Zeitschrift: Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research; Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences

Band: 7 (2007)

Heft: 1

Artikel: Structural segregation and openness : balanced professionalism for public relations!

Autor: Hoffmann, Jochen / Röttger, Ulrike / Jarren, Otfried

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-791071

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Mehr erfahren

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. En savoir plus

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. Find out more

Download PDF: 22.10.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, https://www.e-periodica.ch

Studies in Communication Sciences 7/1 (2007) 125–146

Jochen Hoffmann*, Ulrike Röttger** & Otfried Jarren***

STRUCTURAL SEGREGATION AND OPENNESS: BALANCED PROFESSIONALISM FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS[1]

When analysing public relations as an occupational field, its professionalisation represents a predominant research question. This article demonstrates that the models most frequently used to discuss this question – the trait and power approaches – employ theoretical assumptions that are no longer adequate. The trait approach presumes that occupations gain autonomy during the process of professionalisation, whereas the power approach assumes a monopolisation of the fields of activity. Therefore, both models describe professionalisation as a process toward social segregation. This assumption is questionable, because the professionalisation of public relations may be a response to the challenges of a highly diversified and interconnected society. Understanding public relations as the management of interdependences within and for organizations requires a balance among professional identity, organisational alignments *and* structural openness. When theories unilaterally stress a professional demarcation through autonomisation or monopolisation, they a priori arrive at the diagnosis that the existing professionalisation of public relations is insufficient. Therefore, this article calls for a reorientation of occupational theory in public relations research. Survey data regarding the training and occupational socialisation of public relations practitioners in Switzerland reveal the empirical usefulness of such a reorientation.

Keywords: communications research, communications management, organizational communications, professionalizing, vocational field research.

* Universität Bern, Institut für Kommunikations- und Medienwissenschaft, jochen.hoffmann@ikmb.unibe.ch

** Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Institut für Kommunikationswissenschaft, ulrike.roettger@uni-muenster.de

*** Universität Zürich, IPMZ – Institut für Publizistikwissenschaft und Medienforschung, o.jarren@ipmz.uzh.ch

[1] We are grateful to Nicholas Bornstein and Adrian Steiner for their useful comments on a previous draft of the paper.

1. The Potential of Profession Theories

Questions about the professionalisation of public relations have long had great significance in German-language occupational research on public relations (Riefler 1989; Signitzer 1994; Dees & Döbler 1997; Wamser 1999; Röttger 2000; Lüdke 2001; Wienand 2003). Two central occupational sociological models dominate the scientific discussion. That is, public relations research mainly applies a trait approach, influenced by structural functionalism, though more recently, the power approach has gained in importance (for an overview, see Wienand 2003: 51–66).

Both approaches can be compared on *descriptive*, *explicative*, and *normative* levels. First, they offer terms and indicators for measuring the degree of professionalisation of an occupational field (descriptive level). Second, they explain why professions emerge and their consequences for society (explicative level). Third, they express various claims that make societal evaluation possible (normative level).

Both the trait and the power approach have contributed to occupational sociology on all three levels; the same contribution holds for the field of public relations. Nevertheless, the models exhibit a common blind spot. Thus, as a theoretical reorientation, we propose a balanced approach, whose potential we support on the basis of empirical data pertaining to the occupational socialisation of public relations experts in Switzerland.

2. The Trait Approach

Conventional analysis in occupational sociology pertaining to professions is influenced by structural functionalism and dominated by the trait approach. German-language public relations research centres almost exclusively on the classical trait approach.

The main achievement of trait-theoretical models lies in their definition of indicators to characterise professions, developed from old-fashioned concepts of professions. The functional dimension of specific knowledge and the societal dimension of social orientation both play key roles in this context (cf. Daheim 1973; Hesse 1968), in that both specific competences for solving problems with high social relevance and the particular ethical or public welfare orientation of a profession can be derived from

them. Professions establish socially relevant competences on the basis of their scientifically established knowledge (Klatetzki 1993: 36 ff.; Dewe et al. 1995: 25 ff.) and thereby have important stabilising functions in society (Daheim 1973: 233). Problem-solving competencies and public welfare orientations get operationalised similarly in the literature, despite some variations:

> The list covers familiar ground – a specialised skill and service, an intellectual and practical training, a high degree of professional autonomy, a fiduciary relationship for the profession as a whole, an embargo in some methods of attractive business, and an occupational organisation testing competence, regulating standards, and maintaining discipline (Elliott 1972: 5).

In the field of public relations, Grunig and Hunt (1984: 66) define professions according to a classical trait catalogue that covers the following elements:

- Values: Set of professional values.
- Associations: Membership in strong professional organisations.
- Norms: Adherence to professional norms.
- Body of knowledge: Intellectual traditions and an established body of knowledge.
- Education: Technical skills acquired through professional training.

On the one hand, this list highlights the particular importance of scientific knowledge and theoretical training. On the other hand, it ties professionals to a comprehensive culture and ethics that clarify issues pertaining to professional access, conduct and self-control. In particular, trade associations and professional organisations take charge of these latter aspects.

