

Toward a Contingency Theory of Relating Management: Exploring Organization-Public Relationships (OPRs) in Conflicts

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Abstract

This paper presents the theoretical rationale for a contingency theory of relating management. The purpose of building such a contingency approach is to assist organizations in assessing and managing the dynamics of relationships with their external and internal publics when conflicts arise. Through integrating interdisciplinary literature from public relations and conflict management, this theoretical framework argues that contingent organization-public relationships (COPRs) in the conflict management process are highly dynamic and complex. COPRs influence relationship qualities and depend on three main categories of antecedents, including predisposing, situational, and contextual elements. An up-to-date case about conflicts between Johnson & Johnson and its baby powder consumers was analyzed to illustrate propositions from the postulated theory. Implications of this article help to move public relations theory beyond static and micro-level measurements of relationships and add value to the conflict theory literature, which mainly focuses on intra-organizational or interpersonal conflicts.

When organizations develop relationships with their publics, such as customers or employees, inevitably they must face different types of conflicts over issues, values, or negative emotions (Pondy, 1967). Regarded as a “process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party” (Wall & Calister, 1995, p. 517), conflict in an organizational setting has evolved itself into a typology in the past decades. Scholars (e.g., Liu et al., 2009), following a contingency perspective, subdivided conflict into two main types, task and relationship conflicts. Task conflict refers to “task oriented” disagreements on the objective tasks or issue-related differences in opinion. Relationship conflict included debates on “people oriented” matters such as tension and annoyance among group members, or other subjective emotional positions (Liu & Zhai, 2010). Depending on specific types of conflicts, scholars in conflict management found that each party might conduct different relational behavior; variables such as satisfaction, commitment, or trust (Lu & Guo, 2019) constituted important dimensions of relational outcomes. Previous conflict research also broadly covered four main levels of conflict management (Lewicki et al., 2003), including intergroup, intragroup/intra-organizational, interpersonal, and intrapersonal conflicts. However, the existing scholarship on challenges of relationship management between an organization and its key publics in conflicts has been lacking. Meanwhile, the contingent and dynamic properties of relationships have received limited attention.

Within the current public relations literature, organization-public relationships were frequently mentioned. It has been almost 40 years since Ferguson (1984) presented her conference paper on relationships between organizations and their publics. In 2018, Ferguson republished this conference paper in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and emphasized relationship management as a public relations research paradigm by stating “the unit of study should not be the organization, nor the public, nor the communication process. Rather, the unit of study should be the relationships between organizations and their publics” (p. 164). Following this relational approach, scholars examined relational outcomes (e.g., Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), antecedents of relationships (e.g., Hung, 2005), relationship process (e.g., Cheng & Cameron, 2019; Dougall, 2005), and relationship structure (e.g., Yang & Taylor, 2015). For almost three decades, public relations aimed at maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Cheng, 2020). The complexity perspective of relationships between organizations and their affected publics in conflicts remained largely unexplored. Organizations and their publics might not desire a win-win negotiation or choose mutual benefits as their ultimate goals (Cheng, 2016a, 2020; Stoker, 2015) during conflicts. Instead, the “dual concern theory” model (Thomas, 1992) suggested that each party could choose from a variety of conflict management styles such as compromising, competing, avoiding, collaborating, or accommodating based on self-interest or the interests of others.

To fill the above-mentioned research gaps, this article presents the theoretical underpinnings for a contingent theory for the assessment and management of relationships in conflicts. The purpose of this article contains three dimensions. First, this article presents a review of key concepts from interdisciplinary literature on public relations and conflict management and lists major antecedents and outcomes of OPRs in conflicts. Second, this article moves forward public relations theories by providing a co-oriented perspective to conceptualize and operationalize relationships in conflicts and proposing a continuum to examine changes of relationship modes, which go beyond adopting scales that originated from interpersonal relationships (Sha, 2018). Finally, this article applies Johnson and Johnson’s conflict on the issue of baby powder as a case to illustrate the proposed theoretical framework and describes both qualitative and quantitative research programs as future directions.

Theory Development: A Contingent Perspective of Relationships Definitions and Assumptions

In the relational paradigm of public relations, there are many definitions of OPRs. For instance, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined the concept of OPRs as the relationship state that brought economic, social, or political impacts in the field of public relations. Ledingham (2003) directed researchers to focus more on what public relations was about, rather than what public relations did. Hung (2005) interpreted OPRs' origins and stated, "OPRs arise when organizations and their strategic publics are interdependent, and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly" (p. 396). Scholars also applied the ecological theory (Monge & Poole, 2008) and conceptualized OPR as "inherently communicative and dialogic" meanings between social networks of multiple organizations (Yang & Taylor, 2015, p. 15).

