Causal Linkages between Relationship Cultivation Strategies and Relationship Quality Outcomes

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This study used a survey method to examine how relationship cultivation strategies used by a membership organization affected members' perceptions of relationship quality outcomes with the organization. Links among six relationship cultivation strategies and four relationship quality outcomes provide new information concerning the function of cultivation effects. Overall, relationship cultivation strategies like access, positivity, sharing tasks, and assurances represent the proactive approaches that organizations may employ to cultivate or nurture quality relationships with their target publics.

Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, and Sriramesh (2007) have argued that public relations is an underlying dimension of the emerging paradigm of strategic communication. They suggested that public relations scholarship can contribute to the development of this paradigm through a focus on developing theory about how organizations can "establish and maintain beneficial relationships with key constituencies" (p. 6). This study attempts to do so by building upon research that seeks to empirically link strategic communication in the form of relationship cultivation[1] efforts to positive organizational outcomes defined here as perceptions of relationship quality among key constituencies.

Drawing from the consistent evidence found in interpersonal relationship literature on the association between relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991), public relations scholars have asserted that some relationship cultivation strategies can be precursors to relationship quality outcomes in public relationships as well (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). For example, positivity has been identified as the most effective relationship cultivation strategy for

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[1]The original term, relationship maintenance, was renamed to relationship cultivation to reflect the dynamic processes of relationship management suggested by J. E. Grunig (2006). Throughout this manuscript relationship cultivation is used instead of relationship maintenance.

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sustaining control mutuality. Likewise, assurances are consistently noted as an important predictor of commitment (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Moreover, after developing a measure of relationship cultivation strategies, Ki and Hon (2009) suggested that future research should empirically test how relationship cultivation strategies used by an organization can affect relationship quality outcomes.

So far, most of the research on organization-public relationships has focused on measuring and improving scales of relationship quality outcomes (e.g., Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ferguson, 1984; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig & Ehling, 1992; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997; Jo, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2007a; Kim, 2001). Because these studies have focused on scale development for relationship quality outcomes, the causal linkages among relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes have not been examined empirically. Therefore, this research attempts to do so by investigating the extent to which relationship cultivation strategies predict relational outcomes by adopting this interpersonal relationship perspective as well as suggestions noted by public relations scholars (e.g., J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Establishing causal links between relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes is the missing empirical step in the theoretical public relations literature having to do with organization/public relationships. Doing so also will provide practical guidance for how an organization should use each strategy to impact specific relationship quality outcomes. At the pragmatic level, the results of this study will benefit organizations interested in employing effective relationship cultivation strategies and improving perceptions of organization-public relationships among key constituencies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Publics and Stakeholders

Public relations scholars have defined 'publics' as groups of individuals who are formally or informally impacted by an organization or vice versa (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). By the same token, scholars in strategic management have defined stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 40). Thus, stakeholder management and organization-relationship management are closely related in their theoretical conceptualization of an organization's key constituencies.

Stakeholder theory seeks to explain how organizations interact with diverse groups or stakeholders, which are defined as "any person or group that has an interest, right, claim, or ownership in organization" (Clarkson, 1995, cited in Coombs, 2000, p.75). Some scholars have categorized stakeholders into two groups—primary and secondary (e.g., Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

Primary stakeholders are those whose actions can be either harmful or beneficial to an organization. Examples of primary stakeholders are employees, investors, customers, suppliers, government, and the community (Donaldson & Peterson, 1995). Secondary stakeholders are those who can affect or be affected by the actions of an organization such as the media, activist groups, and competitors. Both groups of stakeholders are interdependent with an organization.

Stakeholder management refers to strategic actions, including communication, that are related to dealing with the relationship between an organization and its diverse stakeholders (Carroll, 1989; Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

Relationship management theory in public relations refers to the same dynamic but the emphasis is on strategies to build and cultivate relationships between organizations and their publics as well as the outcomes of those relationships. Although stakeholder theory divides key constituencies into two groups, J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggested public relationships are best understood using three categories of publics based on situational theory—latent, aware, and active publics. Aware and active publics are similar to primary stakeholders and a latent public is comparable to a secondary stakeholder.

The group this study examined is a primary stakeholder according to stakeholder theory and an active public according to organization-public relationship theory. Given that public relations theory provides more fine distinctions among key constituencies than stakeholder theory, the term 'public' is used throughout this study to underscore the active nature of the public relationship being investigated here.

Stages of Developing Relationships

Although definitions of organization-public relationships differ slightly, scholars seem to agree that such relationships consist of three stages—(1) antecedents of relationships, (2) relationship cultivation strategies, and (3) relationship outcomes (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997). Antecedents of relationships specify the conditions under which organizations need to establish relationships with their target publics (Broom et al., 1997). They defined antecedents of relationships as "social and cultural norms, collective perceptions and expectations, needs for resources, perceptions of uncertain environment, and legal/voluntary necessity" (Broom et al., 1997, p. 94). The second category, relationship cultivation strategies, also called relationship maintenance strategies, describes practitioners' day-to-day activities at the program level and organizations' behavioral efforts to cultivate and nurture relationships with their strategic constituencies. The last category, relationship outcomes, refers to organization's goal achievement or consequences that are produced by effective relationship cultivation strategies (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). In effect, effective relationship cultivation strategies bring about relationship quality outcomes.

Applying the Broom et al. (1997) model, J. E. Grunig and Huang (2000) extended and developed a conceptual framework describing these stages of developing relationships. Figure 1 shows the components of the three-stage model.

