

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Innovative Thought of Critical Ethnography in the Dominance of Excellent Theory in the Research and Practice of Public Relations

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*This study aims to describe the critical ethnographic approach as innovative thinking in the study and practice of public relations amid the dominance of excellent theory. The importance of promoting this approach is also driven by the desire that public relations studies and practices are not fixed on just one type of paradigm, but other paradigms must be developed to enrich the study of Public relations. By reviewing 20 literature, books and journal articles, the author reveals some criticism of the excellent theory, a dominant theory in public relations research and practices. The excellent theory, which is called a normative model, is perceived difficult to apply to different organizational conditions, therefore, there is an assumption that the model is only utopian. The symmetric model is too focused on communication between organizations and the public so that it pays little attention to aspects of relationships. Some critics offer new approaches that based on the view that the practice and study of public relations should not be limited to placing public relations activities as a value-free entity and based on certain systematics and standards to guarantee its objectivity. This view leads to offer a critical ethnography to be adopted in public relations research and practices.*

**Keywords:** excellent theory, critical ethnography, literature review, public relations.

*Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan pendekatan etnografi kritis sebagai pemikiran inovatif dalam studi dan praktik public relations (PR) di tengah dominasi teori excellent. Pentingnya mempromosikan pendekatan ini juga didorong oleh keinginan agar studi dan praktik PR tidak terpaku pada satu jenis paradigma saja, tetapi paradigma lain harus dikembangkan untuk memperkaya studi public relations. Dengan meninjau 20 literatur, buku, dan artikel jurnal, penulis mengungkapkan beberapa kritik terhadap teori excellent, teori yang paling dominan dalam penelitian dan praktik PR. Teori excellent, yang disebut model normatif, dirasa sulit untuk diterapkan pada kondisi organisasi yang berbeda, oleh karena itu, ada asumsi bahwa model itu hanya utopis. Model simetris terlalu fokus pada komunikasi antara organisasi dan publik sehingga kurang memperhatikan aspek hubungan. Beberapa kritikus menawarkan pendekatan baru yang memandang praktik dan studi public relations tidak sebagai entitas yang bebas nilai berdasarkan standar tertentu untuk menjamin objektivitasnya. Pandangan ini menawarkan etnografi kritis untuk diadopsi dalam penelitian dan praktik PR.*

**Kata Kunci:** teori excellent, etnografi kritis, studi literatur, public relations.

As a scientific discipline, public relations is relatively new (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009; Kriyantono & McKenna, 2017). Because of this, there are still very few theories derived from public relations research. James E. Grunig (1989, p. 17) said that "Public relations scientists borrow many theories from Communication Science and other

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social sciences." Public relations is also considered as having "theoretical lateness" (Johansson, 2007) or "lack of theory" (Greenwood, 2010).

The development of public relations theories is highly determined by research activities. "The results of this research are creating and developing knowledge" (Kriyantono, 2015, p.3). As a science, public relations has two basic propositions: (1) public relations as a management function; (2) public relations is responsible for managing relations between organizations and the public (Everett, 2009). It can be said that research in scientific studies is an attempt to explain or prove a proposition (Kriyantono, 2014). In this context, these two propositions can be called objects of study. Like social science, there are different perspectives (approaches) to the object of study: positivistic and post positivistic, interpretive, and critical (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Neuman, 2014; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

Based on several pieces of literature, such as Pasadeos, Berger & Renfro (2010); Stacks (2002); Trujillo & Toth (1987); and Wimmer & Dominick (2006), theoretical studies (including research) and public relations and organizational practices are still dominated by an objective approach. Pasadeos et al. (2010) conducted a content analysis research on 396 pieces of literature on public relations research published in the two largest international journals, *Public relations Review* and *Journal of Public relations Research* between 2000-2005. They found that Excellent Theory in Public relations became a theoretical perspective that dominated much public relations research. The theory initiated by Grunig, et al. Departs from an objective approach that focuses on the need to apply symmetrical two-way communication models.

However, excellent theory has received a lot of criticism, which is considered a normative model and difficult to find as an ideal form in the practice of Public relations (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron (1999); Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2000). One of the innovative thoughts that began to develop a lot are thinking about a critical approach in the study and practice of public relations (Madisson, 2005; Mickey, 2003). This study aims to describe the critical ethnographic approach as innovative thinking in the study and practice of public relations amid the dominance of excellent theory. The importance of promoting this approach is also driven by the desire that public relations studies and practices are not fixed on just one type of paradigm, but other paradigms must be developed to enrich the study of public relations (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009; Skerlep, 2001). This is reinforced by the findings of Pasadeos et al (2010) that there has been turmoil from a paradigm shift away from the functional theory of public relations oriented to America.

