

The Scientific Method in Public Relations: A Dialectic Approach

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Abstract: Based on the assertion that public relations is an applied social science, this article will attempt, by means of hypothetical and deductive methodology, to demonstrate the importance of the scientific method in public relations. After identifying the social reality which is the object of study of public relations, the author highlights the need to deduce how the scientist can comprehend this reality, or in other words, the channels that should be used in attaining this understanding. The method itself enables a better understanding of the results of scientific research as well as allowing a clearer understanding of the very process of research. In this way, the dialectic method is the most appropriate for public relations scientists.

Keywords: Public relations theory, social science research, methodology of social sciences; dialectic method.

INTRODUCTION

It is useful to classify sciences as pure and applied. Pure sciences ascertain how things work. Applied sciences aim to use knowledge in a practical way. Chemistry is a pure science, whereas chemical engineering is an applied science. Public relations is an example of an applied social science (Grunig & Hunt 1984) [1]. The differences between pure and applied sciences affect the way of conducting scientific research.

In other words, the concept of public relations is always an object of knowledge built by the observer who is unable to relate to the empirical complexity of the activity. Following this train of thought, we can uphold that: 1) public relations is the discipline that is concerned with the process of communication through which relations of mutual adaptation between an organization and its publics in its environment are established and managed, and 2) the theory of public relations is a theory that describes the processes of communication through which relations of mutual adaptation between different parties are established and managed.

Once this has been established, there is an inevitable relationship between a determined objective and the method used; in fact, we could go so far as to say that the concept that has been adopted from a particular science conditions the channels of scientific knowledge. Reynolds (1973) [2] stated, in the same way, that a "clear distinction between method and theory is not possible, as all kinds of analyses are subject to theoretic postulations be they explicit or otherwise... consequently, research is conditioned by theory. Using a method is in reality the application and not the origin of the theory" (p. 63).

This impossibility of clearly differentiating theory from method prompts us to introduce the notion of *technique*. According to Kaplan (1998) [3], methods are logical or philosophical principles that are sufficiently specific to be

related to science with regards to distinguishing other efforts or human interests. In this way, methods include procedures such as elaborating concepts and hypotheses, making observations and evaluations, conducting experiments, building models and theories, explaining the explanations, and predicting. On the other hand, techniques are specific procedures used in any given science or in a particular investigative context of that science.

All types of research processes require the use of rigorous operative procedures, adapted to the particular kind of phenomenon being studied and the objective that is being sought. There is, therefore, a clear interdependency between methods and techniques, but they must be clearly distinguished so that we are able to correctly approach the issue that concerns us. As Grawitz (1996) [4] states, "technique represents the stages of limited operations, linked to practical and concrete elements, adapted to a definite goal, while method is an intellectual concept that orders a set of operations, usually several techniques" (p. 319).

As a scientific discipline public relations constitutes the theory of communication processes, orientated dialogically through which relations of mutual adaptation between two parties are established and managed (Xifra, 2003) [5]. With this, we are already stating our methodological conception, because the reality being studied and the scientific approach adopted determine the methodological approach.

Contrary to those public relations specialists for whom the issue of method is merely an occasional problem (Botan, 1989) [6] or, as occurs in most cases, does not even become a problem and there is no reason to waste his/her research effort, our point of view is radically different, because we estimate that methodological research allows the structuring of the scientific knowledge of the reality being studied. The short history of public relations prevents us from having an adequate historical perspective to be able to determine the true influence of the analytical method in the "scientific" evolution of the study of public relations.

However, the method has been intimately linked to the epistemological consolidation of public relations through, from the origins, mass communications and sociology that

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provided it with their own methods. Later on, once public relations was established as a scientific discipline, it was social psychology, through explorative means of interpersonal communication, as well as business sciences, that began to impose their methodology.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: A CROSS-DISCIPLINE

According to Duverger (1961) [7], “in enumerating social sciences, certain disciplines have been included *that can be only partially considered as a science, in the strictest sense of the word* (observational or experimental sciences); such as is the case of law and philosophy” (p. 538). For example, Law describes social phenomena and analyses the content and theoretical and methodological scope of legal texts through its own particular techniques. In this instance is not a science, strictly speaking. It’s a normative discipline (establishes rules instead of describing facts) as it studies the “what should be” of legal texts according to general legal principles, and not by its practical application, based on deductive reasoning. It’s not a science in the strict sense.

