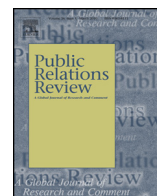




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Social networks, power, and public relations: *Tertius iungens* as a cocreational approach to studying relationship networks

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important roles for public relations professionals is building relationships. The fundamental assumption behind the normative relationship-building role of public relations is that relationships among organizations and publics are mutually beneficial. However, some network theories (e.g., structural holes theory) prescribe that maintaining many organizational relationships is inefficient, instead suggesting that organizations should occupy a powerful network position by separating and controlling the flow of information between others. Under such theories, power comes in the form of *tertius gaudens* (the third who benefits at the expense of others). In this article we argue that such an approach to power in public relations is manipulative and unethical, and offer an alternative approach via the concept of *tertius iungens* (the third who joins others), which endorses connecting organizations and emphasizes the collective good.

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1. Introduction

New theories are often adopted and advanced by a scholarly discipline before the idiosyncrasies, possibilities, and consequences of such an adoption are explored. As Kuhn (1970) suggested, “a new theory, however special its range of application, is seldom or never just an increment to what is already known” (p. 7). New theories require adaptation and accommodation in order to fit into the established assumptions and existing practices of a field. Such is the case with social network theories and analysis in public relations. Scholars have used the method to study various relationship networks (cf., Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003; Sommerfeldt, 2013a) without first discussing the ethical fit of network theories within the scholarship or practice of public relations.

Network theory and social network analysis (SNA) are well established in management, business, and sociology, and a growing body of network research in communication and public relations has emerged over the last decade. The application of network research to public relations contexts has, by and large, taken a structural approach to the study of relationships. The structural approach fits squarely within a functional view of public relations—one that “sees publics and communication as tools or means to achieve organizational goals” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 651). We believe network research can also take a “cocreational approach” that focuses on relationships among publics and organizations that create shared meanings and

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goals, and place an “implicit value on relationships going beyond the achievement of an organizational goal” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652).

The idea that public relations professionals should be relationship builders has become a well-established part of the world-view of both academics and industry professionals (e.g., Ledingham, 2003). Yet, many basic assumptions of network theories actually run counter to the cocreational, dialogic, and socially oriented approaches to public relations that have gained prominence in recent years (cf., Heath, 2006; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Sommerfeldt, 2013b; Taylor, 2010). For example, the notion that organizational members fill “structural holes” (Burt, 1992), and are able to selfishly “broker” information for the good of themselves or their organization, shows little concern for the benefits of relationships to other stakeholders, stakeholders, or other publics and their role in the meaning-making process (cf. Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Perhaps unknowingly, public relations scholars have imported network concepts such as structural holes, brokerage, and power from the business literature whole cloth with little critical examination of how concepts like power are constructed in network research. We believe the way power has been reified in network research is flawed and unethical. The SNA approach to power raises questions for public relations researchers that must be addressed before network research can become fully integrated into public relations scholarship and mesh with the cocreational view of the practice.

The purpose of this article is to critically assess the assumptions of network research by problematizing the concepts of brokerage and *tertius gaudens*. We focus on ethical questions surrounding power in network theories, and offer a solution in the concept of “*tertius iungens*.” To that end, the article is organized into four sections. In the first section, we provide an overview of social network theory and analysis, how public relations researchers have used SNA, and identify the key SNA concepts used by researchers including brokerage and *tertius gaudens* (Burt, 1992). Section two takes up the concept of power in communication and public relations, and how it applies to SNA. The third section examines the contradiction inherent in SNA’s view of networks as a “power over” tool for manipulating others. Finally, section four introduces the concept of *tertius iungens* or “the third who joins” (Baker & Obstfeld, 1999; Lammers et al., 2009). Section four offers suggestions for how SNA research in public relations should move forward, and argues *tertius iungens* is a more ethical replacement for several SNA concepts based on power-over assumptions.

2. Social network theory and analysis

Network theories and social network analysis (SNA) are still new to public relations and have great potential for informing public relations theory and practice. In light of its relative newness and the necessity of new theories to mesh with the axiological, epistemological, and ontological assumptions of the field, a brief overview of SNA is provided here.

