Boundary Spanning Work:
An Interpretive Analysis of Tensions in Public Relations Workplaces

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This dissertation titled

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An Interpretive Analysis of Tensions in Public Relations Workplaces

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Abstract

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Boundary Spanning Work: An Interpretive Analysis of Tensions in Public Relations Workplaces (272 pp.)

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The goal of this dissertation is to advance our understanding of tensions and contradictions experienced in public relations work—a type of boundary spanning work that involves a high amount of information gathering and representation activities. Based on the analysis of 41 in-depth interviews with public relations professionals in the United States this research investigated the type of tensions and contradictions they experienced, how they negotiated with such tensions and contradictions, and what type of communicative strategies they used to deal with these tensions and contradictions.

This research makes several theoretical and practical contributions to extant literature on boundary spanning and workplace tensions across disciplines. First, grounded in social constructionist thought this study presents a new definition of boundary spanning that emphasizes its discursive nature. Second, through a tension-centered perspective on organizations, use of structuration theory, and sensemaking processes, findings revealed that public relations professionals experienced four primary tensions and contradictions that revolved around work relationships with journalists, clients, supervisors, and colleagues. The tensions identified were: tangible-intangible, creative-controlling, secretive-trustworthy, and serving-servitude. Third, public relations professionals understood these tensions, contradictions, and their work through
metaphors of family and games. Fourth, public relations professionals used avoidance and reframing as strategies in navigating through tensions and contradictions. Fifth, the tension-centered perspective unearthed connections between the use of emotions, relationships, and experiences of work-family conflict in public relations work. Thus, this is the first systematic study that takes a tension-centered constitutive view of communication to the study of boundary spanning work in the public relations context and significantly advances our understanding of boundary spanning work from an interpretive standpoint by contributing to literature in organizational communication, public relations, and management.

This study recommends better management of client-agency and employee-agency relationships that focus on clarifying expectations, implementing training programs, and instituting policies on work-family balance. For future research, this study suggests broadening the context of boundary spanning to a different cultural setting, and extending the scope of investigating tensions and contradictions to other boundary spanning roles. This study also recommends using a combination of interview and ethnography for a richer and complementary analysis of boundary spanning work roles.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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Living 8,000 miles away from home is never easy but thanks to the King family my wife and I found a second home in Athens, Ohio. Thanks also to our dear friends Mike and Val and their families. All have provided invaluable support and have fostered bonds that will be cherished forever.

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Dedication

Dedicated to our families

for

their continued support.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Boundary spanning professionals have several names such as gatekeepers, unifiers, change agents, regulators, liaisons, planners, and innovators. They typically fulfill two essential functions in modern society: representing organizations and exerting influence (Adams, 1976). Public relations professionals are boundary spanning professionals who embody the voice of many modern corporations and exert significant influence on how the society perceives the organization. In their boundary spanning role, public relations professionals help develop and clarify perceptions, thoughts, and needs of different groups and act as a communication bridge between two or more people, groups, or parties (Aldrich & Herker, 1977; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Jemison, 1984).

It appears that the decision making of boundary spanners is not purely rational, but influenced by several factors including personal dispositions, self-interests, and power issues (Berger, 2005; Krider & Ross, 1997; Shwom, Hirsch, & Messick, 1998). Prior literature also suggests that conflict, tension, personal attributes, and demographic variables heavily affect the communicative choices made by boundary spanners (see, for example, Shwom, Hirsch, & Messick, 1998). Strongly related to these variables are the work and general life experiences of boundary spanners that are filled with tensions, contradictions, conflict, and communicative choices (Krider and Ross, 1997) that further influence the decision making of boundary spanners. Thus, knowing what tensions these boundary spanners experience and how they handle these tensions within their specific context becomes crucial.

The study of boundary spanning communication is important because today public relations professionals as boundary spanners hold influential positions across
organizations and exert significant power and influence to shape public opinion. In an increasingly globalized and media rich society public relations professionals play an important role in the creation and maintenance of social discourse, eventually becoming gatekeepers of information and social change. Corporate discourses, educational discourses, and general societal discourses such as the pro-environmental discourse, are some examples where public relations professionals are playing an important role. For example, Mosinader and Pesonen (2002) noted that public relations professionals have played a key role in furthering the pro-environmental discourse that simultaneously advocates opposing ideas of consumerism and environmentalism. The authors argued that such discourse greatly disguises the consumerist tendencies by shifting the focus of discourse to green consumerism. However, Newton (2007) argued that such a shift by public relations professionals was necessary to change peoples’ preferences towards green products for a better ecological policy. As can be seen, the role of the public relations professionals as boundary spanners is filled with such oppositions and tensions that permeate the individual and societal levels.

**Background**

A review of boundary spanning literature across management, public relations, and organizational communication leads to three important observations. First, the majority of research on boundary spanning treats communication as an epiphenomenon (i.e., an incidental product of some process where communication has no effect of its own) (Bacharach & Aiken, 1977; Blackburn, 2008). Second, actors in organizational settings are treated nonproblematically as rational and mechanistic while largely ignoring
the emotional and political nature of organizing. Third, due to an overemphasis on quantitative methodology and positivistic tendencies there seem to be marginalization of a space for experiential, dialogic, and meaning making views on boundary spanning communication.

The dual function of representation and influence comes with multiple roles that often create tensions and cause severe role conflict in the boundary spanning workplace (Friedman & Podolny, 1992). As former public relations professional servicing large multinational software and telecom clients, I find these claims to be true. During my tenure as a public relations professional, decision-making (i.e., choice making) for me was full of overt and covert tensions every step of the way. One example of role conflict occurred when I worked for a public relations firm servicing a large multinational corporation. The job required me to be a representative of the company and to use my personal and company’s influence to build relationships with journalists and local newspaper editors. In short, I was using my influence for the benefit of a client organization to further their business. As a boundary spanner I was often caught between the client organization’s agenda, goals set by my employer, building and maintaining relationships, and engaging in ethical persuasion. The multitude of mandates produced several types of tensions, contradictions, and emotions as I navigated my daily work life. Additionally, my employer and client organization’s decision-making was based on highly rational and technical grounds with little regard for individual voices, both inside and outside organizations. In short, my behavior as a boundary spanner fulfilling the representation and influence functions was not simply a matter of cold calculation, but a
process of interpretation and meaning making of my role within my specific work context. Thus, the rational functionalist approach does not adequately take into account the perspective of the boundary spanner or the immense complexity of boundary spanning work.

Further, my relationships with client organizations, journalists, the local population, colleagues, superiors, and subordinates were filled with both productive and unproductive tensions, contradictions, and conflicts. For me the entire enterprise of boundary spanning communication was based on my unique interpretation and sense-making ability afforded by my personal, professional, and social position in a given time and context. I made choices based on several contextual factors such as overlapping social relationships, nuanced communicative behavior of others, and my own personal and professional identity.

