Public relations: functional or functionary? *Public Relations Review*, 2(2), 47-57.

Global Themes	Organizations are open systems	Public relations' functional role
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic Themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organization as social system</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems theory views organization as a social structure</i></li> <li>• <i>Open, biological system</i></li> <li>• <i>Social systems more adaptable than biologic</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organization depends on the environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Seek a steady state</i></li> <li>• <i>Depends on environment for survival</i></li> <li>• <i>Seek input/ sense change in the environment</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Organization system is dynamic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems naturally move to entropy</i></li> <li>• <i>Open systems arrest entropy</i></li> <li>• <i>Repeated cycles of input, output</i></li> </ul>	<b>Public relation roles in the system</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>System theory helps understand PR functions</i></li> <li>• <i>Functional PR- adapt to the environment</i></li> <li>• <i>Functionary PR- maintain steady state</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Organizations are comprised of subsystems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Subsystems in an organization</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems theory deals with interdependence</i></li> <li>• <i>Multiple subsystems</i></li> </ul>	

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**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-centric**

An example of research with a strong focus on the practitioner, and a traditional view of modern public relations. The distinction between ‘functionary’ and ‘functional’ is significant for specifically acknowledging the need for public relations practitioners to be concerned with environmental influences. Bell and Bell noted that organizations would become increasingly be larger and more complex, and therefore must be more inclusive. This, they predicted, would put increasing pressure on the public relations practitioner to be “an interpreter of meaning and consequences of social and economic change” (p. 56) as it relates to clients.

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**F.2**

Bivins, T. (1993). A systems model for ethical decision making in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 18(4), 363-383.

<b>Global Themes</b>	<b>Systems theory assists decision-making at all levels</b>	<b>Organizational decisions are linked to the decisions of individuals</b>	<b>Ethical decision-making considers organizational and system impacts</b>
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic Themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>General systems theory (GST) is a new way of looking at organizations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>GST stresses interdependence</i></li> <li>• <i>GST emphasis on process</i></li> <li>• <i>System theory applied to human communication becomes GST</i></li> </ul>	<b>Practitioners assist with organizational decisions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Counsellor pursues organization's goals</i></li> <li>• <i>Balance stakeholder claims</i></li> <li>• <i>Practitioner has an obligation to the client</i></li> <li>• <i>Counsellor assesses needs of the organization and others</i></li> </ul>	<b>Decision-making systems require analysis of inputs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Feedback loops allows coordination with the environment</i></li> <li>• <i>A system is the result of transformational process of input/output</i></li> <li>• <i>Inputs needed for decision-making</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems theory applied to organizational decision-making</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>System theory describes organizational process</i></li> <li>• <i>Apply to model of ethical decision-making</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems theory has not been applied to organizational decision-making</i></li> </ul>	<b>Human decision-making is the selective process in all systems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Problem-solving = decision-making</i></li> <li>• <i>Problem-solving is a systems model- inputs, planning and outputs</i></li> <li>• <i>Associative system is the highest order system</i></li> <li>• <i>Associative system is the relationship of cognitive systems</i></li> </ul>	<b>Need to survive drives system decision-making and behaviours</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Asymmetrically dependent systems cannot survive loss of other</i></li> <li>• <i>Organization depends on environment for survival</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems in disequilibrium adapt to / control environment</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Decision-making occurs at all levels</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Intra-organization = micro level</i></li> <li>• <i>Inter-organization = macro level</i></li> <li>• <i>Conflicting influence between organization so the system</i></li> <li>• <i>Define stakeholders based on relationship with organization</i></li> </ul>		<b>Ethical decision-making requires assessment of system impacts</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ethical decisions: require ethical analysis and consciousness</i></li> <li>• <i>Moral obligation to consider needs of self, organization and society</i></li> <li>• <i>Ethical analysis compares organizational obligations and stakeholder claims</i></li> </ul>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Organization-centric***

Bivins' model is a detailed consideration of how to integrate a systems model of decision-making processes within the organization, with a focus on ethical behaviour. While somewhat traditional in its presentation of organizational behaviour, I appreciated his observation of the central role for human decision-making as the selective process at the core of an organization's ability to make decisions. This underscores my interest in the interpersonal dynamics of practitioners and leaders.

**F.3**

Broom, G. M., Casey, S. & Ritchey, S. (1997). Toward a concept and theory of organization-public relationships. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 9(2), 83-98.

Global Themes	System theory helps understand relationships	Communication is the foundation of relationships	Interorganizational behaviour determines organization-public relationships
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic Themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Relationship research is needed for practice and theory development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Relationships are not well-defined</i></li> <li>• <i>Definition would help measurement and theory development</i></li> <li>• <i>Few researchers have studied relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems theory useful in building theory</i></li> </ul>	<b>Relationships are central to interpersonal communication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Relationships are defined by the individual's viewpoint</i></li> <li>• <i>Interpersonal interactions produce and are produced by relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships are recurrent patterns of interpersonal events</i></li> <li>• <i>Organizational dynamics best understood through systems of communications</i></li> </ul>	<b>Relationships are central to interorganizational behaviour</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Relationships may take the form of competition</i></li> <li>• <i>Organizational relationships derive from need for resources</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships contingent on reciprocity, power, stability</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems theory is concerned with relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems theory concerned with problems of relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>A system is a set of interacting units in relationship</i></li> <li>• <i>System structure defined by the relationships of units</i></li> </ul>	<b>Communication is critical to relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Communication is the primary exchange in social systems</i></li> <li>• <i>Communications is major determinant of systems functioning</i></li> <li>• <i>Proximity less important when communication flows through technology</i></li> <li>• <i>Communication is most important factor in organizational behaviour and relationships</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organization –public relationships are central to public relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>System structure is the arrangement of system parts</i></li> <li>• <i>The purposive behaviour of actors in relationship</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships are exchange of information, energy, or resource</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-centric**

Broom et al are among those researchers who have undertaken significant work on organization-public relationships as the central unit of analysis. In that context, it is interesting to note the degree to which these relationships are defined by the individual's viewpoint—in fact, they argue, relationships “do not exist outside the cognition and values of the interactors” (p. 87). From my perspective, this reminds us to think of organizations as a manifestation of the collective activity of individuals.

**F.4**

Brown, R. (2011). Epistemological modesty: critical reflection on public relations thought. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 1(1), 89-105.

<b>Global Theme</b>	<b>Systems/symmetry theory is inadequate to explain public relations</b>
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic Themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Public relations misunderstood by the dominant theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Assumption that it has evolved from less- to more-ethical practice</i></li> <li>• <i>Idea that mutuality between public interest and organizational goals is a contradiction</i></li> <li>• <i>Problem is that systems theory underlies symmetry theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Problem with systems methodology used to justify public relations</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems/symmetry theory offers a ‘too mechanical’ view</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems-based PR is inadequate to explain public relations</i></li> <li>• <i>A mechanical rationality underlies systems interpretations</i></li> <li>• <i>Idea of public relations as a function is a mechanical perspective</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Symmetry theory is idealistic and inadequate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Symmetry demands that we think of public relations as an ‘excellent’ thing</i></li> <li>• <i>Symmetry assumes ethical equity between organizations communication with the public</i></li> <li>• <i>The assumption that balance/fairness exists in operational space</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Symmetry theory cannot explain complex modern world</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Shift in society from, ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ modernity: complexity</i></li> <li>• <i>Modernity is unpredictable</i></li> <li>• <i>Imbalance of power is not addressed by systems/symmetry</i></li> </ul>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Critical reflection***

The paper reads as a strong rejection of the work of Grunig and researchers who were influenced by his work. Brown makes a strong case for how the words ‘systems’ and ‘symmetry’ have become synonymous—not so much because he makes the point directly, but due to his frequent usage of the two terms in the same sentence or in ways that create the impression that they are interchangeable. In my own reading, I notice this tendency among other researchers as well. Brown’s characterization of ‘liquid modernity’ is a powerful image that challenges more finite concepts of the social world as a system or network. It aptly supports his contention that systems, symmetry and excellence models of public relations are inadequate to deal with the complexities of the modern social system.

