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# Measuring the immeasurable?

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*Public relations scholars have attempted to measure public relations relationships to determine whether they are satisfactory, whether relational partners trust each other and whether commitment is critical to successful relationships. These scholars point to the need to measure relationships but an essential first step is to have a clear and orderly accepted concept of what is to be measured and whether the measuring of relationships is a realistic goal. This paper suggests that relational characteristics such as commitment, trust and satisfaction are so subjective that attempts to measure them have been extremely difficult as they change with each situation, with different clients and organisations and with varied perceptions and interpretations of those in a relationship. This paper looks at the contribution of interpersonal theory and scholarship in psychology and business management that suggests that personal and business relational dialogue is so complex that attempting to measure relationships or relationship characteristics maybe a fruitless exercise. Rather, interpersonal and business scholars, who focus on relational exchanges and relational development, point to the need to have rules for relationships that specify what is important to the relationship. Supporting the views of these scholars, the need for relational parameters for effective public relations relationship management was an important finding of a qualitative study of public relations consultants and their clients. The qualitative study also produced concepts of relationships and relationship management relevant to public relations that this paper argues extends the range of present perspectives beyond relationship indicators and beyond the measuring of immeasurable relationships.*

## **Introduction: Public relations measurement of relationships**

Public relations practitioners engage in exchanges and relationships with clients, stakeholders, target publics and other organisations and these relationships are diverse and constantly changing. This paper firstly examines public relations research on the measurement of these relationships and, secondly, suggests that there is a need for public relations scholars to carefully examine what they are measuring as the personal and interpersonal aspects of relationships are difficult to gauge and complex to measure.

There has been some excitement about the changing relational paradigm in public relations practice that has received increasing attention by scholars such as Ledingham and Bruning (2000, 1998), Bruning and Ledingham (1999), Taylor (2004) and Grunig and Huang (2000) but the focus on relationships can be traced to earlier beginnings. It seems that public relations scholars were guided by the early research of Ferguson in 1984, as cited by Broom, Casey and Richey (2000):

Ferguson (1984) pointed to the need for the definition and measurement of relationships between organizations and their publics. Her suggested approaches however mix characteristics of relationships with perceptions of the parties in relationships as well as constructs based on the reports of those in relationships (p.5)

Grunig and Huang (2000, p.28) point to Ferguson's emphasis on relationship

characteristics, the need to measure relational satisfaction and define the power in relationships and whether relationships are open or closed. These scholars contend that “the concept of relationships is implicit in the term public relations and both scholars and practitioners regularly use the term in explaining public relations” (p.25). In reference to the October 1996 (Florida, USA) meeting of “21 leading public relations practitioners, counselors, researchers, and academicians” (p.25) to assess professional standards and how to measure effective public relations practice, Grunig and Huang determined that the measuring of relationships was most important. This was one aspect emphasised in this meeting but, at the same time, those representing Ketchum Public Relations Research (Grunig & Huang, p.28) and the Institute for Public Research and Education also pointed out that there was a need to understand the concept and context of relationships.

Other scholars such as Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) point out that “few public relations scholars have studied relationships” (p.4) so they pursued research designed to pin down and measure aspects of relationships. They developed a model that included relationship concepts such as exchanges, antecedents such as cultural norms, and consequences such as goal achievement in relationships (p.16). In their explication of their relationship model, these scholars contended that “public relations researchers and practitioners can study relationships as phenomena distinct from the perceptions held by parties in the relationships” (p.17). This statement reflects their desire to identify relationship characteristics as they point to “measurable properties” (p.17) in relationships. Their pilot study on relationships between “an adult continuing education centre (CEC) and its significant publics” (p.18) included observations of transactions and exchanges that took place between these two groups. The complexity of these exchanges was recognised, but what was actually happening in these relationships was not explored. These scholars pointed to relationships having “unique and measurable

properties that are not shared with the participants in the relationships” (p.17) a most confusing concept as participants and relationship properties are integral to relationships (Carr, 1991).

