

Dialogue in Public Relations Roles: A Q Study Among Young Professionals

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This article addresses the need to analyze dialogue and its aspects in functionalist public relations (PR) role research. In addition to exploring PR roles with regard to the relevance of dialogue, it analyzes how dialogue may be linked to individual or organizational contexts. This study builds on the literature on dialogue in PR and role research. It presents a Q study that used a sample of 22 young PR professionals in Germany. This study identified four roles differing with regard to dialogic aspects. Findings suggest that dialogic practice may be linked to contextual variables, such as one's personal life. This study contributes to the exploration of PR roles and illustrates a method that has great potential for PR research.

Keywords: dialogue, public relations, PR roles, Q study, young professionals

Dialogue has become an ubiquitous element in public relations (PR) research (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Although this "idealised, aspirational" (Lane, 2014, p. 63) construct lacks consistent definition, it is often roughly described as a particular type of communication with certain characteristics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). It is assumed to guide practitioners' communication, influence codes, and allow judgments (Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Huang & Yang, 2015; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Dialogue is called for in times of change and crisis, is seen as an important aspect of social media, and is considered a touchstone of communicating with publics (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent,

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2013). Dialogue plays an important role in discussions on communication in general, PR models, norms, instruments (J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012), and spheres of activity, such as internal communication, media relations, or issues management (Adams & McCorkindale, 2013; Huang & Yang, 2015). This concept's omnipresence, however, has led to questions of whether dialogue is recognized and understood by practitioners as a guiding principle or if it is just an "abstract academic idea" (Lane, 2014, p. 58).

According to Craig (2006), becoming an excellent communicator means "growing as a person, [and] appreciating the values that underlie good communication" (p. 44). In functionalist PR research, what is considered good communication between an organization and its publics is often characterized by holding dialogue as a key value, leading norm, and strategic concept that shapes PR practices (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Patterns of PR practices, guiding principles, norms, and individual values have all been addressed by role research. However, although PR roles have been a major topic in research since the 1970s (Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010), no comprehensive discussion of dialogue has yet been undertaken with regard to role typologies (for an exception, see van Ruler, 2004). This article therefore aims to analyze PR roles with reference to the relevance of dialogue and its aspects, as well as with regard to potential linkages to individual and organizational contexts. To classify aspects of dialogue in role typologies, a short overview of basic conceptions of dialogue in functionalist PR is first provided. After a discussion of this concept in the context of PR role research, the findings of a Q study are presented and discussed.

Dialogue in Functionalist PR Research

In 2012, Theunissen and Wan Noordin stated that "in a discipline that has adopted functionalism as an extension of the systems theory . . . and has become process-driven, dialogic theory *per se* appears to have made little inroads in mainstream public relations thinking" (p. 5). Even though functionalist PR has outpaced instrumentalistic one-way thinking, communication is still seen as a tool that contributes to organizational goals. Given this gap between theory and practice, there is an ongoing discourse as to whether dialogue as a "communication process where the content and outcome are not controlled in the strictest managerial sense" (p. 11) is suitable for strategic communication at all. If dialogue is suited to this purpose, there then remains the question of how it may be implemented in practice (for an overview, see Lane, 2014; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012).

As with the concept of dialogue in communications (Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004), a widely accepted understanding of dialogue in PR does not yet exist. However, the word's etymology is helpful in crafting a working definition. In the strictest sense of the word, the Greek term *diálogos* means conversation or discussion; this Greek root stems from *dialégesthai*, which is composed of *diá* ("across, through") and *legein* ("speak" or "to talk about something"; Harper, n.d.). Thus, this term refers to a conversation between two or more persons or entities that is reciprocal in nature and has an open-ended outcome. In PR research, Kent and Taylor (2002) have adopted this idea, providing a conceptual framework of dialogic PR. Drawing on Buber's philosophy and on work by Pearson (1989), Kent and Taylor define *dialogue* as a conversation between highly involved "equals" characterized by five basic features: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Dialogue is seen as "one particular type of

communication" (Lane, 2014, p. 13), which is defined by certain characteristics and often serves as a normative "communicative orientation" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 25).

To better differentiate between more holistic and more pragmatic approaches to dialogue in PR, we propose a distinction between dialogue with a capital "D" and dialogue with a small "d." This division was inspired by the distinction that is often made between capital "D" and small "d" discourse or dialogue in linguistics, organizational research, or organizational communication studies (e.g., Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Bohm, 1985; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Gee, 2011, 2015). Despite the different research traditions and paradigms that inform these fields, this distinction can be beneficial for PR research. *Capital "D" dialogue* is thereby defined as a "normative, aspirational type of dialogue" (Lane, 2014, p. 35) that allows for a holistic approach to the concept. In contrast, *small "d" dialogue* reflects a pragmatic dialogic practice, and is seen as a "viable organizational tool" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 33).

