

Evolutionary Theory: The Missing Link for Conceptualizing Public Relations

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This article introduces the concept of using Charles Darwin's (1859/1979) evolutionary theory as the metatheory for conceptualizing public relations thought. It examines the state of public relations theory development and explores theories that have been proposed as metatheories for the field, including systems theory, complexity theory, and symmetrical/Excellence theory. It also explores the tenets of evolutionary theory that have relevance for public relations theory, including social intelligence, Machiavellian intelligence, cheater detection, cooperation, reciprocity, and reciprocal altruism. It then makes the case for the role that evolutionary theory could play as a metatheory in the further development of public relations theory.

“For some time, the field of public relations has been in search of a unifying theory” (Leeper, 2001, p. 93). Given the extensive coverage in recent years of Charles Darwin's life, work, and contribution to science through his theory of evolution (Darwin, 1859/1979), it seems only fitting to introduce Darwin into the discussion of public relations theory building. In fact, given the current state of disagreement over theory building among public relations scholars, it seems highly appropriate to consider a widely accepted and widely used metatheory in the life sciences, i.e., evolutionary theory, as a metatheory for conceptualizing public relations thought. The theory contends that the complexity of life forms currently on the planet is the result of the evolution of individual species over vast amounts of time through natural selection, or adaptation, for survival and reproduction (Darwin, 1859/1979; Dennett, 1995).

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Public relations theory development is one of the fastest growing areas of public relations scholarship (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2007). The number of theory development articles published in the two leading public relations research journals, *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, more than doubled from 2001 to 2003 over the 1984-to-2000 time frame (Sallot et al., 2007). The increase might be attributed, in part, to a call by leading public relations scholars for increased theory development (Botan, 1989; J. E. Grunig, 1989), to criticism of existing theory (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Gower, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Hutton, 2001; Murphy, 1991), to the ongoing search for a satisfying theoretical framework (Cheney & Christensen, 2001), or to the lack of a unifying theory (J. E. Grunig, 1989; Leeper, 2001; Murphy, 1996, 2000). Despite the phenomenal growth in attention paid to theory development, the field of public relations still lacks a universally agreed-upon metatheory (Sallot et al., 2007). The lack of a unifying theory for public relations, and the need for one, is the issue that occupies this article.

A *paradigm struggle* is now occurring within public relations between the dominant paradigm, as represented by symmetrical/Excellence theory, and more critical worldviews, including the critical-cultural and the postmodern (Botan, 1993; Botan & Hazleton, 2006b, 1989). That struggle is viewed by some as evidence of public relations' arrival as a more mature discipline (Botan & Hazleton, 2006a; J. E. Grunig, L. A. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006), as evidence of the central role played by symmetrical/Excellence theory (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 2008; J. E. Grunig et al., 2006), as the mechanism by which future theoretical developments will ensue (Botan & Hazleton, 2006b; J. E. Grunig et al., 2006), as a crossroads between the dominant paradigm and a more critical worldview (Gower, 2006), or as a fundamental flaw in the positivist outlook of the dominant paradigm (Curtin & Gaither, 2005).

This struggle, along with the growth of public relations theory development, offers an opportunity to extend the theoretical boundaries of public relations by opening the door to possible pathways for future theory development. One such pathway leads directly from the dominant paradigm (back) to the life sciences and connects the two in ways that could be beneficial to both.

One line of thought that holds great promise for a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary Kuhnian-style (1970) paradigm for public relations is a research tradition from the life sciences that is being integrated slowly into other social and life science disciplines: evolutionary theory. What evolutionary theory requires is a willingness to accept the scientific paradigm. Those willing to consider the scientific model may find this pathway illuminated and illuminating.

Some might argue that evolutionary theory is a well-trodden path, rather than a newly blazed trail, for public relations theory. Cutlip's definition of public relations used the concept of "ecology" (Cutlip, 1952, p. 19) from the life sciences to explain the "interdependence of organizations and others in their environments. Viewed in this perspective, *public relations' essential role is to help organizations adjust and adapt to changes in their environments*" (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994, p. 199). What was lacking in the early use of ecology as an underlying concept for public relations was an acknowledgement of the broader potential of evolutionary theory as a metatheory for the field.

