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Resistance From the Margins: The Postmodern Public Relations Practitioner as Organizational Activist

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A postmodern view of public relations practice holds that practitioners will act as organizational activists. This article examines the discourse of 16 public relations practitioners to determine whether they exhibited postmodern behavior that translates into organizational activism. Practitioners displayed organizational activism through situational ethical decision making, a desire for change, the use of biopower to resist dominant power, a concern for employee representation, and the practice of dissensus, to mention but a few. This study confirms the emancipatory potential of public relations and challenges the domination of modernist perspectives in public relations.

Back in my old organization at a community college, the president got his board to give himself and his people 30% raises and their money was more than 40% of what our people made. Their bonus was more money than our people made in a year. It was a huge issue. It was huge. And, it was communicated wrong. The employees had a hard time with it and they called the papers and made this huge fuss about it. My answer, although I agreed with the employees, my face to the media was, it is justified, the board approved it, and all that stuff. While all this was happening, the president got wind that there were stories out there and he called me

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> and accused me of leaking. He not only accused me of planting the stories, but he decided I did it and told me I was never to talk to the press again. So, here I went ahead and gave the party line and got beat up. It came out who did this and it was not me. But he didn't care. So, from then on, the reaction I had was, I didn't give the party line. I gave the real story and the real story was he didn't do this, he didn't do that. And I left because I could not deal with somebody who was like that. It was not just me. It happened across the board. In my current organization everything that I have seen from legal has been very up front and I hope I do not have to go down that road. But I have been there and I gave the party line. I was not comfortable with giving the party line, but at the same time it was to outside people, it was not to internal people, so I thought it was OK. But, to be slapped because of that ….

This statement by a public relations practitioner illustrates several important issues in a postmodern view of public relations' role as organizational activism: local and situated ethics and decision making (Deetz, 2001), the role of power in organizational relationships, resistance to power, dissensus (Holtzhausen, 2000), and the presence of emotional and psychological violence in work environments (Spicer, 1997), to mention but a few.

This article examines the discourse of 16 public relations practitioners to demonstrate the impact of postmodern perspectives on public relations practice, something public relations theory and education have not taken seriously enough up to now. The fact that postmodernization has led to societal changes in different forms of culture, state, politics, work organization, science, and technology (Boyne & Rattansi, 1990; Crook, Pakulski, & Waters, 1992; Featherstone, 1991; Friedberg, 1990; Lyotard, 1989) has inevitably led to new realities and values in the workplace. As the previous example illustrates, the issues for public relations practitioners might not have changed over time but how they deal with these issues has obviously shifted from the modern to the postmodern.

It will be appropriate to briefly review the main philosophical differences between the modern and the postmodern, particularly as they pertain to the organizational environment in which public relations practitioners operate. Because postmodernism is largely a reaction to modernism, this review does not include interpretive and critical perspectives, which currently represent some of the other approaches to organization and organizational communication theories (Hatch, 1997; Jablin & Putnam, 2001).

A modernist approach to organizations privileges a management discourse and emphasizes upper management's goals for the organization as given and legitimate (Deetz, 2001). Organizations and their functions are evaluated in terms of economic contribution and "'rational' economic goals" (p. 19). The goal of the modernist approach is "an orderly, well-integrated world, with compliant members and regulated conflicts, (which) has accepted without examination organizational goals and member positions" (p. 19). This approach emphasizes the

importance of information transfer in terms of "supervisor/subordinate communication, compliance gaining, networks, power, and relations with the public" (p. 19). Deetz includes in this perspective the concepts of strategic message design, management of culture, and total quality management. Theoretical approaches include covering laws, systems approaches, and an emphasis on skills development, particularly in the areas of communication and management (Deetz; Hatch, 1997).

From the previous description, it is clear that a large portion of public relations theory has been developed within the context of a modernist approach to organizations. The best example of this approach is the Excellence Study executed on behalf of the International Association of Business Communicators and published in the two well-known texts, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (J. E. Grunig, 1992) and *Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995). This approach emphasizes the importance of public relations as a management function, membership in the dominant coalition, and strategic planning of public relations with measurable outcomes, preferably in economic terms. The modernist, or functionalist (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), approach to organizations remains largely dominant in North America (Deetz, 2001; Hatch, 1997; Miller, 1999) and most likely in most Western countries.

Contrary to the modernist endeavor, which "sought universal explanations that could approach … the status of natural laws" (Hatch, 1997, p. 44), postmodernism represents a broad theoretical approach and postmodern philosophers and theorists stress that there is no central postmodern theory. In response to the modernist emphasis on single, dominant theoretical perspectives and philosophies, referred to as metanarratives (Lyotard, 1988), postmodernists revel in multiplicity and diversity, and in even questioning their own theoretical perspectives. Lyotard said, "Theories themselves are concealed narratives (and) we should not be taken by their claim to be valid for all times" (pp. 126–130).

Although some scholars view postmodernism as a critical approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), postmodernism is generally regarded as a distinctly different discourse that focuses on such issues as the link between knowledge and power, dissensus rather than consensus, and "micropolitical processes and the joined nature of power and resistance" (Deetz, 2001, p. 31), to mention a few.[1] As will

[1]Although the term *postmodernism* is still the most widely used term (i.e., Mumby, 2001) Deetz (2001) introduces the concept of "dialogic studies," which is largely based in the work of French postmodern philosophers. He chooses this approach "because of the growing commercial use of the term *postmodern,* resulting in increased difficulty in distinguishing realist assumptions about a changing world (a postmodern world) and a postmodern discourse, which denies realist claims about the world" (p. 31).

be emphasized throughout this article, and as supported by scholars such as Best and Kellner (1991), Deetz (2001), Kincheloe and McLaren (1994), and Mumby (2001), the postmodern movement originated from France, particularly from philosophers such as Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, and Laclau and Mouffe. One of the main emphases of a postmodern approach is to provide a different lens through which society in general, and in this case, public relations in particular, can be viewed to provide an alternative understanding of practitioners' experiences (Deetz; Holtzhausen, 2000). This lens will not only provide a different perspective on practitioners' experiences, but also can be used to refute some of the modernist expectations of public relations practice.