2.1. What is social network analysis?

Social network theory and its related methods go back more than 80-years to work in sociology, mathematics, and business management—a discipline that is arguably responsible for advancing the bulk of network theory and research (Scott, 2000). Generally speaking, network theories have sought to explain how individuals and groups interact, and how such interactions lead to various outcomes (Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2011). Network theories are concerned with three primary elements: (1) relations between individuals and groups, (2) how connections influence individuals and groups, and (3) how individuals and groups create, maintain, and transform networks (Knoke & Yang, 2008).

SNA refers to a methodology that examines the connections of individuals and other entities in a system. Terms like actors, nodes, and vertices are used to reference concepts such as individuals, groups, and organizations. The assessment of connections among actors includes examining concepts such as frequency, stability, multiplexity, strength, direction, symmetry/reciprocity, and others. The actors and the connections or relations among them create the network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

As Monge and Contractor (2000) explained, “communication networks are the patterns of contact between communication partners that are created by transmitting and exchanging messages through time and space” (p. 440). Communication networks represent the patterns or points of contact among individuals and organizations in complex social, business, friendship, familial, and other networks. Network analysis has been used to examine the points of contact among communicators in a social media network (Beard & Yang, 2011; Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Saffer, Taylor, & Yang, 2013), among international actors in public diplomacy efforts and NGO activities (Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003, 2005, 2011; Yang & Taylor, 2010), among business units in a competitive market (Burt, Kilduff, & Tasselli, 2013), and among members of organizations (Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Treadway et al., 2013). Such research on patterns of contact among communicators examines the exchange of resources or information and how the overall network structure affects the potential agency of actors.

Many researchers in business management equate the exchange of information and communication studied by social network analysts as a resource exchange. The resource exchange emphasis in network research developed from the business management and resource dependency literature (cf. Mizruchi, 1994). As Haythornthwaite (1996) explained: “Social network analysis is an approach and set of techniques used to study the exchange of resources among actors (i.e., individuals, groups, and organizations)” (p. 323).

While SNA is clearly based on relational and resource-exchange patterns, true consideration of communication or relational dimensions is missing from the literature. Many researchers in public relations have advanced a cocreational

orientation (cf. Botan & Taylor, 2004; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Heath, 2006); yet, the whole-cloth adoption of network concepts in public relations research prevents such research from becoming fully commensurate with the assumptions of cocreational public relations. While many researchers have focused on socially-oriented topics such as NGO networks using SNA (e.g., Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005), our focus is the axiological assumptions within network theories. We believe a cocreational orientation can foster a more ethical application of SNA to public relations research. With this basic understanding of SNA, we turn to an overview of what has been written in public relations.

2.2. Social network analysis in public relations

A decade ago, Taylor and Doerfel (2005) introduced social network analysis to the public relations literature as a method to study relationships among organizations and publics. Since that time, a number of public relations articles have employed SNA to study the relationships within and among NGOs (Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005; Yang & Taylor, 2010), organizational websites (Saffer, Taylor, & Yang, 2013; Uysal & Yang, 2013), and members of a Twitter group (Himmelboim et al., 2014). Public relations researchers have employed network theories including “the strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973), “structural hole theory” (Burt, 1992), and “resource dependency theory” (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Of these, structural holes theory is the most often discussed by public relations scholars (cf., Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003, 2005; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

Structural holes are communicative gaps between organizations and other groups and organizations. Within a network, groups (or sub-networks) form and are separated from each other by “structural holes.” Burt (1992) explored individuals’ network positions and postulated that certain individuals benefit from connections to multiple sub-networks. Burt (2001) argued that individuals who connect separated groups have “an opportunity to broker the flow of information between people and control the projects that bring together people, from opposite sides of the whole” (Burt, 2001, p. 35, author’s emphasis). Burt (1992, 2001) theorized that actors who broker structural holes receive a benefit from their social relations by having access to nonredundant information and resources. Two interrelated concepts—brokerage and *tertius gaudens*—are fundamental to structural holes theory and we briefly introduce them here before offering a more extended critique later.

