

View from the upper echelon: Examining dominant coalition members' values and perceptions and the impact of formal environmental scanning

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Abstract: Research has shown that decisions about how organizations engage in public relations are ultimately the domain of the dominant coalition. However, scholarship has yet to fully identify and examine the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that influence these decisions. Drawing on insights from systems theory and research on relationships, this study identifies one value (i.e., organizational openness) and two perceptions (i.e., environmental complexity and organizational autonomy) that have the potential to influence dominant coalition members' decision making, and that also could be influenced by public relations activities. This exploratory study adopts upper echelons theory as a framework to examine the relationships among these variables. It also considers the impact of formal environmental scanning by public relations on dominant coalition members' perceptions of its operating environment. The results showed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to their perceptions of environmental complexity. Moreover, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. Finally, the frequency of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning was positively related to dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness and perceptions of environmental complexity.

Keywords: dominant coalition, openness, environmental uncertainty, organizational autonomy, formal environmental scanning

Executive Summary

Organizations today face the challenge of pursuing their missions and achieving their goals while maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999) with a variety of stakeholder groups that demand transparency (Rawlins, 2008), expect authenticity (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Molleda, 2010), and are empowered through new media to affect organizational reputation and behavior (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). In addition, organizations must deal with increased pressure from skeptical consumers, globalization, political polarization, and technological development (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012; Edelman, 2011). A reality of this increasing complexity is that organizations must manage relationships with a variety of stakeholders, some seeking to limit an organization's freedom to operate and others seeking to enhance it (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Practitioners and scholars agree that, in order for the public relations function to assist organizations in cultivating relationships with stakeholders, public relations practitioners must do more than just communicate messages. Rather, they must play an integral role in shaping organizational policy (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). However, a group of the most powerful people in an organization (i.e., dominant coalition) makes the ultimate decisions about how public relations will be practiced by an organization. While research has largely focused on what public relations practitioners can do to become part of the dominant coalition (Berger, 2005), scholars have yet to fully examine "how things work inside the dominant coalition" (Berger, 2007, p. 229), which includes the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that influence their decisions.

The purpose of this study is to take an exploratory step into determining “how things work in the dominant coalition” (Berger, 2007, p. 229). Specifically, this research aims to identify and examine certain values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that can be influenced by public relations activities. This study draws on research from public relations and organizational theory to identify and explore these values and perceptions and the relationships among them. Based on upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), this study proposes that dominant coalition members’ values of organizational openness serve as a filter through which they form their perceptions of the organization’s operating environment (H1), which can be influenced by the formal environmental scanning activities of the public relations function (H2). In turn, dominant coalition members’ perceptions of the organization’s environment should affect their perceptions of organizational autonomy (H3).

The population of interest for this study was dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofits in the United States. Data were collected through a national survey employing a purposive sample of 201 dominant coalition members at three for-profit businesses, three government agencies, and four non-profit organizations. These organizations were from the West, Mountain West, Midwest, South, and Southeast regions of the U.S. Both online and paper-and-pencil surveys were used. There were 118 usable questionnaires (58.71% response rate).

The first hypothesis predicted that as dominant coalition members’ values of organizational openness increased, they would perceive less uncertainty in their organization’s environment. This hypothesis was tested using Pearson correlations. There was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members’ values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = .26, n = 93$). Further analysis revealed that there was a moderate positive relationship between dominant coalition members’ openness to the environment and one of the dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty, perceived environmental complexity ($r = .43, n = 98$).

Hypothesis 2 proposed an inverse relationship between dominant coalition members’ perceptions of public relations’ formal environmental scanning activities and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. The correlations showed a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members’ perceptions of public relations’ use of formal environmental scanning and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = .27, n = 96$). However, correlations among perceptions of the public relations department’s use of formal environmental scanning and the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty showed that perceptions of formal environmental scanning have a significant, positive relationship with perceived environmental complexity ($r = .33, p < .001, n = 102$) and perceived environmental threat ($r = .22, p = .02, n = 107$). Multiple regression was also used to control for dominant coalition members’ familiarity with the public relations department. Results showed that familiarity with the public relations department did not have a significant effect on perceived environmental complexity ($\beta = .80, t = 1.91, p = .06$), but perceptions of formal environmental scanning did have a significant positive effect ($\beta = .36, t = 3.81, p < .001$).

The third hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy. Correlations results showed a small but nonsignificant positive relationship between dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = .05, n = 96$). This hypothesis also was tested by calculating

correlation coefficients among the dimensions of environmental uncertainty and dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. Whereas there were no significant relationships between perceptions of organizational autonomy and perceptions of environmental turbulence ($r = -.06, n = 108$) or perceptions of environmental threat ($r = -.07, n = 106$), there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = .24, n = 102$). A final test of this hypothesis used correlations to examine the relationships among the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty and the two dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy. The results indicated a relatively moderate positive relationship between perceptions of environmental complexity and perceptions of substantive autonomy ($r = .30, n = 102$).

This study took an initial step in identifying and examining the relationships among dominant coalition members' values and their perceptions. In addition, it examined the role that formal environmental scanning plays in the formation of dominant coalition members' perceptions. Specifically, this study found support for the upper echelons theory prediction that dominant coalition members' values act as a filter through which they form perceptions about their organization's environment and their organization's place in it. Moreover, this study found that public relations can play a role in shaping dominant coalition members' values toward and perceptions of their organization's operating environment through the use of formal environmental scanning. This means that public relations managers need to be adept at using rigorous social scientific research methods to collect scanning data and packaging it in a way that will be meaningful for dominant coalition members in order to help them become more aware of and open to their complex operating environments.

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Organizations today face the challenge of pursuing their missions and achieving their goals while maintaining mutually beneficial relationships (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999) with a variety of stakeholder groups that demand transparency (Rawlins, 2008), expect authenticity (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Molleda, 2010), and are empowered through new media to affect organizational reputation and behavior (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). In addition, organizations must deal with increased pressure from skeptical consumers, globalization, political polarization, and technological development (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012; Edelman, 2011). After reviewing the complex nature of the contemporary business environment, a report by the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) concluded that “all of this makes the 21st century enterprise vulnerable at a wholly new level to unexpected developments that can damage brand, negatively affect employee commitment, undercut outside relationships and destabilize management” (p. 14). A reality of this increasing complexity is that organizations must manage relationships with a variety of stakeholders, some seeking to limit an organization’s freedom to operate and others seeking to enhance it (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Practitioners and scholars agree that, in order for the public relations function to assist organizations in cultivating relationships with stakeholders, public relations practitioners must do more than just communicate messages. Rather, they must play an integral role in shaping organizational policy (Edelman, 2011; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, 2012). Nonetheless, Edelman (2011) noted that “many organizations still determine policy and operating approach in a vacuum, and then hand it to the PR folks to explain” (p. 2). According to the power-control perspective, a group of the most powerful people in an organization (i.e., dominant coalition) makes the ultimate decisions about how public relations will be practiced by an organization (Berger, 2005; Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Kelly, 1995; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992). While research has largely focused on what public relations practitioners can do to become part of the dominant coalition (Berger, 2005), scholars have yet to fully examine “how things work inside the dominant coalition” (Berger, 2007, p. 229), which includes the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that influence their decisions about public relations. Previous studies of the dominant coalition have typically used public relations practitioners to evaluate dominant coalition members’ perceptions (e.g., Berger, 2005; Lauzen & Dozier, 1994; Okura Dozier, Sha, & Hofstetter, 2008). A few studies have examined and compared the perceptions of public relations practitioners and dominant coalition members (e.g., L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Plowman, 1998, 2005a). Only one recent public relations study has focused on dominant coalition members’ perceptions (Brønn, 2014).

