
Public relations and climate change impacts: Developing a collaborative response

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Abstract

Global climate change effects pose problems both for community development professionals concerned with strengthening communities and for public relations practitioners confronting communication challenges. This paper suggests that each discipline has something to offer the other in dealing with communities facing climate change impacts. Collaboration between them could help implement the vision of public relations-as-community-building several scholars have advocated over the past two decades. Creating such a linkage would entail significant adjustments, especially for public relations. Yet over time, there could be a payoff in greater social and symbolic capital. Two scenarios discuss how joint public relations-community development approaches could work.

Introduction

Global warming¹ poses problems “about how we ought to live, and how humans should relate to each other and to the rest of nature” (Jamieson, 1992, p. 142). As a result, value-centred discussions about responses to these problems arise, prompting questions about what societies consider important and

the ethical considerations to be applied (Garvey, 2008). It may take a crisis such as extended drought or extreme flooding attributed to climate change to intensify this debate (see also Jagtenberg & McKie, 1997): our interaction with the environment tends to be unconscious “unless the degradation of the earth becomes so obvious that we are forced to be conscious” (Good, 2000, p. 22). In this paper we discuss climate change, public relations’ involvement, and the need for communication responses in local, geographically-defined communities as well as in other contexts. We position global warming as a communication issue with implications for public relations as it deals with affected communities.

Interpretation

Because aspects of climate change such as alterations in the makeup of the earth’s atmosphere are not readily discernible to or measurable by interested laypeople, these factors and their potential consequences need to be interpreted: “We have to be told what climate change is, how it manifests itself, and so on” (Good, 2000, p. 24; see also Stamm, Clark & Eblacas, 2000, p. 220). That makes climate change a communication question. At both mass and interpersonal levels, communication is crucial to improving public understanding of environmental problems (Stamm et al., 2000) and can be important in achieving the adjustments needed to implement

¹ We use “global warming” synonymously with “global climate change” and “climate change”. In the usage of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the term “climate change” means “any change in climate over time whether due to natural variability or as a result of human action” (IPCC 2007, p.8).

climate change-related policies and adaptations (Mortsch, 2000).

As a communication question, climate change is also a public relations issue, as interest groups seek to influence policy decisions through public relations strategies (Roper, Collins & Toledano, 2004). These groups compete to establish the dominance of their agendas (Garrison & Greer-Wooten, 2000) on the basis of value judgments as to what constitutes “dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system” (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, as cited in IPCC 2007, p. 42). Mitigating climate change impacts is not always the priority: for many people, economic prosperity may rate as highly as the sustenance of natural systems (van den Belt, 2004, p. 2). However, we take climate change as a planetary risk with significant present and potential consequences at multiple levels: individual, community, national and international.

In 2007, the Public Relations Society of America recognised the practitioners behind the campaign for the global climate change film “An Inconvenient Truth” as “PR professionals of the year” (Public Relations Society of America, 2007). However, public relations’ history also includes funding by some companies with interests in the status quo of sceptics prepared to speak out against the developing scientific consensus on the issue. Amenable scientists were recruited a decade ago to be trained “in public relations so they can help convince journalists, politicians and the public that the risk of global warming is too uncertain to justify controls on greenhouse gases” (Cushman, 1998, para.2). More recent allegations suggest that this kind of practice has continued (Gelbspan, 2000; Monbiot, 2006, 2006b; Union of Concerned Scientists, 2007; McKnight, 2008). The public relations profession now needs to consider, “what can it do to retrieve the likely reputation fallout from having been so much a part of the [climate change] denial industry”? (McKie &

Galloway, 2007, p. 368). The question is pressing because, as Demeritt noted, “global warming has been transformed from an obscure technical concern into a subject of widespread public concern and international regulatory interest” (2001, p. 307). Climate change anxiety has continued to increase (e.g. Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy, 2007). The issue of climate change and its impacts may have reached one of Breakwell and Barnett’s “critical points”. Although they are talking about risk events, when particular occurrences make possible harm actual, their description seems apposite:

Specifically, critical points are phases of varying lengths of time when the orientation, tempo or strength of the social image of a hazard changes significantly. Self-interest, moral outrage and the arousal of fear are identified as principles that are instrumental in leading to an event achieving critical point status (2001, p. 9).

