

Hegemonic discourse and self-discipline: Exploring Foucault's concept of bio-power among public relations professionals

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Abstract

This qualitative study of 20 public relations practitioners examines power in public relations through the lens of bio-power – the control and management of human life through regulatory and discursive forces (Foucault, 1978; Macey, 2009; Vogelaar, 2007). Results suggest that biopower exists as (1) hegemonic knowledges of 'brokering information', 'shaping public opinion', 'adding value', and 'pleasing people' and (2) disciplining forces of a workaholic culture and self-censorship. Findings suggest that based on specific hegemonic discourses about public relations, practitioners encounter bio-power and discipline themselves to conform with industry hegemonic discourses.

Keywords

Bio-power, discipline, Foucault, hegemony, power, public relations

The public relations industry can be viewed as a site through which power is exercised, and public relations professionals are players in systems of power dynamics and relations. Holtzhausen (2002), for example, asserted that public relations practitioners are 'nothing but the stooges of powerful corporate managers who use public relations' agency to create forms of discipline and normalization criteria' (2002: 257). Practitioners are used to establish corporate ideologies and perpetuate normalizing rules and practices

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that ‘help already powerful organizational role players sustain their power’ (Holtzhausen, 2002: 257).

Previous public relations scholarship has focused heavily on individual practitioner power (e.g. Reber and Berger, 2006; Dozier and Grunig, 1992), but has focused rarely on discursive and structural forms of power¹ (e.g. Edwards, 2009; Holtzhausen, 2002; O’Neil, 2003; Smudde and Courtright, 2010). In order to better understand power in public relations, we must find alternatives to the notion that power is something merely wielded or possessed by individuals and move toward an understanding of power as a series of relations, events or normalizing practices (e.g. Foucault, 1978, 1980). For decades, scholars have issued such calls. Deetz, for example, argued that influence-based definitions of power in which ‘A’ influences ‘B’ do not fully capture how power exists in organizations and overlook the importance and complicity of those who serve as the recipients of influence (1987: 37).

Public relations serves as communication practice, but it also exists as a site of social, cultural and political discourse and debate (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002: 79). This study aims to better understand public relations as a social and cultural site of power. We attempt to explore the current landscape of power in the public relations industry since Holtzhausen (2002) argued that practitioners serve as ‘stooges’ who perpetuate normalizing practices. Specifically, this study examines power in public relations through the lens of bio-power – the control and management of human life through regulatory (e.g. governmental bodies, social policies) and discursive forces (e.g. media, communication experts, producers of information) (Foucault, 1978; Macey, 2009; Vogelaar, 2007). We use bio-power as a framework to explore multiple discourses among public relations practitioners, which we differentiate between dominant, hegemonic discourse and subaltern, counterhegemonic discourse.

Literature review

Power, discourse and public relations

Traditional and managerial interpretations of power. Traditional interpretations of power often describe it as a capacity (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981) or a tool (McWhorter, 2004). Power, as a capacity or tool, is then utilized to influence behaviors and attitudes. Mintzberg, for example, defined power as the *capacity* to affect the behavior of individuals (1983: 5). Pfeffer explained that power depends on the capacity of individuals ‘to enhance their bases of power and to convince others in the organization of their necessity and value’ (1981: 98). Thus, in order for individuals to best influence others, power is assumed to be a tool that some people have, but others lack (Foucault, 1980; McWhorter, 2004).

Interpreting power as a capacity or tool that individuals utilize to influence others represents a managerialist approach to power in public relations. Managerialism implies that managers discursively manipulate employees to perform workplace practices that benefit managers more than workers (Holtzhausen, 2002: 256). Citing Benjamin (1989) and Thompson (1990), Holtzhausen argued that public relations professionals thus become agents who create societal metanarratives and perpetuate rules, practices and

norms, which build corporate ideologies (2002: 257). In turn, rules and practices that sustain the power of influential organizational members are perpetuated (2002: 257). Acknowledging that organizations hold tremendous power over public relations practices and pressure practitioners to conform and comply (Rakow, 1989; as cited in Berger, 2005: 25) becomes all the more important. These notions of societal metanarratives, rules and norms relate to the concept of hegemony, which is ‘the struggle to establish and maintain a dominant ideology’ (McHale et al., 2007: 376).

Hegemonic discourses and power. Specifically, hegemony represents the power force or the ideology that ‘wins’ in the discursive marketplace (Hoffman and Ford, 2010). Hegemony is the process of commodifying – or creating an idea or practice into a good to be exchanged – meanings through a society to sustain current political and economic systems (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, collections of reified meanings – or dominant discourses or preferred readings (Hall, 1993) – through a society sustain current political and economic systems (Gramsci, 1971). Furthermore, a hegemonic reading privileges ‘common sense’ understandings of a phenomenon (McHale et al., 2007) ‘that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is “natural,” “inevitable,” “taken for granted,”’ about the social order (Hall, 1993: 102).