Antecedents

The antecedents to relationships are generally defined as "sources of change, pressure, or tension on the system derived from the environment" (Broom et al., 1997, p. 94). At the antecedent level, an organization should identify the publics the organization needs to develop a relationship with. To identify strategic publics, practitioners conduct environmental scanning and develop public relations program objectives to communicate with the identified publics.

The other two stages—relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes—are considered process and outcome objectives respectively. Process objectives are strategies used to
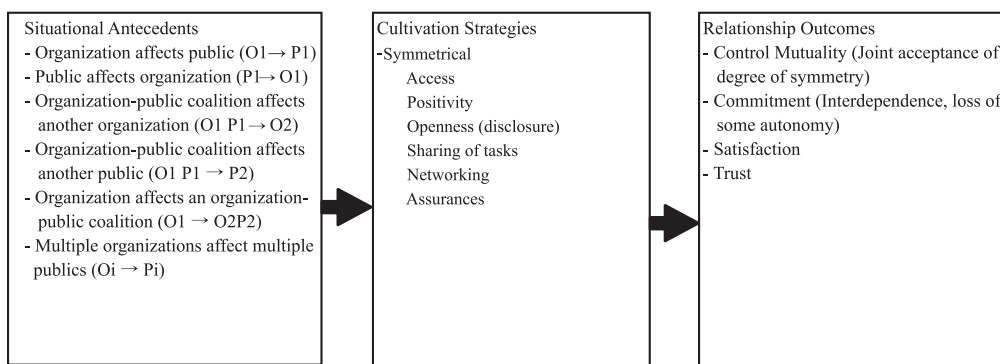
FIGURE 1 Stages and forms of relationships (Adopted from J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000, p. 34).

cultivate and nurture relationships and they result in outcome objectives, such as relationship quality. The causal linkages between the last two stages—relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes are the focus of this study.

Relationship Cultivation Strategies

Originally, Stafford and Canary (1991) established five relationship cultivation strategies—positivity, openness, sharing tasks, social networks, and assurances—used in dyads such as married couples or two individuals in a romantic relationship. These five strategies have been proven to be the most heuristic measure of strategies to cultivate interpersonal relationships to date (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). Stafford et al. (2000) indicated that these five relationship cultivation strategies could be used both strategically and routinely.

Extensive research on interpersonal relationships indicates that these relationship cultivation efforts between two individuals have been found to be reliable and strong predictors of some relationship characteristics (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford et al., 2000). First, relational cultivation efforts were primarily related to relational stability, satisfaction, and commitment (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Second, relationship cultivation involves not only a stage of relational development but also the dynamic processes involved in relating (Canary & Stafford, 1994).

In public relations, cultivating and nurturing organization-public relationships are a goal for organizations that desire long-term, stable, and satisfying relationships with their key publics. Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) emphasized the necessity of relationship cultivation by conveying that public relations professionals retain knowledge that has "something to do with how to communicate with publics, in order to [cultivate] a relationship with those publics" (p. 13). This study refers to relationship cultivation strategies as "any organizational behavioral efforts that attempt to build and sustain quality relationships with strategic publics."

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) and J. E. Grunig and Huang (2000) were the first public relations scholars to adopt these strategies and apply them to public relations studies. The cultivation

strategies they considered the most efficacious for understanding effective public relations are *access, positivity, openness, sharing tasks, networking*, and *assurances*.

Access.   Access is a strategy to provide communication channels for either a public or an organization to the other party to share their opinions or thoughts (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). Access has been described as follows:

> Members of publics or opinion leaders provide access to public relations people. Public relations representatives or senior managers provide representatives of publics similar access to organizational decision-making processes. Either party will answer telephone calls or read letters or e-mail messages from the other. Either party is willing to go to the other when they have complaints or queries, rather than taking negative reactions to third parties. (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 14).

Based on the existing conceptualization of access (Hon & J. E. Grung, 1999), this study defines access as "the degree of behavioral efforts that an organization puts into providing communication channels or media outlets that help its strategic publics to reach it."

Positivity.   Positivity is explained as behavioral efforts to keep interaction upbeat and enjoyable in interpersonal relationships and is composed of pleasant and affectionate behavior, courteous communication, and not criticizing the other partner (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Research on interpersonal relationships has consistently uncovered that positivity could predict control mutuality (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Dainton, 1991; Stafford & Canary, 1991) because interaction in pleasant and courteous ways is more likely to encourage the other party to be cooperative and interdependent in a relationship. Moreover, interpersonal relationship research discovered that a positivity strategy favorably affects relational satisfaction (Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994; Dindia, 1989). Positivity was found to be a proactive strategy in constructive relationship maintenance (Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnik, 1993).

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) applied this positivity strategy to organization-public relationships and defined it as "anything the organization or publics do to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved" (p. 14). Based on their conceptualization, the current study defines positivity as "the degree to which strategic publics can benefit from the organization's efforts to make the relationship more enjoyable."

Openness/disclosure.   In interpersonal relationships, openness is described as the direct and explicit discussion of feelings and opinions about the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Like positivity, openness was found to be a proactive and constructive maintenance action in interpersonal relationships (Guerrero et al., 1993).

The concept of openness was applied to public relations as sharing concerns and opinions among organizations and publics (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Openness can assist both an organization and its strategic publics to be candid in sharing their thoughts and concerns as well as the degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with each other (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Bok (1989) emphasized openness as a tool to bring about an equal distribution of power in a relationship. However, since openness cannot guarantee a good relationship when there is an imbalance of power between two parties involved, the party with greater power should ensure that any safeguarding of information is in the interest of the one with less power (Bok, 1989).