The contingency theory of relating management adopts the concept of contingent organization-public relationships (COPRs), initially proposed by Cheng and Cameron (2019), as a core element and defined OPR as a relating process between at least two parties who maintain the continual information exchange surrounding common issues or topics. Through a relating management process via "structural decisions, individual reactions, and subsequent actions" (Stoker, 2015, p. 354), the current framework assumes that OPR depends on stances of all involved parties, including organizations and their key stakeholders (Cheng, 2020). Following the co-orientation model (Chaffee & McLeod, 1973), this framework assumes the relationship is not solely based on one party's perceptions, instead it is the result of both parties' perceptions toward common issues. Through informational interactions, organizations and their publics are connected and relational partner's perceptions of the other party's adoption of a stance will directly impact the stance of the other (cf. Chaffee & McLeod, 1973). For instance, Dougall (2005) interpreted relationship processes between banks and activists in conflicts as the intensity and reciprocity of information flow. Longitudinal analysis of news reports indicated that the more aggressive banks' stances were, the more competitive those activists were in conflicts.

Second, this theory argues that both organizations and their publics make conscious decisions to form stances, protecting their own interests first, and when possible the interests of others (Cheng, 2018). According to the contingency theory of accommodation, organizations strategically chose their stances/positions at any point along a continuum ranging from aggression to accommodation during crises or conflicts (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999). Aggression represented the position to achieve self-benefits while accommodation represented the desire to consider the welfare of others. In a conflict situation, regarded as a "process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party" (Wall & Calister, 1995, p. 517), expressions of stances such as aggression, neutral, or accommodation would trigger informational interactions between organizations and publics, and provide the means with which to track their relationships longitudinally (Cheng & Cameron, 2019; Dougall, 2005).

Third, the premise for developing this theory has been that organizations and affected publics may stay within a dynamic information interaction ranging from full conflict to full cooperation. According to Ledingham (2003), relationships could change over time. On the one hand, cooperation might occur when a management team functions effectively to focus on shared interests and maintains a positive relationship with publics. On the other hand, players in a strategic setting seek conflicts with each other, and the relationship could end itself as highly conflictual without reaching an agreement (Cheng, 2018).

The COPR and its Relationship Mode

According to Coombs and Holladay (2015), the traditional relationship management research (e.g., Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003) relied on a multi-layered scale of relationships originated from interpersonal communication literature. For instance, Hon and Grunig (1999) offered control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment as four basic dimensions of relationships and this operational approach of OPR was based on a micro-level analysis of individuals' perceptions at one point (Coombs & Holladay, 2015).

To advance the existing measurement, this contingency theory of relating management adopts a co-oriented approach to track six relationship modes, reflecting how one party relates to the other one over time. For instance, if both parties choose aggression as their stances, then we identify such a relationship mode as a competing relationship (Cheng & Cameron, 2019). In this state, both organizations and affected publics would adopt the competing conflict style and confrontation tactics (Tatum & Eberlin, 2006; Thomas, 1992) to maximize self-benefits and desired outcomes, which is symptomatic of "malignant social conflict" (Deutsch & Schichman, 1986, p. 229). In contrast, if both parties use the accommodation as stances, then the relationship mode has been defined as the cooperating relationship, where cooperative protagonists follow the compromising conflict style and mitigation tactics to understand each party's perspective, reach an agreement, and resolve conflicts through satisfying each other's interests (Plowman et al., 2001).

COPR thus contains two extreme modes such as competing and cooperating relationships along a relational continuum. As relationship modes are highly fluid and could change along such a continuum, a capitulating relationship (stances: aggression vs. accommodation), for instance, can occur when one party is aggressively pushing the other party to accommodate their requests in conflicts (Cheng & Cameron, 2019); A neutral relationship (stances: neutral vs. neutral) is located in the middle along the continuum, referring to the mode when both parties choose neutral stances through inaction or the ignoring negotiation style. This type of relationship might happen frequently during conflicts if both parties reach a low level of accuracy and cannot precisely predict what the other is thinking. As both parties in conflicts could change their conflicting styles and stances, accordingly, evading (stances: aggression vs. neutrality) or accommodating relationship (stances: accommodation vs. neutrality) would occur. For instance, an evading relationship mode was used when sports fans continued their aggressive interactions with an organization that then avoided direct responses and diverted the public attention toward other irrelevant topics (Brown & Billings, 2013). COPR thus is dynamically changing along a continuum, ranging from pure competing to pure cooperating orientation (Cheng, 2018). The changing of relationship modes over time is the manifestation of the ongoing information exchange process that defines the concept of COPR. Based on the above-mentioned literature, this article thus proposes the first proposition to study the COPR and its changes during conflicts.