Cultural studies have been used to liberate subaltern meanings from dominant discourses, as ethnographers look for cultural members’ counterhegemonic acts, where ‘intervention is deemed to be either needed or actively taking place – for example, in the identification of sites of resistance’ (Slack and Whitt, 1992: 573). Negotiated and oppositional codes signify acts where cultural members reclaim their identities and meanings. Specifically, a negotiated discourse ‘operates with exceptions to the rule. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definitions of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated application to ‘local conditions,’ to its own more *corporate* positions’ (Hall, 1993: 102). These meanings are ‘shot through with contradictions’ (Hall, 1993: 102) because of the situated position subaltern members and meanings have to powerful hegemonic discourses and entities. Furthermore, subaltern discourses of global hegemonies can bring change at the local level:

Whereas, on one hand, globalization has fundamentally disrupted the notion of master narratives by drawing attention to the fragmented nature of communication and information flow, it has simultaneously brought society face-to-face with the necessity to theorize about the interplay of power and control through which transnational hegemony shapes policies and influences local and global actions. (Pal and Dutta, 2008: 160)

Hegemonic discourses in public relations. In public relations, hegemony is dynamic because organizational discourses are constantly challenged by contradictions pointed out by activists, policies, and social disparities (Boyd and Waymer, 2011; Roper, 2005: 77). As such, hegemony ‘helps explain the stability of the unequal distribution of wealth and power in apparently democratic societies’ (Hess, 1997: 115). Public relations processes such as client relations and message dissemination preserve the hegemonic – or dominant – meanings organizations create in the exchange relationships they hold with publics.

Non-dominant or subaltern discourses have been studied in public relations scholarship (Boyd and Waymer, 2011). Common among the studies and essays regarding hegemony in public relations (e.g. Boyd and Waymer, 2011; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; McHale et al., 2007; Zhang, 2010) are scholars' purposes to expose the power struggles that contribute to establishing and maintaining dominant ideas about public relations purposes, processes and products. These scholars also highlight subaltern voices/bodies in order to contribute to alternative readings of public relations purposes, such as investigating/employing a hegemonic model of crisis communication (McHale et al., 2007), intellectual coexistence (Zhang, 2010), subaltern public sphere (Dutta-Bergman, 2005), and transnational hegemony (Pal and Dutta, 2008). Furthermore, hegemonic transmission occurs globally because 'public relations becomes a conduit for fostering Western hegemony through the diffusion of Western values and thoughts' (Pal and Dutta, 2008: 177). The consequences of transnational discourse as rooted in public relations are so great that Edwards proposed redefining public relations in a 'heretical' fashion, as a purposive 'flow of information' (2012: 22). Drawing on Appadurai's (1996) concept of global cultural flows, 'PR flow' aggregates individual and organizational trans-actions across various contexts: 'More likely to be visible are the various ways in which PR flow(s) interact with other global cultural flows to change the social, cultural, political and economic context – including that of the organization' (Edwards, 2012: 22).

However, while understanding public relations and PR flows as conduits for hegemony are important, there is limited empirical research discussing the hegemonic discourses – or the 'underlying ideological struggle' (McHale et al., 2007: 374) public relations practitioners perceive may exist in their organizations, industries and communities. Finding out the struggles that practitioners encounter in how they contribute to or resist hegemonic ideals is important to learn the current state of power held within the public relations role. We do this through 'identify[ing] the multiple, overlapping, and conflicting interests that define the organizational voice and heed the interests that can easily go unnoticed or ignored' (Boyd and Waymer, 2011: 488).

As the framework for this study, we relate hegemony to bio-power (Foucault, 1978), as Gramsci's concept of hegemony has been likened to Foucault's (1980) concepts of regimes of truth as constitutive of power/knowledge (Hall, 1997). In Foucault's critical history of modern sexuality (1978), he distinguished sex and sexuality as a site for knowledge production. This analysis serves as a metaphor through which truths can be constituted and accepted by regulatory bodies, which we can compare to the truths of public relations:

to account for the fact that [sex] is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said ... Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior ... how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure ... in short the 'polymorphous techniques of power'. (Foucault, 1978: 11)

Foucault's method of inquiry observes the 'will to knowledge' (1978: 12), which we argue serves as the dominant, hegemonic discourse of public relations. First, however,

we discuss postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault's interpretations of power, as he offers a leading perspective on how organizations and regulatory bodies discipline individuals to act according to dominant ideologies.²

Postmodern interpretations of power. Postmodernism interprets power not as a possession, a tool, or sovereign right, but as relational and discursive (Foucault, 1980) and 'dispersed, indeterminate, heteromorphous, subjectless and productive' (Best and Kellner, 1991: 49). As Foucault explained, 'there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse' (Foucault, 1980: 93). Postmodernism critiques these discursive and often unseen relations of power, showing how individuals are dominated or subjected in society (Holtzhausen, 2012: 13–14) through 'the hegemony of norms, political technologies, and the shaping of the body and soul' (Best and Kellner, 1991: 49).

