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Public Relations Review



Public relations and public diplomacy in cultural and educational exchange programs: A coorientational approach to the Humphrey Program

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 June 2015

Received in revised form 5 August 2015

Accepted 18 September 2015

Keywords:

Communication

Public relations

Coorientation model

Public diplomacy

Cultural and educational exchange

Humphrey Program

Intercultural

Conflicts

Qualitative

Interview

1. Introduction

According to a series of surveys of “The Global Attitude Project,” ([Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2002, 2005](#)), the U.S. national image has continuously eroded across the globe, from Western allies to Muslim countries. Anti-Americanism is not a recent issue; it has been one of the main concerns of international relations scholars and diplomats for nearly three decades ([Wang, 2006a](#)). After the Cold War, waning U.S. budgets for public diplomacy, dropping by one-third from 1993 to 2000, indicated a loss of interest ([de Lima, 2007](#)). However, since the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, the U.S. government appears to be revisiting public diplomacy. For example, funding for the Fulbright Program, a major U.S. public diplomacy institution, increased from \$215 million in 2001 to \$386 million in 2010 ([William Fulbright Scholarship Board, 2001, 2010](#)).

The U.S. government made efforts to engage the minds of Arab people and to shape a positive U.S. image. The advertising campaign “Shared Values Initiative” was run in the Middle East and Asia between October 2002 and January 2003, spending \$15 million ([Kendrick & Fullerton, 2004](#)), and Radio Sawa and Television Alhurra were launched in 2002 at an expense of \$35 million and \$62 million, respectively, in 2004. The results of these attempts were deemed skeptical, even worsening the attitudes toward the United States, as the Arab public recognized the implicit intention of the U.S. government ([el-Nawaway, 2006; Plaisance, 2005](#)). As is often the case, communication does not necessarily lead to mutual understanding or intended outcomes, and thus, must be strategically planned and managed until its goal is attained.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.09.008>

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Please cite this article in press as: Kim, J. Public relations and public diplomacy in cultural and educational exchange programs: A coorientational approach to the Humphrey Program. *Public Relations Review* (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2015.09.008>

Strategic communication, defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007), has the potential to help solve such problems, because strategically designed communication with foreign publics could help remove unnecessary misunderstanding, while fostering mutual understanding. A growing number of public relations scholars have attended to public diplomacy (Fitzpatrick, 2007), arguing for the need for long-term relationship-building with foreign citizens built upon the understanding of other cultural values (Kruckeberg, 1996; Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2005) and communicating with them on the individual level (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). However, there exists a lack of empirical research on this need; most studies have theoretically compared and contrasted two areas. At the same time, public diplomacy has been criticized for its lack of theoretical frameworks, perceived as relying on techniques to achieve its goals, rather than relying on academic research-based approaches.

One way of looking at the public diplomacy is through the examination of cultural and educational exchange programs. Ingrid Eide called the international student a “culture carrier,” and such face-to-face interaction between cultures through cultural and educational exchange programs has been found to be effective in reducing biases and stereotypes (de Lima, 2007, p. 239; el-Nawawy, 2006). The U.S. State Department makes an effort to interact with foreign publics at the interpersonal level, through such diverse programs as the Fulbright Exchange Program or the International Visitors Program. However, it is unclear whether such programs successfully achieve their goals, especially when various individuals from different countries interact within such programs. Equally important as the development of such programs for public diplomacy are the ongoing tasks of evaluating and managing their functions to maximize their effectiveness, which are critical to the achievement of the intended goals of the programs. In particular, depending on positions (e.g., staff, participants), individuals’ perceptions may vary. A better understanding of the perceptual differences and possible consequent miscommunication is expected to increase communication effectiveness. For example, reduced conflict at the workplace can enhance the productivity of a company, and removing miscommunication between two countries can prevent wars. With the assumption that strategic communications with foreign publics can help achieve U.S. public diplomacy goals, the current study examines a cultural and educational exchange program. Specifically, this study examines the Humphrey Fellowship Program using the coorientation model – a useful framework to observe gaps between two groups – with focus on the perceptual differences between staff members and Fellows.

The main purposes of the study are threefold. First, the study aims to contribute to the body of public relations literature by testing the applicability of public relations theories to the public diplomacy area. Second, it attempts to provide theoretical frameworks for public diplomacy researchers within which strategic communication plans can be developed. Last, this study aims to provide practical implications for public diplomacy practitioners.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public diplomacy and public relations

Traditionally, diplomacy is defined as “the art and practice of conducting negotiations between nations” (Diplomacy, n.d.). Unlike such government-to-government- or diplomat-to-diplomat-based diplomacy, public diplomacy extends its realm to non-governmental individuals and institutions. According to the definition of the University of Southern California (USC) Center on Public Diplomacy, “public diplomacy focuses on the ways in which governments (or multilateral organizations such as the United Nations) acting deliberately, through both official and private individuals and institutions, communicate with citizens in other societies. Public diplomacy as traditionally defined includes the government-sponsored cultural, educational and informational programs, citizen exchanges and broadcasts used to promote the national interest of a country through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign audiences” (Defining PD, n.d.). The concept of public diplomacy is evolving and its boundary has been blurred. Especially, Nye (2004) emphasized the growing importance of “soft power.” In contrast to hard power, which attempts to influence citizens in other countries through coercive means such as military or economic power, soft power tries to attract foreign publics through a variety of cultural or ideological interactions, such as, popular culture, fashion, sports, news, or the Internet (Defining PD, n.d.). Whereas the former attempts to influence the public immediately through “fast media such as radio, television, or newspapers, and news magazines,” the latter aims to foster “mutual understanding through slow media such as academic and artistic exchanges, films, exhibition, and language instruction” (Signitzer & Wamser, 2006, p. 438).