According to Wilensky (1972: 202 ff.), the shift from an occupation to a profession is marked by the following stages of development:

1. The activity is exercised as a full-time occupation.
2. Adequate forms of training and educational institutions are established; training and occupation become increasingly academic.
3. Occupational organisations emerge.
4. Licensing by the state of the monopolised competence area is aimed for and/or enforced.

5. Binding rules and guidelines of professional conduct (occupational ethics) are codified.

Opinions vary greatly regarding the extent to which public relations actually fulfils these criteria in German-speaking countries. Riefler (1989: 307) considered substantial criteria like full-time occupation, professional organisations, and professional ethics to be in place in Germany, but several empirical findings question this assessment, including the low recognition of codes of conduct and professional standards among practitioners (i.e., Becher 1996; Röttger 2000: 323 ff.). Thus, the strong binding character of existing codes cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, two recent studies from Germany and Switzerland (Röttger 2000; Röttger et al. 2003) indicate that public relations, in the context of organisational practice, is conducted not only by full-time, employed public relations experts but also by amateurs. Furthermore, large deficits exist in public relations training, though many courses of study recently have been created at schools of applied sciences and universities. Finally, though state licensing of public relations sometimes appears in the literature or gets enforced, as in Brazil since 1967 (Molleda & Athaydes 2003), it remains off the agenda in Switzerland, Germany and Austria. Public relations thus represents an unprotected profession that is not bound by any prerequisites of competence or training. For these reasons, researchers in public relations generally agree that public relations in German-speaking countries has not yet achieved professional status, according to the trait approach.

These discussions also show that the trait approach mainly provides useful indicators for *descriptive* empirical studies. The predominant additive character of the trait model's determinants reveals the limited *explicative* and *normative* potential of the model, because the autonomisation of occupations and thus their professionalisation simply reflects functional differentiations in modern society and rarely considers an integrative function. This status might come as a surprise since Talcott Parsons (1978) subsumed all professions – because of their orientation toward the common welfare – within a "professional complex." The integrative dimension of this structure contains a strong *normative* component, in that, as Thomas Kurtz (2003: 94) notes, Parsons' occupational sociological writings are characterised by the hope "that in the future, the professional

complex will dominate and remove political authority and capitalistic exploitation."[2]

In summary, on the *descriptive* level, the trait approach offers elaborate and operationalisable indicators that can be used to measure professionalisation processes. However, on the *explicative* and *normative* levels, the model's capacity and contribution must be regarded as rather trivial. The selective interpretation of Talcott Parsons' writings has prioritised the idea of functional differentiation and reduced societal references to an abstract orientation toward the common welfare.

3. The Power Approach

In contrast to the trait approach, theoretical prospects, often subsumed within the term "power approach," do not maintain a positive view about professionalisation processes. Rather, they reject the assumption that the quality and societal relevance of occupational performance can explain the emergence of professions and legitimate their autonomy and high social status. Instead they attempt to determine how professionals design relationships with customers to their own advantage. Common welfare orientation and professional knowledge thus represent "parts of an ideology and not ... empirical characteristics of individual and collective professional conduct" (Freidson 1975: 32 et seq.). Professionalism results from successful market strategies that aim to gain as much control as possible over the occupation, as well as over the conditions of producing and marketing the occupational work (Dewe et al. 1995: 30). According to this view, professionalisation is characterised by economic processes, which are complemented by an ideological function. On the basis of this idea, the German sociologists Beck, Brater and Daheim describe professionalisation as a complex market strategy that encompasses four different objectives (Beck et al. 1980: 82):

- Making the occupation indispensable.
- Reducing competition by other occupations.
- Replacing external with self-control.
- Extending possible applications of the occupation.

[2] Quotes from publications in German have been translated from the original by the authors.

Similar to trait-theoretical models, the knowledge dimension plays an outstanding role in the power approach. Successful market control requires a specific knowledge base that remains relatively exclusive and clearly distinguishable from the knowledge of amateurs. This assumption highlights a strategic weakness of public relations: It involves the ordinary nature of communication. Unlike, for example, patients of physicians, clients cannot necessarily discern different competence levels between public relations experts and amateurs. The claim of exclusive problem-solving competence is hard to convey or impose on the market, which makes it difficult to differentiate public relations from other communication activities, such as marketing or advertising.

Power models therefore might be summarised as follows: Rooted in critical theories, the approach explains professionalisation processes in reference to politico-economic interests. Thus, it opposes the functionalist trait approach on the *normative* and *explicative* levels but without harming the *descriptive* level. Empirical measures of professionalisation have no impact, because the same indicators apply, though in one case, they express the functionally explained autonomisation of occupations, and in the other, they provide proof of the politico-economically driven monopolisation of occupational service production. Accordingly, empirically derived assumptions about the degree of professionalisation of public relations lead to the same evaluation: Public relations is not a professional field.