One of the few areas where postmodernism has started to have an impact on public relations is in the area of activism. Dozier and Lauzen (2000) make a critical comparison between the behavior of environmental activists and public relations practitioners. They maintain the action of activists lead to "social change, through fundamental deconstruction and reconstruction of the social order" (p. 14). These activists are loyal to a cause rather than to a particular organization, which, they maintain, is rare among public relations practitioners. They clearly do not view public relations behavior as leading to changes in the social order.

In a similar vein, Holtzhausen (2000) calls for the increased participation of public relations practitioners in community activism, and argues public relations practice can be more ethical if practitioners take an activist stance in the organizations for which they work. Using the work of postmodern philosophers as the guiding principles, Holtzhausen equates the role of the postmodern philosopher with that of the postmodern public relations practitioner. In this role, practitioners will be change agents, serve as the conscience of the organization, and give voice to those without power in their relationship with the organization.

Also, postmodern philosophy, as possibly the most dominant Western philosophy at the beginning of the 21st century, should be able to throw some light on practitioner behavior. The poor image of public relations might well be attributed to modernist expectations of practitioner behavior that might be impossible to fulfill in postmodern society.

Public relations practices have, for many years, been criticized for poor ethics and dubious practices. Slang terms such as *spin doctors* and *flacks* have become part of the word arsenal of people who challenge the ethics and credibility of public relations practitioners. Studies, even among people in the public relations industry, confirm that public relations is suffering from a poor image (Callison, 2000; Newsom, Ramsey, & Carrell, 1993; Saunders, 1993). In addition, public relations practitioners also are blatantly accused of unethical practices that make it possible for big corporations to continue with their own dubious activities (Gandy, 1989; Olasky, 1985; Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Unfortunately, these authors make a strong case in support of their arguments.

These accusations indeed question the role and contribution of public relations practitioners in society and in the organizations they work for. However, can these accusations merely be explained away as poor and unethical decision making by practitioners or are there other organizational factors explaining practitioner conduct?

This study maintains that looking at practitioner behavior through a postmodern lens will provide a different understanding of the role of public relations in institutions. On one hand, this lens will highlight why practitioners make positive contributions to their organizations, despite the fact that they do not necessarily practice excellent public relations. On the other hand, postmodernism will provide a different understanding of how organizations function and how practitioners can play the role of organizational activists.

POSTMODERN THEORY AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Relying heavily on the work of postmodern philosophers, this study focuses on several theoretical threads. In addition to a brief introduction to the postmodern theories applicable to this study, postmodern theories will again be introduced with the presentation of the results of the study. This is done to explain the selection of practitioner quotes and to explain practitioner behavior. Five different theoretical perspectives guided this study.

Organizational Politics and Public Relations

The political nature of organizations focuses on strategic relationships and alliances determined by conflict, power, and resistance to or desire for change (Deetz, 1992; Jameson, 1993; Lyotard, 1992; Williams, 1998). An understanding of the political nature of public relations will be essential to the postmodern public relations practitioner. Spicer (1997) holds that when an organization is viewed as a political system, power is the most important resource.

Power perspectives in public relations theory stress the need for practitioners to be part of the organization's dominant coalition (Dozier, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1995). However, postmodern power does not align itself with power at the top of the hierarchy. Postmodern public relations practitioners as activists will resist authoritative, organizational power structures even when they themselves are part of the dominant coalition. They will use other sources of power, such as personal characteristics, expertise, and opportunity (Hatch, 1997) to obtain power; and they will do this more so when they do not have authoritative power. This pursuit of power, however, must be a positive force for change (Williams, 1998). Whereas authoritative power is directed downwards in organizations, the power postmodern practitioners strive for will be multidirectional and inclusive (Hatch).

Micropolitics, Alliances, and Public Relations Practice

The concept of micropolitics holds that power at the macrolevel is made possible only by the power networks at the microlevel that support macropolitics (Baudrillard, 1975, 1981; Best & Kellner, 1991; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Foucault, 1980). People who strive for power, which is inherently a positive force, have to focus their attention on alliances at the microlevel.

The postmodern understanding that macropolitics exist because of micropolitics is essential to an understanding of public relations as activism. Modernist power came about by permeating all levels of micropolitical power, which includes family, educational, and religious institutions, and business and state organizations (Althusser, 1971; Baudrillard, 1975, 1981; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Foucault, 1980). It is therefore important for public relations practitioners to identify areas of micropolitical power in the organization, form alliances with people who can assist them to gain power, and thus, be influential in the organization (Spicer, 1997).

In postmodern society, micropolitics has become the area of struggle for people who have been marginalized in the past and do not form part of the dominant power structures in the organization. These alliances will be formed particularly with people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. In organizational terms, this understanding of diversity will not only extend to employees who are themselves from diverse backgrounds, but also will include employees who do not form part of the most valued disciplines in the organization. These important disciplines obviously will vary among organizations, but normally executive managers and functions representing the technical core (Hatch, 1997) will be regarded as the most vital to the organization's survival. Public relations as a support function (Mintzberg, 1983; Spicer, 1997) will be more marginalized and regarded as less important. Forming alliances with either marginalized people or marginalized organizational functions such as research and development, accounting, personnel, and strategic planning (Hatch, 1997) will therefore be typical postmodern public relations behavior.

Postmodern Biopower and the Public Relations Practitioner

Power relations in the organization depend on the inner power, or biopower, of the individual to resist subjugation. This approach focuses on the individual as conscious participant who has the power to resist macropower (Birch, 1992; Foucault, 1988a, 1988b; Lyotard, 1993a).

Postmodern philosophers regard power as an inherently positive force but then that power must be biopower (Foucault, 1988a, 1988b) that stands up to dominating forms of power. The importance to resist power and domination from within

comes from the postmodern understanding that power and domination are perpetuated when people accept as normal their subjugation to and domination by power.