Foucault, through his genealogical works in particular, offers a lens through which to illustrate and analyze power. On one hand, power operates through discipline and regulation of the human body and the 'power of life'. Foucault explained that, first, power focused on disciplining and optimization of the human body, rendering it docile and integrating it into 'systems of efficient and economic control' (Foucault, 1978: 139). Later, power centered on the body and its biological processes of propagation, birth, mortality and longevity through regulatory controls and economic observation (Foucault, 1978: 139–140).

In contrast, power serves as a productive, creative force, especially in terms of forming new discourse and knowledge: 'it traverses and produces things... it forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression' (Foucault, 1980: 119). McWhorter further explained the creative nature of power in building social forms, institutions, routines, beliefs, theories and self-images (2004: 43). Categories of 'human beings have been invented in institutionalized arrangements of power', such as the 'nerd'. Because these categories are dependent upon certain situations and relations of power, they are always evolving and changing (McWhorter 2004: 43). Viewing power as symbolic, discursive and dynamic helps practitioners to more critically and deeply understand the rhetorical power of public relations (Smudde and Courtright, 2010) and more reflectively create 'mutually beneficial relationships' (Heath et al., 2010: 193). Thus, the dynamic, multiple and sometimes dueling nature of knowledge production is one that we consider important later, for while this is a critical study of practitioners and bio-power, we suggest that public relations embodies hegemonic discourses through which bio-power is achieved.

Bio-power

Developing the concepts of power as a disciplinary and regulatory, yet productive force, Foucault (1978) coined the term bio-power. Bio-power represents the various techniques of managing and controlling human life and 'achieving the subjugation of bodies'

(Foucault, 1978: 140). Through tactics of knowledge-power, biological existence evolved into political existence, and power as the sovereign threat of death evolved into the mastery of exercise over life and body (Foucault, 1978: 142). Bio-power represents how human life and its mechanisms entered the 'realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life' (Foucault, 1978: 143).

Bio-power involves the internalization of these regulatory and political forces. Vogelaar explained, 'Bio-power is effective only when it becomes an integral, vital function that every individual embraces and reactivates of his or her own accord' (2007: 7). Under the process of internalization, individuals, therefore, become disciplined subjects 'capable of self-knowledge and subjects knowable to others' (Hayden, 2001: 34). The shaping of the subject occurs under the supervision and gaze of authority (Foucault 1973). What results, Hayden explained, are docile and productive individuals who have come to serve as their 'own best guards,' through the processes of compartmentalization and internalized surveillance (2001: 35). Foucault conceived bio-power as having an ability to manufacture consent of its 'subjects': 'the law operates more and more as a norm ... A normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life' (1978: 144).

Bio-power also represents the incorporation of the individual into capitalistic ideals and production (Foucault, 1978). Capitalism 'would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes' (Foucault, 1978: 141). Profit and production were enabled by the exercise of bio-power and 'the investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces' (1978: 141). Vogelaar highlighted the implications and consequences of the bio-power on the individual: 'individuality and sexuality are constituted in ways that connect with issues of national policy and capital production ... It could be argued then that the productive (not necessarily healthy) human body is the fundamental asset in a capitalist nation' (2007: 7). This study incorporates these readings of bio-power as the framework through which to study the disciplining of public relations practitioners, as bio-power 'has significance for public relations in that it helps us to understand how organizational practices discipline practitioners and the role practitioners play in disciplining others, while simultaneously creating an understanding of the possibilities of resisting power' (Holtzhausen, 2012: 121).

Bio-power and public relations

Foucault's work has received some attention among public relations scholars (e.g. Holtzhausen, 2012; Øyvind and van Ruler, 2007; Weaver et al., 2004) as 'the use of Foucault's work highlights some of the deeply problematic, contradictory and even questionable aspects of this complex profession by placing meaning production, power effects, truth claims and knowledge systems at the centre of our thinking and investigations' (Motion and Leitch, 2007: 263). However, few empirical studies have applied the concept of bio-power to public relations contexts and theory. Furthermore, public relations scholars have conceived of power differently, utilizing the term to reflect 'political will' (Reber and Berger, 2006: 200) or 'inner power' (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002: 62).

Bio-power, seen as political will or internal fortitude, can be used to change the power of others (Reber and Berger, 2006: 203). Bio-power, as an individual's 'inner power,' relies on self-knowledge and moral consciousness (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002: 69). Holtzhausen and Voto argued, 'Postmodern public relations practitioners have a duty to use their bio-power (Foucault, 1980), their power from within, to assert themselves even if they are not part of the dominant coalition' (2002: 69).

According to public relations scholarship, practitioners utilize bio-power when they resist power relations and serve as organizational activists (Holtzhausen, 2000: 2012; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). Holtzhausen asserted that public relations employees are subjected to controlling practices that can be resisted: 'The individual has a duty to use the power from within, their bio-power, to stand up to destructive power' (2000: 104). Thus, public relations practitioners become 'organizational activists, working from within to resist injustices done to employees and society' (Holtzhausen, 2000: 104). Practitioners can achieve resistance through dissensus, by which they encourage change and make others aware of conflict (Holtzhausen, 2000: 108). Holtzhausen and Voto found that those who are aware of their bio-power were more likely to resist organizational power structures and act as organizational activists (2002: 78).