Yet other scholars such as Hon and Grunig (1999) developed guidelines for measuring relationships for the Institute for Public Relations Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation, Florida, USA. These scholars point to relational diversity, to relationships as situational and including two-party and multi-party exchanges (p.13). Their guidelines extended the thinking about relationships but failed to provide sufficiently for the constantly varying nature of relationships. These scholars gave very little acknowledgment of the possible decline of relationships and that relationships are affected by partners’ perceptions and expectations and sometimes breakdown altogether, a point that will be discussed in further detail as the contribution of relational scholars from other disciplines is explored.

In another study Ledingham and Bruning (2000) identified 17 relational dimensions of users or consumers of a telephone service and the aim was to find out if the users wanted to stay or leave the company. These scholars attempted to measure such dimensions as “commitment to the organisation, openness, trust, involvement” (p.62). Similarly Huang (2001) administered questionnaires to “legislators and their assistants of the Second Plenary Session of the Third Legislative Yuan in Taiwan” (p.274). Data was also collected from participants of congressional liaisons in “Executive Branches in Taiwan” (p.62) who responded to questions about their relationships with the legislators. Huang claimed that the findings, which provide complex measures of commitment and satisfaction, offer evidence that relationship management is important and that relationship management has value for public relations, and more so than the value of relationship marketing for marketers. But as no public relations practitioner was even included in the study, very little attempt was made to

progress understanding of public relations relationship management from a public relations perspective. The questionnaire administered aimed to quantify relationship components in the same way that Hon and Brunner's (2001) study of students and university administrators took primarily a quantitative approach to the exploration of relationship characteristics.

The work of these scholars is both recent and substantial, but even as Hon and Grunig (1999) developed guidelines for measuring relationships for the Institute for Public Relations Commission on PR Measurement and Evaluation they themselves highlighted relational diversity, the situational nature of relationships and the complexity of two party and multiparty exchanges (p.3). They were then aware that a measurement approach to relationships has its limitations, whatever its value. It is also notable that the studies referred to above primarily studied people and situations outside public relations, leaving a gap in the field of relationship studies in public relations itself.

### **Why relationships may be too complex to be measured**

The study of what is important to human relationships has been integral to psychological research. Scholars such as Carr (1991) contend that "we are born into human relationships" (p.239) and that each relationship is unique. As Carr puts it:

interpersonal communication generally concerns itself with speaking transactions involving two or more people in a setting of mutual interest and personal closeness in which the primary content of the communication is each individual. (p.240)

The exchange and the shared communication that involves sharing ideas and feelings between two people is described by some scholars (Carr, 1991; Barker & Gaut, 1996) as dyadic; or, as Devito (1997) puts it: "interpersonal communication that takes place between two persons who have a clearly established

relationship, is relational-dyadic" (p.191). These scholars point to wider influences on these two-way exchanges as the behaviour and response of each person is dependent on the way in which others around them are communicating and influencing these exchanges.

Relationships include multiple interactions so that the complexity of relationships affects the understanding of partners and others in the relationship (Duck & Gilmour, 1981, p.9). In more precise terms, scholars such as Carr (1991) describe two-way communication between partners as "a microcosm of the larger group" (p.242), pointing to the broader relational context of relationship exchanges. Hinde (1981) supports the notion of multiple relational interactions as "every relationship is set in a nexus of other relationships, and may be influenced by the relationships that each participant has with other individuals" (p.15). This being the case, when partners interact, at the same time that they begin to build their relationship and know more about each other, multiple interactions in and between their relationship mean that achieving mutual understanding can be difficult and the result imperfect. This is especially so because of the varied influences on relationships "between and among participants" (Devito, 1997, p.193) that include multiple interpretations and understandings. Attempts to measure relational characteristics within these multiple exchanges seems a most difficult task indicating that public relations scholars need to grasp what this complexity means before any attempt of measurement might be considered. Even then measurement may not be the most appropriate approach to developing relationship scholarship and understanding.