2.2.1. Brokerage

Brokerage is a structural holes theory concept that involves taking advantage of the knowledge or resources of other individuals and members of a social network. As Burt (1992) suggested, “entrepreneurs” can exploit dense networks and relationship networks such as structural holes, seeking out partners with whom they can form unique, or “non-redundant,” relationships and broker information among members and groups. Individuals who act as gatekeepers, boundary spanners, and mediators are examples of brokers filling structural holes (Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Brokerage, in essence, represents a communicative orientation towards other individuals and organizations that seeks to control information flow and relationship building potential, exerting power over others by controlling the flow of information and access, while bolstering one’s own reputation and status. From a public relations standpoint, especially one adopting a cocreational view of theory and practice, brokerage can be used unethically. Brokerage is an overt exercise of power and domination, at least as treated in the management literature. A similarly amoral communication stance is found in the second fundamental concept of structural holes theory, *tertius gaudens*.

2.2.2. Tertius gaudens

Building on the concept of brokerage is *tertius gaudens*. A *tertius gaudens* is a Latin term for the “third who benefits.” As Burt (1992) wrote, *tertius gaudens* “involves bringing together players who are willing to negotiate, have sufficiently comparable resources to view one another’s preferences as valid, but won’t negotiate with one another directly to the exclusions of the *tertius*” (p. 33). The broker that fills a structural hole is the *tertius* who benefits from bringing two unconnected parties together. An organization may benefit (i.e. be the *tertius gaudens*) when it is able to broker the information or communication between other organizations in a network.

Public relations researchers have asserted that brokers and *tertiuses* are the most influential members of a network (cf. Himmelboim et al., 2014; Saffer et al., 2013; Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005). Moreover, dominant views of *tertius gaudens* in business and management suggest that actors often intentionally obscure the identity of tertiary partners so that the individual or organization brokering the exchange can benefit (cf. Lammers et al., 2009). An organization gains advantage through a structural hole by concealing relationships with others within the network (Burt, 1992).

Using one’s position as a *tertius gaudens* in such a way clearly violates professional standards such as the PRSA code of ethics under the free flow of information principle, which states members should advance “the free flow of accurate interests represented. . . [and truthful information [which] is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision making in a democratic society] avoid deceptive tactics” (PRSA Code of Ethics, 2015). The notion of the *tertius*, at least as represented in business and management, is contrary to the ethical code of contemporary public relations practice.

Despite this obvious ethical conflict, public relations scholars have adopted structural holes measures and argued for *tertius* benefits like information non-redundancy, without questioning whether assumptions such as information non-redundancy are actually good for public relations (e.g., Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005). While this research has focused on civil society networks—and has worked to forward public relations’ cocreational role in building civil society and

social capital—questions remain about the applicability and ethicality of network concepts when imported unaltered from business and management. This article does not seek to diminish the important contributions of network scholars in public relations. Rather, we seek to call attention to the original intent and meaning inherent in SNA concepts used in prior public relations research.

For those who embrace the cocreational turn in public relations, structural holes, brokerage, and *tertius gaudens* represent an unethical orientation towards stakeholders and publics. Exploitation and power-over relationships characterizes the thinking of many SNA scholars (i.e., Burt, 1992) and are part of a number of theories such as structural holes. Although power has been reified in a number of ways in public relations, network theorists have treated the concept of power rather narrowly, which is the basis for the critique that follows.

3. Power in communication, public relations, and SNA

The importance of power has been of interest to philosophers, scholars, politicians, dictators, and tacticians for millennia. Indeed, some have argued that ancient texts such as the Bible actually illustrate how the conscious exercise of power is much older than many give credit (Haley, 1969). The concept of power, how it is reified, how it is exercised, and how it influences the decisions and actions of individuals and groups has been the subject of wide exploration. This first section will briefly review the concept of power as it relates to the field of communication and public relations, and follow with a brief summary of power in SNA theory.

3.1. Power as a communicative concept

People who have power, and people who have no power, are often more interested in the concept than the everyday person with nothing obvious at stake. Thus, monarchs, tyrants, politicians, and managers on one side of the spectrum are interested in how power works, while on the other side of the spectrum are individuals and groups that seem to have little (or less) power: the oppressed, the poor, the poorly educated, women, minorities, immigrants, and members of social movement groups (cf. Freire, 1982). Although the members of the power have-nots usually do not have the time (or inclination) to spend reading academic and philosophical texts, many have studied the techniques of their oppressors and internalized them, while others have been inspired by alternative conceptions of power such as movement theory, persuasion, feminism, and violent and non-violent protesting (Alinsky, 1971).

