

## ROLE THEORY AND ITS USEFULNESS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

**C**overing a wide area of public relations may be defined as a set of activities aimed at creating an image based on sympathy in the eyes of the target groups. Public relations (PR) is according to some art and according to some science and communication is the starting point of the majority public relations definitions. PR practitioners have to appeal to internal and external publics listed in a wide range at the same time. Hence they need to shape their messages according to the target groups and to take on different roles for this. Role Theory can provide a useful starting point for planning of public relations activities for external publics of an organization. In this study, it will be included a model trial for it.

**Keywords:** Role Theory, Public Relations (PR)

## 1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) is a rapidly developing field as an academic discipline and also as a practice. But there is no one theory that may explain all public relations practices. There is a complex view which consists of incongruous concepts, terms, structure, process and findings in the field (Dubin,1969:10). According to Broom (2006:142) we are in the early stages of building theory that may someday provide a foundation for the emerging profession and its practice in PR.

Theoretical research is not as much as intended for public relations. It is important to keep in mind that theory construction in PR requires both scientific approach and praxis. Because theory cannot keep apart from practice in PR. Experiences of PR practitioners may contribute to theory and the theory to the praxis. One of the most important theory buildings that has been developed in PR field is about the roles of practitioners in organization and society. PR practitioners need new strategies to respond organizational, social and environmental demands at the same time and in this process they use both of practical and theoretical models and methods from different fields such as communication, sociology, organizational behavior, and etc. Role Theory can contribute to understand the PR practitioners' multifunctional roles. This study aims to present a model trial for PR practitioners within the key concept of role theory.

## 2. Public Relations: General Definitions

It is difficult to arrive at a common definition on PR because it has a wide application field and to be implemented with different objectives in public and private sectors.

According to Edward Bernays (1928), the public relations practitioner is the agent working with both modern media of communications and group formations of society in order to provide ideas to the public's consciousness.

In 1982, Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defined public relations as "PR helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other." In 2012 the PRSA developed a crowd-sourced definition as "PR can also be defined as the practice of managing communication between an organization and its publics."

Grunig and Hunt (1984:25) defined PR as "A practice of managing the spread of information between an individual or an organization (such as a business, government agency, or a nonprofit organization) and the public."

In short, it may be defined as the establishment of a two-way communication system in a planned manner by the purpose of gaining the community's understanding and support.

The aim of public relations is to inform the public, prospective customers, investors, partners, employees, and other stakeholders and ultimately persuade them to maintain a certain view about the organization, its leadership, products, or of political decisions (Seitel,2007). In other words, purpose of public relations to impress the audience and to embark them on a certain belief and action.

Theories in PR come from communication field largely. For example Lattimore et al. (2004) have been approached to public relations from the point of view of mass communication, psychology and sociology and made a classification according to these three main theoretical fields. They have accepted Uses and Gratifications Theory, Framing Theory and Agenda Setting Theory as the theories of mass communication; Social Exchange Theory, Diffusion Theory and Social Learning Theory as psychological and behavioral theories. And the writers have given place to Systems Theory, Contingency Theory and Conflict Resolution approaches in sociological theories.

Systems Theory is useful in public relations because it gives us a way to think about relationships.

Generally, systems theory looks at organizations as made up of interrelated parts, adapting and adjusting to changes in the political, economic, and social environments in which they operate (Lattimore et al.,2004:52). According to System Theory, PR is a subsystem in organizations adopted as a social system. Role of public relations is affected by the definition of an organization in the social system, in other words perception of the organization relating to its role in the society (Miles,1978:24).

Social perspective to PR defines its role according to the activities in the social system. However organizational perspective to PR defines its role according to the contribution to achieving organizational objectives. The best known approach in the second group is James Grunig and Todd Hunt's four public relations model. There is another perspective which accepts that PR is equal to communication. But it is not an efficient point of view because this approach does not provide solutions to problems of PR in practise. PR is a field that practitioners have been faced role multiplicity and role conflict at the same time.

PR is a dynamic and rapidly growing field. Whether you're developing the public image of an organization, dealing with the society, media or managing issues for a large company, you need strong communication skills and a sound understanding of public relations processes as well as social and organizational systems (Johnston, 2009).