I argue that by not taking into account the perspective of the public relations professionals researchers have continued to miss an important opportunity, to study how tensions are manifested, experienced, and negotiated in the context of boundary spanning work. Existing research has not yet adequately explicated the complex interrelationship between types of tensions, role conflict, role ambiguity, and boundary spanners’ personal characteristics. Further, ever since Aldrich and Herker (1977) first used the term boundary spanners, few studies have explored the role of communication in boundary spanning work from an interpretive standpoint, and virtually none from a constitutive communication standpoint (see, for example, Cheney et al., 1998; Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill; 2002; Finet, 1993; Harter & Krone, 2001). Overall studies that take a variable
analytic approach to investigate boundary spanning reduce boundary spanners to passive or reactive agents assumed to act on a rationalistic, stimulus-response model. This is not to say that variable analytic research does not add value to our understanding about boundary spanning, but it does so in a limited way.

Thus, in order to increase our understanding of boundary spanning as an organizing process I will proceed in the following manner. In the remainder of this chapter, I briefly address relevant literature and create a more holistic understanding of the problem that I am researching, and will detail the significance of this research. In the second chapter, I offer a more in-depth analysis of existing literature and conclude with the research questions that guide this study. Chapter three describes the methodology chosen for this study and offers justification of the proposed method. Chapter four presents the relevant findings of this research. Chapter five focuses on discussion of the research findings, limitations, and future direction for this kind of research.

**Statement of the Problem**

Historically, boundary spanning research has stemmed from research on organizational environments and information exchange. This line of research first emerged in the management field. Public relations research was second to adopt the term and perform research on information and communication exchange between public relations professionals. Organizational communication researchers adopted the term in the early 1990s when they found that boundary spanning was an ancillary phenomenon present in several studies. Aldrich (1979) suggested that boundary spanning was based mainly on two important functions performed by the organizational actors: information
gathering and representation. When the boundary spanner scanned the organization’s environment and brought back information considered relevant he/she was fulfilling an information-gathering role. Further, in the process of information gathering, the boundary spanner in most cases also acted as a representative of the the organization. Thus, boundary spanning work came to be associated with the functions of information gathering and representation. As Adams (1976) and Aldrich (1979) further explained the phenomenon, boundary spanning involved both direct and indirect interaction between boundary spanners and their audiences. Thus, information exchange and interaction has historically been at the heart of boundary spanning research.

Although management literature recognized the significance of boundary spanning, scholars did not explore its connection with communication until the mid 1970s. Keller and Holland (1975) investigated the relationship between boundary spanning roles, marginality, role conflict, and job satisfaction, and found that it played a vital role in effective monitoring of the environment and technological transfer across boundaries (see, for example, Dollinger, 1983; Green, Blank, & Liden, 1983). Bacharach and Aiken (1977) were the first to publish studies that explicitly explored the connection between communication and boundary spanning. However, Aldrich and Herker (1979) were instrumental in conceptualizing boundary spanning in the management domain. Through the 1980s and 1990s, boundary spanning research on individual roles increased in management literature. The variables that affected boundary spanning roles were further investigated and classified as being influenced by internal, external, informal, formal environments, etc. Their research operated on two major assumptions. First, they
treated boundaries as given, and did not question the separation of the environment and the organization. Second, they assumed membership in organizations as one of the most important bases for defining the boundary. Mostly, these two assumptions have continued to dominate our understanding of boundary spanning.

Further, studies conducted over the past two decades have continued to use the rationalistic, managerial, and unitary variable analytic procedures with the same basic assumption of rational actors and imposing an apriori framework. For example, De Jong, De Ruyter, and Wetzels (2005) studied boundary spanning in groups and its links with customer satisfaction and profitability in the managerial context. Zott (2007) emphasized the importance of boundary spanning transactions and suggested efficiency-centered models for organizations. Thus, due to the rationalistic, unitary, and variable analytic views of boundary spanning, research in management has not yet offered a complete picture of issues relating to boundary spanning work and the associated tensions experienced by boundary spanners.

Management literature has influenced the majority of public relations research on boundary spanning. In fact, much of the public relations research has replicated information from the management literature while making suitable alterations and extensions to public relations practice. For example, Springston and Leichty (1994) built a survey from existing measures of boundary spanning activities in organizational behavior literature, and found six boundary spanning factors that related to public relations practice: image maintenance, gate keeping, processing of important information, training, collaborative public relations, and information seeking. These variables were
simply adapted to the public relations setting without much critical exploration of the suitability of the built-in managerial notions about boundary spanning. Although boundary spanning research in public relations significantly borrowed its epistemic and methodological stance from managerial research, it does acknowledge communication as the central element of boundary spanning more than the literature in management. However, due to a linear approach towards understanding communication, public relations research to date has largely ignored the practitioner’s point of view and interpretation of events while conducting research on boundary spanning. Considering the practitioners’ interpretation could potentially help us understand more about the communicative choices boundary spanners make. It would further help us assess the effect of these choices from a communicative frame rather than the traditional managerial frame. If public relations theory and subsequent boundary spanning research is to develop, we need different and robust ways of theorizing, especially from a communicative standpoint.

Boundary spanning in contemporary organizational communication literature has largely been a subject of secondary focus with the exception of a few studies. For example, Cheney et al. (1998) demonstrated the importance of boundary spanning for workplace democracy, participation, and communication. Harter and Krone (2001) examined the boundary spanning role of a cooperative support organization in Nebraska, whereas a study by Kuhn and Nelson (2002) that focused on reengineering of identity, explored the possibility of boundary spanners exhibiting different identification profiles. Studies in organizational communication to date only insinuate importance and
implications of studying boundary spanning communication, but few studies exclusively focus on it. For example, Zoller (2004) made a strong case for critically examining inter-organizational discourse in the context of government-business dialogue, and critically examined boundary spanning communication at a macro-level. In my view, the next step in furthering Zoller’s argument would be to examine the process of boundary spanning communication as experienced by actors.

There seems to be evidence in the reviewed literature that boundary spanning is underrepresented and under-researched in management, organizational communication, and public relations.

**Roles Conflict, Paradoxes, Tensions, and Contradictions**

Very few research studies in the management literature and public relations literature have moved beyond the confines of the traditional understanding of organizations to problematize the relationship between boundary spanning and role conflict. Research studies have found that organizational members experience inherent contradictions and many paradoxes in organizations because of role conflicts (Bridge and Baxter, 1992; Jemison, 1984). For example, when individuals receive incongruent messages about job expectations they experience great conflict and tension (McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006; Putnam 1986). Miles (1976) in a study of 202 research and development professionals found that boundary spanning activities were among the best predictors of role conflict as experienced by organizational actors. Singh (1998) further found a curvilinear relationship between boundary spanning positions in organizations and variables that affected role conflict. Voydanoff (2005), a management
scholar, in her study found a strong relation between boundary spanning demands and work-family role conflict. In these studies researchers concluded that boundary spanning activities and role conflicts were related in complex ways but researchers did not focus on elaborating on the intricate nature of these relationships.