A review of the literature on functionalist PR research results in three categories that help to distinguish between small "d" and capital "D" dialogue:

Forms of Communication

Dialogue is mostly equated with specific forms or a certain "implementation" (Lane, 2014, p. 57) of communication. Macnamara (2014), for example, contrasts dialogue to a "one-way transmission of organization messages" (p. 746). Similarly, Lane's (2014) interviews with PR professionals suggest that dialogic practice appears to be more of a "pragmatic two-way communication" (p. 225) than a capital "D" dialogue.

Qualities

Similar to Kent and Taylor (2002), Bokeno and Gantt (2000) name specific qualities of dialogue, such as the mutuality of an organization's relationship to its environment. Other researchers define dialogue as symmetrical communication, and highlight openness as a defining characteristic (J. E. Grunig, 1993; J. E. Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Outcome

Finally, dialogue is defined by the outcome of communication. This outcome can be open-ended—which is the general goal in the holistic concept—or closed, which means more or less intended—which is more the goal of functionalist PR. Examples of outcomes—and, hence, the potential objectives of dialogic communication—include consensus, propinquity, and understanding (Lane, 2014; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). The intended outcome of dialogue is often implicitly understood "as a perfect state of harmony where the organization's interest is reconciled with that of the public," with the public accepting or even supporting the organization's interests (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 7). The aspect of outcome is therefore crucial in differentiating between small "d" and capital "D" notions. When a researcher such as Lane (2014) refers to the motivation of participants as an important characteristic of dialogue—a "desire to understand one another better" in contrast to the "desire to fulfil . . . professional

and personal expectations" (p. 57)—this distinction is also between open-ended and goal-oriented dialogue.

Some writers in the field of functionalist PR refer to the holistic concept of dialogue with a capital "D" and see it as the norm for PR practices (e.g., Botan, 1997; Pearson, 1989). Applying this concept, dialogue then comprises all three defining categories: forms of communication, qualities, and outcomes. Furthermore, it concentrates on certain characteristics of these aspects. It can be defined as a particular type of communication taking place between highly involved equals and characterized by mutuality, reciprocity, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment, as well as by an open-ended outcome (for further explanation, see Kent & Taylor, 2002; Lane, 2014).

In contrast to this holistic conceptualization, most functionalist scholars adopt a small "d" perspective on dialogue, reflecting a more pragmatic approach. They tend to address only one or two categories or aspects of dialogue focusing on those aspects that express "the pragmatic practitioner perspective" (Lane, 2014, p. 207) and that seek to "gain power" (p. 207) over the other instead of striving for open-ended exchange. Scholars in this area therefore focus on intended outcomes such as harmony or consensus, on specific forms of communication such as two-way communication, or on particular qualities such as symmetry. As such, small "d" definitions tend to ignore the philosophical foundation and holistic nature of the concept of dialogue. Distinguishing between capital "D" and small "d" dialogue could therefore help to systematize the different types of dialogic PR in role research.

Small "d" and Capital "D" Dialogue in PR Role Research

Practitioner roles have been a major topic in PR research for the past three decades (Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Pasadeos et al., 2010). Grounded in Broom and Smith's (1979; Broom, 1982) seminal work on the day-to-day activities of PR practitioners, numerous scholars have researched role typologies. *Roles* are defined as abstractions of day-to-day activities (Broom & Smith, 1979; Dozier & Broom, 2006). As "recurring actions of an individual, appropriately interrelated with the repetitive activities of others" (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 189), roles can be conceptualized as systematic patterns of activities (Dozier, 2008). Systematic patterns in the form of typologies offer insight into job functions (Reagan, Anderson, Sumner, & Hill, 1990), professional identity, and the professionalization of a field (Mellado & Lagos, 2014). Research on PR roles has evolved mainly around two questions: What are the recurring actions of PR practitioners, and how are roles linked with individual backgrounds and organizational contexts?

(1) Research on what the recurring actions of PR practitioners are highlights similarities and differences among practitioners' activities to develop and refine role typologies (Leichty & Springston, 1996; Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000). Although typologies vary in the number and scope of roles identified, most authors concur with Dozier's (1984) basic distinction between manager and technician roles (for an overview, see Beurer-Züllig, Fieseler, & Meckel, 2009; Lauzen, 1994) or combine elements of both of these roles (Vieira & Grantham, 2014).

The distinction between managers and technicians arises, among other factors, from the extent of a practitioner's dialogic practices. Broom and Smith (1979) conceptualized and empirically validated a

communication process facilitator role that acts as a mediator, “go-between” (p. 50) and “information broker” (p. 58). To “facilitate the exchange of information” between an organization and its publics or other involved parties (p. 50), communication process facilitators have to maintain “a continuous two-way flow of information” (p. 50) based on the assumption that “better decisions of mutual interest” (p. 51) will be the result. These assumptions point to a specific form of communication, a particular quality as well as an intended outcome of dialogue that indicate a small “d” concept of dialogue.

