



A social capital approach to improving public relations' efficacy: Diagnosing internal constraints on external communication

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ABSTRACT

This article extends Heath's (2006) concept of fully functioning society theory (FFS) and argues that public relations can be used as a force to enhance collective social capital in communities. To serve this purpose, however, the effectiveness of an organization to serve its *external* publics is often dependent on the status and relationships the public relations function has developed *within* the organization. This paper provides a network analysis of a government agency in Jordan that illustrates the relationship between internal organizational social capital and the potential problems for establishing external relationships with publics. Implications for public relations research methods and theory are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

While research in public relations has traditionally been concerned with the practice as related to business (Holtzhausen, 2000; Karlberg, 1996), some scholars have advocated for a larger role for public relations in society to recreate community (Kruckeberg & Stark, 1988), allow for a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006) and facilitate and sustain civil society and social capital (Taylor, 2009).

Public relations scholars have approached social capital vis-à-vis internal public relations (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006), as an improvement on relationship management (Ihlen, 2005), and as organizational participation in civil society (Taylor, 2009). Such research has primarily viewed social capital as a collective or group outcome that public relations can help to achieve in a community or society. However, social capital must first be acquired or made accessible to individual actors in the form of personal networks and resources before it can be expended or achieved (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Halpern, 2005; Lin, 2001). Social capital is thus a process and an outcome, and is relevant to the success of an individual actor at the micro level, an organization at the meso level, and to an entire community or society at the macro level. Consequently, a public relations department or practitioner must have access to or reserves of social capital before it can be expended in either internal or external communications aimed at building a collective social capital.

The purpose of this paper is two fold. First, we seek to contribute to the emerging body of research that positions public relations in the social capital formation process. To that end, this study pays particular attention to how the internal social capital of an organization – and more specifically the social capital of the public relations unit(s) of the organization – may affect the organization's ability to participate in building collective social capital via external communication efforts. A second goal of this paper is to provide a methodological contribution to public relations research that will allow scholars and practitioners to measure internal relationships. We believe that the method proposed here to study social capital provides

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conceptual and diagnostic tools that extend our understanding of the concept of relationships (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Ferguson, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

The first part of the paper provides an overview of social capital theory and public relations. To show how the relationships and processes inherent in organizational social capital may help or hinder actors, the second section of the paper provides a case of a network analysis of a decade-old government agency in Aqaba, Jordan that is charged with the economic, social, and cultural development of the community. After 10 years of operation, the government agency struggles to provide the most basic services to the community. Local residents accuse the decisions of organization's leaders "to be against the local people's interest" (Abu Al-Haija & Al-Faqih, 2009, p. 154).

The government organization–public relationship is characterized by a lack of trust, lack of responsiveness, and an overall weak capacity of the organization to serve public needs. This paper seeks to understand why the organization–public relationship is weak. The case provides a diagnostic example of why internal relationships must be forged first, before the public relations functions can help make the organization capable of participating in a fully functioning society.

2. Social capital theory

As Chen (2009) described it, social capital research is "in vogue in contemporary social sciences" (p. 193). Within the past twenty years, social capital has achieved distinction as a theoretical perspective that explains – at both a micro and macro level – social relations, individual and collective behaviors, chances of economic growth and political participation. Social capital theory thus serves to help explain the relationships that are the basis of a successful democratic society (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, recent events in the Middle East show that low social capital may increase the potential for civil unrest and violent demonstrations against government.

Bourdieu (1984), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993, 2000) – who are largely acknowledged as leading authors in social capital research – conceived of social capital as the norms, cultural values and trust intrinsic to groups, organizations or communities. Their writings lead social capital researchers to be concerned with questions of how groups or communities "develop and maintain their social networks and enhance their collective interests and identity" (Hsung & Breiger, 2009, p. 5). As Putnam (2000) described it, "social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy" (p. 290).

At a more concrete level, Chen (2009) suggested that social capital is a "certain kind of capital that can create advantages for individuals or groups pursuing their own ends" (p. 194). Indeed, social capital is largely understood as a special case of "regular" capital, which Lin (2001) defined as the "investment of resources with expected returns in the marketplace" (p. xi). Lin posited that the notion of capital could be and has been extended to considerations of social relations. Examination of relationships between actors "evokes structural constraints and opportunities as well as actions and choices on the part of the actors" (Lin, 2001, p. 3). Social capital can thus be understood as the social relationships between actors that involve the exchange of resources. As Castiglione (2008) explained, "social capital is understood to mean all those resources that an actor can mobilize and/or profit from because of his [sic] embeddedness in a network of relations with other actors" (p. 23). Accordingly, social capital is the sum of resources acquired through relationships that help to facilitate the successful actions of an individual or corporate actor.

2.1. Organizational social capital

At the organizational level, social capital has been defined as "the ability that organizations have of creating, maintaining, and using relationships to achieve desirable organizational goals" (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 322). Organizational relationships themselves can be thought of as mechanisms for acquiring, exchanging, or consuming resources. Consequently, the amount and quality of organizational relationships help to facilitate organizational cohesiveness, and ultimately the success of organizational actions. As Monge, Heiss, and Margolin (2008) explained:

Organizations invest resources such as people, time, money, and expertise to create relationships and linkages that provide other resources. . . .they expend economic or human capital in order to build their social capital, that is, their connections to the network, from which they hope to profit. (p. 455)

Organizations benefit from high levels of social capital in several ways. Social capital has been shown to reduce organizational turnover (Dess & Shaw, 2001), manage organizational uncertainties and promote free enterprise (Chung & Gibbons, 1997), enhance an organization's capacity for action (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998), and ultimately benefit organizational survival (Pennings, Lee, & Witteloostuijn, 1998). Indeed, high levels of social capital may be among the best indicators of organizational success, for as Putnam (1993) found, social capital may be the independent variable that affects the dependent variable of organizational effectiveness.

2.2. The public relations function and social capital

Ihlen (2005) suggested that as the public relations literature has become more relationship-centered, the quantity and quality of the relationships an organization possesses should now be perceived as the social capital of an organization. Social capital is thus a central concern for internal and external public relations, for as Kennan and Hazleton (2006) have argued,

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