Further, relationships dynamics are sometimes so subtle that measurement of any aspect of the relationship may be quite difficult. For example, interpersonal relationships can be sustained even when "participants do not meet or communicate with each other" (Hinde, 1981, p.3) so that an understanding of relationships and relational concepts also requires an understanding of how relationships are

maintained even when there is no exchange between partners. Relationships may continue because of a history of relational parties enjoying their relationship rather than because a current exchange is taking place. Therefore, the argument of exchange theorists that transactions and exchanges make partners dependent on each other (Broom, Casey, Ritchey, 2000, p.13) may not apply in some phases of a relationship and the measurement of relationship characteristics may not be possible when a relationship exists but relational characteristics may not be easy to identify.

Even when relationships are active Duck (1984) points to the importance of intervention at critical points in a relationship as “some methods [of relating] go stale whilst other methods can still succeed” (p.165) so that success in relationship maintenance requires appropriate and timely intervention. Scholars (Duck, 1984; Devito, 1997; Carr, 1991) emphasise that relationships are not static, rather they move through phases, each phase including many sub-phases and many opportunities for those in the relationship to change the way the relationship is developing or declining. Duck (1984), for example, in addressing the repair of personal relationships presents extensive goals for each phase of repair. The five phases include:

- breakdown and dissatisfaction with the relationship; breakdown
- dissatisfaction with the partner in the relationship; intrapsychic phase
- confrontation with partner; dyadic phase
- publication of relationship distress; social phase and
- the grave phase: getting over it all and tidying up. (p.169)

Within these phases other phases present a picture of complexity, so that in the first phase, for example, there is the possibility of repair or breakdown that might also include another temporary phase when relational partners consider another way to manage a relationship. Relationships do not generally breakdown because of a single event. In building and repair

of relationships there is considerable opportunity to negotiate and to work out ways for relational partners to better understand each other. In public relations relationships this represents a public relations opportunity to negotiate a better way to manage a relationship, to develop skills as negotiators and to manage each relational exchange with a flexible and open approach.

Business relationships have similar characteristics to interpersonal relationships, but they are even more complex as conflicts and differences between individuals and teams, or between different levels of management have an impact on the way organisations function. If public relations scholars are attempting to measure relationship characteristics such as trust in complex business environments then it is important that they initially examine what is important to these business relationships. Further, as each relationship is unique relational characteristics such as trust might be understood differently in each situation.

According to DuBrin (2000, p. 244), ways to establish a relationship of trust between employees and management are to support the ideas of management, to be open and honest about problems, and to give and take ideas from those in a relationship. Managing this way can be effective when meaningful exchanges take place; that is, relationships can be developed when participants are also willing to take the risk to be open (Giovagnoli & Carter-Miller, 2000) and managers positively respond to this openness. However, this presents an ideal situation as being open can also be perceived as taking control or having the power in a relationship, shutting others out of that relationship. Furthermore, Hersey and Blanchard (1988) point out that there are many “blind” (p.277) arenas where employees may be unwilling to share their views, or a manager may not take time to understand the situation. In busy organisational environments it is impossible to discuss and be open in all areas of business management. This creates an expectation gap that Hersey and Blanchard posit can only be closed through feedback and

respecting the view of the employees, and vice versa. Even then, private and personal components of a relationship do not need to be shared with relational partners, so that it is also important to understand what is appropriate to communicate in each given situation. Further, the building of relationships in organisations or of organisations with their clients often takes place between teams, with different team members so that the relational dynamics can be quite complex with so many people involved. If public relations scholars intend to understand effective relationship management of team dynamics, this paper contends that establishing relationship management parameters is a first and essential step. Measurement might be more appropriately focused on outcomes such as measuring the response to new ways to manage a client's internal communication after public relations intervention has taken place.

