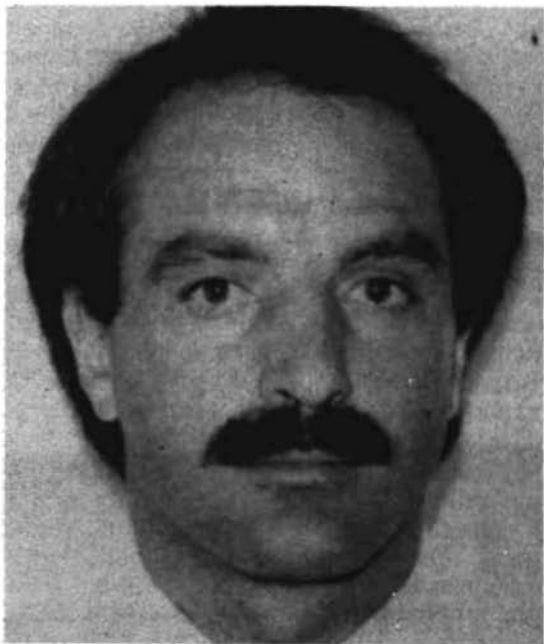


Public Relations: An Alternative View

Gideon de Wet

PUBLIC RELATIONS has, for reasons not that obvious, been neglected in terms of theoretical conceptualization in the study of communication phenomena. Though the field has seen a number of text books and articles written on public relations, attempts to put public relations in conceptual theoretical perspectives have been limited. The need therefore is to elevate the study of public relations to higher theoretical levels, which could also benefit industry eventually. In this article Lewin's field theory, and in particular his topology of the inner person has been put forward as a focus domain of how to conceptualize public relations in an organizational context. Public relations is playing the mediating role between individual and individual, organization and individual as well as organization and organization. Lewin's field theory, as such, provides the communicologist with exploratory alternatives to the study of public relations.



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Public Relations viewed from a conceptual theoretical perspective in communication science has, for reasons not that obvious, been neglected in communication research and theory construction. Could the mechanistic atomistic approach, as presented by "instant manuals" and some text books, be the reason? Although a number of authors attempt to deal with Public Relations conceptually, to mention a few: (Cutlip, Center and Broom (1985), Centre and Welsh (1985), Norris (1984), Skinner and Von Essen (1982), Jefkins (1982), Van der Meiden and Fauconnier (1982), Reilley (1981), little attempt has been made, with the

exception of Cutlip *et al* 1985 (chapter 8), Grunig (1983) and Van der Meiden and Fauconnier (1982) who apply the systems approach, to place Public Relations firmly within a conceptual theoretical framework. The need remains for more substantial exploratory theoretical insights which generate and integrate theoretical perspectives away from the linear atomistic text book panaceas which are so

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easily offered. The thesis is put forward that theoretical perspectives, in addition to the linear atomistic approaches, be generated in order to adequately address the problematics in the area of Public Relations. The question remains where does Public Relations fit in the field of the communication domain? Van der Meiden and Fauconnier (1982) generate a point of view in this respect which I will not examine for the purposes of this study. It provides a very refreshing and welcoming insight.

This need for definite, substantial empirical and theoretical contributions to the field of Public Relations exists not only in academic circles but also in industry. On this account Lindenmann (1979) avers "(that) ... research related to Public Relations planning and measurement is finally starting to come of age, or does it simply mean that there is an awful lot of wheel spinning being done by an awful lot of people on both sides of the fence — academic and corporate?" (p.26). Fauconnier (1981) shares this view. The need therefore is to elevate and link the study of Public Relations to higher theoretical and practical levels which would benefit both theorist and practitioner. In similar vein Grunig (1983) proposes "(that) ... basic research cannot be successful without a broad theory to guide a particular study and to tie several studies together" (p.30). In this study the aim is not to provide a so called "grand" theoretical paradigm which provides egalitarian constructs but to provide an alternative theoretical vehicle which could be applied as an instrument to the study of Public Relations, an alternative view. In particular this analysis will attempt to demonstrate in what way the practice of Public Relations could be conceptualized in terms of Lewin's (1936) Field Theory.

Changing world view and Public Relations

As we approach the end of the century, new developments in every sphere of life, from "heman monsters" to "Star war dreams", are inevitably catapulting man to heights unknown. Lesley (1982) remarks "The final segment of the Twentieth Century is being dominated by the human climate — the attitudes of people that determine how all segments of society will function" (p.9). Aranoff and Baskin (1985) share this view.

Public Relations forms part of this "passing parade" Central to this issue is the human being, who faces new challenges and horizons, who conquers and resets targets, who changes and rebuilds structures. See Byron (1983), Corbett (1983) and Horne (1983).

To gain insight into the mystical components and motives of man's being, the researcher, and the social scientist must work together to unravel the mystical components and motives of man's being. Brinkhead (1981) shares this concern. It is of profound value to the science and the teaching of the discipline. Public Relations is no exception to the rule. Lehrman (1985) notes "(that) ... research will help you to understand why something works" (p.17).