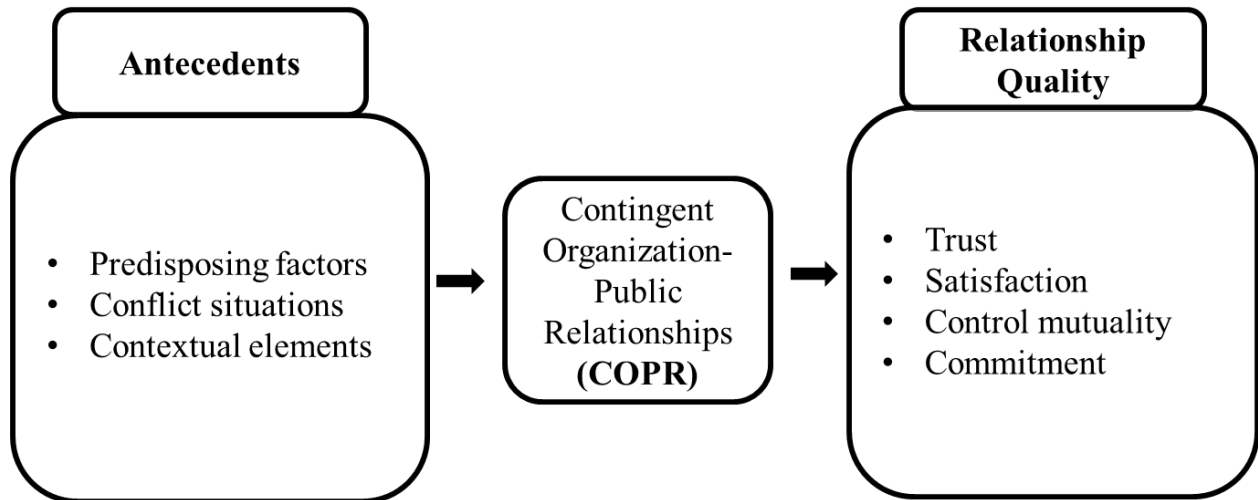
Proposition 1(P1). There are different types of relationship modes between organizations and publics, and such relationship modes will change across stages in conflict(s).

Relationship and its Antecedents

In the literature of conflict management, scholars suggested that relationships were complex and were determined by varieties of conditions in conflicts (Speakman & Ryals, 2010). Several public relations scholars also noted that the stances and relationships depended on contingency factors. The most prominent work was conducted by Cameron and his colleagues (cf. Cancel et al., 1997), who challenged the normative excellence theory and posited the contingency theory of accommodation. This contingency theory argued that the practice of public relations was too complex and organizational stances were impinged by the 87 contingency variables such as organizational culture, industrial environment, size and power of publics, and so on. Cancel et al.'s theory provided a realistic view of practicing public relations, while these 87 contingency factors were criticized for losing parsimony and operational value. Meanwhile, theoretical foundation and

empirical evidence on which types of antecedents might take effects to influence relationships and perspectives of publics in conflict management have been lacking. To fill the gap, this article integrates literature from public relations and conflict management (e.g., Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999; Pang et al., 2010) and presents predisposing, situational, and contextual elements as three main categories of antecedents in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Antecedents and Consequences of COPRs in Conflicts



Predisposing Variables

From a co-oriented perspective, both organizations and their publics preexisted before they entered a conflict situation, and thus attributes of both parties might spur relational changes in conflicts and these factors are considered in this contingency theory of relating management. As shown in Table 1, predisposing factors include prior conflict history between organizations and publics, socioeconomic factors, motivations of publics, and organizational characteristics such as size, culture, and prior reputation. These preexisting characteristics were found to be significantly related to stances and states of relationships. For instance, organizational culture has been found as a key antecedent that influenced conflict management styles (Mehr, 2012). In a charitable crisis in mainland China, Cheng (2016b) found that the closed culture of a Chinese non-profit organization determined its defensive stances in conflicts, which triggered a highly competitive relationship with angry donors. Reber et al. (2003) also indicated that organizational characteristics such as past negative experiences with conflicts are likely to reduce organizational willingness to interact with the public, leading to an avoiding conflict style and neutral stance in conflicts.

Table 1
Antecedents of Relationships in Conflicts

Predisposing Factors	Industry	Organization	Publics	
	Industrial environment; Industrial practice Cameron et al. (2001); Cancel et al. (1997); Cancel et al. (1999)	Organizational culture; Willingness to dilute its cause/request/claim Cameron et al. (2001); Cancel et al. (1997); Cancel et al. (1999) Organizational justice and culture Mehr (2012) Tatum and Eberlin (2008)	Demographic attributions such as gender, generation, and culture Rahim and Katz (2019) Public familiarity with organizations Yang (2007) Prior history with organizations; Power, size, or number of publics Cameron et al. (2001); Cancel et al. (1997); Cancel et al. (1999) Public emotional intelligence Chen et al. (2019)	
Conflict Situations	Situational conflict	Relationship conflict	Task conflict	
	Levels of escalations Jameson (1999) Urgence of the situation; Time pressure to resolve issues Pang et al. (2010) Jameson (1999)	Emotions or personal problems Liu and Zhai (2010)	Costs or benefits for either party Cheng (2016b) Potential threats or material outcomes Cameron et al. (2001)	
Contextual Elements	Legal/Regulation	Morality	Culture	Politics
	Legal/Regulatory restrictions; Justifications Moral conviction Cameron et al. (2001) Pang et al. (2010)	Moral development Chow and Ding (2002)	Cultural influence Huang et al. (2015)	Political interruption Cheng (2016a)