### **Relationship rules, guides, parameters**

Interpersonal and business scholars, who focus on relational exchanges and relational development, point to the need to also have rules for relationships that specify what is important to the relationship. Part of understanding client preferences is that each party needs to specify what these preferences are so that they act in the preferred way of communicating or the preferred ways of developing trust and openness in a relationship. This is especially important in business and client relationships, as Dawson (2000) contends, because clients are now more sophisticated so that relationship management requires both flexibility to adapt to changes in clients' and organisational needs and structure, and flexibility to manage the specifics of these needs. This suggests a deliberate and planned approach to the management of each relationship taking into account what is important to each relationship in terms of communication, places to meet, deadlines and support (Giovagnoli, Carter-Miller, 2000). Managing relationships in this way also increases the possibility of relational partners more accurately responding to each other's expectations. Relationships are also more likely

to develop when employees' positive contribution is supported (DuBrin, 2000). This builds confidence and trust as management and employees know that they can rely on each other. Rewarding relational partners when a relationship is working well is as essential as dealing with conflict when relationships are strained.

Organisational relationships that develop internally or externally can also be developed and sustained if relational partners have an understanding of possible patterns or development in relationships (Schlesinger, Eccles, & Gabarro, 1983). However, notably, in a review of the literature on organisational relationships, the discussion of relationship breakdown or development did not focus on stages and phases in relationships. There seemed to be a more cautious approach in managing business relationships as compared to the interpersonal relationships. As Hersey and Blanchard (1988) contend, building effective relationships in organisations depends on the style of leadership and leaders' flexibility, and that depends on the situation and what is happening in the organisation at any time. Even if feedback is two-way and communication is encouraged, not all communication can be shared and not all differences managed as there is no time to also achieve organisational goals. Organisational relationships therefore seem to experience multiple and simultaneous phases where one part of a relationship could be working well between a middle manager and a member of the executive team, but the middle manager may also have a closed relationship with his/her team members. Team members also respond to each other according to the demands of their schedules so that the diversity and number of responses makes it impossible to attend to many of the relational exchanges in the way that is required to encourage transparency, sharing of ideas and relational understanding.

As every aspect of a relationship potentially undergoes change, there is a need to develop understanding about how to manage relationships effectively so that there is a greater chance to develop trust and other desirable

relational characteristics within constant relational changes. Scholars such as Danziger (1976, p.188) indicate that this may be possible if the notion of social context in interpersonal relationships is understood. Social context implies that feedback and interpretation of what is being communicated in a relationship is integral to the relationship. Feedback or response and comment about what is happening in relationships allow each partner to adjust to changes and facilitate understanding of each partner's perspective. In this environment trust in each other has a chance to develop.

Conversely, Danziger cautions that when feedback, or the opportunity to respond and check out information, does not take place in a relationship, one-way communication may develop a "linear pattern of interaction" (p.182). This one-way process emphasises one individual in the relationship to the detriment of the other and when one individual becomes dominant, relationship dynamics change as the sharing of meaning and experiences no longer builds rapport and understanding between relational partners. This is further exacerbated by partners' interpretations and how they perceive "behaviours and events" (Wood, 2000, p.153). Wood points to the dynamic nature of relationships, but also to the implicit nature of relationships; that is, that once there is an exchange between two or more participants there is a relationship, so there is a need to also take responsibility to manage relational exchanges.

Coombes (2001) points out that "the idea of applying interpersonal communication theory to public relations is neither new nor radical but it is an idea whose time has arrived" (p.105) and it is an idea important to advancing relational scholarship and understanding. It is not possible to address interpersonal communication theory and business relational theory in detail, rather examining some of the key concepts highlights the importance of developing effective ways to manage relationships and establish parameters for best practice.