The purpose of this study is to take an exploratory step into determining “how things work in the dominant coalition” (Berger, 2007, p. 229). Specifically, this research aims to examine certain values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that can be influenced by public relations activities. This study draws on research from public relations and organizational theory to identify and explore these values and perceptions and the relationships among them. Specifically, research based in systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), including work by O. G. Mink, B. P. Mink, Downes, & Owen (1994) and Lauzen and Dozier (1992, 1994), identifies

openness to the environment as a key value that should play a role in how dominant coalition members interpret and respond to their organization's operating environment. In addition, upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) proposes that dominant coalition members' values serve as a filter through which they form perceptions of the organization's operating environment, which could include environmental complexity (Okura et al., 2008) and organizational autonomy (Wilson, Rawlins, & Stoker, 2013; Wilson, 2016). According to public relations theory, these perceptions are likely to be influenced by the information practitioners gather and package through environmental scanning (Okura et al., 2008).

This study contributes to the power-control literature in public relations by incorporating insights from organization theory that had not previously been adopted. In addition, prior public relations scholarship assumes that organizational autonomy and openness to the environment are important dominant coalition variables; however, only a few studies have attempted to measure either concept.

Literature Review

Systems Theory

Public relations scholars have adopted systems theory to explain the role of public relations in organizations (Broom, 2009; Plowman, 2005b). Systems theory is based on the concept of interdependence, or the mutually dependent relationship of organizations and their external environments (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Because organizations are interdependent with their environments, interaction with and adjustment to the environment is required for organizational success and survival. Public relations is suited to play a boundary spanning role that can facilitate the necessary interaction and adjustment. However, organizations cannot completely abandon the mission and goals that define them in an effort to adapt to change pressures from their environments. In other words, too much adaptation can have a negative impact on organizational survival. Therefore, organizations must strike a delicate balance between being open to their environments and being selective about the parts of the environment to which they pay attention.

Resource Dependence

Pfeffer and Salancik's (2003/1978) resource dependence perspective explores the complexities of interdependence. It proposes that organizations are engaged in a constant struggle for autonomy and survival because of their dependence on their external environments for resources. Because organizations need resources from their environments to survive, resource dependence proposes that an organization can be controlled by the constituencies that possess those resources. As a result, organizational behavior can only be understood in the context of the relationships that the organization has with other social actors. Public relations scholars have explained that these external constraints can result in costly adaptation for organizations that must bend to the pressure of activist groups, comply with government regulations, and meet employee demands or customers' expectations (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992). That is, organizations desire autonomy from their environments to "pursue their goals with the least interference from the outside" (p. 67). Nonetheless, because organizations are interdependent with their stakeholders, they are never completely autonomous. They only attain a degree of autonomy by engaging and cooperating with the very groups that can limit or enhance their autonomy. Given this reality, L. A. Grunig and colleagues concluded that organizations give up some autonomy by

cultivating relationships, but ironically, in giving up some autonomy, they maximize their autonomy from the environment.

Power-Control Perspective

J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) conclude that systems theory alone does not provide a sufficient explanation of public relations behavior. In establishing the theoretical framework for the Excellence Study, Dozier and L. A. Grunig (1992) and L. A. Grunig (1992) turned to the power-control perspective to explain why research had not found a relationship between an organization's environment and its public relations behavior. According to this perspective, organizations do not adapt to their environments by selecting optimum structures for that environment because within the organization "there is no consensus as to what is being optimized" (Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 407). A key concept in the power-control perspective is the recognition of a dominant coalition within organizations, composed of individuals who have "power to influence decisions, set organizational goals, and decide how those goals will be met" (Dozier, 1990, p. 9). According to Berger (2005), the concept of a dominant coalition is important in public relations theory because "this group of powerful insiders makes strategic choices, allocates resources, and influences public relations practices" (p. 8). While the environment does not directly determine the structure or behavior of organizations, the power-control perspective holds that the environment plays a role in shaping the values and knowledge of constraints held by the dominant coalition (Child, 1972; Hage, 1980). Accordingly, Hage (1980) says that "if one knows the coalition's values—their preferences about utilities and performances—then one can predict what the organization will do" (p. 16).

Upper Echelons Theory

Research in organization theory has explained that organizations reflect the values and thinking of their top management teams (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick & Mason, 1984). The upper echelon perspective identifies factors that influence the decision-making of top managers (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990) and, thus, provides insights about the values and cognitions of dominant coalition members and how those values and cognitions arise. According to this theory, managers' values and cognitions act as a screen between the actual environment and manager's perception of the environment (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Managers can only pay attention to certain aspects of an organization's environment because it is impossible for managers to pay attention to every aspect of it. In addition, managers only selectively perceive certain aspects of the environment within their narrow field of vision. In the end, the information managers pay attention to is "*interpreted* through a filter woven by [their] cognitive base and values" (p. 195, emphasis in original). This theory has been used predominantly to argue that the senior leaders of the organization "provide an interface between the firm and its environment, and are relatively powerful, and therefore their choices and actions are likely to have an impact on the organization" (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004, p. 753). Additionally, this theory is compatible with systems theory and resource dependence theory, both of which recognize the enacted nature of an organization's environment.

Values of Openness to the Environment

Of the many values held by members of the dominant coalition, the value that potentially has the greatest bearing on how organizations practice public relations is the value of organizational openness. Public relations scholars have connected the degree of openness of an organization with its support of and reliance on the public relations function (e.g., Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Lauzen & Dozier, 1992; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). In addition, research has examined the consequences of organizations choosing to behave as open or closed systems using a variety of measures. Notably, Lauzen and Dozier (1994) examined the effect of dominant coalition openness on public relations and issues management. They found that outer-directed issues management (which is externally focused) and a participative organizational culture—both of which can be seen as an indication of a dominant coalition’s values of openness—had a mediating influence on public relations participation in organizational decision-making and public relations manager role enactment. However, few studies have explored the reasons *why* organizations choose to be open or closed to their environments.