Public diplomacy has received considerable attention from various fields such as media studies or international relations. Public relations scholars, particularly, approached public diplomacy as a case where organizational public relations functions are transferred to governmental activities at an international level. They looked into the similarities between public relations and public diplomacy (Melissen, 2005; Signitzer & Wamser, 2006) and suggested public diplomacy employ public relations disciplines, such as relationship management (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Smith, 2001), two-way asymmetrical/symmetrical communication, (Grunig, 1993; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005; Wang, 2006b, 2007), environmental scanning roles (L’Etang, 1996, 2006), or community-building (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005). Yun (2006) also applied the Excellence Study (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) to public diplomacy by surveying foreign embassies and concluded that “public relations frameworks are transferable to conceptualizing and measuring public diplomacy behavior and excellence in public diplomacy” (p. 307). These scholars have argued that public relations strategies can be extended to the realm of public diplomacy “not only to promote the policies and values of a particular nation but also to engineer consensus and facilitate understanding among overseas publics” (Wang, 2007, p. 27).

Some scholars (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Fitzpatrick, Kendrick, & Fullerton, 2011; Hiebert, 2005) have argued that public relations provides a tool for resolving misperception, misunderstanding, and miscommunication. Due to media environments having limited time and space for conveying information, the images of one's nation-country portrayed via mass media tend to be stereotypical and misrepresented. The images could be intentionally or unintentionally skewed, increasing the chances of misperception and misunderstanding between nation-countries (Hiebert, 2005). Due to the cultural differences, it is even harder to build mutual understanding, because "the value systems of the participants provides the basis for the dialogical process that is built on mutual trust between the participating actors" (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p. 119). Empirically, Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) identified factors that affect anti-Americanism by surveying U.S. public diplomats. Results yielded four factors, indicating that information is the most significant factor, followed by culture, policy, and values, in that order. Misperception about the United States based on false or distorted accounts, or no information, was the biggest reason for negative attitudes toward the United States. The influence of U.S. culture (e.g., entertainment, capitalism) was the second factor. Disagreement with U.S. foreign policies was the third, and disagreement with U.S. values was the least important factor. Fitzpatrick et al. argued that U.S. public diplomacy should change its communication strategies from traditional media campaigns to interactive interpersonal communication, and that cultural and educational programs should be the core player of public diplomacy to increase foreign publics' understanding of national policies or values.

2.2. The cultural and educational exchange program

An extensive body of literature across different disciplines including management, conflict resolution, and communication has demonstrated that face-to-face interactions foster mutual understanding and affinity across nations and cultures (Boxer, 2002). Since people communicate through diverse signals using both verbal and nonverbal signs, research has found that people are more likely to accept others, find similarities with others, and question less within a face-to-face communication context (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2008). Exchange programs, such as the U.S. government-sponsored Fulbright and International Visitor Leadership Programs, are good venues for individual interactions. These programs invite foreign leaders to gain a better understanding of the United States and get professional training. According to the 2006 annual report of the *Interagency Working Group on U.S. Government-Sponsored International Exchanges and Training* (n.d.), there exist 239 exchange programs. However, their impacts are underestimated, as each program is small, and only a limited number of individuals are involved. Sevin (2010) argued that these programs' impacts need to be better understood, as the people participating in these programs are the intellectual and influential individuals in their home countries. Unlike the often-untrusted messages conveyed by the mass media, these individuals are perceived to be credible in the eyes of the local public, and their words are expected to spread to large groups of people. In addition, their global influence needs to be recognized. For example, the Fulbright Program counts among its alumni 39 Nobel Prize Winners, one Secretary General of the United Nations, and one Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Sevin, 2010). It is not difficult to imagine how these individuals' personal experiences in the United States influenced their future decision-making processes toward the U.S.

Despite its significance, exchange programs have been limitedly examined. Of the few that exist, Bu (1999) explained the development of educational exchange programs for the purpose of foreign policy during the Cold War, while Bellamy and Weinberg (2008) argued that cultural and educational exchange programs need to be strategically designed to serve as effective public diplomacy tools. More recently, Hayden's (2009) empirical study examined an exchange program by the Saudi American Exchange (SAE), the Formula 1 Global Marketing Challenge, whereby Arab and U.S. students collaborated for a marketing project in Saudi Arabia. Based on his findings, he argued that the program was able to facilitate a mutual understanding between Arab and U.S. students by actively forcing them to confront the cultural differences and devise plans to overcome misunderstanding, rather than "assuming cohabitation and shared experiences would yield some form of public diplomacy benefit, such as mutual understanding, resolution of differences, and explanations of cultural difference" (p. 536). Sevin (2010) conducted a study with 59 current Fulbright scholars in the United States, and found that the Fulbright Program could become an effective tool for transforming foreign scholars to cultural ambassadors by overcoming diverse barriers that could occur in intercultural communication. Most studies agree that cultural educational exchange programs can help facilitate mutual understanding between different countries and cultures, and need to be strategically used as a public diplomacy tool.

