Toward a model of organizational legitimacy in public relations theory and practice

Abstract

Despite the widespread acceptance of organizational legitimacy as a central concept in management theory, public relations researchers and practitioners have been slow to consider its importance in establishing and maintaining organization-public relationships. This paper outlines the critical position of organizational legitimacy in public relations by tracking its development in organizational studies and demonstrating its importance in building and maintaining the expectations of stakeholders. A model integrating organizational legitimacy and organizational adjustment and adaptation within open systems is proposed, emphasizing the importance of public relations practice in creating and managing the displays of organizational legitimacy.

Further research in this area is also proposed to test the model's propositions as well as to investigate the effects of other influences on the model, including organizational lifecycle, organizational monitoring resources, types of legitimacy, and communication channels.

Introduction

For public relations managers to be effective in establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders, they must understand and negotiate the many environmental influences on the organization that impact its survival. Institutional theory suggests that organizational survival depends not just on material resources and technical information, but also on the organization's perceived legitimacy (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). Suchman (1995) defines organizational legitimacy as the "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a social system" (p. 574). A conferred status, organizational legitimacy is controlled by those outside the organization and thus relies on the organization maintaining a coalition of supportive stakeholders who have legitimacy-determining power (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Suchman (1995) suggests managers can build a legitimacy reservoir through frequent and intense communication with the organization's social surroundings.

As a critical feature in organizational survival, organizational legitimacy has been explored through a diverse range of theoretical lenses, including institutional theory (Ruef & Scott, 1998; Scott, Ruef, Mendel, & Caronna, 2000), resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and organizational ecology (Aldrich,

1979; Aldrich & Marsden, 1988; Hannan & Freeman, 1989), just to name a few.

While described as an "anchor-point" for understanding organization-environment conditions (Suchman, 1995, p.571) and clearly focused on stakeholder perceptions and the importance of building communication links with stakeholders, organizational legitimacy has not been recognized widely by public relations scholars as a long term goal of building organization-public relationships. Heath (2001) suggests that "legitimacy gaps" (p. 3), will be part of the emerging vocabulary of public relations scholars and practitioners as the discipline focuses more on relationship management. To this end, he provided some focus on organizational legitimacy in his recent text (see Heath, 2001), recognizing the work of Everett (2001) in organizational ecology and Metzler's (2001a) rhetorical perspective on achieving legitimacy through dispute resolution. His lead, however, does not appear to have been followed in the discipline's journals and textbooks. A review of two of the major public relations research journals over the past decade revealed only two articles dealing with organizational legitimacy in public relations (Boyd, 2000; Chay-Nemeth, 2001). The discipline's textbook tradition, an important component in establishing and informing theoretical paradigms, also has limited representation with none of four major public relations textbooks released since 2003 devoting any significant attention to the theory of organizational legitimacy and its implications for public relations practice (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, & Van Leuven, 2004; Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2004; Seitel, 2004; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2003).

In this paper, we agree with Boyd's (2000) suggestion that organizational legitimacy should be a "foundational concept" (p. 342) of public relations and argue for greater recognition of Metzler's claim of the "centrality of organizational

legitimacy" to public relations practice (2001a, p.321). The key concepts of organizational legitimacy and its influence on organizational adjustment and adaptation will be explored in the next section, followed by a model that integrates the key concepts and illustrates the central role of public relations in creating and managing the displays of organizational legitimacy.