As pointed out Public Relations cannot escape the turmoil, in fact it's part of it. In this respect, the focus will lie on an alternative theoretical perspective, Lewin's (1936) Field Theory. Littlejohn (1979) declares "Field theory is an organic approach that in it holistic orientation is consistent with the systems point of view" (p.257).

Field theory and public relations

As already indicated, the aim of this paper is to explore an alternative theoretical foundation which could serve to open up new angles on the study of Public Relations — as such it remains an explorative exercise.

Lewin, as one of the founding fathers of modern communication (Schramm, 1983) was one of the most influential psychologists of this century (Littlejohn, 1979). For the purpose of this study, Lewin's 1936 approach to the nature of the individual and group dynamics is our focus domain.

1. Conceptualization

As pointed out Lewin focusses on the individual and the dynamics of group activities in which the individual is instrumental, both as unit and as part of the whole: stated differently — an organic interrelationship. This organic relationship, in an organisation structure, forms the foci of the applications of the field theory to Public Relations. Simply stated: the individual, with his own idiosyncrasies finds himself within an organizational structure which constitutes a group of groups with idiosyncrasies own to the

group and is manifested in the organization in various ways. Such as level of competency, kind and quality of products, level of responsibilities, etc. In this respect interchanging roles of both the individual and the group play very important roles in defining the task domain of Public Relations and how it should concern itself with the attitude as expressed by both individual and group, and how this is eventually reflected to the outside world intentionally or unintentionally. This in itself has particular consequences for the practice of Public Relations.

Stated then: Firstly the individual, and secondly, the individual in a group relational context would be considered. Let us look at Lewin's depiction of man more closely. The individual, and that adds to the complexity as Hall and Lindzey (1978) pointed out, —that the structure of a person is heterogeneous and not homogeneous, and that it consists of sub-divided parts though intercommunication and interdependence are prevalent, finds himself within a life space or a so called psychological field. Within the life space is to be found an inner person linked or protected from the life space by a perceptual motor band. The next step is to organize the inner person region into cells. Those in the center are called central cells and those adjacent to the perceptual motor area region are called peripheral cells. The perceptual motor is left unstructured.

The rational is "... that when the direction of influence is from the environment to the person, the region surrounding the inner-personal sphere represents perceptual processes, and when the direction of influence is from the person to the environment this same region stands for the motor system" (Hall & Lindzey 1978, p.392). Thus we can conclude that the input involves perception, and in the same sense the output involves motor action: Van Rooyen and Marais (1979) share this view.

"In terms of this model, the contents of the peripheral regional can more readily be communicated to the environment than the contents of the central region..." (p.32).

In short then, the person finds himself within a life space which is complex and determines the person's mobility according to tensions generated as a result of the person's needs and

goals. Littlejohn (1979) adds this very important consideration: "It is important to remember that the individual's life space includes groups." (p.259).

From this particular assumption, we would like to put the individual more firmly in an organizational group relational perspective.

As mentioned previously, the individual and the group find themselves in an organic interrelationship, thus it is acceptable to say that groups also have life spaces, which are the products of certain needs and goals and structures. These tensions would tend to move or inevitably shape the structure goal and the ultimate cohesiveness of the group within that particular context. Lewin (1939) adds, for the purpose of this discussion, one very important qualification: "It seems to me rather important to stress (that) many definitions of a group use the similarity of group members rather than their dynamic interdependence as the constituent factor. ... I think one should realize that such a definition is fundamentally different from a definition of a group based on interdependence of its members" (p.147). In this regard, the group or the public should be viewed in terms of the structural interdependence as constituted in an organizational structure. This does not postulate, however, that groups would only be constituted in terms of, for example, levels of management, or sections or subsections of departments. Such structures provide more visible parameters. It does not, however, exclude multi-membership probabilities across these parameters.

In this regard, forces such as job descriptions, rules and regulations, goals and philosophies etc, play decisive roles in the individual's commitment to loyalty, productivity etc., since these properties would be under constant scrutiny. Though Littlejohn (1979) adds an important qualification: "Group values and norms never coincide completely with the needs of the individual. There seems to be an optimal level of freedom in groups. If the individual no longer has enough freedom to pursue goals outside the group, dissatisfaction will result, and the individual may leave the group" (p.260). This emphasizes once again the importance of interdependence between individual and group as well as between groups and groups.

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2. Application

The nature of Public Relations requires, as part of management's policies, that it be integrated in every sphere of the organizational domain. These actions manifest itself in many ways, unique to situations, such as media actions, like home magazine, to spontaneous interdepartmental courtesy visits. In essence, Public Relations thrives on attitudes and actions.

Public Relations as a manifestation of the levels of communications within organizational considerations is in essence communication.