This article introduces the concept of using evolutionary theory as the metatheory for conceptualizing public relations thought. It examines the current state of public relations theory development and explores theories that have been proposed as metatheories, including systems theory, complexity theory, and symmetrical/Excellence theory, to make the case for the role that evolutionary theory could play in the further development of public relations theory.

PUBLIC RELATIONS THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Since its beginnings in the publicity efforts of 19th-century US industrial expansion, public relations has been closely aligned with various fields, including business, political science, psychology, mass communication, and sociology (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Cropp & Pincus, 2001; J. E. Grunig, 1989; K. S. Miller, 2000; Murphy, 1991; Prior-Miller, 1989; Verčič & Grunig, 2000). The practice of public relations has developed from a variety of activities involving individuals and organizations, including rhetoric, oratory, publicity, promotion, advertising, marketing, community relations, and government affairs. In part because of its origins in practice, the theoretical basis of public relations has been called into question, and public relations is accused of lacking theory (J. E. Grunig et al., 1992).

Like other emerging academic fields, such as strategic management (Meyer, 1991), public relations has borrowed or adapted many of its theories from these other disciplines (Coombs, 2001; J. E. Grunig, 1993; Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999). Several historical developments account for why these diverse theories have not been unified as a metatheory for public relations. Theoretical developments in social science have encouraged communication scholars to avoid grand theories and to focus on developing falsifiable middle-range theories (Sallot et al., 2007). The impetus for developing middle-range theories lies in sociology's mid-20th-century desire to avoid general theories that could not account for observations (Merton, 1967).

As an outgrowth of its origins in practice, public relations has focused on applied, or problem-solving, research, rather than basic, or theoretical, research (Botan, 1989). As a result, “In the past, public relations theory has ignored metatheory” (J. E. Grunig, 1989, p. 17).

Of the many theories used in public relations, only a few have claimed the status of a unifying theory, or metatheory, for public relations. Of those few, systems theory, complexity theory, and symmetrical/Excellence theory have received the most attention from scholars.

Systems Theory

Systems theory was introduced into the scientific community in the 1950s (Boulding, 1956; von Bertalanffy, 1951) and had become an established theory by the late 1960s (von Bertalanffy, 1968). However, it was not until the 1970s that it was introduced into the field of communication, where its popularity grew over the next 10 years. Systems theory was used to design speech communication courses (Tucker, 1971), to determine the effectiveness of organizational communication (Hickson III, 1973), to underscore the importance of communication as a cohesive element of organizational systems (Almaney, 1974), and to serve as an organizing theory for organizational communication (J. E. Grunig, 1975). By the mid-1980s, systems theory had gained such a following that it was identified as a foundational theory for public relations (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985; J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1986). Systems theory provided four of the suppositions J. E. Grunig (1989) used in developing symmetrical communication: holism, interdependence, open system, and moving equilibrium (J. E. Grunig, 1989). However, more recently, public relations scholars have criticized systems theory’s goal of organizational survival as “weak” (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 2000, p. 306). Despite its widespread contribution to public relations theory development, systems theory’s lack of status as a metatheory for public relations is evidenced, in part, by the lack of scholarly publications dedicated to it in recent journals (Sallot et al., 2007).

Complexity Theory

Complexity theory is an outgrowth of chaos theory, which was developed from “physics, topology, and systems theory,” and which sees the underlying nature of the universe as made up of “disorder, diversity, instability and non-linearity” (Murphy, 1996, pp. 95–96). Complexity theory is the “study of many individual actors who interact locally in an effort to adapt to their immediate situation” and whose actions have global effects (Murphy, 2000, p. 450). Both theories share a postmodern focus on “participation and relationships” (Stroh, 2007, p. 206), and both have been proposed as

scientific worldviews whose adoption as metatheory would increase the credibility of public relations (McKie, 2001). More recently, complexity theory has been presented as useful in crisis communication (Holtzhausen & Roberts, 2008) and as complementary and equal to symmetrical/Excellence theory as a unifying theory for public relations (Murphy, 2007). However, neither of these theories has shown a significant following as metatheory, based on a recent review of theory development articles published in the leading public relations journals (Sallot et al., 2007).