Thus, two theoretical perspectives that *explain* and *assess* professionalisation differently nevertheless obtain the same *descriptive* result with regard to public relations. The reason for this consensus lies in the common features of both functionalist autonomisation and politico-economical monopolisation as processes of social segregation. Full control over service production and supply represents a central assumption in both models, which coincide with clearly regulated and controlled access to the profession. They tend toward processes of exclusion that disconnect the occupation from its environment. Professions operate by their own rules; they are largely self-referential; and they successfully minimise involvement from clients, other occupations and even the employing organization. An old discussion considers whether organizational demands impede professional performance (Abrahamson 1967; Benson 1973; Davies 1983; Freidson 1984; Terhart 1990), and with regard to public relations profes-

sionals, Grunig and Hunt (1984: 64) identify a "tug of two allegiances: allegiances to the organization for which they work, and allegiance to the profession from which they gain their values and expertise." From a traditional point of view, the ideal professional thus is self-employed.

The observation of professionalisation as a process of segregation inevitably leads to an assessment of substantial deficits in the professionalisation of public relations. However, the outlined disconnection contradicts with the demand for structural openness of public relations so that it might manage interdependencies and serve a boundary-spanning function in the organization (Serini 1993: 18).

4. The Balanced Approach: Social Closure and Structural Openness

The starting point for the subsequent discussion involves understanding public relations as a function of organisations. In an organisational view, public relations enables *inter-systemic* relationships and provides a basis for legitimate interests among relevant persons, organisations, and actors in the organisational environment. Thus, public relations crosses systemic borders and thereby improves the organisation's ability to monitor the environment. Moreover, public relations experts serve a mediating role among social systems and thus may act as managers of interdependences (cf. Jarren 1994).

The goals of monitoring, controlling and stabilising relationships are particularly relevant with regard to journalism. Media coverage has great consequences for organisations because of its influence on agenda-setting processes and public opinion. To influence journalists and stabilise interactions, public relations personnel attempt to enforce rules, norms and frames (e.g. images, brands) (Jarren & Röttger 2004), as well as harmonise self- and others' perceptions. To achieve this goal, public relations must translate between the organisation and environmental systems, which speak different "languages." Every social system, including journalism, has different guidelines for observing its environment.

However, a greater link between societal subsystems also has emerged. The politicisation of economics and the economisation of politics suggest more and more interdependences, as well as increased communicative pressure on organisations and their level of responsiveness. Consequently,

public relations must be both connected and structurally open, which contradicts the process of closure as an effect of professionalisation. The resultant question thus becomes whether classical concepts of professionalisation, including the idea of occupational segregation, can transfer to public relations. Instead, such disconnect might be counterproductive and dysfunctional for the organization, which leads us to propose a type of "negotiating" professional, similar to Serini's (1993: 19) description from a case study: "Different workers, with different relationships to the organization, brought different dynamics to the negotiation process. They all wanted what was best for the organization, but each participant viewed the organization from a different perspective."

For these reasons, theoretical perspectives that view professionalisation mainly in the light of social segregation offer little help for an analysis of communication occupations designed to manage organisational interdependences. Instead, we posit a balanced approach: On the one hand, occupational identity and structural differentiation remain basic conditions for professional action, but on the other hand, public relations as a profession and a function of organisations requires system-bridging and reflexive communication competences. These prerequisites cannot develop without structural openness.

5. Empirical Perspective: Occupational Socialisation of Public Relations Experts

Processes of identity formation and social segregation remain primarily topics of socialisation research. Habits, self-esteem, norms of social milieus and adherence to group and network rules develop over the long-term through communicative adaptations and role acquisitions rather than formal codes. Therefore, we reasonably suggest that occupational socialisation represents a central factor for defining the relationship of social openness and professional closure. To analyse some characteristics of the occupational socialisation of public relations practitioners in Switzerland, we collect data through a national research project on public relations occupations (Röttger et al. 2003). In turn, we apply new interpretations to these empirical data by taking the proposed balanced approach to public relations professionalisation.

The Swiss public relations study involves 2,878 organisations, including the largest 1,000 companies, public administrations on the federal and cantonal level, non-profit organisations (NPOs) represented on the federal level and public relations agencies. Thirty-three percent of the contacted organisations took part in the survey.

The study differentiates between respondents in charge of public relations, whom we call *experts*, and other respondents we label *appointees*. Regardless of their training, experts are full-time public relations practitioners, whereas appointees spend only some of their working hours devoted to public relations and their job title reveals no connection to a communications occupation. For example, a human resources director might be responsible, among other things, for the media relations of the company, because the company does not use a separate public relations department; this director therefore is an appointee. Our empirical results show that public relations in companies, NPOs and public administrations is dominated by such appointees. Whereas nine out of ten organisations carry out public relations, less than one-third of the respondents can be classified as public relations experts.

