**The Impact of Communitarian Ethics on Public Relations**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents an examination of communitarianism ethics and its emphasis on community and responsibility as an ethical base for public relations. It studies the importance businesses currently place on social responsibility, quality, and stewardship and how these core values fit within a communitarian approach. A communitarian foundation for public relations may enable organizations to respond to crises and other situations appropriately because of the sense of community public relations seeks to build.

Keywords: Communitarianism, Communitas, Public Relations, Core Values, Social Capital

**The Impact of Communitarian Ethics on Public Relations**

Born of Aristotelian and Hegelian origins, communitarianism boasts the ethical need to balance individual or organizational rights with the welfare of the community as a whole (Dahlgren, 2006). As Dahlgren (2006) noted, the communitarian movement arose in the United States during the 1980s in response to more robust liberal theories and practices for addressing social problems. Communitarianism is comprised of three broad ideals: the desire to regenerate communities, the need to balance social order with autonomy, and the promotion of the common good through voluntary efforts. Communitarian leaders are social beings shaped by the values and cultures that comprise their respective communities.

A central ethical tenant of this young philosophy is the shift from discussing individual rights to a more holistic response to the masses. Leaders make the case that although people can appreciate specific rights, their actual obligation is to fulfill certain responsibilities to their local communities and society as a whole (Leeper, 1996).

Accordingly, Heath (2006) suggested that public relations (PR) should improve mutually beneficial relationships through understanding and communication. Thus, the good of the community is served, while public relations strategies and connectivity provide awareness of service and ethical commitment.

# Defining Communitarianism Ethics

Communitarianism is a social philosophy based on the values of the common good, just as libertarianism is focused on the values of liberty (Etzioni, 2016). As Etzioni (2016) noted, although the field of scholars who are considered communitarians is still small, the values of the body of work stem from the practices shared in the Old and New Testaments, as well as by the ancient Greeks, the Catholic Church, Confucius, and democratic socialists among others. Strong communitarians concern themselves with only the common good and will ignore individual rights if they believe the common good is better served by their actions. Some scholars have questioned the ethical intent of this approach.

Moreover, on an individual level, communitarian ethicists have stressed the direct connection between an individual and the surrounding community and have stated that a person's social identity is shaped primarily by community relationships (Bell, 1993; Delaney, 1994; & Tam, 1998 as cited in Etzioni, 2016). Dewey (1985) expressed this when he stated, “The human being is an individual only as a stick of wood is, namely, as spatially and numerically separate” (p. 227). Thus, individuals are interdependent, just as organizations rely on various publics for their success. Communitarians pursue the balance between the rights of individuals and social responsibilities, and they believe that the self is shaped by the cultures and values of interdependent communities (Etzioni, 1993).

As discussed by Culbertson and Chen (1997), communitarianism revolves around tenants who help to develop healthy relationships. The rightness or wrongness of actions depends on the positive contributions of the quality of and commitment to relationships. The community necessitates social cohesion and interconnectedness. There is an identification of and commitment to core values which help create a sense of community, and those individuals who claim rights balance such rights with responsibilities. All members of the community must be involved and empowered to create and implement decisions that impact their lives and others’. Finally, a broadening of one's understanding of the significance of others and a broadening of one's social community and the world is required which facilitates an enhanced range of perspective.

Moreover, from a communitarian perspective, the term community means a place where people truly know each other, children play and learn together, and where adults socialize and work in harmony (Sandel, 1996 & Etzioni, 1993). Etzinoni (1993) claimed that two common features of a community exist within communitarian thought. The primary characteristic is the existence of interwoven relationships among groups of individuals which comprise organizations. The second emphasizes shared and collaborative values, norms, culture, history, and identity. Dewey (1985) contended that publics are groups of individuals who through spontaneous action shared indirect effects of specific actions. He went on to note that it is the duty of people to engage in politics and political discourse throughout daily interactions. Accordingly, he expressed that communication is the key to a successful community, and individuals who collaborate about the common good can help build the destiny of not only the community but the political community (Dewey, 1985). Therefore, as Guttman (2007) acknowledged, the communitarian approach boasts the need to engage members of the community in public deliberation and discussions on complex issues, some relating to matters of policy. Thus, without sincere communication, communitarian approaches to ethics do not effectively exist in real-world communities.