The multi-disciplinary nature of public relations implies that there is not one particular category of social sciences that is called public relations. We have public relations history (Cutlip, 1994 [8], 1995 [9]), public relations sociology (Roucek, 1968 [10]), public relations economics (Balsemao, 1968 [11]), public relations law (Moore *et al.*, 1998 [12]), etc. Public relations is the “meeting point” of all these “public relations parts” of social sciences. However, Duverger (1961) [7] warns this concept is legitimate in what it endorses yet inaccurate in what it refutes. In fact, public relations is made up of all “branches of public relations” of social sciences, but not only that. The “intersection” is nothing more than one sector of science, which comprises other sectors that are described through the concept of the science of synthesis, or from its inter-disciplinary nature. As “cross-science” due to its objective, public relations by its very nature is a cross-science due to its methods and research techniques.

At the same time and of no less importance, introducing methods from social psychology and business and management sciences has brought with it, in general, a certain neglect in elaborating a general theory of public relations, while giving disproportionate attention to intermediary theories that are nothing more than simple methods in the best of cases, when not mere techniques. The discussion between those who defend the symmetrical approach and its doctrinal opponents is more of a methodological controversy than strictly a theoretical polemic: it is not what constitutes public relations that is being debated; the central problem is the analytical method, not the object of analysis.

All this clarifies the fact that public relations, while developing as a science, has been more concerned with methodological or technical issues than true theory; or better said, it has been more concerned with the methods of analyzing than by the reality that should be studied. This helps explain much of its deficiencies. Consider the reality of the relationships between transmitter and recipient, or the dialogue as a theoretical framework for public relations, which were not considered with a certain degree of theoretical or methodological depth until the last years (Kent & Taylor, 1998 [13];

Ledingham & Bruning, 2000 [14]; Kent & Taylor, 2002 [15]).

Summarizing, most public relations theorists have not observed the necessary research process. Worse still, these academics have not been capable of establishing what process might be required for their research. There has been much concern for methods and little for its logical use. This inverts the real priority of the effort, since once a methodology has been adopted, the choice of methods simply becomes a tactical matter. It deals, therefore, with what Schwarzenberg (1988) [16] has named as the imperialism of methodology, which occurs when problems adapt to methods and not vice versa.

We are therefore faced with, in our field, the fact that a significant part of developed “theories” have been marginalized from the object of study of our science and from a theoretically-based approach which arises from it. This greatly explains its intellectual and theoretical insufficiency and its enormous fragmentation, and more concretely, its slow advancement in becoming a solid theoretical body of public relations.

Consequently, it is necessary to distinguish the method from research techniques while elevating the method to its correct position, since although we use the method to select the techniques, it must, above all, present a concept of the world, or how we perceive things and processes. In this way, we will be able to use the method as an important tool that will penetrate objects, discover their essence and the *raison d’être* of processes, as well as understanding their development and transformation. Therefore, method will discover, not create, the concrete reality and objective of things.

THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

The problem of method in public relations is therefore not an insubstantial problem. In every science, the need to have a general methodological framework for both the understanding of the reality that is being studied and the creating of theories that reflect this reality is unquestionable. But it is largely understood that a method of knowledge is not exhaustive in itself; but is the road that leads to action in this very reality.

In the study of social reality, we can schematically distinguish three theoretical-methodological orientations approaches.

Firstly, the approach represented by theories which we could call essentialists, whose aim is to discover the essence of mankind as well as diverse social entities by means of philosophical reflection, and is located in the scope of rational knowledge founded in supra-empirical rationality, as well as by intuitive understanding. These are generally characterized by the role of what we would call “what should be” and hence its frequently normative nature.

Secondly, the theoretical empirical approach according to which a theory is a coherent set of proposals subject to verification by comparing the facts. It does not attempt to uncover the characteristics of things, but to present a set of general proposals that various types of social behaviors, interactions, and processes to be explained. To achieve such goal, these theories imply a description and classified of data that tends to forecast the phenomena that they explain.

Thirdly, the theoretical approach which is based on the historical-dialectic method, considers society as a whole and seeks to clarify its structural and contradictory antagonisms and to up-date, by means of an objective hermeneutic sense of history, the dialectic laws of society. In this analytical perspective, theory, as well as an instrument of knowledge, is an instrument of action in social reality.