Resistance to power that excludes the voices of marginalized organizational functions and employees and only privileges the discourse of management, will be a typical response of the postmodern public relations practitioner. However, the postmodern practitioner also can assist the organization itself to become activist by resisting dominant and harmful power in society in general. Organizations that take on government policies that harm the environment or take a stand on behalf of marginalized social groups will be a typical example of such activism. Perhaps the best-known example is the international Benetton Group with its outspoken stance on issues such as the death penalty.

Dissensus and Dissymetry as Models for Public Relations Practice

Dissensus and dissymetry (Docherty, 1993; Lyotard, 1992, 1993a) are powerful forces for change and give birth to new ideas and new solutions to problems. It is rather an act of becoming than an act of being.

Lyotard (1988) believes consensus results in injustice because the most powerful party in the discussion determines the outcome of the consensus. By striving for consensus, the public relations practitioner will automatically reaffirm the will of the most powerful.

Lyotard (1992) believes inventions and novel ways of thinking and solving problems are born from dissensus. He calls events that have the potential to involve opposing voices "tensors" (Lyotard, 1993b, p. 54). Holtzhausen (2000) argues that the postmodern public relations practitioner will strive for dissensus by identifying points of difference (tensors) between the organization and its internal and external publics. "Through the identification of tensors, practitioners will promote and create situations in which new meaning is produced through difference and opposition" (p. 107).

Local and Situated Ethics and Decision Making

Postmodernists resist philosophical and theoretical metanarratives (Lyotard, 1992) and argue for the immediacy of action, as proposed by Foucault (Eribon, 1991) and Lyotard (Williams, 1998). One of the reasons for this rejection of metanarratives and "foundations" (Deetz, 2001, p. 34) is that these narratives often have been used to maintain the privileged positions of dominant power structures in society and to legitimize positions that are often unjust to marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic minorities.

Both Foucault (Eribon, 1991) and Lyotard (1984) propose that the immediate, the local, situation dictates what is the best and most humane decision to make. This suggests the individual steers away from norms being imposed by society in favor of individual, ethically responsible decision making (Küng, 1992). Postmodern practitioners would therefore rather base their ethical decision making on "particularism," the complexities of the particular circumstances at hand, rather than on "universalism," normative social standards of right and wrong (Adler, 1997, p. 59) because these normative standards are often unjust and only privilege those already in power.

A Definition of Organizational Activism

Against this theoretical background, a profile of the public relations practitioner as organizational activist emerges. The practitioner as organizational activist will serve as a conscience in the organization by resisting dominant power structures, particularly when these structures are not inclusive, will preference employees' and external publics' discourse over that of management, will make the most humane decision in a particular situation, and will promote new ways of thinking and problem solving through dissensus and conflict. These actions will contribute to a culture of emancipation and liberation in the organization.

METHOD

This study was done in the postmodern tradition, or what Deetz (2001) refers to as the "dialogic" tradition of research, with its on emphasis micropolitical processes, resistance to power, the one-sidedness of reality, dissensus production, and the local nature of understanding (p. 31).[2] Data for this postmodern analysis of practitioner behavior were collected from 16 depth interviews conducted between May and July 2000. Participants were drawn from the membership list of a Florida PRSA chapter. Their selection was based on availability of practitioners and their willingness to participate, as well as the type of organization, which had to be either profit, nonprofit, public or government, or technology. Organizational type was introduced merely to ensure equal representation of practitioner voices, and not for the conventional postpositivist benchmark of rigor (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The membership list included place of employment, position, and a brief description of each member's area of expertise. Only practitioners who held a public

[2]There is an emergent debate on the relationship between critical research and the postmodern tradition. Scholars such as Guba and Lincoln (1994) include postmodernism in the critical research tradition, whereas others such as Deetz (2001) make a distinct difference between the two approaches. Mumby (2001) argues against a complete disjuncture between these two traditions and maintains the relationship is "productive and dialectical rather than adversarial" (p. 609).

relations position or who worked in areas of public relations (e.g., communication, media relations, community relations) were selected. Practitioners had to have at least 5 years experience in public relations. Gender and seniority of position were not included as criteria. However, eventually all participants had some level of management responsibility. The members who were excluded were academics, those who held marketing or advertising positions, and members of counseling firms. Practitioners from counseling firms were excluded because counseling firms place practitioners in a different power relationship to clients than the power relationship between corporate practitioners and their superiors. Replicating this study among counseling practitioners was regarded as a separate endeavor, which adds to the heuristic value of this study.

The two researchers applied qualitative interviewing techniques, which emphasize the interaction between the interviewer and respondent (Babbie, 2001). A series of open-ended questions were asked with the option of further exploration to establish mutual understanding (see Appendix A). This is in line with Babbie's understanding of a qualitative interview as "a conversation in which the interviewer establishes a general direction for the conversation and pursues specific topics raised by the respondent" (p. 292). Because this type of research acknowledges the mutual influence between the researcher and the researched, interviews in this article are occasionally presented as a dialogue.

All interviews were recorded and lasted from 60 to 90 min. The word *postmodern* was never used in the interviews; rather, interviews were based on an exploration of postmodern perspectives on activism, as they emerged from the literature.

Huberman and Miles (1994) suggest a number of strategies for dealing with qualitative data that were used in this study. All interviews were transcribed and drafted into summary sheets. The researchers then started noting patterns and themes. Clustering of these conceptual groupings was based on what postmodern theory would constitute as activist behavior.

In reporting the results and in adherence to postmodern interviewing techniques (Fontana & Frey, 1994), the individual perceptions of individual practitioners were reported and served as the unit of the analysis, rather than collapsing all voices into one. However, particularly repetitive trends among practitioners were noted and grouped together. Finally, where available, contrasting perspectives were used to highlight differences between what we interpreted to be postmodern and modernist public relations approaches.