In the public relations literature, Cancel et al. (1997) listed several individual characteristics such as size and number of publics and prior history with organizations that might influence the adoption of an accommodative stance. In conflict management literature, studies have intensively discussed the impact of public attributes in interpersonal, intergroup, and intrapersonal conflicts (Speakman & Ryals, 2010). Scholars such as Rahim and Katz (2019) presented that gender and generation could significantly determine publics' conflict management styles: Employees changed their conflict-management styles across generations; male employees frequently applied more competing strategies such as dominating styles than female employees. Yang's model (2007) also indicated that individual familiarity with an organization was likely to result in positive relationships and a favorable impression of organizations.

Conflict Situations

According to Pang et al. (2010), situational factors referred to antecedents that were most likely to influence strategic decision-making and relationship management processes during crises or conflicts. When organizations managed relationships with their publics such as customers or employees, inevitably they had to face and react to three main conflictual situations: 1) task conflict referring to "task oriented" disagreements on objective tasks or material outcomes; 2) relationship conflict focusing on emotional or personal problems and it might negatively influence the relationship between parties (Liu & Zhai, 2010), and 3) situational conflict talks about time pressure, degree of escalation, and the impact of such conflict on organizations, which are relevant to relational interactions (Harrison & Dorefel, 2006).

By setting deadlines and giving high time pressure on the local government, for instance, protestors in Hong Kong aggressively pushed the government to accommodate and shelve the plan of implementing national education, leading to a capitulating relationship (Chong & Tam, 2012). In Cancel et al.'s (1999) study, factors such as the urgency of situations, internal or external threats, and potential costs or benefits of choosing a predisposed accommodative or adversarial stance were supported as significant situational factors. In addition, Cheng (2016b) argued that both parties would balance costs and benefits of adopting a stance in their relationship process. When the Red Cross of China, for example, chose to accommodate and maintain a capitulating relationship with donors during the 2011 credibility crisis, they must have considered the potential negative outcomes of lacking significant donations from the public in the next few years while publics aggressively sought information as their after-tax donations might be inappropriately used.

Contextual Elements

This theory not only considers attributes of organizations and publics and their conflictual situations, but also accounts for external contextual elements as antecedents of COPRs. According to Cameron et al. (2001), six proscriptions within external contexts such as moral conviction, moral neutrality, regulatory restraints, legal constraints, prohibitions from senior managers, and jurisdictional concerns "did not necessarily drive increased or extreme aggression, but did preclude compromise or even communication with a given public" (p. 253). For instance, Zhang et al. (2004) found that the dominant coalition's moral conviction precluded the adoption of an accommodative stance in conflicts. Tatum and Eberlin (2008) also found that if managers were insensitive to organizational justice issues, then it was likely they would address conflicts in a dominating style rather than a collaboration. Huang, Wu, and Cheng (2015) in crisis communication found that Eastern cultural elements such as Confucianism and "Mianzi" (Face) would significantly influence organizations to choose ambiguity or diversion strategies, leading to an evading or accommodating relational pattern with publics.

In conflict management literature, some contextual impacts were mentioned as well. Moral development, regulatory restraints, or legal constraints would affect publics' stances and relationships with

organizations. Chow and Ding (2002) found that in the Chinese or Hong Kong context, moral development was significantly related to individuals' conflict styles. When people developed a higher stage of moral development and contained ethical considerations, the more likely they would adopt integrating conflict styles. Meanwhile, cultural elements of individualism and masculinity strongly influenced individuals' adoption of a competing style of conflict management (Mohammed et al., 2008). Chinese publics for example prefer to use avoiding, integrating, or compromising conflict styles rather than dominating styles (Chow & Ding, 2002). Finally, political interruption strongly influenced the state of COPR as well. For instance, Alphabet Inc's Google once actively cooperated with and supplied the Android operating system to Huawei in the smartphone market, then the recent political restrictions of the Trump administration forced them to suspect business and stop original cooperating relationships with this Chinese company on apps and services (Moon, 2019).

In sum, Table 1 presents all the above-mentioned predisposing, situational, and contextual attributes. Following a contingent perspective, this theory proposes the second proposition to establish the relationship's linkage to its antecedents:

Proposition 2 (P2). Three categories of antecedents such as predispositions, conflict situations, or contextual elements, could significantly influence the relationship modes between organizations and their publics in conflict(s).