Because questions about career paths and forms of occupational socialisation are central to this discussion, we include only public relations experts and managers of public relations agencies in the following analysis (table 1). This sub-sample consists of 313 respondents, most of whom work in companies (40.6 %) and public relations agencies (28.4 %).

Table 1: Public Relations Experts in Companies, NPOs, Public Administration and Agencies

	Frequency	*Percentage*
Companies	127	40.6
NPOs	50	16.0
Public administrations	47	15.0
Agencies	89	28.4
Total	313	100.0

6. Training and Continuing Education

Of course, training ranks among the most important factors of occupational socialisation. An academic diploma is considered a classical characteristic of professions. The findings show clear differences (table 2) between public relations experts in agencies (45.5 %) and those in public administrations (78.3 %), such that a university diploma appears to play a more important role in public service compared with agency managers, who are often independent entrepreneurs. Public relations employees in companies and NPOs fall between these two poles. Compared with other European countries, the share of academics is rather low in Switzerland, particularly in the agency sector. In Germany, two-thirds of public relations professionals in agencies possess a university degree (Wienand 2003: 234), whereas in Switzerland, less than half of the interviewed managers have an academic degree.

Table 2: Public Relations Experts with Academic Degrees

Public relations experts in …	*Percentage of respondents with academic degree*
companies (n = 126)	63.5
NPOs (n = 49)	65.3
public administrations (n = 46)	78.3
agencies (n = 88)	45.5

A higher share of university graduates alone cannot contribute to professionalisation if the university degree does not provide appropriate competencies. Table 3 clarifies that, among university graduates, economists (23.2 %), social scientists (20.9 %) and linguists/language scientists (29.1 %) form the biggest groups. Thus, public relations professionals tend to study subjects that can be considered related to public relations demands (see also Wienand 2003: 295–299; Merten 1997: 48–49). However, the academic subjects remain heterogeneous, which implies a lack of consensus about the appropriate or leading course of study for the occupation. This implication corresponds with findings in other coun-

tries. In the Netherlands for example, ninety percent of public relations practitioners neither possess special professional training nor attended university studies related to communication (Ruler 2003: 228).

Table 3: Subjects of Study of Public Relations Experts

	Percentage of respondents with academic degrees in…						
Public relations experts in…	*Economics*	*Law*	*Social sciences*	*Linguistics/ languages*	*Engineering*	*Other subjects*	*Total*
companies (n = 74)	32.4	6.8	18.9	29.7	6.8	5.4	100
NPOs (n = 30)	13.4	10.0	43.3	16.7	3.3	13.3	100
public administrations (n = 30)	3.3	20.0	10.0	43.3	13.3	10.0	100
agencies (n = 38)	28.9	13.2	15.8	26.3	10.5	5.3	100
Total (n = 172)	23.2	11.0	20.9	29.1	8.1	7.6	100

Different institutional traditions also emerge when we compare the types of organisations. Lawyers are over-represented in the public service sector (20.0 %); economists form the biggest group in companies and agencies (32.4 % and 28.9 %, respectively). Yet the overall distribution across the four subgroups remains multifarious. A clear academic profile of public relations professionals does not exist. In line with the comparatively low proportion of university graduates, this missing profile could indicate a further professionalisation deficit. According to the trait approach, the conditions for developing a functional body of knowledge do not exist, and in the context of the power approach, this academic variety would represent the profession's inability to control admission to the profession through clearly defined criteria.

Instead, the balanced approach suggests these findings imply an adequate mix of organisational requirements and affinity for public relations. In particular, the relatively strong proportion of social scientists reflects structural openness at the level of academic training.

Complementing rather broad academic training by adding special skills in public relations (cf. Cardwell 1997: 7) could be appropriate,

especially at the level of continuing education (table 4). Almost four out of five public relations consultants have taken part in courses related to communications (76.7 %). Similar to the German market however, the Swiss market for continuing education in public relations varies greatly (cf. Wienand 2003: 181–184), which makes it difficult to compare and evaluate the different training possibilities.

Table 4: Continuing Education of Public Relations Experts in Communications

	Percentage of respondents with ...		
Public relations experts in ...	*at least one course in continuing education*	*public relations consultant course*	*public relations assistant course*
companies (n = 125)	70.4	14.4	13.6
NPOs (n = 50)	74.0	16.0	12.0
public administrations (n = 47)	74.5	14.9	8.5
agencies (n = 87)	88.5	32.2	24.1
Total (n = 309)	76.7	19.7	15.5

However, the so-called consultant and assistant courses of the Swiss Public Relations Institute (SPRI) demand special notice. The SPRI, founded in 1969, provides a role model for professional training and continuing education in Europe. Courses for public relations assistants last approximately one year, whereas those for consultants take nearly two years and cater primarily to executives. Thus, offers of continuing education in public relations are both costly and time consuming, which may explain why courses for consultants and assistants are not attended as often as other weekly and nightly courses. Not even one-fifth of all respondents (19.7 % and 15.5 %) possess one of these two degrees.

