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## Public Relations Review



# Evaluating excellence: A model of evaluation for public relations practice in organizational culture and context

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### ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Excellence  
Public relations  
Measurement  
Canada  
Organization  
Alberta Energy Regulator

### ABSTRACT

This paper represents the development of an innovative and comprehensive model designed to measure public relations excellence within an organizational context. Drawing on established scales of evaluation for public relations practice, researchers propose a measurement model situated within excellence Theory. Through a partnership between the research team and The Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) organization, a case study approach was developed and implemented, highlighting the relationships between organizational culture and communication. The *Excellence in Organizational Context* model was tested within the AER, using empirical data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a self-report questionnaire survey conducted with individuals from various identified organizational stakeholder groups. This mixed-method approach was employed to explore and understand the multi-dimensional nature of public relations practice within this organization.

Researchers investigated eight dimensions of excellence in this model. Initial findings indicate that the *Excellence in Organizational Context* model proposed here is a valid and appropriate method for measuring public relations performance when applied as a mixed-method approach for measuring practice and establishing context within an organizational culture. This indicates the need for both organizational, stakeholder, and sector/national level data in confirming relevant benchmarks.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents a framework and methodology which articulates the variables, assumptions, and relationships that we argue should be considered in measuring public relations excellence within an organizational context. Drawing on established scales of evaluation for public relations practice, we propose, test and implement a comprehensive measurement model situated within [Grunig's \(1992\)](#) excellence theory. In this case study, the research team and an organizational partner, the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER), collaborated to develop and implement a model of evaluation which highlights the relationships between organizational culture and communication. The resulting *Excellence in Organizational Context Model* was tested within the AER using empirical data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a self-report questionnaire survey conducted with individuals from various identified organizational stakeholder groups. We took this

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mixed-method approach to explore and understand the multi-dimensional nature of public relations practice. Eight dimensions of organizational practice were identified as: *Access to Dominant Coalition, Ethics and Integrity, Organizational Role and Function of Public Relations, Proactive Worldview, Relationship Satisfaction, Requisite Variety, Strategic Communication Planning, and Symmetry and Mutuality.*

To understand the practices embodied within these dimensions, we used, when possible, previously validated scales of measurement. The resulting comprehensive measurement scale was tested for reliability, factor structure and content validity through assessment of inter-correlations between variables and a confirmatory factor analysis. The Organizational Public Relations Excellence scale (OPRES) was the resulting measurement instrument.

The data and analyses from both the in-depth interviews and the organizational survey were placed into context with existing organizational evaluation and satisfaction survey results. Finally, these findings were assessed against the backdrop of the national contextual data acquired from the GAP VIII Canadian 2014 study (Thurlow, Kushniryk, Blotnick, & Yue, 2014). Thus, we report upon research which created a measurement protocol (the OPRES) which was embedded in organizational climate and culture and situated within a contextual organizational ecology.

## 2. Literature review

To better understand the landscape of public relations excellence evaluation we examined three key areas of the public relations research literature relating to theorizing and measuring public relations excellence as well as the role of organizational context in doing so.

### 2.1. Measuring excellence

Our review of the literature reaffirms that there is no general consensus on how, or indeed whether, public relations can be measured (Huang, 2012). This has been due to inconclusive notions of the multidimensional effects of public relations, and the feasibility of cross-cultural application of a measurement tool (Huang, 2012). Public relations measurement provides a quantitative means by which to evaluate the value or importance of a public relations program, typically manifested as an appraisal or evaluation of a predetermined set of organizational goals or objectives (Lindenmann, 2003). Measurement tends to be more precise and more objective than public relations evaluation and tends to be most effective when efforts are made to identify and understand an organization's key goals, objectives, publics and communications (Lindenmann, 2003). Furthermore, this process is most effective when undertaken with consideration given to the organizational context as a whole (Lindenmann, 2003). Choi and Choi (2009) maintain "understanding public relations leadership from an organization-wide perspective opens up a whole new avenue for future research to strengthen public relations as a management function" (p. 293). Thus, measurement of public relations which is organizationally and culturally situated and yet not solely based upon achievement of specific objectives is both desirable and difficult to attain.