If climate change and its impacts have reached a critical point, fuelled by increasingly acute concerns, public relations needs workable responses to assist both the clients it advises and the standing of the profession itself. One initiative in this direction is that of the UK’s Chartered Institute of Public Relations, which has consulted members over best practice guidelines for “environmental sustainability communications”. The Institute sees this term as encompassing organisations’ communications in response to stakeholder demands that they operate sustainably in the light of climate change impacts (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2008). However, while the Institute notes that there is a “broad consensus that climate change is the greatest environmental challenge faced in the world today” (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2008, para. 1), its main interest is in ensuring that organisations’ “green claims” about products and services’ environmental effects are accurate, rather than false or misleading “greenwash” (Laufer, 2003).

This is an important but limited concern for public relations, as for the profession, climate change/sustainability/'green' issues go deeper. They touch not only on how organisations should present their products and services but also how public relations professionals counselling them should confront a wider range of communication challenges involved in community and national contexts. As McKie and Munshi note, "if PR is to respond to the material challenges of the contemporary world, it has to engage with the implications of the growing body of evidence of physical eco-degradation" (2007, p. 22). There is both a need and an opportunity for this engagement. Publicity around climate change issues and responses to them has increased, but public understanding of climate change is still "a mass communication problem that has yet to be adequately solved" (Stamm et al., 2000, p. 219). This remains the case even though in the UK, for example, "evidence suggests that recognition of the concept of climate change ... has reached saturation point" (Anable, Lane & Kelay, 2006, p. 2).

Continuing, inherent uncertainty about climate change in both the scientific community and among the general public provides "clear scope to improve public awareness, understanding and responses" (Etkin & Ho, 2007, p. 626). Public relations could play a useful role in achieving this improvement, stretching beyond its business-as-usual support for organisations communicating to their stakeholders about "improvements, challenges, increases or reductions" in their environmental impacts (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2008a, para 2). Already, there is evidence that "corporate sustainability communications" is a rapidly growing practice area for public relations professionals, even if public relations research has yet to pay much attention to it (Signitzer & Prexl, 2008, p. 15). But how could public relations extend this work? Our response is based on analyses indicating that projected impacts of global warming, such as changing temperatures,

amounts of rainfall and sea levels are "global, yet localised" (Logsdon, 2004, p. 81; see also van den Belt, 2004, p. 1). Public relations professionals will need to address these localised, as well as wider, impacts with appropriate communication strategies, in line with Wright's insight, quoted in a CIPR news release, that "climate change is revolutionising the way organisations operate" (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2008b, para 3). This development will mean changes, too, for organisations' communication requirements.

At a local level, the effects of climate change may not only degrade the physical environment but also organisations' sustainability and the welfare of communities. In the light of these threats, both near and longer-term, PR could help facilitate the growth of community resilience as well as fulfilling its normal organisational communication functions. It could act through collaboration with community development professionals, whose expertise in building community capacity could complement public relations' communication and relationship management competence. Collaboration makes sense because, as van den Belt states, "There is no single, simple answer available or a single discipline capable of adequately addressing" (2004, p. 2) the problems that arise in the complex interactions between human systems and ecosystems. Community development's priority is enabling communities to build self-efficacy, even if this capacity-building does not completely coincide with benefit for established interests. To this extent, public relations-community development collaboration could challenge the priority public relations gives to clients' interests.

However, it would align with recent public relations scholarship calling for the profession to adopt an 'organic' rather than an organisation-centric perspective, with society *in toto* recognised as organisations' key stakeholder (Kruckeberg, 2006; Vujnovic, Kumar & Kruckeberg, 2007). Public relations collaboration with community development would also help operationalise calls for public

relations to play a central part in community-building (e.g. Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Hallahan, 2004) and in the full functioning of society (Heath, 2006). This proposed collaboration would extend existing public relations programmes that aim to create positive “community relations”. It would widen their focus to include sustained, active attempts to strengthen community networks and communication infrastructure, enhancing community capacity to respond to climate change effects on physical, economic and social environments. In this way the collaboration could build social capital for both the community and the organisation (Goddard, 2005) and in so doing, increase corporate reputational capital, which is linked to organisations’ building of relationships and growth (Doorley & Garcia, 2007).