**F.5**

Coombs, T. (1993). Philosophical underpinnings: ramifications of a pluralist paradigm. *Public Relations Review*, 19(20), 111-119.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Pluralism shields system theory and rhetorical theory from power-based critiques</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Pluralism implications for public relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ideal form of government, where everyone assumed to have equal access and power in decision-making in society</i></li> <li>• <i>Pluralism has become a pre-supposition of both system theory and rhetorical theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Used as a 'shield' against power-based critiques of systems theory and rhetorical theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Theorists must develop more complex approaches to public relations that deal with power-based critiques</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Power-based critiques overlooked in theory development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Organizations have greater ability to influence system decisions</i></li> <li>• <i>Corporate power in communications spending ('deep pockets')</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Pluralist rationale to deflect criticism from system theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Individuals can freely organize into groups/publics</i></li> <li>• <i>Group power can balance organization influence</i></li> <li>• <i>Group power is a self-correcting mechanism in society</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Pluralist rationale to deflect criticism from rhetorical theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The concern for deep pocket spending overstated</i></li> <li>• <i>Groups communicate and influence public policy through other means...lobbying, media coverage, grassroots activism</i></li> </ul>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Critical reflection***

Coombs's article was published in *Public Relations Review's* Special Issue: Public Relations Paradigm in 1993. His argument aligns with others that criticize the use of systems theory as not acknowledging power-based criticisms. Critiques of systems theory by other researchers seem often to be based on a philosophical position that organizations/ corporations simply 'have' power and therefore are to be criticized: Coombs instead points out that pluralist assumptions are used as a rhetorical strategy by systems-influenced public relations researchers in order to counter critiques of power imbalance. Coombs is objective in his criticism and does not single out the work any individual researcher, whereas researchers such as Pieckza (2006) and Brown (2011) target Grunig's work much more specifically.

**F.6**

Creedon, P. (1993). Acknowledging the infrasystem: a critical feminist analysis of systems theory. *Public Relations Review*, 19(2), 157-166.

Global Themes	System theory as applied supports gendered privilege	Systems theory has value for organizations	Acknowledge the infrasystem as a third system
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic Themes</li> </ul>	<b>Systems theory as applied omits feminist lens</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of feminist perspective works against 'excellence'</li> <li>Institutional nature of gender privilege</li> <li>Research to date has not explored patterns of privilege in public relations practice</li> </ul>	<b>Systems theory has value as a metaphor for the organization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systems theory accepted as public relations paradigm</li> <li>Interactions and interrelatedness</li> <li>Studies how organizations interact with/ adapt to the environment</li> <li>Opens systems exchange information, energy</li> </ul>	<b>Description of the 'infrasystem'</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Infrasystem underlies the organization's ability to achieve steady state</li> <li>Infrasystem views culture as flexible, not universal (a critical view)</li> <li>Interacts with environmental suprasystems and organization subsystems</li> </ul>
	<b>Systems theory as applied adopts uncritical stance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systems theory grounded in logical positivism</li> <li>Use of systems theory uncritical accepts gendered norms</li> <li>Pursuit of goals without critical reflection (Pearson)</li> </ul>	<b>Grunig's view of organizations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Root system metaphor for the organization is 'a living organism'</li> <li>Public relations roles                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manage change</li> <li>Identify publics</li> <li>Manage communication</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
	<b>Symmetry theory supports existing privilege</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Symmetrical behaviour reinforces privileged behaviour</li> <li>Symmetry encourages status quo &amp; discourages innovation</li> </ul>		

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical reflection**

Creedon's paper was also published in *Public Relations Review's* Special Issue: Public Relations Paradigm in 1993. She was one of a fairly small number of researchers at that time writing from the feminist point of view, and as such this article is important. Her argument walks a fine line between acknowledging the relevance of Grunig's excellence theory, while at the same time adopting a critical stance. She accomplishes this skillfully by suggesting that public relations can only be considered 'excellent' by naming and dealing with gender imbalance. As I noted in my analysis, this paper is also very meaningful for its consideration of the interior dimensions of the individual.

**F.7**

Cutlip, S.M., Center, A. H. & Broom, G. M. (1985). Adjustment and adaption: a theoretical model of public relations. Chapter 8, pp. 183-198 in *Effective public relations*. 6<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston.

Global Themes	Systems theory is a useful tool for PR professionals	Focus of PR is managing dynamic organization- public relationships
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic Themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Help the profession understand public relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Absence of integrated model hinder the practice</i></li> <li>• <i>Professionalism must be grounded in theory</i></li> <li>• <i>'Ecology' describes how organization interacts with social environments</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems theory helps defines public relations</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organization- public relationships are the primary systems of interest</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mutually dependant relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems defined based on the organization-public relationship</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationship is flexible, defined for each situation, program</i></li> <li>• <i>Organization-public systems are part of social system</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems may be described in many ways</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Subsystem in one unit may be systems in another</i></li> <li>• <i>Most systems are relatively open</i></li> <li>• <i>Ultimate goal is survival</i></li> <li>• <i>Maintain stable but changeable goals</i></li> </ul>	<b>Public relation role is to keep the relationship healthy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Public relations = the adaptive subsystem</i></li> <li>• <i>Part of achieve goals and manage behaviour</i></li> <li>• <i>Publics are abstractions defined the manager applying systems approach</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Communications is essential for complex adaptive systems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Dynamic systems goals change structure and process (Buckley)</i></li> <li>• <i>Open systems emphasize communication</i></li> <li>• <i>Interactions with higher system levels depends on information transmission</i></li> </ul>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Organization-centric***

One of two textbooks included in my sample, *Effective Public Relations* was first published in 1952 and it currently in its 11<sup>th</sup> edition. The 1985 edition was significant as it included, for the first time, a new chapter summarizing the application of systems theory to public relations. In many ways, the authors present a very traditional view of public relations, however unlike Grunig and Hunt's (1984) text, *Managing Public Relations*, they mention various system models, including Buckley's 'complex adaptive systems' which has generally been undertheorized by the field.

**F.8**

Edwards, L. (2011). Public relations and society: a Bourdieuvian perspective. In Edwards, L. & Hodges, C. (Eds.). *Public relations, society and culture*. (pp. 61-74). UK: Routledge.