In the studies following Broom and Smith (1979), being a *communication facilitator* is consistently named as one of the three manifestations of the manager role (e.g., Dozier & Broom, 1995; Springston & Leichty, 1994). Communication facilitators are widely agreed to be managers “working to ensure smooth dialogue and accurate mutual interpretation” (Kelleher, 2001, p. 304). Communication facilitators are assigned four tasks: to keep management informed about public reactions, to keep management informed about the publics’ opinion, to create points of contact for management to “hear the views of various internal and external publics,” and to monitor issues (Dozier & Broom, 1995, p. 11). Capital “D” dialogue has no explicit part in the theoretical and empirical conception of this role (see also Terry, 2001). With its focus on these specific aspects of dialogue, traditional PR role research is thus better characterized by a small “d” than a capital “D” perspective.

Among the more recent work on PR roles, van Ruler’s (2004) typology introduced a capital “D” perspective on dialogue into role research. Based on strategies derived from communication and PR theory, van Ruler refines role typology and proposes—among other roles—a *facilitator role*: “For the facilitator, public relations is all about mediation” (p. 136). Using a definition of communication “as an interactive two-way process combined with a focus on the connotative side of meaning,” this perspective is the opposite of the denotative side that van Ruler links to consensus-building (p. 139). Facilitators are responsible for enabling the free exchange of meanings, as opposed to being responsible for an outcome that is intended by the PR practitioner or organization. Thus, dialogue is implicitly defined as capital “D.” It comprises the idea of an open-ended outcome, a certain form of communication, and particular qualities such as openness.

(2) Research on how PR roles are linked to individual and organizational factors seeks to explain what variables affect or are affected by a practitioner’s role. Roles have been linked to organizational context, practitioner backgrounds, and internalized role aspirations (Dozier & Broom, 2006; Lauzen, 1992; Moss et al., 2000). Empirical studies suggest a link between one’s role and aspects such as PR models (J. E. Grunig et al., 1991), size of the PR unit (Dozier & Broom, 1995), involvement in strategic decision making (Moss et al., 2000), salary, and job satisfaction (Broom & Dozier, 1986). On the level of individual background, roles have been found to be dependent on sociodemographic characteristics such as gender (Broom, 1982; Creedon, 1991; Toth & L. A. Grunig, 1993; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998) and education (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999), as well as on career-based variables such as professional socialization (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999) or experience (Dozier & Broom, 1995).

Given the links between roles and context, it seems likely that a practitioner’s notion of dialogue could be linked to role perception and enactment. However, to date, little is known about the relationship between a practitioner’s role and her or his stance on the duality of small “d” and capital “D” dialogue.

Based on interviews with PR managers, Lauzen (1990, as cited in Lauzen, 1992) found that practitioners' behavior was guided by their role aspirations, which were formed by values and psychological preferences. Therefore, dialogue as linked to specific roles may be based on an individual's cognition, motivation, and context. Individual variables have to be taken into account when analyzing how PR roles are linked to an understanding of dialogue based on, for example, an awareness of PR models or professional socialization in reciprocal, open, and mutual PR practices.

Aim of the Study

Our study addressed the need to analyze dialogue and its aspects in PR roles more systematically. In analyzing roles with regard to the relevance of dialogue, we posed two research questions:

RQ1: What relevance does dialogue (or its aspects) have in the roles enacted by young PR professionals?

RQ2: What individual or organizational variables are linked to aspects of dialogic role?

The decision to focus on young professionals was made to focus on the technician role, as empirical research to date has mainly linked aspects of dialogue to manager roles. However, changing media and volatile organizational and societal environments have posed huge challenges to PR. We assume that developments such as digitization and public participation may have led to changes in the tasks performed by technicians, making dialogic practices more important in technician roles. As these roles predominate in the earlier stages of one's career (Broom & Smith, 1979; Gregory, 2008), we selected participants who were young professionals with no more than five years of experience. Selecting such a relatively homogeneous sample also helped us to focus on specific differences in dialogic practices and contexts, instead of maximizing role predictors. This is particularly important when working with the small samples required by the Q method.

Method

Using a Q study allows researchers to "identify groups of participants who make sense of a pool of items in comparable ways" (Watts & Stenner, 2005, p. 68) instead of identifying and combining items and analyzing their distribution among a larger population, as in traditional quantitative surveys. Q methodology applies quantitative, statistical methods to in-depth qualitative research (Stephenson, 1935, 1953). By correlating people and their opinions, it can be used to create types or profiles based on similarities and differences of perceptions, attitudes, and practices (Coogan & Herrington, 2011). Capturing the beliefs and attitudes of different persons allows dialogue and its aspects to be integrated into such assessments. The Q methodology consists of three steps:

In the first step, a *Q sample* is developed. This sample should represent the topic to be researched as comprehensively as possible. Our sample consisted of a set of statements on role

activities.² To broadly capture dialogic role aspects, we drew items from studies by Broom and Smith (1979; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier & Broom, 1995) and van Ruler (2004). These statements were translated into German while maintaining key words; after a pretest, the terminology of some of the items was slightly adjusted. Van Ruler's "traffic manager" role was excluded for reasons of distinctness. The final sample consisted of 20 statements. To assess the role of contexts in practitioners' day-to-day activities, we designed a supplemental questionnaire to cover individual variables including gender, education, socialization, years of work experience, and professional position, as well as organizational variables such as type of organization or size of the PR unit.