Relational Outcomes: Consequences of COPRs

Organizations' relationship quality in conflicts has been a key term in both public relations and conflict management scholarship (Cheng, 2018; Speakman & Ryals, 2010). Relational outcomes, as a composite measure of relationship strength include four major dimensions: satisfaction, trust, commitment, and control mutuality. Scholars such as Grunig and Huang (2000) and Yang (2007) both constructed integrated models and they successfully supported control mutuality, trust, relationship satisfaction, and relational commitment as consequences of OPR. Cheng and Shen (2020) conceptualized trust as the level of mutual confidence between two or more relational partners. Relational satisfaction refers to "a satisfying relationship is one in which the distribution of rewards is equitable and the relational rewards outweigh the cost" (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p. 225). With information exchange between involved parties, increasing academic attention in recent years has been paid to people's satisfaction and affection (Curhan et al., 2010). Commitment is another important relational outcome, and Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined it as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (p. 23). Control mutuality means "the degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 19).

Past literature also suggested that the relating management process between organizations and their publics might significantly affect their relationship quality. For instance, Trudel (2010) found that organizational commitment, as one dimension of relational outcome in workforce, was determined by different conflict styles and relationship modes. For instance, the dominating conflict management style (Rahim, 2004) and the capitulating relationship mode were negatively related to organizational commitment. Integrating conflict management styles associated with the cooperating relationship mode in contrast received a higher level of organizational commitment. Harrison and Doerfel's (2006) research also demonstrated that an open and integrative conflict management style and relational interactions could help restore trust and commitment in the organization. We thus propose the third proposition:

Proposition 3(P3). The contingent organization-public relationships (COPR) might significantly influence the relationship quality between organizations and their publics in conflict(s).

The Case Illustrations

To further apply the above-mentioned research propositions, this article adopted an illustrative case on the conflict between Johnson and its talc-based baby powder consumers. This approach allowed researchers to understand the complexity of dynamic relationships, delve into essential processes of information interactions between organizations and their key publics, and explore the connection between these relational processes with a larger context (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). In the following sections, we first briefly introduced the case background of Johnson’s conflict with its baby powder consumers, and then we applied the theoretical propositions (P1-P3) in the analysis of this case.

Brief Introduction

Johnson & Johnson, an American international medical products corporation, publicly announced on their website on May 19, 2020 that they would be discontinuing the sale of their talc-based baby powder (Johnson & Johnson, 2020). A “barrage of litigation advertising” came after stories published in Reuters and the New York Times (NYT), both on December 14, 2018, alleged that Johnson was aware that there was a link between their talc-based products and ovarian cancer and mesothelioma, as asbestos occurred underground near talcum and their products would test positive for trace amounts of asbestos (Girion, 2018). The Johnson’s baby powder consumers brought media attention to the potentially hazardous product by suing in droves-nearly 19,000 lawsuits were filed- and refusing to continue buying the product which makes up “half a percent of its total consumer health business in the United States” (Hsu & Rabin, 2020, para. 19). A timeline of this conflict was presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Timeline of Johnson & Johnson’s Baby Powder Conflict

Date	Actions of Johnson	Responses from Consumers
Stage 1: Starting of a Competing Relationship		
1970s-2000s	-Internal documents show Johnson was aware of the potential health risk of their talc-based baby powder -Internal tests show trace amounts of asbestos in talc-based Johnson’s baby powder	-The public is initially unaware of these documents and continue to use Johnson’s baby powder -Regulations on talcum increase as it is linked with asbestos contamination in scientific studies
October 2017	-Documents unsealed that stated Johnson was aware of the potential contamination of their baby powder	-22 plaintiffs win a case against Johnson in connection to cancer to Johnson’s talc-based baby powder, \$4.69 billion in damages awarded -Groundbreaking win for consumers

Cheng & Fisk

April and May 2018	-Johnson loses more cases but maintains the safety of their product	-Consumers continue to demand discontinuation of talc-based Johnson's baby powder
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December 14, 2018	-Reuters and New York Times (NYT) reports that Johnson knew about potential health hazards of the product, in the following days their stocks plummet -Johnson continues to appeal litigation against them, maintaining that their product is safe	-High numbers of cases filed by consumers against Johnson as more people come forward with cancer linked to talc-based products - There's a \$40 billion dollar stock sell-off as consumer's trust in Johnson decreases in response to Reuters and NYT articles
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Stage 2: Moving Toward a Capitulating Relationship

October 5, 2019	-CEO of Johnson testifies to the safety of their talc-based baby powder	-Consumers continue litigations
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October 18, 2019	-Johnson recalls 33,000 bottles of talc-based baby powder for trace asbestos contamination	-Consumers call for the discontinuation of talc-based Johnson's baby powder
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Stage 3: Finalizing as a Cooperating Relationship

May 19, 2020	-Johnson discontinues its talc-based Johnson's baby powder in Canada and the U.S.	-Consumers agree with the settlement as Johnson discontinues its baby powder.
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The COPR in Conflicts

The first proposition (*P1*) was about the state of relationships between the organization (i.e., Johnson & Johnson) and publics (i.e., baby powder consumers), and how the relationship changed across stages in this conflict. Below we presented and analyzed three stages of contingent relationships.