Literature review

Organizational legitimacy

Organizational legitimacy is a summative reflection of the relationship between an organization and its environment. Almost four decades ago, Weber (1968) stressed the importance of legitimacy with his belief that legitimate order guided social action. This proposal stemmed from his research, which distinguished between general social norms and guaranteed law. Even earlier, Parsons (1960) argued that organizations that pursue goals in line with social values have a legitimate claim on resources. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) continued this line of thought and argued that organizational legitimation efforts help explain organizational adjustment to the environment.
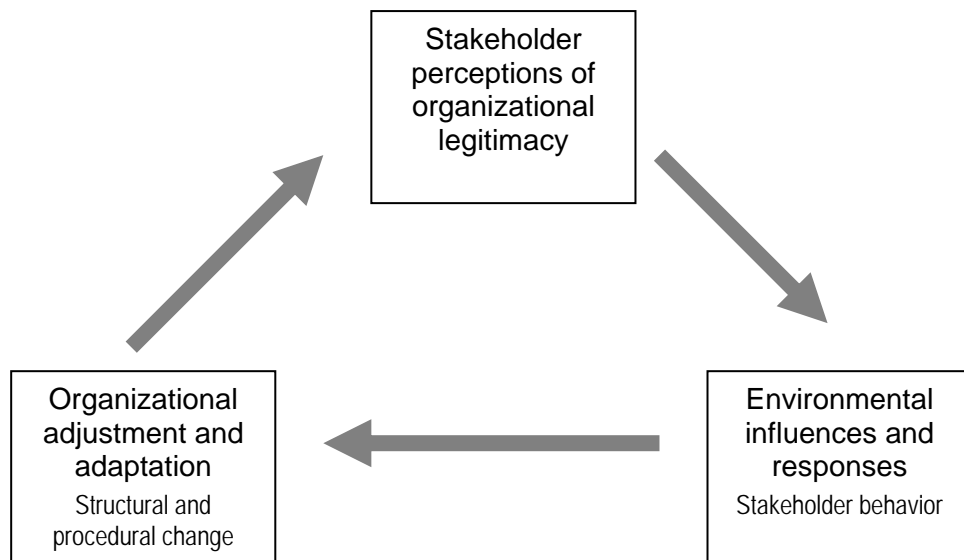
A third wave of interest in legitimacy was based on cognitive belief systems. In this paradigm, stakeholders judge organizations based on their consistency with cultural models or rules for appropriate structures or procedures (Lounsubury & Glynn, 2001; Ruef & Scott, 1998). Meyer and Rowan (1977) were among the first to

"call attention to the ways in which organizations seek legitimacy and support by incorporating structures and procedures that match widely accepted cultural models embodying common beliefs and knowledge systems" (p. 878).

Throughout this evolution of the concept, different theoretical domains and levels of analysis for legitimacy emerged. Legitimacy is grounded in organizational ecology, institutional and resource dependence theories. In organizational ecology, the process of acquiring legitimacy is linked to organizational antecedents such as organizational age, market niche, mission, structure, and size (Baum & Oliver, 1992; Baum & Powell, 1995). While recognizing these different domains, authors have focused more specifically on investigating legitimacy at different levels of analysis from individual organizations to populations of organizations. This paper situates legitimacy at an organizational level, which is equivalent to the emphasis of most public relations literature and practice.

In the organizational literature, researchers have encountered challenges related to both conceptualisation and measurement (Ruef & Scott, 1998). Recognizing these limitations, this paper uses the framework established within organizational theory in order to propose a model for organizational legitimacy in public relations. But first, the paper defines and discusses the relationship of organizational legitimacy to organizations and environments (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theoretical positioning of organizational legitimacy

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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │   Stakeholder   │
                    │  perceptions of │
                    │  organizational │
                    │    legitimacy   │
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│  Organizational  │              │   Environmental  │
│  adjustment and  │  ←────────   │   influences and │
│    adaptation    │              │     responses    │
│  Structural and  │              │Stakeholder behavior│
│ procedural change│              │                  │
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Legitimacy is regarded as an asset that sustains the flow of resources from the environment to the organization (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). Equally, Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) suggest that legitimacy is a resource "which a given focal organization attempts to obtain and which competing organizations seek to deny" (p. 125). According to Scott et al (2000), in order to survive and thrive in their social environments, organizations need more than material resources and technical information. Organizations also require social acceptability and credibility (Scott et al., 2000), and competence (Hearit, 1995). An organization's response to environmental standards for acceptability and legitimacy leads to persistence as Parsons (1960) argues that audiences are most likely to supply resources to organizations that appear desirable or appropriate.

Having received much attention in the management literature, legitimacy is most clearly defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of

norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Suchman's work

builds on the foundational research conducted by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) who

argue that organizational legitimacy reflects a congruence between social system

norms and social values associated with or implied by an organization's activities

(Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Organizations can build legitimacy in three ways:

conform to existing social norms, alter social norms, and identify with social values

(Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) suggest the latter two

strategies are attempted through communication but that the changing of social norms

is very difficult. Changing social norms and values constitute a motivation for

organizational change and source of pressure for organizational legitimation (Dowling

& Pfeffer, 1975, p. 125).

In order for legitimacy to be conferred or withdrawn, environmental actors

must judge an organization's activities against a set of accepted standards. According

to Scott et al (2000) these standards include culture, norms, rules and laws.