Community

This section discusses concepts of community and community development and the rationale for corporate involvement in enhancing community wellbeing. This is followed by a discussion of social capital and social interaction theory and the public-relations-as-community-building literature as a theoretical foundation for our proposed collaboration. Finally, we examine how our approach could work in practice.

In considering these topics, Wild’s (1981) three-part model of community, communion and society is helpful:

Community represents the interdependence of social institutions developed over time in a specific locality, and how they acquire their own traditions and customs. It is an unquestioned given, unlike communion, which represents the feeling component, the experience of a mutual sense of belonging. Society is indicated by the engagement of individuals with larger social systems by way of contractual agreements and laws, operating impersonally and

universally (cited in Lynn, 1997, p. 331).

Community development’s major intellectual and practice framings preceded more recent rubrics of capacity building and community engagement by about 30 years. However, community development practice and skills continue to underpin and to provide inspiration for community capacity-building, an approach that has acquired broad support from governments and corporations since the 1990s, especially in Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Community development professionals operate on a foundation of principles such as social justice, equity, human rights and both ecological and social sustainability (Ife 2002; Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). Brennan names several leading conceptualisations of community development, including that it is about:

- purposive activity designed to alter local conditions in a positive way;
- pursuing specific projects with an emphasis on building social relationships and communication networks; or
- community residents working together to address common issues (2004, p. 2).

All three conceptualisations are relevant to addressing climate change impacts at a community level, while not prescribing what the response should be. Effective community development does not adopt a single notion of community nor does it assume that communities hold a single view of the common good (Little, 2002). In targeting change, two contrasting approaches within community development adopt consensual or contestual modes of interaction (Weeks, Hoatson & Dixon, 2003). While the power imbalance between decision-makers and those for whom decisions are made is always significant, if not central, in community development, how this is conceived shapes variants in practice. Community development’s modus operandi may include challenging established interests whose activities may not square with the community’s broadly defined interests (for example, together with community members,

community development practitioners may demand access to information, a voice in decisions that affect them, and action to secure a sustainable environment). In communities confronting impacts assumed to be linked to climate change, community development activities could include all of these elements, using social relationships and networks to draw citizens together in exploring how to meet expected calls on community resources. Public relations' collaboration with community development professionals would be designed to facilitate this process, by recruiting organisational resources to the task of building community resilience, which is defined as:

The capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organising itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures.

(International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, n.d., para 35)

Public relations already deals with community, as described above, through corporate community relations and corporate social responsibility or corporate citizenship programmes. Community relations is recognised as the "part of the mix that defines public relations" (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001, p. 527), which seeks to act as a social bridge between corporations and communities (Goddard, 2005). Ideally, it functions as "an institution's planned, active and continuing participation with and within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both the institution and the community" (Peak, 1998, p. 117, cited in Ledingham & Bruning, 2001, p. 527). According to Ledingham and Bruning, community relations is a component of "an

overall strategy that not only supports the business interests of an organisation but also contributes to organisational efforts to meet its responsibility to support the welfare of the community" (2001, p. 528).

Community relations includes "good neighbour activities such as philanthropic contributions" and has been understood as "corporate citizenship" (Lodgson, 2004, p. 69). Discretionary philanthropy is, however, only one of nine possible types of corporate citizenship, with "active sustainability leadership" (Marsden, 2000, p.21) at the pinnacle of the list. Sustainability is among a variety of terms, often used interchangeably, related to the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) which provides an overarching rationale for corporate community involvement. According to Rowe,

The terms all point in the same direction: throughout the industrialised world and in many developing countries, there has been a sharp escalation in the social roles corporations are expected to play and in the number of stakeholder groups to whom they are expected to be accountable, in addition to shareholders (2006, p. 441).

While an American approach to CSR would focus on interpreting these social roles in philanthropic terms, the European model focuses "more on operating the core business in a socially responsible way and on investing in communities for solid business case reasons" (Rowe, 2006, p. 444). As it is now understood, CSR goes beyond philanthropy and compliance to "the manner in which companies manage their economic, social and environmental impacts and their stakeholder relationships in all their key spheres of influence: the workplace, the marketplace, the supply chain, the community and the public policy realm" (Kennedy School, n.d., in Rowe, 2006, p. 444). Some large organisations – American Express, NatWest Bank, Johnson & Johnson Europe and Levi Strauss – have moved away from "reactive

grant giving to social investment geared to expected measurable outcomes and often embracing an issue related to the company's business" (Marsden, 2000, p.4) . Several scholars rationalise corporate citizenship as "social investing" (Waddock, 2001) in order to enhance social or reputational capital and thereby help improve the corporation's economic performance (Matten & Crane, 2005, p. 168).