Organizational communication scholars have argued that tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions are an important part of the organizing process. McGuire, Dougherty, and Atkinson (2006) state that “understanding the relationship of paradoxes and dialectical tensions creates a more richly textured understanding of their impact in a variety of organizations” (p. 417). In consolidating previous research on tensions in organizational communication, Stohl and Cheney (2001) defined five important concepts that are relevant to understanding the relationship between boundary spanning communication and dilemmas. The concepts were tension, contradiction, paradox, double bind, and irony. Paradoxes involve conflicting forces that are either/or decisions, whereas dialectics allowed for the simultaneous presence of such conflicting forces including choice and negotiation between seemingly opposing poles. Paradoxes have been studied in different contexts. Applying the study of paradoxes and dialectical tensions to the health care setting McGuire, Dougherty, and Atkinson (2006) studied the dynamics of nurses’ responses to sexual harassment by their patients. In the organizational context, paradoxes, contradictions, and dialectical tensions have been explored further in for-profit work settings, not-for-profit work settings, and temporary work settings. The research setting in these studies varied from multinational firms, corporate offices, and correctional facilities to community and day care service providers (see, for example, Butler & Modaff, 2008;
Harter, 2004; Harter & Krone, 2001; Ingram, Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Gotsi, 2008; McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006; Tracy, 2004). In several of these studies researchers argued that paradoxes and contradictions were inherently problematic. However, Tracy (2004) argued that the framing of tensions by organizational actors determined the nature of the paradox for organizational actors. Tracy (2004) suggested that paradoxes and dialectical tensions emerge and sustain themselves in an interpretive process that depends on the organizational actor’s framing of the paradox, and is therefore worthy of scholarly attention.

I believe that public relations work, as a category of boundary spanning work, is nested in complex relationships filled with role conflict, paradoxes, and dialectical tensions. Therefore, taking into account boundary spanners’ perspective of organizational events is not only beneficial, but essential for communication researchers, organizational consultants, policy makers, and citizens. However, most traditional variable analytic research is unable to problematize such complexities. Another significant limitation of variable analytic research to date has been its apriori framework that privileges the researcher’s point of view and suppresses the organizational actors’ interpretations. Evidence strongly points to the fact that boundary spanning has been alluded to by contemporary organizational communication scholars, but questions relating to dialectics, voice, and identity, particularly in the context of boundary spanning communication, remain largely unexplored.
Proposed Research

In order to understand the complex relationship between role conflict, uncertainty, ambiguity, tensions, and paradoxes in boundary spanning work, I propose using a tension-centered perspective.

Public relations, media, and communications professionals are the most heavily engaged in fulfilling the two core boundary spanning functions: information gathering and representation. These professionals can be classified as high boundary spanners (Leifer & Huber, 1977). Moreover, extant literature suggests that tensions and paradoxes experienced by these professionals are inherent in the type of communication work they do (Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabring, & Townsend, 2008; Barnard, 1938).

Recent research suggests that membership in organizations largely depends on the perception of communicative boundaries recognized by organizational actors (Masterson & Stamper, 2003). Specifically within the public relations context, I am interested in researching issues of dialectics, paradoxes, tensions, voice, and identity of these boundary spanners; as I believe this approach will provide an understanding of micro and macro communicative processes that constitute boundary spanners’ interrelated social worlds. Further, workplace participation that extends beyond the organization into personal, social, and political realms is a fundamental need for boundary spanners as they try to engage in spanning, material and discursive boundaries. The prospect of exploring tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions, as experienced by public relations professionals, should provide a different and more nuanced representation about public relations professionals’ lives than what currently exists in literature. Since public relations
professionals are embedded in a web of professional and social relationships, how public relations professionals identify, understand, and negotiate conflicts might affect their boundary spanning relationships. This will also help us better understand the communicative choices made by public relations professionals in their work and relationships.

Existing research on boundary spanning limits its conceptualization to variable analytic procedures and does not allow space for a dialogic, meaning making, and discursive view of boundary spanning. Thus, I advance a (re)definition of boundary spanning that considers the ongoing process of communicative organizing and allows studying boundary spanning through an interpretive lens. Using an interpretative approach (Charmaz, 2005; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), I investigate paradoxes, dualities, tensions, and contradictions in public relations work, which is a category of boundary spanning work that involves a high amount of information gathering and representation. I am interested in knowing what kinds of dialectical tensions these public relations professionals experience. How do public relations professionals negotiate with dialectical tensions? To achieve this goal I propose a more inclusive definition of boundary spanning that emphasizes the discursive nature of boundaries and takes a constitutive view of communication.

Significance

Boundary spanning communication is significant to contemporary research in organizational communication and public relations for two reasons. First, boundary spanners in the capacity of public relations professionals, corporate communication
executives, community relations officers, etc., hold influential positions across organizations to shape public opinion. They essentially act as gatekeepers, unifiers, change agents, regulators, liaisons, planners, and innovators who because of the nature of their work have great symbolic and material power in organizations (Leifer & Delbecq, 1978). A second related reason is that boundary spanners’ individual disposition towards work, life, and social issues directly affects the communicative choices they make for themselves and their employers, which in turn have consequences for stakeholders and the public at large. This influence exerted by boundary spanners plays a significant role in creating, maintaining, and changing relationships between an organization and society. Thus, understanding the actions of individual boundary spanners within their specific work context is vital.

Given the immense importance of what boundary spanners do and how much influence they have in shaping discourse and policy, this research contributes to theoretical and practical aspects of boundary spanning, paradoxes, and dialectics scholarship in three distinct ways.

First, this study puts the process of communicative organizing in the foreground as it advances a new definition of boundary spanning. This (re)definition adds to the literature in the disciplines of management, public relations, and organizational communication. Increasingly, management and public relations scholars are recognizing the limitations of managerial thinking and this definition will further expand the scope of boundary spanning. Public relations scholars are also steadily moving away from a mass communication orientation (e.g. hypodermic model) to a more interpersonal orientation
(e.g. use of social media to build relationships). Within this broader shift, this
(re)definition will contribute to the relational orientation literature in public relations
(Toth, 2007).

Second, this study adds to the literature on paradoxes and dialectical tensions in
the workplace. Previous contexts within which paradoxes and dialectical tensions have
mainly been researched include religious organizations, day care organizations,
cooperatives, hospitals, families, etc. (see, for example, Butler & Modaff, 2008; Harter,
Little research exists on public relations agencies or corporate communication
departments as workplaces. This research will add to the understanding of new dialectical
tensions that might be specific to such contexts. A third related contribution is that this
study will contribute to applied communication scholarship. The results from this study
will be particularly helpful to public relations practitioners and the field of public
relations for implementing organizational change in agency and corporate
communication set-ups.