RESULTS

The analysis of data focused on the individual practitioner as having a unique consciousness, not on the practitioner as part of a group that can be studied objectively. Birch (1992) said, "The human being is a subject and not simply an object pushed

around by external relations. To be a subject is to be responsive, to constitute oneself purposefully in response to one's environment" (p. 293). Data analysis therefore focused on the unique attributes and environment of individual practitioners, and how these factors affect their decision making.

Moral and Ethical Decisions are Situational

Lyotard (1988) rejects modernist philosophy and science as metanarratives that co-opt individuals into suppressive social practices that give more power to the already powerful. The role of the philosopher and scientist is continuously to cut free from metanarratives that have been transmitted through the rules, practices, and norms of modernist institutions. Postmodernism opposes philosophies that assume applicability in all situations and under all circumstances. Deleuze and Guattari (1983) said, "We no longer believe in a primordial totality than once existed or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date" (p. 42).

Deetz (2001) showed how in organizational terms "the narratives of 'effectiveness,' 'expertise,' and 'excellence' were used to legitimize managerial control systems" (p. 35). However, the result of the rejection of metanarratives is the fragmentation of identities and the loss of foundations. This is not necessarily regarded as a positive outcome but rather an inevitable one (Deetz). The insight that metanarratives are used to maintain dominant power structures forces people to make situational (or local) decisions on what is ethical and correct behavior.

Holtzhausen (2000) and Fitzpatrick (1996) hold that public relations can play an important ethical role by being the conscience of the organization through highlighting ethical situations and emphasizing the need for ethical decision making. However, the postmodern stance to ethics and moral decision making holds that a single dominant ethical philosophy will submit employees to a repressive metanarrative. Both Lyotard (Williams, 1998) and Foucault (Eribon, 1991) suggest a counterstrategy for ethical decision making that focuses on the immediacy of actions. Instead of focusing on the overall state of ethics in the organization, the postmodern public relations practitioner will show "what is intolerable in a situation that makes it truly intolerable" (Eribon, p. 234). The postmodern understanding thus will emphasize the role of the public relations practitioner as a conscience rather than the conscience of the organization. Nonetheless, ethical decision making will be an important component of daily actions (Küng, 1992).

This approach was strongly supported by a number of practitioners, as can be seen from the following responses to the question whether they see themselves as the conscience of the organization.

Interviewer:
Do your morals play an important part in your daily decision making?

Interviewee:
Hmmm … not daily decision making but they certainly play a part in how we want the department to be viewed or ourselves to be viewed.

Interviewer:
Do you see yourself as being the conscience of the organization?

Interviewee:
A part of that. I think if your definition of the conscience is the person, the little voice inside your head, then I'm part of it. The little voice that says this is happening, that's happening, and, oh, she crossed her arms, something's wrong, then yes.

It is clear this practitioner did not see her role as being responsible for the organization's conscience. Moral decision making was a personal issue, not something done on behalf of someone else.

Other practitioners were equally skeptical about public relations practitioners policing the conscience of the organization. Rather, they reserved this role for particular situations. One said,

> I am not really sure that that is the role of the public relations group to be the conscience of the organization. I don't know where the conscience of the organization will be held. I think it has got to initially be held through the leadership … it has got to start at the top. I think we as public relations practitioners can point out areas where in good conscience certain acts may not be in the best interest and consistent with a corporation or organization's values but I don't know that it rests with us to be the conscience of the marketing section. Maybe the heart, but not the conscience.

The concept of the public relations practitioner as a kind of emotional barometer or "heart" for the organization was reflected in the words of another practitioner:

> I think that is definitely true, at least in our area here, because we have so many engineers, and so many people that look at things very methodically, very structurally, and we are the free thinkers, and they tell us we are the free thinkers.

Another practitioner also saw the involvement of practitioners in ethical issues as a counseling role rather than a policing role. Again the emotional satisfaction, the heart, of the practitioner emerges, "I feel real good about that situation, where they will listen to your counseling and you are their conscience and sometimes you need to prick the conscience to get them [to see] what has to be done."

Yet another practitioner altogether, questioned the role of the public relations practitioner as the conscience of the organization, believing that public relations has such a poor reputation that people will not equate that role with the function:

> I don't think that a lot of people would buy that. The public I don't think would perceive public relations people as that because the public generally perceives public relations as the people who package everything and make it look pretty, whether it is a good thing or a bad thing. They would think of them more as spin doctors or maybe in a negative way, without understanding truly what a public relations person does. Internally in this organization I see this organization has a big conscience anyway, so they don't need conscience police.

Against this background of postmodern ethics as situational, the modernist approach of ethics as metanarrative is vividly juxtaposed in the words of this practitioner, "Definitely, almost social architect, because we have a big effect on the information that we give the public." The concept of *social architect* is typical of the modernist concept of a metanarrative by which society can be manipulated and made subject to totalizing ideas.

Power and the Public Relations Practitioner

Several scholars have theorized power and public relations. The main emphasis of these perspectives was to stress the importance of power for the public relations function. As a result the need for public relations to be a member of the dominant coalition is one that has become entrenched in public relations literature (Dozier, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1995). However, many of these practitioners are not part of the dominant coalition and do not have a lot of institutional power. That does not inhibit them from striving for personal power, as is clear from this dialogue.

> Interviewee:
>
> But I am not part of the power structure. I don't feel … I have to cover my rear end or I am going to lose my VP status or something.
>
> Interviewer:
>
> So you think it is to a certain extent beneficial to the communication process to not really be in there?
>
> Interviewee:
>
> No, no, no. At the present moment, the way our current structure is, I think it is very beneficial for me here because I still have the ear but I am not perceived as being a threat to anybody. I have no agenda. I am here to help you. Now eventually, I want to be at the table to help [the president] but I need to do these other things first.

As this practitioner suggests, there may be some political advantage to being an outsider in terms of dominant power coalitions.

Spicer (1997) suggests viewing the organization in terms of a political metaphor will help public relations practitioners understand how power and conflict

operate in organizations. The political metaphor draws on our understanding of how the political system of government finds ways to manage diverse and conflicting interests. He makes a distinction between organizations as political systems and organizational politics and suggests the former should serve as the applicable metaphor. In this model, power is the most important resource.