Viewed as such, Public Relations remains an integral part of the very existence of an organisation. Without this property no estimate of the equilibrium of the organisation can be made in terms of the availability and accessibility of the flow of communication. From a communication point of view, Public Relations is equally difficult as well as easy. It is straight forward, since it is basic to the human being. It is difficult since it concerns itself with the existence of the human being, as an individual as well as a group member. Public Relations in this regard could link up with how Grossberg (1982) views communication, he remarks that: "(this) is a process whereby two individuals are related by virtue of learning the same meaning." (p.175). Public Relations viewed as such implies positiveness towards a common goal, thus establishing a definite relationship, which is the result of a mutual effort, in fact, it mediates between individuals, individuals and groups, groups and groups, organisations and organisations. This perspective substantiate the well known definition of Public Relations as Skinner and Von Essen (1985) refer to it as "(the) deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" (p.1). It is the shared conviction that knowledge of the human being, and the science that accompanies him, is of paramount importance for the practitioner. This explains the need therefore, to gain insight into the mystical dimensions of the human being in an organisational context. Lewin's Field Theory could provide us with an additional focus.

As in the case of both organisation/group and the individual, communication represents the organisation or individual's contact with the immediate environment. In this respect, it refers

to all the levels of communication, from interpersonal to mass communication. Both individual and organisation are exposed to the environment *via* communication, and *vice versa*; the organisation/group learns from the environment by means of the mediating role of communication.

This particular relationship can be presented in different ways. Simply stated: (Figure 1)

As stated already, Lewin's Field Theory could be applied as an alternative perspective. As pointed out the individual finds himself within a particular life space (read for this purpose, organisation/groups). The perceptual motoric contact area links the individual and the life space. This life space, as stated is a complex field in which the person mobilizes himself in terms of needs or tensions. This life space could also include as Farace, Monge and Russell (1977) put it, so-called "information environments", which then influence the nature and aim of the communication that would be generated as a result of the relationship. Van der Meiden and Fauconnier (1982) share this perspective as well. Van Rooyen and Marais (1979) argued that the perceptual motoric contact area, facilitates the communication property of the individual/group. It can be depicted as follows (Figure 2):

The conceptual model of input, throughput and output becomes evident. Grunig (1975) puts it differently: "Communication will be viewed as behaviour which systems use to reduce uncertainty in problematic situations in order to gain a more accurate picture of the environment with which they must cope." (pp.101, 102).

The Public Relations practitioner could conceptualize the practice of Public Relations as a topology model to Lewin's Field Theory. This application of the Field Theory share a close resemblance with the systems approach application to Public Relations and provides new stimulus to the study of Public Relations.

Conclusion

The Public Relations practitioner has to strive to gain more insight into the complexities of man's existence to be able to conceptualize particular contextual constructs of man's existence. This is central to the practice of Public Relations.



Figure 1

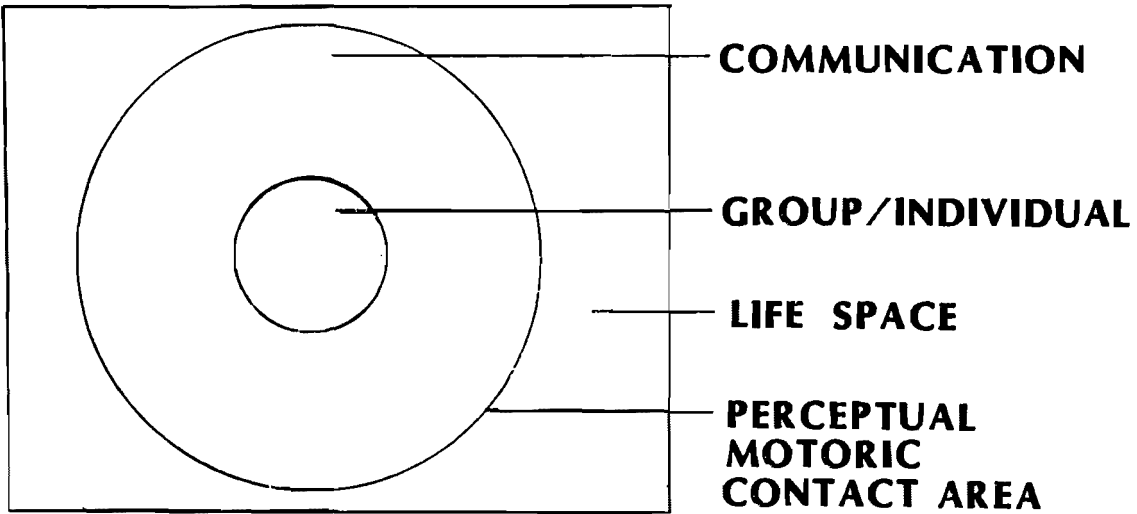


Figure 2

Equally important, more research and theoretical constructions are necessary to elevate Public Relations to higher values, both in theory and practice. Though Lewin did not work per se on communication, his topology of the inner

person provides us with some general orientations towards behaviour in group relations, and opens up thus new awareness for the study of applied forms of communication.

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