Environmental actors can use a range of bases from which to evaluate the actions of

an organization. Their relationship to the organization can be based on exchange as

well as opinion. Suchman (1995) proposes three types of legitimacy: pragmatic,

moral, and cognitive. Scott et al (2000) also built a typology of legitimacy against the

normative, regulative and cognitive components of institutions. Each type of

legitimacy uses a different standard for evaluating legitimacy. For example, moral

legitimacy reflects a positive normative evaluation of the organization and its

activities (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994). In evaluating the organization, the environmental

actor makes judgements not about whether a given activity benefits the actor but

whether it is the right thing to do, whereas regulative legitimacy measures an organization against regulatory standards or agencies.

The various types of legitimacy provide more than just an important connection between organizations and their environments. Organizations can be judged as legitimate or illegitimate using all or a combination of these elements (Ruef and Scott, 1998). Further, it is possible that legitimacy can be conferred at a cognitive level but not achieved at a moral level. Understanding that these assessments are made across a number of events but in relation to the types of legitimacy is critical for building, maintaining or defending legitimacy. According to Ashforth and Gibbs (1990), maintaining legitimacy is often routinized into organizational activity. Although organizations may seek to achieve across all types of legitimacy, not all legitimation attempts meet with equal success (Suchman, 1995). Despite this, legitimacy is a pre-requisite to a connection between an organization and its environment. Legitimacy is required to enhance stability (Suchman, 1995); ensure survival (D'Aunno & Zuckerman, 1987); and secure viability (Barnett, 1997).

Organizational adjustment and environmental influences and responses

Within this context of legitimacy, the ultimate goal for any organization is survival in its environment. According to Scott (2001), the environment of an organization is conceptualized as not only as a supply house of resources and target of outputs but also as a "source of meanings for the members of organizations" (p. 42). Institutional theory suggests that environments are built around three components:

institutional logics, governance systems, and institutional actors (Scott et al., 2000). Institutional logics refers to organizing principles which act as cognitive maps that guide the relationships between an organization and its environment (Scott et al., 2000). Governance systems are particular to industries but regulate and control the actions of organizations (Scott et al., 2000). Together, institutional logics and governance systems guide institutional actors whose roles are discussed later in this paper.

Public relations theory shares this organizing framework and is part of an organization's adaptive system (Cutlip et al., 2000). Adaptation is defined as an organizational response to feedback from the environment (Levinthal, 1994). Meyer, Brooks and Goes (1990) propose that in adaptive systems, organizations "track their environments more or less continuously and adjust to them purposively" (p. 95). In his proposed ecological models of public relations, Everett (2001) highlighted the importance of monitoring and argued that environmental changes are tracked and responded to by the public relations function.

Within systems, there are various levels of adaptation, which are influenced by factors such as organizational resources, environmental predictability, and organizational management styles. Another influence on adaptation relates to how an organization selectively perceives its environment (Scott, 2003). Duncan (1972, as cited in White & Dozier, 1992) argues the environment is "built from the flow of information into the organization" (p. 92). From this conceptualisation, White and Dozier (1992) argue that organizations create their environments based on their selection or ignorance of information from the environment. In fact, Driscoll and

Crombie (2001) suggest that organizations select and respond to the most powerful stakeholder issues.

In public relations theory, an organization is connected to its environment through publics. Cutlip et al (2000) argue that some organizations will actively monitor their social environment and make adjustments based on what is learned. This process reflects the open systems approach to public relations. Metzler (2001b) suggests that monitoring and adaptation occurs cyclically to balance between the organizational- environment relationship. The process of learning is built around feedback, the approach organizations use to identify and judge their adjustments to the environment (Newsom et al., 2004). The type of feedback will determine the type of change, that is procedural or structural change (Cutlip et al., 2000). As such an organization will adjust its structures or processes in response to threats and opportunities in order to improve or influence relationships with publics. It is these structural and procedural changes that lead to a new state of adaptation with the environment (Cutlip et al., 2000; Everett, 2001). Structural changes relate to "what the system is" and procedural changes relate to "what the system does" (Cutlip et al, 2000, p. 234). For example, a structural change could result from a reorganization, merger, or acquisition; and procedural change could be new procedures for dealing with customer complaints, new community relations activities, or new employee training programs.

