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The European School of Public Relations:

Origins, Main Traits, and Theoretical Contributions

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Abstract

Though European theorizing about public relations is as diverse and multifaceted as the continent's 44 countries, this chapter proposes that certain common theoretical underpinnings of a "European school" can be identified in public relations theory. Originating in the second part of last century, the European School of Public Relations (ESPR) draws upon several classical theories that are deeply rooted in social theory and neighboring communication disciplines (see pp. 3-4).

This chapter discusses the main underpinnings of the ESPR. It starts by presenting a concise overview of the genesis of the ESPR, and then it introduces the reader to the core assumptions and major approaches (pp. 4-12). Next, it summarizes common traits of the ESPR and its research: (1) a deep connection to society, (2) a strong emphasis on responsibility, (3) a broad understanding of stakes and stakeholders, and (4) theoretical and methodological diversity (section two, pp. 12-22). The chapter concludes (section 3, pp. 22-24) with reflections on the impact of ESPR on the global body of theoretical knowledge about public relations.

Keywords: European public relations theory, social theory, responsibility, diversity, arenas, stakeholders, stakes.

Introduction

Public relations theory is often developed to meet the current communication needs of organizations and the societies around them (Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018). Evolving with the practice (Brunner, 2019; Toth & Dozier, 2018), theoretical developments in public relations are highly influenced by US cultural norms and professional contexts (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2020). However, other theoretical efforts have emerged from across the world, contributing to the body of public relations knowledge (van Ruler & Vercic, 2004). This chapter presents the main underpinnings of several European theorization efforts, offering an overview of the main assumptions of the theories, models, and thinking pertaining to public relations. These shared foundations, we argue, are the basis of the European School of Public Relations (ESPR).

Europe is bordered by the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, and Asia to the east. Only 27 of the 44 countries in the continent are part of the European Union. These 27 countries are increasingly joining resources to develop an EU research agenda (see e.g., Horizon Europe), yet the historical, cultural, societal, political, and economic differences across European countries affect the practice and development of public relations both academically and professionally (Verhoeven et al., 2020). Moreover, the variety of languages spoken in Europe contributes to the emergence of language-specific academic traditions that may remain unavailable to outsiders.

Rather than focusing on diversity, this chapter will focus on the common epistemological roots and their impact for theorizing efforts in Europe. Such work is timely; ESPR theories have often been developed as alternatives to mainstream public relations theories, which have fallen short to explain, predict, or govern organization–public relationships in complex organizations and/or situations. The fresh approaches of the ESPR may prove valuable to understand

phenomena that do not fit normative theoretical principles, which may be of use to culturally diverse societies during societal challenges, such as pandemics, wars, and economic crises.

The European School of Public Relations: Genesis, premises and core assumptions

Far from being a complete and defined set of thoughts, the ESPR is defined by the intellectual traditions shared by European scholars in the fields of public relations, strategic communication, corporate communication, and organizational communication. Stemming from the history of conflicts between neighboring countries, European social theorists specializing in communication (see for e.g., Habermas and Luhmann) aimed to solve societal problems by better understanding how communication can contribute to the development of a better society and individuals. As the genesis of these sub-communication disciplines is the same, so are their research trajectories, which investigate organizational, societal, and stakeholder impacts.

In Europe, as in many other parts of the world, the emergence of communication sciences as an academic discipline has produced several sub-specializations in specific internal, external, mediating, and moderating elements of human-to-human, human-to-machine, and human-to-organization interactions. Yet, in Europe, and most likely in other parts of the world, these have not developed into distinct and segregated fields or created what Craig (1999, p. 124) described as an increasing “theoretical tension”, but rather they have lively dialogues among them and between communication and not-communication disciplines.

For ESPR scholars, it is natural to bridge and redefine existing theoretical assumptions to explain, predict, and understand public relations problems. Yet, part of this dialogical-dialectical disciplinary approach (Craig, 1999) is dialoguing with existing public relations literature. The

ESPR does not disregard "classical" public relations theories[1] , such as relationship management theory, excellence theory, etc., a priori. But, when classical public relations theories and theoretical propositions are employed by European scholars, they are often reexamined and further developed (Brunner, 2019) based on European perspectives and historical developments. Thus, they change and evolve in response to new observations and empirical validations. A critical mindset to re-examining propositions and theories is common among ESPR scholars (Valentini, 2021b) whose research agenda aims to address, explain and/or solve professional, societal and stakeholder challenges. Because professional, societal and stakeholder problems have become increasingly complex and intertwined, a critical mindset in public relations theorizing has been considered superior to normative thinking in addressing emergent problems without falling short, or conventional in answering important questions.