For purposes of this study, the authors align their definition of bio-power with those similar to Foucault (1978) to conceptualize bio-power as the management and normalization of individual life, which works as regulatory and controlling, but also a creative and productive phenomenon. The authors also conceive of bio-power as that which ties the body to the ideals of production, capitalism and profit (Foucault, 1978).

Purpose and research questions

The purposes of this article are to explore the occurrence of bio-power in public relations and to more fully illustrate public relations as a system of power relations, normalization practices, and regulatory discourses – or bio-power. To first understand what are the dominant ideals that public relations supports, RQ1 asked: *What are the hegemonic discourses of public relations, according to practitioners?* Then, to link hegemony to the type of people that can perform hegemonic discourses and uphold dominant ideals, RQ2 asked: *How do public relations practitioners discipline themselves or their practices to align with industry ideals?*

Method

A qualitative research method was most appropriate for this descriptive study of public relations professionals and bio-power. Qualitative research best explores the experiences of participants and examines how 'meanings are formed through and in culture' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008[1998]: 12). Thick qualitative description of experiences and contexts enables practices, historical situations and particular meanings to be understood (Hodder, 2003: 169). An empirical approach versus a conceptual approach was chosen in order to illustrate theoretical notions of bio-power in public relations: specifically, how systems of discursive power play an integral role in shaping public relations professionals' notions of workplace culture.

Sample

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used for this study to obtain rich details about individuals' experiences, feelings, perceptions and thoughts (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002) about power in their organizations and public relations. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods. A purposive method sought to select practitioners of varying levels of expertise, industry type or geographic background in order to capture a variety of professional experiences. Purposive sampling was also done in order to further explore and better understand rival explanations to themes that arose during the interview process. Later, purposively selected participants recommended other practitioners to participate in the study, which furnished a snowball sample. The researchers ceased the sampling and interviewing process once they began to establish a 'saturation point' or when no new data emerged (Corbin and Strauss, 2008[1998]).

Twenty public relations professionals from the Midwest (nine practitioners), South (six practitioners), and East Coast (five practitioners) regions of the USA were interviewed. Sixteen practitioners are women, and four are men. Their ages span from six practitioners in their 20s, 10 in their 30s, three in their 50s, and one in her 60s. Seventeen practitioners are White, one is Middle Eastern, one is Latina, and one is African American. Finally, 13 participants worked in an agency setting (including working as independent consultants, contracting their services to multiple clients simultaneously), whereas four worked for nonprofit organizations, two worked in corporations and one worked as an independent practitioner.

Procedure

Data was collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol that featured broad, open-ended questions in a predetermined order that ranged in specificity. Initial broad questions seeking to build rapport with the participant included, 'What do you like best about the public relations profession?' More specific open-ended questions examining concepts related to bio-power were then asked, including, 'Tell me about a time when you experienced 'power' in the public relations industry?' and 'How has working in the public relations industry, in a sense, shaped who you are?' Researchers asked follow-up questions and probes such as 'Why?' to elicit further description and dialogue from the participants.

Interviews were conducted in person or via telephone and ranged in length from 45 to 100 minutes. The researchers incorporated member checks and follow-up emails or interviews to request confirmation or further elaboration on specific topics.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, the researchers used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which involved the constant comparison of data and the coding of data for themes and patterns. Interviews were fully transcribed and all words and phrases of each interview transcript were coded for themes using open, axial and systematic codes. To achieve

consistency, the researchers utilized the same interview protocol, co-created and shared coding themes, and shared coded transcripts. The researchers sought to enhance the data analysis process and generate researcher reflexivity by utilizing memos, observer comments and scholar-to-scholar dialogue. Additionally, the researchers reflected upon and critically examined their biases as researchers and former public relations practitioners, and how their opinions, feelings and backgrounds may affect the data collection, data analysis and final write-up processes.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the inconsistencies in the data collection method, the lack of diversity in the types of organizations represented by the practitioners and the practitioners themselves. Specifically, some use of phone interviews may have affected how and why interviewees disclosed information or diminished the interviewer's ability to view interviewee's non-verbal responses. Additionally, most participants came from agency settings, meaning that nonprofit or corporate organizations are under-represented in this study. Furthermore, the majority of the practitioners interviewed were White women in their 20s and 30s. Thus, this study represents consistencies of perspectives among a specific demographic of practitioner. Additionally, the sample of public relations practitioners is not generalizable to the public relations industry at large. However, the dominance of a certain 'type' of practitioner suggests that (a) some industries may subtly permit their practitioners to participate in such research, whereas others may discipline their practitioners to abstain; and (b) the findings in this study are further validated because of the consistency of the identities of the participants.

Results

Hegemonic discourses of public relations

To understand how bio-power functions in public relations, RQ1 sought to learn the dominant discourses that practitioners believe public relations as a function represents and perpetuates. This section solely discusses how practitioners believe those in the field and those external to the field (e.g. clients, personnel in other organizational functions, media, partners) think about the role of public relations. Practitioners perceive the hegemonic discourses of public relations are *to broker information*, *to shape public opinion*, *to add value* and *to please people*. These categories are likely not surprising to any researchers and professionals in the field; however, highlighting them as the dominant ideals that practitioners struggle over is a relatively new approach to understanding how power influences the actions of practitioners and thereby the social and industrial perceptions and expectations of public relations.