Power has long been equated with “power over,” or the ability to dominate those with no power or less power. Thus, power is enacted as a sword or a club. However, scholars have also explored the relational nature of power and how even those who have power over others, are also beholden to the power held by others. Power is not a monolithic construct. As Emerson (1962) has argued:

It is commonly observed that some person X dominates Y, while being subservient in relations with Z. Furthermore, these power relations are frequently intransitive! Hence, to say that “X has power” is vacant, unless we specify “over whom.” In making these necessary qualifications we force ourselves to face up to the obvious: power is a property of the social relation; it is not an attribute of the actor. (p. 32)

The relational, culture bound, and symbolic nature of power was not lost on communication scholars. Rhetoricians have known for thousands of years that a compelling speech given at the right time can mean more than an army (cf. Bitzer, 1968; Conley, 1990). For that same reason, rhetoric and persuasion have been seen as subversive by establishment figures and institutions (cf. Cooper & Nothstine, 1998). Teaching people how to exercise power through language is not something valued by establishment leaders. Indeed, knowledge, training, and rhetorical skills have often been what those *without* power lacked that the power elites controlled.

Other prominent forces that have influenced thinking about power in communication have been feminist and postmodern scholars like Foucault (1977, 1980), Mumby and Putnam (1994), critical scholars like Spears and Lea (1994) and scholars like French and Raven (1959). Buzzanell (1994) provided an elegant summary of feminist positions on power, noting that various categories of feminists have different conceptions of power. Liberal feminists, for example, seek to obtain men’s power, while in Marxist feminism, *relationships* are dominated by power (Buzzanell, 1994). Similarly, Foucault (1977) spent considerable time exploring a critical/feminist view of power and explained how power includes both physical and psychic components. The power of the legal system, for example, to mete out punishment, is enacted within certain socio-legal constructs. As Foucault explained, the power of the legal system:

is intended as a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientificolegal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications and rules, from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity. (p. 23)

For Foucault, and many others, modern enactments of power represent much more than the simple “power-over” others by elites.

A third, and perhaps the best-known conception of power comes from French and Raven’s (1959) seminal chapter on power. French and Raven catalogued six types of power that are intended to describe the complexity and range of power enactments: (1) *Reward power*—the ability to administer to another things he or she desires or to remove or decrease things

he or she does not desire; (2) *Coercive power*—the ability to use force to obtain what one wants from another. Coercive power is socially dependent and includes impersonal and personal coercion; (3) *Legitimate power*—the ability to administer to another feelings of obligation or responsibility; (4) *Referent power*—the ability to administer to another feelings of personal acceptance or approval; (5) *Expert power*—the ability to administer to another information, knowledge, or expertise; and (6) *Information provider*—the ability to broker one's information for higher status, more pay, a more influential economic, political, or social position, etc.

French and Raven's variables are much more sophisticated than the simple "power over" model described by Emerson (1962). As we move to public relations to see how power has been reified in our own discipline, we see similar complexity.

3.2. Power in the public relations literature

Like communication, public relations has a sophisticated grasp of what power means. Although many professionals still treat power very simplistically, as a measure of one's financial or political strength (cf. Garcia, 2011; Zhang, 2007; Zoch et al., 2008), power is also seen as a dynamic social force with both positive and negative connotations.

For example, cultural treatments of power, such as Hofstede (1997)—whose cultural variables have been widely used in public relations—describe world-views where power is invested in another because of his/her age, gender, hierarchical status, etc. Deference is paid to elders in some cultures merely because of their longevity or perceived wisdom. Similarly, in Thai culture, for example, one's chronological age (to the minute or second) is an important determinant of the way that one person must treat another.

"Power," in cultural enactments, is not so much a "power-over," in the classic conception of power, nor does power granted to someone else because of who they are fit neatly into one of French and Raven's categories. The French and Raven power framework has a Western emphasis that smacks of resentment and jealousy. In high context cultures with high face demands (cf. Kent & Taylor, 2011), the strictures of face or power are not perceived as something negative.

Another cultural manifestation of power of interest to public relations scholars is the principle of "soft power" (Yang, Klyueva, & Taylor, 2012). Soft power refers to the use of relational power and influence in public diplomacy efforts. To use French and Raven's (1959) conception of power, the ability to reward, punish, and legitimate the activities of others are an example of what soft power encompasses. Soft power is a form of influence, persuasion, and identification, whereby stakeholders, stakeseekers, and key publics are convinced to join or become a part of a group, organization, or cause of their own accord, because s/he believes in an organization and/or its leaders.