## **Public Relations Relationship Parameters**

While much of the research in the field (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hon & Brunner, 2001; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000; Huang, 2001) has focused on public relations practitioners' relationships with organisations and the characteristics important to good relationships, their research has not developed a sound basis for the practice of relationship management. Mackey (2003) suggests, for example, that Ledingham and Bruning's (2000) endless list of relationship factors offers nothing more than what might be part of a good relationship but Mackey himself has given little recognition to the integral aspect of relationships that are part of all public relations exchanges and everyday practice. Scholars (Carr, 1991; Duck, 1984; Duck & Gilmour, 1981; Wood, 2000) indicate that in the same way that phases constantly change, relational characteristics change so that the more important goal of a sound relationship is to be flexible and open to change in every part of the relationship. Due to the constant tensions that exist between interactions of relational partners (Devito, 1997, p.193), the goal in quality relationships is to be tolerant and mutually committed to the relationship whether partners are in agreement or in conflict (Carr, 1991, p.242). Carr (1991) suggests that "shifting moments of uncertainty can be gifts to the relationship – keeping it from going stale, dull, or too predictable" (p.268).

In addition to the contribution of psychology and business relational scholarship addressed in this paper, Chia's (2004, 2005) qualitative study reported in detail in previous papers, aimed to ascertain whether the new relational focus in public relations practice was evident and in what form and to capture the characteristics of consultant-client relationships, explore how relationships are managed, or not managed, and identify failings in communication that distance clients from their practitioners

The sample of 16 consultants was randomly selected from the Registered Consultants of the Public Relations Institute of Australia and these consultants gave permission for 16 of their clients to be interviewed. Semi-structured client interviews were integral to the validity of the research findings as the only way to test the validity of the practitioners' (semi-structured interviews were firstly conducted with the consultants) understanding of relationship management was by comparing consultants' responses with those of a sample of their clients. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to probe "the subjective meanings of the people being studied" (Frankfort-Nachmias, & Nachmias, D, 1992, p.272) and their subjective views of relationships. As research on relationships in public relations is still relatively new, a qualitative approach allowed these rich descriptions to evolve within an interpretative perspective, where:

social reality is something that is constructed and interpreted by the people – rather than something that exists objectively "out there". From the interpretivists' point of view the social world does not have the tangible, material qualities that allow it to be measured, touched or observed in some literal way. (Denscombe, 2002, p.18)

The semi-structured interviews were designed to facilitate open discussion about broader relationship perspectives but also facilitate discussion about those areas of a relationship that clients said were important to relationship development or affected relationship decline. The study showed that until public relations relationships are better understood, it is more important to develop guidelines on the most effective ways to manage relationships. The study indicated that public relations scholars and practitioners must understand relational diversity and complexity so that they are aware of what is required to manage effectively for the mutual benefit of relational partners. Study participants indicated that as part of ethical public relations practice, relational characteristics evolve when relational

parties aim to work in partnership towards agreed goals.

Study findings showed that current public relations relational theory is limited in its usefulness because it is too general and it is focused on relational characteristics that may result from effective relationships, not the elements (such as flexibility, diverse skills to manage all aspects of a relationship online and offline) by which effective relationships are constructed. The findings also indicated that characteristics such as trust and commitment are actually signposts pointing to the fact that effective relationships are in place so that it is important to know how trust and commitment are established and how to encourage and build trusting relationships.

Study findings point to public relations consultants needing to manage relationships appropriate to the specific and changing needs of clients, the phase of project and program development, and the volatility of the business environment rather than to focus on, and attempt to measure, relational characteristics. The characteristics of trust and commitment are by-products of processes and policies which are designed to make the relationship satisfactory for both parties, such as open, appropriate, clear and timely communication, competence, discretion and reliability on the part of both partners. Where characteristics such as trust and commitment exist, they are not qualities that have generated the relationship; where they exist, the public relations person has been engaging in good practice. They signal the achievement of the goal, not the path to the goal.