In the second step, the Q sample and questionnaire were presented to young PR practitioners in Germany. Based on the number of Q items used, a sample of 20 to 25 individuals was recommended (Brown, 1980). Data were therefore collected among a convenience sample of 22 practitioners working in large, medium-sized, and small companies, as well as in PR agencies.³ In the *Q sorting* step, participants were asked to sort the statements on a continuum from +3 (*most important*) to -3 (*least important*), with respondents required to rank statements on a placement sheet (i.e., forced distribution). For our study, we used the recommended optimum shape of a flattened normal distribution of four rows (Brown, 1991). As items presented near the end of the statement deck are more likely to be placed in the middle categories, we shuffled cards across decks and invited respondents to re-evaluate their item placements until they were satisfied. Unlike Likert-type measurements, the Q method has the advantage of not being susceptible to acquiescence bias or midpoint reporting. However, it does take participants longer to complete the task (Serfass & Sherman, 2013).

In the last step, we analyzed the Q data using method-specific statistical analysis procedures to calculate correlations, by-person factor analysis (Brown-Centroid), and rotation to a varimax solution; these analyses were conducted using PQMethod 2.33 (McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Watts & Stenner, 2012). *Q analysis* intercorrelates the overall configurations of all placed Q sorts instead of correlating items and analyzing relationships between items. Thus, the factor analysis produces factors according to similarities between participants' configurations (Brown, 1980). To characterize a given factor, Q analysis then merges "Q sorts of all participants that load significantly on a given factor" into an exploratory pattern (Watts & Stenner, 2005, p. 82).

It is important to stress that unlike quantitative research, Q study explores the correlations between persons and not between items. The Q methodology "neither tests its participants nor imposes a priori meanings" (Coogan & Herrington, 2011, p. 24): Each of the 22 participants had her or his own definition of dialogue and sorted statements according to that particular definition. Whereas such a diversity of definition would render a traditional survey useless, this condition was a prerequisite for use of

² A theoretically structured and ready-made Q sample was used.

³ Participants were selected to achieve variety in terms of the factors of gender (female = 16 participants; male = 6), age (20–24 years = 2; 25–29 years = 11; 30–34 years = 6; 35–39 years = 3), position (management = 8; specialist/consultant = 12; trainee = 2), and type of organization (large company = 5; medium-sized company = 5; small company = 1; agency/consultancy = 10; other (subsidiary of large company) = 1).

the Q method. "Participants are asked to decide what is meaningful and significant *from their perspective* [emphasis added]" (Coogan & Herrington, 2011, p. 24). In the questionnaire designed to assess the role of individual and organizational contexts in practitioners' day-to-day activities, we did not ask participants to explicitly define their understanding of dialogue. Several questions, however, addressed their perspective on dialogue, for instance, as part of their job description, professional identity, or use of PR instruments. These questions helped to build a baseline offering additional insights into interpreting the Q sorting of dialogic items, which were an integral part of the Q sample. Both the pretest and the comments at the end of our questionnaire demonstrated that participants noticed and understood that the dialogic role aspects in the Q set corresponded to different understandings of dialogic PR. In the following section, we touch on these findings in more detail.

Results: Practitioner Roles and Dialogue

Our Q analysis resulted in four factors, indicating four types. All four types met the statistical requirements to be selected and interpreted⁴ (see Table 1). They accounted for 49% of the total variation, which can be interpreted as a good result. The reliability of this result was excellent (.923-.970; Brown, 1980).

Table 1. Factor Correlation, Eigenvalues, and Variance Among Types.

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV	Total
Type I	-				
Type II	.217	-			
Type III	.307	.320	-		
Type IV	.117	.351	.453	-	
Composite reliability	.923	.960	.970	.923	-
Eigenvalue	5.95	2.56	2.45	1.98	-
Variance in %	8	16	14	11	49

Of the 22 participants, three were of Type I, six of Type II, eight of Type III, and three of Type IV. Two participants were hybrid, and thus could not be attributed to a singular type. For each type, the Z-scores show the typical item placement (see Table 2).