In developing a valid quantitative measurement instrument, we allowed the existing literature to strongly guide our choices. We specifically drew upon the following research and established scales: the Worldviews scale (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998; Grunig & White, 1992), the Measurement of Relationships scale (Hon & Grunig, 1999), the OPRA Organization-Public Relationship Assessment scale (Huang, 2001), the OPDC Organization-Public Dialogical Communication scale (Yang, Kang, & Cha, 2015) and the GAP VIII Canada national data – 2014 benchmarks (Thurlow et al., 2014). The Worldviews scale is a validated measurement tool which asserts that symmetrical and asymmetrical worldviews may be measured within a public relations context (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998), and it was derived from the scholarship of Grunig (1992) on excellence theory. The Measurement of Relationships scales consist of separate subscales, measuring relationship satisfaction, exchange relationships and communal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The Organization-Public Relationship Assessment (OPRA) scale was developed to examine the cross-cultural comparability of organization-public relationship within an organizational context (Huang, 2001). The Organization-Public Dialogical Communication (OPDC) scale measures the dialogue and trust/distrust relationships between organizations and their publics (Yang et al., 2015). In short, the existing literature provided previously tested scales, which could be adapted to our specific research questions and context.

### 2.2. Grunig's model of excellence

Over the past three decades, public relations scholars have endeavoured to develop discipline-specific theories that represent a theoretically-based body of knowledge representative of a scholarly profession. One key focus in this work has been the need for relevant and insightful methods of evaluation related to public relations practice and its organizational value. Although an evaluation of excellence has been elusive to date, the work in this area has been defined by excellence theory, introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Excellence theory is normative in nature and prescribes how to do public relations in an ideal situation (Pompper, 2004). Fundamental to this theory is an articulation of evolution of public relations from asymmetrical (focused on organizational goals and one-way communication) to symmetrical (respecting both organizational goals and those of other stakeholders) two-way communication.

Consistent with the literature on public relations excellence, we started from the position that an organizational culture which encourages two-way symmetrical patterns of communication facilitates the excellence model and enhances public

relations practice. Moreover, drawing on the tenets of excellence theory presented in the 1992 IABC research report edited by James Grunig, this current research was designed to measure public relations practice, organizational support for public relations, and dimensions of excellence as embodied in one specific organizational culture. The ten principles of excellence articulated in this theoretical framework are presented as variables related to overall organizational effectiveness, and Grunig (1992) suggests that these do not vary across cultures or national boundaries, or by organization size or industry type. Although there have been critiques of this framework as idealized and unattainable in practice, no alternative framework for understanding excellence has emerged. To address concerns in the literature about the practicality of this theoretical approach, we adopted a case-study application so that we may test the tenets of the theory within an applied context of practice.

### 2.3. Organizational context and public relations performance

Lindenmann (2003) maintains that public relations measurement is best undertaken with a comprehensive understanding of the organization already in place. Likewise, this deep understanding of the organization must be situated within the broader contextual ecology in which the organization functions if public relations measurement is to be more than only evaluation research, as detailed above. This means that our chosen methods must allow for a nuanced and situated examination of public relations in such a way as to keep in tension the needs for local reliability of measurement against broader, more generalizable validity needs. The literature on case study methods articulates that the external validity in such situations can be understood as transferability (e.g. Yin, 1989) and Yue (2010) suggests that comparison and contrasts within a single case represents examination of convergent/divergent validity. Consequently, we can invoke aspects of research trustworthiness such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to act as sophisticated proxies for otherwise more simplistic understandings of reliability and validity. Most importantly they allow for public relations performance to be measured when conceptualized as being situated both within an organization and located in the larger organizational context in which such an organization exists. Simply put, a single case study approach which respects the dyadic relationship of organizational culture and organizational context offers sufficient nuance to allow researchers to responsibly undertake public relations measurement research, as differentiated from evaluation research techniques and perspectives.

## 3. Theoretical framework and case study

Our theoretical starting point is firmly situated within the normative articulation of Grunig's excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992) as described in the literature review. In field research there is often a mismatch between theory as espoused in the literature and what is best described as theory situated in a particular context, i.e. substantive theory. This is at the heart of the tension between reliability and generalizable validity. In case study sampling situations (such as applied research in general and specifically this present case) the tension between existing theory and its specific application towards actionable ends can be resolved using multiple research methods. Often a type of grounded theory approach is used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to improve theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in order to allow effective application of substantive theorizing to a specific context. This is important to highlight because direct application of theory without some attempt to pragmatically locate it within the case context would result in poor elucidation of the constructs and measure. Informed by this perspective, we applied excellence theory to our case study organization, the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER).