**Emphasizing Communitarian Core Values**

Leaders who share this view have stated that cultural cohesion and shared values are imperative for the creation of a highly-functioning community. Furthermore, societal moral predicaments can be resolved through community empowerment (Dalhgren, 2006). Communitarians have added to the argument that a community of communities can be established if deep relationships are established both within communities and between neighboring communities. A supra-community can be developed if all parties have mutually beneficial interests. Etzioni (1993) presented, “the more one favors strengthening communities, the more one must concern oneself with ensuring that they see themselves as a part of a more encompassing whole” (p. 155).

Thus, as part of a whole, communitarianism embraces diversity. Consequently, public relations can aid in identifying distinct community value structures and ensure that each is uniquely appreciated (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Accordingly, the goal of these public relations initiatives should be consensus building and understanding within the community. Public relations in this capacity should identify value structures and ensure that such structures are appreciated for their importance (Stocker & Tusinski, 2006).

Furthermore, the American Marketing Association's (AMA) Statement of Ethics (2016) discusses two general norms for leaders who practice professional ethics—to ‘never knowingly do harm’ and ‘to foster trust in marketing systems by avoiding deception.’ A rather complex and third norm requests that leaders in marketing and public relations embrace six values which enhance the community while carrying out their respective duties. These make up the core attributes of honesty, responsibility, fairness, respect, transparency, and citizenship. These values have been linked to marketing ethics through communitarian approaches and have called for adherence to certain essential business virtues. Community-centric marketers and public relations experts are encouraged to utilize the following corporate social responsibility actions: acknowledging a social obligation to stakeholders, consideration of environmental stewardship, treatment of all individuals—including competitors—like we would treat ourselves, protection of the ecological environment, and the gifting of charitable contributions and volunteerism to the community.

Thus, Laczniak and Murphy (2016) stated that professional ethics as it relates to community-centric or a communitarian approach to marketing and public relations is not value neutral. They postulated that, since this type of approach is typically specified within company policy, it has an aspirational, normative dimension. The contributions of marketing and public relations will thus ultimately have societal effects for which leaders in this field will be held responsible. Moreover, central to ethics in American public relations and communitarianism is the reality that practitioners have the voluntary choice to be ethical or not (Wright, 1989). Accordingly, the Public Relations Society of America Foundation (1991) noted, public relations can help our pluralistic society to reach decisions and to function by contributing to mutual understanding among groups, organizations, and institutions. Thus, both public and private policies must co-exist in harmony for all parties involved.

New-aged public relations scholars and practitioners of contemporary public relations strategies have surpassed the utilization of both rhetoric and persuasion as central concepts in professional public relations work (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Instead, they have stated that public relations should not only aim to influence publics for the good of the institution, but rather to help their publics accommodate the interests of the other party with a mutual benefit in mind. However, others have argued that persuasion is still at the heart of all public relations efforts and all organizational practitioners should lead through persuasion and advocacy (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988). A combination of these views has been seen throughout modern-day public relations tactics and include both techniques of genuinely benevolent, community-centric campaigns, as well as self-centered persuasive models (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Consequently, although values do exist in scholarly works and are utilized by professionals, the parameters for public relations and communitarian work have not been, and perhaps will never be, defined.

# Communitarian Approach to Public Relations

Communitarian leaders feel they have an ethical responsibility for fostering symmetry in relationships through public relations efforts. Public relations in this context is defined as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics’ (Grunig and Hunt, 1998, p. 6). Accordingly, Heath (2006) discussed Communitas, “the symbolic and instrumental reality of community as transcending the structures and functions of individuals and organizations” (p. 106). Public relations practiced through the Communitas lens is described as open: respectful and caring, trustworthy (which builds trust among multiple publics), cooperative in mutually-beneficial decisions, agreeable to all parties involved with rewards and goals, compatible, and committed to community well-being.