RQ1 asked what relevance dialogue (or its aspects) has in roles enacted by young professionals. To answer this, Table 2 presents the item placement and highlights statements that can be used to distinguish types either positively or negatively. Special attention is given to the four items representing dialogue, as taken from Broom and Smith (1979) and van Ruler (2004): The two statements "I initiate and moderate a dialogue between my organization/my client and its environment" (Item 19, facilitator role; van Ruler, 2004) and "I enable mutual exchanges as equals with my organization's/my client's

⁴ Eigenvalues higher than 1.0, at least two Q sorters loading significantly on a factor, at least two participants per factor, and distinguishing statements per factor.

environment" (Item 9, communication facilitator role; Broom & Smith, 1979) closely adhere to the holistic concept of dialogue with a capital "D" in the sense of mutual, reciprocal, and open-ended exchange, with the second item emphasizing a certain quality of dialogue. "I provide information and media for informational exchange" (Item 8) and "I mediate between my organization/my client and the public" (Item 7; both communication facilitator role; Broom & Smith, 1979) refer to three characteristics of dialogue—quality, form, and intended outcome—that instead indicate a small "d" understanding.

Table 2. Q Statements, Z-Scores (Z-SCR), and Factor Arrays (Q-SV) According to Types.

Item	Q statement	Type I (n = 3)		Type II (n = 6)		Type III (n = 8)		Type IV (n = 3)	
		Z-SCR	Q-SV	Z-SCR	Q-SV	Z-SCR	Q-SV	Z-SCR	Q-SV
Distinguishing statements for each type									
7	I mediate between my organization/my client and the public.	1.282*	2	-0.015	0	0.336	0	-0.878	-2
10	I know my trade when it comes to writing press releases or organizing events.	0.051*	0	1.545	3	0.971	2	1.437	3
9	I enable mutual exchanges as equals with my organization's/my client's environment.	-1.526	-3	-0.681	-1	0.358	1	-0.281	0
11	I am good at implementing decisions, e.g., regarding specific activities.	-1.570*	-3	0.901	2	1.096	3	0.881	1
3	I carry responsibility with respect to my organization's/my client's communication planning.	-0.673	-2	1.459*	2	-1.112	-2	-0.363	0
5	I support my organization's management/my client with regard to problem solving.	1.662	3	-0.118	0	1.634	3	-0.960	-2
16	I establish and foster my organization's/my client's relationships with its environment in an optimal way.	1.326	3	-0.744*	-1	0.924	2	0.597	1

8	I provide information and media for informational exchange.	-0.623	-1	-1.381	-3	-0.459	-1	-0.395	0
1	I am always as well informed as possible regarding my organization/my client and its context.	0.945	2	0.859	1	0.283	0	0.963	2
19	I initiate and moderate a dialogue between my organization/my client and its environment.	-0.802	-2	-1.088	-2	0.087	0	0.760	1
13	I keep an eye on my employees' or colleagues' work and can step in if necessary.	-0.094	0	-0.788	-1	-1.754*	-3	-0.797	-1
19	I initiate and moderate a dialogue between my organization/my client and its environment.	-0.802	-2	-1.088	-2	0.087	0	0.760	1
7	I mediate between my organization/my client and the public.	1.282	2	-0.015	0	0.336	0	-0.878	-2
5	I support my organization's management/my client with regard to problem solving.	1.662	3	-0.118	0	1.634	3	-0.960	-2
Consensus statements (statements that do not distinguish between any pair of factors)									
1	I am always as well informed as possible regarding my organization/my client and its context.	0.945	2	0.859	1	0.283	0	0.963	2
17	I ensure a harmonious exchange between my organization/my client and its environment.	-0.516	0	-0.513	0	-0.629	-1	-0.515	-1
20	I am able to communicate and act intuitively and do not have to explain everything rationally.	-1.418	-2	-1.028	-2	-1.130	-2	-0.881	-2

Other (statements that neither distinguish one type nor are consensual)

2	I make strategic decisions regarding my organization's/my client's overall communication.	-0.523	-1	0.590	1	0.347	0	-1.242	-3
4	I am part of my organization's/my client's management team.	0.673	1	0.896	2	-1.424	-2	-1.641	-3
6	Regarding problems, I show my organization/my client the step-by-step way to an answer.	-0.058	0	-0.859	-2	0.443	1	-0.797	-1
12	I master various instruments and channels I have on hand.	0.431	1	1.785	3	1.058	2	1.637	3
14	I am able to plan and manage a budget.	-0.574	-1	-1.286	-3	-1.528	-3	0.038	0
15	I efficiently and effectively spread my organization's/my client's messages.	0.768	1	0.363	1	0.915	1	1.359	2
18	I ensure important stakeholders' strong loyalty toward my organization/my client.	1.240	2	0.103	0	-0.415	-1	1.078	2

* $p < .01$.

Type I: Relationship Creator

In Type I (relationship creator) practitioners' day-to-day activities, it is most important that they support the management team of their organizations and establish and foster relationships with the public; it is least important that they implement decisions made by others, or that they enable mutual exchanges as equals with an organization's environment.