The AER is the regulator for the provincial government of Alberta, a Western Canadian province rich in oil and other natural resources. With approximately 1200 employees, the AER operates at arms-length from the government, and is funded through industry. Because of the vast industry around energy extraction in this province, the AER is unique in its role in Canada, given the scope of its mandate. It also operates in a complex communication environment, with multiple stakeholders and divergent interests. As described on the organization's website ([www.aer.ca](http://www.aer.ca)):

The Alberta Energy Regulator mandate is to ensure the safe, efficient, orderly, and environmentally responsible development of hydrocarbon resources over their entire life cycle. This includes allocating and conserving water resources, managing public lands, and protecting the environment while providing economic benefits for all Albertans.

As a result of this unique position, both as a regulator and a communicator, the AER offers a rich site for investigation of intersections between communication, culture and excellence in public relations practice. Being a single case study we employed a quantitative survey and used qualitative interviews to determine the validity and reliability of the proposed measurement approach. Yin (1989) writes that case studies have a distinctive place within evaluation research, and that case studies may serve as meta-evaluations (studies of studies). As in most case studies, the organizational partner, the AER, played a significant role in the development of the method and data categories (Yin, 1989). The size of the organization provided a large sample from which to collect data, and the diversity of roles and responsibilities of its members allowed for a greater understanding of the organization as a whole.

### 3.1. Organizational context: the GAP VIII (Canada)

The GAP VIII (Canada) was an internationally undertaken effort to study generally accepted practices in public relations, led by the University of Southern California and supported by The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. CPRS (The Canadian Public Relations Society), the Communication + PR Foundation and Mount Saint Vincent University partnered to conduct the 2014 Canadian GAP VIII (Canada) survey, collecting data between December 2013 and March 2014 from senior communication professionals across Canada to develop a greater understanding of public relations practice within a national context and to provide benchmark data for future studies. Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, South Africa, and the United States also participated in the international study (Thurlow et al., 2014).

This present study draws upon and modified a number of GAP VIII (Canada) survey questions, which were used to develop demographic and general overview questions, as well as to supplement diversity and ethical dimension question groups in the original survey conceptualization. Thus the GAP VIII (Canada) study provided an empirically defensible articulation of the organizational context for our case study and also specific measures which could be modified and redeployed for this research.

## 4. Methodology

As described above, this study utilizes what is fundamentally a single case research design (Yin, 1989). The case we examined was selected for practical reasons (because actionable and pragmatic outcomes are expected from the research) and therefore the resulting research is grounded in the reality of the specific organization. Thus, our findings offer a framework for practical actions (Strübing, 2007; Yue, 2013). This research is therefore situated within an empiricist frame. This means that we strategically used techniques recursively situated between existing theory, its application, and augmentation of past knowledge with the context of the case being examined. We are consequently able to offer an evaluation/measurement model that can be deployed in other situations and organizations and is also planted in the specific context of the AER. In this section of the paper we first describe our methods, and their rationale(s). We then move to describe the samples, constructs and resulting measures that we deployed in our self-report survey questionnaire.

### 4.1. Method

Building upon the theoretical framework and case study methodology, we identified appropriate measures to investigate how the meta-level theory would function at the organizational level of analysis (see for example House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995). To form an empirical and defensible meso-level application of excellence theory we then conducted a number of qualitative in depth interviews. These interviews were intended to reveal support or refutation as to the applicability of the literature review to AER in light of national benchmark data. The interview data also provided organizationally specific information which informed the development of the dimensions and survey items themselves.

Quantitative data was then gathered through a survey questionnaire. Completed surveys were entered into a data matrix and processed via SPSS. When existing data were available as to the reliability (internal consistency) of the scales, we compared our data set to these historical findings. The reliability and factor analyses were conducted to verify the constructs as articulated based upon our interviews and the literature review of excellence theory. The next sections describe the samples obtained, some of their characteristics, and then move on to detail the constructs and measures. This sets the stage for discussion with some background to offer confidence in our findings.

### 4.2. Interviews

Our premise for developing the OPRES measurement instrument is that our model consists of several fundamental features, which were described by Grunig's (1992) principles of excellence and demonstrated conceptually and empirically in other studies.