Leeper (1996) detailed that public relations efforts should add value to organizations’ active participation with the community at large. The community and public relations activities should not only build awareness but should reinforce community ties for the shared benefit of both the community members and the organization. Therefore, several scholars have noted that what is best for the surrounding community should also be good for the partnering organization or company.

Accordingly, to enhance organizational ethical capacity and accountable community relations programs, Leeper (2006) suggested that communitarian-focused organizations ought to focus on three issues: quality, stewardship, and social responsibility. They must concentrate on quality by offering high-quality services and products. Stewardship is understanding their impact on the community and accepting responsibility for organizational decisions which alter community outcomes. Organizations must also take social responsibility by emphasizing policies that affect the security of the workforce, local economy, and the environment.

Moreover, Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) stated that communitarians should avoid serving only the interests of their clients. As an alternative, leaders utilizing public relations methods to serve clients should create a sense of community where both the asks of the clients as well as broader needs of the community are served. Additionally, by generating a sense of unity through community relations and leadership activities, team members within organizations gain a sense of pride and help individual community members overcome alienation. By engaging in leisure and social activities within the local community, employees help the organization highlight competing interests within specific community groups and can help resolve contentious issues. Consequently, a feeling of pride is fostered for employees (Leeper, 1996).

# Need for Ethical Tools in Organizational Practice

As stated by Arvidsson (2014), to echo Margaret Thatcher’s words, companies sometimes target both individuals and families that operate in the absence of any ethically binding sociality, without any common values, exchanging, at the most, quid pro quo. Ethical brands, therefore, may appear as the "epitome of cynicism: They are an attempt to make loose and largely unsubstantiated and unverifiable claims to ‘do good’ in some vague sense in order to promote marketing goals” (p. 119). Consequently, “public relations is still considered by many, particularly journalists, as just another name for publicity” (Shaw & White, 2004). However, as noted by Shaw and White (2004), public relations as a strategic business function has evolved quickly, but public perception almost always lags behind reality.

Hence, those who wish to approach public relations via a communitarian lens must utilize a number of tools to enhance this community-centric method. A shared vision must be included as a tactic for success and should start with the idea that organizations must convey organizational knowledge (Arenas & Rodrigo, 2016). Preserving organizational memory is essential for transmitting a culture that is helpful to the community at large. “Ethical questions about memory emerge at the individual and societal level, but also at the organizational one” (p. 170). This preservation helps to support special interpersonal relationships which communitarianism espouses.

Additionally, organizational visions “result from and inspire conversations and rhetoric throughout the organizations and, as such, they are important resources to justify involvement in organizational knowledge creation” (Nonaka, Krough, and Voelpel, 2006, p. 1188). Thus, there is a view of organizations as communities. This communitarian tactic gives value to the preservation of specific groups and communities and holds a conception of individuals whose identity and self-awareness is shaped by their belonging to different types of communities (Arenas & Rodrigo, 2016). Hence, some ethics scholars have suggested that the communitarian approach should include the view of a firm or organization as a “community of persons” (Mele, 2012; Sison, 2009; Solomon, 1994; Hartman, 1994).

Also, under these circumstances, as Phillips and Johnson-Cramer (2006) noted, obligations are created between stakeholders and groups which are based on the value of reciprocity. This tool is vital to creating a mutually beneficial contract-like relationship with stakeholders throughout the community. These stakeholders are then bound together, and a bridge is created for future generations. Fair-play is considered as issues arise which impact community groups and stakeholders, thus leveling the playing-field for all parties involved. Hence, tools of this nature eliminate criticism of public relations efforts and bring sincerity to the conversations, which are advantageous for all involved.