2.3. The coorientation model

The coorientation model (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973) posits that people are affected not only by their internal thinking, but also by their orientation to and interactions with others. The model consists of three components: agreement, the extent to which one part's evaluations is similar to the other's; congruency, which is called perceived agreement, the extent to which one part's estimate matches the other part's views on the issue; and accuracy, the extent to which one part's estimate matches the actual views of the other part (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). Scholars have often employed this model, because it helps pinpoint three communication problems in the organization-public context: (1) an organization and a public have different meanings about an issue; (2) there is a gap between the organization's perceived views on a public's thoughts of an issue and the public's actual views; and (3) individuals of a public have inaccurate perceptions of the issue positions of an organization. The model has been a useful framework to examine perceptual differences between two groups, such as public relations

professionals and journalists about the news values (Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998) and the source-reporter interaction (Shin & Cameron, 2003, 2005).

2.4. The current study

Despite the efforts to use public relations frameworks in investigating public diplomacy problems, there exists a lack of research. Most public relations scholars have approached public diplomacy with conceptual similarities, rather than providing solid evidence. Only a few studies (e.g., Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Yun, 2006) have empirically examined the applicability of public relations concepts and theories to public diplomacy. In particular, public relations scholars (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Hiebert, 2005) have argued that public relations approaches would aid public diplomacy in decreasing the chance of misunderstanding, misperception, and miscommunication. On the other hand, cultural/education exchange programs have been attended by scholars (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Hayden, 2009) as a tool for public diplomacy; few studies, if any, have examined such programs within a framework of public relations. Hayden (2009) argued that different groups' shared experiences or cohabitation does not guarantee mutual understanding between groups, and thus, strategic program design to effect in removing misperception and facilitating mutual understanding is critical. However, whether such programs were strategically designed to reduce misperceptions has not been fully researched. Therefore, the current study aims to explore whether there exist perceptual gaps between two parties in a program. Especially, the Humphrey Fellowship Program was chosen for this study because it is a part of the Fulbright Program, the biggest cultural and educational exchange program in the United States (Institute of International Education [IIE], n.d.), and it aims to foster a mutual understanding between countries (The Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program, 2011). The study is guided by the coorientation model, as the model allows researchers to investigate whether deliberately designed communication practices achieve their intended goals, by directly comparing the intended and received messages. Specifically, this study explores the perceptual gaps between staff and participants of the Humphrey Fellowship Program, wherein the staff comprises U.S. citizens and the Fellows are from other cultures. This analysis was guided by the following research questions, based on the coorientation model.

RQ1. Agreement: Do staff and Fellows agree with each other regarding the role of the program?

RQ2. Congruency: Do staff and Fellows maintain congruency regarding the role of the program?

RQ3. Accuracy: Do staff and Fellows accurately perceive how their counterparts view the role of the program?

By answering the questions, this study, first, attempts to contribute to the research of public diplomacy by providing a public relations theoretical framework. Second, this study aims to contribute to public relations theory by extending its applicability to the public diplomacy field. Empirical testing of the utility of the coorientation model is expected to consolidate the theoretical ground. Third, this new approach is expected to offer practical implications for public diplomacy practitioners by disclosing perceptual gaps between two parties and providing practical guidelines for their program design or communication management.

3. Method

Qualitative research is useful for finding meanings constructed in real life. In particular, it is a robust strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The study examines not only whether gaps exist between two groups' views, but also how and why they differ. Thus, qualitative research is an appropriate method for this study.

The Humphrey Fellowship Program at the University of X had eleven Fellows, and all of them came from different countries, while all staff members were U.S. citizens. All of them were contacted for interviews, but some declined, with a total of eight out of eleven Fellows participating in the interviews. Staff existed at three levels, including the local institution, IIE, and the U.S. Department of State. Two local coordinators and two staff at the IIE were interviewed. Staff at the U.S. Department of State were contacted, but they did not respond. Before the interviews, this study received Institutional Review Board approval, and interviewees read and signed consent forms. All interviewees agreed to be audiotaped, with one exception. The interviews lasted about 40–85 min. During the process, observer comments and memos were frequently inserted to reflect on the researcher herself and to capture interviewees' nonverbal communication. The interview protocols detailed in the Appendix were prepared according to the guideline of Rubin and Rubin (1995). This protocol was pretested by conducting mock interviews, and fixed for clarification. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to allow for participants to control the interview while focusing on the research questions. Open-ended questions were used, and follow-up questions and probes were added for the purpose of encouraging interviewees to provide their own examples and descriptions.