Public relations practitioners are growing increasingly concerned with their company's marketing practices, questioning whether they agree with the company's social responsibility. They seek more influence over marketing and more of a counseling and policy-making role (Kermani and Needham, 2006:27).

Today public relations practitioners face a two-way task as to create relationships with both internal and external target groups as well as to create new strategies according to the developments in an unsteady social, cultural, environmental and organizational structure. In order to fulfill these tasks it is so important that there should be correct definitions for the role of PR in the organization and also role of the organization in the society.

Roles may be defined as a collection of everyday activities of the people (Lattimore et al.,2004:61). Dozier and Broom (1995) in their study classified role of PR activities as technical and managerial. Technician role is based on the artistic dimension of PR and includes activities such as writing, editing, preparation of communication messages, media interviews, and etc. Managerial role focuses on the revealing of problems and solutions.

It is not possible for organizations to be isolated from economic, social and cultural structures of the society and organizations have to adopt their selves to new conditions for continuity and also establish two-way relationship with the community they reside in. Open systems gather information from the environment via public relations subsystem. Activities of PR department will be affected by the role perception of the organization in general role system. Organization has some basic expectations such as continuity, financial strength, increasing sales, gaining prestige, finding employees, and etc. However, there are various expectations of society from the organization. Today, organization is not only a technical or economical intuition; it is defined as a social system.

Grunig et al (1992:8) allocate the five roles of public relations in the social system as:

*Pragmatic role:* Basic role of public relations is to help achieve the objectives of the customer. Social or ethical codes are not essential, mere important thing is achieving the desired purpose.

*Conservative role:* Public relations is a means of gaining power.

*Radical role:* Public relations can help social development and change.

*Neutrality role:* Public relations is a neutral practice. Researchers can reveal the role of the practitioners in an unbiased manner.

*Ideal role:* Public relations is a mechanism that will allow solving problems to be to everyone's benefit between individuals and groups in competition.

### 3. Role Theory

Although the word role has existed in European languages for centuries, as a sociological concept, the term has only been around since the 1920s and 1930s. It became more prominent in sociological discourse through the theoretical works of George Herbert Mead, Jacob L. Moreno, Talcott Parsons, and Linton. Two of Mead's concepts – the mind and the self – are the precursors to role theory (Hindin,2007:3959).

Role theory is a perspective in sociology and in social psychology that considers most of everyday activity to be the acting out of socially defined categories (e.g., mother, manager, teacher). Each social role is a set of rights, duties, expectations, norms and behaviors that a person has to face and fulfill. The model is based on the observation that people behave in a predictable way, and that an individual's behavior is context specific, based on social position and other factors (Michener,1999).

Substantial debate exists in the field over the meaning of the "role" in Role Theory. A role can be defined as a social position, behavior associated with a social position, or a typical behavior. Some theorists have put forward the idea that roles are essentially expectations about how an individual ought to behave in a given situation, while others consider it means how individuals actually behave in a given social position. Others have suggested that a role is a characteristic behavior or expected behavior, a part to be played, or a script for social conduct (Coser,1975:257).

In their life people have to face different social roles, sometimes they have to face different roles at the same time in different social situations. Many role theorists see Role Theory as one of the most compelling theories bridging individual behavior and social structure. Roles, which are in part dictated by social structure and in part by social interactions, guide the behavior of the individual. The individual, in turn, influences the norms, expectations, and behaviors associated with roles. The functionalist approach sees a role as the set of expectations that society places on an individual. By unspoken consensus, certain behaviors are deemed appropriate and others inappropriate. According to interactionist definition role is not fixed or prescribed but something that is constantly negotiated between individuals (Goffman,1959:24).

Role theory is, in fact, predictive. It implies that if we have information about the role expectations for a specified position (e.g., sister, fireman, and teacher), a significant portion of the behavior of the persons occupying that position can be predicted. What's more, role theory also argues that in order to change behavior it is necessary to change roles; roles correspond to behaviors and vice versa. In addition to heavily influencing behavior, roles influence beliefs and attitudes; individuals will change their beliefs and attitudes to correspond with their roles (Biddle,1986:68).