Because there is an inconsistency in approaches to studying openness, this study adopts the Open Organization Model (OOM) developed by O. G. Mink, B. P. Mink, Downes, and Owen (1994) to explore values of openness among dominant coalition members. The OOM is based on systems theory and defines openness as full interaction among all the parts of the organization and with its external environment. It identifies three dimensions of openness that can be studied at any level of analysis: unity, internal responsiveness, and external responsiveness. The model has been tested through the authors’ consulting work with for-profit, government, and nonprofit organizations. The validity and reliability of the model also have been tested (Stubbs, 2007). The current research will focus specifically on the dimension of external responsiveness, which is defined as a continuous free flow of information “in and out of the organization so its products, services, and systems can adapt readily to changes in its social, economic, and technical environment” (Stubbs, 2007, p. 18), as this dimension is the most reflective of public relations thinking. Furthermore, the current study assumes that the dimension of openness can be measured at the individual level as a value held by dominant coalition members (O. G. Mink et al., 1994).

Perceived Environmental Uncertainty

Organizational environments are psychological constructs formed in the minds of organizational members as information about the environment comes into an organization (White & Dozier, 1992). According to Weick (1979), people in organizations pay attention to specific information from particular parts of the organization’s environment while ignoring other information in a process called *enactment*. Furthermore, White and Dozier (1992) explain that the information to which organizations pay attention becomes “the perception of the external world upon which all subsequent decisions are based” (p. 92).

Public relations researchers have relied on Child’s (1972) conceptualization of environmental uncertainty, which consists of three dimensions: complexity, turbulence, and threat. *Environmental complexity* is “the heterogeneity and range of environmental activities which are relevant to an organization’s operations” (p. 3), *environmental turbulence* is “the degree of change which characterizes environmental activities relevant to an organization’s operations” (p. 3), and *environmental threat* is “the degree of threat that faces organizational

decision-makers in the achievement of their goals from external competition, hostility or even indifference” (p. 4). Child recognizes that the external environment constrains organizational action; however, he also proposes that top organizational decision-makers have agency to make strategic choices independent of environmental conditions. Specifically, some of these strategic choices include Lauzen and Dozier’s (1992) findings that public relations practitioners’ perceptions of environmental complexity and turbulence were related to manager role enactment and Lauzen and Dozier (1994) findings that practitioner’s perceptions of complexity and turbulence were positively related to their perceptions of dominant coalition openness.

Environmental scanning by public relations practitioners is a potential source of information about the environment that can influence the perceptions of dominant coalition members (White & Dozier, 1992). *Environmental scanning* is a process that detects changes or problems in an organization’s environment (Dozier, 1990; Okura et al, 2008). Research has identified two types of scanning activities: formal and informal. Formal environmental scanning uses rigorous social scientific research methods such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses (Dozier, 1990; Dozier & Broom, 2006). On the other hand, informal environmental scanning reflects “informal ‘gut’ feelings about ‘what is going on’ and ‘what works’” (Dozier, 1990, p. 7).

While research has demonstrated that public relations practitioners use both types of scanning activities (Dozier, 1990; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), scanning research is not useful to the dominant coalition unless “the practitioner can translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions” (Broom & Dozier, 2006, p. 153). According to Okura et al. (2008), formal environmental scanning incorporates the idea of translation because its activities involve “packaging scanning information into the numeric rhetoric of management” (p. 57). They also reported that formal environmental scanning mediates the relationship between perceived environmental complexity, as evaluated by a public relations practitioner, and use of scanning research in organizational decision making.

Perceived Organizational Autonomy

Ultimately, the perceptions that dominant coalition members have formed about their organization’s environment will shape their perceptions of their organization’s freedom to operate. This is because information about an organization’s environment contributes to dominant coalition members’ perceptions of the organization’s interdependence with stakeholders in its environment. Most public relations scholarship has focused on the autonomy of the public relations department rather than the autonomy of the organization (e.g., Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). Few public relations scholars have examined organizational autonomy. Notably, L. A. Grunig (1987) reported that mechanical organizations (large scale, low complexity) had the most autonomy and the most cooperative relationships, while organic organizations (small scale, high complexity) exhibited the least autonomy and the most competitive relationships. Kelly (1995) attempted to measure a charitable nonprofit organizations’ propensity to forfeit autonomy in exchange for gifts. She concluded that she actually measured accountability to donors and, as a result, proposed that autonomy and accountability are two ends of a continuum. Similarly, Wilson, et al. (2013) studied the impact of paradoxical tensions caused by organization-public interdependence—defined by the opposing poles of autonomy and dependence—on the decision making process. They reported that when

managers fail to recognize that their organization is dependent on (i.e., accountable to) stakeholders to achieve organizational goals, paradoxical tensions cause decision makers to focus on maximizing autonomy and, ultimately, can have a negative effect on the organization's relationships and autonomy. Recently, Wilson (2016) found that dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy predicted their perceptions of the public relations departments' participation in organizational decision making.

While public relations scholars have identified organizational autonomy as a key concept in explaining the value of the public relations function (L. A. Grunig et al., 1992), they have not provided a concise conceptual definition of the construct. Following Kelly's (1991) approach to defining autonomy, the current study examined the construct and its dimensions using the scholarly literature from higher education, nonprofit and government, organization theory, entrepreneurship, and organizational behavior. As a result, this study adopted Stainton's (1994) definition of organizational autonomy: "the organization's freedom from both internal and external constraints to formulate and pursue self-determined plans and purposes" (pp. 21-22). This definition is broad enough to describe the perceptions of organizational autonomy held by decision makers at a variety of organizations. Further, this definition takes into account potential constraints from stakeholders inside and outside the organization, reflecting the range of stakeholders with whom public relations practitioners are typically concerned. In addition, as the literature from multiple disciplines consistently differentiates between substantive and procedural autonomy, this study adopts the two dimensional structure of autonomy (e.g., Berdahl, Altbach, & Gumpert, 2011; Lumpkin, Coglisier, Schneider, 2009). Substantive autonomy is the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities. Procedural autonomy is the power of an organization to determine the means by which it will pursue its mission, goals, and objectives, and implement its policies and priorities.

Environmental Scanning

Scholars have defined environmental scanning as a public relations function that detects changes or problems in an organization's environment (Dozier, 1990; Okura et al, 2008). According to White and Dozier (1992), information provided by boundary spanners, such as public relations managers, can be crucial to dominant coalition members because their perceptions of the organization's environment are only as accurate as the information they have received about it.