In a number of studies in relationship management, openness was uncovered repeatedly as a key predictor of relationship quality outcomes such as satisfaction (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998)

and trust (Dimmick, Bell, Burgiss, & Ragsdale, 2000). This study conceptualizes openness as "an organization's behavioral efforts to provide information about the nature of the organization and what it is doing that affects its strategic publics."

Sharing tasks.   Interpersonal relationship studies identified sharing tasks as dividing routine tasks and carrying out responsibilities fairly (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991). The joint performance of chores is an example of sharing tasks in interpersonal relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1994).

In interpersonal relationship studies, this strategy has continuously been shown to be a strong predictor of quality relational characteristics such as control mutuality and liking (Canary & Stafford, 1994) as well as satisfaction (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986; Wilmot & Sillars, 1989). Sharing tasks also is linked to constructive relationship maintenance (Guerrero et al., 1993).

The concept of sharing tasks has expanded to the organization-public relationship as a strategy through which an organization and its strategic publics share in solving joint or separate problems (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Both parties can work together to reduce pollution, support philanthropic efforts, provide employment opportunities, remain competitive, etc. (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). The idea of sharing tasks is similar to corporate social responsibility for an organization. So, sharing tasks can be evaluated through an organization's corporate social responsibility reports which show how much an organization has made an effort to work with publics on issues of concern (Ki & Hon, 2009).

This study conceptualizes sharing tasks as "an organization's behavioral efforts to share in working on projects or solving problems of common interest between an organization and its strategic publics." Thus, sharing tasks indicates the organization's and publics' willingness to perform their responsibilities so that both can achieve their interdependent goals. However, since this study focuses on organizational behavioral efforts made to cultivate relationships with strategic publics, this study addresses only the organization's performance of sharing tasks.

Networking.   Studies of interpersonal relationships describe networking as the use of common friends and affiliations to maintain relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1994). This strategy has been found to be a primary predictor of relationship outcomes such as control mutuality (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991) and liking (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1994; Dainton et al., 1994) and it has been identified as a proactive and constructive maintenance strategy (Guerrero et al., 1993).

The idea of networking has been applied to organization-public relationships. For example, an organization can form relationships with the groups its strategic publics have networked with such as unions, community, activist, and environmental groups (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Hung (2000) discovered that networking is the catalyst for building public relationships in Chinese culture because personal relationships have been regarded as key in Chinese society. This study defines networking as "an organization's effort to build networks or coalitions with the same groups that its strategic publics do."

Assurances.   In interpersonal relationships, assurances are referred as to reassurances provided to the partner about one's importance, as well as the importance of the relationship between the two individuals (Canary & Stafford, 1994). This strategy has been found to be a

primary predictor of relational characteristics between members of couples such as commitment (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991) and satisfaction (Dainton et al., 1994). Canary and Stafford (1992) investigated the association between relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes in married couples and found that an assurance strategy is the one that most strongly affected the commitment of both the husbands and wives. Additionally, this strategy was identified as an important indicator of trust in interpersonal relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

The assurance strategy also can be applied to organization-public relationships. For example, an organization can communicate how it values the relationship with its strategic publics (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). L. A. Grunig et al. (2002) highlighted that assurances can occur when "each party in the relationship attempts to assure the other that it and its concerns are legitimate and to demonstrate that it is committed to maintaining the relationship" (p. 551). The present study defines an assurance strategy as "an organization's effort to assure its strategic publics that they and their concerns are attended to."

Relationship Quality Outcomes

Since Ferguson's (1984) landmark paper on relationship management, scholars in public relations have moved forward to establish measures of the relationship between an organization and its strategic publics through extensive research on diverse perspectives including interpersonal relationships, psychology, psychotherapy, and relational marketing (e.g., Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; L. A. Grunig et al., 1992; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Jo, 2006; Kim, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000; Ledingham, Bruning, & Wilson, 1999). This study selected four indicators of relationship quality outcomes—control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment—which Huang (1997) initially developed in her dissertation and Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) elaborated on later. The choice of these four is justified for several reasons.

First, these indicators are continuously found to be essential relational features across diverse disciplines including interpersonal and interorganizational communication, relational marketing, and public relations (e.g., Aldrich, 1975, 1979; Burgoon & Hale, 1984, 1987; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Canary & Stafford, 1992; L. A. Grunig et al., 1992; Ferguson, 1984; Millar & Rogers, 1976; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Second, they have been uncovered as the essence of organization-public relationships in multiple empirical studies in public relations (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Jo, 2006; Ki & Hon, 2007a; Kim, 2001; Yang, 2007). Third, three of the indicators—satisfaction, trust, and commitment—were found to be critical even in other cultural settings including Taiwan (Huang, 2001) and South Korea (Jo, 2006).

Control mutuality.   This indicator describes the decision making process and how much each party's opinion is reflected in the final decision. In interpersonal relationships, control mutuality is indispensable to interdependence and relationship stability (Stafford & Canary, 1991). For a stable and positive relationship between publics and an organization, control mutuality should exist to some extent although some degree of power inequality might exist (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Several similar concepts to control mutuality were suggested as follows: mutual legitimacy (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999), reciprocity (Aldrich, 1975, 1979), empowerment

(Moore, 1986), and power distribution (Ferguson, 1984). Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999)'s conceptualization of control mutuality was used for this study and was defined as "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another" (p. 3).

Satisfaction. This indicator is the most widely used as a relationship quality outcome measure across studies (Ki & Shin, 2006). Satisfaction is defined as "the extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced" (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). Equity theory suggests that satisfaction is at the highest level when a party believes that one's relationship is equitable—that is, the ratio of inputs to outputs is equal for both parties involved in the relationship (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne, & Hayy, 1985). In interpersonal relationship studies, satisfaction has been found to be the relational characteristic that is most frequently associated with the relationship cultivation strategies (Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stafford & Canary, 1991). By adopting Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) conceptualization, this study defines satisfaction as "the extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other."