### 4. Usefulness of Role Theory in Public Relations

Role Theory focuses on roles of all actors including organizations in social system and according to the approach organizations are actors who behave according to different rules and patterns as well as individuals (Allen and Caillouet,1994:45). So it is possible to be said that organizations are expected to act according to their social positions.

According to the definition of Linton (1945) the role is the sum of the rights and obligations determined by the organizational status of an individual. If we think organizational level, role is model of expected behaviors from organization at the activities which take place in system including other organizations. In other words, role is a behavioral systematic related to a specific position in the social system (Katz and Kahn, 1977).

It may be mentioned three factors forming a role as the expectations of the environment, the perception of the person/organization and the behavior of person/organization (Biddle,1986:71). The expectations of the

environment may be defined as pressures and demands of the environment related to the role of organization. The role perception of the organization may be defined as the view of organization about its role in the system. Role behaviors may be defined as behavior pattern which is produced by the organization by combining with the its own characteristics and the expectations of the environment (Hall,1972:471).

Cutlip and et al. (2005) classify the external publics as governmental, non-governmental and private (corporate) entities. Policy of an organization through the external publics will be affected by the role of the organization in the social system. Because organizations are open systems that are in interaction with the environment as an organism. A system is open if it is exchanging material, energy or information with its environment and is called a closed system does not exist (Berkowitz,1980:241).

### **5. A Model Trial for Role Theory in Public Relations**

One of the most useful ways of thinking about PR has been through the description of models that identify the central ideas of the field and how they are related to each other. Role Theory may provide a useful basis to make theoretical model trial for PR policies through organization's external publics. According to Uysal-Sezer (1987) basic elements should have to be introduced in order to answer the “is it possible a PR theory?” question. These elements;

- a) Identification of the basic concepts of the system,
- b) Establishment of relationships between concepts in the identification,
- c) Introduction of a model of the relationships between the concepts.

A model trial has been presented in Figure 1 below. If we developed the theoretical model trial based on Role Theory according to these three levels:

In a) level for the first step is an endeavor to answer the “what is PR?” question. International Public Relations Association (IPRA) definition may create a useful ground

According to IPRA public relations; a continuous and organized administrative task of a private or governmental organization which is used to gain and maintain the support of the target people or groups and to this end fulfills analyzing and changing opinions (economic), adjusting the behaviors (legal) and keeping in mind the common social benefits (social) functions.

Second b) level focuses on relationship among concepts in the definition. According to the definition, PR has three roles as changing opinions (economic), adjusting the behaviors (legal) and keeping in mind the common social benefits (social).

Economic role of PR is based on determination of dominant opinions and trends in the society in order to ensure the continuity of an organization. Legal role is based on ensuring the implementation of organizational behaviors under the certain rules and patterns. The social role of public relations will be shaped by expectations of the outside target groups.

According to these three areas, a classification for the roles of PR in the organization may be following way:

<b>ECONOMIC ROLE</b>	<b>LEGAL ROLE</b>	<b>SOCIAL ROLE</b>
1. Contribution to the organization's continuity 2. Contribution to the productivity and profit 3. Adaptation to the environment 4. Contribution to the recruitment	1. Compliance to the legal framework and rules 2. Compliance to the organizational practices	1. Contribution to the proper usage of social and organizational resources 2. Compliance to the ethical and socio-cultural norms 3. Contribution to the creating a positive social image

Basic variables that influence the roles of PR department in the organization may be classified as technology, organizational structure; education levels both employees and PR practitioners and support of the upper management. These factors are in interaction mutually and successively and they also affect the roles of PR. For example technologic level of the organization or education levels of PR practitioner may affect the success of economic roles. Also organizational culture and structure and attitude of the executives' can affect the level of contribution of PR department to the social roles.