In the field of public relations, methodological antagonism, that in the general theory of knowledge opposes rationalism and imperialism, is manifest in the form of antagonism between "idealism" (the two-way symmetrical theory) and "realism" (for example, the British doctrine of public relations, headed by L'Etang and Pieczka, 1996 [17]). Idealism operates like the heir to enlightenment rationalism, or deductively from aprioristic postulates, and uniquely from an assumed natural state. Realism is fruit of a reaction to positivist empiricism. Therefore, dialectic materialism remains marginalized as a method of knowledge, and supposes, to a certain degree, to improve this antagonism and approach the problem from a different point of view.

THE DIALECTIC METHOD AS A METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

Our methodological proposal, based on the reality under study and the theoretically approach expounded and taking the dialectic method as a general framework, can be none other than the end result of the methodology of the historical-sociological approach, unique in that it allows fully use of the category of totality as a way of expressing and understanding reality. Piaget (1970) [18] commented, referring to the nomothetical sciences of humans (within which we believe the discipline of public relations is found) that the key factor in scientific development has been the tendency to delimit problems, with the methodological requirements that this involves. In other words, "the scientific phase of research starts when the researcher, separating that which is verifiable from what is reflexive or intuitive, elaborates special methods, adapted to his problem, which are both methods of analysis and verifications" (p. 63).

From this point of view, only sociology and history that are adapted to the reality which we are attempting to study can fully account for the total social phenomena; "...history presents a series of total social phenomena, unique in its genre, irreplaceable... the object of sociology is the typology of social phenomena, typology that... tends to build quite an indistinct reality in order to accentuate its differences. The *sociological method*, therefore, reaches a discontinuous result of a relatively continuous subject. The *historical method*, on the other hand, fills whole voids with facts and events, based on time, being perhaps artificially rebuilt, but ensuring continuity, a net of phenomena" (Grawitz, 1996, p. 382 [4]). In fact, both complement each other.

In this way, the sociological method allows, more appropriately than other methods, the reality of public relations to be approached, while not requiring use of metaphors that distort such a reality. Furthermore, it is more comprehensive in that all social phenomena are taken into consideration. Finally, it deals with an essentially empirical method that tries to understand the reality in itself. It is essential that our theory is directly based on observation, rather than on intuition or aprioristic postulates; it must be based on an empiri-

cal approach, from knowledge of the reality of relationships between organizations and their publics.

The historical method allows for greater understanding of public relations in its own evolutionary dynamic, which enables its processes of change and observation to be studied as an intellectual domain. But it is a historical method in a double-sense. On the one hand, it is like a historical succession, like a historical explanation of the evolution of public relations' object of study and its processes and changes, and in which the notion of time plays a decisive role. On the other hand, the historical method takes the perspective of the genetic method, which looks for the beginning of events, the genesis, in which time is secondary; in other words, it is the sub-product of a genesis that has its own rhythm and seeks the causality of events. The historical method, moreover, let us to compare and to identify the variables that have played a role: 1) in influencing the different communicative processes that have dominated collaborative relationships between organizations and publics through time, and 2) the behavior of the actors in the processes.

The study of public relations requires, therefore, the comparative method. If Comte and Durkheim already stated that comparison is the fundamental method in social sciences, we can state that it is the only possible method if the theory is to escape from the domain of private interest and acquire a sufficient reach that allows for an understanding of its structures and under-lying processes. Faced with the difficulties that come to light when experimenting in the field of social sciences, comparison is the only method that permits the theorist to analyze concrete data, establishing constant and general elements. However, its danger stems from artificial comparisons, which occurs if there is not a definite analogy between the phenomena that are being compared; this requires special attention on the behalf of the researcher. It also implies that the main application of the comparative method should be carried out once the phenomena under comparison have been adequately described, identified and interpreted.

All the prior considerations regarding method lead us to the necessity of applying a dialectic method as a general methodological framework. Grawitz has not hesitated in stating that it is the most complete, rich and perfected "for want of not calling it *THE* method, because it corresponds to the fundamental requirements of the same notion of method. It is, in first place, an attitude *towards the object*: empirical and deductive...It represents, in second place, an attempt to explain social facts, in other words, it is directly linked to the notion of totality" (1996, pp. 399-400 [4]). A notion that is essential in building a theory of public relations.