Symmetrical/Excellence Theory

Symmetrical communication was developed specifically to address this lack of a unifying theory for public relations (J. E. Grunig, 1989; J. E. Grunig et al., 2006). Its purpose was to counteract the then-dominant paradigm, or leading theory, of public relations developed by Bernays, which used “theories of attitudes and persuasion” (J. E. Grunig, 1989, p. 19) “to manipulate publics for the benefit of the organization” (p. 18). In response, J. E. Grunig (1989) developed symmetrical public relations, “which has a different set of presuppositions and calls for a different kind of theory” (p. 19). Symmetrical theory was developed as a presupposition, or metatheory, for public relations.

Presuppositions are the essence of metatheory. . . . They consist of assumptions about the world and values attached to those assumptions. Presuppositions define the problems researchers attempt to solve, the theoretical traditions that are used in their research, and the extent to which the world outside a research community accepts the theories that result from research. (J. E. Grunig, 1989, p. 18)

Symmetrical communication and the Excellence theory that followed it employed scientific methods to advance an overarching set of attitudes and beliefs about how public relations should function and how public relations should be measured, while at the same time warning against overestimating the objectivity, neutrality, and truth of scientific findings (J. E. Grunig et al., 1992).

The symmetrical/Excellence theory eventually became seen by many as the dominant paradigm of public relations, and as such, it drove a significant amount of the progress in public relations theory development and research (Botan & Hazleton, 2006a; J. E. Grunig et al., 2006). For example, of the four authors of the Excellence study, J. E. Grunig and D. M. Dozier were two of the three most cited authors from 1990 to 1995, and L.A. Grunig was one of the three most published authors during that period (Pasadeos et al., 1999). Further, several scholars identified symmetrical/Excellence theory as the

theory most closely approximating a metatheory developed thus far in public relations (Botan & Hazleton, 2006a; Sallot et al., 2007).

Other Theoretical Directions

Some scholars disagree (Leeper, 2001; Sallot et al., 2007). Although acknowledging the role of symmetrical/Excellence theory in public relations theory development, Sallot et al. (2007) argued that “no dominant paradigms per se have emerged” (Sallot et al., 2007, p. 656) in this or the last century. “Of course, many might *still* argue that Excellence Theory is the dominant paradigm in public relations” (Sallot et al., 2007, p. 656). The debate about symmetrical/Excellence theory’s role as the dominant paradigm in public relations theory may reflect its maturation as a theory, or it may reflect the paradigmatic struggle between the dominant paradigm and postmodernism that some argue is indicative of a maturing discipline (Botan & Hazleton, 2006a).

Part of that paradigmatic struggle concerns the commerce between public relations and other disciplines and the stature public relations research is granted outside the field (McKie, 2001). Given its historic willingness to borrow from other fields, one might expect public relations to continue to welcome infusions of research and theory from a variety of other disciplines. However, despite an initial cross-pollination of theories from other disciplines, public relations has been accused of not acknowledging or accepting research from disciplines other than the communication and business fields (McKie, 2001). Perhaps for these reasons, some view the scope of public relations research as limited and see that limitation as the reason few outside the field cite it (Pasadeos et al., 1999).

Scholars who are critical of the dominant public relations paradigm contend that public relations has limited its horizons by following the scientific research model, or what McKie (2001) called “outmoded ideas of science” (p. 80). This criticism reflects the philosophical differences between the critical-cultural and postmodernist positions and that of positivism (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; J. E. Grunig & White, 1992). Some have argued that the scientific method has added to the stature of public relations theory (Botan & Hazleton, 1989, 2006a; J. E. Grunig & White, 1992; Pasadeos et al., 1999). Yet others argue that the scientific method, although valuable, is fundamentally subjective, and scholars should be willing to entertain a new paradigm (Kuhn, 1970), presupposition, or worldview about the purpose and role of public relations (J. E. Grunig et al., 1992). This debate underscores a philosophical difference of opinion about research methods that must be noted in this discussion (Botan, 1993; Botan & Hazleton, 2006a), but the resolution of which lies outside the scope of this article.

The fact that the debate is occurring indicates a healthy interest in public relations theory development. The debate also indicates that, despite the great strides that have been made to date, something is missing and more work remains to be done. Some would argue that the missing element lies in the area of cross-disciplinary research (McKie, 2001; Pasadeos et al., 1999), and this article further develops that argument. What is missing to date is the metatheory or defining theory that would link public relations to the disciplines to which it is connected by pedigree and inheritance. One theory that provides a path between public relations and science, just as it provides a bridge between natural science and the humanities (Wilson, 1998), is evolutionary theory.

