

Beyond excellence: Extending the generic approach to international public relations The case of Bosnia

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Abstract

This article extends the generic approach to international public relations research. The current generic approach, based on the Excellence theory of public relations, suggests a normative framework to study and evaluate international public relations practices. This generic approach has great potential for focusing international research and clarifying infrastructure, geopolitical, legal, cultural, media, and other important variables. Unfortunately, this generic approach has been mainly used to confirm the Excellence model of public relations. Thus, it falls short of providing scholars and practitioners the tools they need to conduct and study global public relations. This paper seeks to clarify international public relations research by explicating rhetorical generic theory (RGT).

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Is there a normative model of public relations that can transcend cultural and national boundaries? Recent public relations research has sought to prove the link between effective organizations and “excellent” (or normative) public relations (cf., Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Grunig, 2006; Lim, Goh, & Sriramesh, 2005; O’Neil, 2003; Rhee, 2002; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003). Although developing a normative theory of U.S. public relations, or a normative theory of Latvian public relations may be *possible*, culture is far too complex for one set of principles (even “generic principles”) to account for everything in every situation or culture. Currently, there is one dominant way that scholars are codifying international public relations research—through the lens of the 1992 Excellence Project that argues that symmetrical communication is the most effective and ethical practice.

The notion that there is a normative model of public relations for understanding American and international public relations is actually limiting public relations theory development. Many fields across the physical and social sciences rely on multiple theories to explain their phenomena of interest. In physics, for example, Newton (theory of gravity), Einstein (theory of relativity), Heisenberg (Quantum Theory), Schrödinger (uncertainty theory), and others (chaos, string theory, etc.), are all necessary to explain various phenomena. Indeed, just as Game Theory informs political science, economics, communication, and many other fields, so too are an assortment of theories

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needed to understand culture, organizational communication, interpersonal communication, persuasion, and public relations.

The approach to the study of international public relations, and the one that has received the most attention has been the idea of a “generic approach” (Lim et al., 2005; Rhee, 2002; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003; Vercic, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996). Grunig (2006) noted that “evidence continues to mount supporting the usefulness of our theory of generic principles and specific applications” (p. 170). Grunig further claims that research is moving “beyond confirmation of the utility of the generic principles of the Excellence theory” (p. 171).

As Sallot et al. (2003) point out in their meta-analysis of theory development in the field of public relations, “Theory was most prevalent in articles about excellence/symmetry” (p. 27), and more articles on theory development in public relations (19/148) have focused on excellence/symmetrical theories (p. 42). Sallot et al. conclude, “Of the 148 articles classified as theory development, the largest share. . . were categorized as concerned with Excellence theory, arguably the closest public relations comes at this time to having a paradigm” (p. 51).

We agree that the generic approach has great potential for focusing international research and clarifying infrastructure, geopolitical, legal, cultural, media, and other important variables (see Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, pp. 2–17 for a complete discussion of the principles). The generic approach to international public relations is valuable insofar as its five variables: political ideology, economic system, degree of activism, culture, and media system (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, p. 2) serve to describe a majority of the salient features of public relations in other nations. However, the generic approach (as named in the Excellence model) has several limitations.

This essay extends the framework of generic theory as it relates to public relations and provides an example of how to use generic principles derived from rhetorical studies to conduct international research. This essay (1) provides a brief overview of rhetorical generic theory (RGT) and the excellence generic theory (EGT); (2), describes how the RGT might be employed in current research on Bosnian public relations; (3), uses a case study method of past research to highlight how a contemporary generic study might work; (4), outlines a study of generic communication to advance international public relations research; and (5), extends the theory of generic international public relations research.

1. Rhetorical generic theory (RGT)

The notion that a generic body of research principles can serve as the starting point for understanding a phenomenon is not a new idea. Generic (or genre) theory dates back nearly fifty years to scholars such as Frye (1957) and Black (1965). During the heyday of generic studies in the 1970s and 1980s scholars sought to identify the common or generic features of communication situations. In practice, generic theory was developed as a method for examining related areas of discourse: sermons, weddings, funerals, public apologies, inaugural addresses, etc. As Martin (1976) explains: “A rhetorical genre is produced by a recurrent, distinctive relationship among three elements, (1) occasion, (2) audience and (3) speaker-role, from which springs discourse necessarily displaying recurrent similarities in theme, style, tactics, and perhaps presentational elements” (p. 247).