What is the ESPR proposing?

Given the genesis and core premises of the ESPR, three main assumptions emerge as distinctive. First, ESPR scholars prefer to embrace the notions of complexity and paradoxes as "normal aspects" of social realities considering the critical mindset described above (Tench et al., 2017). Overall, there is skepticism of simplistic, extreme positivist views and normative principles regarding, for example, what professionals should do and what excellence—as described in the excellence theory—in public relations means. Although not all phenomena can be fully understood, as paradoxes are common in today's global, hypermodern culture, they are considered in theorizing efforts. By accepting paradoxes and the potential challenges associated

[1] For a discussion of "classical" public relations theory, see Valentini (2021b).

with every suggestion for excellent communication, scholars are deinstitutionalizing established principles of excellence in public relations. At the same time, although complex findings are challenging to turn into practical managerial implications, they resonate globally among practitioners.

Second, within the ESPR, communication and relationships are assumed to be two sides of the same coin (Vercic et al., 2001), as communication is "a form of behavior and at the same time . . . the essence of any kind of relations" (van Ruler & Vercic, 2004, pp. 4–5). Thus, when strategizing about communication, professionals think about the impact on stakeholder relationships and implications for society. This contrasts with the US mainstream relationship management understanding (see for e.g., Ledingham, 2021), where communication has a marginal role, and is not considered either an antecedent or a dimension/factor of relationship management. To understand public relations problems, European scholars begin with studying the essence of communication in different interactional situations (van Ruler, 2018), including stakeholder and societal relationships. That is, they study communication as a constitutive, mediating, and persuasive element that defines social realities with or without organizations. This understanding has shifted public relations focus from organizations' problems to global and societal problems from multiple points of view, including a broader understanding of the diverse stakeholder expectations, building trust and legitimacy, and ultimately contributing to the common good of societies, not just to organizations' or clients' interests (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2019).

Third, ESPR scholars tend to assume that public relations is driven by four characteristics: reflectiveness, managerialism, operationalization, and education (van Ruler & Vercic, 2004). Reflectiveness involves reflection on societal standards and values and bringing these reflections

to the attention to organizations. Managerialism involves cultivating relationships and mutual understandings through a managerial approach driven by theoretical soundness and clear instruments for measuring communication value. Operationalization involves helping organizations to address stakeholders and societal concerns. Finally, education involves helping all members of an organization to become communicators and to understand stakeholders and societal needs.

The field of public relations: a holistic communication discipline and profession

European scholars have traditionally employed a holistic approach to study different public relations phenomena, applying a broader set of social, cultural, economic, and political theories than a standard education in public relations in the US normally includes. Many European scholars, particularly those of older generations, have been trained in fields other than communication sciences (e.g., applied linguistics, journalism, foreign languages and literature, social sciences, political sciences, business, and economics)[2]. Younger generations of scholars acknowledge that borrowing theoretical thinking from other communication and non-communication disciplines enables public relations to be positioned in different contexts and situations in different manners, thus adding value to the public relations function. For example, *The communication value circle* theorizes that communication provides professional value through enabling tangible assets, building intangible assets, ensuring flexibility, and adjusting strategy (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017).

[2] For an overview of the history of public relations education in Europe, see Watson, 2015

Much like in the US, European professionals have fulfilled several roles and functions beyond the narrow definition of public relations as a message-crafting activity, which characterized most European public relations practices of the first half of the 20th century. In Europe, terms like "organizational communication," "communication management," and "corporate communication" or "strategic communication" (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014; van Ruler & Vercic, 2004) are preferred, perhaps because the term "public relations" often connotes propaganda and image creation. Even within the scholarly community, there is a preference for terms such as "strategic communication," "organizational communication" and "corporate communication." From an epistemological point of view, names carry specific meanings, identify, specific elements of a profession, and reveal how it is perceived by practitioners and the general public. Thus, the choice of any term is not casual nor without implications. It indicates how professionals and academics want to be perceived by stakeholders and the general community, and the approach they take in practicing or theorizing on communication. When scholars and practitioners discuss the field and its contributions, they often refer to holistic management of communication in organizations and among stakeholders.