Z-scores show that Type I is defined by four items that significantly distinguish it from other types: Positive indicators for this role are mediating between the organization and the public (Z-score = 1.282, $p < .01$) and knowing one's trade in performing everyday communication (0.051, $p < .01$). Negative indicators are the two least important tasks: implementing decisions (-1.570, $p < .01$) and enabling mutual exchanges as equals (-1.526). These four statements shape the role of a *relationship creator* who is well versed in operative tasks, with a strong focus on mediation. Relationship creators seem to hold an asymmetric perspective on PR: Despite the fact that they are clearly technicians, they score lowest on the technician scale compared with the other three types. Relationship creators strive for management aspects, although these are not or not yet dominant.

These data suggest a direct link between Type I and aspects of dialogue. By believing that mediating between an organization and the public is important, relationship creators indicate that they are focused on the intended outcome of dialogue, such as consensus. However, they neither support dialogue to its full extent nor explicitly address specific qualities of dialogic communication. Understanding PR as a goal-oriented management function, relationship creators seem to exhibit a small "d" understanding of dialogue.

Type II: Planning Technician

Type II (planning technician) practitioners rate technical aspects of PR as most important in their daily work, ranking being technically skilled and mastering communication tools as the most important items. To Type II practitioners, it is also important to be responsible for communication planning, be part of the management team, and be able to implement decisions well. The least important items are providing information and media for informational exchange and planning and managing a budget.

For this role, the statement on carrying responsibility for communication planning is a distinguishing positive indicator (Z -score = 1.459, $p < .01$). Negative indicators are providing information and media for informational exchange (-1.381), establishing and fostering relationships between an organization and its publics (-0.744 , $p < .01$), and supporting management regarding problem solving (-0.118). Considering this profile, Type II can be labeled *planning technician*. This type is clearly characterized by an operative perspective on PR, but it also includes managerial aspects such as a planning-oriented perspective, being part of decision-making processes, and advising management. Planning technicians approach PR from more of a one-way perspective, with a strong emphasis on communication techniques. Aspects of dialogue are clearly irrelevant in this role, as all four items on dialogue were ranked with negative values, indicating that these are less important in day-to-day practice. Thus, neither aspects of small "d" nor capital "D" dialogue are part of this type's profile.

Type III: Service Provider

Type III (service provider) practitioners report supporting their organization's management team in coping with challenges and implementing decisions as being the two most important aspects of their day-to-day activities. Mastering instruments, media, activities, and techniques is also seen as important. Type III practitioners place strong emphasis on operative tasks, whereas managerial aspects like coordinating others or planning a budget score lowest.

Distinguishing positive statements refer to practitioners being informed about their organizations and contexts (Z -score = 0.283), initiating and moderating dialogue between an organization and its environment (0.087), and—as a negative indicator—monitoring and managing the work of employees or colleagues (-1.754 , $p < .01$). With their strong focus on technical skills and tools, combined with problem solving and supporting management, this role can be labeled *service provider*. Practitioners enacting this role report dialogic aspects to be somewhat important in their daily activities. In Q sorting, the statements on ensuring mutual exchange as equals and on mediating between an organization and its publics are

ranked slightly positively. It can be hypothesized that the idea of dialogue implicitly, but not explicitly, guides service providers' work.

Type IV: Dialogic Technician

Type IV (dialogic technician) practitioners see being technically skilled, mastering communication tools, and communicating their organization's messages efficiently and effectively as their most important activities, with items referring to technical skills, mastering instruments, and knowing one's trade being most prominent. The least important items were managerial tasks such as being part of the management team, making strategic decisions, or helping the organization to overcome challenges.

Helping the organization to overcome challenges, specifically, was one of the most salient negative indicators for this role (Z-score = -0.960). Another negative indicator was mediating between an organization and the public (-0.878). A distinguishing positive item was initiating and moderating dialogue (0.760). Due to the strong emphasis on technical skills and tools, in combination with a strong commitment to dialogue, Type IV could be described as *dialogic technician*. In terms of dialogic aspects, this type seems to support a concept of dialogue that is directly linked to the essence of dialogue as presented in the literature review. The data show negative ratings for specific aspects of dialogue such as qualities, forms, or intended outcomes. This was especially true with regard to the statement on mediation, as evidenced by Z-scores. This type tends to strive for a more idealistic understanding of communication and a capital "D" dialogue between an organization and its publics. This assessment is supported by this type's negative ranking of one-sided management items, such as supporting one's management team.

Linkages Between Types and Context

RQ2 asked what individual or organizational variables are linked to aspects of dialogic role. Although our decision to use Q method meant that our sample had to be small, RQ2 can be addressed using an explorative analysis of the data provided through the supplemental questionnaire. As we deliberately selected practitioners with similar academic and vocational backgrounds, all of whom were in the early stages of their careers, our findings are based on a relatively homogeneous group. Two thirds had an academic background in media/communication science. Almost 60% had professional training in PR/organizational communication, 36% in advertising/marketing, 23% in journalism, and 14% in business. However, despite these similarities, there were major differences in variables such as formative influences of work environment and individual position. Depending on these variables, role enactment varied, as follows.