Many of the early generic essays were accused of being nothing more than “genre hunts” where scholars searched for new genres to “classify” (Bostdorff, 1987). Aly’s (1969) famous essay on gallows rhetoric is one of the best examples of classification. Over time, generic theory became more sophisticated. In response to critiques by Conley (1979), Bostdorff (1987) pointed out that generic theory should “clarify” not “classify.” Generic theorists moved beyond the idea of simply studying audience, occasion, and speaker-role. Many generic studies have been instrumental in developing public relations theory. Indeed, several studies that started out as generic critiques have evolved into mainstream public relations theories. Take for example Hearit’s (2006) work on corporate apologia and Benoit’s (1995) theory of image restoration which both draw upon Ware and Linkugel’s (1973) generic critique of apologia.

A modern generic study (rhetorical genre theory or RGT) conducted in Communication might include both critical and empirical features. As Kent (1997) explains, a generic approach to research should do more than just identify categories. A generic approach to research should:

- (1) *Identify features of the situation/strategies used.* In the case of international public relations, for example, cultural issues such as gender roles, status, age, and other variables might need to be examined.
- (2) *Identify the intended audience effects.* Are the goals of organizations’ communication efforts persuasion, propaganda, marketing, etc., i.e., what do local practitioners see as their role?

- (3) *Clarify the motivational intent of the organization and publics* (to placate, to entertain, to inspire, to build the nation, to monitor an organization, to learn about products/services, to meet social emotional needs).
- (4) *Examine the archetypal or symbolic nature of language* in order to understand cultural and historical issues, who the heroes and villains are, and to understand what motivates citizens to act/react.
- (5) *Examine the strategic considerations that communicators are aware of when creating messages* (i.e., respect for elders, the role of the government, religious and social features, trust, perception of time etc.). And, most importantly,
- (6) Use communication principles and theory to understand the culture being examined and how cultures influences organizations and communication (pp. 158–159).

This list of rhetorical principles reflects an eclectic approach to understanding discourse and assumes that communication is a dynamic process that requires communicators to examine the choices that are made by individuals and organizations when communicating with publics. In short, a generic approach to international public relations would ask scholars to understand and answer the same cultural, social, and organizational questions that are still being explored in the United States and that underlie what “excellent public relations” advocates assume to be universal concepts. The next section of the essay reviews the rhetorical generic public relations principles in more detail.

2. Application of generic theory in EGT

Vercic et al. (1996) first outlined a series of “generic principles” based on the 1992 Excellence Project sponsored by the research foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators. According to Vercic et al., “The project was named the ‘excellence project’ because [of] the characteristics of the most effective public relations units” (p. 36). More recently, Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) used the excellence generic categories as the basis for their *Global Public Relations Handbook*. In their book, Sriramesh and Vercic “relied on the three nation study commonly known as the Excellence Project” that proposed that nine normative¹ “generic principles” and five variables (political ideology, economic system, degree of activism, culture, and media system) (2003, p. 2) be examined as part of “three factors: a country’s infrastructure, media environment, and societal culture” (p. 2). As “generic principles” (in the RGT sense) for understanding international public relations, Vercic et al.’s five variables and three factors are useful and embody the spirit of modern rhetorical generic theory. Additionally, several of Vercic et al.’s excellence generic principles (notably 1–5, 8, and 9) represent reasonable generic questions.

Problems exist, however, with Vercic et al.’s efforts to base their generic international public relations principles on the principles from the excellence project. Here the authors are confounding efforts to come up with good theoretical questions to help understand and explain international public relations with their own scholarly interests in creating a normative model of public relations.