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Evolutionary theory is widely recognized in academic disciplines and widely discussed in the popular press, including recent series in both *Nature* (Gee, Howlett, & Campbell, 2009) and *The New York Times* (Safina, 2009; Wade, 2009), but the implications for public relations theory development have not been explored until now. Darwin's (1859/1979) theory attempts to provide an explanation for the number and variety of species that he personally observed and that were then known to exist on the planet. The theory contends that the evolution of individual species over time through natural selection for survival and reproduction has resulted in the life forms now in existence. Prior to Darwin, and as far back as Aristotle, species had been seen as unchanging, distinct entities; since Darwin, that view of the world has changed (Dennett, 1995).

Evolutionary theory has been substantially validated and advanced in recent years by scientific discovery (Byrne & Whiten, 1988, 1997; Dennett, 1995; Trivers, 1971, 1985). "From the perspective of 2009, Darwin's principal ideas are substantially correct" (Wade, 2009). The 1930s and 1940s witnessed a significant breakthrough in the biological sciences in which the discovery of genes was coupled with natural selection to explain heredity (Dennett, 1995). With the later discoveries of DNA and RNA, the transmission mechanisms of heredity and the exact pathways of natural selection are becoming known. Research continues to provide information about the transmission of genetic change that extends the role of evolution, despite the fact that genes were unknown to Darwin (Dennett, 1995).

The growth of this body of knowledge is prompting the adoption of evolutionary theory in a variety of widespread disciplines. Evolutionary theory has emerged in evolutionary biology through Darwin and others (Darwin, 1859/1979; Dennett, 1995; Dobzhansky, 1973; Hamilton, 1964; Trivers,

1971; Wilson, 1975, 1998); in evolutionary psychology (Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Buss, 1991; Cosmides, Tooby, & Barkow, 1992; G. F. Miller, 2000), in evolutionary psychology applied to marketing (Greenwood & Kahle, 2007; Saad, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Saad & Gill, 2000); in evolutionary economics (Nelson & Winter, 1982); in organizational evolution (Aldrich, 1999; Aldrich & Ruef, 2006; Baum & Singh, 1994; Singh, 1990); in political science (Orbell, Morikawa, Hartwig, Hanley, & Allen, 2004; Smirnov, Arrow, Kennett, & Orbell, 2007); in social psychology (Byrne & Whiten, 1997; Kahle, 1984); in evolutionary anthropology; and in human behavioral ecology. Even those disciplines without primary subspecialties in evolutionary theory have been forced to contend with the rapidly emerging discipline and its interdisciplinary impacts. For example, the recent use of evolutionary psychology to explain a finding that violence decreases enjoyment of television dramas for both men and women points to the emergence of evolutionary theory in the field of mass communication (Weaver & Wilson, 2009).

KEY CONCEPTS OF EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

Evolutionary theory has much to offer public relations as a metatheory, particularly as it sheds light on relationships. Relationships have long been recognized as a crucial component of public relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), and key concepts of evolutionary theory have implications for human relationships. These include social intelligence, Machiavellian intelligence, cheater detection, cooperation, reciprocity, and reciprocal altruism. These concepts are directly applicable to the concept of relationships, as well as to the concepts of two-way symmetrical communication and Excellence theory.

Primates are not the only animals that have social relationships, but primates have their own ways of developing and using relationships (Cords, 1997). Nonhuman primates form groups with dominance structures, matrilineal organization, and longstanding membership (Whiten & Byrne, 1997). Nonhuman primates also build relationships (friendships) through reciprocal behaviors such as grooming, and they repair those relationships when they are damaged. They strategically develop alliances and coalitions with others for competitive value; they repair those alliances and coalitions when they are damaged; they engage third-party protectors when threatened; and they recognize the social rank of non-group members (Whiten & Byrne, 1997). These are all behaviors in which human primates engage, as well.

But what is it about primates that allows them (and humans) to enter into relationships in the first place? The foundational capacity that allows primates to engage in social behaviors is social intelligence (Humphrey, 1976, 1988).