<b>Global Themes</b>	<b>Effects of public relations are evident at all levels of social system</b>	<b>Public relations recursively reproduces itself within the field</b>	<b>Practitioners and organizations exercise power</b>
<b>Organizing Themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic Themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Effects of public relations are felt deep within fabric of society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Affects individuals (habitus)</i></li> <li>• <i>Affects organization (practice)</i></li> <li>• <i>Affects social context (occupational fields)</i></li> </ul>	<b>Public relations and society interact and co-produce each other</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Structure of society reflects structure of PR</i></li> <li>• <i>Assumptions which guide practice become legitimate lens through which to view society</i></li> </ul>	<b>Practitioners and organizations exercise symbolic power in the field</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Symbolic capital determined by the elite</i></li> <li>• <i>Practitioners exercise symbolic violence</i></li> <li>• <i>Agents with power define reality in the field</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Social world structured in fields of competitive relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social world structured in fields; social hierarchy results</i></li> <li>• <i>Competitive relations in all fields</i></li> <li>• <i>Field status through acquisition of assets</i></li> </ul>	<b>Established doxa in the field influences practice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Doxa- implicit beliefs about PR shapes practice</i></li> <li>• <i>Guides behaviour in the profession</i></li> </ul>	<b>Practitioners and organizations compete for power</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Practitioner role affects the way they work</i></li> <li>• <i>Consultants struggle for power (for self and client)</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Practice and messages affect the way the profession evolves</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Practice not isolated from society; not neutral</i></li> <li>• <i>Culture in which PR enacted shapes how profession evolves</i></li> <li>• <i>Reflected in messages practitioners develop</i></li> </ul>	

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Sociological Turn***

Bourdieu is among the noted cultural/social theorists whose work has in recent years been considered for its applicability to public relations. Edwards’ article considers Bourdieu’s main theoretical concepts in terms of public relations’ impact within society and also how it operates within the field of public relations practice. Organization-centric public relations has often been critiqued for its inability to deal with issues of power, and the application of Bourdieu and other social theorists is a more proactive approach to addressing these concerns—instead of making the organization the centre of power debates, and thus becoming fixated on corporate interests as an object, we observe power as a force within the social world at large, working at all system levels and in various occupational fields, including public relations practice.

**F.9**

Edwards, L. The role of public relations in deliberative systems. *Journal of Communication*, 66(2016), 60-81.

Global themes	Deliberative systems to understand public relations	Public relations- dynamic tension between positive and negative societal impacts
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic themes</li> </ul>	<b>Deliberation in society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Emphasis on open debate</i></li> <li>• <i>Habermas' deliberation in public sphere</i></li> <li>• <i>PR at nexus of relationship and development of civil society</i></li> </ul>	<b>Positive potential of public relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Exchange of views facilitates change</i></li> <li>• <i>Connections between individuals and groups</i></li> <li>• <i>Create conditions that enact civil society</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Public sphere and civil society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Civil society is a mediating space between public and private sphere</i></li> <li>• <i>Healthy public sphere = fully functioning society</i></li> <li>• <i>Ethical organization contributes to healthy public sphere</i></li> </ul>	<b>Negative potential of public relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Rhetoric used to persuade, not dialogue (consensus)</i></li> <li>• <i>Exploitation by powerful interests (corporations, gov'ts)</i></li> <li>• <i>Deliberative 'pathology'-politics</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Deliberative systems theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Deliberation occurs at micro (individuals), meso (larger groups and macro (public sphere) levels</i></li> <li>• <i>Self-interest is essential for participation in public sphere</i></li> </ul>	<b>Tension between positive/negative</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Self-interest vs common good</i></li> <li>• <i>Current age = the mediatization of politics</i></li> <li>• <i>Information driven by media needs as opposed to needs of society</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Sociological Turn**

I selected a second paper by Edwards as she approaches the topic from a very different perspective than her paper on Bourdieu. In this case, Edwards applies Habermas' notion of the public sphere to provide an objective assessment of positive and negative impacts of public relations. Deliberation within the social system is theorized to occur at all levels: civil society exists between the public and private spheres. Deliberation and debate is essential to maintain a healthy civil society. Ultimately Edwards' take on the role of public relations is more positive than negative. In reading Edwards and other researchers who are applying social theory to public relations, it occurs to me that the mere fact such theories are being integrated into public relations theory is positive—an effective next step is to bring these ideas into undergraduate and graduate classrooms, integrated with insights from organization-centric and critical perspectives.

**F.10**

Ferguson, M. A. (1984, August). *Building theory in public relations: Interorganizational relationships*. Paper presented at the convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville, FL.

Global themes	Organization-public relationship – the only unit of analysis	Relationship paradigm will legitimize the field	Organization-public relationships in the social environment
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic themes</li> </ul>	<b>Org-public relationship is central</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Need a primary unit of analysis</li> <li>Not the org, or public or communication process</li> </ul>	<b>Study relationship variables</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Variables impacting the organization depend on the environment</li> <li>Integrates org-level and communications variables</li> </ul>	<b>Organizations and publics operate in a larger environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizations and publics are social units</li> <li>Environmental constraints</li> </ul>
	<b>Publics are loosely-structured systems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Grunig’s definition</li> <li>Publics behave as one body</li> </ul>	<b>Paradigm necessary for PR to be called a field</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One unit of analysis provides structure for theory development</li> <li>PR in need of legitimization</li> </ul>	<b>Understanding organizational relationships in society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Must understand the relationships to understand how orgs operate in society</li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-Centric**

Ferguson’s paper, delivered at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in 1984, is often referred to in the literature as galvanizing ‘organization-public relationships’ as the main unit of analysis for public relations researchers. Ferguson’s article was based on her analysis of nine years of articles published in *Public Relations Review* between 1975 and 1984. She compared the foci of articles and categorized the major areas of study to be social responsibility and ethics, social issues and issues management, and public relationships. Today, her sample seems a bit restricted and U.S.-centric; that said, it undertakes a comprehensive assessment of theory development in the pre-eminent journal at that time.

**F.11**

Gregory, A. (2000). Systems theories and public relations practice. *Journal of Communication Management*, 4(3), 266-277.

Global themes	Adaptive systems most relevant of prior models	Newer systems models more relevant for complex society
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic themes</li> </ul>	<b>Closed system model not adequate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management theory influence</li> <li>• Cannot manage a system without reference to outside influence</li> </ul>	<b>Chaos / complexity theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universe is a flowing, unbroken whole</li> <li>• Can be chaotic and ordered</li> <li>• Complexity produces random disturbances</li> <li>• Order cannot be forcefully imposed</li> </ul>
	<b>Open system model not adequate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assumes organizations can have control</li> <li>• Overemphasizes effects of communication</li> <li>• Survival as goal</li> </ul>	<b>Actor-network theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rejects 'pure' social sphere</li> <li>• Humans relationship is interpenetrated by nature and technological objects</li> <li>• No actors are passive, all have some form of agency</li> <li>• Networks are contingent and emergent</li> </ul>
	<b>Adaptive system best model</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress from mechanical and organismic models</li> <li>• Goal-morphogenesis: system evolves and changes</li> <li>• Considers shared meaning and mutual understanding</li> <li>• Tension and feedback essential elements</li> </ul>	<b>Organizational ecology/ eco-system</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations are not discrete entities</li> <li>• Exist in an eco-system (like and Organism</li> <li>• Emphasizes interdependence</li> <li>• Emphasizes collaboration and co-creation</li> </ul>
		<b>Autopoiesis</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizations are self-referential</li> <li>• The environment is a reflection of the organization</li> <li>• Environment can be seen as part of the organization</li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical Reflection**

This article is beneficial to my study as it provides a summary of the ways systems theory had been, at the time of publication, applied to public relations. Like Bivins (1992), Cutlip et al (1985), Pearson (1989), and Pieckza (2006), Gregory briefly acknowledges Buckley's adaptive systems model. Gregory also highlights some of the newer ideas that had evolved by 2000, such as chaos/complexity theory; actor-network theory; organizational ecology; and self-referential systems. Coverage of all of these newer ideas makes this article a very useful summary of the 'state of the field' at that time, bridging organization-centric views with ideas arising at the turn of the century. For this reason, I categorize the article as part of the critical reflection phase.

**F.12**

Grunig, J. E. (1975). A multi-systems theory of organizational communication. *Communication Research*, 2(2), 99-136.