### **Excellent theory dominates public relations research**

The practice of public relations developing together with human activity as a profession is new (Horsley, 2009; Kriyantono, 2017), and has developed as a discipline in the last four decades (Kriyantono & McKenna, 2017; Skerlep, 2001) so that it is still considered "lacking theory" (Greenwood, 2010).

One of the studies that initiated and produced public relations theory was the excellent study conducted by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)

Research Foundation led by James E. Grunig of the University of Maryland (Gower, 2006; Grunig & Grunig, 2002). Grunig and Grunig (2002) further explain that excellent theory is the development of four public relations models from Grunig and Hunt in 1984 and the situational theory of the publics (Grunig, 1979). Excellent theory emphasizes more on the aspects of negotiation and compromise in the communication process, the contribution of communication to the achievement of organizational goals (Rhee, 2004), the involvement of public relations in strategic management is important and indicates the characteristics of excellent public relations (Grunig, 2008), and communication systems symmetrical internal effect on employee satisfaction with their work and organization (Grunig, 2008). Furthermore, this excellent study succeeded in formulating 10 (ten) premises of excellent theory which is an ideal indicator of public relations in an organization (Bowen & Rawlins, 2010; Grunig, 2008).

The results of James E. Grunig's thought later became a theoretical perspective that dominated public relations research and was widely cited by other scientists (Laskin, 2011; Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2010) and called the normative model of public relations (Kent & Taylor 2007). This theory is proven to be applied in several countries (Kent & Taylor, 2007; Kriyantono, 2017; Wakefield, 2011).

Theory of excellent was developed from Grunig and Hunt's public relations model (1984) which, in turn, replaced Grunig's synchronous and diachronic model based on Thayer's (1968) work, arguing that two-way symmetrical interactions between organizations and society are the main requirements and characteristics of public relations excellent (Grunig & Grunig, 1992, p. 320). This symmetrical interaction can be facilitated by public relations practitioners who, ideally positioned in the "dominant coalition" of organizational management, work as "boundary spanners" representing organizational and public interests, based on their professional, ethical and knowledge values (Grunig, 2000; Grunig, et al., 2002).

Over the years in its development, the theory of excellent also integrated a number of theories into its study, including the situational theory of the publics (Grunig, 1968) which was the result of research for Grunig's doctoral degree, and has been modified, revised, and refined for nearly two decades. In addition, also added system theory (Broom, 2009), strategic management theory (Dozier, et al., 1995; Grunig, et al., 2006), co-orientation theory (Vercic, 2008), contingency of accommodation theory (Cameron, 1997), relationship theory (Ledingham & Brunig, 2001), and some elements of dialogical theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002), rhetoric theory (Heath, 2009), and feminist theory (Aldoory, 2007). Spicer (2007, quoted in Macnamara, 2012) also noticed how the public relations model and theory of excellent have been reviewed, expanded, and revised since its first appearance in 1992 (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). It can be said that the main strength of excellent theory is its flexibility and development as a theory.

The fact of the dominance of the theory of excellent is also evidenced in the early stages of its development, the objective paradigm (which in this case is the theory of excellent) has dominated the study of public relations (Gower, 2006; Skerlep, 2001; Kriyantono, 2012). The dominance of the theory of excellent has also been demonstrated in several empirical studies, for example, in a study of the development of public relations theory in 1984, based

on the analysis of articles published in *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research* (Ferguson, 1984), Sallot and colleagues reported in 2003 that, although the development of theory has been expanded, the symmetrical excellent theory is the most dominant (Sallot et al., 2003).

Furthermore, recently, a review of several public relations literature in the period 2000-2005 conducted by Pasadeos et al. (2010) confirmed that, while some new names and a number of theories entered the public relations lexicon, the largest category of works cited was still related to excellent theory.