Trust. Like satisfaction, trust has been found to be as an essential indicator for measuring relationship quality across diverse disciplines. The classical definition of trust in relational marketing is that trust "exist(s) when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p. 23). Similar to this definition, public relations scholars defined trust as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3).

The concept of trust includes several underlying dimensions—integrity, dependability, and competence (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Carnevale, 1995; Daley & Vasu, 1995; Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard, & Werner, 1998). Integrity is the belief that an organization is fair and just. Dependability refers to the belief that an organization will keep promises about what it says it will do. Dependability is a key component of trust, as evidenced by Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) operationalization of trust as an organization "doing what it says it will do." Competence is defined as the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Applying the concept to this study, trust can be described as publics' belief that an organization is reliable, honest, and stands by its words as well as carries out its promised responsibilities. This study defines trust as a "public's willingness to depend on the organization in which it has confidence."

Commitment. This relationship indicator has been revealed as a focal concept in diverse disciplines including social exchange literature (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), organization and buyer behavior (Becker, 1960; Reichers, 1985), relational marketing (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Morgan & Hunt, 1994) and organization-public relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Jo, 2006; Yang, 2007). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined commitment as "the organization being committed to the welfare of the community" by emphasizing corporate social responsibility, especially community responsibility. Commitment contains two underlying dimensions—continuance and affective. Continuance commitment is "commitment to continue a certain line of action" (Meyer & Allen, 1984, p. 373).

Affective commitment is "an emotional orientation," (Buchanan, 1974; Kanter, 1968; Porter, Crampon, & Smith, 1976; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974; Sheldon, 1971; Steers,

1977), which indicates a psychological attachment between an organization and its target publics. By adopting the aforementioned definitions, this study conceptualizes commitment as "the belief that an ongoing relationship with the other party is important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it." This definition implies that the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely.

Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) asserted that the interpersonal relationship cultivation strategies they identified might be applied successfully to organization-public relationships by transforming the focus of communication strategies from individuals to publics. The cultivation strategies explained were proposed to lead to several relationship quality outcomes, including control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). However, although assumptions about the causal linkages between relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes have been posited, no empirical research tests if and how relationship cultivation strategies predict relationship quality outcomes. Furthermore, no research has been conducted to determine whether these suggested strategies are equally effective at producing positive relational outcomes. Based on the exploratory nature of this study, the following research question was posed:

> *Research Question*: *To which and what extent are relationship cultivation strategies positively connected with which relationship quality outcomes?*

METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to examine how the relationship cultivation strategies an organization uses on a daily basis affect relational outcomes. The organization in this study is a State Farm Bureau (SFB hereafter),[2] the largest agricultural organization in the state. SFB is an independent, non-governmental, voluntary, grass roots organization representing its members, who are primarily farmers and ranch families. The public in this study is SFB's current members. The relationship between the organization and its members is paramount to this organization because all of the organization's activities are based on its interactions with members. More importantly, the organization's vitality and continued existence depend on its membership. And, increasing its number of members is the best way to increase power and influence for this kind of membership organization (Kile, 1948). If this organization did not make efforts to cultivate and sustain quality relationships with its members, members would not likely remain affiliated with the organization and the organization would cease to thrive.

The population of this study is composed of current members of SFB, which has a membership of over 140,000 ("Welcome to State Farm Bureau," 2006). These members can provide meaningful assessments about the strategies SFB has employed for cultivating relationships with them as well as the quality of their relationships with SFB. The members are the focus and target for SFB's relationship building efforts.

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[2]"State" is used throughout this manuscript as a substitute for the name of the state.

Pretest

One online pilot test was conducted to ensure that the questionnaire was understandable and that the questions would produce valid responses. An e-mail requesting participation in the pilot study was sent to 140 current members of SFB. Out of 140, 16 emails failed to be delivered. Out of a valid sample of 124, 28 members provided feedback, resulting in a 23 percent response rate for the pilot study. Based on members' feedback and comments, some minor refinements in wording were made to the questionnaire.

Administration

This study employed a survey as the primary data collection method. Babbie (2001) referred to survey research as "the administration of questionnaires to a sample of respondents selected from some population" (p. 282). The major concerns of this study dealt with exploring the causal links among relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes. The survey method, which is applicable to nonexperimental data, is most suitable for this research purpose.

A mail survey was favored over other available survey methods such as one-on-one interviews, telephone surveys, etc. Because it is necessary to have at least 200 data points for each variable to test the proposed model using path analysis, it would not have been feasible to conduct one-on-one interviews. In addition, telephone surveys have a high rejection rate due to people's annoyance with telemarketing calls. Furthermore, telephone surveys are useful for asking only a short list of questions, while a mail survey can make large samples feasible at a reasonable cost and easily accommodates the long list of questions required for this study (Babbie, 2001).

To increase response rate, three waves of mailing were conducted. A brief pre-notice post-card was sent to each respondent seven days prior to sending the primary questionnaire. In the second mailing, each of the 2,100 randomly selected members received a package containing a cover letter, the survey questionnaire, and a return envelope with paid postage. As the last wave, a follow-up reminder was mailed one week after the original questionnaire was sent. Out of 2,100 members, 553 responded to the survey. Among these 553 returned questionnaires, 493 were completed, 9 were incomplete, 26 were refused and returned by the respondents, and 25 failed to deliver so that the response rate was 24.2%.[3] The researchers examined the 493 completed questionnaires and removed an additional 24 of those that displayed response set. Consequently, the final sample size was 469.