Social Intelligence

One of the key concerns of public relations, the development and maintenance of relationships, is tied to one of the key concerns of evolutionary scientists: the size and complexity of the human brain and the fact that it evolved so rapidly in evolutionary time. The idea that has the most promise for explaining this phenomenon is the concept of social intelligence (Humphrey, 1976, 1988). Social intelligence predicates that the extensive size of the human brain resulted from the need to deal with the complexities of social organization and that this large brain predisposes humans to solve social problems (Humphrey, 1976, 1988). The key aspects of complex social structure include living in large groups, recognizing other individuals, communicating with other individuals, remembering interactions with other individuals, learning from other individuals, manipulating other individuals, detecting when one has been manipulated, and engaging in reciprocal beneficial activities (Byrne & Whiten, 1997; Whiten & Byrne, 1997).

Although the topic is controversial, some argue that current brain imaging research supports the concept of social intelligence (Frith, 2007). Brain imaging has found dedicated areas in the human brain that allow people to predict what will happen in social interactions, what Brothers called “the social brain” (Brothers, 1990, cited in Frith, 2007, p. 671). Researchers have found that certain areas of the brain control specific functions that are used in social interactions. These include reading the mental states of others, predicting what others will do based on their mental states, remembering how to behave in various situations, and experiencing empathetically, or mirroring, the emotions others are feeling. It is the ability to experience emotions, desires, beliefs; to communicate verbally and through actions; to recognize and remember individual features to know who is trustworthy and who is not; to know what another is seeing; and to guess at what another is thinking or sensing that defines the social brain (Frith, 2007).

Machiavellian Intelligence and Cheater Detection

At the root of the concept of trustworthiness are the concepts of Machiavellian intelligence and its counterpart, cheater detection. Machiavellian intelligence is the ability to manipulate others, and cheater detection is the ability to detect manipulation or cheating by others (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Orbell et al., 2004). The evolutionary basis for Machiavellian intelligence is

the concept that group living encourages selection of manipulative behavior that favors the individual without disrupting the group (Whiten & Byrne, 1997). Machiavellian intelligence is understood in social psychology in a colloquial sense as manipulating others for one's own benefit, often to the detriment of the others. In that context, it is viewed as a personality trait, wherein one can be considered high Mach or low Mach. In the context of evolutionary biology, Machiavellian intelligence is a more complex social strategy encompassing both helping and deceiving strategies (Byrne & Whiten, 1997).

Machiavellian intelligence involves sending deceptive signals. For example, young people, particularly young women, use tanning to promote the illusion of good health and enhance sexual attraction (sexual selection), despite the well-known and well-publicized adverse health effects of prolonged exposure to ultraviolet rays (Saad, 2006a). If ads targeted to young women are focused on the long-term aging effects of tanning, those appeals can actually have the desired public health effect of reducing sun exposure (Hillhouse & Turrisi, 2002, and Jones & Leary, 1994, cited in Saad, 2006a). In other words, the desire to look young and sexually alluring over an extended time may, in fact, trump the desire to appear young and sexually alluring in the present.

The concept of Machiavellian intelligence is applicable also to strategic public relations campaign planning and relationship management. If PR experts understand that humans will act in accordance with certain principles, i.e., the desire "to seek food and shelter, attract and retain a mate, protect and nurture one's kin, and develop strategic networks of friends and alliances" (Saad, 2006a, pp. 630–631), they will design their strategies accordingly. This would argue that, in most instances, an exchange approach will be the more effective model of relationships and that an asymmetrical approach will be the more effective model of communication.

The message for public relations from evolutionary theory is that persuasion may be a more effective communication model than symmetrical communication because of the evolutionary development of the human brain. Persuasion has been described as "humankind's primary symbolic resource for exerting control over the environment (Miller & Steinberg, 1975)" (G. R. Miller, 1989, pp. 45–46). However, this conclusion should not preclude scholars or practitioners from aspiring to or attempting communal relationships and symmetrical communications. From an evolutionary perspective, Machiavellian intelligence and cheater detection are not the only elements affecting relationships. Three other evolutionary concepts—cooperation, reciprocity, and reciprocal altruism—play a significant role in relationship development, as well, and they validate the more normative aspects of symmetrical/Excellence theory.