An organisation's desire to make this social investment in order to build public loyalty and purchase preferences (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001) is a sufficient foundation for it, representing the first of three categories Altman identified as "motivating forces for corporate community involvement":

- Economic, where strategic goals made the activity necessary.
- Moral, where corporate values determine support of a certain local activity.
- A combined values/strategy approach, where "pre-existing corporate values are merged with new corporate strategic values" (2000 p. 61).

Altman noted that in the sample of companies she studied, community involvement was clearly motivated by economic considerations, confirming a gap between practice and the stakeholder and CSR literatures "which assert that responsibility to the community as stakeholder is predominantly driven by morals or values" (2000, p. 64). She pointed to "a pressure to link community affairs to corporate strategy" (p. 56), with corporate relations activities being required to show measurable results (p. 57).

Similarly, Matten and Crane describing what they call a limited view of corporate citizenship, comment that in this view, corporations engage in strategic philanthropy from motivations of self-interest, "including the insight that a stable social, environmental and political environment ensures profitable

business" (2005, p. 168). Organisations may place varying priorities on their economic and social interests, making trade-offs between them, in response to both external and internal environmental influences (Hing & McMillen, 2002). We suggest that where large-scale risks such as climate change impacts confront a community, these tradeoffs could include organisations choosing to put longer-term community building ahead of short-term economic advantage in the expectation that doing so will deliver greater stability than might otherwise have been the case. A corporate decision to help build community resilience, not just a "good neighbour" positioning, would have implications for public relations programming and evaluation. Both would need to be considered from the perspective of the organisation adapting to its environment rather than the other way around (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001).

Such an orientation would take into account not only community considered as social institutions developed over time in a specific locality but also the importance of *communitas* (cf. Wild's "communion", as cited in Lynn, 1997, p. 331) which denotes intense feelings of social togetherness and belonging (*Communitas*, n.d.). This is a spirit to which Kruckeberg and Starck referred when they argued that public relations "is best defined as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community" (1988, p. xi) from a privileged organisational perspective. Only in this way, they asserted, could public relations fully participate in society's "information and communication milieu" (p. xi). They saw the public relations practitioner's brief as wider than being a communicator; it should, they held, include helping "to build a sense of community among organisations and their geographic publics" (p. 112).

Community-building

According to Kruckeberg and Starck, public relations practice exists because of the loss of a sense of community, and the shared meaning that underpinned it, resulting from the social

effects of new means of communication and transportation. In their view, the primary role for the public relations practitioner is as a community-builder (2004, p.136). They contend that “community-building must be regarded as the highest calling of public relations practice” and the best way to serve society as well as clients (2004, p. 137). With “guidance and primary leadership” (Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001, p. 59) from corporations’ public relations practitioners, organisations can proactively encourage and nurture community-building. The practitioners need to consider “all entities potentially affected by the corporations” (p. 59) and the corporations themselves, to recognise society itself as their greatest stakeholder.

Kruckeberg and Starck acknowledge that discussion of contemporary community-building raises “a host of issues”, especially surrounding community work engaged in by public relations practitioners on behalf of what are seen to be vested corporate interests (2004, p. 6). They identify eight ways in which, they propose, practitioners could “restore and maintain a sense of community in their organisations and among stakeholders/publics” (1988, pp. 112-117), including practitioners helping “community members and the organisations they represent become conscious of common interests that are the basis for both their contentions and their solutions” (2000, p. 9). Hallahan makes a similar case, contending that the field of public relations “might be better called “community relations” (2004, p. 233) although this suggestion may exaggerate for the sake of emphasis, as it ignores the fact that not only geographically-defined communities (which are our focus here) but also employees, retirees, shareholders and other stakeholders can be considered communities. His argument for the community as the theoretical basis for public relations rests on four foundations: the pervasiveness of the community idea and ideal in everyday life and contemporary scholarship; conceptual limitations of the focus on publics in public relations; the rise

of community-related theories in public relations scholarship and “the strength of community-building as a philosophy to drive public relations practice” (2004, p. 233). He notes that other scholars have followed Kruckeberg and Starck’s lead, with the two most explicit arguments advanced revolving around the ideas of strategic co-operative communities and of communitarianism.