Survey Instrument

This study describes relationship cultivation strategies as "the organization's behavioral efforts to cultivate or nurture a relationship with its key publics." Concepts and items representing the six dimensions of relationship cultivation strategies—access, positivity, openness, sharing tasks, networking, and assurances—were adopted from Ki and Hon (2009).[4]

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[3]Response rate = (complete + incomplete)/(total-nondelivered).

[4]The detailed procedures of the scale development for relationship cultivation strategies can be found at Ki, E.-J., & Hon, L. C. (2009). A measure of relationship cultivation strategies. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 21,* 1–24.

This study defines relationship quality outcomes as "factors that determine or characterize successful relationships between an organization and its strategic publics." This study used the Ki and Hon (2007a) scale, which tested the full version of Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) measurement items representing the four dimensions of relationship quality outcomes—control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment.[5] Scale responses ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Neutral (5) and Strongly Agree (9) with no verbal labels for scale points two through four and six through eight.

Statistical Procedures for Data Analysis

Path analysis.   To answer the research question, this study chose to perform path analysis over regression analysis. The rationale for doing so was because with regression analysis, multicollinearity can be a problem. Correlation analysis demonstrated that the variables used in this study have strong associations.

Path analysis can be a practical method to address multicollinearity since the technique allows for interdependent relationships among independent variables. Path analysis, thus, utilizes simple bivariate correlations by specifying the relationships in a series of regression-like equations that then can be estimated by determining the amount of correlation attributable to each effect in each equation simultaneously (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). To test the model with all its paths, the study uses a goodness-of-fit test from a structural equation program. In this model testing, relationship cultivation strategies are exogenous variables,[6] and relationship quality outcomes are endogenous variables.[7]

RESULTS

Demographic Profile

The participants were asked to answer a few demographic questions including gender, age, education, and race. A total of 429 members participated in this study. Considering the *2002 Census of Agriculture State Profile*,[8] more males participated in this study than females (68 percent for male vs. 32% for female) with a mean age of 64 years, which is somewhat older than the population average ($M = 57$). The majority of respondents had some level of college education—some college (27%), college degree (19%), and a graduate degree (18%) with the rest of the sample comprised of some schooling (7%) and a high

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[5]The detailed procedures for this scale development can be found at the following article. Ki, E.-J., & Hon, L. C. (2007). Reliability and validity of organization-public relationship measurement and linkages among relationship indicators on a membership organization. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 84*, 419–438.

[6]Exogenous variables are those that do not have causes specified in the model.

[7]Endogenous variables are those that have causes specified in the model. They are dependent variables here.

[8]As there is no demographic information about the member population of the state farm bureau, this study compared the sample of this study with the demographic data from United States Department of Agriculture-State Agriculture Statistics Service. There may be some differences between the demographic information from State Agricultural Statistics Service and the member population of State Farm Bureau. However, the demographic information used here is the most similar available to that of the population of the State Farm Bureau members.

school diploma (29%).[9] The majority of the sample was White/Caucasian (97%), but with some range of other categories (e.g., Native American, Latino/Hispanic and African American). These figures are similar to the ethnic distribution of the population.

Reliability Test

Cronbach's alpha was used to examine the internal consistency of the scales used. As shown Table 1 and Table 2, reliabilities of the six indicators for relationship cultivation strategies are as followed: .83 for 4-item access, .82 for 5-item positivity, .80 for 4-item openness, .82 for 3-item sharing of tasks, .81 for 3-item networking, and .84 for 4-item assurances. Cronbach's alpha of each indicator for relationship quality outcomes are as follows: .93 for control mutuality, .92 for satisfaction, .93 for trust, and .89 for commitment. All of the indicators used displayed acceptable levels of internal consistency according to Kline (2005)'s suggestion.[10]

Correlation Analysis

This study used composite variables which are useful for making the proposed causal model more parsimonious and easy for convergence. As shown in Table 1 and Table 2, all items of the 10 variables have fairly high factor loadings ranging from .69 to .89. The composite scores obtained from principal component analysis for each of the 10 indicators on the two sets of measures—relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes—were used for correlation analysis. A correlation analysis was conducted to check the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Table 3 presents the results of the correlation analysis for relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcome variables. Overall, all of the variables for relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes demonstrate high associations with each other. Among the relationship cultivation strategies, assurances displayed the highest associations across all of the relationship quality outcome variables while networking had the lowest associations across all of the relationship quality outcome variables.

Path Analysis

Table 4 shows the results of path model analysis for the relationship between each measure of relationship cultivation strategies and each measure of relationship quality outcomes. Figure 2 provides the results of the statistical tests for the individual paths, including magnitude and significances of the coefficients for the model.

Access, positivity, sharing tasks, and assurances significantly affected control mutuality even though the effect sizes are different. The effect size of assurances on control mutuality ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) is bigger than 1.8 times that of access ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$), about 2.3 times that of sharing

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[9] The demographic information from United States Department of Agriculture does not provide educational information about the population. Therefore, comparison of demographic information in this category could not be provided.

[10] A Cronbach's alpha coefficient of approximately .90 is excellent, around .80 is very good, and values around .70 are adequate (Kline, 2005).