We started our data collection with 34 in-depth interviews with participants who were recruited from various identified organizational stakeholder groups. The organization identified and recruited participants via email, information kiosks and manager rollout discussions. These interviews were conducted via telephone and in-person and were recorded and coded using emergent theme based principles that correspond to Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The process of coding involved aggregating the text into small "categories of information" and then assigning a label to a code. Then the codes were collapsed and related to broad themes that consisted of several codes combined to form a common idea (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews were compared and contrasted to examine for recurring themes and these data when juxtaposed with the excellence literature specifically informed how we undertook to understand and articulate the constructs that we would later measure using self-report surveying techniques. From these interviews and the excellence literature discussed previously, we proposed the following eight dimensions of Excellence in Organizational Context. These are:

1. Access to Dominant Coalition
2. Ethics and Integrity
3. Organizational Role and Function of Public Relations
4. Proactive Worldview
5. Relationship Satisfaction
6. Requisite Variety
7. Strategic Communication Planning
8. Symmetry and Mutuality

Taken in concert, these dimensions form an index of Excellence in Organizational Context, which is organizationally situated, and with constructs that are both inward and outward facing in terms of foci. With the confidence gained in the initial qualitative exploration of the applicability of excellence theory to the meso-level organizational context, we then operationalized constructs and their measures.

#### 4.3. *Generation of measurement items: theoretical item grouping*

Given our conceptualization of Excellence in Organizational Context, it was essential that its measure should capture all eight identified dimensions. However, no such unified measure existed at the inception of our study. Therefore we drew on four existing instruments which demonstrated high reliability and validity in published studies. The Access to the Dominant Coalition dimension investigates the degree to which public relations professionals had access to organizational management, decision-making and problem solving efforts (Choi & Choi, 2009). This is a key principle of excellence within the theoretical framework. The items in the subscale were drawn in part from the Organization-Public Dialogic Communication (OPDC) scale developed by Yang et al. (2015). These items referred to the ways in which organizational objectives, strategies, and decision making are managed at an organizational level.

The 'Organizational Role and Function of Public Relations' dimension was evaluated using two subscales: a ten-item 'Role of PR' and a six-item 'Function of PR' subscales. The role of PR subscale is inherently concerned with a more idealized understanding of what PR ought to be in an organization, whereas the function of PR is better understood as the practices which constitute public relations within the organization. These items were adapted from GAP VIII national study.

We used the Worldviews scale (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998; Grunig & White, 1992) to measure 'Strategic Communication Planning', 'Requisite Variety', and 'Proactive Worldview' dimensions. The Worldviews scale (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998) comprises 51 items aimed to measure various aspects of an organizational culture and worldview. The pool of items was sufficiently large to select statements that reflected our definitions of the proposed dimensions. To evaluate 'Strategic Communication Planning' we modified six items from the Worldviews scale. Four items were selected to measure 'Access to Dominant Coalition'. Two-item 'Diversity' and seven-item 'Openness' subscales were used to evaluate 'Requisite Variety' dimension. Requisite variety as a construct was incorporated by Grunig (1992) into the 10 principles of excellence from the work of Karl Weick (1979) who advocated that teams within organizations needed to remain open to diversity of ideas within their environments. This could be achieved by both assuring diversity within the makeup of the public relations team, and creating the conditions for openness to new ideas from all stakeholder perspectives as a matter of how public relations functions within the organization. As Vogus and Sutcliffe (2016) assert, 'requisite variety enables organizations to notice more, develop a broader repertoire of responses, and be more adaptive over time' (p.1). In essence, requisite variety as a principle of excellence indicates that the diversity within an organization should reflect the diversity within the communities in which the organization operates. Likewise, divergent perspectives must be included and respected within organizational decision making and a diversity of approaches with regard to communication are required to effectively reach a variety of communities and address differing perspectives.

Six items reflecting "Proactive Worldview" were also adapted from the Worldviews scale. We adapted fourteen items from the Measurement of Relationships scale (Hon & Grunig, 1999) to measure 'Relationship Satisfaction' (ten items) and 'Symmetry and Mutuality' (four items) and to reflect our definitions of these dimensions. Symmetry and mutuality reflects the degree to which two parties (i.e. organization and stakeholder groups) are able to influence one another. Research shows that two-way or symmetrical communication leads to more stable and productive relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

For 'Ethics and Integrity', we used four items from the Organization-Public Relationship Assessment scale OPRA (Huang, 2001) as well as items from the GAP VIII (Canada) for national-level comparisons. The subscale also includes measurements of trust including dependability and competence.