Stage 1: Start of a Competing Relationship

Both Johnson and talc-based baby powder consumers had aggressive stances during this stage of their conflict, therefore they had a competing relationship.

Johnson's Stance - Aggression. Before the release of the Reuters and NYT Reports on the potential health hazards posed by Johnson's baby powder, Johnson took an aggressive stance against consumers who were suing them due to an alleged connection between their talc-based baby powder and ovarian cancer and mesothelioma. They displayed this stance by appealing cases against them and the presence of internal documentation, "hundreds of pages of memos, executives worried about a potential government ban of talc, the safety of the product and a public backlash over Johnson's baby powder, a brand built on a reputation for trustworthiness and health" stated the NYT report that, along with a similar Reuters article, sparked Johnson's baby powder crisis (Rabin & Hsu, 2018, para. 4).

Public Stance - Aggression. Johnson's baby powder consumers took an aggressive stance by suing the company, as there was a connection made between their cancer and the talc-based baby powder. There were 22 female consumers who had sued Johnson and won \$4.7 billion, "one of the largest personal injury verdicts ever" (Hsu & Rabin, 2020, para. 9). Johnson's baby powder consumers had federal regulation to back this litigation, as scientific evidence connecting talcum-based products to ovarian cancer and mesothelioma had prompted the FDA to tighten regulations protecting consumers (Girion, 2018).

Stage 2: Moving Toward a Capitulating Relationship

As Johnson moved away from their aggressive stance and consumers continued to demand the discontinuation of the baby powder, the relationship moved towards capitulating.

Johnson's Stance - Accommodation. Up until a voluntary recall, Johnson maintained an aggressive stance by appealing cases they lost and maintaining that their baby powder was safe (Girion, 2018). In October of 2019, they moved toward an accommodating stance when they voluntarily recalled 33,000 bottles of talc-based baby powder due to trace amounts of asbestos contamination (Hsu & Rabin, 2019).

Public Stance - Aggression. The Reuters and NYT stories prompted "a stock selloff that erased about \$40 billion from the company's market value in one day" (Terhune et al., 2019, para. 30). There were around 19,000 lawsuits, as of late March, against Johnson made by consumers who believed that their ovarian cancer or mesothelioma was caused by its talc-based baby powder, which brought about negative media attention and cost Johnson billions (Hsu & Rabin, 2020). After the October 2019 recall, consumers called for a discontinuation of the talc-based baby powder (Hsu & Rabin, 2019).

Stage 3: Finalizing as a Cooperative Relationship

Johnson's stance became accommodative, meeting the consumer's demands to discontinue their baby powder, moving the relationship toward cooperative.

Johnson's Stance - Accommodation. "The decision to wind down sales of the product is a huge concession for Johnson & Johnson, which has for more than a century promoted the powder as pure and gentle enough for babies" (Hsu & Rabin, 2020, para. 2). After continued litigation and both reputational and economic losses, Johnson discontinued their Johnson's baby powder product stating that it was no longer economically viable (Johnson & Johnson, 2020).

Public Stance - Accommodation. Consumers successfully pressured Johnson into discontinuing the product through continued pressure in the media and continued court cases and allegations against Johnson. Their demand had been met and agreed with the settlement in the United States and Canada (Hsu & Rabin, 2020).

In summary, Johnson's relationship with its talc-based baby powder consumers became a competing relationship when those consumers were made aware of the potentially carcinogenic effects of Johnson's baby powder in the 1970s and began suing Johnson (Rabin & Hsu, 2018). The lawsuits increased after the release of Reuters and The NYT articles confirming Johnson knew its baby powder was potentially unsafe and could contain asbestos. As Johnson continued to defend itself in court, consumers called for Johnson to remove its product from sale (Rabin & Hsu, 2018). The relationship mode became capitulating as Johnson voluntarily recalled 33,000 bottles of Johnson's baby powder on October 18, 2019, which tested positive for trace amounts of asbestos (Hsu & Rabin, 2019). The call from consumers for a total recall of all bottles continued until Johnson took the accommodative stance and discontinued the talc-based baby powder on May 19, 2020, moving the relationship to a cooperative one where Johnson met the demands of its consumers (Johnson & Johnson, 2020).

The Antecedents of COPR in Conflicts

Antecedent categories such as predisposition, situational variables, and contextual variables could influence the relationship between talc baby powder consumers and Johnson during this crisis. Based on this second proposition (*P2*), the following section delineated antecedents and their impact during this conflict.

Predisposing Factors

Johnson had an organizational culture of promoting their brand as a family-friendly health organization and a history of appealing lawsuits against them and taking aggressive stances against consumers who found issues with their products (Rabin & Hsu, 2018). Johnson's baby powder consumers used the precedents set by product safety laws that predispose consumers to litigation as a tool of aggression (Girion, 2018). Meanwhile, public familiarity with Johnson and the size of the public calling attention to its issues-over 19,000 lawsuits- with its talc-based baby powder increased the negotiation power, resulting in a competing relationship with the company in early stages of conflicts (Coleman, 2020).