Research about the environmental scanning activities of public relations practitioners has found two types of scanning activities: formal and informal. Formal environmental scanning uses rigorous social scientific research methods such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses (Dozier, 1990; Dozier & Broom, 2006). On the other hand, informal environmental scanning reflects "informal 'gut' feelings about 'what is going on' and 'what works'" (Dozier, 1990, p. 7). While research has demonstrated that public relations practitioners use both types of scanning activities (Dozier, 1990; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), Broom and Dozier (2006) noted that scanning research is not useful to the dominant coalition unless "the practitioner can translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions" (p. 153). According to Okura et al. (2008), formal environmental scanning incorporates the idea of translation because its activities involve "packaging scanning information into the numeric rhetoric of management" (p. 57). Lauzen

(1995) reported that formal environmental scanning allowed organizations to track a greater number of external issues in a shorter amount of time. Additionally, Okura et al. (2008) reported that formal environmental scanning mediates the relationship between perceived environmental complexity (as evaluated by a public relations practitioner) and use of scanning research in organizational decision making. Based on these findings, the current study assumes that public relations can have an influence on dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment through formal environmental scanning.

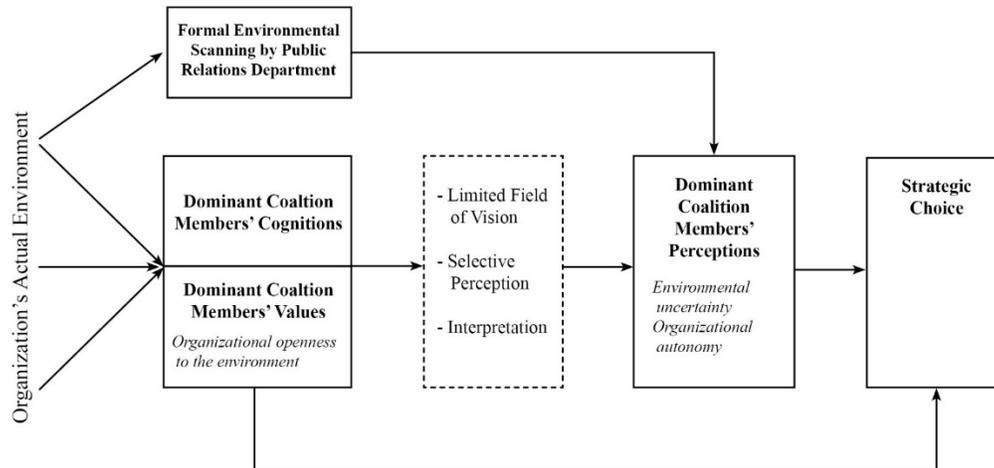


Figure 1. Upper Echelons model, adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984), applied to public relations.

Hypotheses

Based on upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), this study proposes that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness serve as a filter through which they form their perceptions of the organization's operating environment, which can be influenced by the formal environmental scanning activities of the public relations function. In turn, dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's environment should affect their perceptions of organizational autonomy. This assumption is based on the resource dependence notion that because of interdependence with their environments, organizations seek autonomy to pursue their goals (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003/1978). Therefore, these assumptions drawn from the review of literature, diagrammed in Figure 1, resulting in the following hypotheses:

H1: The more the dominant coalition members value organizational openness to the organization's environment, the lower their perceptions of environmental uncertainty.

H2: The greater the dominant coalition members' perceptions of the public relations departments' use of formal environmental scanning, the lower their perceptions of environmental uncertainty.

H3: Dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty will be negatively associated with their perceptions of organizational autonomy.

Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to test its hypotheses. All of the scales used interval measurement, specifically 5-point Likert-type scales.

Population and Sample

The population of interest for this study is dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofit organizations in the United States that employ at least one full-time public relations practitioner. This study employed a two-stage nonrandom sampling procedure, as drawing a random sample of the population was not feasible. The first stage involved the identification of organizations from each sector with at least one full-time public relations practitioner. Organizations were identified based on the researcher's prior work experience and his membership in professional associations. Ten organizations agreed to participate: a public biomedical company in the Southeast, a private health and fitness company in the Southeast, a public energy company in the Midwest, a school district in the West, a state government agency in the Mountain West, a convention and visitor's bureau in the Southeast, a public university in the Mountain West, a public broadcasting network in the Midwest, an art museum in the Northeast, and a hospital in the South.

The second stage focused on identifying members of each participating organization's dominant coalition. Working directly with contacts in each organization, the researcher instructed each organizational contact person to identify the dominant coalition by including the top two levels of management; members of the organization's board of directors or trustees, if appropriate; and individuals who were outside of these formal structures of power but who still had considerable influence on decision-making in the organization (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). Following this process, the researcher produced a sampling frame of 201 dominant coalition members from the 10 participating organizations.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire for this study included measures of the four concepts of interest (values of openness to the environment, perceived environmental uncertainty, perceived organizational autonomy, and perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning) as well as questions to gather demographic information. It was pretested by six public relations and management experts. Following the pretest, a pilot study was conducted to further refine the questionnaire. The researcher secured the approval of a utility company in the Southeast to administer a Web-based version of the questionnaire to 60 of the organization's senior managers.

Values of organizational openness to the environment. This study measured dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment by adopting 10 indicators from the external responsiveness scale from the OOM (O. G. Mink et al., 1994). The original scale items were modified to reflect organizational values rather than behaviors by turning the statements into gerund phrases. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each item was important to the survival and growth of their organization. Stubbs (2007) reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .91 for this specific scale. The pilot study produced an alpha of .94. See Table 1 for main study results.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Values of Organizational Openness to the Environment

<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
1. Innovating and experimenting in order to cope with changes in the organization's operating environment.	4.50	0.73	.89
2. Appointing task forces (or other such work groups) to help the organization understand new situations or problems.	3.94	0.91	
3. Modifying organizational structures, policies, and procedures in response to changes inside and outside the organization.	4.25	0.80	
4. Demonstrating responsibility for the organization's impact on its stakeholders.	4.39	0.73	
5. Responding swiftly to organizational opportunities.	4.26	0.79	
6. Regularly and systematically seeking new information to improve the organization's products and services.	4.45	0.69	
7. Providing enough energy and resources to support the organization's commitment to a new way of doing things.	4.42	0.78	
8. Adapting to changing situations rather than functioning in a mechanical or preprogrammed manner.	4.46	0.76	
9. Demonstrating a real interest in the needs of the organization's stakeholders.	4.54	0.74	
10. Supporting the community by providing help where needed.	4.17	0.83	

Note. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each item was important to the survival and growth of their organization.