This is also apparent within the ESPR, which tends to theorize less about the distinctive aspects of communication functions and more about the shared elements. In the European academic community, this field focuses "on understanding, exploring and analyzing their different practices and their impact on organizations, publics and stakeholders and societies" (Valentini, 2021a, p. 7).

Even the object of public relations is often very broad, extending beyond what the literature defines as key stakeholders. Particularly in the latest work of the ESPR, there is an increasing interest in widening the object of public relations in theorizing efforts, as public

relations professionals are "asked to perform a number of very different organizing activities at social, cultural, political, economic and interpersonal levels" (Valentini, 2021a, p. 10). This is another reason why, epistemologically, and methodologically, European public relations scholars borrow and adapt insights from other disciplines, particularly the European disciplines of corporate communication, communication management, organizational communication, strategic communication, and, to some extent, marketing communication disciplines.

Dark side of public relations theory

For most European countries, the World Wars and their propaganda led communication theorists to focus on rhetoric traditions and postwar societal reconstruction (see, Watson, 2015). However, there are also negative forms of public relations and disinformation in Europe, which public relations theory reflects upon (Pamment et al, 2018). Recent work has focused on negative forms of engagement, complaints and the strength of the emotion associated with them (e.g., Lievonen et al., 2018; Ruppel & Einwiller, 2021) or dark forms of communication related to sustainability and corporate social responsibility (Siano et al., 2017, Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2018; Vollero et al., 2016).

For the Nordic and western European countries with strong public sectors, public relations theories are heavily intertwined with public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019), relying deeply on the work of European sociologists (Ihlen & Fredrikssen, 2018). Additionally, according to their missions, public sector organizations should operate in accordance with the best interests of citizens and society. Yet, this is the sector in which, historically, the "propaganda machine" was employed by public relations professionals. The dark side of public relations is still present today in the war torn Eastern European countries (Hejlová & Klimeš,

2019; Koudelková et al., 2015), where crisis communication may turn into unethical influencing, or "black PR," mixing less ethical practices with new theories (Gryzunova, 2020, p. 201).

On some level, scholars view fighting disinformation similarly to the call for postwar theorizing to rebuild society through the strategic use of communication. To address phenomena pertaining to black PR or disinformation, European scholars have worked in close collaboration with governments and multinational organizations to help them becoming more antifragile and better able to survive problems and challenges (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Pamment et al., 2018). Pamment et al. (2018) note that communication professionals are centrally located to prepare their organizations to become aware of, identify, and counter attempts to influence information. Despite some dark sides, distinct bright traits of the European School of Public Relations have emerged which are next addressed in more detail.

Main traits of the European School of Public Relations

Four overlapping major traits can be identified that characterize the thinking shared by most scholars on the European continent: (1) a focus within public relations inquiry on concerns facing society at large, (2) a focus on the responsibility of professionals and organizations to act and impact society, (3) broad consideration of stakes and social actors, and (4) theoretical and methodological diversity in theorization and conceptualization of public relations. All these develop in tandem, where progress in one shapes the others: for example, any societal change reflects on changes in stakeholders' demands and stakes, the levels, forms and types of responsibilities, and affect the diversity of research efforts. Figure 1 illustrates the relations between these four traits with the overall understanding of communication in relationships that characterizes the ESPR. The following sections elaborate on these four overlapping traits.

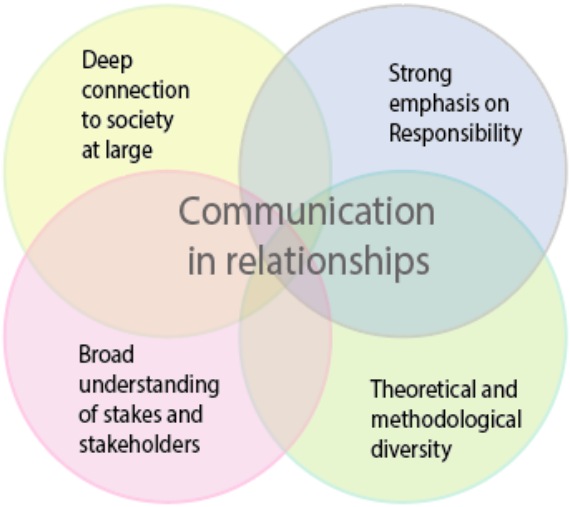

Figure 1. Areas of focus for the European School of Public Relations.