By comparing the four organisational types, we note that public relations practitioners working in agencies make the most use of continuing education. Nearly one-third of all agency managers (32.2 %) have completed the public relations consultant course.

Overall, on the supply side, a remarkable infrastructure of continuing education has developed in Switzerland. So far however, this offering is not yet reflected in adequate acceptance or use on the demand side. Any evaluation of the professionalisation of public relations therefore must remain ambivalent. Continuing education specialising in public relations gets even more important, if the variety of occupational training combines with a great variety of occupational histories. Therefore, we analyse the occupational histories of our respondents next.

7. Careers Related to the Type of Organisation

What shapes a career in public relations? Is it the type of organisation for which someone works? Or is it the public relations activity itself, independent of whether it takes place in a company, NPO, public administration or agency? In this latter case, the occupational field would represent the determining factor, not the type of organization.

As we have already noted, public relations might encompass both a specific function of organisations and a profession that includes practitioners as a social entity, without contradiction. Public relations executives are professional, especially if they can acquire knowledge that enables them to manage interdependencies with the organisation for which they work. That is, they require a balance between specific organisational needs and their professional identity. To some extent, this balance might be mediated by career paths.

Therefore, we asked respondents to indicate their three previous occupations as well as the number of years they had spent in those positions. In table 5, we depict these experiences, which are distributed among the four types of organisations and journalism.

In other words, we measure the ties of public relations careers to organisational types and find:

- Public relations professionals in companies spend more than two-thirds of their previous work experience in companies (67.5 %). Professional experience in other areas plays almost no role. Thus, a clear connection of careers to the type of organisation is apparent.
- A similarly strong connection is not apparent in the non-profit sector. Public relations executives spend a little less than one-quarter of their

Table 5: Shape of Careers Related to the Type of Organisation

Public relations experts in …	*Percentage of previous work years in …*					
	Companies	*NPOs*	*Public admin.*	*PR agencies*	*Journalism*	*Total*
companies (n = 885.0)	67.5	4.0	3.1	11.9	13.5	100
NPOs (n = 510.0)	23.1	23.6	9.8	6.6	36.9	100
public administrations (n = 614.0)	9.2	11.4	33.9	0.7	44.9	100
agencies (n = 870.5)	31.2	9.2	13.6	29.2	16.8	100

previous work experience with NPOs (23.6 %). Instead, journalism is the most important recruiting field (36.9 %), and many respondents posses previous experience working in companies (23.1 %).

- Two recruiting fields are important for public relations experts in public administrations. First, a connection to the type of organisation is manifest; executives in public administrations occupy positions in public administrations in roughly one-third of their previous years of experience (33.9 %). Second, professional experience in journalism is even more important, with a share of 44.9 %.
- Managers of public relations agencies usually lay the groundwork for their careers in the private sector. Agencies often recruit junior employees from agencies (29.2 %); to a similar extent, they employ people who were not previously external service providers for agencies but were employed in-house within the private sector (31.2 %).

Overall, public relations professionals in companies exhibit the strongest ties to their type of organisation, especially respondents who only mention occupational positions from a single area (table 6). More than half the public relations professionals currently employed by companies previously worked solely in companies. Such a one-sided career path, tied to a specific type of organisation, occurs less frequently among respondents working in NPOs, public administrations and agencies.

Table 6: Homogeneity of Careers Tied to a Specific Type of Organisation

Public relations experts in …	*Percentage of careers tied to a single organisational type*
companies (n = 118)	51.7
NPOs (n = 47)	6.4
public administrations (n = 46)	17.4
agencies (n = 83)	12.0

8. Careers Related to the Field of Occupation

A strong tie to an organisational type does not rule out strong ties with public relations as an occupational field. For example, a public relations expert might work for companies all his or her life and also work in public relations all the time. In this particular case, strong ties with the organisation and the occupation exist simultaneously. Therefore, the career's ties with occupational fields must be measured too.

Again, the data pertain to the total number of years of previous work experience. Table 7 shows the number of years respondents spent in public relations positions in-house and in specialised positions in-house, with the exception of public relations, in agencies, and in journalism.

Table 7: Shape of Careers Tied to the Field of Occupation

	Percentage of previous work years in …				
Public relations experts in …	*in-house PR*	*in-house except for PR*	*PR agencies*	*journalism*	*Total*
companies (n = 866.0)	31.1	42.9	12.2	13.8	100
NPOs (n = 510.0)	30.0	26.6	6.6	36.9	100
public administrations (n = 604.5)	35.0	18.8	0.7	45.6	100
agencies (n = 870.5)	35.2	18.8	29.2	16.8	100

Compared with their strong linkage with companies, the career paths of public relations experts in companies are far less determined by public relations as a occupational field. They spend as many years in specialised positions unrelated to public relations (42.9 %) as they do in positions associated with public relations (in-house 31.1 %, external 12.2 %).