Hallahan recalls that Wilson (1996) argued that building community requires corporations to possess long-range vision, a sincere commitment to community service, not just profit; organisational values that reflect the importance of people; cooperative problem solving and empowerment and a relationship-building approach to public relations. Wilson envisaged a genuinely co-operative, non-exploitative relationship between organisations and the community. Two of his colleagues, Rawlins and Stoker, claimed that organisations have become detached through callous exploitation of communities. They made a case for community that included promoting autonomy and independence among community members and a willingness to sacrifice self-interests to promote the community’s ideals and values (as cited in Hallahan, 2004, p. 251). Hallahan traverses the scholarship that suggests communitarianism is a community-based approach relevant to public relations theory and practice and the work of others who propose symmetric, dialogic and transactional approaches to community (2004, p. 252), though communitarianism has its critics (e.g. Little, 2002) who see it as assuming a moral consensus in community, a single view of the common good and an unwillingness to negotiate through diversity, complexity and conflict.

Integration

According to Hallahan, community-building involves “the integration of people and the organisations they create into a functional collectivity that strives toward common or compatible goals” (2004, p. 259). He contends that community building “redirects public

relations away from its institutional focus and slavish emphasis on achieving organisational goals to address community citizenship” (p. 259). It also, he says, squares with the idea of public relations as having to do with the building and maintenance of mutually beneficial relationships and moves public relations from an emphasis on control “to the two fundamental functions that public relations performs: providing counsel about community interests and facilitating communication” (p. 259).

Hallahan’s prescription for organisational community-building is three-fold: community involvement, community nurturing and community organising. Community involvement has to do with public relations practitioners facilitating an organisation or cause-related group’s participation in an existing geographic community, including taking part in discussions and dialogue. Nurturing goes further, to “fostering the economic, political, social, and cultural vitality of communities in which people and organisations or causes are members” (2004, p. 261), while community organising involves the grassroots creation of new communities among disparate individuals with common interests, an activity it might share with other community practitioners. Sponsorship, volunteerism, and philanthropy are examples of community nurturing (p. 261), while community organising could see public relations approaches used to improve economic or social conditions in a particular neighbourhood or for members of a particular minority group. Hallahan notes that while a focus on “community shifts the organisational emphasis from the cold treatment of impersonal, often adversarial publics, to a warmer, more enlightened emphasis on collaboration and cooperation with others” (p. 264) this does not mean that organisations will necessarily act more responsibly or ethically. Indeed, creating communities that communicate effectively does not imply an ideal consensus (p. 263).

Even if this consensus cannot be reached, a foundation of shared meaning can serve as a base for debate and decision-making. Heath, therefore, advances a “fully functioning society theory of public relations [FST]” (2006, p. 96). He notes that critics often claim that public relations inherently works against a fully functioning society because of a penchant for deception and various “base acts” (p. 94) that work against the public interest. Organisations have replaced single individuals in the citizenship roles needed for a fully functioning society. These organisations engage in robust combat, dialogue and hegemony to influence agendas, to put facts and values into play and to frame arguments.

At its worst, the public relations role is to propagandise (p. 94). At their best, organisations employ tactics to increase awareness and attract others—whether followers, supporters or customers—to participate in a coordinated enactment based on shared meaning, that both leads to and results from enlightened choice. In Heath’s view, public relations best serves society and the organisations that help form it by facilitating the growth of this shared meaning, through listening to people, resolving conflicts, fostering dialogue and taking part in collective decision-making. He notes that humans are “collectivist animals” (p. 95) who work out individual and collective interests through the creation of shared meaning in communication and decision making infrastructures. Heath reasons that improving these infrastructures “requires insights into community as a geographic and mental context in which collaboration can be ideal” (p. 96). His exposition of the fully functioning society theory of public relations is worth quoting in detail:

The FST of public relations postulates that individuals (individually and collectively) seek to make rewarding decisions in the face of risks posed by uncertainties that require enlightened decision making by obtaining information (facts), opinions, and policy

recommendations from various sources (in varying degrees of collaborative decision making and dialogue) that are variously trusted as legitimate participants in the community infrastructure to foster mutually beneficial relationships through balancing systems, responsibly using control and power to the advantage of the community, co-creating meaning as shared narratives and identifications, and through meeting of normative social exchange expectations.