Deep connection to society at large

European public relations theory has a strong connection to its surrounding society and understanding of the contribution of communication to society at large. As van Ruler and Vercic (2004, p. 3) summarize: "The common US-oriented approach to the field focuses on 'public' as managing 'publics'—those concerned people who act to solve a problem they face—while in some European countries at least, the roots of public relations science and practice seem to be much more based on public as in and for the 'public sphere'." Often, European professionals and scholars conceive of the public relations profession as a profession aiming to relate with the larger context of society, labelled the "public sphere" (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010; Vercic et al.,

2001). “Communication as a social institution highly depends on the development of the public sphere” (Kashirskikh & Sverev, 2021, p. 31) and the other way around. Yet, in some Eastern European countries, where the public sphere remains underdeveloped, utilizing Western European or US-based theories may backfire, as expectations of trust or open communication by organizations may not exist or may be seen with skepticism (Kashirskikh & Sverev, 2021).

One of public relations’ core functions is defined as building, enhancing, and maintaining trust among social systems, that is, publics, institutions, and organizations (Bentele, 1994; Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2008; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2011). This emphasis on society is evident in both the European tradition of bridging sociological theories to public relations (see, e.g., Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018) and on the strong focus of research on intangible assets that enable societal functions such as trust (Bentele, 1994, Bentele & Seidenglanz, 2008) or engagement (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019).

Theories on collaboration are popular in Europe, and even traditional media relations are explained through the mutual connections and dependencies of different actors in society. For instance, the German scholars Bentele et al. (1997) developed the *Intereffication Model* (from the Latin words “inter” and “efficare,” meaning “to mutually enable”) to explain the mutual dependencies, orientations, and influences between journalists and public relations in liberal-democratic societies. It also shows that the activities of public relations professionals and journalists are only possible when the other side exists and cooperates. Early US studies on relationships between public relations professionals and journalists portray the scenario as antagonistic (e.g., Kopenhaver et al., 1984; Ryan & Martinson, 1988; Shin & Cameron, 2004). However, different studies (e.g., Niejens & Smit, 2006; Valentini & Falconi, 2008) show that, in a European context, these two communication professions are “Siamese twins” (Bentele &

Nothhaft, 2008), have a "structural coupling" relationship (Luhmann, 1987), and can normally achieve their respective communicative objectives, such as publicity for particular topics or changes of attitude (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2008).

Societal interdependence is also visible in the work and contribution of the Danish scholar Holmström (1998, 2004, 2005), who epistemologically bases her reflections on the function of public relations on Luhmann's system thinking and a reflective paradigm. From this perspective, the role of public relations is organizational legitimization, interrelated with different and changing forms of societal coordination. Holmström's thinking has contributed to the development of a research agenda on public relations' role in organizations' social license to operate and CSR (e.g., Cho et al., 2020; Hurst et al., 2020). Furthermore, the reflective approach to public relations approach is not just a normative ideal, as van Ruler and Vercic (2004) showed. Most European professionals believe that the main role of public relations is to continuously adjust decisions (i.e., to bridge between organizational and societal interests) based on society's changing norms and values. This concern is still high on the agenda of top communication professionals, as underlined by the annual reports of the European Communication Monitor (see Verhoeven et al., 2020).

Overall, at both the professional and academic levels, there is a strong understanding of the Habermasian public sphere (Katus, 2004; Raupp, 2004, 2011), and how communication can contribute to and constitute a society that aligns with the Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) perspective (Romenti & Illia, 2013; Valentini et al., 2016; Wehmeier & Winkler, 2013). Accordingly, public relations is often situated as a societal phenomenon rather than an organizational one, and it is studied as something that impacts social realities.

Strong emphasis on responsibility

Given its main societal orientation, ESPR and its theorizing efforts are driven by a strong focus on responsibility. Responsibility is taken as a starting point for organizational legitimacy, not an added function or contribution. European scholars have co-edited the leading CSR volume in public relations (see Ihlen et al., 2011), and a special emphasis on ethics in public relations is noticeable among European scholars' thinking (Einwiller & Carroll, 2020). Further, most of the crisis communication literature from Europe includes responsibility beyond corporate losses (e.g., Einwiller & Carroll, 2020; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Ruppel & Einwiller, 2021).