This research employed pattern matching in analyzing the collected data. The logic of pattern matching “compares an empirically based pattern with a predicted one (or with several alternative predictions)” (Yin, 1994, p. 106). In particular, a grounded theory approach was used in which the findings are grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher attempts to understand “the patterns, the recurrences, the plausible whys” to seek for “repeatable regularities” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). All the recorded interviews were transcribed. To protect the confidentiality of the interviewees, pseudonyms such as Ana or Sean were used. Guided by research questions, the transcribed interviews were read repeatedly until certain themes emerged. Each emerging theme was grouped with interrelated themes, while separated for new themes

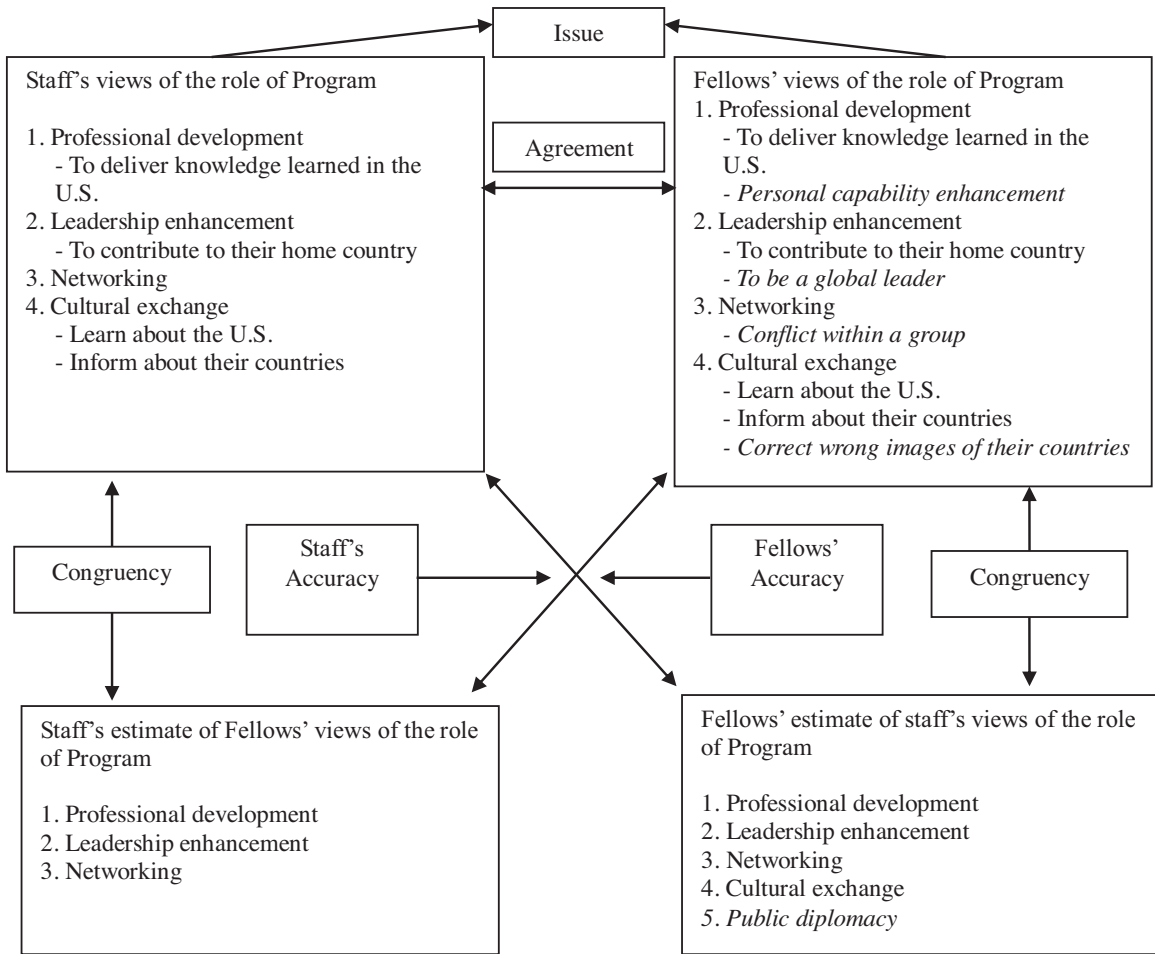


Fig. 1. The views of staff and Fellows toward the goal of the Humphrey Fellowship Program analyzed by the coorientation model.

using the constant-comparative analysis method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Finally, the researcher organized the list of themes according to the three research questions.

4. Results

In the following sections, four perspectives on the meaning of the Humphrey Fellowship Programs will be described. These include program staff's views on the meaning of the program, Fellows' views on the meaning of the program, staff's perceptions of Fellows' meanings of the program, and Fellows' perceptions of staff's meanings of the program. Since the goal of the study is to find potential gaps between two parties, the focus will be on the discrepancies, reporting similarities in brief. The results are presented in the following three research questions.

RQ1. Agreement: Do staff and Fellows agree with each other regarding the goal of the program?

In general, staff and Fellows agreed on the meaning of the Program. Four themes in both parties emerged: professional development, leadership enhancement, networking, and cultural exchange. As is italicized in Fig. 1, however, detailed meanings of each theme differed.

5. Professional development

Both staff and Fellows regarded professional development as the most important goal of this program. Both groups valued diverse opportunities, such as professional affiliation, seminars, or courses at the university, for learning advanced knowledge and skills. In particular, some countries did not have any discipline-specific courses or institutions. One Fellow, a broadcasting journalist, said that in his country, schools of journalism did not exist. Another Fellow, who worked for a woman's organization, mentioned she had not had any opportunities to obtain theoretical knowledge saying, "There [in her

home country] existed only day-to-day practices.¹ Fellows especially valued two things as the most important parts of their learning: advanced technology and professionalism. For example, technological equipment allowed for the immediate and large coverage of the news, which were not available in their home countries. Training for more advanced, standardized professional skills, such as a balanced and objective journalistic standard or better writing skills, was the other factor that Fellows valued.