Organization-public relationships change in response to environmental pressures such as regulatory intervention (Scott et al., 2000); public opinion (Deephouse, 1996); and share price fluctuations (Tegarden, Sarason, & Banbury,

2003). If these do not change, old relationships become dysfunctional because the organization acts and reacts in ways inappropriate to the new circumstances (Cutlip et al., 2000). This entropic state makes impossible the coordination of relationships between organizations and stakeholders, which affects negatively the attainment of mutually beneficial goals (Cutlip et al., 2000). Organizations can also risk access to resources among other environmental effects when adaptive change violates legitimacy claims (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). According to Scott (2003), as much as organizations respond to their environment, they also attempt to influence their environments by lobbying for legislative change, or attempting to shape public opinion. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations regularly monitor and understand the relationship between organizations and their environments and the effects of their actions. Organizations that do not monitor their environments risk missing opportunities and guarding against threats (Strandholm & Kumar, 2003).

Organizations can monitor their environment through boundary-spanning structures, which also "signal commitment to institutionalized beliefs and represent the organization favorably to stakeholders" (Heugens, Van den Bosch, & Van Riel, 2002), p. 39). Heugens et al (2002) put forward a number of propositions that related these structural changes to cognitive legitimacy. Whilst the literature supports the need for environmental monitoring, very rarely is the task ascribed solely to a particular function. However, the public relations literature clearly establishes some responsibility for organizational-environmental relationships in order to realize the mutual interests and goals of organizations and their stakeholders (Cutlip et al., 2000). This relationship focus is recognized as a new direction for public relations (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998).

A model of organizational legitimacy and public relations

Both organizational legitimacy and public relations offer models for exploring relationships between an organization and its environment. These relationships are built around two key elements, stakeholders and communication, the importance of which are first discussed and then integrated to develop a model of organizational legitimacy in the practice of public relations.

Stakeholders are defined as "a person or group of persons who has a vested interest in the activities or performance of an organization" (Viljoen & Dann, 2003, p. 205). Treated as institutional actors in institutional theory, stakeholders affect the success and survival of organizations (Cutlip et al., 2000; Scott et al., 2000). According to Freeman (1994, as cited in Driscoll & Crombie, 2001), stakeholders have three attributes: "power to influence the organization, legitimacy of a relationship, and urgency of a claim" (p. 444). Stakeholders are recognized sources of environmental change pressures on organizations (Cutlip et al., 2000). For example, stakeholders can individually and collectively use their interests to influence change of organizational policies. Burke (1999, as cited in Driscoll & Crombie, 2001) suggests that organizations cannot "ignore community expectations and must design community relations programs so they are seen as the 'neighbor of choice'" (p. 444). In order to maintain functional relationships with stakeholders, organizations must continually adjust their actions in line with stakeholders' needs. One difficulty posed

by this approach is the heterogeneous nature of stakeholders. Organizational stakeholders differ in their priorities and their position is dynamic. Therefore, continually satisfying such stakeholders is challenging (Massey, 2001).

The integration of stakeholders into organizational decision making has been shown to influence procedural and structural adaptive strategies within organizations (Heugens et al., 2002). According to Meyer & Rowan (1991), "organizational adherence to institutionally prescribed structures influenced by stakeholder integration, conveys the message that the organization is acting on collectively valued purposes in a proper and adequate manner" (p. 50). Examples of adaptive strategies influenced by stakeholder integration include: employee share ownership plans (Marens, Wicks, & Huber, 1999), stakeholder representation on boards (Luoma & Goodstein, 1999), boundary spanning organizational structures (Heugens et al., 2002), collaboration (Gray 1989, as cited in Heugens et al, 2002), and associations with certifying institutions (Aldrich, 1999; Zucker, 1986). In their study of how organizations incorporate the natural environment into their decision-making, Buysse and Verbeke (2003) argued that effective stakeholder management helps organizations secure environmental resources.

Singh, Tucker and House (1986) suggest that internal reorganization processes may be related to external processes of legitimation. That is, organizational adaptive strategies result in environmental outcomes, which stakeholders then use to evaluate an organization's conformity to a specific standard or model (Ruef & Scott, 1998), and thereby determine legitimacy. All stakeholders participate in determining legitimacy, "evaluating one or another aspect of the organization with varying degrees

of knowledge and varying degrees of influence on the overall level of legitimacy"
(Ruef and Scott, 1998, p. 880). Stakeholders also act as sources of external or internal
legitimacy, depending on their relationship to the organization. Regardless of their
role, when stakeholders confer legitimacy on organizations, they also perceive such
organizations as more "meaningful, predictable, and trustworthy" (Suchman, 1995,
p.575).