Understanding the European contribution to the study of responsibility in public relations contexts requires looking at the different responsibility-related concepts used by European scholars, including accountability, reflectiveness, opacity, transparency, and citizenship. Cross-disciplinary work is the norm, rather than the exception, and contributing to literature beyond public relations is typical. Indeed, European scholars were among the first to examine the financial value of CSR to market performance (see, e.g., Helmig et al., 2016) as well as looking at the potential backfiring effects (Einwiller et al., 2019). In addition, European scholars have examined the ideal match of organizations and their corporate citizenship attempts (Ihlen et al. 2011; Timonen & Luoma-aho, 2010) as well as the new forms of media, including transparency of sponsored content (Borchers & Enke, 2020; Ikonen et al., 2017), authenticity of organizations' collaborations with influencers (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Theoretically, this has led to new theories that include responsibility as a key component, such as *relationship expectation theory* (RET; Olkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2021).

Responsibility also pertains to technology. Capriotti and Moreno (2007) were among the first to discuss whether online CSR initiatives were interactive, and they noted that companies

were mostly using their websites for promotional purposes, not dialogue with stakeholders. More recently, European scholars have helped expand the understanding of responsibility to the digital realm. For example, with the advent of artificial intelligence and its use by professionals and organizations, responsibility has become a key element to be addressed, and communication plays an important role in stakeholder participation, comprehensiveness, and responsiveness as well as multivocality (Buhmann et al., 2019). Others, such as Gregory and Halff (2020) and Bourne and Edwards (2021), have called for organizations to admit the social cost of big data and the public relations it drives. They call for public relations to better consider stakeholders' choices for accessing, using, aggregating, storing, reusing, transacting, and even trading their own data. In addition, they call for public relations professionals to return control of the digital data collected by organizations to stakeholders, or "consumer-citizens."

Overall, responsibility to stakeholders and society at large is seen as a form of professional accountability in the ESPR, or, as van Ruler (2015) suggests with the notion of reflective practitioners, a reflective, holistic aspect of public relations practices. It also pertains to decisional, social, and performative organizational aspects, including reflection at the team level and with organizational partners and alliances. Accountability and its maintenance are integral parts of all relationships between the public relations profession and stakeholders and society. The role of communication in this process is central; it enables the multi-way diachronic process of constructing meaning, which is highly relevant for public relations theory and practice.

Broad understanding of stakes and stakeholders

Given the deep connection to society and great attention to responsibility, European public relations theory acknowledges a much broader definition of the stakes and who can be

understood as a stakeholder beyond the typical primary stakeholders in US research. For instance, the environment is often considered a legitimate stakeholder in public relations initiatives.

European scholars also prefer to address stakeholders instead of publics, as publics tend to act in response to problems they face, whereas stakeholders—as groups or entities with tangible and intangible interests—have duties and rights towards organizations and societies. Those rights include influencing the directions of organizations and leaders, their policies, and actions beyond when there is a problem. Indeed, European scholars acknowledge the central role of stakeholders in deciding the strategic direction of organizations (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Often, European public relations theories acknowledge that communication is no longer organization-centric, but stakeholder-centric (see, e.g., Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010).

Originating from network analysis and the theory of social capital (Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018, Luoma-aho 2016), European scholars were among the first to discuss different types of stakeholders in the context of public relations: advocating faith-holders (Luoma-aho, 2015) and corporate-attacking negative stakeholders, or hateholders (Gruber et al., 2020; Lievonen et al., 2019; Ruppel & Einwiller, 2021). Building on actor–network theory, which explains how non-human influences (e.g., IT mergers, natural environments) may birth unexpected contexts, situations, and stakeholder groups for organizations and how these shape public relations (Luoma-aho & Paloviita, 2010), European scholars have introduced the idea of non-human stakeholders to public relations theory (Somerville, 2021). Moreover, European scholars have theorized about the role of disinformation (Ihlen et al., 2019), fake stakeholders (or fakeholders; Luoma-aho, 2015), and their effect on organizational legitimacy, and understanding the future

changes that technology (Luoma-aho & Badham, 2023) and mediatization (Pallas & Fredriksson, 2013) bring to communication is of central importance.