Postmodern philosophers also link politics and power. The political is referred to as all forms and spheres of action linked to change or resistance to change (Williams, 1998). Postmodern power is regarded as an inherently positive force for change. Postmodern public relations practitioners have a duty to use their biopower (Foucault, 1980), their power from within, to assert themselves even if they are not part of the dominant coalition. Biopower is the result of self-knowledge, particularly in the form of moral consciousness. As in the previous example, other practitioners, too, regarded access to powerful people as having personal power and valued this form of power more than having institutional power: "I do feel that we have the ear of the highest level management. I can very easily pick up the phone and call our CEO and he will actually take my call. He will listen to what I have to say."

Another practitioner extended power even beyond the organization itself:

> Absolutely, I have a very close relationship with our director who is my boss, and he with the county administrator who is in charge of everything. I have access to the county administrator. I can get him on the phone right now and get him down here, as well as all the members of our board.

Postmodernists have in common the rejection of blind, uncritical obedience to power, which is brought about by philosophical and moral metanarratives. The following comments of a practitioner starkly contrast the desire for power as expressed by other practitioners and are typical of what postmodernists criticize in modern power:

> Internally, there is not a whole lot I can do about them, because they are pretty cut and dry as to who takes ownership of the particular project. So, unless a project comes to me and I can truly direct it, all I have is input and I have to let the leader of that particular issue or project kind of mold whatever they feel best. So I can only do as much as I am asked and as much as they will accept from me.

The power structure in this organization left the practitioner feeling powerless and unable to challenge or make inputs unless she is asked.

Postmodern practitioners have in common the inherent power and desire to resist dominant power if they regard that power as unfair or amoral. These practitioners display some of the equalizing fervor exhibited by activists (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1997). However, this resistance to power often poses problems for

practitioners. They are aware of their own objections and will assert themselves but often have to give in to power, even though reluctantly.

As corporate employees public relations practitioners of course are subjected to the same power relations to which other employees are subjected. Although very little research exists about these power relations, Spicer (1997) alludes to the violence done to practitioners as a result of power.

From the interviews it became clear that these power relations are often responsible for unenviable positions in which practitioners find themselves. One practitioner related how she had to compromise her own principles. Describing an argument about a sexual harassment case, she said:

> Interviewee:
>
> We went at it for 2 hr and I tried every argument to sway him. I did not succeed. He went his own way and circumstances proved him wrong in the end. But that was not a good thing for me. I would rather that he trust me.
>
> Interviewer:
>
> When you walked out of that meeting, did you still stick to your viewpoint?
>
> Interviewee:
>
> I stuck to my viewpoint but my public face was his message because he is my president; I am his communications person. That is what he wants to get out, so that is my message. Behind the scenes, to my boss and to him [I stuck to my viewpoint].

However, she insisted that she was not afraid to take on the system and said,

> As far as I am concerned I am not afraid to take on the system when it is something I believe in. I think a lot of that was my childhood experience. My brothers are that way. The family is that way.

This practitioner brought to life the postmodern concept of resisting power, even if it creates discomfort. Foucault (1988a) said, "As soon as there is a power relation, there is a possibility of resistance. We can never be ensnared by power: we can always modify its grip in determinate conditions and according to precise strategy" (p. 123). Other practitioners supported Foucault's (1988b) belief that "every relationship is to some degree a power relation. We move in a world of perpetual strategic relations" (p. 168).

Asked whether she would challenge power in her organization, another practitioner said,

> Absolutely, absolutely, to the point where I can probably endanger my stance as a team player, but I also feel extremely strongly about the public's concerns, and what is in their best interest. It is not always a politically good position to be in.

Another practitioner echoed this attitude and said, "Yes, most definitely. I am prepared to take on something … go against for example top management if there were any issues I felt strongly about."

Foucault (1988a, 1988b) believed that without biopower, political power permeates the individual and induces obedience and conformity. It might well be the lack of biopower that leads practitioners to make unethical decisions, as in the case of this practitioner who willingly manipulates the truth:

> Sometimes, even though it is a company mandate as what needs to be done, they give me the latitude to work, and we don't like to use the term, but to spin it so that it is more acceptable to the public without being untruthful.

This blind obedience to expectations from others might well contribute to the poor image of public relations.

Employees Come First

Public relations practitioners as "critical worker researchers" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 147) will question scientific management principles by analyzing their own position in the hierarchy of the workplace and will be critical of the perfectly controlled work environment. Not only will these practitioners be aware of the need for their own worker autonomy, but also they will be concerned with the autonomy of other employees and will question management principles that strive to control and manipulate.

A practitioner explained her own as well as her colleague's concern for employees in the form of an inverted pyramid, where workers' concerns should be at the top and managers at the bottom, small point of the triangle. For her, not being part of top management was important in this role:

> I strive for it constantly. I strive for it in everything that I hear and everything that I do … because to me that's respect for people. And that is what it means to be built this way. (She uses her hands to show an inverted pyramid.) I mean, I think about it in everything that I do. But I am at the middle management level where I can get out and about. I am not at the exec level where somebody will come down on me because I have spent $5 million on this project.

Critical worker researchers will give voice to those in the organization who do not have a voice, not in a patronizing or paternalistic way but by legitimating the knowledge of those employees (Garrison, 1989). This happens mainly because "practitioner research tends to distort reality less often than expert research because the practitioner is closer to the purposes, cares, everyday concerns, and interests of work" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, p. 149).

The idea of the practitioner as being closer to employees than other managers is expressed in the words of the previously-mentioned practitioner:

> I definitely see myself as, and this sounds very arrogant, "The voice of the people." And by that I mean the execs are so high up, they don't talk to the people, they don't talk to somebody in the cafeteria, like talk to people in the elevator. They don't question anything. And I do. I talk to people. [My colleague] talks to people. When there is an issue out there, when there is a problem out there I consider it my duty and my responsibility to bring that to somebody's attention—somebody that might be relevant to that and that we can do something about it.