Global themes	Diachronic communication is system-appropriate	General systems theory (GST) can help manage environmental relationships
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Communication mediates between organization and environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Diachronic model compatible with systems view</i></li> <li>• <i>Explains communications as one aspect of organizational behaviour</i></li> <li>• <i>Communications reduces uncertainty</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organizations constrained by environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>External environment is a supra-system, constrains components</i></li> <li>• <i>Organization in turn constrains sub-systems and individuals in the organization</i></li> <li>• <i>Organizations also constrained by technology</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Public relations department role</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Explains communications as one aspect of organizational behaviour</i></li> <li>• <i>PR department an institutionalized role</i></li> <li>• <i>PR specialists communicate to external audiences about the organization</i></li> </ul>	<b>System structure based on relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Structural characteristics = relationships between individuals</i></li> <li>• <i>Structure IS relationship between individuals, systems and environment</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems do not act alone-impacted by relationships</i></li> </ul>
		<b>GST helps practitioners communicate within a system perspective</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Encourages practitioners to see communications behaviour through different types of systems</i></li> <li>• <i>Does not use specific GST concepts</i></li> <li>• <i>Communication behaviour motivated by individual and structural characteristics of people and situations</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-Centric**

This early Grunig paper builds off the application of systems theory to organizations. He presents a theory of the many types of communication organizations must consider. Grunig's use of Thayer's (1968) model of synchronic/diachronic communication is the foundation for his own symmetrical models of communication, which continue to be influential ideas in the public relations canon. Public relations is presented as serving the institution by managing communications to internal and external audiences. Interestingly, Grunig notes that organizational structure is reflected in the relationships between individuals, however the central unit of analysis here is communication.

**F.13**

Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. New York, NY: CBS College Publishing.

Global themes	Organizations serve public interest through variety of communication	PR is a communication subsystem within an organization system
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic themes</li> </ul>	<b>PR serves public interest</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsiveness to public</li> <li>• Increase public knowledge</li> <li>• Provides ideas, public forum</li> <li>• One way society adjusts to changing circumstances</li> <li>• PR a boundary-spanner</li> </ul>	<b>Systems theory assumes organizations are open systems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closed system = acts without considering system impacts</li> <li>• Open approach thinks of total context</li> <li>• Organization affects and is affected by other systems</li> </ul>
	<b>Different communication approaches</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication approach varies depending on environment</li> <li>• 2 way symmetrical: adaptation</li> <li>• 2-way asymmetrical: more control</li> <li>• Reactive/proactive</li> </ul>	<b>PR as communication subsystem</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Function at edge of the organization</li> <li>• PR supports other organization subsystems</li> <li>• Part of the management subsystem</li> <li>• Specialized communication role</li> </ul>
		<b>Organizations and systems interpenetrate</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization is a subsystem of a larger suprasystem</li> <li>• All systems in the suprasystems impact the organization system</li> <li>• Neither controls or is controlled by the social environment</li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-Centric**

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) *Managing Public Relations*, along with Cutlip et al's (1985) *Effective Public Relations* are arguably the two most influential, early public relations texts. Grunig and Hunt's book is a good example of a normative orientation—public relations' role is stated as serving the public interest, and the four models of communications are presented as a historical evolution of practice toward a more ethical standard. The authors clearly state that theory must be relevant to practitioners. Grunig and Hunt must be given credit for their influence on the field, however at the same time their focus on the practice of public relations and normative orientation are the source of considerable concern to critical theorists.

**F.14**

Hazelton, V. H. (1991). Towards a systems theory of public relations. In Avenarius et al. (eds.), *Ist Public Relations eine Wissenschaft?* (pp. 33-45) Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag GmbH.

Global themes	PR process model is an open system, three subsystems	GST can help explain the PR process model
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Communications subsystem-monitoring and outputs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Boundary spanner role-produce and deliver messages</i></li> <li>• <i>Messages are organizational output, have form</i></li> <li>• <i>Contain organizational meaning</i></li> </ul>	<b>Use system theory to build model</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Focus on task and function</i></li> <li>• <i>Practice- subjective perceptions of environment</i></li> <li>• <i>Effectiveness-subjective and objective measures</i></li> <li>• <i>Goals and interdependence</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Organization subsystem drives goals</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Goals are central to organizations</i></li> <li>• <i>Communication is a function of the dominant coalition</i></li> <li>• <i>Use communication to reach goals</i></li> </ul>	<b>GST explains functional relationship</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>GST as meta-theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Assumes cause-effect variables</i></li> <li>• <i>Describes functional relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Consider input, throughout and output</i></li> </ul>
	<b>PR process is an open system</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Macro = environment systems (social, legal, technological, economic)</i></li> <li>• <i>Micro = organizations, communications and publics</i></li> </ul>	<b>Systems are abstract concepts that help understand organizations/ processes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>System has no substance itself; system analyses are abstract</i></li> <li>• <i>Symbols stand for real objects and relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems approaches are holistic</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-Centric**

Hazelton notes the widespread use of systems theory by organizational theorists, but also that it has only minimally been applied by public relations researchers. His goal was therefore to provide a general overview of a “systems theory of public relations” (p. 33). He situates public relations processes within the organization, and in turn the organization with the larger environment. In my view the main interest of this paper is simply that he applies systems theory to a consideration of public relations process, at a high level.

**F.15**

Heath, R. L., (2006). Onward into more fog: thoughts on public relations research directions. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 18(2), 93-114.

Global themes	Fully functioning society theory (FFST) a new paradigm	PR must demonstrate interest in public and community	PR as responsible rhetor promotes positive social exchange
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>FFST combines system, rhetoric and social exchange theories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Promotes corporate social responsibility</i></li> <li>• <i>FFS is an augmentation of system theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Postulates the individuals seek rewarding decisions and enlightened choice</i></li> </ul>	<b>PR must demonstrate concern for societal interests</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Challenge of discovering the whole while finding PR role in it</i></li> <li>• <i>Managers can contribute concern for social issues</i></li> <li>• <i>Holmström - reflection</i></li> </ul>	<b>Corporate PR illusion of symmetrical dialogue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Corporate role the essence of modern PR</i></li> <li>• <i>The organization has replaced the individual in citizenship role in society</i></li> <li>• <i>Traditional PR- illusion of symmetry, reflexive (not reflective)</i></li> </ul>
	<b>FFST builds on symmetric and excellence theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Relationships are symmetrical when goal is 'communitas not 'corporatas'</i></li> <li>• <i>Organizations must understand community and their impact on same</i></li> </ul>	<b>Community theme</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>European sociological views: create shared reality through zones of meaning</i></li> <li>• <i>Community is a balance of mind, self and society</i></li> <li>• <i>Society is enacted by identification, relationship, communication and decision-making</i></li> </ul>	<b>Control and power at centre of social exchange</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Control and power at centre of exchange</i></li> <li>• <i>Power- legitimacy and exercise of power</i></li> <li>• <i>Management to assess own power- social or self-interest</i></li> </ul>
	<b>New paradigm needed for PR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Must consider how to add value to society</i></li> <li>• <i>Defines ethical status of PR but without destroying the soul of PR</i></li> <li>• <i>New paradigm must acknowledge all types of organizations</i></li> </ul>	<b>Public interest the central theme in society</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Society consists of multiple collectives</i></li> <li>• <i>Public interest quintessential theme: difficult to define</i></li> <li>• <i>Society is complex: information and opinion at odds, conflicting decisions and inputs</i></li> </ul>	<b>Responsible rhetor</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PR role found in social influence</i></li> <li>• <i>Rhetoric is persuasive communication</i></li> <li>• <i>Principled communication fosters enlightened choice through dialogue</i></li> </ul>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Critical Reflection***

Heath's fully-functional society theory (FFST) is an attempt to build on top of systems theory, through the addition of rhetorical theory and social exchange theory. This is a much more ambitious approach compared with other theorists. It is critical in orientation not because it attempts to derail the use of system theory; rather, Heath realizes that while the idea of a system provides a useful framework, additional theoretical ideas are needed. Heath incorporates responsible communication, community and the idea of organizational reflection as elements in a comprehensive model. Of U.S. theorists, Heath seems most willing to use what works from systems theory, while incorporating other ideas. Together, his approach represents an attempt at a more integrative perspective, one focused on society and organizational interests.