Despite the apparent agreement between staff and Fellows, the expected outcome of professional development differed. Staff stressed that Fellows' enhanced professional skills after completing the Program should contribute to the professional fields in the Fellows' societies. However, for Fellows, professional development meant an opportunity to upgrade their career paths and to enhance personal capabilities, rather than transferring advanced knowledge to their countries. For example, one Fellow clearly expressed different emphases saying, "Fellows perceive the program much more like a personal development opportunity, but for staff or organizers it is really a means or tool to get the desired outcomes, such as spreading democratic values, American ideals and promoting their methods worldwide."

6. Leadership enhancement

Leadership was another explicit focus of the Program. Staff emphasized that Fellows were selected based on their leadership potential, and this already-proven leadership would be more sharpened through the diverse opportunities for leadership training, such as field trips or workshops, saying "The idea is to develop leaders and send them back home, so with the enhanced careers, they become better leaders on their professions in their home countries."

Fellows, taking the same view as staff, perceived that their leadership would exert influence beyond their careers and home country. They stressed that they would be policymakers in their countries who would influence relationships with other countries as global leaders. One Fellow mentioned, "All the fellows get together and share the viewpoints upon very important issues of the world such as global change, financial problems, global warming, and even some other issues concerning of immigration, people trafficking. I think that because the program requires attendants to focus more on leadership so that in the future we create more changes to the country and to the relationships between the U.S. and other countries."

7. Networking

Networking was considered another purpose of this program. Two types of networking existed: individual networking and in-group networking. Individual networking meant that Fellows had diverse opportunities for making contacts with other people through professional affiliations, classes, or by making friends during the Program. In particular, Fellows built relationships through their internships at U.S. organizations, such as the World Bank, the State Department, CNN, or NGOs. One Fellow described how he would use the information available in the United States through the connections of people after he returned to his country, saying "I do not have resources because my country is poor, so I could get the source from here, like in X [library]." However, the success of this type of networking depended on each Fellow's desire and efforts. Staff strongly believed there must be ongoing communication between Fellows and their professional affiliations in the U.S., although they were not sure whether this occurred.

The other type of networking was in-group networking. Fellows became a member of the Humphrey Alumni, and were able to keep in touch with staff or other Fellows after their term was over. Staff expected some kind of communication to be occurring among Fellows, not having heard of any formal communication channels. Unlike the staff's expectations, most Fellows seemed to have problems with in-group networking. Fellows experienced high levels of tension and conflict with other Fellows because they were all from different cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds. One Fellow described that she had to live with two other Fellows without any option and coped with continuous conflicts in every household aspect. Seemingly minor issues such as food choice caused conflicts. Saying that she wanted to go back to her country, she revealed negative feelings toward the program. Fellows had no mentionable conflicts with Americans, but experienced huge difficulties in getting along with other Fellows, consequently developing overall negative experiences toward the program, as one explained:

...those people who got here are already leaders themselves in their countries. They have really strong personalities, they have their own way of thinking, they have their own way of convincing, and they are not that young to lean towards new ideas or new methods, new ways of thinking every time. They can do that, but not as flexible as younger people and they couldn't really get together as a team, the team idea was just fell apart and we had fractions, individuals of that people here, not a team.

8. Cultural exchange

Lastly, staff and Fellows agreed that one of the primary goals of the program was opening minds to the world and facilitating mutual understanding and global connection. First, Fellows learned about the United States. In weekly seminars,

¹ Most of the Fellows are from non-English-speaking countries, and all of the quotes are verbatim.

Fellows learned about various aspects of the U.S., such as the American government system, values, or cultures. For example, one Fellow valued Americans' efficient way of thinking, which was "fast, simple, clear and direct based on specific factors, such as scale or clear examples." Having face-to-face interactions with Americans seemed to have provided an opportunity to correct their misperceptions about the U.S. One European Fellow explained that before he joined the program, he thought Americans were "dumb." After he had conversations with Americans, even those who were poorly educated, he changed his prejudice about American people. Another Fellow from Africa also changed his misconception about the rich country, "America has an easy life because it is a rich country. But still people work as [hard as] I work in my home country. In America, [people are] always in a rush and time is so fast. People cannot just drink, eat, or play." Fellows strongly valued interpersonal communication. They often mentioned that they changed their views because knowledge gained from face-to-face interactions was more credible than secondary sources, such as books or Web sites, that they had relied on before they came.