Another practitioner echoed this concern for voice and also viewed this action not as "talking on behalf of" people but rather as creating an awareness of issues that need to be dealt with:

> [It is] through being a voice in meetings at every level, whether it is with our support staff or in the departments, that I can continue to the best of my ability to bring both sides of any issue to the table, try to heighten the awareness.

This creation of awareness about worker issues can be equated with the role of the postmodern researcher as an advocate and activist that expands consciousness by confronting ignorance and misapprehensions (Deetz, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Some practitioners in this study gave examples of how they translate messages from other employees to increase understanding between management and staff:

> There is an employee that had a situation where she needed to leave every day by a certain time because she had responsibilities to pick up her child from day care and what would appear to be getting routinely scheduled into meetings that would go beyond that time limit, putting this person in a bad situation. So I voiced concern on her behalf, I mean, that is a minor detail, but it is important for that person.

Another practitioner also gave an example of how she deconstructed a message for management. The organization had a competition for suggestions to improve productivity. However, all suggestions had to relate to something outside the employee's direct area of responsibility. One employee resubmitted a proposal he had made to his direct manager and as a result management did not want to consider the proposal. The practitioner told them,

> That is not the issue he is telling you. The issue he is telling you is he brought this information to his manager and the manager said "tough." You're not paying attention to the underlying issue. He is saying he brought the information and he has the spreadsheet to prove it and his manager is not taking it seriously. And that was an eye-opener

> for the execs. They did not understand that this was really what that guy was saying. So I am trying to do it in everything.

The attitude of another practitioner who did adhere to the principles of a scientifically managed and tightly controlled workplace juxtaposed the aforementioned stance to employees and their concerns:

> I don't generally interfere. I try to stay within the channels of communication or supervisory requirements that are appropriate. I mean, I supervise a couple of people and I do take their issues to the human resources department, and stand up for them, absolutely, when I thought that what they were asking for was not unreasonable. So yes, I would do that, if I need to.

Whereas the previously mentioned practitioners clearly adhered to the emanicipatory power of public relations, this practitioner gave preference to existing "channels of communication" without really challenging the status quo on behalf of employees. This practitioner would decide for employees what was reasonable or not, exhibiting the paternalistic behavior typical of modernist management principles.

Postmodern Public Relations Practitioners Choose Sides

Perhaps one of the most significant findings of this research is the confirmation that practitioners find it very difficult to adhere to the concept of consensus. Although several scholars, such as Spicer (1997), have come to understand symmetry as collaboration rather than consensus, symmetry as consensus is assumed in much public relations literature (Dozier, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1995; Pearson, 1989).

Postmodernists, however, question the possibility of consensus and believe the most powerful person in the relationship determines the consensus, thus silencing the voice of those with less power (Lyotard, 1988). As previously discussed, all relationships are political and therefore power-related. To overcome the concept of consensus and the silencing of voice, Lyotard (1992) proposes difference and division rather than reconciliation. He refers to this state as dissensus and believes novel ways of thinking and problem solving comes from dissensus. He equates consensus with the end of thinking, whereas dissensus extends thinking. In this process of dissensus, public relations practitioners are forced to choose sides, which provides a new perspective on the bridging function of public relations. Several practitioners gave examples of where this situation of dissensus arose in the workplace. One said, "Everybody is entitled to their opinion, and this is just a situation where you are never going to be in agreement with them. So we hopefully end these conversations delicately and politely."

These situations are typically what Lyotard (1993b) refers to as "tensors" (p. 54)—events that cannot be resolved because of the strongly held differences in opinion. The role of the postmodern public relations practitioner is to identify these tensors between the organization and its publics. In addition, the practitioner will be forced to choose sides because taking sides with both parties is impossible. One practitioner gave a graphic example:

> I have seen meetings where we literally get up and leave the table and the public is still angry. And we have said as much as we can say because if we give you more then we have to give the next guy that comes along more. So we try to stay right within our contract.

This acceptance of different viewpoints is important because voice is suppressed when participants in a dispute cannot express themselves and represent something outside of the status quo. One practitioner gave this vivid example of a tensor and how her manager dealt with it:

> There was one instance where [my boss] and I had a difference and we were so agitated that we stood in opposite sides of the room with our arms folded. And we moved to these positions. We started out across the table from each other. At the end of the discussion we agreed to disagree. There was no resolution to the discussion and we decided to just hang onto that. But the good thing for me was that [he] allowed me to argue with him. And I feel comfortable enough with [the president of the company] to go to him and do that.

Although practitioners try to be neutral because they have been trained to believe that neutrality is the moral imperative for practitioners, they find it extremely hard to do. Again, this postmodern perspective on dissensus explains practitioners' predominant use of the mixed motive model of public relations (Dozier, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1995). Perhaps practitioners will find themselves in less of a moral dilemma if they understood the impossible expectations of being truly symmetrical.

In addition, the poor image of public relations might be directly related to modernist ethical expectations that are not longer applicable in the postmodern world. This results in a gap between actual practitioner behavior and expectations of practitioner behavior.

Marginalization and Diversity in the Workplace

Postmodernists describe macropolitics as the politics of class and state, and micropolitics as the institutional networks that support macropolitics (Althusser,

1971; Baudrillard, 1975, 1981; Best & Kellner, 1991; Deleuze & Guattari, 1983; Foucault, 1980; Pêcheux, 1982). To obtain political power, it is necessary to have power at the microlevel and postmodernists, therefore, suggest resistance to domination through micropolitics.

Because societies are becoming more heterogeneous, the struggle for political power is in itself becoming more diverse and diffused. Local groups, often those people who have been previously marginalized, are organizing against the diffused and decentered forms of power that support dominant power structures. In this way, postmodern politics is a struggle between the dominant values of society and those who feel marginalized by those values (Baudrillard, 1975, 1981).

