

# Status of organization–public relationship research from an analysis of published articles, 1985–2004

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## Abstract

This study analyzes trends and patterns of research about organization–public relationships (OPR) through a content analysis of articles published between 1985 and 2004. The current status of OPR studies suggests that we have made progress in OPR research over the past two decades but need to explicate, replicate and extend the existing studies and cumulate the research trend.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, organization–public relationship (OPR) has been one of the most frequently used conceptual frames in public relations scholarship. Scholars have suggested that relational perspectives shift the validation of public relations initiatives from measures of communication output to the measures of behavioral outcomes, thus providing a basis for evaluating public relations effectiveness. Regardless of the growing interest, there has been little consensus regarding definition and measurement of OPR. Starting from this concern, this study examined the current status of OPR studies published in academic periodicals over 2 decades to gain retrospective understanding of the trend and to identify a prospective direction of research.

## 2. Results

Of all the articles reviewed, 12 (31.6%) were published in *Public Relations Review*: 7 in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (18.4%); 5 in *Business Year Book* (13.2%); 3 in the *Journal of Communication Management* (7.9%); 3 in *Communication Research Reports* (7.9%); 2 in the *Journal of Promotion Management* (5.3%); 1, respectively, in *Academy of Management Review*, *Academy of Managerial Communication*, *Communication Quarterly*, *Communication Studies*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and *Southern Communication Journal*. Of the total articles, 24 (63.2%) articles were published between 2000 and 2005 and the remaining 14 (36.8%) were published between 1990 and 1999. Stephen Bruning was the first author for 19 articles (50%), and John Ledingham authored 13

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articles (34.2%). Other authors include Glen B. Broom, Timothy W. Coombs, James E. Grunig, Linda Childers Hon, Yi-Hui Huang, Chun-Ju Hung, Samsup Jo, Yungwook Kim, Rachel Kovacs, Walter K. Lindenmann, Christine Oliver, Lisa A. Petrison and Laurie J. Wilson.

Only 4 out of the reviewed articles provided OPR definitions by author(s), and 12 articles provided an OPR definition using other sources. The majority of studies examined community relationship as the focus of relationship management ( $N = 16$ , 42.1%). Organization–public relationships were also examined as media relations ( $N = 4$ , 11%), marketing ( $N = 2$ , 5.2%) and issue management ( $N = 2$ , 5.2%). Other areas included public affairs, crisis management and reputation management.

Approximately 45% of the studies utilized the excellence theory ( $N = 17$ , 44.7%) as the major theoretical framework. System theory ( $N = 3$ , 7.9%), social exchange ( $N = 2$ , 5.3%) and co-orientation ( $N = 1$ , 2.6%) were also used as a theoretical framework. Researchers predominantly brought interpersonal perspective into OPR studies ( $N = 21$ , 40.4%) followed by marketing ( $N = 11$ , 21.6%), psychology ( $N = 9$ , 17.6%) and intra-organizational approach ( $N = 4$ , 7.8%). Other perspectives included economics and international perspectives.

OPR researchers mostly employed perceptual ( $N = 11$ , 25%) and behavioral ( $N = 11$ , 25%) aspects of organization–public relationships. Others include symbolic ( $N = 6$ , 13.6%), professional ( $N = 6$ , 13.6%) and personal ( $N = 5$ , 11.4%). Outcomes ( $N = 11$ , 39.3%) and antecedents ( $N = 9$ , 32.1%) were the primary construct of OPR research. Consequences ( $N = 2$ , 7.1%) and properties ( $N = 1$ , 3.6%) were also used for the construct. Scholars have identified outcome variables such as satisfaction ( $N = 11$ , 23.9%), commitment ( $N = 6$ , 13%), trust ( $N = 5$ , 10.9%), mutual understanding ( $N = 5$ , 10.9%), control mutuality ( $N = 4$ , 8.7%) and benefit ( $N = 3$ , 6.5%). Likewise, they introduced measurement variables, i.e., trust ( $N = 10$ , 38.5%), openness ( $N = 5$ , 19.2%), credibility ( $N = 3$ , 11.5%), emotion ( $N = 1$ , 3.8%), intimacy ( $N = 2$ , 7.7%), immediacy ( $N = 1$ , 3.8%) and common interests ( $N = 3$ , 11.5%). Others include commitment, control mutuality, exchange, investment, involvement, culture, personal relationships, relational history, reciprocity, quality, issues, time, action or intent, attitude and anthropomorphism.

Eighteen articles suggested at least one relationship maintenance strategy. The maintenance strategies include networking ( $N = 10$ , 28.6%), openness ( $N = 7$ , 20%), sharing of tasks ( $N = 7$ , 20%), assurance ( $N = 5$ , 14.3%), positivity ( $N = 3$ , 8.6%) and access ( $N = 1$ , 2.9%). Sixteen articles employed at least one monitoring strategy. Co-orientation ( $N = 9$ , 50%) was most frequently used, followed by observation ( $N = 6$ , 33.3%), storage/access ( $N = 2$ , 11.1%) and scanning ( $N = 1$ , 5.6%). As an important process for developing a general theory, scholars have built models, i.e., transitional model, three-stage model, professional model, three-step model, process model, OPRA model, etc.

The OPR studies employed methods of surveys ( $N = 22$ , 40.7%), focus groups ( $N = 3$ , 5.6%), in-depth interviews ( $N = 2$ , 3.7%) and experiments ( $N = 2$ , 3.7%). More than 80% used probability sampling ( $N = 21$ , 81%), and the rest used non-probability sampling ( $N = 5$ , 19%). Sample size varies from 19 to 535 depending on the method used for a particular study. About one half ( $N = 9$ , 42.8%) of the articles using samples employed a sample of 101–200, while approximately the other half ( $N = 8$ , 28.2%) used a sample over 200. The studies used diverse statistical analyses such as discriminant analysis ( $N = 6$ , 11.1%), factor analysis ( $N = 5$ , 9.3%), ANOVA or MANOVA ( $N = 3$ , 5.6%), correlation ( $N = 3$ , 5.6%), Chi-square ( $N = 2$ , 3.7%), *T*-test ( $N = 2$ , 3.7%), regression ( $N = 2$ , 3.7%) and S.E.M. ( $N = 1$ , 1.9%).

### 3. Discussion

Scholars need to work together to explicate and distinguish terminology, and to specify the nature and boundaries of OPR studies to build a shared understanding of observed phenomena. Further research is needed to extensively examine the relationship between an organization and its various publics in different contexts; fully delineate the dimensions of organization–public relationships; thoroughly analyze different levels of organization–public relationships; and sensibly test the contingencies of organization–public relationships over time. Particularly, a majority of OPR articles construct organization–public relationships as antecedents or outcomes, but further research is needed to consider the organization–public relationship as a dynamic process. Theorizing OPR through the lens of interpersonal communication crystallizes important indicators but the level of difference needs to be addressed using social psychology, intra-organization, marketing and conflict management perspectives. Some methodological development should be considered to gauge levels of difference.

The complete study is available on request from the author at [ejki@jou.ufl.edu](mailto:ejki@jou.ufl.edu).