To broker information. All participants talked to some degree about the power of public relations to generate and craft information for particular groups. Ron, a professional in his 20s at an agency on the East Coast, called public relations the 'birthplace of information':

Information from a brand is top secret until they release the information and then the information comes out through a press release and there, at that point, PR is the frontrunner. It's where all the other outlets or websites get the information. I think they are in a power position, because they are the ones up on the pedestal, while others are looking and waiting for the information to drop.

Ron situates public relations practitioners as those *with* power, thereby placing them in dominant social positions over those without power. Differently, Marie, a digital media strategist in her 30s for government agencies on the East Coast, proposed that public relations today has shifted from a position of withholding information to sharing information because of the advent and possibilities of new media:

I think right now it's about sharing information ... It used to be that before, having the information was power. Now sharing the information is power. If I put the message out there on Twitter, and it gets re-tweeted several times, that means it's critical. That means it's resonating with people ...

In both these practitioners' view, information is a primary commodity of public relations. How practitioners are expected to deal it out to myriad publics may be the site of struggle in modern public relations.

To shape public opinion. With the role of brokering information comes the power to use that information to influence publics' attitudes and behaviors. Many participants talked about this power in public relations as a responsibility to be respected and managed properly. For example, Renee – a director of communications for a national health non-profit organization, based in a southern state and in her 30s – tells the communication employees she manages that they are the 'keepers of the reputation':

I always tell my staff that we're the keepers of the reputation. That's pretty darn powerful. It's our job to influence the key stakeholders. And the key stakeholders are powerful in their positions, like the Board of Directors. That's a very powerful group of people. And in turn, they can influence their communities and their colleagues. That's pretty huge.

Similarly, Terry – another director of communications in her 30s, managing a large metropolitan region for a national health nonprofit organization – explained that she has a power that the majority of lay people do not have, which is to translate an organization's perspective on a crisis using specific expertise and relationships:

Being able to take a really bad situation and just communicate to the public the effectiveness of the business or the business's main objective in terms of safety, or what their intentions were. Being able to translate that to the public definitely shows power. To be able to shape public opinion with what we're communicating to them. I certainly think that gives PR professionals a lot of power that average person doesn't have.

Participants seemed highly aware that their role in shaping public opinion is persuasive and potentially controlling. These two practitioners' perspectives indicate a hegemonic ideology of public relations to maintain a stable exchange relationship in which

organizations hold power to influence consumer behavior through information (Hess, 1997; Roper, 2005). Important to this discussion is the point Terry makes, that there is an 'unequal distribution of wealth and power' (Hess, 1997: 115) between the shapers of public opinion and the 'average person', the consumers of public information.

To add value. Participants talked about how public relations is expected to 'add value' to the organizational mission. To do this, practitioners must show immediate return on investment (ROI), present the value of public relations, and manage expectations. Terry did not believe that it was difficult to 'sell' public relations to her sponsors and managers: 'I think it's not necessarily hard to sell it. I think people see the value ... They see it, they want it. They want to see their brand out in public, and they want to see it succeed in the press.' However, many participants talked about the barriers to adding value, like managing expectations with clients that it takes time to build relationships, brand recognition, and change perception. For example, as the digital media consultant for a governmental group, Marie presented the idea of her client sponsoring a 'tweet-up' to bring constituents together for networking. However, her client expected some immediate return for the sponsorship:

Yea, the first time I wanted to hold a tweet-up, I got asked how many resumes would we get from the tweet-up. How many employees or customers we might bring in the door because of this tweet-up? Most likely zero. But you have to start small and build. I've seen this woman who started her own personal branding and marketing company. She started a couple of years ago with just eight people at her tweet-up. And then they had to cut it off at 300 people this year at Social Media Day.

To negotiate this struggle of adding the value of public relations with managing client expectations, Brittany – a sole proprietor in her 30s managing clients in the energy, health care, and entertainment industries – works diligently from the beginning of the client relationship to educate clients on the delayed returns public relations may sometimes require:

The word 'disclaimer' is all over my contracts, saying public relations is not a science, it's an art. And my agency will not promise on delivering media relations hits, results because we literally cannot control the weather. You can't control the media, you can't control what they print. I can have a great interview, my client can do absolutely perfect, but the message can be completely missed and lost. That's completely out of my control.

The management of clients seems to be a simultaneous ideal of public relations alongside the management of public opinion and information. This point is unique to understandings of hegemony in public relations because most studies have embarked on how media are used to maintain dominant meanings for organizations' bottom lines. Instead, these practitioners also point out how they must use information and persuasion to maintain some control with clients and donors/sponsors. The politics of client-based work reveal tensions practitioners experience, as they must determine whose needs take priority in a particular timeframe and context (e.g. client A versus client B; client's professional needs versus practitioner's personal needs) and face potentially negative consequences to their professional and personal relationships.