This theory presumes that individuals, qua individuals and in collectivities, are confronted with a reality fraught with chaos, entropy, and turbulence to which they wish to bring order through enlightened decision making. To do so requires shared meaning that rests on interpretations of information, weighing of values, and consideration of policy. Broadly, these choices are traditionally addressed through publicity and promotion as well as in contests over issues, responses to crises, and discussions of risk management (Heath, 2006, p. 99).

Heath's emphasis on collaboration, community infrastructure, dialogue, relationships, and norms—even though he does not include these terms in his description of public relations and a fully functioning society—effectively underlines the importance of both social capital theory and social interaction theory to a public relations role in strengthening communities. In the next section, we explore the applicability of these theories to public relations and community development.

Social capital

Social capital and public relations are linked in the writing of a number of public relations scholars (e.g. Hazleton & Kennan, 2000; Kruckeberg & Starck, 2004; Leichty &

Warner, 2001; Ihlen, 2005; Fussell, Harrison-Rexrode, Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Kennan & Hazleton, 2006). The concept of social capital “has many definitions and perspectives” (Cavaye, 2004, p. 3). Persson (2008) combines descriptions by Bourdieu (1997 [1991], 2006 [1999]), Coleman (1987, 1988) and Putnam (1993, 1995) to define social capital as:

the relational resources that we as individuals or as part of a collective, as well as organisations or companies, inherit or intentionally construct in order to achieve our own goals. Depending on structural and normative characteristics of the social system in which it operates, social capital can facilitate but also limit both individual and collective action. It is in this collective action, or community building, that we find the origin of social capital (Persson, 2008, p. 40).

Cavaye (2004, p. 6) points out that social capital is not monolithic but more of a mosaic: it is not “a generic overarching element of communities” but exists “in families, friends, neighbourhoods, organisations, and across communities at large”. Although intangible (p. 2), it can help produce “hard” outcomes such as improved community infrastructure and is an important element in economic development (p. 8). Hazleton and Kennan (2000) argue that communication is required to create and make use of social capital. They identify four communication functions as “the mechanism for exploiting the stock of social capital: information exchange, problem/solution identification, behaviour regulation, and conflict management” (p. 83). Information exchange is crucial to organisations' ability to interact with and adapt to their environments, with access to information made possible by trust. Problem identification and solution is seen as a process of exchanging symbols, made possible by the presence of “sufficient” social capital, while conflict management and behaviour regulation refer to other symbolic processes, in the latter case shaping the behaviour of various actors to suit

organisational goals and objectives (p. 83). While we do not accept the implications of Hazleton and Kennan's use of the word "exploit" (our arguments are based on the idea of organisations adapting to their environments, rather than the other way round), we do endorse their emphasis on the importance of communication in both creating and drawing on social capital.

Ihlen refers to corporate organisations having various forms of capital: economic; knowledge; symbolic (reputation) and social (2005, p. 493). He connects the development of social and symbolic capital: "the development of social capital, and through it symbolic capital, seems to be at the heart of public relations" (p. 494). According to Ihlen, while organisational management works to increase social capital, "it seems to be an exclusive function of public relations to develop programs in this area" (p. 494). This claim to exclusivity would seem to deny a whole range of activities conducted by human service, educational and local government organisations with the primary aim of creating social capital. Nevertheless, if one puts the narrowness of Ihlen's perspective to one side, accepts it as referring to for-profit organisations and acknowledges that the concept of social capital "means different things to different people – even within the same discipline" (Flora & Allen, 2006, p. 3), public relations can be defined as "an activity designed to create, maintain and expend social capital" (Fussell et al., 2006, p. 7) because of the central role communication, relationships, reputation and trust-building play in the profession. Critics have pointed to a "downside" to social capital – gangs, for example, are a social network with shared norms - but in the form of social trust and associational networks, high social capital correlates with "a multiplicity of desirable policy outcomes" (Harper, 2001, p. 6).