Respondents working in NPOs and public administrations indicate a stronger career-related tie to public relations, but their occupational socialisations are even more shaped by journalism. Whereas the journalistic socialisation of respondents working in companies plays only a subordinate role (13.8 %), public relations experts in NPOs (36.9 %) and public administrations (45.6 %) assign great importance to such experiences. They also spend more time in journalism than in public relations.

Respondents from agencies exhibit the strongest tie to their occupational field. Their previous experience splits evenly between working in-house on public relations positions (35.2 %) and functioning as external service providers in agencies (29.2 %). As table 8 shows, only 13.3 % of respondents in agencies have no previous experience in public relations. However, almost half of the in-house public relations experts in companies, NPOs and public administrations lack professional experience in public relations – a striking result, considering that each respondent is in charge of public relations in his or her organisation.

Thus, external service providers in agencies reveal a clear identification with public relations (see also Cardwell 1997: 4), whereas in-house public relations professionals lack such socialisation. For companies, experiences

Table 8: Homogeneity of Careers Related to the Field of Occupation

	Percentage of respondents with previous positions ...			
Public relations experts in ...	*never in PR*	*in PR & other fields*	*solely in PR*	*Total*
companies (n = 119)	45.4	27.7	26.9	100
NPOs (n = 48)	50.0	29.2	20.8	100
public administrations (n = 46)	47.8	32.6	19.6	100
agencies (n = 83)	13.3	48.2	38.6	100

related to their specific type of organisation are more important than references to public relations. Practitioners frequently shift from specialised positions in organisations unrelated to public relations into public relations. Finally, journalism represents the most important recruiting field for NPOs and public administrations.

9. Journalism as Recruiting Field

Our last empirical analysis considers the relevance of journalism as a recruiting field for public relations in more detail. Respondents provided additional information about their journalistic experience, including the degree to which they previously worked as journalists employed on a regular basis or as freelancers (table 9).

Table 9: Journalistic Experience of Public Relations Experts

	Percentage with experience in journalism as…		*Percentage without experience in journalism*	*Total*
PR experts in…	*employee*	*freelancer*		
companies (n = 123)	16.3	26.8	56.9	100
NPOs (n = 49)	46.9	22.4	30.6	100
public administrations (n = 47)	63.8	14.9	21.3	100
agencies (n = 89)	34.8	31.5	33.7	100

The findings are remarkable, especially with regard to the representatives of public administrations. Almost two-thirds of public relations experts in public services (63.8 %) previously were employed as journalists. Slightly more than one-fifth of respondents have no journalistic experience (21.3 %). To conduct public relations in NPOs, journalistic experience is of great importance, as well. Nearly half the respondents (46.9 %) were previously employed as journalists. The share of journalists in agencies is somewhat smaller (34.8 %), and experience in journalism does not represent a significant demand for public relations in

companies. More than half the respondents in companies have never worked as journalists before (56.9 %).

10. Conclusions

The findings regarding the career paths of public relations experts can be summarised as follows: Occupational experience in public relations plays only a minor role for people working in companies, and an origin in the same milieu or organisational environment is much more important. Non-profit organisations feature the most diversified setting, so we cannot derive any real generalizations from the employment histories of respondents from NPOs. For public administrations, journalism is the central field of recruitment.

The careers of agency managers maintain the strongest reference to public relations; they are also the forerunners in terms of other traditional characteristics of professions. For example, they take part in continuing education much more frequently than do in-house public relations experts. In addition, their share of membership in professional associations (73.9 %) is much higher than that of in-house public relations experts (44.4 %), and they are more familiar with public relations' codes of conduct. Almost two-thirds (63.2 %) indicate knowing the *Code d'Athènes* or the *Code of Lisbon* well; this rate stands in stark contrast with the 16.3 % of in-house practitioners who know these codes (for more details, see Röttger et al. 2003: 220–257). Briefly, executives of agencies seem to provide the main impetus for public relations professionalisation in Switzerland. However, this interpretation remains based on the traditional professionalisation concepts of the trait or power approaches.

With regard to in-house public relations professionals, the professionalism judgement would be devastating; socialisation pertaining to public relations is only marginally visible in the levels of training, continuing education and career paths. Accordingly, its contribution to the autonomisation or the monopolisation of the occupation remains moderate at best.

In contrast to these interpretations though, a more ambitious perspective extends traditional professionalisation models and conceives of public relations as an organisational function that manages interdependencies. Consequently, the degree of professionalisation cannot be derived directly

or quantitatively from the indicators of the trait approach. A professional balance between structural openness and social segregation as an empirical point of reference must be qualitatively adjusted for each variable that claims to measure professionalism.

Thus, we challenge the view that a strong reference to organisations and a weak reference to the occupation in the careers of public relations experts necessarily derogates the professionalisation process. We also reject the hypothesis that public relations professionals who are socialised solely in companies are automatically less qualified to manage interdependencies. Instead, we consider companies as organisational systems that never follow economic logic exclusively and, in light of system theory, we assign the economic system, like all other functional systems, to the environment of a company (cf. Nassehi 2004: 109). In doing so, organisational systems become "zones of dense communication" (ibid.: 110) that result from concurrent references to different functional communications as part of organisational decisions.