Most studies in management have been concerned with structural characteristics
of communication whereas studies in public relations have theorized boundary spanning
as a function of the organization. With contemporary organizational communication yet
to be able to theorize boundary spanning in a way suited for a constitutive view of
communication, this study directly contributes to our theoretical understanding of what
boundary spanning means to organizational actors within their context. Thus, as for
contribution to the field of management, public relations, and organizational
communication, this is the first systematic study that takes a constitutive view of
communication to the study of boundary spanning work in the public relations context.
Overall, the interpretive stance of this research combined with postmodern sensibilities
helps us acknowledge the complex nature of boundary spanning work and its connection
to communication. Thus, this research creates space for dialogic and meaning making
views of boundary spanning through understanding of paradoxes and dialectical tensions
in the work life of public relations professionals.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

The concept of boundary spanning has been discussed in several disciplines including management, public relations, organizational communication, sociology, economics, and even politics. Our discussion will be restricted to former three for these directly concern the purpose of this research. Here I will begin by providing a systematic overview of boundary spanning literature in the fields of management, public relations, and organizational communication to further problematize the notion of boundary spanning. Each disciplinary review surveys the literature as it relates to the concept of boundary spanning, uncovering the ontological and epistemological assumptions that limit our understanding of boundary spanning and its fundamental communicative nature. Subsequent to this, I argue in favor of a discursive definition of boundary spanning and provide one. Following which, I emphasize the need for studying the boundary spanning work of public relations professionals, and how a tension-centered perspective fits the needs of this research. The review concludes with two research questions.

Situating Boundary Spanning

Historically, boundary spanning had its philosophical roots in systems thinking and can be better understood through multiple perspectives that deal with organizational environments and organizational information processing. This is because conceptualization of boundary spanning was achieved by separating the organization from its environment, and labeling the two as internal and external environments. The term boundary spanning was first introduced by Baker and Schulberg (1970) in a study that examined functions performed by workers who acted as intermediaries. Although
they never explicitly defined boundary spanning, subsequent studies have used the term in the context of a person fulfilling an intermediary function, and it acquired its meaning from this function. The organizational actor fulfilling this intermediary role was referred to as a boundary role person (BRP). Aldrich (1979) classified this intermediary role of a BRP in two categories: information gathering and representation (Aldrich, 1979). The information gathering function consisted of the boundary spanner scanning the organizational environment and bringing back information considered relevant. While the representation function involved representing the organization, primarily to external members. As Adams (1976) and Aldrich (1979) described the phenomenon, boundary spanning came to involve both direct and indirect interaction between boundary spanners and their audiences, and therefore subsequent studies have focused on interaction occurring between the boundary spanner representing an organization, and its target audience (Finet, 1993; Lievens & Moenaert, 2000). Therefore, when a boundary spanner fulfilled the function of information gathering and representation, boundary spanning work was said to have been achieved.

Scholars of management and boundary spanning research have tended to situate themselves in the broader context of organizational environments and organizational information processing. In extant literature there are four perspectives from which scholars view environments and organizations: objectivist, perpetual and interpretivist; environmental; and enactment (Sutcliffe, 2000). These four perspectives broadly fall into two groups. The first is the more traditional perspectives that presume real, material environments whose boundaries are distinct from the concrete material organizations
located within them. The second is the relatively later developed enactment perspective that assumes boundaries as socially created symbolic worlds (Weick, 1995), and abandons the idea of concrete material organizations/environments (Sutcliffe, 2000). In short, the objective, perceived and interpretive, and environmental perspectives differentiated what is outside and inside the organization/firm based on clearly defined boundaries as a consequence of legal factors or apparent observable differences of identity, culture, and/or strategic priorities. The enactment perspective on the other hand, considered the environment and organizations, and therefore sees boundaries as social constructions (see, for example, Sutcliffe, 2000).

Further, scholars have two views on how organizational members process information: the logistical view and the interpretive information processing view. The logistical view is focused on the capacity of uncertainty reduction through organizational structures and processes that enhance or impede transfer of data or information and subsequent decision making. On the other hand, the interpretive information processing view is concerned with how the interpretation of information is affected by factors unique to the context. Such factors could be organizational structures, organizational processes, and psychological and social psychological characteristics of organizational members (Weick, 1995). Thus, it is in this broader context that the term boundary spanning has been used, and much research to date on the topic can be understood from these differing perspectives on environment and information processing.

Academics and practitioners in management, organizational communication, and public relations have agreed that scarce resources, decentralization, and the increasing
complexity of organizations have created more demanding boundary spanning work roles in recent times. Further, generally scholars have agreed that increasing prevalence of dependence of organizations on each other and the resulting complex relationships, (Barringer & Harrison, 2000; Koschmann, 2008) are factors that compel the study of boundary spanning functions and the role of communication. The functions of information gathering and representation have become much more complex than originally envisioned by Aldrich and Herker (1977). Thus, given the prominent role of boundary spanners and the boundary spanning function, it is important to examine critically the literature and practice of boundary spanning. The disciplines of management, organizational communication, and public relations have researched boundary spanning from the four perspectives suggested by Stufcliffe (2000), and depending on one’s ontological and epistemological view of environment, organization, and information, one’s views about boundary spanning and communication would tend to differ. Thus, below I organize my review across these three disciplinary and subdisciplinary domains. This cross-disciplinary review directly pertains to the purpose of this research, and in doing so I further contextualize and problematize the notion of boundary spanning in management, organizational communication, and public relations.

**Boundary spanning function in management.**

The review below represents a description of how boundary spanning and communication has been conceptualized, operationalized, and connected to different areas in management literature in the past three decades. It begins with a historical overview of boundary spanning in management, moving on to focus on research on
boundary spanning roles and role conflict, to conclude with shortcomings in extant literature reviewed.

**Early developments.**

Baker and Schulberg (1970) produced one of the earliest works on boundary spanning wherein they employed the concept with reference to a hospital system. However, Hrebiniak and Alutto (1972) seemed to be the first to conduct an empirical study on the role of boundary spanners. In their study of two psychiatric departments in a hospital, they framed the psychiatric inpatient department as representing an intermediate point in the mental health treatment system, while the boundary spanning function was conceived by them as a subsystem whose role was to perform a channelizing function by distributing medical cases to other treatment locations. An influential article that set the stage for the contemporary use of the term boundary spanner was by Aldrich and Herker (1977) in which the authors examined the creation, elaboration, and functions of boundary spanning roles with respect to environmental and technological sources. In their research they proposed eleven hypotheses for future empirical testing that dealt with the influence of environment and technology on the behavior of the boundary spanner. Further, they also largely defined what a BRP meant. According to them, a BRP was an individual responsible for contacting people outside his or her own group. In their subsequent studies of the differentiation of boundary spanning roles they found that a BRP also conveyed influence between constituents and their opponents. A boundary spanner thus represented the perceptions, expectations, and ideas of each side to the other, and played a central role in intergroup relations. Malinowski (1922) had observed
that person fulfilling the boundary spanning roles was also important to conduct the exchange of ideas and information between two groups. In short, the boundary spanning role was primarily defined by the functions of information gathering and representation.