As the examples of power above illustrate, power is a complex phenomenon. Critical scholars have argued that dominant public relations theories such as excellence theory and symmetrical communication (cf. Grunig, 1992) offer little insight into power. Despite claims by Grunig (2006) that the point of symmetrical communication is to "empower those with less power" (p. 165), some have pointed out that symmetry actually serves as a guise for exerting power over publics. As organizations and publics are inherently imbalanced in terms of their resources and negotiating power (Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Leitch & Neilson, 2001), by engaging in so-called symmetrical communication with publics, organizations may be doing, as Roper (2005) described, "'just enough' to quiet public criticism, allowing essentially business as usual strategy to remain in force" (p. 83). Similarly, contingency theory (e.g. Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997) places comparable emphasis on maintaining power over an organization's environment, with variables designed to measure the "relative power of the organization" and the "relative power of the public" (p. 61). Such a view is clearly demonstrative of a functional, rather than cocreational view of public relations.

Although power has received a range of treatments in the public relations literature, the notion of power in network research is monolithic and functional. Network research treats power in a "power over" fashion, with little regard for potential benefits to other stakeholders and publics. Thus, before public relations can adopt and appropriately adapt network theories and methods further, a fuller understanding of the assumptions guiding the previous network research is needed.

4. Power as network access and control in SNA

The network of relationships in which an organization is embedded is seen by many to enhance or detract from organizational power and success. Power, therefore, has primarily been described in the network (primarily management and business) literature in terms of how organizations can arrange and control their own networks. Indeed, as Smith et al. (2014) have defined it, network power is not merely "the ability of an actor to influence others into doing what they might not otherwise do, or to avoid being influenced in such a manner," but more precisely about "being in the right place" in the network, because "certain network positions allow the actors to have more access to resources flowing through the network, or more control over those flows based on how dependent other actors are on the focal actor" (p. 162). Access and control thus provide two useful dimensions by which to discuss how power in the network literature has been articulated.

The power-as-access dimension views power as a function of access to resources through an individual or organization's network connections (Smith et al., 2014). The number of connections an actor holds in the network (called degree centrality) is often considered a metric of an actor's prestige and therefore of his/her/its resource-advantage in the network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The power-as-access argument follows resource-dependence logic (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978): central actors have greater access to relevant resources, which decreases their dependency on others while increasing others' dependence on them (Brass, 2009). The sheer number of connections an actor holds is representative of his/her/its access to and capacity

to assemble resources—which is what makes the individual or organization valuable to others and thus powerful within a network.

Being connected to the most powerful or “popular” members of a network (known as eigenvector centrality) is another kind of access believed to provide network members with power (e.g., Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001; Treadway et al., 2013; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Similarly, measures of centrality like closeness and betweenness are seen to provide power through network access. Actors are perceived to have more power when they can easily access other members in a network through the fewest “steps” or ties (Smith et al., 2014).

As mentioned above, Burt’s (1992) theory of structural holes is the umbrella theory under which most network perspectives of power-as-control have been organized in the literature. Structural holes theory suggests that the existence or absence of ties in networks is an indication of the extent to which networks are cohesive. Organizations that fill strategic positions in networks—without which the network would be less cohesive—are perceived to fill structural holes.

By bridging a structural hole between two individuals or organizations, the connecting party has leverage, access, and control over resources from the unconnected parties, by providing information and resources that the individual parties do not have (*tertius gaudens*). The lack of ties among particular members in a network, affords an actor/organization strategic benefits, such as greater autonomy, control, access to novel information, and resource brokerage (Burt, 1992).

Thus, unlike Granovetter’s (1973) concept of strong and weak ties, which sees multiple ties as inherently useful, Borgatti and Halgin (2011) argued that Burt’s theory of structural holes takes a purely strategic and instrumental view of networks and the role of the organization in shaping them. In Burt’s view, the network surrounding an individual or organization represents advantaged or disadvantaged access to the information and resources that allow the individual or organization to control the network (Burt et al., 2013).