In general, the notion of a normative model of public relations practice that might apply everywhere is a very Western goal that has very little to do with understanding public relations. Indeed, the basic assumptions of the Excellence model rest on a corporate metaphor of what constitutes “excellence” and “success” in public relations rather than on “relationship building” or some other metaphor.

We argue that whether or not an organization practices a two-way symmetrical model of public relations (Vercic et al., 1996, sixth and seventh generic variables), is not *essential* to understanding the public relations choices made by organizations in other countries or cultures. For instance, in many high context, Eastern cultures, organizations solicit information from organizational members and the public, and share information in ways entirely different than in the United States. Alternatively, some of the most successful organizations in the U.S. have been consensus driven while others have been driven by the iron hand of an organizational founder or leader. How can one mode of organizational communication be useful by all organizations in all countries or settings?

¹ The nine variables are: (1) involvement of public relations in strategic management; (2) empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition; (3) integrated public relations function; (4) public relations as a separate management function; (5) role of the public relations practitioner; (6) two-way symmetrical model of public relations; (7) symmetrical system of internal communication; (8) professionals trained in modern public relations; and (9), diverse organizational role structure (Vercic et al., 1996, pp. 37–40).

To suggest that two-way symmetrical communication *à la* the U.S. is the most viable public relations model (ignoring other models such as dialogue, feminism, postmodernism, etc. which are only now receiving increased attention in public relations) misses the point of international public relations research. International public relations research should not be guided by efforts to prove that any single grand theory (or normative theory to use Vercic et al.'s terms) exists, but to understand the practice of public relations in other nations.

Every field from psychology to political science, biology to geology, physics to philosophy, has competing theories to explain events and many phenomena can only be understood by reference to several different or competing theories. Why would public relations be any different and how could any human activity that touches upon the lives of diverse citizens, socially, economically, racially, politically, geographically, be any different and any more subject to naïve description by one set of concepts? Understanding how and why public relations is practiced internationally and how to combine and use European, U.S., and other nations' models of public relations is ultimately more important than proving that particular nations mimic U.S. practices. Why is "excellent public relations" even considered a normative goal in light of the abundant research on international/intercultural communication? Grunig (2006), Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2006) acknowledge the research has discovered country specific differences in Slovenia and Korea arguing "that symmetrical public relations in Korea has been adopted to fit Confucian culture, with its emphasis on hierarchical relationships combined with collective responsibility" (p. 59). We believe that terms cannot just be stretched or altered in a normative model to fit the circumstances. Either a country's practices are symmetrical, or they are not.

As suggested in the previous section of this essay, then, what needs to be considered by scholars are those areas alluded to in Kent's (1997) sixth generic principle: supporting claims by reference to other bodies of theory and practice. The excellence generic principles do not represent true "generic" questions in the spirit of rhetorical generic theory and true inquiry.

As suggested above, the RGT approach calls for integrating theory and research from a number of academic and professional areas. In the case of a country/region that has never been studied, a generic approach might call on a scholar to research many of the macro areas suggested above and prepare a lengthy literature review that highlights cultural, political, media, etc. issues before proceeding with a more lengthy or microscopic study. In the case of Bosnia, scholars have already conducted many studies of its culture, media system, political system, and economic systems.

Bosnia makes a useful case for illustrating rhetorical generic theory because many studies of Bosnian public relations and media have already been conducted and are consistent with generic research practices. The previous studies provide an opportunity for triangulation of methods, theories, and data—something inherent in the RGT approach.

Many of the previous studies that have invoked "excellence" to support their activities (cf., Park, 2003; Rhee, 2002) seek to prove or disprove that "excellent public relations" exists in this or that nation rather than focusing on how public relations is actually practiced or manifested in each particular nation. However, the relationship with the media, or the type of organization examined, dramatically influences how public relations is practiced in a region or nation (Taylor & Kent, 1999, 2000), as do other variables such as trust (Botan & Taylor, 2005), level of societal activism (Taylor & Kent, 2006), and the nature of the political system (Taylor & Kent, 1999).