A 59-item questionnaire was created representing all eight dimensions of the Measurement Model of Excellence in Public Relations. A seven-point scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" (7) to "Strongly Disagree" (1), with verbal labels for scale points 2 through 6, came with each statement. The questionnaire consisted of a number of negatively worded statements. Scale values were reversed for negatively worded statements prior to data analysis.

The 'Access to Dominant Coalition' and 'Ethics and Integrity' subscales were specifically designed for public relations professionals. These subscales were only administered to the Public Affairs employees within the organization. This group was targeted specifically for these questions because the excellence framework we are building on describes access to the dominant coalition as central to public relations practice and as a defining element of a management function. 'Access to the Dominant Coalition' on a broader level throughout the organization is not particularly relevant in this specific context. The

**Table 1**  
 Summary of Results of Purification of Excellence Instrument.

Dimension	Scale	No. of Items	No. of Factors	Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha$ )	Factor Loading Range
Organizational Role and Function of Public Relations	Public Relations Function	10	1	0.895	0.460 – 0.836
	Role of Public Relations	5	1	0.781	0.451 – 0.910
Access to Dominant Coalition Symmetry and Mutuality Strategic Communication Planning	Access to Dominant Coalition	4	1	0.735	0.589 – 0.906
	Symmetry and Mutuality	5	1	0.87	0.712 – 0.910
	Strategy/Research	3	1	0.705	0.752 – 0.817
Requisite Variety	Diversity	2	1	0.572	0.837
	Openness	7	1	0.867	0.592 – 0.812
Ethics & Integrity	Ethics and Integrity	4	1	0.821	0.723 – 0.872
Relationship Satisfaction	Relationship Satisfaction	8	1	0.887	0.707 – 0.825
Proactive Worldview	Symmetrical Worldview	6	2 <sup>1</sup>	0.77	0.660 – 0.879

'Ethics and Integrity' subscale focused on the organization's Public Affairs employees as this dimension was informed by the nationally benchmarked GAP VIII Canada data which was gathered only from public relations practitioners nationwide. In addition, some of the questions pertained specifically to public relations ethics in a discipline-specific manner.

4.4. Data collection and sample

The survey questionnaire was developed and distributed electronically through email invitations and reminders for voluntary participation. Because of the arms-length anonymous nature of the surveying procedure, the data collection was conducted in accordance with the University Research Ethics Board policies. Overall, we received 376 completed responses from the AER employees. The response rate was 29%. Our sampling method succeeded in providing responses from all branches of the organization: Operations – 175 (46%); Strategy and Regulatory – 59 (16%); Corporate services – 85 (22%); Stakeholder and Government Relations – 23 (6%); Public Affairs – 28 (7%); Other (CEO office, Hearing Commissioner, Executive Advisor, and Law) – 6 (2%). 147 (39%) of participants were males, and 168 (44%) were females. Sixty-two (62) or 16% of participants did not disclose their gender identity.

4.5. Data Analyses: Purification of the Instrument

We started our data analyses with the computation of Cronbach's alpha following Churchill's (1979) recommendation. Due to the fact that our Excellence in Organizational Context Model is multidimensional, the alpha coefficient was computed separately for each of the subscales (Churchill, 1979). Then, the factor loading for each item was computed. On the basis of these analyses five poorly performing items were eliminated from the scale. The items were eliminated if they had: 1) low item-to-total correlation values; 2) low commonalities with their intended construct and loaded highly on unintended factors; and 3) their factor loading was less than 0.4 with other items of their respective subscales. We repeated the iterative sequence of computing alphas, item-to-total correlations, and factor loading, followed by deletion of items which resulted in a set of 54 items. After the poorly performing items were eliminated, the alphas for each of the subscales were computed again and presented in Table 1. For brevity, this table also summarizes other key details regarding the dimensions and their measurement characteristics, such as subscale means, and factor loading ranges for each subscale.

We argue that all subscales represented viable constructs of measuring Excellence in Organizational Context. The Cronbach's alpha values for nine out of ten subscales ranged from 0.705 to 0.895 and reached acceptable levels and indicated good internal consistency between each item in each subscale. However, the alpha value of the 'Diversity' subscale did not reach the acceptable level due to the fact that it consisted of just two items. This reflects the fact that the two items are not collinear and thus we could not legitimately conclude that diversity was unidimensional. This could be solely a measurement artifact in that we did not have sufficient items, or even perhaps reflect that diversity could be argued to be better understood as an index and its formative indicators. Regardless, we chose to maintain the inclusion of diversity as a manifestation of an organization's requisite variety. In addition, nine out of ten subscales consisted of one factor. The Proactive Worldview subscale was found to be comprised of two factors which we labeled "two-way communication" and "proactive communication."