The management of legitimacy rests heavily on communication between
organizations and their environments (Elsbach, 1994; Suchman, 1995).
Communication is used extensively in public relations to manage organizational-
environmental relationships. According to Seitel (2004), communication is a "process
of exchanging information, imparting ideas and making oneself understood by
others…and understanding others in return" (p. 53). Newsom et al (2004) similarly
suggest that public relations opens a dialogue between an organization and its
stakeholders in order to encourage mutual adjustments between an organization and
society.

The purpose of dialogue between an organization and its publics is motivated
by a constant need to legitimize its actions (Giradelli, 2004). Metzler (2001a) suggests
that legitimacy is established, maintained, challenged and defended through such
dialogue. Legitimacy assessments are important signals to the environment. A
credible collective account or rationale explaining what the organization is doing and
why is part of the cultural congruence captured by the term legitimacy (Jepperson,
1991, as cited in Suchman, 1995). According to Meyer and Rowan (1991),
organizations that fail to verify their activities against legitimacy are vulnerable to

claims of negligence and necessity. According to Suchman (1995), organizations cannot extract legitimacy from their environments but rely on external institutions to construct and interpenetrate the organization. In times of crisis, an organization is often constrained and must respond to the agendas of critics rather than depend on standard communication to maintain its legitimacy (Hearit, 1995).

Organizations respond to their environment through the exchange of information. The exchange of information within a system will cause adjustment in both system structures and processes (Cutlip et al, 2000). These adjustments are used to signal legitimation to stakeholders.

Given that both stakeholders and communication are central to both legitimacy and public relations, this paper is based on the following principles:

- Stakeholder perceptions determine legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995)

- Communication of this legitimacy can lead to environmental influences and processes (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995)

- Stakeholder behaviors are enacted in and through environmental influences and processes (Cutlip et al., 2000)

- Communication of such environmental influences and processes can lead to organizational adjustment and adaptation (Cutlip et al., 2000; Everett, 2001)

- Stakeholder behaviors are enacted in and through organizational adjustment and adaptation (H. Aldrich, 1999; Buysse & Verbeke, 2003; Cutlip et al., 2000; Everett, 2001; Heugens et al., 2002; Luoma & Goodstein, 1999)

- Communication of such organizational adjustment and adaptation can lead to organizational legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Suchman, 1995).

In considering these principles, we offer the following propositions.

Organizing proposition: Organizations that value environmental influences and responses in their decision-making and actions, maximize the achievement of organizational legitimacy.

Proposition 1: Organizations that monitor and respond to displays of stakeholder perceptions and behavior, maximise the achievement of legitimacy.
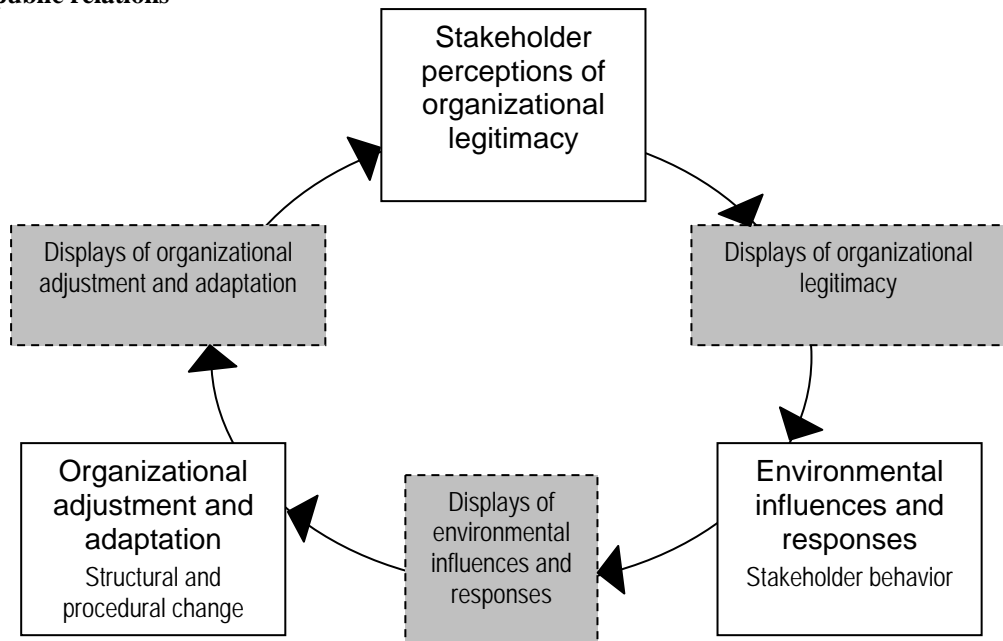
Proposition 2: Organizations that monitor and respond to non-stakeholder displays of environmental influences and processes maximize the achievement of legitimacy.