Perceived environmental uncertainty. This study measured dominant coalition members' perceived environmental uncertainty using a scale developed by Okura et al. (2008), which encompasses three distinct dimensions: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The original scale developed by Okura et al. asked respondents to rate six different publics: (1) consumers/clients, (2) stockholders/investors, (3) media, (4) government/regulatory agencies, (5) community members, and (6) labor organizations. Respondents rated each public based on each of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty. The current study added a seventh public that traditionally has been important to public relations—employees. By adding this public, the measure of environmental uncertainty used in this study captures the influence of internal and external publics on the uncertainty faced by dominant coalition members. As a result of this addition, environmental uncertainty was measured using 21 indicators, seven publics on each of the three dimensions.

Perceived environmental complexity was measured by asking respondents to “rate the importance of the following publics to the survival and growth of your organization” (Okura et al., 2008, p. 59). *Perceived environmental turbulence* was measured by asking respondents, “How often do the attitudes or behaviors of the following publics change in a manner that affects the survival and growth of your organization?” (Okura et al., 2008, p. 60). *Perceived environmental threat* was measured by asking respondents, “To what degree do the following publics pose an immediate or potential threat to the survival and growth of your organization?” (Okura et al., 2008, p. 60). Okura et al. reported a Cronbach's alpha of .79 for an index created

from all three scales. The pilot study produced an alpha of .70. See Table 2 for main study results.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Environmental Uncertainty

<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
1. Perceived environmental complexity index	4.00	0.56	.65
Consumers/Clients	4.89	0.47	
Employees	4.79	0.53	
Investors (e.g., stockholders)	3.32	1.55	
Media	3.93	0.90	
Government/Regulatory agencies	4.28	0.80	
Community members	4.29	0.76	
Labor organizations	2.54	1.38	
2. Perceived environmental turbulence index	3.10	0.56	.70
Consumers/Clients	3.56	0.81	
Employees	3.13	0.86	
Investors (e.g., stockholders)	2.75	1.17	
Media	3.26	0.89	
Government/Regulatory agencies	3.44	0.90	
Community members	3.27	0.84	
Labor organizations	2.28	1.05	
3. Perceived environmental threat index	2.81	0.67	.75
Consumers/Clients	3.26	1.22	
Employees	2.66	1.02	
Investors (e.g., stockholders)	2.40	1.14	
Media	2.97	0.99	
Government/Regulatory agencies	3.36	1.04	
Community members	2.73	0.93	
Labor organizations	2.15	1.12	
4. Perceived environmental uncertainty index	3.30	0.40	.74

Note. For perceived environmental complexity respondents were asked to “rate the importance of the following publics to the survival and growth of your organization” (Okura et al., 2008, p. 59). For perceived environmental turbulence they were asked, “How often do the attitudes or behaviors of the following publics change in a manner that affects the survival and growth of your organization?” (p. 60). For perceived environmental threat they were asked, “To what degree do the following publics pose an immediate or potential threat to the survival and growth of your organization?” (p. 60).

Perceived public relations’ use of formal environmental scanning. Perceived use of formal environmental scanning was measured with the six-item scale used by Okura et al. (2008). This scale rates participants’ agreement about how often public relations practitioners engage in formal environmental scanning behaviors. In the Okura et al. (2008) study, the scale was administered to individual public relations practitioners. In the present study, the scale was administered to dominant coalition members; therefore, the wording of the instructions was

adapted to reflect this change. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the public relations department in their organization was involved in the activities described by each of the items. Okura et al. (2008) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .83 for this scale. The pilot study produced an alpha of .81. See Table 3 for main study results.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Public Relations' Use of Formal Environmental Scanning

<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
1. Conduct formal research studies to track stakeholder reactions to the organization.	2.63	1.06	.92
2. Subscribe to or use the services of public opinion research agencies.	2.64	1.03	
3. Conduct surveys of key stakeholders.	2.75	0.94	
4. Use demographic data to help make decisions concerning stakeholders.	2.97	1.11	
5. Conduct communication or public relations audits to find out about stakeholders.	2.63	1.11	
6. Use online databases or information services to obtain research data concerning stakeholders.	2.98	1.06	

Note. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which the public relations department in their organization was involved in the activities described by each of the items.

Because the operational definition of the dominant coalition adopted in this study included boards of directors/trustees, the top two-levels of organizational management, and individuals outside of this hierarchy with informal power, it was highly likely that there would be differences in dominant coalition members' familiarity with the operation of their organization's public relations department. Therefore, a one-item measure was adopted as a control variable for the differing levels of dominant coalition member familiarity with their organization's public relations department. Respondents were asked about the extent to which they were familiar with the workings of the public relations department in their organization.

Perceived organizational autonomy. A review of the research on autonomy did not find a measurement scale that could be adapted easily to suit the purposes of this study. Therefore, a new scale was created to measure dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. Using Stainton's (1994) conceptual definition of autonomy, the researcher made an initial selection of 20 items, 10 to measure substantive autonomy and 10 to measure procedural autonomy. These items were adopted and modified from existing autonomy measures including the Work Group Autonomy Scale (Wright & Barker, 2000), the Work Method Autonomy Scale (Breugh, 1999), the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), the Innovation-Championing Strategies Scale (Shane, Venkataraman, & MacMillan, 1995), the Psychological Empowerment Scale (Spreitzer, 1995), and the organizational autonomy scales of Lumpkin et al. (2009) and Johnson (2012), as well as measures related to autonomy from the public relations literature (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006; L. A. Grunig, 1987; Huang & Su, 2009; Kelly, 1995). Each of the items was modified to reflect the concerns of public relations scholars about an

organization's ability to determine and pursue its mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities.

To ensure that the autonomy scale assessed the overall autonomy of the organization, both dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy were measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each of the 20 items applied to their organization. In addition, respondents were asked to consider the combined impact of all organizational stakeholders (e.g., consumers and employees) in their responses to each item. The pretest and pilot study allowed the researcher to refine this scale. Exploratory factor analysis and reliability analysis enabled the researcher to reduce the scale to eight items, four for substantive autonomy and four for procedural autonomy, which loaded on their intended factors. The substantive autonomy subscale had a Cronbach's alpha of .87 and the procedural autonomy subscale had an alpha of .88. The overall perceived organizational autonomy scale had an alpha of .90. See Table 4 for main study results.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations of Perceived Organizational Autonomy

<i>Items</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Factor Loadings</i>	<i>α</i>
1. Substantive autonomy index	4.06	0.63		.77
The organization has the ability to determine its own objectives.	4.04	0.78	.81	
The organization has the authority to determine its own mission.	3.85	1.08	.80	
The organization is free to make decisions about its goals.	4.14	0.73	.74	
The organization's decision makers are primarily responsible for establishing the priorities of the organization.	4.22	0.66	.59	
2. Procedural autonomy index	3.96	0.63		.84
The organization is free to choose the methods it will use to implement its policies.	4.00	0.80	.82	
Stakeholders expect the organization to use its own discretion in establishing its policies.	3.65	0.93	.64	
The organization is able to choose the way it goes about accomplishing its goals.	4.08	0.64	.89	
The organization is empowered to decide how it will achieve its objectives.	4.09	0.68	.82	
3. Perceived organizational autonomy index	4.01	0.56		.86

Note. To ensure that the autonomy scale assessed the overall autonomy of the organization, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each items applied to their organization. In addition, respondents were asked to consider the combined impact of all organizational stakeholders (e.g., consumers and employees) in their responses to each item.