Therefore, it can be assumed that practitioners who will be conscious of power imbalances in the organization and who strive for power at the microlevel (i.e., in their immediate environment) will be practitioners who themselves have felt marginalized in some way in their own lives. One practitioner explains the feeling of being marginalized as follows:

> Interviewer:
>
> I sort of get the feeling that people who have this feeling, or had this experience of being marginalized, be it then a gender issue or a childhood issue, or a race issue, sexual orientation, or whatever, that people like that will be more likely to take on the system.
>
> Interviewee:
>
> I think you are absolutely right about the idea, especially when you get into the really deeper issues, the things that are obvious about you. Not everybody would know that I was the only girl but everybody would know if I was Black, or the fact that I am female. These kind of issues definitely. I think you have the strength to buck the system. Because you are not the norm in the system. The system is White male, 25 to 40 years old. So I think you have a tendency to do that.

Foucault (1980) held that power is ascending not descending, and that power evolves upwards through micropolitics to become macropolitics. Because all relationships exist in terms of power relations, power is dynamic and exists in terms of alliances (Jameson, 1981, 1984, 1988). Postmodern practitioners will, therefore, strive for power at the organization's micropolitical level and will seek alliances where necessary to obtain power.

Feelings of marginalization and the resulting need for alliances and strategic relationships are as true in organizations as they are in society. The same practitioner spontaneously referred to the importance of alliances and said,

> [I am not afraid] to make alliances. I base my decision to take on beyond what I am feeling [on forming alliances]. I talk to other people. Where is everybody's head on this. Is this something … and sometimes I won't.

The feeling of being a marginalized individual, however, did not translate into an increased understanding of diversity issues. The aspect of diversity, as understood in postmodern literature, was the most problematic aspect of postmodern behavior for practitioners.

Although all the participants emphasized that their organizations were very aware of the need for diversity and equal opportunities, they did not share the postmodern understanding of this concept. Equal opportunity translated into hiring the best person for the job, as in the words of this practitioner,

> This organization is an equal opportunity employer, so regardless of race, creed, color, disability, sex, we make no judgment there. We always are looking for the best person with the best credentials and background to fill any positions.

This attitude is typical of modern management's performance-based discourse with its emphasis on regularity and normalization, particularly of people on the margins (Deetz, 2001). Although the practitioner mentioned those aspects that make for a diverse appointment, in the final instance the best person for the job was appointed. The question, of course, is who determines what the "best" is. In modernist organizations, the best will be determined by those in power and the best will look like the dominant group. There was no understanding that the best person for the job might be somebody who did not conform to the dominant worldview in the organization. Such a person might well be the best candidate because she or he represents a strong opposing voice from outside of the organization.

DISCUSSION

Using the postmodern lens in this study indeed provides an alternative perspective to the organizational behavior of public relations practitioners. The discussion will highlight those differences and the implications for public relations practice and research.

It was apparent that some practitioners were more likely to exhibit postmodern values and organizational activist behavior than others. These behaviors were often the result of organizational environments but also of the individual differences between practitioners. Even in the highly homogenized environment of corporate America, a postmodern approach to studying public relations practice emphasizes the importance of focusing on practitioners' individual understandings and experiences, on "the human being as subject" (Birch, 1992, p. 293) instead of studying practitioners as a homogeneous group. Postmodern research will therefore privilege a variety of qualitative research methods that can highlight the individual experience.

This research also confirms Spicer's (1997) contention that public relations practitioners are subjected to particularly emotional violence in the organizations they work for. The poor image of public relations might be ascribed to this violence, where public relations practitioners, despite their opposition to unethical organizational behavior, are often the ones blamed for that behavior. An additional factor might be the undemocratic organizational environment that does not have the checks and balances of a democratic society. Members of a democratic society clearly have more freedom to make ethical decisions and differ from people in power than have public relations practitioners. Several of the anecdotes reflected the normative discourse of corporate management and managers' unflinching belief that their organizational decisions are legitimate and should therefore be accepted, even in the face of opposition (Deetz, 2001).

If viewed from a modernist organizational perspective, the idea of organizational activism seems confrontational and perhaps even impossible. However, viewing practitioner behavior from a postmodern perspective makes the idea of organizational activism desirable. Many of the practitioners waged a continuous battle between the modern, normative expectations of their work environment and their postmodern values and desires. A number of them found ways to deal with workplace demands by displaying postmodern activist behavior.

Activist behavior took different shapes, but those instances where activism was practiced practitioners indeed displayed equalizing fervor (J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1997), particularly on behalf of colleagues. Contrary to Dozier and Lauzen's (2000) belief, the research showed practitioners could be passionate and loyal to a cause. In this research, practitioners often privileged their colleagues and would speak out on their behalf, which again emphasizes the emancipatory possibilities of public relations.

A postmodern approach to public relations values further emphasizes the situational and local nature of ethical decision making in the field. In this approach the emphasis shifts from ethical norms set by society to ethical decision-making by the moral individual. Practitioners rather saw themselves as a conscience of the organization than the conscience of the organization. In this role, practitioners made decisions based on the immediacy of the situation, what Foucault refers to as local and immediate action, and on their own values, rather than relying on organizational norms.

The desire for change is inherent in organizational activism (Holtzhausen, 2000). The struggle between postmodern desires and behavior of practitioners and modernist expectations of organizational management that strive for ultimate outcomes and control are an indication of the current changes in society. Although not surprising, this is a particularly enlightening finding. Practitioners as boundary spanners will inevitably be more in touch with the societal and cultural environment of organizations and will therefore be more susceptible to these changes than most others. Lyotard (1992) provides an understanding of

this change in practitioner values. He said, "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern" (p. 147). By exhibiting postmodern activist behavior practitioners can be on the forefront of leading organizations through a postmodern era to a new modern era, which will again exhibit its own postmodern tendencies. In this role, public relations practitioners can be perpetual change agents for their organizations and change will be a constant state for activist practitioners.