TABLE 1
Relationship Cultivation Strategy Scale Items

Relationship Cultivation Strategies	Measurement Items	Factor Loading
Access α = .83	Q2. ____ provides members with adequate contact information.	.79
	Q8. ____ provides members opportunities to meet its staff.	.77
	Q26. When members have questions or concerns, ____ is willing to answer their inquiries.	.85
	Q29. ____ provides members with adequate contact information for specific staff on specific issues.	.84
Positivity α = .82	Q7. The member benefits ____ provides are important to members.	.68
	Q13. Receiving regular communications from ____ is beneficial to members.	.77
	Q15. ____'s communication with members is courteous.	.80
	Q18. ____ attempts to make its interactions with members enjoyable.	.82
	Q28. ____ is cooperative when handling disagreements with members.	.68
Openness α = .80	Q3. ____'s Annual Report is a valuable source of information for members about what it has done.	.75
	Q12. ____ shares enough information with members about the organization's governance.	.75
	Q22. ____'s member meetings are a valuable way for members to communicate their opinions to the org.	.76
	Q24. The issue briefings ____ provides help members understand the issues.	.83
Sharing of Tasks α = .82	Q5. ____ works with members to develop solutions to problems that benefit members.	.81
	Q6. ____is involved in managing community issues that members care about.	.86
	Q9. ____ works effectively to resolve regulatory issues its members are facing.	.84
Networking α = .81	Q11. ____ effectively builds coalitions with groups that impact members.	.68
	Q17. The coalitions that ____ forms with other agricultural groups benefit its members.	.69
	Q20. The Ag Coalition for legislative activities that ____ is involved in is helpful to its members.	.71
Assurances α = .84	Q4. ____ makes a genuine effort to provide personal responses to members' concerns.	.82
	Q14. ____ communicates the importance of members.	.78
	Q19. ____'s policy development process allows members adequate opportunity to raise an issue and propose a solution.	.76
	Q23. When members raise concerns, ____ takes these concerns seriously.	.86

tasks (β = .16, $p < .05$), and 5.1 times that of positivity (β = .07, $p < .001$). The remaining cultivation strategies, openness and networking, did not significantly affect control mutuality. Assurances were found to be most significant among the six relationship cultivation strategies across all relationship quality outcome variables. Positivity, sharing tasks, and access had some degree of significant impact. However, openness and networking did not have any significant effect.

TABLE 2
Relationship Quality Outcome Measure

Relationship Quality Outcomes	Measurement Items	Factor Loading
Control Mutuality $\alpha = .93$	Q4. ___ believes the opinions of members are legitimate.	
	Q5. ___ neglects members. [R]	
	Q9. When dealing with members, ___ has a tendency to throw its weight around. [R]	
	Q12. ___ really listens to what members have to say.	
	Q16. ___ seems to ignore members' opinions in the decisions that affect members. [R]	
	Q21. When members interact with ___, members feel that they have some sense of control.	
	Q24. ___ cooperates with members.	
	Q28. Members have influence with the decision makers at ___.	
Satisfaction $\alpha = .92$	Q7. Both ___ and members benefit from their relationship.	
	Q11. Members are dissatisfied with their interaction with ___. [R]	
	Q.26. ___ fails to satisfy members' needs. [R]	
	Q.27. Members feel they are important to ___.	
	Q.31. In general, nothing of value has been accomplished by ___ for members. [R]	
	Q13. Members are happy with ___.	
	Q15. Generally speaking, members are unhappy with the relationship ___ has established with them. [R]	
	Q19. Members enjoy dealing with ___.	
Trust $\alpha = .93$	Q2. ___ treats members fairly and justly.	
	Q6. Whenever ___ makes an important decision, members know ___ will consider the decision's impact on members.	
	Q10. ___ can be relied on to keep its promises to members.	
	Q14. ___ takes the opinions of members into account when making decisions.	
	Q17. Members feel very confident about ___ abilities.	
	Q25. Sound principles guide ___'s behavior.	
	Q29. ___ misleads members. [R]	
Commitment $\alpha = .90$	Q1. ___ is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to members.	
	Q8. ___ wants to maintain a positive relationship with members.	
	Q18. Compared to other farm organizations, members value their relationship with ___ the most.	
	Q20. Members would rather work with ___ than without it.	
	Q30. Members feel a sense of loyalty to ___.	

Note: The blanks replace the name of the organization. [R] indicates reverse-coding.

DISCUSSION

Using path analysis, this study examined how relationship cultivation strategies used by an organization affected a public's perceptions of relationship quality outcomes. Links among the six relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes provide new information concerning the function of cultivation effects.

TABLE 3
Correlation Matrix Between Relationship Cultivation Strategies and Relationship Quality Outcomes

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Access	—									
2. Positivity	.82**	—								
3. Openness	.77**	.75**	—							
4. Sharing tasks	.76**	.78**	.76**	—						
5. Networking	.66**	.73**	.68**	.71**	—					
6. Assurances	.84**	.86**	.81**	.84**	.72**	—				
7. Control mutuality	.75**	.74**	.69**	.73**	.62**	.80**	—			
8. Satisfaction	.72**	.75**	.67**	.70**	.59**	.78**	.92**	—		
9. Trust	.75**	.77**	.71**	.73**	.63**	.82**	.93**	.93**	—	
10. Commitment	.71**	.79**	.68**	.69**	.60**	.79**	.85**	.89**	.91**	—

$*p < .05; **p < .01.$

Overall, relationship cultivation strategies such as access, positivity, sharing tasks, and assurances represent the proactive approaches that organizations may employ to cultivate or nurture positive quality relationships with their target publics. In this study, the member public's perception of SFB's efforts to cultivate a relationship through assurances was the primary predictor of all relationship quality outcome indicators. Namely, providing assurances as a relationship cultivation strategy increased members' perceptions of control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment in the relationship. Second, SFB's effort to make the organization-public relationship more enjoyable via courteous communication and interaction with members positively affected control mutuality, satisfaction, and trust. Third, the analysis found that providing communication channels to facilitate public feedback and interaction significantly influences members' evaluation of control mutuality. Fourth, the path analysis indicated that sharing tasks, or SFB's sharing projects and problems of mutual interest with members, positively impacted members' perceptions of control mutuality and satisfaction. Last, the analysis revealed that the relationship cultivation strategies of openness and networking were not significant predictors of any relationship quality outcome indicators.