Even though an emphasis on the boundary spanning role was acknowledged, its connection to communication was sporadic until 1977 when Bacharach and Aiken (1977) published one of the first studies that explicitly explored communication and boundary spanning. They sought to find the link between the frequency of upward communication, downward communication, and lateral communication on organizational size, shape (width and vertical differentiation), routine use of technology, decentralization of authority, and boundary spanning. According to Bacharach and Aiken (1977), although communication was a recurrent theme in organizational theory there was little empirical research that dealt with organizational constraints on communication. Bacharach and Aiken (1977) argued that research prior to their study was theoretical and emphasized communication as a key element in organization, but they found no empirical evidence that communication played a key role in boundary spanning (see, for example, Barnard, 1938; Blau & Scott, 1962; March & Simon, 1958). Most research on communication during this time was concerned with control, decentralization, and decision making, which according to Bacharach and Aiken (1977) were inextricably linked to the flow of communication. Bacharach and Aiken (1977) went on to critique organizational research of their time, as treating communication epiphenomenally, i.e., as a secondary phenomenon to other phenomenon in organization. In light of the interpretive turn in organizational communication, I claim that their work was equally plagued by the same
epiphenomenalism of communication that they were arguing against, and that much research done during this time had a strong positivistic orientation, which saw communication as a byproduct of human actions.

By 1978, boundary spanning was treated as an organizational function that a single individual performed. For example, Leifer and Delbecq (1978) found that nomenclature used to describe boundary spanning personnel ranged from gatekeeper, unifier, change agent, regulator, liaison role, and planner to innovator. Based on this nomenclature, they argued that when an organizational member fulfilled a particular function on the boundary of the organization, he/she deserved to be called a boundary spanner. Thus, the way boundary spanning was defined in early literature was mainly based on Aldrich and Herker’s (1977) explanation of boundary, conceptualized from a systems view. Continuing this use of boundary, Leifer and Delbecq (1978) acknowledged that “an organization’s boundary is usually vague” (p.41), but did not elaborate on the extent of the boundary’s vagueness. Further, influenced by the dominant positivist orientation and sociological studies of its time, a strong structural focus can be observed in studies dealing with boundary spanning, which continues to date (see, for example, Brass, 1984; Hazy, Tivnan, & Schwandt, 2003; Saeed, Malhotra, & Grover, 2005; Zablah, Johnston, & Bellenger, 2005; Zott, & Amit, 2007).

Aldrich and Herker’s conceptualization of boundary spanning particularly contains assumptions that need to be examined. There are two main issues with early studies on boundary spanning in the early half of the 1970s. First, they treated boundaries as given and conveniently treated membership as one of the important bases for defining
the boundary of an organization. Aldrich and Herker’s (1977) conception of boundary was only one of the many possible bases of defining the separation of the organization from the environment. Second, their discussion of power revolved around conceptualizing power as a resource for strategic advantage and domination over others. For example, they stated that “future research should overcome (my emphasis) problems created when organizations are treated as wholes or single entities” (p.217). This statement hints towards a strong positivist orientation of prediction and control over their research subjects. Interpreting Aldrich and Herker’s (1977) understanding of power in light of contemporary managerial and communication ethics literature, their treatment of power over others seems oppressive and unethical.

*Focus on roles and role conflict.*

In the following years, much research on boundary spanning was conducted in the area of industrial management, which focused on uncertainty, innovation, and individual performance in organizations. Research on boundary spanning in these contexts focused heavily on boundary spanning roles. This line of largely variable analytic research, further cemented the connection between boundary spanning role conflict, uncertainty, ambiguity, and stress.

In the mid 1970s, Keller and Holland (1975) investigated the relationship between boundary spanning roles, marginality, role conflict, and job satisfaction on the premise that boundary spanning played a vital role in effective monitoring of the environment and technological transfer across boundaries (see, for example, Dollinger, 1983; Green, Blank, & Liden, 1983). Tushman and Romanelli (1983) investigated the relative effects
of formal status and informal communication roles in administrative and technical
decision making. They argued that while external information entered the organization
via boundary spanning individuals, the exercise of influence at lower levels of the
organization depended on mediating critical organizational contingencies. Overall, they
claimed that greater task and environmental uncertainty lead to greater influence by
boundary spanning individuals. One conclusion they arrived at was that formal hierarchy
and informal social processes complemented each other in the exercise of influence, and
boundary spanning played a key role.

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, boundary spanning research on individual
roles started increasing in management literature. In spite of the increasing focus on of
the humanistic tradition, researchers’ structural focus has still been predominant in
boundary spanning work (Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1989; Vandelle & Gemmel,
2006). Individuals were treated as objects that reacted in a certain presumed way based
on the stimulus and response model of the environment and the organization. This can be
further observed in studies that extensively focused on roles in organizations. This line of
research assumed that roles existed outside of the organizational members, and it was
roles that exclusively guided a member’s behavior. A typical example of this type of
study was the application of role theory analysis on sales managers of organizations
(Lyonski & Johnson, 1983). Lyonski and Johnson (1983) claimed that communicative
activities encountered in such jobs fall under the rubric of boundary spanning. Their
hypothetico-deductive model painted an elaborate and neater picture that divided
organizational variables into three classes: boundary spanning variables, role perception
variables, and psychological consequences (see, Appendix A). Boundary spanning variables were further classified into internal, external, informal, and formal boundary spanning. Role perception was classified into role conflict and role ambiguity, and psychological consequences were classified as job satisfaction, job related tension, perceived performance, and propensity to leave (the organization).

Much research on boundary spanning in the following years focused on finding relationships and variances among variables conceptualized by Lyonski and Johnson (1983) and their effects on the organizational effectiveness and innovation. Galaskiewicz & Wasserman (1989) focused on network ties among boundary spanning personnel across organizations and found that they acted as a conduit/channel to disseminate ideas and innovations throughout the organizational field. Their focus was on how managers could use this research to further improve the productivity and innovation in organizations. Lee and Heath (1999) investigated managerial media selection and information evaluation between personal networks and peers outside the organization, and examined how communication boosted productivity and efficiency. De Jong, De Ruyter, and Wetzels’ (2005) study focused on boundary spanning in groups and its links with customer satisfaction and profitability. Vandelle and Gemmel (2006) researched the effects of boundary spanning behavior on performance in customer sales settings. Zott and Amit (2007) emphasized the importance of an organization's set of boundary spanning transactions and suggested efficiency-centered models. Few researchers in the management tradition have moved beyond these confines of the traditional organization to problematize the relationship between boundary spanning and role conflict. Voydanoff
(2005), in her study of work-family issues, found that boundary spanning demands and work-family role conflict were strongly related. For future research, Voydanoff (2005) suggested that additional work was needed to further delineate the processes through which boundary spanning demands operated to increase or reduce conflict and stress.