Questionnaire Administration

This study gathered data based on the survey administration preferences of the participating organizations. Namely, the choice was between a paper-and-pencil questionnaire and an online questionnaire. The researcher adopted this approach because of the difficulty in gaining access to and getting survey responses from this study's elite population. As the researcher worked with his organizational contacts to identify dominant coalition members, he asked each contact person to choose the type of questionnaire that would yield the highest

response rates for that particular organization. In all, two organizations chose the paper-and-pencil questionnaire, while the remaining eight organizations chose the online questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in 2014, during the months of January through March.

Results

Demographic Profile

A total of 118 usable questionnaires were collected. This represents a response rate of 58.71%. The 118 total dominant coalition members' responses included 18 responses from for-profit organizations (15.52%), 66 responses from government agencies (55.93%), and 34 responses from nonprofit organizations (28.81%). There were 74 (63.79%) male respondents and 42 (36.21%) female respondents. A large majority of the respondents were Caucasian ($N = 107$, or 92.24%). With regard to education, more than half of the respondents had graduate degrees ($N = 68$, or 58.12%). In terms of the participants' current positions, more than half were either chief officers ($N = 16$, or 14.95%) or senior managers ($N = 52$, or 48.6%). The average age (in years) of the respondents was 50.47 ($SD = 9.75$), and ages ranged from 27 to 71. The average number of direct reports was 17.27 ($SD = 53.29$). The number of direct reports ranged from 0 to 380. The average number of years respondents worked at their current organization was 13.98 ($SD = 9.57$). Finally, the average number of years respondents have been in their current position was 6.41 ($SD = 7.38$). Table 5 shows the complete results of the categorical demographic data.

Table 5

Categorical Demographic Data of the Respondents

<i>Items</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Gender		
Male	74	63.79%
Female	42	36.21%
Race/Ethnicity		
African American	0	0%
Asian American	4	3.45%
Caucasian	107	92.24%
Native American (includes Native Alaskan, Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islanders)	1	0.86%
Hispanic American	4	3.45%
Other	0	0%
Education		
High School	0	0%
Some College	8	6.84%
Bachelor's Degree	39	33.33%
Master's Degree	50	42.74%
Juris Doctorate	1	0.85%
Doctoral Degree	17	14.53%
Other	2	1.71%

Past Job Experience		
General Administration	36	31.30%
Human Resources	4	3.48%
Legal	2	1.74%
Research and Development	4	3.48%
Finance	10	8.70%
Accounting	4	3.48%
Marketing	9	7.83%
Other	46	40%
Current Position		
C-Suite	16	14.95%
Senior Management	52	48.60%
Middle Management	25	23.36%
Supervisory	6	5.61%
Other	8	7.48%
Board Membership		
Board of Trustees/Board of Directors	4	50%
Other	4	50%

Reliability and Factor Analysis

Tables 1 through 4 report the results of reliability and factor analysis. Reliabilities for all scales were above .70, except for perceptions of environmental complexity. Principal axis factoring with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization was used to confirm the factors in the perceived organizational autonomy scale. Factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 were included in the final solution. The analysis showed that dominant coalition members distinguish between substantive and procedural autonomy, accounting for 65.89% of the variance.

Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis predicted that as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increased, they would perceive less uncertainty in their organization's environment. This hypothesis was tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. As shown in Table 6, there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = .26, n = 93$) that was significant at the $p < .05$ level. This hypothesis was also tested by calculating correlation coefficients among dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty: complexity, turbulence, and threat. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 7, revealed that there was a moderate positive relationship between dominant coalition members' openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental complexity ($r = .43, n = 98$) that was significant at the $p < .001$ level. The relationships between dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness and the other two dimensions of environmental uncertainty were small and not significant.

While these tests found a statistically significant relationship between values of organizational openness to the environment and perceived environmental uncertainty, the results

are contrary to the direction stated in H1 and demonstrate that as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increased, they perceived more uncertainty in their organization's environment. Moreover, as dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness increased, they perceived more complexity in their organization's environment. Therefore, although the relationship has theoretical value, H1 was not supported as stated.

Table 6

Pearson's r Correlations for the Study's Four Variables

<i>Variables</i>	1	2	3
1. Values of organizational openness to the environment	1		
2. Perceived environmental uncertainty	.26* (n = 93) ^a	1	
3. Perceived organizational autonomy	.17 (n = 113)	.05 (n = 96) ^a	1
4. Perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning	.25** (n = 114)	.27** (n = 96) ^a	.23* (n = 117)

Note. ^aAn analysis of missing data revealed that responding to perceived environmental uncertainty index was difficult for some participants. Twenty-two (18.64%) of the 118 respondents did not respond to one or more of the indicators for this index. As a result the number of participants in these analysis are lower than the sample total.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 7

Pearson's r Correlations among Values of Organizational Openness to the Environment, Three Dimensions of Environmental Uncertainty, Two Dimensions of Organizational Autonomy, and Formal Environmental Scanning

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Values of organizational openness to the environment	1					
2. Perceived environmental complexity	.43*** (n = 98)	1				
3. Perceived environmental turbulence	-.004 (n = 105)	.09 (n = 99)	1			
4. Perceived environmental threat	.14 (n = 104)	.02 (n = 98)	.34*** (n = 105)	1		
5. Perceived substantive autonomy	.05 (n = 114)	.30** (n = 102)	.05 (n = 109)	-.07 (n = 107)	1	
6. Perceived procedural autonomy	.24** (n = 113)	.11 (n = 102)	-.16 (n = 108)	-.06 (n = 106)	.59*** (n = 117)	1
7. Perceived public relations use of formal environmental scanning	.25** (n = 114)	.33** (n = 102)	.003 (n = 109)	.22* (n = 107)	.17 (n = 118)	.24** (n = 117)

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

H2 proposed an inverse relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' formal environmental scanning activities and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. The correlation matrix in Table 6 showed a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations' use of formal environmental scanning and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty ($r = .27, n = 96$). This relationship was significant at the $p < .01$ level. However, correlations among perceptions of the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning and the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty showed that perceptions of formal environmental scanning have a significant, positive relationship with perceived environmental complexity ($r = .33, p < .001, n = 102$) and perceived environmental threat ($r = .22, p = .02, n = 107$). The relationship between perceptions of formal environmental scanning and perceived environmental turbulence was weak and not significant ($r = .003, n = 109$).