Thus, we favour a theoretical understanding that does not succumb to the temptation of reification by subordinating the meso-level into the macro-level (for a critical review, see Kneer 2001: 415–416). In turn, we also renounce the assumption that public relations as a profession must be an occupation unrestricted by specific, organizational, in-house-claims: "As a result of the increased complexity of the organisation and its environment, autonomy in its traditional sense is not as desirable as the ability to negotiate credibly within the power structure" (Serini 1993: 3). Society takes place within organizations, and therefore, the *societal* management of interdependence is necessary *within* companies, NPOs and public administrations.

The balanced model does not challenge the idea that societal environments have differential importance for organisations. An economic system generally is more important to a company than the political system, which is monitored more closely by public administrations' communications. Furthermore, public administrations carry a public mandate and are subject to greater attention from the public than are companies. As a result, journalists become important stakeholders for administrations, so it makes sense for them to hire journalists on a larger scale for public relations work, because these employees know the structures and processes of journalism.

The ability to differentiate between more and less important stakeholders and understand the logic of different social systems resulting from diverse socialisations can represent a form of professionalism that enables the management of interdependence. Accordingly, the heterogeneity of career paths, particularly among NPO representatives, primarily indicates the existence of large varieties of both organisations and relevant organisational environments.

In the end, only agency representatives contribute to the old-fashioned image of professions. This contribution represents a compulsory attribute, in that agencies act more market orientated than do in-house public relations professionals, and the question of professionalism figures primarily as an issue of "impression management." Structures of traditional professions may be outdated, but their semantics remain useful as a repertoire for a strategic "competence in demonstrating competence" (Pfadenhauer 2003).

In all, the theoretical objectives of research into public relations as a occupational field could be formulated as follows: (1) Consider questions of impression management within the power approach, (2) continue to exploit the descriptive potential of the trait approach, and (3) relativise the notion of social segregation by implementing a balanced approach that takes into account the need for structural openness of professional public relations within and for organizations.

References

ABRAHAMSON, MARK (ed.) (1967). The Professional in the Organization, Chicago: Rand McNally.

BECHER, MARTINA (1996). Moral in der PR? Eine empirische Studie zu ethischen Problemen im Berufsfeld Öffentlichkeitsarbeit: Vol. 1 Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, Public Relations und Kommunikationsmanagement, Berlin: Vistas.

BECK, ULRICH; BRATER, MICHAEL & DAHEIM, HANSJÜRGEN (1980). Soziologie der Arbeit und der Berufe: Grundlagen, Problemfelder, Forschungsergebnisse, Reinbek: Rowohlt.

BENSON, J.KENNETH (1973). The Analysis of Bureaucratic-Professional Conflict: Functional versus Dialectical Approaches. *Sociological Quarterly* 14: 376–394.

CARDWELL, JEAN (1997). Career Paths in Public Relations. In: CAYWOOD, C. L. (ed.). The Handbook of Strategic Public Relations & Integrated Communications, Boston: McGraw-Hill: 3–14.

DAHEIM, HANSJÜRGEN (1973). Professionalisierung: Begriff und einige latente Makrofunktionen. In: ALBRECHT, G.; DAHEIM, H. & SACK, F. (eds.). Soziologie. Sprache. Bezug zur Praxis. Verhältnis zu anderen Wissenschaften: René König zum 65. Geburtstag, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag: 232–249.

DAVIES, CELIA (1983). Professionals in Bureaucracies: The Conflict Thesis Revisited. In: DINGWALL, R. & LEWIS, P. (eds.). The Sociology of the Professions: Lawyers, Doctors and Others, London: Macmillan: 177–194.

DEES, MATTHIAS, & DÖBLER, THOMAS (1997). Public Relations als Aufgabe für Manager? Rollenverständnis, Professionalisierung, Feminisierung: Eine empirische Untersuchung, Stuttgart: Edition 451.

DEWE, BERND et al. (1995). Professionelles soziales Handeln: Soziale Arbeit im Spannungsfeld zwischen Theorie und Praxis (2nd Edition), Weinheim: Juventa.

ELLIOTT, PHILIP R. C. (1972). The sociology of the professions, London: Macmillan.

FREIDSON, ELIOT (1975). Dominanz der Experten: Zur sozialen Struktur medizinischer Versorgung, München: Urban & Schwarzenberg.

FREIDSON, ELIOT (1984). The Changing Nature of Professional Control. *Annual Review of Sociology* 10/1: 1–20.

GRUNIG, JAMES E. & HUNT, TODD (1984). Managing Public Relations, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

HESSE, HANS A. (1968). Berufe im Wandel: Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Professionalisierung, Stuttgart, Germany: Enke.

JARREN, OTFRIED (1994). Kann man mit Öffentlichkeitsarbeit die Politik «retten»? Überlegungen zum Öffentlichkeits-, Medien- und Politikwandel in der modernen Gesellschaft. Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen 24/4: 653–673.