No cultural concept is reified the same in all cultures. The concept of "excellence" means different things from culture to culture (humility vs. flamboyance, respect for ancestors vs. treating everyone equally, patience vs. opportunism, "wealthy" vs. "happy"). Definitionally, however, the technical term "excellence" (as per the excellence scholarship) has characterized public relations as a management function, rather than being about "negotiating relationships," etc.

In some ways, our field is suffering from what Kenneth Burke (1984) describes as "occupational psychosis." Humans see what their schemas or frameworks allow them to see. When scholars and professionals reduce the study of public relations to proving the existence of one theoretical framework, they necessarily cut themselves off from other useful features of public relations. Public relations is a humanistic activity, an art, and even if one grand theory of public relations were capable of explaining the practice of public relations in every nation, we believe that such a theory would obscure more than it illuminated. What ultimately matters is understanding the practice of public relations in each nation, not proving whether a country/region conforms to one theory/model.

3. Employing a generic approach to Bosnian public relations

To illustrate the applicability of a generic approach to the study of international public relations, we will examine Bosnian public relations. Below we will outline a study that follows up on past scholarship and tries to clarify Bosnian

public relations practices. First, however, we will outline how the research that has been conducted before follows a generic model of studying intercultural public relations.

At its base, the generic approach to research is about triangulation, and bringing together information, knowledge, scholarship, etc. from many areas. As explained above, Kent suggests that there are six basic steps involved in taking a generic approach. The steps do not have to take place in order, nor is it likely that any single study (except a very large one: theses, dissertation, government research reports) could touch on all six of the areas.

The first generic question involves identifying cultural issues such as gender roles, status, age, and other cultural variables. In the case of public relations scholarship on Bosnia, early work by scholars included examining the media, examining the political system, and conducting interviews with professional communicators, politicians, and citizens. Taylor and others have examined how the media system in Bosnia-Herzegovina influenced organization–public communication, citizen perceptions of trust in the media, as well as how the post-Tito government communicated with citizens (Brkic & Husic, 2004; Sullivan, 1999; Taylor & Kent, 2000; Taylor, 1999, 2000, <http://www.dec.org/pdf_docs/PNACE670.pdf>, <http://www.dec.org/pdf_docs/pnack165.pdf>).

A second generic question is to identify the intended audience effects: the goals of organizations' communication efforts (persuasion, propaganda, marketing), what practitioners see as their role, etc. Once again, scholars conducted interviews with Bosnian citizens and public relations professionals regarding their use of technology, and examined messages in the print and broadcast media (Brkic & Husic, 2004; Kent, Taylor, & Turcilo, 2006; Taylor, 2000).

A third generic question is to clarify the motivational intent of the organization and publics. How do organizations see their relationships with publics and how do publics view organizations? Several professional journalists and scholars have examined the media, political, and business situation in the former Yugoslavia and their insights have been incorporated into public relations scholarship (cf., Glenny, 1995; Kent et al., 2006; Sullivan, 1999).

A fourth generic question involves examining the archetypal or symbolic nature of language in order to understand cultural and historical issues, who the heroes and villains are, and to understand what motivates citizens to act/react. On this point, a number of scholars have examined Bosnian culture and sought to explain how/why citizens respond to messages in the media and from organizations, the influence of totalitarianism under Tito, etc. (Botan & Taylor, 2005; Glenny, 1995).

A fifth generic question involves examining the strategic considerations that communicators are aware of when creating messages (i.e., respect for elders, the role of the government, religious and social features, trust, perception of time etc.). In general, this question has received less attention than several of the others and is only now becoming possible to ask. As we will explain below, issues of public trust and perceptions by practitioners about how they see their organizations' roles are raised.

The last generic question involves drawing upon communication principles and theory to understand and explain the communication and public relations strategies in particular nations/regions. In general, international scholarship that takes a generic approach focuses on theoretical and communicative principles in order to understand various cultures. For example, Kent et al. (2006) examined professionalism and encroachment. Taylor (2000) has examined civil society. And Taylor and Napoli (2003) and Taylor and Kent (2000) examined media relations and propaganda in Bosnia. Studying diverse cultural concepts afford scholars a wider and more comprehensive understanding of a nation and its public relations practices. By seeking to understand cultural and communicative practices in the region rather than proving the existence of a single positivistic model in every country (as with excellence), practitioners, students, and scholars are afforded a more dynamic and richer understanding of the nation.