Subsequent research has found that uncertainty and role conflict are increasingly associated with the boundary spanning function. Some have argued that conflict is an important and inescapable part of boundary spanning work (Simpson & Zorn, 2004; Thanem, 2006). Miles (1976) found in a study of 202 research and development professionals that boundary spanning activities were amongst the best predictors of role conflict experienced by organizational actors. However, one exception was Keller’s (1978) longitudinal study that did not find any causal link between boundary spanning activity and role conflict. Bettencourt and Brown (2003) found that role conflict and role ambiguity were also directly related to Customer Oriented Boundary Spanning Behaviors (COBSB) (see, for example, Singh, Goolsby & Rhoads, 1994). Singh (1998) found a curvilinear relationship between boundary spanning positions in organizations and variables affecting role conflict and this further complicated the relationships between boundary spanning activities and role conflict. Based on his research, Singh concluded that a curvilinear relationship existed between role stressors (i.e., role conflict, ambiguity, and overload) and job characteristics (i.e., autonomy, feedback, task variety, and participation) on five key job outcomes of salespeople. Needless to say, such boundary spanning activities and role conflict had a complex interdependent relationship. Hypothetico-deductive models, such as the one used in Singh’s study helped to identify
variables and establish synthetic relationships, but his model failed to uncover the processes behind the workings of these complex relationships.

In short, traditional hypothetico-deductive models to date have mainly been used within the traditional confines of the positivistic outlook of the organization, as constrained by the container metaphor. Further, the boundary spanning function and the boundary spanner has been visualized as part of a complex interdependent system interacting at the institutional, representative, and personal levels (Eisenberg et al., 1984). Friedman and Podolny (1992) argued that since boundary spanners usually juggled multiple roles, had multiple functions of influence and representation, and were often caught between two sides, high role conflict was usually observed.

Overall, boundary spanning in management has been strongly associated with role conflict, uncertainty, ambiguity, and stress as boundary spanners try to fulfill the functions of information gathering and representation. These have been studied in many different contexts, ranging from industrial management, labor negotiations, sales, marketing, and entrepreneurship to innovation. In short, role conflict, uncertainty, ambiguity, and stress have broadly constituted the subject of investigation in boundary spanning research for more than four decades. Due to the tendency of researchers to approach the topic of boundary spanning work with a unitary variable analytic perspective, the relationship of conflict, uncertainty, ambiguity, and stress, and its underlying causes has been too complex to uncover. This tendency has continued to be observed in contemporary management and organizational behavior pertaining to boundary spanning.
Shortcomings in management literature.

Four observations are relevant based on the previous review boundary spanning literature in management. First, almost all studies on boundary spanning in management seem to operate with the inherent assumption of separation between the environment and the organization. This inherent separation fundamentally changes how the boundary of the organization is viewed and how boundary spanning and the role of the boundary spanners are discussed. Second, in the majority of the studies on boundary spanning, communication is treated as a mere variable in a mix of other variables. As pointed out by Bacharach and Aiken (1977) communication is treated as an epiphenomenon, with communication exclusively associated with the traditional transmission model, and a byproduct of something else more important and central to organizations. Third, actors in organizational settings are nonproblematically treated as rational and mechanistic and assumed to be lacking emotions. This tendency is largely true of most management research of the eighties and nineties. As a postmodern organizational communication and public relations scholar, I question their tendency of orienting towards boundary spanners not as human beings who express and feel emotions, but as mere resources to be exploited by the firm. Fourth, issues of power in the organizing process are largely ignored. For example, although Aldrich and Herker (1977) devoted an entire section in their study to power issues, their discussion of power largely undermined the complex nature of power and communication in boundary spanning. Power was assumed as a given force that could not be controlled, and therefore beyond empirical evaluation. More
generally, power was seen as a resource that boundary spanners could use over others, against the environment, and in favor of the organization.

The above criticism is true of most management research on boundary spanning in the past four decades. The above review represents a description of how boundary spanning has been conceptualized, operationalized, and connected to different organizational areas in management literature in the past three decades. I now turn to reviewing the boundary spanning function in the organizational communication.

**Boundary spanning function in organizational communication.**

Overall, the term boundary spanning was introduced in organizational communication in the early 1990s. Although not much research in organizational communication has exclusively focused on boundary spanning, boundary spanning was alluded to in studies throughout the past decade in organizational communication (Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002; Harter and Krone, 2001; Zoller, 2004).

One of the earliest definitions of boundary spanning in organizational communication was provided by Finet (1993) who defined boundary spanning “as communication between organizational members and elements of the organizational environment, where perceptions of organizational legitimacy are established and challenged” (p. 41). Her study primarily focused on the nature of boundary spanning communication and delegitimacy of organizations. Taking an institutional view of the organizations, she explored the relationship between boundary spanning communication of individual organizational members and organizational legitimacy, particularly in the context of dealing with organizational conflict between two members of the same
organization. Through a case analysis she found that perceptions regarding the nature of
the boundary spanning communication of the agency head in the case study and the staff
scientist significantly contributed to the sociopolitical delegitimation of the organization.
Thus, her research seemed to be the first interpretive study where boundary spanning was
the central focus of the research, and dealt with conflict, politics, and power issues in
boundary spanning communication. In short, it was the first time that a definition of
boundary spanning placed communication and power in the foreground.

However, Finet’s (1993) study operated on the idea of treating the organization
and its environment as separate and continued to reinforce the dichotomy between
organization and environment. Finet (1993) used legitimacy in purely political terms,
particularly in situations where one party was subdued by the other. It seems that
Finet(1993) ignored the possibility of parties on a similar or friendly footing. Further, the
politics of legitimacy in Finet’s (1993) work gained a greater focus than communicative
phenomenon. In short, in Finet’s (1993) interpretation, there was an implicit assumption
that communication is external to legitimacy, which further reinforced the dichotomy of
the organization as separate from the environment.

Subsequent to Finet’s (1993) work, not much research in organizational
communication has exclusively focused on boundary spanning communication, but
boundary spanning, as a theoretical concept, has been alluded to in select research studies
(Cheney et al. 1998; Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002; Harter and Krone, 2001; Zoller,
2004). The few research studies that mentioned boundary spanning, have contexts that
primarily explore oppositions, tensions, and role conflict through an interpretive perspective.

Cheney et al, (1998) in a multidisciplinary review of workplace participation showed that boundary spanning roles contributed to the flow of communication, representation of voices, and exchange of ideas, and therefore were important for maintaining workplace democracy and participation. Harter and Krone (2001) examined the boundary spanning role of a cooperative support organization in Nebraska, and investigated how the Nebraska council helped co-operatives manage the paradox of stability and change. Harter and Krone (2001) found that it was through the boundary spanning activities of learning, promoting, and protecting the legitimacy of the co-operative, that the co-operative managed the paradox of stability and change. Further, research by Kuhn and Nelson’s study (2002) that focused on reengineering of identity across groups, explored the possibility of organization members exhibiting different identification profiles. Their analysis found that members’ network position, members’ use of discursive resources, and members’ experience of identity seemed to affect how members identified with multiple social groups. Kuhn and Nelson (2002) further suggested that boundary spanners, who typically occupied several roles, may exhibit different identification profiles. In short, their study hinted at a possibility of how boundary spanning work roles might affect identity and identification processes. Similarly Fairhurst, Cooren, and Cahill (2002) mentioned boundary spanners in connection with their study of downsizing. In their study, Fairhurst, Cooren, and Cahill (2002) explored the idea that contradictory expectations explained why organizations
performed in contradictory ways. Their research examined several internal organizational contradictions over missions, values, job expectations, and resources, and showed that an organization’s management yielded contradictory solutions and unintended consequences. They concluded through a contradiction-centered view of organizations, that organizational members constructed the oppositions as organizational realities through the situated discourse. In their implications, they suggested that managers in their research who acted as boundary spanners were in a better position to see the unintended consequences of a group’s actions because they generally were less ideologically bound. They suggested the value of such less ideologically bound agents in environment and counted them as useful members. Zoller (2004) made a strong case for critically examining inter-organizational communication discourse in the context of government-business dialogue and found that boundary spanning played an important role in the process. Using the Transatlantic Business Dialogue (TABD) as a case in point, Zoller (2004) showed that TABD strategically exploited various meanings of boundary spanning dialogue that promoted and legitimized a hegemonic role. Critical examination of boundary spanning communication at a macro level in this study revealed that TABD excluded multiple viewpoints from public dialogue about trade and business policies.