It is worth noting that Fellows also had an impact on American society. Even though the number of Fellows was small, Fellows were considered to have multiplier effects, influencing both the general public and U.S. society. Fellows had various opportunities to meet with influential people in the United States, and it was presumed to have a great impact on U.S. society because U.S. leaders would be attentive to the comments and observations of Fellows, which might influence their decision-making process in the U.S. Fellows were also believed to have the potential for opening the minds of U.S. citizens, as one staff described, "They [Americans] may never have met someone from Togo before and they see, and learn about how someone from that country lives, what their values are, I think it's very valuable for Americans to get exposures to as many different countries outside the U.S." Fellows mentioned that they were very shocked to find out that Americans had very strong stereotypes, misperceptions, and wrong information about other cultures. For example, one Fellow from Kazakhstan commented that U.S. citizens frequently asked her negative questions regarding the film "Borat," a popular film about Kazakhstan. She was upset because the film did not represent her country correctly, and Americans had no idea about her country, except with regard to Caspian oil. Another Fellow mentioned that Americans tended to think other countries were underdeveloped not to have cell phones. Due to the misperceptions about their home countries, some Fellows were offended.

RQ2. Congruency: Do staff and Fellows maintain congruency regarding the goal of the program?

Staff and Fellows were asked directly whether they found any gaps between the other party and theirs about the goal of the program, and how they perceived the other party's views of the program. Staff congruency (i.e., how staff estimated Fellows' views of the program) and Fellows' congruency (i.e., how Fellows estimated staff's views of the program) were compared. First, staff strongly believed the meaning of program must be the same for both parties, because the program's purposes were clearly written on various documents (e.g., application materials), and had been clearly described throughout the program. One staff member said, "These things [professional development and networking] are my expectations and it is supposed to be their expectations also, because that is why they applied to the program."

When Fellows were asked, the answer was split into two responses. Half of the Fellows thought their view exactly matched that of the staff, while the other half assumed the presence of gaps between the staff's views and theirs. The latter argued that the staff had an intention of creating a positive U.S. image to spread American values worldwide, and to make good friends for the U.S. by utilizing the program as an effective tool for public diplomacy. Such a public diplomacy goal was, however, generally viewed as a win-win game for both parties, because "it is not a disagreement, just a mutually beneficial trade-off for both parties," as one Fellow stated. Fellows gained a great opportunity to develop their professional skills, while the United States had an opportunity to establish and foster good relationships with foreign leaders.

Fellows perceived the public diplomacy goal as being implemented in various ways. For example, the J-1 visa that Fellows received in order to enter the United States stated that Fellows were prohibited from coming back to the U.S. within two years. Fellows explained that this rule was designed to encourage them to expose their countries to U.S. values for at least two years. Such rules were considered to reflect U.S. government efforts for canceling the negative impressions created by U.S. foreign policies and for balancing it through this program. Fellows said that this goal was clear all through the Fellowship selection process, from statements like only "those who... have the power to contribute to the understanding between the two countries" would be selected. Another Fellow added that no matter what experience the Fellows had in the U.S., they were benefited by the financial aid of the U.S. government, and thus, Fellowship recipients could not help having a positive relationship with the U.S. Moreover, the program was perceived as a good investment for training high-quality ambassadors for public diplomacy. With a limited amount of money paid for the program, the U.S. government would be able to build a good relationship with those who could reasonably be expected to have power in their home country in the near future, as one Fellow described:

I'm 33. For 33 years, I've lived in my country, I've worked for a living, I've had to do many things, I had education I had to pay for that. And for the rest of my life, 30 years, I will be a good friend of the program. I'll be a good friend of the U.S., so what do you think? Thirty years for one year. This is a good return. It's a long-term vision.

However, some Fellows mentioned that the U.S. government tried to show them the "best vision of America" and to teach them "the methods and strategies of democracy," in spite of U.S. restrictions on the people's free will.

RQ3 Accuracy: Do staff and Fellows accurately perceive how their counterparts view the meaning of the program?

To examine the staff's accuracy, the staff's estimate of the Fellows' views of the program and the Fellows' views of the program were compared. For the Fellows' accuracy, Fellows' estimates of the staff's views of the program were compared with staff's views of the program. Apparently, the staff accurately perceived the Fellows' views, but the quality of each theme differed. Moreover, even though half of the Fellows showed accuracy, the other half strongly believed that the major goal of the program was public diplomacy, which staff had never mentioned. In this regard, there seemed to be a high level of inaccuracy in the Fellows' estimate of staff views of the purpose of the program.

9. Discussion and conclusion

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the perceptual differences between staff and Fellows toward the meaning of the Humphrey Fellowship Program. The coorientation model, as a theoretical and methodological framework, structured research questions and guided data collection and analysis. Research questions asked whether the two parties' views showed agreement, congruency, and accuracy toward the meaning of the program. On a surface level, staff and Fellows agreed on the purpose of the program, but when investigated minutely, each party's emphasis varied greatly under the umbrella of each emerging theme. Fellows indicated incongruency in considering the staff's goal to be public diplomacy, but staff were not concerned with public diplomacy, resulting in inaccuracy between the two parties.