Relationship creators (Type I; female = 0, male = 3; average age = 30.67 years) worked in small or medium-sized companies where PR was organized as a department or part of top management, with PR being served by up to five full-time positions or the equivalent. They had three to four years of work experience in their current positions. They all held degrees in communication or in a related field. When asked what discipline most influenced their professional socialization, they named a variety of disciplines: politics, advertising/marketing, PR/organizational communication. They felt, however, that their PR

practice is primarily inspired by their academic expertise, individual values, and conceptions of what professional PR entails.

Of the planning technicians (Type II; female = 5, male = 1; average age = 28.33 years), half worked in large PR agencies, and the other half in large corporations where PR was mainly organized as a separate division, with relatively minimal staffing (i.e., up to five full-time positions or their equivalent). Their academic background was primarily in communications. As formative influences, they named diverse aspects ranging from scientific training to private values and social norms.

Of the service providers (Type III; female = 7, male = 1; average age = 28.25 years), four were PR consultants in an agency, and the other four worked in medium-sized or large corporations. In all of these corporations, PR was part of larger communication departments, with at least 25 full-time positions. Most of these service providers had worked less than two years in their current positions. They all held degrees in communications or in a related field. Their vocational roots included media/communication science, journalism, or advertising/marketing. They reported their practices as being inspired primarily by both their private and their professional networks.

Of the dialogic technicians (Type IV; female = 2, male = 1; average age = 30.00 years), two worked in large communication consultancies and one worked in a large corporation. In terms of their professional background, all held degrees in communications or in business with communications as a minor. Their vocational roots were consistently in PR/organizational communication and media/communication science. Dialogic technicians reported their personal context—family and friends or role models from private life—as the most important influences on their PR practices.

Looking at job context for these types, participants were asked to name and describe the three tasks they perform most often in their daily work. Although no consistent set of answers was given, reported tasks were closely linked with role profiles. Our findings also suggest specific linkages to specific notions of dialogue: All three relationship creators (Type I) reported relationship management with stakeholders as being one of their most important tasks, fitting this role's functionalist perspective on dialogue. Among both service providers (Type III) and planning technicians (Type II), half of the practitioners named relationship management as one of their top tasks. Service providers were the only group that referred to fostering contacts and responding to inquiries—tasks that are consistent with this role's profile in dialogue and problem solving. In contrast, planning technicians (Type II) referred to the task of advising and consulting, corresponding to this role's emphasis on being part of the decision-making process and advising management. Dialogic technicians (Type IV) were the only group that did not name relationship management among their top-three tasks. Instead, one of the dialogic technicians explicitly listed "engaging in dialogues" in the questionnaire.

All practitioners were also asked to rate a detailed list of PR instruments such as face-to-face or online communication regarding their relevance in day-to-day practices (5-point Likert scale: 1 = *very important*, 4 = *not important at all*, 5 = *not used*). Our findings suggest that dialogic role profiles may be linked to specific instruments: Dialogic technicians (Type IV) and relationship creators (Type I) named interpersonal communication with internal or external publics, as well as online communication as the

most important instruments. Service providers (Type III) had a strong focus on online communication, communicating with external stakeholders such as customers or activists, and coordinating with superiors. Planning technicians (Type II) reported online communication and internal communication, especially addressing executives, as being the most important. These findings are consistent with the dialogic role profiles from the Q study and with the top-three tasks named.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyze what relevance dialogue or its aspects have in the roles that are enacted by young PR professionals, as well as to determine any linkages to individual or organizational variables. Our two key findings were, first, that dialogic aspects vary from role to role, and second, that context variables may be valuable indicators of dialogic practice.

Dialogic Aspects Differ Between Types

The results of our study reflect a duality of small "d" and capital "D" dialogue in functionalist PR: Of the items that operationalize dialogue, participants rated "mediation between an organization/a client and its environment" highest (Z-score = 1.282) and "mutual exchanges as equals" lowest (-1.526). Furthermore, findings indicate that neither the philosophical understanding of the concept of dialogue, particularly represented by the item "initiating and moderating a dialogue," nor the specific characteristics of dialogue are strong determinants of young professionals' roles. However, three of the four roles seem to be characterized by at least one aspect of dialogue that is part of their set of distinguishing statements: Dialogic technicians (Type IV) are characterized by a clear sense of advocacy regarding dialogue, reporting that initiating and moderating dialogue are important parts of their day-to-day activities. Z-scores indicate that a holistic concept of capital "D" dialogue is an integral part of their mindset. For relationships creators (Type I), dialogue is important, but the focus is on mediating between an organization and its publics. By concentrating on goal-oriented outcomes from a communication-management perspective, they implicitly define dialogue with a small "d." In contrast to these two roles, service providers (Type III) have a strong focus on problem solving, and if they are guided by the idea of dialogue at all, it is only on the implicit level. For planning technicians (Type II), dialogic aspects seem entirely irrelevant.