To please people. As a way to accomplish the management of information and people in public relations, many participants expressed the dominant ideal that public relations is the ‘people’ function of an organization. Marie explained that although new technology is interesting and exciting, her core mission still revolves around people: ‘It’s about people. The technology’s fun. But at the end of the day, it’s about people.’

To accomplish public relations goals, participants talked about the need to put forth their ‘people skills’ by being positive and nice. However, participants discussed the politeness in the context of dealing with influential people, as Sharon – a vice president of an agency in the Midwest – noted that she must, ‘Provide information and be respectful of that relationship. Because there are so many people with influence out there. You don’t want to make anybody mad.’ Furthermore, Lila, an agency professional in her 30s on the East Coast, outlined the rules she must follow to accomplish her relationship-building goals with journalists: ‘Nobody likes an asshole. You get more bees with honey than you do with vinegar. Why create antagonism when you don’t have to? You want journalists to want to talk to you ... Be nice, but to a point.’ ‘Pleasing people’ illustrates not only public relations professionals’ consent of a hegemonic ideal, but also their subsequent management and control of their feelings – as emotional labor.

Whereas bio-power exists as forms of hegemonic knowledge and discourse, it also exists as forms of discipline and regulation regarding how public relations practitioners work and communicate.

Practitioners’ self-disciplining

Hegemonic knowledge within the public relations industry can contribute to forms of disciplining or normalizing practices, which ultimately serve as forms of bio-power. To explore this, RQ2 asked: *how do public relations practitioners discipline themselves or their practices to align with organizational ideals?* Public relations professionals cited that they disciplined their behaviors or practices in response to the industry’s demanding work culture by *becoming a ‘workaholic’*. They also learn to *self-censor* their words and actions because of the constraints or norms of communication within the field. Professionals in various fields of public relations voiced disciplining themselves to organizational ideals in similar ways.

Become a ‘workaholic’. Professionals disciplined themselves in regard to how hard and how long they work in response to a demanding 24/7 news cycle and client expectations. As a result, a ‘typical’ work day in public relations fails to exist, and public relations practitioners adapt their work habits and work schedule to fit industry, boss and client expectations. Lila, the agency professional from the East explained how she routinely takes calls from journalists as late as 10 pm on work nights. Regarding the 24/7 nature of the profession, she explained:

With our profession, I don’t think you are ever ‘OFF.’ I think you need to be cognizant of that when you enter this profession ... Because we have a 24/7 news cycle. And as long as we have a 24/7 news cycle, people will be looking for material to fill it ... So, it’s a 24/7 job. And my boss says, ‘We are available all the time.’ He makes himself available and we are also expected to be available.

Similarly, Sharon, the female agency vice president in the Midwest explained how she is always 'on' despite leaving the office:

You work a lot of hours, you spend your weekends and holidays and my personal life definitely takes a hit ... The cycle of news. This not the job where you can go home and turn it off at 5:30 when you walk in the door. You are always on. There is always someone you could be reaching out to.

Participants also explained how intense agency work culture and clients' or boss's demands affected how practitioners regulated and disciplined their behaviors. Client demands often called for practitioners – willingly and unwillingly – to work long hours, weekends, and forfeit personal time. Amy, a female in her 20s at a large agency in the East explained:

We are driven by whatever the client needs. So, if you have to stay here late for hours to finish a report that needs to be in the client's office by morning, that is our main goal. There was one night when I was here until midnight working on a report that had to go across seas with the account lead the following day.

Some participants cited how clients' or boss's demands resulted in professionals' working overtime or forfeiting time off. For example, Lila shared:

Our bosses like to run us on a shoestring budget ... The one practitioner I worked with – her husband had to have his colon removed. It was life or death and she wasn't allowed to take any time off. She was doing conference calls from the hospital where her husband was being operated on. This shouldn't happen. You should be able to take some time off.

Generally, the time consuming and demanding culture of public relations proves difficult to escape, according to participants. Terry, the nonprofit director in the South, summarized the powerful effect the industry holds on practitioners' work habits and personal lives:

It's a really hard juggle for your life, in general. It's very time consuming, it's stressful. It's really the industry as a whole. Coming from an agency when I worked 55, 60 hours a week, even over to the nonprofit where I'm probably at 45 to 50 ... I may not be working the same hours, but the stress and the nature of the business is still the same.

Participants' accommodation of client or needs over their own or working around the clock with limited resources or during family emergencies demonstrates bio-power as the 'controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production ... their reinforcement as well as their availability and their docility' for the development of capitalism and profit (Foucault, 1978: 141). Public relations professionals are available, regulated and often consenting bodies in a system of 'workaholic' norms and discourses.

Self-censor. Participants cited that the public relations industry norms not only regulate how they must work, but also how and what they must communicate. Professionals explained that they discipline their communication habits due to their roles as

organizational spokespeople and the importance of strategic messaging in the industry. Because public relations professionals serve as the 'voice' of an organization or brand, they must often regulate their communication in the form of censorship. Lila explained:

I'm very careful about what I communicate to people ... because I was the spokesperson for the company, I was always on the record. I was available for comment, so I never felt it was safe unless I was in a work situation to talk about what I do.