**F.16**

Heath, R. L., Motion, J. & Leitch, S. (2011) Power and public relations: paradoxes and programmatic thoughts. Institute for Public Relations. Retrieved from <http://www.instituteforpr.org/power-and-pr>

Global themes	Reflective organizations wield power constructively	PR has power through its ability to create meaning through discourse
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Systems view- power arises through relationship and information flow</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Construct power relationships through discourse</i></li> <li>• <i>Power arises from system dynamics</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems create and share information</i></li> <li>• <i>Power defines nature and quality of relationships</i></li> </ul>	<b>Power a societal resource enacted through dialogue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Narratives are foundation of discourse and power distribution</i></li> <li>• <i>Power is socially constructed interpretation of facts and systems relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Power comes from meaning generated</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems actors connect/disconnect to power structures</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social capital created through quality of relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems generate and facilitate power structure</i></li> <li>• <i>PR connects organizations as power structures to other power structures</i></li> </ul>	<b>PR creates meaning at all system levels</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Discourse defines mind, self, and society</i></li> <li>• <i>Mind= ideation, self= identity &amp; society = relationship</i></li> <li>• <i>PR is a meaning creation process</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Reflection balances power</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Reflection is poly-contextual (Holmström)</i></li> <li>• <i>Key polarities defines conditions for influence</i></li> <li>• <i>Central theme of societal power – who’s meaning prevails?</i></li> <li>• <i>What rationale or power can advance mutual empowerment</i></li> </ul>	<b>Power through discourse</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PR exerts soft power, by making sense of situations through discourse</i></li> <li>• <i>Meaning can become hegemonic - unnoticed, accepted as common sense.</i></li> <li>• <i>PR wields unjustified social influence</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical Reflection**

The article is noteworthy in that the authors do not attempt to avoid claims that the use of public relations can have hegemonic impacts—they agree that it can result in imbalanced social influence. Power is addressed directly by acknowledging it as a characteristic of any system, enacted in the public sphere through the creation of meaning structures. Organizations ‘perform’ their role through the use discourse to build narratives, and power relations are at the core of these performances (p. 17). “Discourse-based advocacy defines mind, self and society” (p. 16). Reflection, which is defined as self-understanding in relation to the environment, is positioned as a potential mechanism for power to be modulated.

**F.17**

Holmström, S. (2007). Niklas Luhmann: Contingency, risk, trust, and reflection. *Public Relations Review*, 33(2007), 255-262.

Global themes	Reflection enables poly-contextual perspective of system	Systems perspectives are contingent	Society reflects decision-making in system
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic themes</li> </ul>	<b>Reflection enables recognition of interdependence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizes justification of interdependence</li> <li>Organization sees itself from within</li> <li>Org must find ways to mediate own decisions</li> <li>Sees potential conflicts and facilitate exchange of views</li> </ul>	<b>Reflection versus reflexivity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflection is a second order behaviour; reflexivity is first order</li> <li>Reflexivity- is mono-contextual, narcissistic</li> <li>Reflection – enables a poly-contextual perspective</li> </ul>	<b>Social systems self-referential systems of communication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operate based on consciousness and communication</li> <li>Social systems are systems of communication</li> <li>Communications processes select only from specific horizon of meaning- closed system</li> </ul>
	<b>Complexity may lead to reflexivity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflection about extreme complexity...leads to hyper-irritation and powerlessness</li> <li>To reduce complexity, organizations resort to reflexive behaviour</li> </ul>	<b>Social systems are poly-contextual not hierarchical</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>System rationality = establishing structures of expectation in view of ultra-complexity</li> <li>Public perspective – immense complexity reduced to public opinion</li> <li>Society not hierarchical but poly-centred</li> </ul>	<b>System is the result of decision-making</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communications flows where connection most probable</li> <li>Organizations are nothing but communication decisions</li> <li>All social contacts are systems: society is the sum of all possible contacts</li> </ul>
		<b>Systems perspectives are contingent</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A system's own world view is contingent</li> <li>Systems perceive the world from many different perspectives</li> <li>Communication is a filter through which the world is recognized</li> </ul>	

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Sociological Turn**

Holmström interprets public relations through Niklas Luhmann's social theory, which she acknowledges is complex and has not often been applied to the field. Luhmann sees social systems as systems of communication, where system structure is the result of communication decisions. Organizations are not viewed as being comprised of individuals and resources; rather they also are observed to be the result of communication decisions. The significance of this article is Holmstrom's discussion of multiple perspectives within the system, and her strong argument in favour of reflection as a capacity that allows these different perspectives to be understood and appreciated.

**F.18**

Holtzhausen, D. (2002). Towards a postmodern research agenda for public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28(2002), 251-264.

Global themes	Modern PR reflects organization-centric reality	Postmodern view challenges modernist paradigm	Power achieved through discursive practice (PR)
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organizations construct reality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Modern PR based on objective knowledge</i></li> <li>• <i>Seeks consensus</i></li> <li>• <i>Rationality is an effort to classify and regulate experience through knowledge</i></li> </ul>	<b>Postmodernism critiques contradictions in PR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Seek conflict and dissensus</i></li> <li>• <i>Rejects manager as rational and objective being</i></li> <li>• <i>Postmodernism legitimizes different forms of meaning and understanding</i></li> </ul>	<b>Modern PR based on language games</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Creation of hyper-reality through image/ sign struggles</i></li> <li>• <i>A crisis of representation</i></li> <li>• <i>Practitioners using modern PR practice are tools of the organization</i></li> </ul>
	<b>PR practice and theory based on a concealed meta-narrative</b> <i>Meta-narratives</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Symmetrical/excellence theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Need for a paradigm</i></li> <li>• <i>PR as management function</i></li> <li>• <i>Rationality of economic goals</i></li> </ul>	<b>Pearson’s challenge to modern PR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Alluded to the postmodern skepticism of rational knowledge</i></li> <li>• <i>Challenges modernist views</i></li> <li>• <i>Observed strategy as an orientation, not an objective reality</i></li> </ul>	<b>Discursive practice maintains power</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Organizations legitimate selves through discourse</i></li> <li>• <i>Communication used to transfer information and gain compliance</i></li> <li>• <i>Need to deconstruct management language</i></li> <li>• <i>Strategy is an attempt to exert power</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Modern PR is hegemonic</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Privileges management view</i></li> <li>• <i>Practitioners interpellated into system to legitimize managers</i></li> <li>• <i>Dominant coalitions role in strategy, planning</i></li> </ul>	

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Critical reflection***

Postmodern approaches have the benefit of dispelling the normative assumptions that public relations practice is a force for the public good, and that organizations seek to balance their own interests with that of the publics they target. While I appreciate Holtzhausen’s attempt to dispel such idealistic assertions, the tone of the analysis is somewhat confrontational in nature and seems to be based on a priori assumptions about organizational intent to exert power. Other researchers, such as Heath, Motion and Leitch (2011), critique power in a more objective manner.

**F.19**

Ihlen, Ø. & van Ruler, B. (2010). Applying social theory to public relations. In Ø. Ihlen, B. van Ruler & M. Frederickson (Eds.) *Public Relations and Social Theory* (pp. 1-20). New York, NY: Routledge.