4. A generic approach to Bosnian public relations: Applying principles of communication theory

After examining the past research on Bosnian public relations several issues stand out for more detailed examination: (1) evaluating Bosnian public relations practitioners' level of understanding of public relations; (2) evaluating the level of trust in the media and how that influences the tactics and decisions of practitioners. And (3), better understanding how public relations is actually practiced by Bosnian public relations practitioners. What approach guides practice and why is public relations in Bosnia practiced that way (the more important question).

Identifying the model of public relations practiced serves little more than a descriptive function helping practitioners understand a nation's culture. Symmetrical arguments do little for advancing scholars and practitioners' understanding of international public relations in general or Bosnian public relations in particular. Bosnia makes a good case for illustrating generic theory since so many diverse studies of Bosnian public relations have already been conducted.

4.1. *Understanding Bosnian public relations: A generic extension*

Following the lead provided by generic theory, we first examined the extant scholarship on public relations in Eastern Europe and the former Yugoslavian states including Bosnia (Brkic & Husic, 2004; Glenny, 1995; Sullivan, 1999; Taylor, 2000), Croatia (Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Kent, 2000; Taylor & Napoli, 2003), and Slovenia (Vercic, 2003; Vercic et al., 1996). Based on these and other studies of Bosnian public relations, questions emerged concerning how public trust influences practitioners' public relations choices and strategies, the type of public relations practiced (cultural interpreter, personal influence, symmetrical, etc.), and preferred media tactics. Although we do examine the model of public relations practiced by Bosnian practitioners in order to understand the generic issues mentioned above, the more important issue for us seemed to be trust.

4.2. *Organizational and public trust in public relations*

Public trust of organizations and institutions is one of the prerequisites for effective public relations in Bosnia or any country. Trust is a foundation of the organization–public relationship and it is at the very heart of what is needed in a newly privatized economy. In order to understand how trust plays a role in Bosnia, we examined how trust is reified in Bosnian public relations.

Again, in keeping with Kent's sixth principle to draw upon communication and public relations theory when examining cultural phenomenon, our work has been informed by the shift in research that reflects a relational approach to public relations. The work of Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997), Huang (2001), Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000), and Grunig and Huang (2000), has helped focus public relations research on a core aspect of public relations: relationship building. Trust is one of the foundations for a relational approach to public relations. Trust is also an important part of both interpersonal and organization–public relationships.

The concept of trust is a fundamental principle of both civil society and public relations. Being “trustworthy,” creating and maintaining trust, and keeping clients' trust are concepts that are found throughout the basic textbooks of the discipline as well as embodied in several of the clauses of the public relations society of America's code of ethical conduct. But the principle of trust has implications at every level of the public relations practitioner's communication from interpersonal contexts to organization–public communication. Thus, to understand a country such as Bosnia's public relations requires an understanding of public trust. As Neace (1999) explains “‘Trust’ is the expectation of or within two or more entities (persons, organizations) that regular day-to-day behavior will be honest, cooperative, and predictable based on shared norms” (1999, pp. 150–151).

4.3. *Trust in transitional economies*

Lawniczak (2004) has provided a systematic analysis of the public relations environment in transitional nations of Eastern Europe. Economic transitions are exemplified as a time when societal trust is quite low. Smeltz, Bell, Mendrala, Sweeney, and Teare (2000) reported the results of a 10-year study of public trust in institutions in Eastern Europe. They found that it was the armed forces that enjoyed consistent levels of public trust in all of the East European institutions. The armed forces were more trusted than hospitals, universities, government officials, media and the church. Lovell (2001) noted that trust is so low in post-communist nations because of “the real and perceived behavior of current elites, disappointment with outcomes so far, and brazen cheating in the market place” (2001, p. 32). Research also suggests that people who lived in the former communist states developed “strong, face to face social networks” that enabled them to trust one another (Rose, Mishler, & Haerpfer, 1997, p. 85). Through face-to-face interactions people can read both the verbal and non-verbal cues of the other interactants and in most situations face-to-face communication allows for increased certainty, trust, and confidence.