To study this wide set of stakes and stakeholders, some ESPR scholars have advanced the notion of "arenas" where different voices meet to discuss and interpret events and issues occurring in society (e.g., Frandsen & Johansen, 2017; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010; Valentini et al., 2016). Such work focuses on continuous interactions rather than messages with a one-time influence and effectiveness. In addition, the concept of arenas shifts the focus from a corporation's own network to broader ones. It also rests on one of the main assumptions of the ESPR: that communication constitutes an element of social reality. Arenas are communicatively constituted, and thereby, so are the interactions that take place among social actors. Anyone, at any time, is capable of defining and offering their own interpretation of events to a wide set of publics, who can, in turn, re-define their meanings.

Based on these underpinnings, Luoma-aho and Vos (2010) suggest that we have actually moved away from communication that is organization-centric and toward issue-centric thinking. Issue arenas, they note, are the online and offline places where societal dialogue occurs and meanings are assigned. Based on issue arena theory, those individuals or organizations that are able to engage the arena early on are in better strategic positions as they can contribute to who is accepted to the dialogue and how communication occurs (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). Similarly, Johansen (2018) speaks about rhetorical arenas as social spaces that open when a crisis occurs and multiple voices communicate about it. The concept, however, has been applied to various situations when different opinions and ideas are shared and discussed. These spaces are rhetorical in that they are communicatively constructed and maintained through rhetorical moves. Recent European research shows that the concept of rhetorical arena is particularly

relevant to study the role of employees in organizational communications. These have been found to be a central stakeholder group when investigating how issues are communicatively constructed and reconstructed in arenas (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

Theoretical and methodological diversity

European public relations theory has much inherent diversity at the epistemological, ontological, and methodological levels (Jelen, 2008; Pasadeos et al., 2011; Valentini, 2020) as well as in the roots of theories. Epistemologically, public relations theorization in the ESPR has been characterized by a dominant hermeneutic view that focuses on interpretation and understanding of the societal phenomena that affect organizations, stakeholders, and publics as well as society at large. Rather than speaking about public relations as an isolated function of organizations, the European view on public relations theory follows a "hermeneutic circle," understanding the whole from its parts and each individual part by its reference to the whole. As explained above, European public relations theory integrates all forms of communications and relationships (Falkheimer & Heide, 2014) and adopts a holistic view of communication. In addition, there may be a preference for subjective ontology, as phenomena are studied in and for a specific context. When European scholars analyze public relations phenomena, they often investigate the context, its interdependencies, and contingencies. Moreover, there is a strong focus on diverse types of organizations beyond businesses and for-profit entities. Another difference is the focus on macro (i.e., societal) and meso (i.e., organizational) level aspects, as opposed to micro-level activities and results that support professional management functions, which often receive more attention from Anglo-American theorists. Overall, European public

relations theory addresses organizations and societies as coupled elements (van Ruler & Vercic, 2004).

Ontologically speaking, ESPR research is clearly influenced by interpretivism and social interpretivism, leading to a preference for qualitative empirical studies. For instance, some of the first scholars interested in public relations from the Nordic region were those educated in applied linguistics. It follows that their early research into public relations was highly influenced by their educational background. The language-based roots of public relations is evidenced in studies articulating an understanding of public relations as a rhetorical tradition (e.g., Ihlen, Frandsen, and Johansen's work) or a constituting element of social reality (van Ruler, 2018).

Critical, cultural, social, postmodern, technological, and feminist perspectives, which have long been considered to be fringe in public relations theory, have become quite important contributions to the discipline. This is also due to the work of European scholars and their friends working in European universities or abroad, such as Edwards (2018), Hodges (2006), Fawkes (2015), L'Etang (2007), L'Etang et al. (2016); Pieczka (2018), Ihlen and Heath (2019), and Frandsen and Johansen (2013). Although European scholars are also engaging with functionalist studies, a more balanced and diverse range of paradigms seems apparent, especially compared with the US research tradition in public relations, which still tends to rely heavily on behavioralism, with strong emphases on functionalism (Wehmeier & Winkler, 2013), managerial issues (Valentini, 2021b), and applied research (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). European scholars seem to be braver in regard to venues and research approaches other than classical surveys, content analyses, and interviews, which are the dominant research methods in the international public relations field (e.g., Jelen-Sanchez, 2018, Valentini, 2020). Catellani (2012) has been a pioneer in applying Umberto Eco's semiotics learning to study environmental and CSR

communications in a public relations context. Likewise, Maier's (2012) multi-modality approach has enriched the potential to study different communication formats in public relations studies.