Conflict Situations

The conflict situation involved potential threats and costs to Johnson's reputation and the economic viability of their talc-based baby powder (Johnson & Johnson, 2020). Johnson had a \$40 billion market loss after a stock sell-off the day after the NYT and Reuters stories came out (Terhune et al., 2019). Johnson also had to pay \$4.7 billion in one of the over 19,000 cases against them by consumers (Hsu & Rabin, 2020). The total cost of the baby powder conflict was estimated between \$5 billion and \$10 billion in 2019 (Hsu & Rabin, 2019), pushing Johnson to finally comprise and discontinue its baby powder in 2020. For consumers, the potential threats were both to their health and the potential for a settlement from Johnson for the damages caused to those consumers by the product (Girion, 2018), leading toward an aggressive stance. As consumers and Johnson moved through the levels of escalation that led up to the change to a capitulating relationship, the conflict situation also shifted. This is because accommodative moves by Johnson served to de-escalate the conflict due to high levels of costs.

Contextual Elements

Regarding contextual variables, we found that moral conviction, regulatory/legal restraints, and jurisdictional concerns all influenced the relational interactions between Johnson their public. For instance, as laws and regulations developed around the use of talc-based products, so did the responses of both consumers and Johnson. Consumers felt a moral conviction for removing the talc-based baby powder from circulation. Many consumers held Johnson's baby powder responsible for their cancer. One consumer, who had used the powder since she was ten years old and survived ovarian cancer twice, went as far as to state that its ultimate removal meant that "no more little girls are going to go through what we went through" (Hsu & Rabin, 2020, para. 9). For Johnson, initially the legality of previous cases was against them as it was found that "J&J didn't tell the FDA that at least three tests by three different labs from 1972 to 1975 had found asbestos in its talc - in one case at levels reported as rather high" (Girion, 2018, para. 5). As these internal documents were released to the public, they gave credibility to new lawsuits and negatively impacted consumer opinion of Johnson. More recently, they had to accommodate and recall products as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was alerting customers that a type of asbestos was found from a sample of Johnson's products (Girion, 2018).

The Outcomes of COPRs in Conflicts

The third proposition stated that contingent OPR would influence the relationship quality in terms of the control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, or commitment between organizations and their publics. In other words, more cooperative and less conflicting relationships were of a higher quality than high conflict relationships. Indicators like control mutuality- authentic, pertinent, and responsive discourse- and trust- an attempt at communication that will show the competence, dependability, and integrity of the organization- show how relationships changed (Charbonnet, 2012). These indicators showed negative results by publics or organizations when the relationship wasn't positive and leaned toward a competitive relationship. For instance, early on in the conflict, consumers on social media said that the link between Johnson's baby powder and cancer was "scary"; consumers claimed that they "distrusted" the brand and would not use the product anymore (Athavaley, 2016).

When the COPR improved and moved toward the cooperating orientation, relationship quality such as control mutuality and trust would increase as well. For instance, Johnson showed that it attempted to regain consumer trust by discontinuing its sale of the talc-based baby powder in Canada and the United States. Consumer advocates even stated that other companies should follow Johnson's example, as several companies still use asbestos in their manufacturing process, and that the action will save lives (Hsu & Rabin, 2020). This indicated increasing trust by consumers for Johnson and its decision to discontinue its talc-based baby powder. As sales declined and the baby powder failed to perform, Johnson's change in stance toward accommodation allowed for a resolution of the conflict between consumers and themselves (Hsu & Rabin, 2020). This exhibited control mutuality as Johnson considered what consumer's reactions have been to the talc-baby powder and responded to their concerns. Consequently, the contingency theory of relating management took into consideration the effects of both organizational responses and consumer's reaction and how the relationship modes might have significantly influenced the relationship quality.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to Hazleton and Botan (1989), "a theory consists of at least two concepts and a statement explaining or predicting the relationship between those concepts" (p. 7). Different from a model, a theory should be used to explain a phenomenon (Littlejohn, 1995). Grounded in public relations and conflict management literature, this article presented contingency theory of relating management, as a contingent approach illuminating the phenomenon (i.e., dynamic relationship process between organizations and their publics) and elements of the condition (i.e., antecedents such as predisposing, situational, and contextual factors) to produce such a phenomenon in conflicts. Aiming to clarify "what enables the organization to change, what causes the changes to occur in relationships" (Cheng & Cameron, 2019, p. 690), and what might be the outcomes of relationships, this contingency theory emphasized COPRs as the domain and its connections with antecedents and relational outcomes. Operationally, this article specified operational definitions and measures of relationships. A case illustration of conflicts between Johnson and its baby powder consumers was analyzed to support propositions of this theory. Implications were delineated from the three dimensions below.