**The Role of Trust and its Relationship to Communitarianism**

Trust and ethics are key issues for approaching professional public relations activities in relation to communitarianism. Trust is the hope that “people have of each other, of the organizations and institutions in which they live, and of the natural and moral social orders, which set the fundamental understanding for their lives” (Barber, 1983, p. 165 as cited in Zhang & Abitbol, 2016). Accordingly, individuals who trust fully are likely to give others the benefit of the doubt and are more likely to feel connected to one another (Delli Carpini, 2004). As Orbells and Dawes (1991) discussed, volunteerism at non-profits and voluntary associations are more likely to be contributed by individuals and organizations who have higher levels of trust. These individuals are likely to form bonds and cooperate to find solutions to community problems. “This trust occurs between individuals and other individuals, or between an individual and social, political institutions” (Zhang & Abitbol, 2016).

Thus, public relations activities impact cultural flows to change the political, economic, and cultural context of relationships. Trust is essential to these strategies in communitarian environments. Regarding this statement, Bowen (2004) claimed that "public relations is a field fraught with ethical dilemmas" (p. 65). However, many scholars have refuted Bowen's statement; there is no one-size-fits-all approach to ethics policy. Accordingly, if practitioners are to administer ethical approaches to communitarianism, they need an integrated system of activities, while keeping trust at the forefront of all strategies (Tilley, 2005). As stated by Tilley (2005), Fleisher and Mahaffy (1997) recommended a balanced scorecard approach which urged practitioners to create “a set of audience, client, stakeholder, financial, improvement, and operational process performance measures that reflect progress against a plan” (p. 117). Likewise, Macnamara’s (2002) plan proposed sequential, continuous evaluation and improvements to building ethical trust with community groups. These strategies would allow for leaders to “measure, clarify, communicate, and manage an ethical compliance strategy” (Tilley, 2005), therefore building trust. Thus, advocates of communitarianism suggest “fostering a strong internal moral compass to guide right action” (p.308).

**Creating Social Capital**

“The importance of bridging social capital, where bonds of connectedness are bridged across diverse social groups” was stressed by Putnam (2000, as cited by Painter, 2017, p. 3). He went on to say that in today’s society, our American people are deserting traditional community values and trading a shared public life and common identity to further individual pursuits. Thus, without social capital, social, political, and economic systems will fail (Painter, 2017). Hence, “without multiple and competing discourses, humans, as members of society, would not have the building blocks for making decisions” (Taylor, 2011, p. 437). Boulding (1977, as cited by Taylor, 2001) observed that individual perceptions, or what individuals ‘believe to be true’ is called our ‘image’ of the world. Behaviors, including personal, organizational, political, and social are based on these images.

Through discourses, these images are shaped and changed and added to dialogue which creates rhetoric. As such, “rhetoric provides a framework for ethic public relations” (Porter, 2010). Public relations activities thus extend this rhetoric, which allows for organizational agendas to be endorsed. Public discussion of these agendas, as Heath (2006) states, allows for enlightened choice. “Together, they foster social capital that societies need” (Taylor, 2011, p. 437.) To create what Heath (2006) called “a fully functioning society” (p. 96), social capital must include a variety of political, economic, and social processes. Hence, many scholars of public relations contend that public relations and improve these processes. Many advocate a communitarian approach to the creation of social capital (Leeper, 1996).

Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) contended, “It would be difficult to find a public relations professional who disagreed with the concepts espoused in the ethical theories based on the need for enhanced social responsibility, good citizenship, and improved community relations. All of these concepts focus on the need for public relations to contribute to the betterment of both communities in which their clients and employers operate” (p. 194). Therefore, Heath (2006) recognized eight premises that provide the basis for organizational rhetoric and public relations to make a community better. As summarized, Heath (2006) believed that management should bring order to uncertainty, offer corporate responsibility, and manage power resources. The community should serve as a conflicting and conjoined interest, while each relationship should have symmetry (communitas vs. corportas). There should be organizational connections. Finally, responsible advocacy, narrative, and other forms of rhetoric should lead to enlightened choice.