Theoretical and Managerial Implications

This study examined how a public's evaluation of an organization's relationship cultivation strategies affects perceptions of the relationship quality outcomes. This study found that the cultivation strategies predicted different relationship quality outcomes in a variety of ways. The results suggest that the cultivation strategies represent proactive approaches that an organization can use to nurture relationships with its strategic publics.

The strategy of access was found to have a positive impact on control mutuality. Given the characteristics of control mutuality, which are related to the decision making process and the extent to which a party's opinion is reflected in the final decision, having accessibility to express one's opinion is critical. The access factor includes items that are clear ways to get members of publics to join in the decision making process of the organization, such as the organization's efforts to provide contact information, meet with the public, and answer public inquiries.

TABLE 4
Path Model of Relationship Cultivation Strategies and Relationship
Quality Outcomes

Path	Standardized Coefficient	Standardized Error
Access → Control mutuality	.20***	.06
Access → Satisfaction	.12	.06
Access → Trust	.10	.06
Access → Commitment	.01	.06
Positivity → Control mutuality	.07***	.06
Positivity → Satisfaction	.24*	.07
Positivity → Trust	.14***	.06
Positivity → Commitment	.40	.06
Openness → Control mutuality	.02	.05
Openness → Satisfaction	.04	.06
Openness → Trust	.08	.05
Openness → Commitment	.07	.05
Sharing tasks → Control mutuality	.16**	.06
Sharing tasks → Satisfaction	.13*	.06
Sharing tasks → Trust	.09	.06
Sharing tasks → Commitment	.02	.06
Networking → Control mutuality	.00	.05
Networking → Satisfaction	−.04	.05
Networking → Trust	−.01	.04
Networking → Commitment	−.03	.05
Assurances → Control mutuality	.36***	.08
Assurances → Satisfaction	.49***	.07
Assurances → Trust	.40***	.07
Assurances → Commitment	.42***	.07

Note: ***$p < .001$; **$p < .05$; *$p < .01$.

An organization's use of positivity as a cultivation strategy was determined to be a significant factor predicting control mutuality, satisfaction, and trust. The finding that positivity significantly predicted satisfaction is consistent with studies on interpersonal communication. For instance, Dindia (1989) found that positivity increased relational satisfaction. Courteous and enjoyable communication with members of a public might encourage a public's cooperation in the organization and help the relationship preserve interdependence. The positivity items clearly show the rewards or benefits the organization provides to a public. From a social exchange perspective, a clear display of rewards and benefits to a public instills a positive perception that increases satisfaction because as the rewards and benefits increase, a public feels that the costs incurred by the relationship decrease (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004). These benefits can provide a public with strong incentives to remain in a relationship with the organization.

Sharing tasks was an important factor predicting control mutuality and satisfaction. The concept of sharing tasks is similar to corporate social responsibility. Performing corporate social responsibility activities has frequently appeared as an organizational mandate in public relations.
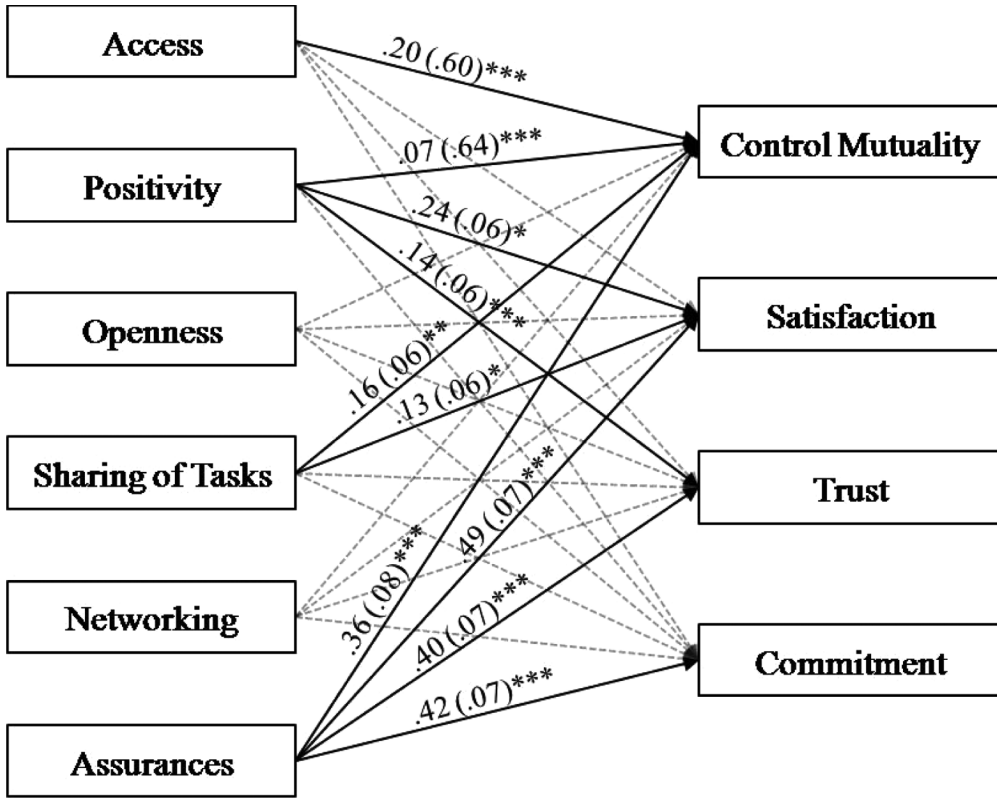
FIGURE 2 Final model linking relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes.