This research uses a literature study with the aim of exploring the criticisms that emerge against the dominance of the use of excellent theory as the beginning of the emergence of typical theories in the field of public relations studies. This research also describes critical ethnography as an approach in public relations practice and studies. Below is the list of data sources which are used in this study:

Table 1. Sources of data

| No | Source   |
|----|--|
| 1  | <i>Doing Critical Ethnography</i>  |
| 2  | <i>Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance</i>   |
| 3  | <i>Deconstructing Public Relations: Public Relations Criticism</i> , and research articles published in international journal sources, such as <i>Public Relations Review</i> , <i>Journal of Public relations Research</i> , <i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i> , and <i>Journal of Communication Management</i>                       |
| 4  | Articles that discuss the development and history of public relations, such as reconstruction of public relations history through publications in <i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i> (Podnar & Golob, 2009), <i>Public Relations: State of the Field</i> (Botan & Taylor, 2004), and <i>Handbook of Public relations</i> (Heath, 2009). |

A number of such literature often mention the names of the journals above as a reference that is part of the development of public relations, shows the revolution that occurred in the research of public relations, and there have been major developments from year to year in the last two decades, and still increasing. The existence of a number of these journal names contributed greatly to public relations research.

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as "thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data in detail" (pp. 6-9). Using thematic analysis techniques, researchers produce a number of critical themes contained in several international journal articles that discuss the application of the theory of excellent, both theoretically and practically.

### Criticism of the excellent theory

This research from Pasadeos et al. (2010) resulted in a sequence of several areas of research that were mostly carried out in the public relations discipline, namely: researches on excellent theory, relationship management theory, (developing excellent theory), issue management, and agenda building-information subsidies focus on all public relations

communication media used to influence the media agenda. Pasadeos, et al, also found five theories that experienced an increase in the development of public relations theories during 2000-2005, namely: theory of excellent, relationship management theory, image restoration theory, contingency theory of accommodation, and theory of postmodernism. The latest findings from Pasadeos et al show that a critical approach -through the theory of postmodernism- has begun to be adapted in public relations research.

Some literatures (such as Botan & Hazleton, 2006; Gower, 2006; Greenwood, 2010; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Pasadeos, et al, 2010; Trujilo & Toth, 1987) mention that there has been a paradigm battle between the dominant paradigms represented by symmetric/excellent theory and critical paradigm, including postmodernism. This critical paradigm criticizes the dominance of the theory of excellent, which dominated public relations research between the 1970s and 1990s because it was considered not to include the power-control aspect when discussing the phenomenon of public relations (Wehmeier, 2009).

From research using the meta-analysis method, Gower (2006) has collected several criticisms of the theory of excellent. This theory has colored the public relations research agenda so far. Excellent research agendas are criticized because they tend to regard public relations only as a management function, only research public relations based on its functions, use more transmission communication models, put more emphasis on organizational theories, and cannot reveal the main forces in construction relations between individuals and organizations. Since the excellent theory tends to use positivist paradigm in its research, the theory is regarded as out of date. The use of the two-way communication model in research in the theory of excellent is criticized because it is more likely to adopt a functional approach in organizations that only focus on how public relations function within the organization. In fact, according to critics, public relations is ideological rather than merely functioning or intentionally symmetrical. From Gower's findings above, it can be concluded that public relations cannot be interpreted as an entity that is free from efforts to spread certain ideologies, especially from the holders of power. That is, according to critics, there is no two-way communication that is independent of organizational ideology. These new thoughts are driving critical public relations studies.

From the 20 papers studied, there are several main themes of criticism. The practice of public relations in several countries differs from one another. As Rhee (2004) explained, the context of organizational culture can be a factor that distinguishes the practice of public relations in each organization in each country. Theory of excellent can be applied to organizations throughout the world, however, it cannot be applied simply by ignoring other aspects. The diversity of economic, political and socio-cultural conditions in each country is different. The socio-cultural aspect has become a very influential aspect of public relations activities in several countries. In a global context, the application of excellent theory is often involved with two main concepts, namely the interpersonal influence model and the cultural interpretation model (Sriramesh, Yungwook, & Mioko, 1999; Rhee, 2004).

This normative model is difficult to find as an ideal form in the practice of public relations (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2000; Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). Critical and postmodern scholars see the symmetry model does not always provide an ideal end result

for the practice of public relations and does not really create balanced participation from all parties that benefit all parties involved (Laskin, 2011).

This normative model is difficult to apply to different organizational conditions, so there is an assumption that the model is only utopian (Kunczik, 1994; Pieczka, 1995; L'Etang, 2004). The symmetric model is too focused on communication between organizations and the public so that it pays little attention to aspects of relationships (Ferguson, 1984). Others say the symmetrical model only becomes "a strategy for hegemony" (Roper, 2005, p. 69) because the public and organizations are rarely in the same position, and their inequality allows organizations to advance their own interests by taking advantage of their power (Stauber & Rampton, 1995).

