



# U.S. public relations educators' identification and perception of the discipline



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## ABSTRACT

In this study of U.S. public relations educators, previous research was confirmed that calling and identification influence work meaningfulness. The research highlights the discipline's division about importance of practical experience and research. Participants with an orientation to practical experience had significant positive correlations with calling, not to identification or meaningfulness. Those with a theory/research orientation had a significant positive correlation with organizational identification and meaningfulness, not with calling. This suggests that a practice orientation leads to a stronger public relations calling but not a calling to academia. Those with theory/research identification have less calling to the public relations profession.

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## 1. The importance of identity and public relations

In the public relations literature, little focus has been given to the direct study of the identity of its practitioners and educators. More is known about the state of the field, education levels, work experience, and practical and theoretical knowledge (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009). Other fields, such as organizational communication, education, psychology, and media studies have found exploring concepts of the self and identity illuminating to better understanding the discipline, the practitioners and educators in it, and to providing useful insights into best practices (Turner and Oakes, 1986).

One core institution assisting in the shaping of new public relations role identities is the university. The identities and work satisfaction of those educating young public relations professionals influence not only students but also the discipline. Many academic disciplines hire educators based on their successful completion of terminal, usually Ph.D., education. For public relations positions often practical experience is a preferred skill. Even for tenure-track lines, many job calls prefer candidates who have not only succeeded academically but also have practical experience in the field.

This study seeks to build a connection between a subset within self and identity construction of public relations educators – organizational identification, the meaningfulness of work – and the perspective on the field in which they teach, research, and work. Public relations educators across the U.S. were invited to participate in this exploratory study.

### 1.1. Identity and identification

The self can be defined as the overarching, broadest category, describing who a person is. Identities “are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is” (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith,

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2012, p. 69). A person's self is constructed from social and role identities (Oyserman et al., 2012). Role identities describe the behaviors of the varying roles each person holds in society, ranging from family to work roles (Greenhaus, Peng, & Allen, 2012). Identities are contextually bound, yet dynamic. People tend to refer to their identities as stable (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Belonging to a group can influence the selection of behavior and influences the construction, not only of identities, but the self. Therefore, group membership in organizations and the role of organizational and work identities are important.

Social identity theory explains how individuals create their social and role identities. People compare themselves to one another and use this to affiliate with certain social groups and not others (Turner and Oakes, 1986; Walsh and Gordon, 2008). This suggests that identities describe both a belonging and differentiation from social groups. Furthermore, group membership assists individuals to make sense of their environments.

Identity construction is complex and multi-dimensional, encapsulating identities for multiple social roles (e.g., work identity, parent, spouse, athlete, etc.) (Oyserman et al., 2012; Walsh and Gordon, 2008). Occupational identity is a major component of a person's self-concept (Skorikov and Vondracek, 2011). It has been mostly understood as the identity of an organization or the process of how an individual identifies with an organization's identity (Walsh and Gordon, 2008).

Organizational identification is important to understand the link between an individual and an organization (Edwards and Peccei, 2007). Edwards and Peccei (2007) defined organizational identification "as a psychological bond between the individual and the organization based on self-categorization, the sharing of organizational goals and values, and a sense of belonging and attachment to the organization" (p. 52). An other important element to organizational identification describes the benefits (e.g., greater employee buy-in; higher level of motivation) of this relationship for both organization and employee (Edwards and Peccei, 2007).

Congruent with prior research, three components describe organizational identification. First, the self-categorization of an individual as an organizational member is closely related to the forming of a work-identity (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Edwards and Peccei, 2007). The second component refers to the sharing of goals and values with an organization. The more an individual's and an organization's values and goals overlap, the stronger the identification (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Edwards and Peccei, 2007; Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970). The third component, an affective component, describes the extent to which an individual feels a sense of belonging, attachment, and membership in an organization (Edwards and Peccei, 2007; Hall et al., 1970).

## 1.2. Callings and work meaningfulness

However, not all work identities are tied to one specific organization and organizational identification may not be limited to a specific organization. They may also be connected, either to a job work identity (e.g., work in a job to finance other parts of their life) or to a calling to work in a particular occupation (Walsh and Gordon, 2008). A calling-work orientation suggests that individuals will more likely identify with membership in an occupation rather than an organization. In a calling-work orientation social identity and work identity are closely connected; it may even be the defining construct of the self-concept (Walsh and Gordon, 2008) or a "consuming, meaningful passion for a particular career domain" (Hirschi, 2012, p. 479).

Bunderson and Thompson (2009) further defined the concept of calling. In their sample of one professional occupation, zookeepers, the authors found that an occupational calling led to occupational identification and in turn to work meaningfulness. Hirschi (2012) similarly found connections between calling, organizational identification and work meaningfulness.

Work meaningfulness describes the significance people ascribe to their work (Hirschi, 2012). In contrast to calling, work can be meaningful due to certain job characteristics that do not, however, relate to a person's perceived purpose in life. This study, too, supports that "callings facilitate identification with the domain of the calling and (...) include callings as a predictor of meaningful work (...)" (Hirschi, 2012, p. 483).

The strong influence of a work calling in public relations on meaningfulness and identification has been pointed out in some studies (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Hirschi, 2012). Better understanding if public relations educators perceive to have a calling to their work may help identify and address negative perceptions or attitudes toward the discipline. To explore this area of public relations education the following relationships are predicted:

- H1: Public relations educators who perceive a work calling will identify with the public relations profession.
- H2: Identification with the public relations profession predicts a high level of meaningfulness.
- H3: Work calling is positively related to meaningfulness mediated by organizational identification.

Furthermore, the study asks the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do PR educators perceive the development of the academic public relations discipline?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between calling, work meaningfulness, occupational identification, and the perceived state of the academic public relations discipline?

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