H2 was also tested with multiple regression to control for dominant coalition members' familiarity with their organization's public relations department. The results, presented in Table 8, revealed that familiarity with the public relations department did not have a significant effect on perceived environmental complexity ($\beta = .80, t = 1.91, p = .06$), but perceptions of formal environmental scanning did have a significant positive effect ($\beta = .36, t = 3.81, p < .001$). Similarly, familiarity with the public relations department did not have a significant effect on perceived environmental threat ($\beta = .09, t = 0.89, p = .38$); however, perceptions of formal environmental scanning did have a significant positive effect ($\beta = .21, t = 2.20, p = .03$). These models predict that as dominant coalition members perceive that the public relations department's use of formal environmental scanning increases, their perceptions of environmental complexity and environmental threat increase. Therefore, because the relationship was in the opposite direction predicted, H2 was not supported, although the findings have theoretical value.

Table 8

Multiple Regression Analysis of Variables Predicting Dominant Coalition Members' Perceptions of Environmental Complexity and Threat

Variable	Perceptions of environmental complexity				Perceptions of environmental threat			
	B	SE B	β	t	B	SE B	β	t
Use of formal environmental scanning	.21	.05	.36	3.81***	.16	.07	.21	2.20*
Familiarity with public relations department	.12	.06	.18	.06	.08	.09	.09	.88
R^2				.18 ^a				.06 ^b
R^2_{adj}				.16				.04

Note. ^a $F(2, 96) = 10.42, p < .001$. ^b $F(2, 102) = 3.08, p = .05$. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

The third hypothesis predicted a negative relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy. This hypothesis was tested using Pearson correlation analysis. As reported in Table 6, there was a small but nonsignificant positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental uncertainty and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = .05, p > .05, n = 96$). This hypothesis also was tested by calculating correlation coefficients

among the dimensions of environmental uncertainty (i.e., complexity, turbulence, and threat) and dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. Whereas there were no significant relationships between perceptions of organizational autonomy and perceptions of environmental turbulence ($r = -.06$, $n = 108$) or perceptions of environmental threat ($r = -.07$, $n = 106$), there was a relatively weak positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity and their perceptions of organizational autonomy ($r = .24$, $n = 102$). This relationship was significant at the $p < .05$ level. This means that as dominant coalition members perceive more complexity in their organization's environment, they also perceive that their organization has increased autonomy. While this relationship is significant, it is in the opposite direction of that predicted in the hypothesis.

A final test of this hypothesis used Pearson correlations to examine the relationships among the three dimensions of perceived environmental uncertainty and the two dimensions of perceived organizational autonomy. The results of this analysis, presented in Table 7, indicate a relatively moderate positive relationship between perceptions of environmental complexity and perceptions of substantive autonomy ($r = .30$, $n = 102$) that was significant at the $p < .01$ level. In other words, as dominant coalition members' perceptions of complexity in their organization's environment increase, their perceptions of substantive autonomy also increase. Again, this relationship was in the opposite direction than predicted. No significant relationships were found between the other dimensions of both variables. Therefore, although the relationship reported in this analysis has theoretical value, H3 was not supported as stated.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to take an exploratory step into examining the relationships among dominant coalition members' values and perceptions, as well as the influence of formal environmental scanning activities by public relations on dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment. An in-depth understanding of dominant coalition members is critical because public relations scholars have adopted a power-control perspective that focuses on the central role of the dominant coalition in determining how organizations relate to their environments (e.g., Berger, 2005; L. A. Grunig et al., 2002) and practice public relations. While previous research has provided hints about the factors that shape the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002), it has yet to explain "how things work inside the dominant coalition" (Berger, 2007, p. 229). Understanding the dominant coalition is an important endeavor for public relations managers because if public relations managers know the dominant coalition members' values and perceptions they will be able to predict the decisions the dominant coalition will make (Hage, 1980).

In an effort to examine the factors that influence dominant coalition members' values and perceptions that could impact the management of public relations within organizations, this study adopted upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). This theory provided a framework that was used to conceptualize the relationships involved in shaping dominant coalition members' values and perceptions. The results of this study support the upper echelon theory's prediction that dominant coalition members' values have an impact on their perceptions. The results showed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively related to environmental uncertainty. Further analysis revealed that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were positively correlated with only one of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty:

environmental complexity. It should be recalled that openness to the environment was defined as the continuous free flow of information “in and out of the organization so its products, services, and systems can adapt readily to changes in its social, economic, and technical environment” (O. G. Mink et al., 1994, p. 18). In addition, environmental complexity was defined as “the number of external forces or influences that the organization must attend to pursue its objectives” (Okura et al., 2008, p. 56) and operationalized as the number of stakeholder groups that are important to the organization. Therefore, this relationship signifies that the more dominant coalition members value the free flow of information for the purposes of adaptation and change, the greater their perception of the number of stakeholder groups the organization must attend to as it pursues organizational goals. This result is in line with previous theoretical assumptions drawn by J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1989) that dominant coalition values would play a role in the model of public relations employed by an organization. The current study’s finding also corresponds with the results reported by Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron (1999), who found strong support for the relationship between dominant coalition enlightenment about maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders and individual characteristics of dominant coalition members, including open-mindedness.

Moreover, the current study proposed that public relations could influence dominant coalition members’ perceptions of the environment through formal environmental scanning activities. The results show that dominant coalition members’ perceptions of public relations’ use of formal environmental scanning were positively related to their perceptions of environmental uncertainty. That is, as public relations’ use of formal environmental scanning increases, dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental uncertainty increase as well. An in-depth analysis of the three dimensions of environmental uncertainty discovered that formal environmental scanning was positively related with dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental complexity and threat. This means that formal environmental scanning activities help dominant coalition members understand the degree of complexity, as well as recognize potential threats from stakeholders, in the organization’s environment. These results support the contention of Okura et al. (2008) that environmental scanning can serve as “an organization’s early warning system that detects problems in the organizational environment” (p. 53). The findings also indicate that the public relations department can play a role in “opening the eyes” of dominant coalition members to see the complexity and threat in the environment that may be filtered out through dominant coalition members’ selective perception (Hambrick & Mason, 1984).