Overall, research on boundary spanning in organizational communication seemed to overcome some limitations of the management research. Unlike management, organizational communication research generally has taken a constitutive view of communication. In most of the studies above, researchers saw actors as nonrational and acknowledged the role of power in the boundary spanning context, and approached the
research setting through an interpretive perspective. It is also perhaps because of this that
issues of conflict and power emerged strongly as it related to boundary spanning
function.

**Shortcoming in organizational communication literature.**

There are, however, a few limitations to extant organizational communication
literature as well. First, although there are few exceptions (Finet, 1993; Harter & Krone,
2001), boundary spanning is seldom the sole empirical focus of research studies in
organizational communication. Generally, boundary spanning is seen to emerge as an
ancillary phenomenon, typically recommended for future investigation. Second, because
of this epiphenomenological nature of boundary spanning similar to management
research, no research study in organizational communication literature was found to have
focused on boundary spanners specifically, asking questions about meaning making,
tensions, voice, and identity as experienced from the boundary spanner’s perspective. For
example, Zoller’s (2004) examination of inter-organizational communication between the
USA and European business agencies was largely rhetorical in nature and did not take
into account organizational members’ interpretations of events at TABD meetings. The
next step in furthering Zoller’s (2004) research would be to examine the process of
boundary spanning communication as experienced by actors involved in the organizing
of the TABD dialogue. Privileging their (TABD actors’) organizational worldview is
likely to bring new insights that will further our understanding of some of the reasons of
the outcome of the TABD dialogue Zoller (2004). As an exception, Harter and Krone’s
(2001) study did partly address participants’ viewpoints, but more so in a directly
entrusted group context, and looked at actors as independent decision makers in complex formal work relationships. Third, pertaining specifically to boundary spanning communication, based on extant review, organizational communication scholars tend to operate with the assumption of treating environment and organizations as separate. This further infuses some of the same managerial assumptions, although to a much lesser degree, in research studies that hint at boundary spanning in communication, (i.e., the active process of construction of boundaries and infusing them with meanings is largely ignored).

In order to overcome some of these limitations, boundary spanning should be the central focus and worldviews of organizational actors must be privileged. Such interpretive approaches are likely to yield a better understanding of the contextual nature of boundary spanning communication. As it can be learned from the case of TABD, issues of dialectics, voice, and identity in boundary spanning communication are important mainly for two reasons. First, boundary spanners in the capacity of business representatives, public relations professionals, communication executives, community relations officers, etc hold influential positions across organizations to shape public opinion. Second, boundary spanners’ bias towards a particular subject or a problem directly affects the communicative strategies and choices they make on behalf of their organization. This in turn has consequences for other stakeholders and the public at large, as can be seen in the case of TABD (see, Zoller, 2004). Overall, it can be said that the discussion on boundary spanning in recent organizational communication literature is
heavily under-represented and under-researched, as it pertains to boundary spanning and understanding the role of communication.

The public relations context seems to provide a unique opportunity to study boundary spanning work. Below, I review extant literature in public relations, and make a case that complex boundary spanning in the public relations context is understudied from an interpretive and social constructionist perspective, and needs a closer examination.

**Boundary spanning function in public relations.**

Public relations and private business enterprises have had a long history of close ties that extend into academic research, especially due to the practice oriented work of public relations (Olasky, 1985). Because of this reason, the majority of public relations research on boundary spanning has been influenced and replicated from management literature, with alterations and extensions to public relations practices. Below I will examine the evolution of boundary spanning in public relations and its connection with the contemporary view of communication in greater detail.

During the mid 1980s, the development of issues management framework in public relations research created the theoretical base for importing the concept of the boundary spanning function from management to public relations work. Two issues management frameworks used were based on systems theory and conceptualized boundary spanning activity, in terms of information gathering and representation. The first framework was developed by Nelson and Heath (1986) where they conceptualized issues management as having four important elements: external input, internal input, throughput, and a strategic planning output. The second framework was developed a
decade later by Lauzen and Dozier’s (1995). Their research defined issues management as the process that allowed organizations to “know, understand, and interact effectively with their environments” (p.163), (see also, Lauzen, 1995). The two frameworks grounded in the systems approach were very similar to how management scholars conceptualized the boundary spanning function. However, the broader shift in boundary spanning research in public relations area has occurred because of the two issues management frameworks. The two frameworks have been responsible to shift focus from issues of general management, to the management of the communication in boundary spanning. Thus, the two issues management frameworks discussed above have typically focused on the role of communication function performed by public relations practitioners. This line of boundary spanning research in public relations has historically emphasized the central role of communication to the boundary spanning function. Thus, Nelson and Heath (1986) and Lauzen and Dozier’s (1994) research that took a systems approach, created the much needed theoretical base for connecting the boundary spanning function in a managerial capacity to public relations practice.

Public relations practitioners borrowed many of their concepts about boundary spanning from management scholars and adapted to the practice of public relations work. For example, public relations scholars Springston and Leichty (1994) took existing measures of boundary spanning from organizational behavior literature and applied it to public relations practice. They found six boundary spanning factors that related to the public relations function: image maintenance, gate keeping, processing of important information, training, and collaborative public relations. Springston and Leichty (1994)
also found that these six measures positively and significantly correlated with earlier research on public relations roles that classified practitioners as expert prescribers, communication facilitators, and problem-solving process facilitators (Broom & Smith, 1979). Grunig and Grunig (1992) defined public relations professionals as boundary spanners who had contact with both internal and external groups. Researchers in public relations were in agreement that public relations professionals as boundary spanners performed dual roles. These dual roles of information gathering and representation helped public relations professionals to achieve their main goal of clarifying perceptions, thoughts, and needs of different groups towards each other. Research has suggested that in order to achieve this, public relations professionals assumed the role of communicators and facilitators (Broom & Smith, 1979; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). In performing communication and facilitation, they engaged in an intense amount of information gathering and representation simultaneously.