First, this article and its theoretical framework provide an alternative approach to the normative theory of public relations and shift our focus from one-time snapshots of relationships to a holistic overview of the relational state between two or multiple parties in conflicts. As shown in the conflict between Johnson and its consumers, each demonstrated their own stances implemented through diversified conflicting management strategies. Both parties co-oriented toward each other in decision-making processes, and perspectives of both parties were counted. Meanwhile, results supported the dynamic nature of the relationship process using an empirical case study (Broom et al., 1997; Dougall, 2005). Across the three

stages of Johnson's conflicts, we noticed that the relationships between the company and their publics changed over time, starting from a highly competitive mode to a capitulating one in past decades. Then, after negotiations, both parties reached a cooperating relationship in 2020.

Second, this theory advances current public relations literature on conflicts (Cancel et al., 1997; Dougall, 2005; Kelleher, 2003; Murphy & Dee, 1996; Shin et al., 2005). As conflict is an inevitable aspect of relationships in organizational contexts, a few researchers have investigated OPRs in conflicts (Cheng & Cameron, 2019; Dougall, 2005). However, within the limited discussions, the characteristics of conflicts such as time pressure and levels of escalations were ignored, and antecedents of relationships were not fully considered (Cheng, 2018). The contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel et al., 1997), for instance, has been widely applied in conflicts or crises for strategic management. However, this theory did not elaborate on the relationship management in conflicts and the unit of analysis focused on organizations only. This new established theoretical frame, thus contributed to strategic emphases of public relations in conflict management via explicating three categories of antecedents: predispositions about attributes of organizations and publics; situational variables like time pressure, levels of escalations, or perceived threats during crises or conflict communication process; and contextual elements such as cultural characteristics and political interruption. The outcomes of COPRs were also delineated in this article, supplementing previous discussions on contingency factors (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999). At the end of a particular point in time, relational outcomes might serve as the antecedents of COPRs for the next point in time.

Third, this new model of COPRs adds value to the existing conflict theory, which mainly focuses on intra-organizational (e.g., Guinot et al., 2015; Jameson, 1999; Oliveira & Lumineau, 2019) or interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Ayoko, 2016; Thomas, 1992). However, to date, there has been little theoretical discussion in conflict management focusing on the relationships between organizations and their publics. Organizations nowadays are facing conflicts with their diversified stakeholders such as employees or customers, whether the organization is a corporate or a non-profit or whether the conflict is about resources, relationship, identity, or justice (Lu & Guo, 2019). Thus, it is important to propose the contingency theory of relating management to advance theoretical lens about the interactive and changing relationships during conflicts and synthesize both organization and publics' perspectives that might determine the dynamic relationships in conflicts. By introducing public relations literature into the social conflict paradigm, this contingency theory is not only descriptive, but it can also be utilized as a strategic toolkit that serves both organizational and public interests and predicts directions for decision-making processes in conflict management.

Limitation and Suggestions for Future Research

Built on existing literature of public relations and conflict management, this contingency theory of relating management fulfills the criterion of a theory set by Littlejohn (1995), serving as a heuristic for further empirical research on COPRs in conflicts and a practical toolkit for negotiators and crisis managers as well. Although this theory is built on extensive literature review and evidence from a case illustration, its applicability and universality remain unknown. Future empirical studies should be conducted to validate these propositions in single- or multiple-cases. Below section briefly introduces qualitative and quantitative research programs that can be implemented in the future.

Qualitative Research

The first stage in research derived from this theoretical work should include a program of qualitative research such as in-depth interviews or focus groups with both public relations practitioners and publics to explore the proposed antecedents, how they may relate or affect each other, and further influence COPRs. Specifically, both organizations and their key publics (e.g., consumers or employees) in conflicts can be asked

if and when a certain stance occurs, what factors motivate them to adopt that stance, and what factors drive more competing or accommodating conflict styles. Interviewees could also help to review the entire matrix of antecedents of COPRs and identify possible missing factors for further validation and refinement of the existing framework.

Quantitative Research

Grounded in quantitative work, quantitative research methods such as computational content analysis and machine learning techniques could be utilized to collect generalizable data in the second stage. Specifically, the massive structured or unstructured sources of data achieved from social media tools are likely to provide manifest contents for understanding the contingent relationships between organizations and their publics over time (Cheng & Cameron, 2019; Spence et al., 2016). This theory allows scholars to take advantage of new technologies, analyzing the “continuous information flows and issue dynamics among relational parties” in communication (Cheng & Cameron, 2019, p. 702). By recognizing and identifying the different modes of relationships across time, this theory also helps to foresee future relational states and relationship qualities and test the OPR state’s association with its antecedents and outcomes. We expect that the publics and organizations benefit to varying degrees and develop a better understanding of each other, even if they may not necessarily agree with each other. Comparative research utilizing this theoretical framework in both Western and non-Western countries can be examined in future studies as well.

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