Proposition 3: Organizational adjustments and adaptation occurring in response to displays of stakeholder and other environmental inputs maximize the achievement of legitimacy.

Proposition 4: Stakeholder perceptions and behavior, and other environmental influences and responses will be influenced by displays of organizational responsiveness to environmental change.

Based on these propositions, we propose the following model of legitimacy (Figure 2). This model connects the recognized and shared elements of legitimacy and public relations. That is, the model illustrates that organizational legitimacy is causally linked to organizational adjustment and adaptation as well as environmental influences and responses within open systems. The connection between these three elements is dialogic communication. Displays of legitimacy and organizational adjustment and adaptation, and displays from the environment are vital in order for each element to exist and be known. Displays are defined as any manifestation or exhibition of perceptions and behavior on the part of organizations and their stakeholders. These displays may be exhibited through either direct or mediated channels (Cutlip et al., 2000). For example, an organization could "display" a new identity program through a wide range of both direct or mediated actions and communication. Likewise, a stakeholder group such as unionized workers may also employ a variety of actions (such as going on strike or engaging a work slowdown) and communication (such as picketing and placing advertisements in selected media).

Figure 2: Proposed model of the impact of organizational legitimacy and open systems public relations

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                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │   Stakeholder   │
                    │  perceptions of │
                    │  organizational │
                    │    legitimacy   │
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     │ Displays of organizational │  │ Displays of organizational │
     │ adjustment and adaptation  │  │        legitimacy          │
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   │  Organizational │  │  Displays of │  │  Environmental  │
   │  adjustment and │  │ environmental│  │  influences and │
   │    adaptation   │  │ influences and│  │    responses    │
   │   Structural and│  │   responses  │  │ Stakeholder behavior │
   │ procedural change│  └──────────────┘  └─────────────────┘
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Conclusions

The theories of public relations and organizational legitimacy both focus on organizational-environmental relationships that are monitored and managed through communication with stakeholders. In this paper, we have offered a model and a series of theoretical propositions to initiate a new stream of research. Our goal has been to extend the investigation of organizational legitimacy in public relations. The next steps are to further explicate the theoretical model and to begin operationalizing and testing the propositions.

Future studies could consider the effects of legitimacy at different points in an organization's lifecycle across different relationships with stakeholders. The

legitimacy literature suggests that there are different types of legitimacy as well as various methods for building, maintaining and defending legitimacy. It is likely that these factors will be used to extend the set of propositions in this paper. For example, researchers could consider how different types of legitimacy affect the responses and performance of the organization.

The proposed model suggests that organizational-environmental relationships exist through a series of displays of legitimacy, and of environmental influences and responses. The way these displays are received by the organization or the environment is as critical as the way the information is enacted and any resultant change communicated. The interaction between direct organizational communication and mass media reporting of organizational change may impact legitimacy assessments. Several studies have already started to investigate this premise (Bartlett, 2004; Deephouse, 1996).

Strandholm and Kumar (2003) established a relationship between organizational resources for environmental monitoring and organization size. Our propositions, as well as legitimacy and public relations theories suggest that organizations are most effective when they openly monitor their environments, it would be important to explore how the allocation of organizational resources for environmental monitoring relates to legitimacy. Such research could also examine the effects of legitimacy at different levels of analysis, that is the organizational and population levels, which would extend recent research in public relations (Bartlett, 2004; Everett, 2001).

In this paper, we presented one way for public relations theorists to explore how organizational legitimacy is established within organizational-stakeholder relationships. However, this is just the beginning. The continuing inquiry requires an elaborated theoretical framework for exploring organizational legitimacy in the context of an expanded role for public relations in both organizations and society.

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