Global themes	PR impacts on social system	Increased relevance of social theory	PR subverts ideal of public sphere
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Basic themes</li> </ul>	<b>A social phenomenon</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine impacts on organizations, public arena, society</li> <li>Explains socially oriented PR programs</li> <li>Understand construction/deconstruction of social structure</li> </ul>	<b>PR has been an isolated discipline</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scholarship should not be so close to the social institution it analyzes</li> <li>Growing interest for differentiated approaches</li> <li>Social theorists have not focused on it until recently: early example...Boorstin, Habermas (to a degree)</li> </ul>	<b>Role of communication constructing shared reality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PR similar to journalism in terms of impacts on society</li> <li>Humans reflect 'the other' to themselves</li> <li>Social reality is a dynamic process</li> </ul>
	<b>Societal levels</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insights micro (Individual) meso (organizations) and macro (society) levels</li> <li>Practice understood in this context</li> <li>Sociological view brings the 'macro' view into play; PR is mostly the micro/meso view</li> </ul>	<b>Brings new ideas to PR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Systems/ rhetorical approaches overlook society</li> <li>New ideas...</li> <li>Postmodern, feminist, communitarian, critical and cultural theory</li> <li>Luhmann, Bourdieu, Habermas</li> <li>Globalize the study of PR</li> </ul>	<b>Public sphere a social construction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Struggle of actors in a battlefield of meanings</li> <li>Sociological views is concerned with values</li> <li>Social reality is a shared process</li> </ul>
		<b>Does not privilege the organization</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social focus not oriented to management problems</li> <li>Focuses on the relationship PR has with society and the social systems it coproduces</li> </ul>	<b>Modern PR altered nature of public sphere</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PR change public sphere into 'applauding decisions' not debate</li> <li>Habermas denounced PR- pretends to fulfill public role, hides its true intentions</li> <li>Public sphere owned by special interests</li> <li>Professional communicators dominate</li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Sociological Turn**

The trend to bring social theory and sociological views into public relations research is a welcome one. Many important social/cultural thinkers seem not to have considered public relations specifically to any degree. The weakness of organization-centric views of the field, despite best intentions, is that they are unable to fully address important critiques of the impact of public relations on society. While social theory may prove difficult to immediately relate to practice-oriented programs, I believe that contemporary students should be exposed to this literature, at the same time as they study literature that is more practitioner-focused.

**F.20**

Leeper, R. (2001). In search of a metatheory for public relations: an argument for communitarianism. In Heath, R. L. (Ed.). *The handbook of public relations*. (pp. 93-104). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Global themes	Liberalism fosters individualism over community	Communitarianism as a paradigm for the field
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Liberalism a dominant ideology</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Extreme individualism in the U.S. = liberalism</i></li> <li>• <i>A common approach to values and society are lost on liberalist ideology</i></li> </ul>	<b>Community is a critical unit of analysis</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Humans relate to communities of culture and language</i></li> <li>• <i>Self does not develop without language, narrative (C. Taylor)</i></li> <li>• <i>Human community as a component of social system</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Emphasis on individual rights versus community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Liberalism sees individual rights as universal, not contingent</i></li> <li>• <i>Individual rights over the responsibility to the community</i></li> <li>• <i>Individual goals divert attention from societal goals</i></li> </ul>	<b>Importance of community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The individual is situated in community</i></li> <li>• <i>Morality learned in community</i></li> <li>• <i>Minimum community values needed for system correctness</i></li> <li>• <i>Loss of shared meaning affects culture</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Communication develops self and community</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Rhetorical participation necessary for sense of community and social responsibility</i></li> <li>• <i>Situating the self through participation with public arena</i></li> <li>• <i>Dialogue a training ground for morality</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical reflection**

In my view this article is extremely important in the sense that it diverts the organizational focus on publics, and places it on the larger concept of community. As articulated by Leeper, this refers not only to community in the physical sense (a community with location), but to a sense of community that exists within many different kinds of social groups. In an article that is not included in my literature sample, Kathie Leeper (1996) suggests that communitarian values may assist organizations more effectively undertake social responsibility programs, and lead to more appropriate responses in crisis situations. I also find it compatible with my own assertion of the importance of individuals— community and individuals are interdependent concepts and at the very core of the social system.

**F.21**

Leitch, S. & Neilsen, D. (2001). Bringing publics into public relations. In Heath, R. L. (Ed.). *The handbook of public relations*. (pp. 127-138). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Global themes	Re-imagines concept of public	Traditional PR conception of public is inadequate
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Social theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Links to public sphere</i></li> <li>• <i>Public sphere is separate from the 'system'</i></li> </ul>	<b>Organization-centred</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>No mention of public sphere, replaced by multiple publics.</i></li> <li>• <i>Publics exist only as defined by the practitioner</i></li> <li>• <i>Influence of Grunig/systems theory</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Habermas and public sphere</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Publics related to public sphere</i></li> <li>• <i>Public sphere a place for debate among citizens</i></li> <li>• <i>Distinction between the system and the lifeworld</i></li> <li>• <i>Lifeworld = the public sphere and private sphere</i></li> </ul>	<b>Misunderstands publics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Individuals belong to diverse publics</i></li> <li>• <i>Public should be thought of as all citizens</i></li> <li>• <i>No mention of public sphere in traditional PR research</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Omits power relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Organizations and publics seen as interchangeable</i></li> <li>• <i>Publics not accorded any agency</i></li> <li>• <i>Symmetrical model – power absent</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Publics as objects</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Goal-driven rationalization</i></li> <li>• <i>Publics as artifacts</i></li> <li>• <i>Publics as consumers</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Sociological Turn**

During my career, I have always experienced some discomfort about how practitioners (including myself) have employed the term ‘publics’, but I could never articulate why. Leitch and Nielsen’s paper accurately captures my concern—the term publics influence us to think of groups of individuals as an object. The use of the term is part of the habitus of practitioners and fundamental to the organization-centric worldview; an organization will often ‘target’ publics, but would rarely refer to itself as one. Another aspect of this article that I admire is the integration of Habermas’ concept of the ‘Lifeworld’. Leitch and Nielsen interpret the Lifeworld as encompassing both public and private spheres, allowing “groups of individuals develop their own identities, and perhaps representations of their collective interests, in relation to the system” (p. 131).

**F.22**

Merten, K. (2004). A constructivist approach to public relations. In B. Van Ruler & D. Vercic (Eds.) *Public relations and communication management in Europe: A nation-by-nation introduction to public relations theory and practice*. (pp. 45-54).

Global themes	Social reality constructed through communication	Systems theory only theory to explain communication process
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Differentiation of reality by/in modern media</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Confusion of fact vs. fiction</i></li> <li>• <i>Fictional substitutes for the real</i></li> <li>• <i>Fictional reality creates daily relevance</i></li> <li>• <i>Real action and real people substituted in media</i></li> </ul>	<b>Communication subsystem most important</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The most recent subsystem</i></li> <li>• <i>Most relevant- created the media society</i></li> <li>• <i>Media systems has grown most quickly of all</i></li> </ul>
	<b>PR constructs social reality</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Generates effects</i></li> <li>• <i>Establishes consensus</i></li> <li>• <i>Created fictional reality &amp; gives it authority to create daily relevance</i></li> </ul>	<b>Communication at all levels, interrelates all</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Applied to micro, meso, and macro levels</i></li> <li>• <i>Basic level= the communication process</i></li> <li>• <i>Second level= organization/ group</i></li> <li>• <i>Third level = society</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Luhmann's model valuable</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Problem in media society- information overload</i></li> <li>• <i>Complexity managed social system through reflexive reaction</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Sociological Turn**

Merten is a strong proponent that systems theory is the only theory that effectively deals with communication: this is important given the rapid growth of the media 'subsystem' in recent years. This article is also interesting for its focus on how the media subsystem creates confusion between fact and fiction. It does this through the construction of layers of mediation, and the distance then created, between individuals and their direct experience of social phenomena. Media provides fictional realities in place of real action and real people, drawing support for his ideas from Boorstin (1961). The main challenge presented by the media subsystem is information overload, which he suggests is only manageable through reflexive reaction, as per Luhmann.