Similarly, Ron, the agency professional from the East, explained the need to discipline or regulate how you speak stating:

there is no 'go back' or 'erase' button ... You have to be very careful with what you are doing because companies entrust agencies like mine to make a voice for their brand to millions of consumers. If you aren't relaying the right message or you have a slipup, it can taint the brand.

The industry's focus on strategic and targeted messaging has also had a regulating and normalizing effect on practitioner communication. Practitioners explained that they discipline how and what they communicate both in professional and personal contexts. Sharon, the agency vice president in the Midwest said:

There definitely are times when you watch or you are careful about what you say. It has made the PR industry. I think about the best way to message. If I'm in a conflict with somebody, for example, I message that. It doesn't come across as freely I would like.

Terry, a female nonprofit director in the South echoed this sentiment regarding messaging:

when I'm talking to someone about my organization, I'm overly aware that this person could very well know five to six journalists and what I say could definitely be on the record. So I'm just cognizant of representing the organization ... I tend to have this bullshit clause because really I'm always thinking about what I'm going to say before I say it.

Systems of bio-power at play in the public relations industry promote productive bodies to meet ever-increasing organizational and client needs. Powerful workplace norms shape public relations professionals not only into able-bodied workers who discipline their bodies and lifestyles, but also self-censor and control their personal and professional speech.

Discussion

This exploratory qualitative study of 20 public relations practitioners illustrates how public relations is a social and cultural site of power – more specifically, bio-power. Bio-power, simply put, represents the management and control of human life (Foucault, 1978). In the public relations industry, power exists not only as individual influence, but also as hegemonic and subaltern knowledge, norms and practices, which regulate and

discipline how public relations practitioners act, communicate and perceive the nature of their work (Motion and Leitch, 2007). Findings suggest that, based on specific hegemonic discourses about public relations, practitioners experience forms of bio-power and discipline themselves to conform with industry norms and hegemonic ideals. As a result, conflicting discourses – a dominant discourse and a subaltern perspective – perpetuate within and around the discipline that practitioners must negotiate, and the political work from customers determines which discourse is marginalized. This perspective on power relations is relatively uncharted in public relations research, and these findings indicate a new theoretical critique on the discursive practices and structural consequences of public relations as seen through practitioners' perspectives.

Theoretical implications

Power and public relations. This study extended beyond traditional notions of power as finite capacities (Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981) that one person/group bestows or withholds from another person/group (McWhorter, 2004). Traditional perspectives limit the scope of understanding power relations in public relations to a managerial bias that assumes practitioners want to hold managerial-type power and, thus, perpetuate managerial metanarratives (Holtzhausen, 2002). Rather, this study positions practitioners – managers and technicians alike – as active players in the industrial discourse of public relations. Practitioners recognize their cognizant, autonomous participation in the field and their struggle with dominant narratives impressed upon and simultaneously perpetuated by them.

Hegemonic and subaltern discourses in public relations. The purpose of determining hegemonic discourses in public relations was to identify 'underlying ideological struggle[s]' (McHale et al., 2007: 374) practitioners encounter. To this point, we found evidence of hegemonic and counterhegemonic – or subaltern – discourses among participants. One dominant collection of meanings among participants is critical: practitioners talked mostly about being the 'keepers of the reputation,' the translators to the public, and that they have the 'power in shaping people's moods and their ideas and their opinions.' They position themselves as largely obedient to client, media and organizational demands with little consideration of the publics' interpretations of information. They take part as builders of the 'regime of truth' (Foucault, 1980).

A subaltern discourse among practitioners reflected a more sympathetic view of how they discipline themselves to align with the politics of client-based work. First, practitioners believe public relations to be a valuable, relationship-building 'birthplace' of information, but they also recognize the supervision and gaze of authority (Foucault 1973) by clients and those outside the industry who perceive the industry to be lacking in truth and content. Second, practitioners talking about how they monitor their social media posts, continue to work despite familial and health obligations, and posture to acquiesce to client demands exemplify the supervision by authority and their own self-imposed 'internalized surveillance' (Hayden 2001). Thus, these practitioners seemed proud of their positions as knowledge/power brokers and simultaneously resentful of, yet consenting to, the compromises to the self they agree to.

To this point, hegemony implies, however, that certain discourses are made normal and acceptable by both empowered and marginalized parties in order to maintain a stable but inequitable allocation of intellectual and economic wealth among a population (Gramsci, 1971; Hess, 1997). In other words, hegemony maintains a steadiness among a culture despite the *known* power disparities, particularly because practitioners are complacent in their own subservience. These practitioners suggest that public relations as an occupation and intellectual context empowers and suppresses truths, and practitioners are active members in this conflicting hegemony. Stark contrasts between hegemonic discourses among practitioners signify the consequences of hegemony: that some voices are privileged and some are muted, and that these conflicts remain relatively unquestioned (Boyd and Waymer, 2011). These hegemonic narratives serve to discipline practitioners in the industry and exemplify their 'will to knowledge' (Foucault, 1978: 12). This discord may hold detrimental consequences for the industry when alternative discourses are rejected, or dominant discourses are not questioned to preserve the norm of professionalism in the field.