JARREN, OTFRIED & RÖTTGER, ULRIKE (2004). Steuerung, Reflexierung und Interpenetration: Kernelemente einer strukturationstheoretisch begründeten PR-Theorie. In: RÖTTGER, U. (ed.). Theorien der Public Relations: Grundlagen und Perspektiven der PR-Forschung, Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag: 25–45.

KLATETZKI, THOMAS (1993). Wissen, was man tut: Professionalität als organisationskulturelles System: Eine ethnographische Interpretation, Bielefeld: KT-Verlag.

KNEER, GEORG (2001). Organisation und Gesellschaft: Zum ungeklärten Verhältnis von Organisations- und Funktionssystemen in Luhmanns Theorie sozialer Systeme. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 30/6: 407–428.

KURTZ, THOMAS (2003). Gesellschaft, Funktionssystem, Person: Überlegungen zum Bedeutungswandel professioneller Leistung. In: MIEG, H. & PFADENHAUER, M. (eds.). Professionelle Leistung – Professional Performance: Positionen der Professionssoziologie, Konstanz: UVK: 89–107.

LÜDKE, DOROTHEA (2001). «Feminisierung» und Professionalisierung der PR: US-amerikanische Konzeptionalisierungen eines sozialen Wandels. In: KLAUS, E.; RÖSER, J. & WISCHERMANN, U. (eds.). Kommunikationswissenschaft und Gender Studies, Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag: 163–186.

MERTEN, KLAUS (1997). PR als Beruf: Anforderungsprofile und Trends für die PR-Ausbildung. *prmagazin* 28/1: 43–50.

MOLLEDA, JUAN-CARLOS & ATHYDES, ANDRÉIA (2003). Public Relations Licensing in Brazil: Evolution and the Views of Professionals. *Public Relations Review* 29: 271–279.

NASSEHI, ARMIN (2004). Die Theorie funktionaler Differenzierung im Horizont ihrer Kritik. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 33/2: 98–118.

PARSONS, TALCOTT (1978). Research with Human Subjects and the «Professional Complex». In: PARSONS, T. (ed.). Action Theory and the Human Condition, New York: The Free Press: 35–65.

PFADENHAUER, MICHAELA (2003). Professionalität: Eine wissenssoziologische Rekonstruktion institutionalisierter Kompetenzdarstellungskompetenz, Opladen: Leske+Budrich.

RIEFLER, STEFAN (1989). Public Relations eine Profession? Berufssoziologie und Public Relations. In: SCHULZE-FÜRSTENOW, G. (ed.). Handbuch für Öffentlichkeitsarbeit von Wirtschaft, Verbänden, Behörden und Institutionen, Neuwied: Luchterhand.

RÖTTGER, ULRIKE (2000). Public Relations – Organisation und Profession: Öffentlichkeitsarbeit als Organisationsfunktion: Eine Berufsfeldstudie, Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.

RÖTTGER, ULRIKE; HOFFMANN, JOCHEN & JARREN, OTFRIED (2003). Public Relations in der Schweiz: Eine empirische Studie zum Berufsfeld Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, Konstanz: UVK.

SERINI, SHIRLEY A. (1993). Influences on the Power of Public Relations Professionals in Organizations: A Case Study. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 5/1: 1–25.

SIGNITZER, BENNO (1994). Professionalisierungstheoretische Ansätze und Public Relations: Überlegungen zur Public Relations-Berufsforschung. In: ARMBRECHT, W. & ZABEL, U. (eds.). Normative Aspekte der Public Relations: Grundlegende Fragen und Perspektiven: Eine Einführung, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag: 265–280.

TERHART, EWALD (1990). Professionen in Organisationen: Institutionelle Bedingungen der Entwicklung von Professionswissen, in: ALISCH, L.; BAUMERT, J. & BECK, KLAUS (eds.): Professionswissen und Professionalisierung, Braunschweig,Germany: Technische Universität: 151–170.

VAN RULER, BETTEKE (2003). Public Relations in the Polder: The Case of the Netherlands. In: KRISHNAMURTHY, S. & VERCIC, D. (eds.). The Global Public Relations Handbook: Theory, Research, and Practice, Mahwah, NJ, London: Erlbaum: 222–243.

WAMSER, CAROLA (1999). Die Wissensdimension im Professionalisierungsprozess der Public Relations: Wissenschaftlich-theoretische Fundierung und deren Auswirkungen auf eine potentielle Professionalisierung am Beispiel der Public Relations (PhD dissertation), Salzburg, Switzerland: Universität Salzburg.

WIENAND, EDITH (2003). Public Relations als Beruf: Kritische Analyse eines aufstrebenden Kommunikationsberufes, Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag.

WILENSKY, HAROLD L. (1972). Jeder Beruf eine Profession? In: LUCKMANN, T. & SPRONDEL, W. (eds.). Berufssoziologie, Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch: 198–215.