Individuals and organizations, then, can work to “exploit” (Walker, Kogut, & Shan, 1997, p. 110) the structural holes between disparate parts of networks through several means. First, power is perceived to come from controlling the number and types of relationships in which an organization engages. Unlike Coleman’s (1988) theory of social capital, in which benefits are reaped through building a dense and highly interconnected network of strong ties, Burt (1992) argued that organizational advantage comes from maximizing relational benefit by strategically building indirect “weak” contacts. In this view, constructing networks of disconnected, disempowered, actors is the best organizational strategy (Ahuja, 2000). Building weak, indirect ties is an efficient way to reap the benefits of larger network size without expending undue time and effort in maintaining direct, stronger ties (Burt, 1992).

The second issue in SNA is how power is seen as a way to control information flows in a network. Being embedded in a network of strong and direct ties is perceived to be a disadvantage for organizations. Organizations with many direct ties may be more limited in their ability to “profit” from information coming from their indirect ties (Ahuja, 2000). When an organization’s partners also have many direct connections, information that reaches the organization will also reach many others at the same time, thus diffusing its value. Organizations are thus advised to build relationships with many disconnected clusters and use those connections to access information not widely available, thus maintaining control or power over others (Burt, 1992).

The third issue with how SNA treats power lies in how occupying structural holes is seen as an opportunity for organizations to strategically manipulate their identity, providing different information to different stakeholders. Burt et al. (2013) suggested that individuals and organizations that bridge structural holes are afforded the opportunity to “broker communication while displaying different beliefs and identities to each contact” (p. 531). The broker, quite simply, is an opportunist who is able to take advantage of a propinquitous placement within a structural network for the benefit of one’s self or organization.

While Burt et al. (2013) admitted this strategic position could be used to coordinate otherwise unconnected people, the primary implication is clearly that individuals and organizations who bridge structural holes are able to take the resources and knowledge of one group and use it to the advantage of other disconnected social clusters. Organizations actually benefit from keeping disparate parts of the network separate and only bridging disconnected clusters when it becomes strategically valuable to do so (Battilana & Casciaro, 2012).

As should be obvious, the SNA conception of power is fundamentally different from a public relations or communication view of power, and in most ways would be seen as unethical by cocreational public relations professionals and scholars. A power critique of SNA and public relations follows.

5. Power critique: SNA and public relations

As shown above, the ethical problems in SNA stem from the prior applications of the theory within other disciplines, such as business and management, which exclusively view power as a functional and manipulative tool to achieve organizational goals. Aside from the overarching desire to maximize profits and minimize expenses, business is a discipline interested in prediction and control. As a result of the somewhat amoral position of many business professionals (cf. Friedman, 1970) who confuse following the law with being moral, an assumption of many managers is that profits are more important than people. Thus, maximizing profits is good; incurring costs (of any kind) is bad.

Principles like performance, power, and other concepts are accepted rather unreflectively. As management scholar Brass (2009) argues, “power” is simply a description of an individual’s or an organization’s structural position. For Brass, power is vested in the position. The better placed a person is, the more power s/he has—and usually leaders have the most power

because of their position in an organizational hierarchy: “most people have an intuitive idea of what social networks are, what centrality is, and how both might relate to power” (p. 12).

Importantly, the network justification for power being a simple positional feature of organizational networks is that more relationships equal less power relative to the number of relationships that require resources to maintain. As Brass (2009) explained of a simple network comprised of four organizations: “adding an additional tie and node to each of the four nodes B, C, D, and E will substantially decrease A’s power” (p. 12). The assumption among network scholars is that parsimony is the guiding principle. In network research, scholars have often adopted the position that the fewer the relationships the better, as long as one has *enough* to control/manipulate the actions of others and access broader parts of the network through primary relationship contacts.

SNA’s rather mercenary approach to network theory shows no concern or interest in the nature of the relationships, an organization’s mission or vision, and is actually fundamentally in conflict with most public relations scholarship that suggests that building and maintaining multiple relationships is a central and important public relations activity, and one vital to building strong communities and societies (Heath, 2006; Sommerfeldt, 2013b; Taylor, 2010).