Cooperation, Reciprocity, and Reciprocal Altruism

Kin selection, which is the genetic predisposition to aid one's close relatives (Hamilton, 1964), can be understood in the light of evolution more easily, perhaps, than such actions as cooperation, reciprocity, and reciprocal altruism, which provide benefits to unrelated individuals. Cooperation is defined as engaging in mutually beneficial activities; reciprocity is defined as returning behavior in-kind; and reciprocal altruism is defined as enduring loss so that another may benefit (Axelrod, 1984; Fessler & Haley, 2003; Field, 2004; Gigerenzer, 1997; Hamilton, 1964; Hammerstein, 2003; Orbell et al., 2004; Trivers, 1971; Whiten & Byrne, 1997). All three of these concepts have been demonstrated as elements of human and nonhuman primate relationships.

Cooperation is facilitated through social relationships; emotions act as the guardians of those relationships (Hammerstein, 2003). Various emotions and psychological states, including "friendship, dislike, moralistic aggression, gratitude, sympathy, trust, suspicion, trustworthiness, aspects of guilt, and some forms of dishonesty and hypocrisy can be explained as important adaptations to regulate the altruistic system" (Trivers, 1971, p. 35). Cooperation can evolve from tendencies to manipulate when those tendencies are balanced by another evolutionary trait, the ability to detect attempts at manipulation (Orbell et al., 2004). In other words, cooperation may demonstrate Machiavellian intelligence operating in conjunction with cheater detection.

Reciprocity is the trading of favors, such as grooming activities among apes and monkeys, possibly to build relationships for future benefit (Byrne & Whiten, 1997). As such, reciprocity forms one of the foundational concepts of human, as well as nonhuman, primate sociality. Reciprocal altruism, in which there is a small cost to the giver and a great benefit to the taker, requires repeated, positive interaction with nonkin over time (Trivers, 1971). Humans are among the few primates who engage in reciprocal altruism, a form of cooperation (Trivers, 1971).

In public relations, the more common term is *reciprocity*, although the distinction between reciprocity and reciprocal altruism is not as finely drawn as in evolutionary theory. Reciprocity has been shown to be a "universal component of all moral codes" (Gouldner, 1960, cited in Kelly, 2001, p. 284) and the first of Kelly's (2001) four key tenets of stewardship, along with responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing. Reciprocity also is "an integral part of the symmetrical worldview that is an essential part of excellent public relations" (J. E. Grunig et al., 1992, p. 48).

Reciprocity forms a link between evolutionary theory and symmetrical/ Excellence theory by way of game theory. Reciprocity is the foundation of game theory; success in game theory also involves cooperation and the

likelihood of repeated encounters (Axelrod, 1984); and game theory has been used to modify symmetrical/Excellence theory (Murphy, 1991). The supposed dichotomy between asymmetrical and symmetrical communications has been shown, instead, to be a continuum between total self-interest and other-interest, or between persuasive and collaborative behavior (Murphy, 1991). Symmetrical/Excellence theory now is understood to include mixed motives (J. E. Grunig, 2001), which could be interpreted as a combination of self-interest and either reciprocity or reciprocal altruism. "The norm of reciprocity is the essence of what generally is called social responsibility" (J. E. Grunig & White, 1992, p. 47).

Relationships in both human and nonhuman primates incorporate most, if not all, of these characteristics. From an interpersonal perspective, individuals or organizations cultivate relationships through relationship maintenance strategies, the results of which are relationship quality outcomes and which represent two kinds of relationships, exchange and communal (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Strategies include access, the ability of two parties to interact without involving a third; positivity, the effort to make the relationship enjoyable; openness, the sharing of thoughts and feelings; sharing of tasks, joint problem-solving; networking, the creation of coalitions; and assurances, the validation of the legitimacy of the other's concerns. Relationship quality outcomes include trust, a confidence in and willingness to be open to another; satisfaction, a cost-benefit analysis in favor of the relationship; commitment, a willingness to spend time on the relationship; and control mutuality, a sense of shared power in the relationship (control mutuality). Relationships are either exchange, a trade of benefits, or communal, in which no benefit is anticipated (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Several relationship maintenance strategies appear to have been demonstrated in primate research. Nonhuman primates have demonstrated the use of third parties, the creation of alliances and coalitions, networking, and grooming behaviors (Byrne & Whiten, 1997). These activities could be equated at some level to the relationship maintenance strategies of access, positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, networking, and assurances. Relationship quality outcomes in the relationships of nonhuman primates are more difficult to measure because outcomes measure states of mind that are not directly accessible in nonhuman primates. However, exchange relationships, which demonstrate reciprocity, are clearly evident in nonhuman primate behavior. The evidence for communal relationships, which demonstrate reciprocal altruism, however, is limited almost exclusively to humans. In that respect, perhaps, the normative aspect of symmetrical relationships is accurately portrayed. Providing good to another at a cost to oneself, i.e., self-sacrifice, is an attainment solely of the higher primate—humans.