**F.23**

Pavlik, J. V. (1987). *Public relations: what research tells us*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>General systems theory (GST) as a PR paradigm</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>GST as paradigm</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>GST is more an approach than a theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Kuhn's idea of paradigm: researchers challenge, new ideas emerge</i></li> <li>• <i>GST has potential to achieve status as PR paradigm</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems and the environment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Contain objects</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems within larger environment</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems = an integrated whole</i></li> </ul>
	<b>The PR function</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>A subsystem in a complex, open system</i></li> <li>• <i>Helps with adaptive behaviour</i></li> <li>• <i>Interconnected with other subsystems</i></li> <li>• <i>Regulates relationships in/outside the organization</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Grunig's model</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Four models of communication based on open system</i></li> <li>• <i>Modern form – 2-way symmetrical</i></li> <li>• <i>An organic organization solves problems</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Individual objects interrelated to form a whole (system)</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships between / among objects in system</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships the focus of majority of PR research</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-Centric**

At the time of writing, researchers were predisposed to seek a unifying theory for the field. Pavlik's article assesses the early impact of general systems theory (GST) in that regard. As the systems metaphor had already been applied for some time to organizations, it was natural for public relations researchers to apply it to public relations subsystems and communication processes. As with much of the early literature, in-depth analysis of system theory is missing; as a result, systems theory is applied very generally. However, this is understandable in the sense that researchers were just then beginning to explore the theoretical possibilities. The bigger insight in Pavlik's article is his acknowledgement of Grunig's role as the leading systems-influenced researcher in the field. Grunig had begun to use systems theory as a catalyst for his own research into practice-specific applications. There is nothing wrong with that at all; however, the popularity of Grunig's symmetrical communication model and his reputation as having used systems theory, meant that the two terms were often used synonymously.

**F.24**

Pearson, R. (1990). Ethical values or strategic values? The two faces of systems theory in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 1990(2), 219-234.

Global themes	Systems theory (ST) and strategic values	Systems theory(ST) and ethical values
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>ST an emerging paradigm</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Introduced by practitioners (Bell and Bell)</i></li> <li>• <i>ST relevant to organization theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships, structure, interdependence</i></li> </ul>	<b>Ethical perspective</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Micro/meso/macro domains</i></li> <li>• <i>Micro domain - individuals</i></li> <li>• <i>Ethics are at the micro domain (decision-making)</i></li> <li>• <i>Rational discussion among system members is required</i></li> </ul>
	<b>PR has choice to make</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Choice will affect discipline's self-understanding</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems language can make functional approach seem 'new/novel'</i></li> </ul>	<b>I-force vs We-force</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Modernity stress individualism ("I")</i></li> <li>• <i>Postmodernity must focus on social responsibility ("We")</i></li> </ul>
	<b>How system theory has been used</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Has been applied to functional view of PR</i></li> <li>• <i>Systems language (input/output)</i></li> <li>• <i>Organismic/mechanical metaphors</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationships seen as main focus</i></li> </ul>	<b>Social theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How is the social subject related to society?</i> <i>Habermas/Luhmann debate</i></li> <li>• <i>Habermas: system must allow for rational debate, (emphasizes an individual focus)</i></li> <li>• <i>Luhmann: complexity in system (emphasizes system outcomes, survival)</i></li> </ul>
		<b>Social system model not considered</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Buckley's adaptive social systems model not studied</i></li> <li>• <i>Human decision-making is the paradigm (Buckley)</i></li> <li>• <i>Social system is not an organism</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical Reflection**

I have argued for the importance of Pearson's article in terms of how systems theory was considered by public relations theorists to that point in time. Pearson was able to isolate the core problem of applying systems theory, which was essentially that the object of study would become the organization, leading to prioritization of strategic and functional considerations. Pearson's doctoral dissertation was entitled 'A theory of public relations ethics' (1989), which was influenced by the work of Albert J. Sullivan's (1965) work on ethics and values. Pearson's 1990 article effectively synthesized strategic and ethical concerns, and also positioned the ideas of Habermas and Luhmann as relevant to a fuller understanding of systems analysis.

**F.25**

Pieczka, M., (2006). Paradigms, systems theory, and public relations. In J. L’Etang & M Pieczka, (Eds.) *Public Relations: Critical Debates and Contemporary Practice*. (pp. 333-357). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Systems theory (ST) is misinterpreted as a PR paradigm</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> • <i>Basic themes</i>	<b>How ST interprets PR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Presupposition of organization as an open system</i></li> <li>• <i>ST called systems approach or focus</i></li> <li>• <i>Uses language of ST loosely</i></li> <li>• <i>‘System’ presented as an ambiguous concept</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Use of paradigms</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>PR uses very general definition of paradigm: ‘a model with followers’</i></li> <li>• <i>Has turned into professional discourse (esp. through textbooks)</i></li> <li>• <i>Adapted from organization theory</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Grunig misinterprets</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Paradox: sees the organization as a separate entity, yet humans needed for sense-making</i></li> <li>• <i>Used mechanical/ organismic models of ST</i></li> <li>• <i>ST emerged into excellence theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Sees ethics as process not outcome</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>e.g., communication is ethical if it is symmetrical</i></li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	<b>Critical aspects overlooked</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Social systems model (Buckley) not explored</i></li> <li>• <i>Ethical dimension mission (social responsibility)</i></li> <li>• <i>Grunig created a hybrid form of ST, more professional discourse than theory</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical Reflection**

This article is the most thorough summary and critique of the application of systems theory that I found. Pieckza documented several deficiencies with prior research, and was most critical of J. E. Grunig who she felt had misunderstood system theory. In particular, Pieckza noted an overly general application of core system concepts in Grunig’s work; the creation of a ‘hybrid form of system theory; too close an alignment with the needs of practitioners as opposed to theorists; and the dominance of U.S. in terms of the public relations research agenda. She also criticized Grunig and Hunt’s characterization of the four models of communication as an evolutionary arc leading to more ethical practice. Pieckza felt this implies that as long as communication is symmetrical it can also be considered ethical— which ignores any consideration of inherent power imbalances between organizations and publics. While her criticisms are valid, the degree to which she singled out Grunig as a negative influence seems counter-productive and ignores his many contributions to the field.

**F.26**

Raupp, J. (2004) The public sphere as a central concept of public relations. In Vercic, D & von Ruler, B. (eds.) *Public Relations and Communications Management in Europe: A nation-by-nation introduction to public relations theory and practice.* (pp. 311-316). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Public sphere as the main concept of public relations</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> • <i>Basic themes</i>	<b>How PR should work in relation to public sphere</b> • <i>Adopt societal perspective: foster communication in public sphere</i> • <i>Operate within the structural conditions it presents</i>
	<b>Organization-centric view of ‘publics’</b> • <i>Seen as social groups in the organization’s environment</i> • <i>Strategic actions target publics</i> • <i>Publics is a term adopted by organizations/practitioners</i> • <i>Dispersed and fragmented/ active and latent</i>
	<b>Public sphere</b> • <i>Public sphere: A space for communication. Citizens participate</i> • <i>A term used by social theorists</i> • <i>Habermas used for social analysis</i>
	<b>Public</b> • <i>Singular use of the term</i> • <i>All citizens are included</i>
	<b>Publics/public sphere are interdependent</b> • <i>Publics are social actors in the public sphere</i> • <i>Both are products of communication</i> • <i>Integrative approach to relate the two concepts</i>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Sociological Turn***

Raupp distinguishes between the public, publics (plural), and the public sphere. Public is a term that refers to all citizens. Publics is an organizational term—groups of individuals that are the target of strategic actions. Raupp uses public sphere in the sense intended by Habermas, but suggests that we consider publics more broadly, as actors participating in the public sphere. In this context, public relations should focus its efforts on fostering communication in the public sphere. Like many sociological perspectives this overlooks, as opposed to balances, the organization’s right to self-determination and the achievement of its goals.