Skerlep (2001) initiated the need for another paradigm to enrich the study of public relations. Laskin (2012) developed five scales of public relations as a substitute for applying the model of public relations. Laskin offers a measurement approach as an approach to plan, monitor and evaluate public relations programs, as well as to improve the knowledge and expertise of practitioners and the public relations department. Laskin (2012) shows that the lack of flexibility in the conceptualized and operationalized public relations model makes the symmetrical model often not be applied in practice. Laskin also added that the symmetrical model in the theory needed to be revised to include other variables that were considered important.

Furthermore, research by Adam W. Tyma (2008) resulted in the formulation of an alternative approach which states that the normative theory is no longer relevant to the social, political, and corporate reality faced by public relations practitioners today. The research presents excellent theory as a critical paradigm, which allows for the development of other theories. Application of theory in this paper as an ideological critique of public relations scenarios, both in the formation, or reflection on the practice and practice of public relations. Tyma (2008) shows that normative and critical approaches are not, in fact, contradictory and that the theory of excellent can be interpreted as both, changing the position of theory as an emancipatory practice, and showing that the theory can also be used to not only present what makes public relations excellent a normative model. In addition, excellent theory can be positioned as a critical paradigm that offers opportunities for critics to develop their ideas. This deconstructed theory of excellent then shows that in some cases its existence is not at odds with a critical approach, but rather becomes a part of it.

Another criticism that was also developed to criticize the existence of the theory of excellent is a critique of several aspects which according to some scientists are not given enough attention in developing the theory of excellent, such as criticism from Gower (2006) which states that the theory of excellent tends to assume the theory of the public relations only functions as a management function, only researching public relations based on their functions, using more transmission communication models, emphasizing organizational theories, and not being able to reveal the main forces in the construction of relations between individuals and organizations. Edwards and Hodges (2011) also argue that Grunig is too focused on organizational theory to simplify human behavior. They argue that a single focus on public relations in organizations ignores the social world in which these organizations operate.

In addition, in developing the theory of excellent, Grunig is considered less concerned with aspects of rhetoric as part of public relations because according to his understanding rhetoric and persuasion are manipulations, so he created four models of public relations that are considered as an ideal form of organizational relations with the public (Skerlep, 2001). In fact, this aspect of rhetoric is considered important as a symbolic characteristic of communication in constructing public expectations, behavior and beliefs, social legitimacy, understanding, and continuity of interaction (Toth, 2009). Skerlep also said the importance of the element of rhetoric in the development of public relations activities is useful to justify managerial decisions with convincing arguments. Rhetoric can further elaborate on crucial aspects of the practice of public relations. Therefore, rhetoric is considered necessary to be included in the development of public relations excellent theory.

The development of a number of criticisms from some of the research findings above actually shows the maturity of the theory of excellent, because it refers to the opinion of Ihlen and van Ruler (2009) the maturity requirements of science, namely if the science contains diversity and comparison of paradigms and various theoretical foundations. A good theory is a theory must be open to debate (West & Turner, 2007).

### **Critical ethnography as a new approach to public relations**

According to L'Etang (2005, p. 522): "the Critical Approach has challenged the assumptions which currently prevail, define and criticize the dominant paradigm, apply critical theory and criticize public relations policies and practices." There are research examples that also prove L'Etang's opinion above, namely from Leitch & Neilson's (1997) research that deconstructs public terms. The public should be defined based on a dialogical approach, not based on a strategic approach that happens a lot. In the strategic approach, the public is treated as a passive recipient of messages delivered by public relations. That is, the public is more a consumer of organizational programs. On the different side, dialogical approach, the public is given broad opportunities to actively and equally participate in dialogue with organizations.

Critical paradigms regard organizations as arenas of ideological and economic battles, such as power, influence, and control. The public is coalitions and constituents who have different needs, values and perceptions. This approach, then, focuses on the political aspects of the organization and examines how organizations use communication to bargain and negotiate with various coalitions and constituents (L'Etang, 2005; Mickey, 2003; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Toth, 2009).

Research with a critical approach is useful as a reflection effort. Mickey (2003) considers that the practice of public relations is still often not followed by a critical reflection of critical theory, marxism or postmodernism. Public relations is assumed to focus more on finding views about problem-solving but is not interested in the self-reflection approach. Fifth, as Grunig said (Motion & Weaver, 2005, p. 49): "a need for critical theorists and researchers to more clearly building the contribution of a critical approach so as to develop not only public relations theory but also research and practice."