PROBLEMS CRITICS HAVE WITH EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Despite its widespread acceptance and incorporation in a variety of disciplines, evolutionary theory has its shortcomings and its share of detractors. Some take issue with evolutionary theory because of the difficulty of comprehending the estimated 4.5 billion-year-age of the earth and the millions of years necessary to accomplish the current state of mankind. Contributing to the difficulty is the fact that Darwin initially did not apply his theory of natural selection to the human species; he feared such a claim would overshadow his work and lead to its rejection (Dennett, 1995). Although he corrected this problem in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Darwin, 1871/1874), his reluctance has led to ongoing debate regarding the applicability of evolutionary theory to humans (Dennett, 1995). Darwin's (1859/1979) initial work also identifies natural selection as the primary, but not necessarily the exclusive, means of change in species. Despite the initial impression of hedging, the remainder of his work clearly demonstrates his belief that the overwhelming evidence is on the side of evolution (Darwin, 1859/1979).

However, the major arguments against evolution involve the theological and philosophical unwillingness of some to relegate the creation of life to random selection. These arguments can be arranged along a continuum of belief in theological intervention from absolute Creationism (all things having been created by Divine Intervention), through evolution with help from intervention (Divine or otherwise) outside of evolution, to Darwin's idea of something evolving from nothing over time (Dennett, 1995). Critics argue that evolution is reductionist (it oversimplifies scientific process to an absurd level), but supporters argue that reductionism merely insists on scientific method without resorting to Divine Intervention (Dennett, 1995).

Despite the criticisms that have been leveled against evolutionary theory, a significant number of disciplines now have members who have embraced it conceptually, have incorporated its concepts, and are testing its suppositions. Is it not possible that there is a role for evolutionary theory in the development of public relations theory and, particularly, in the development of a metatheory for public relations?

DISCUSSION

The concepts of evolutionary theory have the potential to influence, profoundly, the ways in which public relations is conceived, theorized, and practiced. They even provide evolutionary explanation for the position of critical theorists, who accuse public relations of being unethical and of using persuasion for deception. The abilities of humans to deceive one another, to

recognize when they are being deceived, to reciprocate behavior they have experienced, and to choose not to reciprocate negative behavior but, instead, to turn the other cheek are all capabilities that many believe are hard-wired into the species through evolution (Orbell et al., 2004; Whiten & Byrne, 1997).

Some might argue that the business of public relations is about humans and human relationships, not about relationships among other species. Others would argue that understanding social behavior depends upon an understanding of how the social creatures under consideration (in this case, humans) originated (Trivers, 1985). If evolution applies to humans, as well as other animals, then the advances in evolutionary theory derived from biology and the other life sciences are applicable to humans, too. The tenets of evolutionary theory have potential significance for the practice and discipline of public relations because they explain human behavior.

And although some may argue that public relations deals only with a subset of human behavior, that of groups or organizations and external parties (stakeholders or publics), it seems clear that human behavior at the primate level involves groups and organizations, and that human behavior is what should be of interest to public relations scholars. By understanding how primates function in situations involving these behaviors, researchers may have a better understanding of how humans function. This should provide a better ability to predict behaviors in humans. It is from an understanding of human behavior that people can develop an understanding of group behavior and organizational behavior.