Bio-power and public relations. Results suggest that public relations practitioners do perpetuate normalizing rules and practices that 'help already powerful organizational role players sustain their power' (Holtzhausen, 2002: 257). As Feder explained, 'bio-power is the power of regularization' (2007: 62). Public relations has become regularized in terms of its discursive and professional norms and practitioners' sometimes tacit and willing acceptance of them. Statements such as 'I think you need to be cognizant of that when you enter this profession' and 'it's really the industry as a whole ... the stress and the nature of the business is still the same' hint that practitioners perceive the norms and constraints of the industry to be something they shape themselves to, rather than something that can change or evolve to suit their professional and personal needs. Moreover, bio-power is also evidenced through practitioners' self-disciplining to accept a 24/7 work schedule and self-censorship in order to promote an organization's, client's, or brand's success and survival. This places practitioners as core perpetrators of the act of capitalistic investment of human capital in the economic processes for profit and advancement (e.g. Foucault, 1978).

These compliance and resistance acts of disciplining conjure important revelations about practitioners' understandings of power in public relations. Simply put, uncovering hegemony and bio-power as perceived by practitioners indicates that the field is securely positioned as not only the 'birthplace of information' for external publics, but as a factory outputting fairly homogenized knowledge producers as well. To this point, Foucault (1978) wrote that:

Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. (1978: 142)

Public relations is not often involved in dire, life-threatening circumstances as noted by Foucault; however, without self-disciplining, practitioners face significant threats to their powerful jobs. Essentially, public relations shapes and dictates the dynamics of

practitioners' lives: practitioners adjust their personal lives, their schedules, their social behaviors, and sometimes their health status in order to keep their jobs. Hegemonic discourses suggesting that public relations practitioners work in a demanding field with significant communication constraints in order to add value to others' organizational missions perpetuate the self-disciplining required to succeed.

This study moves us closer toward fully theorizing power and bio-power in public relations. As we have found, bio-power operates as global and industry-wide disciplining norms, stigmas and discourses, not as internal fortitude (Reber and Berger, 2006) or inner power (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002) as previously suggested. Reflecting Vogelaar (2007), public relations practitioners are internalizing and embracing norms mostly on their own accord – thus engaging fully as participants in bio-power. Bio-power in public relations does not simply modify practitioners' bodies, schedules or discourses; it bleeds into and maintains practitioners' personal lives, emotions and notions of self. Forms of bio-power such as accommodation of the 24/7 news cycle, winning over journalists, and self-censorship are unique to the public relations profession and can critically affect how practitioners interact and relate to stakeholder groups. Compliance to and embracing of some norms is important for basic performance and professionalism within the public relations industry, yet resistance to negative forms of discipline and normalization may best promote ethical communication, the physical and emotional health of practitioners, and consideration of all individuals involved in public relations efforts (Holtzhausen, 2000, 2012; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

From the results, we theorize bio-power in public relations as (1) dependent on hegemonic discourses that maintain stable organizational–public relationships via unequal access to power resources; and (2) enacted by concurrent constant work ethics and various forms of self-discipline.

Practical Implications

Bio-power, hegemony, and subaltern discourses are distant concepts from the everyday practice of public relations. However, educators of public relations students and practitioners can benefit from these findings. First, the politics of client work are a vital subject students must learn before entering the field. Specifically, they should be exposed to and become mindful of how they will be expected to self-discipline, and how they will negotiate such private tensions. Second, recognition is an important act of making an alternative meaning to metanarratives in the field, which disrupt the mainstream ideals of public relations (Dutta-Bergman, 2005). Knowing the dominant and subaltern discourses may insert more reality – or objectivity – into intra-organizational and industry-wide conversations.

Future research

Future research must continue to understand and map out the nature of power in the public relations workplace. As power is intricately related to roles research, identifying any distinctions in bio-power factors and consequences between managers and technicians would extend our understanding of advancement into dominant groups that

maintain hegemony and reinforce bio-power. Because of global economic systems and a lack of global workforce policies, public relations perpetuates relationships that discipline employees without censure from stakeholders (Dutta and Pal, 2011). Transnational hegemony, in some cases, relies on bio-power to exploit workers' emotional and physical labor and uses communication as the means to obtain global stakeholders' consent. Thus, the ramifications of studying bio-power in global public relations are relevant to multinational organizations.

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Notes

1. We define discursive power as the processes and products of creating representations and socially mediated norms (through texts and organizational policies). We suggest that structural power means the social systems that contribute to the distribution of power among social groups (e.g. policymakers and consumers).
2. Foucault has been labeled as postmodern and poststructuralist, although he believed his work to be part of a 'critical history of modernity' paradigm (Macey, 1993). Public relations scholars have previously categorized Foucault as postmodern (Best and Kellner, 1991; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002). We do, as well, because public relations scholarship has so little work in the area of critical examinations of power and because his work indeed represents oppositional critiques of modern society and institutions.

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