Furthermore, while not included in the hypothesis testing, the results showed that dominant coalition members’ perceptions of public relations’ use of formal environmental scanning were positively related to their values of organizational openness ($r = .25, p < .01$). This is an indication that formal environmental scanning activities have the potential to go beyond influencing dominant coalition members’ perceptions of its operating environment. Formal scanning also seems to influence dominant coalition members’ values toward the operating environment. In other words, helping dominant coalition members see the degree of complexity in the operating environment may also help them to become more open to it as they realize that closing themselves off from it is not a viable solution to deal with complexity.

The results also demonstrated that dominant coalition members’ perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of organizational autonomy. In other words, information about an organization’s operating environment

contributes to dominant coalition members' perceptions of their organization's interdependence with stakeholders in its environment. Moreover, dominant coalition members' perceptions of environmental complexity were positively related to their perceptions of substantive autonomy, which was defined in this study as the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, and priorities. Therefore, this relationship signifies that as dominant coalition members perceive a greater number of stakeholders that their organization must attend to in order to pursue its objectives, the more they will perceive that their organization has power to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, and priorities.

On the surface, this relationship appears to be counterintuitive. It seems more reasonable that as an organization must attend to an increased number of stakeholders, constraints imposed on the organization by these stakeholders would result in decreased perceptions of substantive autonomy. However, the results of the current study seem to indicate that environmental complexity is not a reflection of constraint but a recognition of interdependence with stakeholders and publics who have a relationship to the organization. In fact, the results obtained in this study support the contention that the great irony of interdependence is that organizations must surrender some of their autonomy to "gain some control over the activities of another organization" (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978/2003, p. 261).

L. A. Grunig et al. (1992) explain this irony in terms of an organization's relationship with publics. While they theorize that relationships limit autonomy generally, they note that positive relationships with publics "make organizations more effective because they allow organizations more freedom—more autonomy to achieve their missions" (p. 69). This idea is also supported by results from Kelly's (1995) research about fundraising and organizational autonomy. She reported that larger nonprofit charitable organizations are more likely to practice the two-way symmetrical model of fundraising because their broad base of donors allows them to "be more flexible in meeting donors' needs and interests" (p. 129) without giving up control of the organization. Based on this logic, an increase in the number of important relationships with organizational stakeholders equates to an increase in the perceived autonomy of an organization to choose its mission and goals. Stated another way, organizational autonomy does not appear to be a finite organizational resource that is divvied up among stakeholder relationships until it is exhausted. Rather, it seems that organizational autonomy is perceived as a renewable resource that arises from relationships with stakeholders. Therefore, organizations have much more to gain than they have to lose by opening themselves to relationships with multiple stakeholders in a complex environment.

Implications for Public Relations Practice

Two important implications for public relations practice can be drawn from the results of this study. First, the descriptive statistics indicate that the dominant coalition members in the 10 organizations studied have low evaluations public relations' use of formal environmental scanning ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.06$). In addition, dominant coalition members' who participated in this study reported a high familiarity ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.75$) with the public relations function in their organizations. Therefore, it appears that these low scores are not the result of dominant coalition members lacking awareness of the activities of their public relations departments; rather, they seem to indicate that the dominant coalition members are not that impressed with the formal scanning activity of their public relations departments. Therefore, these findings seem to suggest that in the eyes of organizational managers who participated in this study, public

relations practitioners are still lacking in skills and abilities related to formal environmental scanning, which include the use of rigorous social scientific research methods, such as surveys, public opinion polls, and content analyses, to collect and package scanning data.

Second, public relations can influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the environment through formal environmental scanning. When public relations practitioners have the necessary skills to conduct formal research to track the reactions of stakeholders to the organization, they are able to have an impact on the perceptions may ultimately shape the decisions of dominant coalition members. Specifically, the results of this study indicate that when public relations departments use formal environmental scanning to "translate scanning . . . data into information that makes sense to other managers and clarifies implications of vying decisions" (Broom & Dozier, 2006, p. 153), they can influence dominant coalition members by helping them see the complexity of their operating environments and recognize the number of publics with which the organization must maintain relationships to have success and survival. Formal scanning may also help dominant coalition member see more value in openness to its operating environment. From the power-control perspective, it seems that formal environmental scanning is an important factor in moving an organization toward two-way interaction and communication with publics.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While this study contributed to public relations theory by examining the relationships among dominant coalition members' values and perceptions, there were several limitations that should be acknowledged. A purposive sample was used because of the difficulty in compiling a comprehensive list of dominant coalition members; however, this sampling method limits the generalizability of the findings. While the demographic composition of dominant coalition members in the current study's sample did not differ noticeably from the characteristics of senior executives reported in other studies (e.g., Cook & Glass, 2011; Lantz, 2008), the number of dominant coalition members sampled in this study from the three primary types of organizations were not equal. Also, the sample contained an underrepresentation of board members who, theoretically, are considered to be the most powerful members of an organization's dominant coalition. In this study, there were only four valid responses from board members. On the other hand, low representation of board members may indicate perceptions of low power among board members or high power among an organization's paid employees.

In addition, the purposive sample seemed to reflect responses of dominant coalition members working for organizations that valued openness to the environment. The high mean score ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.55$) for respondents on the openness index indicates that the organizations, and subsequently, the dominant coalition members who agreed to participate in this study likely did so because they were open to sharing information about themselves and their organizations with someone from outside the organization. Moreover, there may have been differences in how a contact person at one organization identified members of the dominant coalition compared to a contact person at another organization.

Future research could address issues of external validity and dominant coalition membership by using random samples of dominant coalition members. One way this might be accomplished is by focusing on one type of organization, such as nonprofits, and generating a random sample of organizations that employ at least one public relations practitioner from the membership lists of professional associations like the Public Relations Society of America

(PRSA). A senior leader from each organization could then be randomly selected to represent the dominant coalition. This method might also yield better response rates and a larger sample size than was secured for this exploratory study.

Conclusion

Because of the complexities of the current business environment, organizations must deal with a variety of stakeholder groups and publics. However, little research has been conducted to understand the factors that influence dominant coalition members' perceptions of the organization's operating environment and its autonomy. This study took an initial step in addressing this gap by examining the relationships among dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of environmental uncertainty and organizational autonomy. In addition, it examined the role that formal environmental scanning plays in the formation of dominant coalition members' perceptions. Specifically, this study found support for the upper echelons theory prediction that dominant coalition members' values act as a filter through which they form perceptions about their organization's environment and their organization's place in it. Moreover, this study found that public relations can play a role in shaping dominant coalition members' values toward and perceptions of their organization's operating environment through the use of formal environmental scanning. This means that public relations managers need to be adept at using rigorous social scientific research methods to collect scanning data and package it in a way that will be meaningful for dominant coalition members in order to help their organizations become more aware of and open to their complex environments.

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