Hazleton and Kennan (2000) place communication at the centre of social capital and identify structure, relationships and communication as its three dimensions.

Structure is an attribute of network connections and availability of information through them; the relational dimension has components of obligations, trust, and the strength of the tie that exists between relational partners, while "the communication dimension can include a variety of human messaging activities" (Fussell et al., 2006, p. 3). Fussell et al. argue that the extent to which organisations create social capital may enable them to manage transaction costs (defined as "those costs associated with human interaction" (p. 2) and to obtain beneficial organisational outcomes. Their research provided empirical support for a connection between social capital, transaction costs and organisational outcomes, although they concluded that the role of the communication dimension of social capital needed further exploration in future work (2006, p.8). However, social capital is not the only theory to which public relations could resort in considering its role in strengthening communities in the context of addressing climate change impacts.

Bridger and Alter propose the social interactional theory of community organisation as a better foundation for development policy in many communities (2006, p. 6). They note that networks, norms and trust are context-dependant (p. 8). Modern community life is characterised by diverse and ephemeral populations with people unlikely to "remain in the same community long enough to build the strong social networks upon which social capital depends" (p. 8). Putnam's response was to distinguish between "bonding" and "bridging" social capital. Bonding social capital provides a "sociological superglue" found in dense networks such as those in some ethnic groups and religious organisations, while bridging social capital "provides people with access to outside resources and promotes information diffusion by creating linkages across" (p. 9) social divides.

Bridger and Alter argue that "instability is now the distinguishing feature of many communities. Social capital cannot flourish in this environment, and this raises serious

questions about its role in community development” (2006, p.14). However, they contend, social interaction is a consistent feature of local life. “Community simply depends on interaction. Thus, there is a latent potential for community to emerge in almost any setting, no matter how turbulent it may be. Community development nurtures this possibility” (p. 14). This approach considers local groups and organisations as unbounded fields of interaction, with the “community composed of several of these more or less distinct social fields” (p.14). According to Bridger and Alter, in contrast to the social capital perspective, which seeks to build trust and norms of reciprocity to facilitate various actions, the interactional approach stresses the importance of forging connections between the actions of different groups and organisations. They comment:

By creating these linkages, a generalized structure of relationships emerges – one that can be used to address shared problems and concerns. Community development involves purposive attempts to build this generalized structure (Wilkinson, 1991). Of course, trust and norms of reciprocity may emerge during the course of this process, but they are not a prerequisite for community development (Bridger & Alter, 2006, p. 15).

We suggest that either social capital or social interaction theory could serve as a foundation for public relations collaboration with community development. Social capital theory’s emphasis on strengthening networks, trust and reciprocity accords with theories of public relations that see the profession’s role as building dialogic relationships (Kent & Taylor, 2002); enhancing trust as a basis for corporate reputation (Doorley & Garcia, 2007); and “serving networks, organisations and individuals by obtaining, processing and outputting information between organisations and individual publics” (Heath, 2005, p. 566). Social interaction theory’s focus on building

relationships in order to address common concerns accords with research on public relations as concerned with relationship building and management (Ledingham & Bruning, 2001; Wilson, 2001). It also aligns with Molleda and Ferguson’s suggestion (2004, p. 328) that public relations professionals may have a role as social intermediaries where collaboration is the guiding principle governing the development of relationships between organisations and their publics.

Application

Leeper and Leeper (2001) draw on an example from risk communication to show how a community-centred approach could work in practice. In a scenario where organisations are seeking to locate hazardous waste sites, instead of asking for or trying to develop trust on their own, they could help the local community to develop its own resources for assessing organisations’ trustworthiness. Organisations would help the community develop independent information gathering capabilities, keep an open door policy and might use dialogic communication methods such as focus groups, game simulations and Delphi studies. They would also involve “the community in direct negotiation to meet its concerns” (Sandman, cited in Leeper & Leeper, 2001, p. 4). Public relations and community development could work together to implement these approaches, with public relations drawing on organisational resources to do so and community development delivering its community network connections and facilitation skills.