The dialectic method questions, first and foremost, the social system that is considered a totality; it defines its nature, essential characteristics and, later on, it uses the way in which the social system is understood as a means of explaining its different parts and clarifying the existing causality. In this way, one of its main merits is that it emphasizes the unity of reality, of phenomena, the idea of totality, instead of artificially cutting into the heart of reality, which leads to different aspects and social phenomena being isolated, since social reality, and consequently, public relations reality as a form of relations in society, is made up of a variety of facts between which a dialectic link exists, as well as between

facts and totality. In such a way, and in this way only, it is possible to conceive *public relations* reality as structured and dialectic *whole* in which all kinds of phenomena or registered facts within these relationships can be rationally included.

On the other hand, this wholeness of viewing reality allows us to resolve the matter of incorporating and integrating theoretical contributions, methods and techniques, which are produced both in the field of public relations and in other social sciences. Due to its special characteristics, in public relations, a methodological issue that is made evident through a double phenomena is approached with particular interest: 1) through the inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary character of public relations, and 2) through dissecting theoretical methodology to which it is presently subjected, due to the complexity and extent of the subject and scientific infancy.

Public relations theory investigates a sector of social reality that is also the object of consideration for other disciplines, even if it is done so from a particular perspective (the communicational perspective) which leads to relations of trust between an organization and publics of its environment. This means that public relations has to rely on information brought in from other disciplines (interpersonal and social communication, sociology, social psychology, economics, politics, law, history, etc.) and consequently, it cannot be devoid of the contributions and methods or the idiosyncratic techniques of each discipline.

Faced with this topic, the dialectic method, in the way in which it acts as an integrator of scientific contributions that help provide a better understanding of social reality, allows us to incorporate the theories, methods and techniques that are formulated from other social sciences, connecting them to each other. For that, and contrary to what public relations analysts are used to, the validity of contributions from other disciplines must be made relevant and their results presented for critique.

The same could be said of the methodological and theoretical division that presently characterizes the theory of public relations. In this case, the dialectic method can act as an integrative framework on the basis of its relativization and critical consideration.

These two theoretical phenomena act, therefore, in an identical methodological way, making evident the need to establish a general methodological framework provided by dialectic method, that makes the study of public relations operative and relevant.

We cannot conclude without mentioning that the method is not in itself exhaustive. Although its function is to permit us to understand reality, it should aspire to a higher purpose, or otherwise the public relations specialist would irreversibly become a "social engineer" of the communication of social structures with its environment. The dialectic method, by allowing us to understand public relations as a totality complete with contradictions, provides us with the base to develop our commitment to the communicative phenomena that we are studying, and it allows us to understand reality in the sense of progressing in its transformation. Public relations must be a tool for a better understanding of human rela-

tions with open mindedness, mutual understanding and peace in relationships.

If a mainly empirical approach is introduced into the study of public relations, which is not equivalent to an axiological indifference with respect to the reality, this does not provide an excuse to avoid carrying out a critical analysis of the communication of organizations with their publics. Explained in another way, a realistic explanation of "what it is" is perfectly compatible with the viewpoints built regarding *what it should be*. This is demonstrated in the studies on excellence and public relations (Dozier *et al.*, 1995 [19]; L. Grunig *et al.*, 2002 [20]). Concretely, only an understanding of the reality that is based on the same reality will allow us to act on it and orientate it appropriately. Because human convictions regarding what it "must be" are an ingredient of the reality, as far as human reality is concerned, and should be taken into account as an efficacy factor.

CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective that we are developing, which is based on the distinction between method, working methods and research techniques, the choice of a method in the study of public relations does not under any circumstances mean excluding other methods and techniques that are needed to fully understand the analysis of a broad and complex reality such as the one with which we are concerned. In this sense, the choice of these will depend on the concrete object and the purpose of the research, and in many cases it will be necessary to combine methods and different techniques to arrive at valid results. However, social sciences, with exceptions, are still very young and poorly developed. Their methods are not perfect, and many new techniques are still to be discovered. Moreover, we cannot overlook the fact that public relations is even less developed than other applied social sciences. For this reason, it is quite normal that its own methods have still not been developed and that it borrows more from other sciences than it lends. However, as Duverger (1961) [7] stated, as far as politics is concerned, this does not pre-judge the future.

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