By providing moral judgments, social criticisms and offering solutions to create equality of rights, researchers function as agents that deny the existence of phenomena, which

according to Madison (2005: 5), "domestication." Domestication can be interpreted as a process or act that makes a person, group or community is under the dominance of certain parties. Domestication can occur in public relations practices. If public relations messages focus more on imaging efforts by manipulating reality it can be categorized as domestication, because the effect of the message has the potential to create an image of reality in the public self. The public unconsciously considers the reality conveyed by these messages, for example through advertisements, newsletters or company magazines, to be an objective reality.

Toth (2009) & L'Tang (2005) mentioned that critical research has provided alternatives to building knowledge for public relations. Research from Wigley (2002) is an example of public relations research that can produce new theories which are the development of the cognitive dissonance theory. This research uses a qualitative-critical method (interview & FGD). This research aims to identify the factors that support and enlarge the phenomenon of glass-ceiling for women in the practice of public relations and corporate communication management. Wrigley took to the field with the assumption that "glass-ceiling" (a term that refers to restrictions that are experienced by women; women are likened to being in a closed glass room/confined) limiting the role of women in public relations and management of corporate communication, despite feminization in public relations increased. The majority of public relations practitioners in the US are women, but the representation of women in management (both in the field of public relations and other fields) is still low. This makes the contribution of women is still low. In the end, this research introduces a new theory called negotiated resignation. This theory is giving a broader explanation of the cognitive dissonance theory. According to this research, there has been a psychological process at work in an effort to negotiate feelings about the glass ceiling. If the glass ceiling creates dissonance for women at work and the women want to continue working in their environment, they must try to adapt and overcome the discrepancies with various strategies also discovered through this research. The findings in this research were analyzed and interpreted by researchers using the radical feminist and liberal feminist perspectives.

From the description above it can be concluded that the practice and study of public relations should not be limited to placing public relations activities as a value-free entity and based on certain systematics and standards to guarantee its objectivity. However, public relations must be seen as a tool of the actors involved in it in an ideological war to hegemony the ideology of others.

Thus, critical ethnography enables public relations scientists and practitioners to act as agents of multiculturalism, that is, the nature of recognizing and valuing differences inequality both individually and culturally. If this multicultural nature is internalized in an individual, then the individual will openly understand, appreciate and examine the culture of others based on the spirit of respect in togetherness. Critical ethnography allows researchers to enlighten society, the values of equality through public discourse after disseminating the results of their research.

The critical approach explains how power or power (power), pressures, and the provision of facilities or differences in treatment to certain individuals or groups (privileges) have been formed through forms of communication. The critical approach has enriched the



ethnographic method by adding an important aspect, namely critical analysis, rather than merely describing reality (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). In other words, the critical approach gives a new perspective to ethnographic research, which is called critical ethnography (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017; Ma-dison, 2005; Thomas, 1993; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). By using a critical approach, critical ethnography will ask injustice (fairness), freedom, hidden agendas, repression, constraints, and constraints, and well-being. Researchers will always pay high attention to the conditions of deprivation and suffering experienced by marginalized and subordinate groups in order to offer solutions to achieve the ideal situation in public relations practice (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2014; Madison, 2005; Thomas, 1993; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

## Conclusion

Based on the previous explanation, the conclusions from the results of this literature study, it can be mentioned that the central themes which are the subject of attention in the development of excellent theory are related to two things, namely the managerial function of public relations and ethical aspects in the implementation of communication with the public. These two themes become the main discussion. The excellent theory then is in public relations theory which has an objective paradigm and is functionalist, because it focuses on how organizations can maintain and maintain the organizational order so that it runs in an ideal form.

Then, from the search results of a number of research journals, researchers found that the tendency of criticism given to the application of excellent theory is the normativity of the theory to be applied globally and the symmetrical model as an ethical and effective model of communication is doubtful because the reality in the field is different from public relations theory. The need to develop another approach in public relations was also conveyed in some criticisms by other scholars. However, Grunig's open-minded figure is able to deal with all forms of criticism of the work he has developed through the disclosure of facts and empirical studies. The excellent theory is also proven to have flexibility in its application globally and in the digital age.

More than that, it can also be said that this research contributes to the historical mapping of the development of public relations in the world and provides an overview of the dominance of the American school in the early development of communication science also seems to influence the development of public relations, through the theory of excellent as an objective paradigm which is then able to expand the theme public relations research themes for several periods, show evidence of the success of the objectives of the holding of decolonization by the British government and psychological warfare (psychology warfare) by America to hegemony the scientific world, especially communication science.

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