Trust is necessary not only for social and political development in Bosnia; trust is also necessary for economic development (Murphy, 2002). Neace (1999) studied levels of trust in the NIS (Newly Independent States). In a study of organizational leaders, “social capital in the form of trust was, in the view of these entrepreneurs, the second factor essential to establish viable, sustainable small businesses. Entrepreneurs also saw trust as facilitating learning, reducing uncertainty, and therefore increasing efficiency and effectiveness” (Neace, 1999, p. 158). Trust is an integral part of public relations in newly privatizing economies and lead to our first research question:

RQ1: How important is trust for Bosnian organizations?

4.4. Importance of understanding the models of public relations practiced

Recent literature about international public relations has explored whether the original four models of public relations and the recent additions of the Personal Influence (Sriramesh, 1992, 1996) and Cultural Interpreter (Lyra, 1991) models have explanatory utility in different cultures (Culbertson & Chen, 1996; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). The original four models have value in the U.S. in that they help students and professionals understand the historic progression of the field. The newer models also help scholars to understand and benchmark public relations practice around the world. Countries and regions vary in terms of their reliance on personal influence, symmetrical communication (through the media and other channels), and other means of public relations. However, as suggested above, because trust in the media varies greatly from region to region (Taylor & Kent, 2000) so too do the models practiced and their likelihood of success.

From a generic perspective, understanding the *influence* of particular models is the real issue, rather than whether organizations practice two-way symmetrical public relations. In order to evaluate the models of public relations practiced, levels of trust, and media channels employed by Bosnian public relations practitioners, two additional research questions were posed:

- RQ2: In what ways are the models of public relations reliable measures for understanding Bosnian public relations?
 RQ3: What specific questions from the models provide insight into the practice of public relations in Bosnia?

Although the models are only one small piece of the picture of the practice of public relations in any nation, cultural preference for particular approaches and communication tactics can also add to our understanding of unique international approaches to public relations. Whether or not the models of public relations actually tap into culturally specific practices of public relations as reliable measurement instruments is an important question.

Since the goal of this paper is to clarify the generic method as an international public relations tool as well as to suggest alternative frameworks for understanding international public relations, a study that only included the models of public relations would do little to further our understanding of international public relations. To move beyond the models, the authors identified additional cultural theories that might help us understand the development of the practice. Drawing on theory to explain research and practice is consistent with Kent's sixth generic principle.

4.5. Relevant theories in Bosnian public relations

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) suggests that people strategically use communication channels because of their "richness" or depth. Taylor (2004) posited that public relations activities in many East European nations fall on the rich side of the channel richness continuum because of a lack of trust. Additional research questions examined using media richness theory and based on the low levels of trust in Bosnian society suggest our final research question:

- RQ4: What are the most frequently used media tactics?

The answers to these research questions seek to identify, describe, and measure the cultural and social context of public relations in Bosnia.

5. Method of the study

This research is part of Kent et al's (2006) study of Bosnian public relations. See Kent et al. article for the details of the methodology. To understand the level of trust as a generic backdrop to public relations in Bosnia, respondents were asked to rate four questions on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 meaning strongly agree and 1 meaning strongly disagree: Q(1) being friendly to the media is important; Q(2) having the media trust our organization is important; Q(3) having the public trust our organization is important; and Q(4) trust is a problem in Bosnian society.

In keeping with the RGT approach to Bosnian public relations, and to tap into cultural preferences in external communication, the researchers sought to isolate practitioners' preferences for particular media tactics. Daft and Lengel (1984, 1984) suggested a continuum of channels for organizational communication. Respondents identified their preferences on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 meaning strongly agree and 1 meaning strongly disagree. Respondents identified their preference for the following tactics: news conferences, personal invitations to the media, news releases, buying advertisements, paying a media outlet to write a story about their organization, and hiring an agency for media relations.