The findings of this study also challenge the need for public relations to be part of the dominant coalition to be successful (Dozier, J. E. Grunig, & L. A. Grunig, 1995). Practitioners were influential without necessarily having authoritative power. These practitioners relied on personal characteristics, relationship building, expertise, and opportunity to gain power, as pointed out by Hatch (1997). As long as they had access to powerful people and could form alliances, they had at least some power to make changes. The danger of being part of the dominant coalition can lie in the real possibility that the practitioner becomes so co-opted into the power structure that it becomes difficult to play the activist role.

This study indeed confirms the importance of power for the public relations position; however, this power is most significant in a personal rather than an authoritative context. Using a political metaphor for organizations, as Spicer (1997) suggests, will help practitioners understand power relationships and the necessity of forming alliances, bargaining, and negotiation at the microlevel of the organization. Although not recognized as such, in this study micropolitics was an important tool for practitioners, particularly through strategic alliance formation.

Personal power in the form of biopower was also essential for activism. Practitioners who were aware of their biopower and had a high sense of self were more likely to resist dominant organizational power structures and act as organizational activists than those practitioners who accepted the power status quo. As the literature suggests, this biopower was a positive force and was often used on behalf of others, particularly employees and external publics who did not have the opportunity to make their voices heard. Postmodern power is indeed inclusive and multidirectional, as Hatch (1997) suggests, and again confirms the emancipatory potential of public relations practice.

Although practitioners might strive for symmetry, most practitioners in this study found it difficult to translate symmetry into consensus or neutrality. Activist practitioners practiced dissensus and experienced dissymetry. Several practitioners expressed their skepticism about consensus and neutrality and preferred, or were forced, to choose sides. Sometimes practitioners were forced to choose the side of the CEO, but other times they were able to choose the side they felt morally obliged to. The existence of tensors— irresoluble situations—is a reality in the life of most of these practitioners, and several of them indeed preferred to at least occasionally stick to their viewpoint in the face of opposition. This phenomenon calls into question the ability of practitioners to implement two-way symmetrical public

relations practices in the organization and further emphasizes the need for alternative perspectives on public relations practice.

Several of the participants in this study had a natural inclination toward activist behavior but never articulated their behavior as such. Introducing practitioners to the idea of activism in public relations gave these practitioners a new understanding of the potential for resistance to unfair and unethical work environments. Perhaps one of the biggest dangers for public relations education, particularly when public relations is taught from a management perspective, is that students are taught to be submissive and docile corporate citizens. Public relations education needs to free the biopower of students. As maintained by Giroux (1988) and Kincheloe and Maclaren (1994), "Schools can become institutions where forms of knowledge, values, and social relations are taught for the purpose of educating young people for critical empowerment rather than subjugation" (p. 139).

Another area that public relations education should highlight is the need for diversity in the workplace. This is an area where practitioners were the least likely to display postmodern activist behavior. Not only did they not play a role in creating an awareness of diversity issues, but they also did not display an understanding of what diversity in the workplace meant. This lack of insight would limit their ability to bring about organizational change.

This study generates some future research possibilities. As suggested earlier, a replication of this research among public relations counselors might be particularly valuable to understand the power relations between counselors and clients. It also might enhance our understanding of the ethical decision-making practices of practitioners working in counseling firms. A similar comparative study between public relations practitioners and marketing and advertising practitioners might well suggest that public relations practitioners are subjected to higher and more unrealistic ethical expectations than their marketing and advertising counterparts. Studying public relations, not as an insolated discipline but one that is deeply and uniquely influenced by organizational factors and relationships, will provide a different understanding of practitioner behavior and will shed new light on the ethical choices practitioners have to make.

Finally, this study shows the importance of studying public relations as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon and not merely as an organizational practice. A postmodern approach to public relations practice highlights the extent to which public relations has been studied within the context of what Deetz (2001) refers to as "normative studies" (p. 19). A postmodern perspective challenges scholars and practitioners to adopt a different perspective.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW OUTLINE

1. Introduction and discussion about the activities of the organization and its public relations department, such as size, roles and duties, and reporting structure.
2. Discussion of the organization's attitude toward people from diverse backgrounds, such as women, ethnic and sexual minorities, and people with disabilities. Explore real examples.
3. Discussion of minorities in the public relations department itself, whether there is an active program to employ minority practitioners, and the practitioner's general attitude toward this issue.
4. Exploration of differences of opinion between practitioner and department and management. Ask for real examples. Discuss practitioner's comfort level with stating opposing views and the culture around differences in opinion and viewpoints in the organization.
5. Ask practitioner to describe feelings and actions when employees or external publics have issues with the organization that they cannot resolve on their own. Does he or she ever feel the need to speak out on behalf of colleagues or people outside the organization who do not have as much power as they have?
6. Explore involvement in social or community actions where the practitioner applies public relations skills. Ask for examples and explore the factors that make such involvement difficult or impossible.
7. Discuss the possibility of public relations as an activist function, both in the current organization and in activist organizations such as environmental or social activist groups.
8. Ask practitioner about the level of the function and whether it is included in the highest management level of the organization. Explore from here the need for power and whether the practitioner feels she or he has enough power to fulfill the public relations role as she or he wishes or sees best.
9. Explore organizational issues (both internal and external) that the practitioner feels strongly about and whether the practitioner has the power to address these issues. Ask for examples.
10. Discuss the concept of public relations as a bridging function and whether this requires the practitioner to be neutral. Explore the concept of choosing sides, and how conflict is handled in the organization. Are there ever situations where the practitioner is unable to resolve conflict between the organization and a public? Ask for examples.
11. Ask whether the practitioner ever considers the historical, social, or political realities of the organization's publics before or during communication activities.
12. Discuss the organization's attitude toward change in society and the business environment and whether the organization is more open to change than in the past.

13. Discuss the level of democracy in the organization and to which extent publics are taken into consideration in the decision-making process.
14. Explore the practitioner's understanding of the role of change agent and whether this role is performed.
15. Explore the role of the practitioner as "the conscience of the organization."