Chia's study (2004, 2005) which began with a focus on relationship characteristics progressed to the development of principles for best practice. The research findings echo those of scholars of psychology, management and marketing (Giovagnoli & Carter-Miller, 2000; Dawson, 2000; Carr, 1991; Devito, 1997; Blois, 1997; Kitchen & De Pelsmacker, 2004) who posit that an understanding of relational context

and relational concepts is integral to all relationships and to their effective management. The findings illustrate that relationship management in contemporary public relations practice is governed by a variety of issues:

- Public relations consultants' relationships with their clients, other organisations and stakeholders are now multi-faceted and include communication exchanges offline, such as face-to-face, and online, such as email, and with many different parties that affect and contribute to the consultant-client relationship.
- Public relations consultants' relationships with their clients are constantly changing. Such constant change requires flexibility by all parties in the relationship in order to manage all aspects of relationships appropriately and in line with the varied changes that frame and direct public relations programs and activities.

When these core principles, such as the need for flexibility and constant adaptation in managing relationships, are embedded in relationship management then relationships are more likely to include trust, commitment, proficiency and integrity that lead to client satisfaction. Theory explication that is proposed from this study places relational characteristics where they have relevance to relationship sustenance rather than characteristics directing and framing relationships and the management of these relationships. However, these characteristics such as trust, once present in a relationship, also indicate that a sound relationship has been established and that trust has the potential to become more important to the ongoing relationship.

The emphasis is one of adaptability with an understanding that relationships are multilayered, multifaceted and even more so now that new media exchanges are increasingly changing the way exchanges are taking place. This paper has not addressed the impact of new media on relationships but it is important to be aware of the added complexity that new media brings to relational exchanges making it even

more difficult to measure any aspect of the relationship.

The findings of Chia's (2004, 2005) Australian study show that despite the complexity of relationship management, professionally managed relationships by capable consultant managers are viable, necessary and should be the goal for all public relations practitioners in practice. The parameters established from the findings of the Australian study have the potential to become the benchmark for best practice in public relations as they have been shown in the study to be the prerequisite and the ongoing requirement to the most effective public relations and to sustaining, developing and enhancing effective relationships between public relations consultants and their clients. Furthermore, when relationships fail, consultants and clients need to address the issues that have led to failure; and future, stronger relationships can be guided by the relationship management parameters that are proposed in Figure 1 of this paper.

The relational parameters listed in Figure 1, column 1, traditional public relations practice, represent the way in which most consultants and clients in the study reported that relationships were being carried out as compared to the way that effective relationship management was evident in four consultant-client relationships and particularly so in two of these relationships. These latter relationships pointed to these public relations and their consultants conducting their relationships in a flexible way where the public relations consultants were also skilled in managing their websites, email, and face-to-face communication according to each client's needs, and according to clients' constantly changing situation. Effective relationships were evident when consultants and clients collaborated in all aspects of their exchanges to achieve the best relational and business outcomes for both parties.

While this paper does not allow for a detailed explanation of the research findings the findings showed that ineffective relationships were conducted when the public relations consultant

was the expert and the client the receiver of the expertise; partnerships was not a consideration, a flexible approach was not evident and skill level was evident in some areas but not in those aspects of the relationship that clients required.

The difference in the management of the effective and ineffective relationships primarily related to the way consultants and clients approached and understood the relationship.