Another problem with the reification of power in SNA research for public relations scholars is the lack of ethics when describing network behaviors. Power is reified quite simply as the ability to get others to do what one wants and to access information before others have a chance to benefit from it. Power is manipulation. Consider Kilduff and Brass (2010) who wrote:

The advantages to an actor of occupying a structural hole may come from the flow of power (playing one actor off against another), from the flow of information (acquiring non-redundant information from alters), or from the flow of referrals from grateful alters (subsequent to the closing of the hole). (p. 331)

Public relations professionals are boundary spanners who *should* bridge many structural holes. Indeed, because of the humanistic ethical principles (democracy, communitarianism, dialogue, fully functioning society, social capital, etc.) that inform a cocreational view of public relations, practitioners should not use organizational positions to manipulate the relationship networks in which organizations are embedded to the exclusion of others. Thus, although occupying a structural hole may give a communicator an informational and persuasive advantage, intentionally *taking advantage* of stakeholders and public should not be something public relations professionals do.

Part of the reason that business professionals and scholars in SNA are able to instrumentalize their stakeholders and publics, treating them as means to an end rather than inherently valuable, is because of the rhetoric that is used. By using the language of euphemisms (alters, egos, structural holes, etc.), business professionals are able to maintain a worldview where the world revolves around them or their organizations, and where communicators have no real responsibilities to others, except as they relate to organizational needs. Fortunately, some communication scholars have moved away from the euphemistic, manipulative language common among business and management scholars (cf. Monge & Contractor, 2000), and public relations needs to do the same.

In much of the seminal SNA research in fields such as sociology, business, and math, concepts like “power” are treated as unexamined ideographs that everyone agrees mean the same thing: an actor’s ability to get what s/he wants at minimal or no cost (cf. Borgatti & Cross, 2003; Brass, 2009; Jones, Hesterly, & Borgatti, 1997; Kilduff & Brass, 2010). The SNA view of power is overly simplistic and ignores the complexity of power as it is exercised in practice. The naïve treatment of power found in the SNA literature ignores the many types of power: cultural, coercive, reward, legitimate, expert, referent (cf. French & Raven, 1959; Kent & Taylor, 2011), and limits the usefulness of network theory and methodology for those in our relationship-based profession who take a cocreational approach to public relations (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

The next section reconciles many of the problems with power in social network analysis theory by introducing the concept of *tertius iungens* and explaining how *tertius iungens* is a more humanistic and ethical way of theorizing and researching brokerage, structural holes, and power in public relations.

5.1. *Tertius iungens* as a cocreational approach to networks in public relations

Tertius iungens is more ethical and more consistent with the values of cocreational public relations. The introduction of the SNA concepts into public relations literature has occurred with little scrutiny until now. Public relations scholars have utilized network concepts such as brokerage and structural holes without critical reflection on the origins of the terms. Adopting *tertius gaudens* as a guiding principle, as has been done in the past (e.g., Saffer et al., 2013; Sommerfeldt, 2013a; Taylor & Doerfel, 2005), is likely to be of limited theoretical use for public relations down the road, and runs counter to an assortment of ethical principles of the profession that have evolved over the last 75 years.

Indeed, viewing organizations or even public relations professionals as network “brokers” is awkward for public relations research. While network access and control may be afforded to those who bridge structural holes, this strategic position does not come without disadvantages, particularly when adopting a public relations lens. Brokerage often has the effect of undermining others partners’ confidence in that broker. Brokers also exhibit patterns of behaviors that make it easy for partners to discern that they are dealing with a broker (Gulati, Sytch, & Tatrynowicz, 2012). For example, brokers often take steps to make it difficult for their relational partners to form direct links with each other (Burt, 1992), thereby reducing trust in the broker. When network members are highly dependent on a broker as the only available path to gain information, confidence and trust in that broker can be undermined. “Since brokers have more information than alters (or relational

partners) do, brokers may be suspected of using this asymmetry to their advantage to the detriment of alters” (Markóczy, Sun, Pen, Shi, & Ren, 2013, p. 1372). Clearly, the exploitative view of network brokerage is inconsistent with contemporary assumptions about the role of modern public relations communication practices.