As the ESPR relies on theoretical foundations and epistemological, ontological, and methodological positions that borrow from the diverse cultures that characterize Europe, it remains less cohesive and more fragmented in terms of public relations practices than its US counterpart whose cultural, educational, and professional amalgamation efforts have produced a much more homogenous set of values (van Ruler & Vercic, 2004). This is important to consider when reflecting on the standpoints taken by European scholars.

Concluding reflections

The ESPR reflects the future of the public relations theorizing on several levels. Although Europe's 44 countries differ greatly, there are some common assumptions that underpin the theoretical efforts of European scholars. These assumptions have shaped and are shaping European public relations theory. The four traits outlined in this chapter that link different theoretical trajectories are (1) a deep connection to society, (2) a strong emphasis on responsibility, (3) a broad understanding of stakes and stakeholders, and (4) wide theoretical and methodological diversity. While individually not unique to European theory, taken together, these traits are the basis for the ESPR.

As cross-collaborations among international scholars and mobility have increased over the last decade, the ESPR's influence has spread beyond Europe, particularly to Australia/Oceania and South America, where scholars have welcomed some of the ESPR's thinking as alternatives to the classical public relations theories developed by US scholars. Globally, theorizing on societal public relations has increased, with more studies conducted on

social activism and community engagement (see for e.g., Johnston and Taylor, 2018) as well as responsibility and accountability due in part to early European scholars' work. Indeed, responsibility in businesses and organizations is a largely European concept, and European scholars remain at the forefront of research addressing new forms of responsibility that arise from technological developments in the fields of public relations. In addition, European scholars have taken a critical approach to CSR, examining its fit, potential harm, and challenges. As public relations theory in Europe is constructed in an environment of dynamic change and ongoing construction of meanings, the ESPR has developed a broad understanding of stakes, which has been helpful beyond Europe. Stakeholder thinking has become the norm globally, and as digitalization continues, we predict that arena thinking will also become a global starting point. Moreover, the more complex organizations and networks become, the more agency non-human stakeholders and influences can gain, increasing the need for knowledge on broader stakes. To gain an understanding of such complexities, we argue that interdisciplinary approaches, such as those adopted by the ESPR, are needed at the theoretical and methodological levels.

Overall, the ESPR has contributed to increased critical thinking in the discipline, as European scholars or scholars at European universities have shown great interest in challenging established assumptions to develop (original) European theory (Jelen-Sanchez, 2018; Valentini, 2020, 2021b). It has continuously contributed to the contextualization of existing theory for specific national environments and situations, thus helping to empirically validate or re-define global public relations theories.

Far from being a set way of thinking about public relations theory, the ESPR is offering a multidisciplinary and multi-vocal take on current global challenges. Perhaps it has not

contributed to legitimizing public relations' identity, but it has demonstrated the broader value of public relations to society. The ESPR has also contributed to public relations theory by situating public relations thinking among ethical, sustainable, and society-oriented disciplines and professions. The ESPR does not promote a normative understanding of public relations (e.g., Heath, 2018; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988), but embraces contradictions and paradoxes and accepts them as part of dynamic interactions with stakeholders through an agile approach (van Ruler, 2015). Furthermore, the disciplinary dialogues that characterize the ESPR reduce tension among communication sub-disciplines (Craig, 1999) and help scholars focus on the real purpose of public relations theorizing: to solve global problems by establishing, nurturing, and managing mutual and beneficial relationships with diverse stakeholders for organizations and clients. The ESPR holds potential to become a thought leader in the next decades, as responsibility and diversity questions gain ground globally. The ESPR calls for more globally diverse debates on public relations theory and practice.

A final warning: some scholars may disagree with the overview offered in this chapter. For some, it may be too reductive, not fully capturing the scholarly reality in Europe. This chapter does not claim to represent all European scholars' endeavors, but we argue that it addresses a large portion. Given the diversity of European traditions within the ESPR, further analyses are needed to better understand specific regions and nations, and it is hoped that this chapter can serve as a starting point.

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