The combined Cronbach's alpha for the final 54-item unified scale was excellent (.955), therefore, the 54-item OPRES is found to be a reliable instrument and is ready for the future testing with data from new samples.

<sup>1</sup> Factor 1 (4 items) is two-way communication: Factor 2 (2 items) is proactive communication.

#### 4.6. Confirmatory factor analysis

As the next step, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis in order to 1) determine whether better subscales could be produced than the excellence theory based scales that we have identified in the previous step of our data analysis, and 2) confirm the key factors that explain common and unique variances in all items that describe the dimensions of excellence in public relations. In our factor analysis, we excluded the 'Access to Dominant Coalition' and 'Ethics and Integrity' subscales because they were specifically designed for public relations professionals and were administered only to 28 members of Public Affairs within the organization. We also excluded the 'Proactive Worldview' subscale because it was found to be comprised of two factors. The 'Proactive worldview' is a dimension that reflects not just the management function of public relations practice but also structural factors within the organization which impact the proactive or reactive nature of communication within the organization. As this is a complex relationship between practice and structure, we have chosen to develop this dimension as a two-factor subscale.

We used a Varimax rotation option for factor rotations and to calculate interfactor correlations of the 40 remaining items. Factors were extracted if their eigenvalues were greater than 1. Items with loading values less than 0.4 were excluded from corresponding factors. Initially, eight factors were extracted as a result of the factor analysis, which explained 66% of variance. We examined the loading of items and evaluated the theoretical connection between items within factors. The eight discovered factors strongly reflected the dimensions of public relations excellence (see Table 2). Factor one perfectly grouped all remaining eight items of the 'Relationship Satisfaction' scale. Factor two consisted of four 'Symmetry and Mutuality' items. Seven items of 'Requisite Variety: Openness' loaded on factor three. Nine out of ten items of 'Public Relations Function' loaded on factor 4. Factor five was composed of three 'Role of Public Relations' items. Two other items of this subscale constituted factor seven. All three items of 'Strategic Communication Planning' loaded on the sixth factor. The two items from 'Requisite Variety: Diversity' loaded on two different factors: factor three and factor eight.

The confirmatory factor analysis was remarkably successful despite minor inconsistencies in factor loading compared to theoretical item grouping that is based on the dimensions of the Excellence in Organizational Context Model. Although these factor solutions may be of great value, the initial excellence theory based scales, which evaluate the eight dimensions of the Excellence in Organizational Context Model, have strong alphas, and, as such, the preference is given to the initial theory-based scale over those that emerged from this factor analysis.

### 5. Discussion and conclusions

#### 5.1. Confirmation of model

Initial findings indicate that the Excellence in Organizational Context Model proposed here is a valid and reliable method for measuring public relations performance when applied as a mixed-method approach for measuring practice and establishing context within an organizational culture. This indicates the need for both organizational, stakeholder, and sector/national level data in confirming relevant benchmarks.

#### 5.2. Outcomes for the case study

The OPRES scale is reported and interpreted via means with a low mean representing less evidence of a dimension than a higher computed mean. The AER OPRES scores were interpreted as ranging from 'Good' to 'Excellent' in terms of public relations performance on all of the eight dimensions of excellence measured in this model. The only dimension that was significantly below a 5 (interpreted as "excellent") was the Access to the Dominant Coalition dimension with an average score of 3.69 out of 7. The highest scoring dimension was Ethics and Integrity with an average score of 5.56 out of 7. Many strengths of the Public Affairs Branch (PA) came through in both the quantitative analysis and the qualitative interviews. We noted a strong feeling in the organization that PA contributes significantly to the success of the organization, that the work PA has done around initiatives such as the plain language strategy, and the professionalism of the branch are well received and appreciated. The professionalism and speed of response times were noted by both internal and external stakeholders. All respondents indicated they feel best served when they are connected with an individual PA Branch member assigned directly to their specific project.