Another example, discussed elsewhere at greater length by one of the authors (Galloway, 2009) is that of the Queensland, Australia, city of Toowoomba. The city’s water supplies were constrained by the effects of long-term drought – an assumed climate change effect. The council advanced a controversial proposal to incorporate a significant component of recycled sewage effluent in citizens’ drinking water. Although councillors held many public meetings before a poll on the subject, the

recycling plan was roundly rejected. How might a joint public relations-CD approach to the question have worked?

Using Hallahan's categories of community involvement, nurturing and organising, a joint strategy would focus on the nurturing and organising categories. "Involvement" would simply cover operating business-as-usual mechanisms for public discussion of community issues, such as the many public meetings the council held. Nurturing, however, would go further, into collaboratively investigating how community resources (physical, economic, social and cultural) could be recruited to the task of identifying ways of building greater resilience in the face of threats to the supply of a vital resource. It would be based on the organisation – in this case, the council – acknowledging shared interests with the community in which it hires staff, pays taxes, and utilises resources. Community organising would extend to public relations and CD working together to structure problem-solving processes whose outcome is not pre-determined. These processes would be based on recognising the plethora of interests, concerns, prejudices and myths surrounding the water crisis and on accepting as legitimate, even if not scientifically accurate, each position as an expression of genuinely-held belief.

One way of doing this is to identify common ground through a methodology of study circles to give people ownership of their own knowledge-seeking and knowledge creation (Sheil, 2002). Public relations and community development would help self-selecting study circle members to establish their own questions and seek their own answers, including funding their inquiries as required. The authorities would need to be non-directive in their facilitation to avoid any suggestion of community capture for cynical motives. They would have to be prepared to trust the community to reach a decision that they had not controlled but which was informed by knowledge, including scientific

research, they had helped participants to access. Such a process enables a community to take ownership of an issue and develop the capacity to advocate for its own position. It is, we propose, more likely to result in a community identifying a convergence of interests between an organisation and the community in which it operates.

Hazleton's taxonomy of public relations strategies (1992, 1993 as cited in Kennan & Hazleton, 2006, p. 328) is helpful in identifying public relations approaches to working with communities in the way we envisage. Kennan and Hazleton describe these strategies as "phrased in terms of individual functions that are useful in understanding the communicative dimension of social capital: facilitative, informative, persuasive, promise and reward, threat and punishment, bargaining and cooperative problem solving" (2006, p. 328). In situations where communities face a significant risk, such as climate change impacts, public relations' role can encompass all or most of these strategies. We envisage that most emphasis would be placed on the facilitative, informative, persuasive, bargaining and cooperative problem-solving strategies. For public relations to implement them in collaboration with community development, both disciplines would need to recognise the mutual gains potentially available: each can benefit the other.

Invisible colleges

Community development people know how to access "invisible colleges" (Crane, 1972), the fundamental networks of communication and relationship that are essential strands in any community's dynamic. Invisible college is a term more commonly used to refer to scientific or academic communities, but we apply it to the expertise that various members of a location-specific community may possess, using a broad interpretation of Lievrouw's (1990) definition of an invisible college as "a set of informal communication relations among scholars or researchers who share a common interest or goal" (p. 66, cited in Zuccala, 2005, p. 5).

Because of its role in working with such informal connections, community development may be able to help public relations acquire important community-based insights that might otherwise not be available due to suspicion of corporate motives.

The contention that these fields can work together does challenge conventional notions of these particular professional identities. On this basis, our argument may be idealised. Yet, as Leeper recalled,

J. Grunig and White (1992) wrote that public relations should play an idealistic role in society by serving the public interest, increasing mutual understanding, and encouraging debate and dialogue. Recognizing community as the context within which organizations operate, and recognizing the importance to organizations of establishing strong communities and organizational ties with those communities, is a good backdrop for realizing the idealistic role of public relations (Leeper, 2001, p. 102).

An idealised approach can stimulate intellectual inquiry, as James Grunig did with his symmetrical communication research in the public relations literature, and serve as a model for new forms of organisational-community interaction. Such new forms, we suggest, could be based on public relations and community development professionals collaborating in strategy-building on climate change risk issues. For both professions, the rationale for collaboration is the idea that communities facing significant risk such as a one-in-a-hundred-year drought of the kind that has afflicted parts of Australia in recent years will look not only for answers to the immediate substantive risk issue but also to the need to strengthen their resilience in coping with such challenges in the future.

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