Consequently, decisions which benefit society at large should ultimately benefit the organization (Taylor, 2011). Ultimately, “society is best served when organizations use their power responsibly” (Taylor, 2011). Additionally, social capital is present when enlightened choice occurs and two-way communication transpires between organizations and stakeholders within the community. Accordingly, organizations must make tools available for advancing the advocacy efforts of individuals, groups, and other organizations (Heath, 2006). Messaging and rhetoric should thus be utilized effectively during this process. Essentially, creation of this social capital benefits the community and allows for needs of its members to be met fully.

**Conclusion**

An increasing emphasis on communitarianism in recent years has added value to this relatively young ethics approach as it relates to the field of public relations. The debate has shifted from journalism and objectivity-versus-advocacy to two-way symmetry versus two-way asymmetry. The communitarian view states that public relations is now “better defined and practiced as the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community” (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988, p. 11). With this goal in mind, public relations can be integrated into the communication and information milieu that comprises our American culture and society. As Leeper (1996) noted, organizations’ growing attention to “quality, social responsibility, and stewardship” (p. 163) has added value to the communitarian foundation of public relations ethics (Marsh, 2001).

As discussed, the parameters for ethics-related public relations strategies have not been clearly defined, making it difficult for practitioners and leaders to take full advantage of the impact of such. Still, confusion remains on just how ethical standards should define the practice of public relations (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). Secondly, public relations as a practice has not been disentangled from its journalistic origins. “Although advocates can be fair, they are seldom objective” (p. 195) in their approach. Next, there are no minimum standards set forth for the practice of public relations in communitarian environments. Although codes exist within organizations and public relations associations, many codes fall short of detailing a theoretical basis for decision making as it relates to ethical contexts. Lastly, there is no distinct delineation between individuals and organizations who practice communitarian-based ethics. Specifically, the values and ethics of the institutions represented by professionals are often confused with the values and ethics of the individuals who create the community-centric public relations strategies (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001).

Bivins (1989) concluded that “there is no conceptual framework for which to study public relations ethics” (p. 39). However, as Baker (1999) determined, “businesses do well (financially) by doing good (ethically), and it is, therefore, in their bottom-line interest to engage in good deeds and ethical behavior” (pg. 73). Communitarianism thus begs for social capital to build successful relationships. However, the application of social capital as it relates to public relations efforts has produced a “mixed bag of evidence for its benefits” (Zhang & Abitbol, 2016).

As examined by Hazelton and Kennan (2000), the role of social capital in an organization generated amplified productivity, quality, customer gratification, and organizational advantages. However, as stated by these scholars, outcomes founded by such social capital is not easily observed and measured. Accordingly, social capital requires trust in order for communitarian approaches to work successfully with organizations within communities of various stakeholder groups, but trust is not easily evaluated. Trust can be either resilient or fragile and may not last if the benefits and costs to all parties involved are not perceived as equal (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). As Taylor (2011) noted, public relations strategies within communitarian environments can nurture relationships and strengthen communities by establishing greater capacity. Such efforts can foster shared trust and better help to address shared issues of importance.

Hence, as communitarian advocates have noted throughout existing literature, public relations can create a bridge between an institution or organization and its publics (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988). Such strategies have also helped to encourage communal core values, thereby forging partnerships within and among organizations and alliances. Thus, as communitarians believe that the “self is neither autonomous nor exists in isolation” (Etzioni, 1993), positive public relations efforts add to the constructive contributions and commitment to relationships to which these leaders adhere.

As stated, communication is critical to this ethical approach. As practitioners have engaged in webs of reinforced relationships, they better understand that “anyone affected by indirect consequences of a specific action, therefore, will have a common interest in solving a common problem” (Painter, 2017). When organizations who engage in these practices consider their customers’ humanity, deep comradery is conceived. Thus, communitarianism aims to build links between organizations and their publics, and communities function better when relationships are fostered and environmental stewardship is emphasized among all parties involved.

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