**F.27**

Röttger, U., & Preusse, J. (2013) External Consulting in Strategic Communication: Functions and Roles Within Systems Theory. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 7, 99-117.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Systems theory approach to public relations consulting</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Implications of Luhmann (autopoietic)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The client (organization) is an autopoietic system</i></li> <li>• <i>Consultant prompts change, but organization changes from within</i></li> <li>• <i>Deep structure of organization: self-referential</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems and systemic consulting</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Lack of theory related to consulting</i></li> <li>• <i>Apply system theory/ systemic consulting</i></li> <li>• <i>Function and role of consultant is the focus</i></li> <li>• <i>A sociology of consulting</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Systems perspective in consulting</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Consultant maintains reflective distance from client</i></li> <li>• <i>Consultant is observer: a 2<sup>nd</sup> order view</i></li> <li>• <i>Support/ encourage client reflection</i></li> <li>• <i>Dilemma of in-house PR: being embedded in the client view</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Interaction with client system</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Interaction between consulting system and client system</i></li> <li>• <i>Consultant view: consultant, client <u>and</u> publics</i></li> <li>• <i>Client view: client and consultant</i></li> <li>• <i>Consultants – the system that produces reflection</i></li> <li>• <i>‘Systemic’ consulting focuses on process</i></li> <li>• <i>Organization system partially hidden from consulting</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Organization-Centric**

Röttger and Preusse apply systems theory to a consideration of strategic consulting in public relations. They view the difference between systemic consulting and traditional consulting as the understanding of the consultant’s role, arguing that the practitioner must maintain a reflective distance from the client and adopt a ‘second-order’ view. The benefit of this lies in the ability of the practitioner to encourage client reflection about strategic action, and the impact on their audiences. Though they use the word ‘view’ to describe this reflective distance, their meaning is similar to my use of perspective-taking. Based on my experience in consulting, their ideas are not new, however I like how the authors employ the word ‘reflection’ as a practitioner accountability, and distinguish between client and consultant perspectives. The article is a balanced presentation of practice and theory.

**F.28**

Toth, E. L. (1992). The case for pluralistic studies of public relations: rhetorical, critical, and systems perspectives. In Toth, E. L., & Heath, R. L. (Eds.), *Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations* (pp. 315-320), Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Understandings of public relations between systems, rhetorical, and critical theory</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Distinguish focus of each theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems: functional orientation of communication</i></li> <li>• <i>Rhetorical: communication as persuasion/consensus</i></li> <li>• <i>Critical: the message derived from communication</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Importance of historical-critical method</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems: influenced improved practice (four models)</i></li> <li>• <i>Rhetorical: symbolic properties of communication</i></li> <li>• <i>Critical: disrupts our beliefs about organizations</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Common link between them found in critical stance of each</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems: critical of 'non-excellent' public relations</i></li> <li>• <i>Rhetorical: how communications creates/influences organization-public relationships</i></li> <li>• <i>Critical: critique arenas of power</i></li> </ul>
	<b>System theory's influence on PR</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Grunig identified as 'systems scholar'</i></li> <li>• <i>How PR function in organizations (dominant coalition)</i></li> <li>• <i>Manage conflict and build relationships with publics that limit organizational authority</i></li> </ul>

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**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical-Reflection**

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Toth looks for common ground between systems theory, rhetorical theory and critical theory. What I like about Toth's approach here is that she deliberately sets out to find ways in which theories can fit together; many researchers simply position one theory against another. In hindsight, Toth's interpretation of Grunig as a systems theorist I think misses the mark, though would have been a credible assertion amongst researchers at that time. Overall the article strikes me as an attempt to make a case for the inclusion of approaches other than systems theory, while not appearing to be overly critical of the dominant theory at that time—Grunig's excellence theory, also published in 1992.

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**F.29**

Verhoeven, P. (2009). On Latour: actor-network-theory (ANT) and public relations. In Ihlen, Ø., van Ruler, B., & Fredriksson, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Public relations and social theory: Key figures and concepts*. (pp. 166-186). New York: Routledge.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Actor-network theory a new way to consider public relations</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> • <i>Basic themes</i>	<b>Challenges traditional view of PR</b> • <i>Consider human and non-human actors</i> • <i>No 'fixed' publics or groups</i> • <i>At odds with normative/ functionalist views</i>
	<b>Importance More complex view of practitioner role</b> • <i>Practice is not a process of communicating strategic action</i> • <i>Practitioners must consider non-human actors</i> • <i>Rethink how to handle representation in the public sphere</i>
	<b>Encourages more reflective practice</b> • <i>Microsociological view of practitioners in action</i> • <i>Practitioners associate with all actors</i> • <i>Encouraged reflective practice</i>
	<b>Alternative view of social system</b> • <i>Society and nature are not 'two' distinct concepts</i> • <i>Society and nature as one process of attributing meaning</i> • <i>No hierarchy (e.g., micro/meso/macro or other)</i> • <i>Human/ non-human comprise the network</i>

***Personal reflection***

***Phase: Sociological Turn***

Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) has not been applied to public relations in any significant way. Verhoeven's paper is the most comprehensive example, and he notes Ian Somerville's (1999) as the only other discussion on the subject. The main challenge with ANT lies in the complexity of Latour's ideas, including the counter-intuitive assertion that non-human actants are considered to display a form of human-like agency. These ideas will run counter to most practitioners' beliefs. Therefore, it may be necessary to find 'bridging' ideas which could be used to provide analogies between ANT and more familiar ways of thinking. It is a theory that deserves more analytical attention by the field.

**F.30**

Witmer, D. (2006). Overcoming systems and culture boundaries: public relations from a structuration perspective. In Botan, C. & Hazelton, V. *Public Relations Theory II*. (pp. 361-374. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<b>Global theme</b>	<b>Structuration as a logical extension of systems theory</b>
<b>Organizing themes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Basic themes</i></li> </ul>	<b>Influence of general systems theory/system theory</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mainstream theory in PR girded by system theory</i></li> <li>• <i>Influences views of publics, practitioner role, management</i></li> <li>• <i>Advantage of general system theory- relationships between system components</i></li> <li>• <i>PR both a system component and boundary-spanner</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Organization / environment interface historical-critical method</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Systems oversimplifies ways in which organizations create/are created by structure</i></li> <li>• <i>System theory sees organizations and environment as discrete concepts</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Publics as discursive communities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>System theory does not account for creation of publics through shared experience</i></li> <li>• <i>Communication interaction from discursive community</i></li> <li>• <i>Publics span space/time through communication technology</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Structuration – how it aids understanding of public relations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sees interconnectedness of agents and institutions</i></li> <li>• <i>Structure of social system – both outcome and medium of recursive practice</i></li> <li>• <i>Interactive nature of systems: they are patterns that reproduce structure</i></li> </ul>

**Personal reflection**

**Phase: Critical-Reflection**

Witmer argues that Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory provides a more meaningful understanding of public relations as compared with systems theory. Witmer acknowledges system theory’s contribution to an understanding of mainstream public relations, but argues it falls short by oversimplifying agent/ structure connections. Certainly, structuration is a more complex theory; in fact, the challenge I had with it is its very complexity, and it was not always clear (to me) how it answers the criticisms it aims at systems theory. This points out the challenge of assessing various social or systems theories with respect to public relations through interpretations by other researchers. I would need to do more extensive reading of Giddens’ original works before I could attempt a more thoughtful opinion on the value of structuration theory.