It is worth noting in this section that the main areas for development indicated through this analysis involve organization-wide considerations and are not necessarily specific to the PA Branch. For example, confusion around organization-wide objectives, or areas of responsibility for organizational procedures, sometimes fall on the PA Branch as they are seen as the last "gatekeeper" in the organization before communication is disseminated.

Most salient is that the organization can have some conviction as to the nature of its excellence within the AER's organizational context, which is a substantially different understanding than what could be accrued through simple evaluation strategies against organizational objectives.

<sup>2</sup> Q question item on the survey.

**Table 2**  
 Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

	Component							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Relationship Satisfaction (RS)								
RS Q <sup>2</sup> 1	0.811							
RS Q2	0.715							
RS Q3	0.688							
RS Q4	0.672							
RS Q5	0.581							
RS Q6	0.544		0.427					
RS Q7	0.525		0.400					
RS Q8	0.489							
Symmetry and Mutuality (SM)								
SM Q1		0.881						
SM Q 2		0.832						
SM Q3		0.784						
SM Q4		0.729						
SM Q5		0.687						
Requisite Variety: Openness(RVO)								
RVO Q1			0.760					
RVO Q2			0.718					
RVO Q3	0.414		0.710					
RV O Q4	0.416		0.635					
RVO Q5	0.509		0.542					
RV O Q6			0.519	0.449				
RVO Q7			0.400					
Public Relations Function (PRF)								
PRF Q1				0.627				
PRF Q2	0.452			0.625				
PRF Q3	0.430			0.540				
PRF Q4				0.426				
PRFQ5	0.679			0.420				
PRF Q6	0.577			0.375				
PRF Q7	0.627			0.551				
PRF Q8	0.625			0.410				
PRF Q9	0.470		0.421					
PRF Q10				0.520				0.572
Role of Public Relations (RPR)								
RPR Q1					0.838			
RPR Q2					0.809			
RPR Q3					0.743			
RPR Q4					0.285		0.767	
RPR Q5					0.448		0.486	
Strategic Communication Planning (SCP)								
SCP Q1						0.839		
SCP Q2						0.747		
SCP Q3						0.727		
Requisite Variety: Diversity (RVD)								
RVD Q1								0.794
RVD Q2		0.794						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.  
 Rotation converged in 12 iterations.

5.3. Implications of our findings

Overall, the OPRES has performed well in terms of consistency and validity in the measurement of public relations performance. The Excellence in Organizational Context model has allowed us to investigate the theoretical framework of excellence as an approach within a context that allows for both dimensions of practice and nationally established benchmarks. In concrete terms, this provides encouraging evidence of the applicability of this model to public relations units working within organizational contexts.

It is hoped that these findings will: (1) contribute to improving future research endeavors of scholars studying the evaluation of excellence in public relations practice; (2) provide practitioners with a scale that can be used to measure the performance of public relations units within organizations in a theoretically grounded approach; and (3) raise the standard



by which measuring instruments are designed and employed for measurement and study of excellence in public relations practice.

Sound measures of evaluation are especially critical for practitioners attempting to understand excellent public relations practices within organizations. To date, there has been much discussion in the literature on the need for these measures, but a dearth in the application of research in this area.

#### 5.4. Limitations of study

The OPRES measurement is based upon survey reportage and thus is subject to a variety of biases. These are both contextualized and mitigated through deployment of the complete *Excellence in Organizational Context Model* approach as we have described above. Specifically, our use of triangulation through interviews and national level data descriptive of the practice of public relations in Canada used method-based controls to mitigate the varieties of self-report biases common to survey techniques.

## 6. Conclusion

Practitioners must be able to act upon evaluation research if it is to provide value. Simple public relations evaluation research against excellence theory is tricky because it may be ineffective in capturing the broader ecology in which the organization is situated. This research therefore offers a more refined, strategic and situation-dependent perspective on excellence theory. The unique opportunity to examine excellence qualitatively and quantitatively, inwardly and outwardly facing, through process and outcomes, and against appropriate background context illustrates what is necessary to achieve a realistic, practically-oriented and actionable assessment of excellence in organizational communication.

The Excellence in Organizational Context Model presented in this paper may offer a useful response to the call for relevant and applicable measurements of public relations excellence within organizations. Although this call has been referenced over the past three decades, little has emerged in the way of an applied model of evaluation which has the potential to address the complexities of the excellence theory framework.

## Acknowledgments and funding

This work was supported by the Alberta Energy Regulator (AER) from 2015-2016.

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