News conferences and personal invitations are considered richer tactics. The news release is considered a moderately rich tactic since in Bosnia, news releases are often hand delivered to reporters. Buying advertisements, paying a media outlet to write a story about their organization, and hiring an agency for media relations are considered leaner tactics because they are based on economic rather than personal relationships.

Bosnian practitioners were also asked about the applicability of the models to their practice of public relations. Respondents were asked to identify their public relations activities according to the various descriptive models of public relations developed by Grunig (1984). As well as the cultural practices of public relations, that emerge from the two newer models (personal influence and cultural interpreter models) that have been qualitatively described by Sriramesh (1992) and Lyra (1991). Wu, Taylor and Chen (2001) operationalized the personal influence and cultural interpreter models and created quantitative measures to tap into unique multicultural practices in international public relations communication. Respondents were again asked questions using a 5-point Likert scale with 5 meaning strongly agree and 1 meaning strongly disagree.

6. Results

In keeping with the descriptive categories of RGT, the researchers sought evidence about the levels of trust in Bosnian society. RQ1 asked about how much trust was thought to exist as a framework for effective public relations. Respondents moderately agreed that trust in Bosnian society was a problem ($M = 3.68$, $S.D. = 1.596$). Practitioners responded unanimously ($M = 5.0$, $S.D. = 0$) that gaining public trust was central to successful public relations. Additionally, the practitioners recognized that they must earn the trust of the media ($M = 4.63$, $S.D. = 0.913$). One way to accomplish this was for practitioners to become friendly with the media ($M = 4.66$, $S.D. = 0.582$).

RQ 2 asked about the preferences of media tactics. The preferred communication tactics with the news releases ($M = 4.71$, $S.D. = 0.81$), news conferences, ($M = 4.71$, $S.D. = 0.84$) and personal invitations ($M = 4.45$, $S.D. = 1.25$) to the media emerging as first choices. Buying ads, paying for stories and hiring agencies are not preferred tactics.

The third research question inquired about the prevalence and reliability of the six models of public relations. The most prevalent models of public relations were the cultural interpreter model ($M = 4.28$, $S.D. = 0.92$), the press agency model ($M = 4.10$, $S.D. = 1.06$), and the personal influence model ($M = 3.91$, $S.D. = 0.62$). The public information model ($M = 2.52$, $S.D. = 0.94$), the two way asymmetrical model ($M = 2.20$, $S.D. = 1.27$), and the two way symmetrical model ($M = 3.07$, $S.D. = 1.30$) do not appear to offer much explanatory nature of the actual public relations practices in Bosnia.

What may offer insight into why the traditional Excellence research has limited value for international practices of public relations is the wide variance in reliability scores for each of the models. Reliability coefficients using Cronbach's alpha were calculated for each of the six models: Press agency 0.21, Public Information 0.37, Two-way Asymmetrical 0.71, Two-way Symmetrical 0.70, Personal Influence 0.49, and Cultural Interpreter 0.63. Given the low reliability alphas of the models and to further answer RQ3, the researchers examined which of the questions asked of the six models garnered the highest levels of agreement. The authors used the 4-point mean criterion on the 5-point scale as the cut off point to select questions where there appeared to be consistent agreement. Also, reliable questions had to show lower levels of standard deviation (less than 1.5).

Eight questions emerged as having consistently high agreement: gaining favorable coverage/keeping unfavorable publicity out of media, evaluating public relations by counting, creating strong interpersonal relationships within the organization, establishing strong interpersonal relationships with people outside of the organization, socializing as an important part of the job, understanding a second language, helping clients understand Bosnia, and introducing clients to important people. These questions appear to tap into a Bosnian model of public relations which has aspects of the press agency, personal influence, and cultural interpreter models. No questions from public information, two-way asymmetrical, or two way symmetrical emerged with consistent agreement above the 4-point mean.