Our study indicates that young practitioners' roles are not strongly dominated by aspects of dialogue in neither a holistic nor a pragmatic way. However, dialogue is one of the main characteristics of the dialogic technician and relationship creator roles. These findings suggest, in line with our hypothesis, that dialogue may no longer be merely a characteristic of the communication (process) facilitator role. Dialogue no longer seems to be exclusively linked to the manager role, but to be a relevant part of technician roles, as well. This may be particularly true for the more pragmatic notion of small "d" dialogue, as capital "D" dialogue demands more distance toward organizational intentions and functionalist role expectations. One explanation for this shift might be that the previous dominance of one-way communication in practitioner roles, like writing for print media, has increasingly become two-way communication, such as when communicating takes place using social media, a task that is often entrusted to young professionals.

Our findings also suggest that a practitioner's perspective on dialogue might be linked to her or his role type. Thus, role typology, as a condensed model of PR conceptions and practices, offers a way to identify how small "d" and capital "D" understandings are implemented in PR.

Individual and Organizational Context as Indicator for Dialogic Practice

In terms of individual and organizational characteristics, our findings suggest that a type's specific notion of dialogue might be systematically linked with the importance attributed to PR tasks and instruments. However, we found the most striking results to be our findings on the personal, vocational, or organizational aspects that most seem to shape practitioners' practices. For service providers, the most important influences seemed to be their private and professional networks. Dialogic technicians primarily named family, friends, and personal role models as important influences. Relationship creators—the only group consisting mainly of male practitioners—stressed the relevance of academic studies and mental models of PR. Finally, planning technicians referenced a wide spectrum of influences, offering a mixed picture.

Although these results are of an exploratory nature, they indicate a possible link between personal values or aspects of one's personal life and dialogic role aspects. They suggest that those participants who named personal values or influences from their personal life as important influences on their work ranked dialogic role aspects—especially those pertaining to the capital "D" concept—slightly more positively than other participants. Individual perspectives and norms could therefore be a promising starting point for further research. It would also be interesting to analyze how and to what extent understandings of dialogue are coined and altered during one's academic socialization and professional life. If these understandings become evident in a type's tasks and use of instruments—as our findings seem to indicate—the question arises as to whether a practitioner chooses instruments according to her or his perspective on dialogue, or if preexisting notions of dialogue can be identified through instrument choice.

Limitations

Although Q methodology has been used in the social sciences for decades, few such studies to date have been conducted from a PR role perspective (e.g., Dozier & Gottesman, 1982, as cited in L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; J. E. Grunig, 1975). Despite this limited body of work, Q methodology can be a valuable instrument, offering a statistical technique that can be used to compare participants' profiles according to similarities and differences in the way they think. However, Q methodology has a limitation in that it can only identify types that exist within a given sample, and cannot describe representations of roles in a set population (Brown, 1991). This means that the four types identified in the present study do not necessarily cover all of the types that may exist in the population of young professionals. Similarly, Q method's requirement of a small sample size limits the options for statistically correlating types and individual or organizational variables.

We suggest that research combine Q method and quantitative surveys to analyze the distribution of types in a population (Danielson, 2009). Such a mixed-method inquiry could test these four roles in a

larger population of practitioners and analyze how different aspects of dialogue are linked with a wider range of PR roles, how dialogue is perceived by different types, and how individual variables such as values influence dialogic practices. Future research could also gather qualitative insights into individual understanding of dialogue, such as through guided interviews, and integrate these aspects into a natural or hybrid Q sample, thus contributing additional items to PR role research.

Conclusion

This study contributes to PR research in three ways. First, it suggests that dialogic practices are not limited to the facilitator role or the manager role alone, especially in the case of young professionals. Second, it offers insight into how young practitioners' roles are linked with small "d" or capital "D" perspectives on dialogue, with our findings suggesting that young professionals have a highly differentiated understanding of dialogue. Third, it models the use of a method that has been rarely applied to PR research to date, but that has great potential for identifying and clustering individuals based on similarities of beliefs, attitudes, and opinions. Given these unique strengths, the Q method could be a valuable tool for communicator or stakeholder analyses.

In proposing a small "d"–"capital D" distinction in PR roles, this study provides theoretical and empirical insights into how the "abstract academic idea" of dialogue (Lane, 2014, p. 58) could be adapted to specific contexts of strategic communication practice. In PR practice, dialogue appears to be a mostly "pragmatic two-way communication" (Lane, 2014, p. 225). However, there are hints to a capital "D" concept that might stem from individual motivations. Further research on dialogue in PR and role research could include individual motivations as independent or even opposing variables, along with organizational goals. Dialogue not only differs in forms, qualities, and outcomes, but also in its relevance within different role types. Systematizing patterns of communication activities on a small "d"–"capital D" continuum could inspire research into other fields of PR research, while enhancing linkages with organizational communication research.

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