The two parties seemed to agree upon the goal of the program to some extent. In particular, staff and Fellows viewed the program as fostering cultural exchange, supporting prior studies (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Hiebert, 2005), which indicated that false or distorted accounts or no information about the United States was one of the biggest factors that created negative attitudes toward the United States. This could have stemmed from stereotypical representation of the mass media (Hiebert, 2005) or a set of value systems developed from culture and history (Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Katzenstein & Keohane, 2007). Katzenstein and Keohane (2007) explained that historical experiences of a specific society with the U.S. affect current views toward the United States, perpetuating negative attitudes in "countries in which the elite have a long history of looking down on American culture," (p. 36) termed as "elitist anti-Americanism." Findings supported their arguments; some Fellows from European countries confessed that they had thought of U.S. citizens as not being smart. On the other hand, some Fellows from African countries had presumptions that U.S. citizens were lazy. However, such misperceptions were greatly changed through interaction with U.S. citizens. In particular, this finding provides empirical evidence supporting prior studies (Bellamy & Weinberg, 2008; Boxer, 2002; Fitzpatrick et al., 2011; Sevin, 2010) that U.S. public diplomacy should change its communication strategies from traditional media campaigns to interactive interpersonal communication, and that cultural and educational programs should be the core players for increasing foreign publics' understanding of U.S. policies or values. Fellows gained a better understanding of the United States, and changed much of their prior U.S. images by interacting with U.S. citizens at work places or during home visits. Unlike their prior images that had been accumulated through mass media in their home countries, the information earned from face-to-face interactions with U.S. citizens seemed to be viewed more credible by Fellows.

The apparent agreement, however, differed when investigated in depth, although four themes emerged from both staff and Fellows' interviews. Staff viewed the role of the program as short-term-based, one-way communication at a societal level, while Fellows viewed the role of program as long-term-based, two-way communication at a more individual level. Specifically, staff emphasized the program's social roles, such as conveying advanced knowledge of the U.S. to Fellows' home countries, whereas Fellows viewed the program wherein they would be benefited at the individual level. Fellows did not mention how they would contribute to their society after returning to their countries, rather stressing that this program would facilitate their individual success, help them become global leaders, and ultimately grant them the power of influencing other countries in the long term. In addition, while staff focused on Fellows' learning about U.S. culture, Fellows equally stressed their contribution to the United States. Often commenting that U.S. citizens had very strong stereotypes regarding foreign countries, Fellows strongly believed that they played an important role in correcting U.S. citizens' misperceptions about foreign countries. In other words, the program was viewed as a "give-and-take" (i.e., two-way communication) for Fellows, while it represented more "give" (i.e., one-way communication) for staff. A more fundamental gap existed in viewing the program's long-term outcomes. Fellows viewed that the United States would benefit more from the program in the long-term, by having good friends who would become globally influential figures and support U.S. global policies, while staff considered the program more beneficial to Fellows, as Fellows would gain advanced knowledge and experiences to help develop Fellows' home countries.

Such gaps seem to cause further inaccuracy in estimating the other party's view, and incongruency in comparing the two parties' views, as observed in answering RQ2 and RQ3. In particular, a perceptual gap toward the public diplomacy goal of the program seems to be the biggest discrepancy between the two parties. Such discrepancy requires two things: cultural understanding and strategic communication. Fundamentally, a culture-centric approach (Dutta-Bergman, 2006) to public diplomacy is in demand, where misunderstandings and misperceptions are to be solved through mutual understanding and dialogue. As Dutta-Bergman (2006) stressed, to better understand foreign publics, it is necessary to understand their value systems, and historical, cultural, educational backgrounds. Fellows have come to the program with various value systems and backgrounds that may have affected how they make meaning of the program. For example, some Fellows had a prior belief that U.S. people are lazy because they are rich, while others believed that U.S. citizens are not smart. Their interaction in the program seemed to ameliorate such misperceptions. More important, some Fellows perceived the primary goal of the program to be public diplomacy. Public diplomacy should be the goal, but its connotation may need to be better constructed

from “give-and-take” to relationship building through mutual understanding. For Fellows, public diplomacy seemed to be interpreted as the U.S. government’s intention to achieve a long-term benefit (i.e., “take”) by investing in Fellows (i.e. “give”). However, as scholars (e.g., [Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2005](#); [Fitzpatrick, 2007](#)) have argued, U.S. public diplomacy needs to rely on and be perceived as two-way communication, to effectively manage relationships with foreign publics. Therefore, the program needs to understand why and how Fellows developed such prior attitudes or beliefs, in order to diminish such perceptions.

Secondly, Fellows perceived the staff’s goal to be public diplomacy, but staff did not. The U.S. Department of State (n.d.) clearly states that America’s public diplomacy efforts include educational or cultural exchange programs. Such a strategic mindset may have existed at the top of program (e.g., the State Department), but not at the bottom levels. However, it is critical to strategically communicate with Fellows from the top to the bottom to maximize the outcome of the program. The gap existing between the two parties may ignite unnecessary misunderstandings. For example, some Fellows mentioned that the program tried to show “the best vision of America,” intentionally hiding its public diplomacy goal. A more strategic design may need to show a gesture of admitting the goal of public diplomacy, but proactively communicating with Fellows and foreign publics to better achieve the goal. Despite its efforts to build mutually beneficial relationships with foreign publics, Fellows perceived the Humphrey Program as “lecturing” rather than “listening” to the concerns of foreign publics, as Karen Hughes, who served as the Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, criticized ([Khouri, 2007](#)). Nevertheless, as prior research (e.g., [el-Nawawy, 2006](#); [Plaisance, 2005](#)) has found, one-way communication intended to convey American values to foreign countries in the past may be dominant in fact or in perception.