7. Discussion: A RGT model of Bosnian public relations

The mistake often made with EGT is arguing that what category a country falls into proves, or tells researchers very much of value. The models are descriptive—much like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. The EGT categories are useful tools to help understand broader cultural, political, economic, or rhetorical trends/practices but they do not offer a lot in terms of explaining *why* public relations is practiced the way that it is in a particular country. “Why?” is the *real* question of interest in international public relations research.

The most prevalent models of Bosnian public relations are the cultural interpreter model, the press agency model, and the personal influence model respectively. Additionally, the specific questions that garnered the most agreement are tied to these three models. Yet, the reliability scores for these models are among the lowest scores of all six of the public relations models. The original four models were set up to tap into the *purpose and direction* of public relations communication. The two international models were operationalized to tap into the *relationship* between the practitioner and others (organizational members, the media, and the client). Indeed, what emerged as highly applicable to Bosnian practitioners were the interpersonal relational dimensions of press agency.

That interpersonal dimensions were rated highly is not surprising in light of the economic constraints noted by Lawniczak (2004), and Kent et al. (2006). Kent et al. found that although Bosnian public relations practitioners understand that public relations has more lofty goals, their open ended answers indicate that they have “poor equipment,” managers and citizens who “do not understand the need for public relations,” “small coverage by the media” (unless they are willing to purchase space), divided markets, monopoly infrastructure, no public opinion research (or means to conduct it), and poor media relations. Such constraints on effective practice may be why Bosnian practitioners prefer richer communication channels.

7.1. Extending RGT

As the study reported here should illustrate, practitioners and scholars need to know a lot more than whether a country practices “excellent” public relations. Indeed, what this study illustrates is that what is more important than understanding the model of public relations practiced (cultural interpreter, personal influence, etc.) is to be able to account for the cultural factors that explain why a model is practiced (perceptions of time, hierarchical figures, events, relationships, influence of religion, cultural paradigms, trust, media relations, etc.). As the study reported above illustrates, the more that one understands country/region specific communication imperatives, motivational issues, cultural events, hero/villains, etc., the more robust and thorough will be the understanding of a nation’s public relations practices.

The study reported here was only possible after a number of other studies on Bosnian public relations and Bosnian culture had been completed, after the researchers visited the region and examined media and cultural institutions first hand, and after actually talking with dozens of local public relations, government, and media professionals. As suggested above (RGT steps 1–3), understanding strategic issues faced by practitioners might involve talking to journalists, NGOs, politicians, and examining print, broadcast, and Internet journalism, rather than just surveying public relations practitioners on “Excellence” or “symmetry.” Developing an understanding of the world-views and cosmologies of a nation’s citizens might necessitate examining historical texts, conducting focus groups and interviews, and examining messages disseminated by the mass media (RGT steps 3–5). Finally, to begin to understand the practice of public relations in another nation (RGT step 6) necessitates drawing upon communication and other theories (political, media, intercultural, rhetorical, psychological, sociological, etc.) to make sense of (or test) the cultural imperatives in individual nations. The generic approach advocated here is avowedly “relativistic” (a pejorative term to some), but not radically relativistic. It does not suggest that public relations practices in different nations and cultures have nothing in common. Rather, RGT suggests that specific cultural and historic situations may have greater influences than originally believed.

8. Conclusion

Public relations academics and professionals need to more vigorously examine the cultural, social, and economic factors that influence public relations development in different contexts. The RGT approach to studying international public relations developed in this article is one such beginning. Studies of intercultural and interpersonal communication have shown that culture and communication cannot be reduced to a few principles, a topology, or a list.

In public relations, studies by many scholars have informed our practices and every new study has potential value. However, we must not be seduced by the simple topology. Culture is too complex. New research, theories, and models are needed to better describe and measure international practices in public relations.

We believe that an understanding of international public relations practices should be as dynamic as other areas of research. One theory will *never* explain the practice of public relations in every country but an assortment of heuristics, models, theories, topologies, and examples of practice will allow professionals and academics to more effectively conduct and teach international public relations.

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