**Figure 1: Relationship management parameters for contemporary public relations practice**

Traditional public relations practice and managing relationships rationally	Current focus on relationship management in contemporary public relations practice
Public relations consultant is the expert and undertakes a service for the client.	Public relations consultant's and client's expertise together underpin the management of the business account.
The consultant takes the lead in managing the client's account.	Depending on the stage of project and the pressures on the client's organisation, consultant and client manage their accounts in line with changing circumstances and together work on the most appropriate ways to manage.
Consultant promotes traditional skills through client media management and promotion of client's organisation.	Consultant is conversant with traditional and new media skills and constantly upgrades skills in line with client needs and their organisation's demands.
Consultant organises special occasions to celebrate with the client and uses these occasions to build relationships.	Consultant occasionally organises a special function to celebrate with the client, but the greater focus is on overall relationship management; informal and personal aspects of the consultant-client relationship are embedded in each communication exchange.
Because the client has undertaken a contract with the consultant, it is assumed that the client trusts them to do the job and is committed to the consultancy.	Consultant understands that the client has hired them with an expectation that the job will be well done, but that trust and commitment in the consultant-client relationship need constant reinforcement.
The consultant is slow to upgrade skills in managing client public relations activities.	Consultant improves new media skills and responds to client's requests to upgrade skills in all areas of their public relations practice
Consultant considers email to be a primary, highly efficient tool of communication that	Consultant understands that email is effective as a secondary tool of

assists in the management of their client relationships.	communication and when used appropriately to the situation.
Website management has a low priority in managing relationships	Consultant manages their website interactively. The client benefits from specific client access-only web facilities, and this medium of communication supports the consultant- client relationship.
Consultant considers that the client does not understand the public relations profession. Client needs to be educated so that they can work with the consultant and improve the relationship.	Consultant is constantly aware of and managing change in the public relations profession. Both consultant and client have a responsibility to develop understanding of each other's position and to realise goals set by either or both parties.
Consultant recognises the need to understand the client's organisational culture and develop this understanding through regular client briefing sessions; but this does not always eventuate because of work and time pressures on consultants and clients.	Consultant works closely with the client in order to better understand the client's organisation's culture. Even though work and time pressures make face-to-face meetings difficult, these meetings take priority as the consultant places value on meeting with clients, understanding organisational culture and building a sound relationship with the client.
Consultant works with the client to manage client accounts in the best way possible and to satisfy the client.	Consultant aims to exceed the expectations of the client, thereby enhance the relationship.
Consultant manages the relationship but does not incorporate relationship management within the culture of their day-to-day practice.	Consultant and client create a business culture of relationship management so that each expects that relational intent will be part of business practice.
Consultant assumes knowledge and understanding of what is best for the client	Consultants and clients spell out and formalise agreements to ensure that each understands and agrees to the terms of the relationship and how it is managed at all levels of communication exchange

### Conclusion

This paper examined the complexity of relationships and the difficulty of measuring relational characteristics. The contribution of relationship scholarship from psychology and business is one that public relations scholars

may have considered but they appear to have diverted their attention to measure and define what is essential to a relationship and what constitutes a relationship.

Chia's Australian study reported in this paper focused on relationships in their complexity

rather than “as phenomena distinct from the perceptions held by parties in the relationships” (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 2000, p.17) in order to identify how effective relationships may be constructed and maintained. The relationship management parameters derived from the effective relationships in the study emphasised the need for public relations practitioners to pay attention to the way in which they conduct their relationships, to improve skills in managing them and to adopt a flexible approach to all aspects of their relational exchanges.

This paper argues that in the same way that psychology scholars such as Duck (1986) provide detailed guidelines for the management of interpersonal relationships and point to the importance of relational partners anticipating both the good and bad times, public relations scholars need guidelines for effective management of relationships even when they may be challenging and difficult. Attempting to measure relationship properties and developing endless lists of relational qualities is attempting to define and measure the immeasurable, to quantify the subjective and to pin down measurable relational aspects of complex, dynamic relationships. The relationship management parameters presented in Figure 1 clearly point to the greater need for guidance on best public relations practice.

Relational scholarship from other disciplines and the findings of the Chia’s Australian study reported in this paper point to public relations relational theorists’ slow recognition of the need to deal with the constantly volatile nature of relationships in today’s environment of constant change and this is holding back relational theory development. Relationships and multiple relational exchanges represent an opportunity for public relations scholars and practitioners to understand relationships and how to manage each exchange for the mutual benefit of all partners. This is possible when parameters for best practice become more important than measured components of what might be good for a relationship.

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