Note: Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant paths. Solid lines indicate significant paths. The numbers outside parentheses indicate standardized coefficient and those in parentheses indicate standardized error. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Such actions as learning what concerns a public and participating in activities such as disaster relief, environmental protection in the community, and resolving regulatory issues are necessary to accomplishing the interdependent goals and objectives an organization and a public have. Corporate social responsibility has been suggested as a proactive strategy to deal with the media's negative coverage during a crisis (Lez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). The causal linkage that demonstrates sharing tasks promotes control mutuality and satisfaction confirms the axiom that actions speak louder than words.

Providing assurances was the key strategy for producing all of the relationship quality outcomes. This finding is consistent with studies on interpersonal relationships that have identified and confirmed that assurances is the most effective strategy for nurturing relationship commitment between two individuals (Canary & Stafford, 1992, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Providing assurances also has been an essential predictor of trust in several studies on interpersonal

relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991). In accordance with a study by Canary and Stafford (1992), the current study revealed that an organization's use of assurances as a cultivation strategy can engender commitment in organization-public relationships.

Assurances items include the organization's efforts to provide personal responses to a public's concerns, to communicate to members of a public how important they consider the public to be, and to allow members of the public opportunities to raise issues and propose solutions during the policy development process. The organization's desire to assure a public that its concerns are attended to implies the organization's commitment to a long-term and stable relationship with the public. Moreover, providing assurances may lead a public to believe that the organization is willing to invest organizational resources in the relationship to ensure its success.

This study's finding about openness is consistent with the interpersonal relationship literature but not consistent with the public relations literature. For example, Stafford and Canary (1991) found that openness was the least predictive of relational features in a couple's relationship. However, scholars in public relations have consistently identified and suggested that openness is an important predictor of relationship quality outcomes. Specifically, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) discovered that openness was a significant predictor of relational satisfaction. Also, it has been proposed that openness is a fundamental indicator to evaluate relationship quality with an organization's target public (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992). Successful relationships with a target public can indeed be maintained through open communication, but the insignificant finding related to openness might be because openness is not a mutually exclusive strategy but rather a dimension of all of the relationship cultivation strategies.

This study revealed that an organization's use of networking does not generate any relationship quality outcomes. Although personal networking opportunities have been found to be the most important means of attracting and retaining members in farm bureau organizations (King & Walker, 1992), the importance of networks was not shown in this study. This study's finding about networking might be due to an insufficient number of measurement items (i.e., only three items) included for tapping the networking strategy the organization used.

The findings indicate that cultivation strategies vary in their relevance to relational outcomes. Therefore, causal linkages between cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes could provide guidelines for how an organization should use each strategy to affect specific relationship quality outcomes. Accordingly, organizations may select one cultivation strategy approach over another depending on the relationship quality outcome desired. For example, an organization can use assurances to cultivate or promote commitment among a strategic public such as customers. Also, an organization might use access to ensure control mutuality with employees.

For more than a decade, the effective management of relationships between an organization and its target publics has become an increasingly important topic for both public relations scholars and practitioners. Relationship quality improves an organization's effectiveness (Dozier, L. A. Grunig, & J. E. Grunig, 1995; Hon, 1997; Huang, 1999; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), helps resolve conflicts between the organization and its publics (Huang, 1997), and affects publics' supportive attitude and behaviors toward the organization (Bruning, 2002; Ki & Hon, 2007b).

The results of this study provide implications for strategic communication designed to build and nurture organization-public relationships. In essence, this study found that the ways in which a public perceived an organization's relationship cultivation strategies directly affected ratings of the relationship quality outcomes of control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment.

Even though there are many ways for organizations to cultivate and sustain quality relationships with their strategic publics, the assurance strategy was the most successful across all of the relationship quality outcomes. And, in most conditions, positivity, or providing a public with benefits and participating in enjoyable and courteous communication with them effectively engenders control mutuality, satisfaction, and trust in the organization-public relationship. For strategic communication managers, providing assurances and looking for ways to demonstrate positivity are crucial for improving relationships with publics.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study is original and compelling in several ways, it has its limitations that nonetheless can help guide future research endeavors. First, although the links and effects among relationship cultivation strategies and perceptions of relationship quality outcomes are neither straightforward nor simple, more attention should be paid to how the effects of relationship cultivation strategies are translated into the public's perceptions of relationship quality. Therefore, future research should investigate conditions such as the time lag between cultivation and perception of relationship quality that may influence the relative superiority of the model tested here.

Second, this study collected data from a single organization. Although random sampling was used, the findings of this study must be cautiously interpreted and applied to other types of organization-public relationships because each organization is surrounded by different environments. To improve the external validity of the proposed linkages, several independent studies should test and confirm the linkages by studying diverse types of organizations including government organizations, for-profit companies, and international institutions and their relationship with a variety of publics.

Last, the somewhat low response rate from this study's survey makes generalizations to the entire member public tenable. Although this research established a basis of causal linkages between relationship cultivation strategies and relationship quality outcomes, higher response rates in future studies would help to ensure that the findings are truly applicable to the public or publics of interest.

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