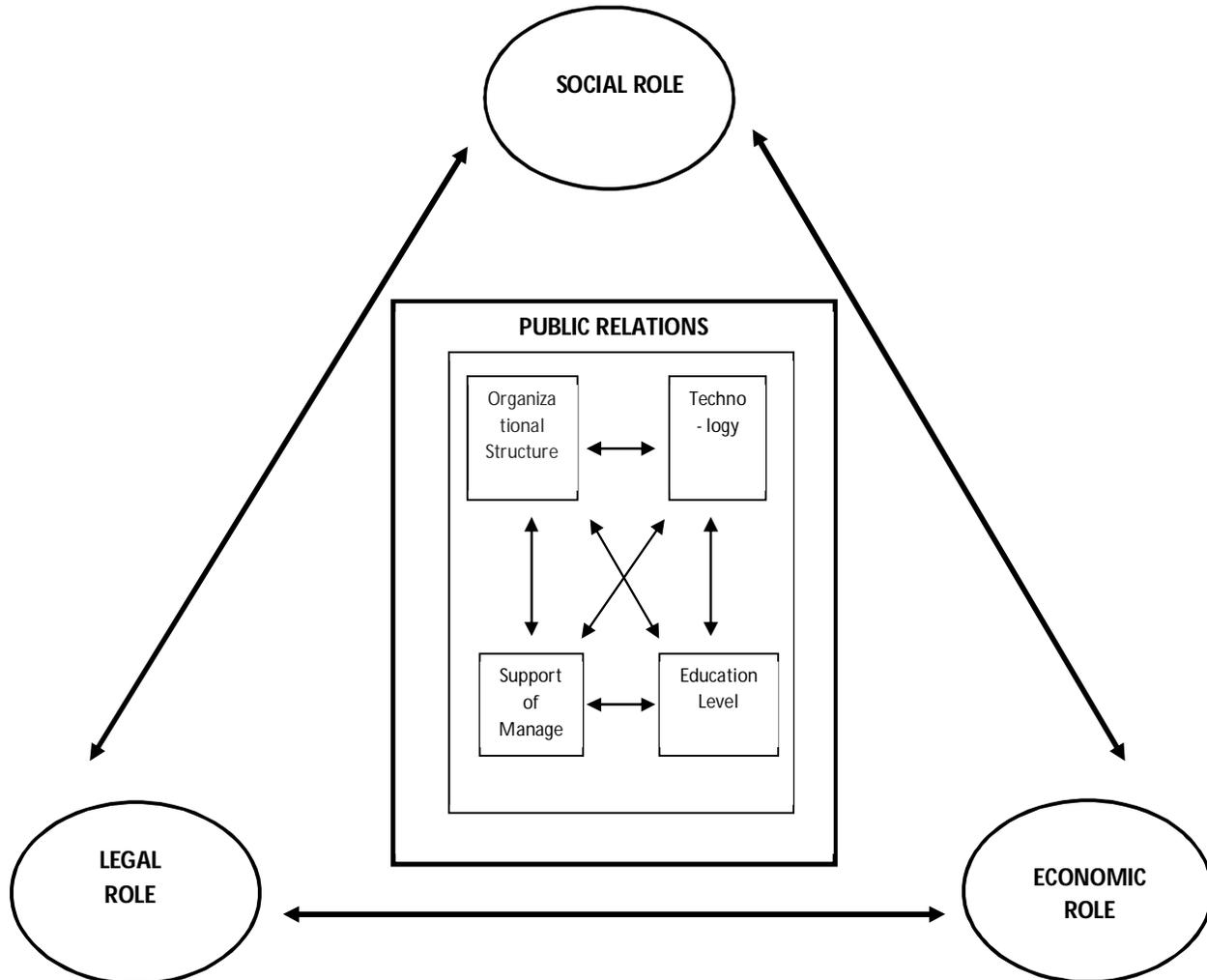
In third c) level, a simplified model of the relationship among concepts in the definition has been tried to be revealed.

## **6. Conclusion**

Theories help practitioners explain and predict human behavior and communication. PR practitioner can make campaigns and messages more effective using theories.

Theories of how PR is practiced continue to develop. Role Theory may be a starting point for describing the key activities and different roles of PR practitioners in the organization and also society.

Figure 1: Trial Model for Role Theory in PR



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