Cultural understanding and strategic communication come together when designing exchange programs. As [Hayden \(2009\)](#) found, the SAE program was successful due to the fact that it was explicitly designed to establish a mutual understanding of culturally grounded communication and media consumption practices, rather than “assuming cohabitation and shared experiences would yield some form of public diplomacy benefit, such as mutual understanding, resolution of differences, and explanations of cultural difference” (p. 536). Unlike the SAE program, the Humphrey Program assumed that individuals from different cultures would develop a better understanding with each other, once cohabitated, as evidenced from the staff’s expectation that Fellows would actively mingle and network with U.S. citizens and other Fellows. In reality, however, Fellows expressed a high level of anxiety caused by conflicts among themselves because of the cultural differences, as they shared the same place and continuously faced small or large conflicts. Some felt uncomfortable in expressing their difficulties because it was regarded as rude and inappropriate in their cultures. In an extreme case, one Fellow said she could not express anything, as she was afraid of being asked to leave the United States. From the perspective of strategic communication, such insecurity or unpleasant experience during the program is directly opposite of the Program’s goal. To minimize such negative experiences, a better understanding of Fellows’ cultural backgrounds is critical. For example, college students often share rooms in U.S. culture, but sharing a room may not be common in other cultures.

Such a cultural difference was obvious in communication styles. Staff evidenced the Program’s goal from documents on website or application documents. Fellows, however, rarely mentioned documents, but often found evidence from their personal experiences, such as participating in seminars, or other activities. One feasible explanation can be found in [Hall’s \(1976\)](#) discussion of high-/low-context cultures. In low-context cultures (e.g., North America), people tend to use direct, specific, and explicit communication using clear language code, while in high-context cultures (e.g., Asia, Arab countries), people tend to consider contexts such as time, situation, or the relationship between communicators ([Gudykunst et al., 1996](#)). From this point, staff members, raised in a low-context culture, were more likely to refer to written documents, whereas most Fellows, raised in high-context cultures, might have interpreted information based on their prior knowledge commonly shared in their countries.

Despite its contribution, this research has a limitation in sampling. For this program, three levels of staff existed: local coordinating staff on campus, staff in the IIE who manage the actual program, and the State Department. The most strategic mindset is expected to come from the highest level of this organization: the State Department. The current study made an effort to interview people at the highest level, but it was not possible to interview the staff at the State Department. Although the staff at the local institution and IIE design the Program and interact directly with Fellows, inclusion of the views of the State Department would have provided a more accurate overview. Thus, future research is suggested to conduct interviews with those who are in higher positions in the Humphrey Program, such as the State Department. Furthermore, all Fellows and local staff in this study were from a single institution; thus, the findings may be limited to this institution. Additional research is therefore suggested to examine various cultural exchange programs in different institutions, to better grasp the potential perceptual gaps.

This study presents implications for public relations scholars. First, the research provides empirical data for testing the coorientation model. Public relations scholars have argued for the transferability of public relations theories to public diplomacy, but most articles have been limited to describing conceptual similarities, often lacking data. The current study found evidence that public diplomacy could benefit from public relations. This study also contributes to the research of public diplomacy, which lacks theoretical frameworks ([L’Etang, 1996, 2009](#)), by providing public relations concepts and frameworks.

Practically, the study’s implications are not limited to the Humphrey Program, or U.S.-based cultural educational exchange programs. Every nation-state has its own public diplomacy programs aiming to foster positive relationships with foreign publics. Those public citizens are invited to nation-states (e.g., the Humphrey Program), or nation-states develop their programs in foreign countries (e.g., the Goethe-Institut of Germany). Such programs face similar problems, as their publics

come from different cultures. To maximize the impacts, such programs need a strategic plan to succeed, especially, through a better understanding of the invited or participating foreign publics. Depending on backgrounds, people have various misperceptions, predominating sentiments, or prior beliefs and attitudes toward a nation–country. By better understanding why and how different foreign publics have developed their current views, programs need to develop strategic plans for what should be communicated, and how (e.g., what misperceptions need to be corrected with whom, or how). In addition, such programs need strategic plans to establish and maintain favorable long-term relationships with the invited or participating foreign publics. As shown in the example where Fellows experienced a great level of conflict, the assumption that participants would have positive experiences during the Program should be re-examined. Regular quality checks on the invited foreigners are critical. Once positive relationships are established, strategic communication to maintain the relationships is required. The Humphrey Program lacked a systematic network that could involve the Fellows within a circle of on-going networks, requiring more strategic plans that would help foster long-term relationships with them.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Dr. Linda Aldoori and Dr. Elizabeth L. Toth, from the University of Maryland, for their guidance with this research.

Appendix.

Interview protocol

1. How would you describe the meaning (goal or purpose) of the Humphrey Fellowship? Why?
2. How do you think being a Humphrey Fellowship recipient would benefit you?
3. How do you think this program affected you (attitudes, skills etc.)? Why?
4. How would you describe your role in your home country after the Program?
5. What do you think would be the possible contribution to your home country as a Humphrey Fellow?
6. What do you think the staff expects you to do in this Program?
7. What do you think the staff expects you to do after you finish the Program?
8. What do you think is the staff's view of the meaning (goal/purpose) of the Program?
9. How would you describe the gap between the staff and you regarding the meaning (goal/purpose) of the Program, if a gap exists? If disagreement exists, do you think staff also perceives this?

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