The value of using evolutionary theory to guide the study of public relations is its ability to increase the understanding of human behavior. Although there is much to learn from other sciences, it will be valuable to the field to conduct studies within public relations to show the application of evolutionary theory to public relations problems. For example, complexity theory suggests that entities are not strategic in their collaborations. "Instead, they form alliances with others who are simply most similar to them" (Murphy, 2000, p. 457). Primate studies, however, demonstrate that long-term strategic considerations play a factor in the formation of alliances (Byrne & Whiten, 1997; Harcourt & de Waal, 1992). If public relations scholars accept the applicability of evolutionary theory to public relations, they could follow the developments in evolutionary theory in the life sciences and in evolutionary psychology, and they could design studies to replicate the findings in non-human primates with human subjects, where possible.

Evolutionary theory has the capacity to serve as a metatheory for public relations, an umbrella under which all mid-range public relations theories can shelter. When the source of humanity is acknowledged to be biological, and when the foundation of public relations is acknowledged to be the interaction of humans, then the path to illumination for public relations would

seem to lie through biology. And when the only accepted biological theory is evolution—"Darwin's theory of evolution has become the bedrock of modern biology" (Wade, February 10, 2009)—one could argue that public relations should turn to evolutionary theory.

CONCLUSION

Envision, if you will, a world in which evolutionary theory is accepted as the organizing metatheory for all of the life sciences and humanities. Imagine E. O. Wilson's (1998) world of consilience, in which biology grounds human thinking and understanding, and all disciplines converse in a common language in pursuit of similar goals. What would public relations theory look like in such a world? In reality, it might not look terribly different from the way it looks today. There would be no need to eliminate or destroy the current theories of public relations under the organizing light of evolution. All theories have a place in this new world, observational and data-based, as well as normative and philosophically based. The only caveat is that all of these theories must recognize that all living things are the product of evolution. Today's behaviors have evolved as solutions to yesterday's problems, and understanding, as well as changing, behaviors if that is what is wanted requires understanding the purposes those behaviors serve.

Wilson (1998) has gone so far as to propose evolutionary theory as the bridge between the natural and social sciences that could lead to a unified theory of knowledge. The belief in the *unity of the sciences*, the foundation for the 200-year Enlightenment, has been abandoned in the face of romanticism, postmodernism, and the growth of scientific specialization (Wilson, 1998). For Wilson, the continued search for unification between science, social sciences, and art, which he calls "consilience" (Wilson, 1998, p. 8), is the only appropriate path for future exploration. "The greatest enterprise of the mind has always been and always will be the attempted linkage of the sciences and humanities" (Wilson, 1998, p. 8). For Wilson, objective knowledge grounded in evolutionary biology is that link (Wilson, 1998).

Knowing the framework of human behavior can both limit one's expectations and raise one's hopes for the future. If the significance of public relations lies in relationships (J. E. Grunig et al., 1992), does it not behoove scholars of relationships to be open to and to learn from those disciplines where relationships are studied? What is lacking and still needed in public relations is a Kuhnian paradigm that would provide explanatory and predictive power to public relations research (Kuhn, 1970). What is needed is a willingness to go beyond the confines of the current social sciences viewpoint and look to the life sciences for answers. What is needed is a willingness to

consider that evolutionary theory, with its emphasis on social relationships, may provide what public relations is seeking. Does the field of public relations not owe it to itself to at least consider using evolutionary theory as the framework for a new research agenda that might enlighten the discipline?

That research agenda could include the full range of research techniques, quantitative and qualitative, applied to the examination of research questions derived from evolutionary theory and directed to problems in public relations. These problems could include, among others, the management of relationships between organizations and groups, the relative efficacy of persuasion versus symmetry in approaches to communication, and the disparities between normative theories of behavior and actual human behavior. By using evolutionary theory to guide these explorations, the field of public relations could link its research to that of other fields already engaging in evolution-based research and, thus, expand both its knowledge-base and its relevance. Scholars would benefit from the combined approach through increased collaboration and mutual recognition with scholars in other fields, and public relations research could gain the stature outside the field that it desires and deserves.

As Saad (2007) so eloquently pointed out in the conclusion of *The Evolutionary Bases of Consumption*, the article by the Ukrainian geneticist, Theodosius Dobzhansky—*Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution* (Dobzhansky, 1973)—has implications for other fields. Given that public relations is a human science, and given that humanity is unambiguously “biological,” one might add, *Nothing in public relations makes sense except in the light of evolution*.

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