However, a less used but more appropriate network concept exists for understanding the role of individuals and organizations that connect unconnected groups: *tertius iungens*. The notion of *tertius iungens* recognizes that individuals and organizations in a connecting or “arbiter” role can benefit. But rather than being “the third who benefits” (the *tertius gaudens*), individuals and organizations can be “the third to benefit” (the *tertius iungens*), by uniting unconnected network members (Obstfeld, 2005). Instead of approaching networks from a competitive orientation, *tertius iungens* is orientated toward cooperation and collaboration. As Garriga (2009) explained:

“iungo” implies join, unite or connect. The *tertius iungens* strategy implies the uniting of disconnected parties. . . the ego closes the gap between disconnected others by bringing them together, functions as arbiter who balances contradictory claims against one to another and eliminates what is incompatible among them. . . the *tertius iungens* role contemplates an arbiter role which considers attitudinal or cultural aspects which correspond to the framing process (the norms of reciprocity, collective identity, and degree of interdependence. (p. 633)

Based on Garriga’s description—and unlike the *tertius gaudens*—*tertius iungens* is an ethical orientation toward stakeholder, stakeseekers, and public relationships. The concept therefore offers significant theoretical insight into brokerage and structural holes for future public relations scholarship, and fits squarely within a cocreational view of public relations theory and practice.

The notion of *tertius iungens* resonates with several contemporary trends in the cocreational public relations literature. Recent scholarship has called for a focus on public relations as a community building function (cf. Sommerfeldt, 2013b; Valentini et al., 2012). Heath (2006) similarly proposed the notion of a fully-functioning society wherein public relations is used to enact rhetorical discourse among multiple parties. Heath (2006) suggested that public relations adds value to society through cocreating shared meaning and negotiating relationships among social actors to help manage risk and reduce uncertainty. Heath advanced the concept of *communitas* where individuals and organization have an orientation toward harmony, identify themselves as part of the same community, and work to address community issues (cf., Boyd & Stahley, 2008).

Bringing multiple parties together to address community issues is a highly complex process (cf., Heath, 2013; Taylor, 2011). *Tertius iungens* recognizes the complexity and adversarial tension that might surround parties within a community. Simmel (1950) outlined two *tertius iungens* activities. The first involves a non-partisan party simply initiating contact between unconnected or clashing parties. The second activity builds on the first by removing the non-partisan party or, if necessary, acting as an arbiter that balances the clashing claims between opposing parties.

Public relations can enact a *tertius iungen* strategy by acting as a non-partisan arbiter of conflicting claims. Through this role, public relations professionals and organizations build trust, gain esteem, and make society (and communities) more fully functional. When strategic relationships are used as a force “to foster community as blended relationships, resource distribution, and shared meanings that advance and yield to enlightened choice” (Heath, 2006, p. 97), power is reduced, not consolidated. A *tertius iungens* strategy can orient public relations network researchers to study how communicators enact rhetorical discourse or relationships that unites communities.

Other scholars have positioned strategic relationship building as a way to build internal and external social capital (cf. Ihlen, 2005; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011; Taylor, 2009). *Tertius iungens* fits squarely within social capital theory. When public relations works to build collective trust, relationships that cross cultural boundaries, and helps to facilitate a plurality of views, members of a community are united (*tertius iungens*). Unity creates the social capital requisite for communities to form and societies to function (Sommerfeldt, 2013a). *Tertius iungens* positions public relations as essential to the creation and maintenance of civil society (cf. Sommerfeldt, 2013b; Taylor, 2010), and champions ways for public relations to bring communities together.

6. Conclusion

The critique of power as it relates to network theory and analysis conducted here extends our understanding of network theory in public relations. As Kuhn (1970) suggested, when new theories are introduced to a field, they are rarely just incremental adjustments to what is already known. Social network analysis has enormous potential to help tell a story and paint a picture about the diversity and complexity of organization—public relationships that has never been told before. However, as SNA is adopted by public relations scholars and professionals, we need also to adapt the language and adjust the assumptions to be consistent with public relations’ ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Public relations should not be about exploitation of other stakeholders or publics for an organization’s benefit, but about creating ethical, mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their multiple publics (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Social network analysis as a research tool has significant potential for furthering public relations scholarship, helping to determine the relational vitality of organizational and community networks, and, as argued by Taylor and Doerfel (2005), helping public relations scholars and professionals to “understand and strategize the building of inter-organizational relationships” (p. 123). Before the full contributions of network theory and analysis come to fruition, however, critical reflections

like those presented here are needed to redirect research toward a more ethical and harmonious path. *Tertius iungens* is one way to bridge the ethics and theory gap, using SNA principles in a way that allow public relations professionals to ethically engage stakeholders and publics and build mutually beneficial relationships.

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