Research by Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) further segmented the public relations work based on previous boundary spanning research, similar to that of technician and manager. They claimed that technicians mainly engaged in task oriented public relations work, while managers engaged more in the strategic and planning process. This classification was very similar to segmenting the boundary spanning function into information and representation in management literature. It considered information gathering primarily technical in nature, while representation involved a more strategic focus. Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) also suggested that it was the distinction between the manager and technician role that typically distinguished excellent
from less excellent public relations departments. In subsequent research, scholars have emphasized that communication activities performed by public relations professionals were fundamentally related to boundary spanning work performed by professionals in marketing, sales, and advertising. However, public relations has been considered different because it involves a heavy amount of both information gathering and representation work. For example, some scholars have argued that in fields, such as medicine, the role of the Public Information Officer (PIO) or community relations manager is crucial in performing boundary spanning communication work between the experts, media, and the community in general (Lariscy, Avery, & Sohn, 2010). It primarily has consisted of information gathering and representation, which involves a high degree of communication and coordination with different units and constituents. Thus, individuals fulfilling the essential function of information gathering and representation, tended to be public relations professionals who acted as interpreters between the management of an organization and the stakeholders (Jemison, 1984).

**Conditions for role conflict.**

Based on the common theoretical underpinnings of systems theory and the focus on the management of communication function, public relations scholars have been able to explore the links between public relations and boundary spanning roles. In doing so, most public relations scholars have borrowed the concept of boundary spanning from management scholars, and adapted it to public relations practice (Ankley & Curtin 2002; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The rise of public relations practice has spurred further research focusing on the connection between boundary spanning and public relations roles.
Subsequent research on professionals working in public relations agencies and corporate communications departments of companies has suggested that public relations professionals act as key boundary spanners. Their role in organizations has been viewed as crucial, relational, and complex but filled with stress and role conflict. Some of the role conflict that has emerged in the public relations came from the question: What do public relations professionals really do? There have been multiple answers to this question based on the evolution of public relations and each scholar’s (and organization’s) outlook on communication. On the whole, scholars broadly have agreed that the two core functions of information gathering and representation constitute a large part of public relations professionals’ work (Aldrich, 1979), and thus public relations was a distinct type of boundary spanning work, riddled with unique complexities. Below I will review the historical beginning of role conflict research in public relations and then move on to explore some of the relationships that seem to be responsible for stress and conflict in the public relations workplace.

Similar to management research, initial research on public relations as boundary spanning began with analyzing and surveying the roles of public relations practitioners. In a survey of 62 public affairs managers publicly held in U.S. corporations, Mattingly (2007) found that boundary spanning was related to many organizational factors such as industry regulation, type of company, internal reporting, etc. Mattingly’s (2007) research found that managers attributed power and legitimacy to stakeholders, and reported that their organizations needed to cooperate with stakeholders because unhealthy relationships with stakeholder groups could be detrimental to their organization's long-term prospects.
Thus, managers seemed to recognize stakeholders and public interest organizations as potent and legitimate potential allies and tried to build and maintain good relationships with them. Empirical results from his research suggested that organizations adopted four relational styles of communication that included avoidance, compliance, co-optation, and negotiation. These relational styles were strongly affected by the cooperativeness of the organization and the boundary spanning activity performed by boundary spanners. For example, Public Information Officers (PIOs) traditionally have served as a conduit between an organization’s communication efforts and the media, which involves significant relationship building. Ankley and Curtin (2002) in their study claimed that editors of newspapers and doctors both agreed PIOs fulfilled a critical boundary spanning role. Similar to medical PIOs, other community relations managers, media relations managers, etc were charged with not only passing information, but bringing groups together and creating trusting relationships with other members of the public. Thus, a boundary spanner representing an organization played a crucial role in organizing and interpreting an organization’s action to the public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) and interpreting the actions of the public to the management.

This broader recognition by corporations about the importance of external stakeholders seemed to put further emphasis on the relational nature of the boundary spanning function in organizations. In short, public relations professionals as boundary spanners engaged in the broader exercise of building and maintaining mutually trustful relationships between organizations and stakeholders. With the immense growth of public relations practice and the increasing emphasis and expectation on building
relationships with stakeholders (Toth, 2007), the stress and role conflict in public relations practice has only increased over the years. The boundary spanning work of public relations has become much more complex in the past three decades. And most extant literature does not acknowledge this change.

Within this broader framework of a push for building trusting relationships, news media has been seen by public relations practitioners as a key way to influence and communicate with other stakeholders. These relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists have been studied under the source-reporter relationship literature in public relations (Belz, Talbott, & Stark, 1989). Traditionally public relations professionals have acted as the official source of news and information for journalists. Research has found the source-reporter relationship to be a mixed relationship with elements of both mutual dependency and mutual mistrust (Shin & Cameron, 2005). The It is termed as mutual dependency because reporters depended on public relations professionals for much of their news and access to key executives, while public relations professionals depended on reporters and journalists to write positively about their organizations (Shin & Cameron, 2005). Previous research also found the presence of misunderstanding, discord, and perceived conflict between public relations practitioners and journalists (Gandy, 1982; Kopenhaver, 1985; Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield, & Cropp, 1993). It has been claimed as a common occurrence and as part of the routine of public relations work, but reasons for such misunderstanding, discord, and perceived conflicts have been merely speculated and not thoroughly investigated (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997). Majority of previous studies on source-reporter relationships have also tended to
focus on the ethical dimensions that tend to vilify public relations professionals (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Shin & Cameron, 2005). Further, they assume journalists as neutral players in the pursuit of truth, credibility, and objectivity (Belz, Talbott, & Stark, 1989; Ryan & Martinson, 1984; Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998; Shin & Cameron, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005). Thus, the relationship between public relations professionals and news media clearly has focused on issues of mistrust, but empirical research seldom gets at the complexities of such mistrust.

Beyond the media however, the role of public relations professionals has been constantly changing and evolving in complex ways. Bunnel (2006) studied the diverse role and work of public relations practitioners in international schools, and found that practitioners’ roles seemed to be prone to change quickly. In her study, Bunnel (2006) observed that most practitioners seemed to work in informal, isolationist, and highly individualistic workplaces; they faced great internal work stress in the form of overwork, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Plus, she also found that the personality of the individual practitioners affected how one handled conflict and tension in the workplace (Bunnel, 2005). However, her study merely proved the presence and likely connection of stress to the public relations workplace, but did not research the kind of tensions and how public relations professionals experienced and handled such stress emanating from such tensions.

Further, internal relationships with supervisors and clients have also been linked to role stress and tension. Literature analyzing the public relations workplace has traditionally focused on the agency-client relationship. Sung (2003) found that public
relations professionals go to great lengths to maintain good relationships with individual clients in order to retain them. Bruning and Ledingham (2002) studied communication behaviors and interaction patterns of agency-client relationships from a developmental standpoint. Their research suggested that client-agency relationships go through five stages, marked by development and decline. The phases of development included: introductory phase, exploration phase, escalating phase, assimilating phase, and fidelity phase. While phases of decline included: contrasting phase, spiraling phase, idling phase, evading phase, and discontinuance phase. Within these phases conflicts and dilemmas typically marked the declining stage of a relationship, which was observed by participants physically and emotionally withdrawing from the situation.

However, much research to date on public relations has not addressed the individual perspective, of the public relations professionals. Much like Bruning and Ledingham’s (2002) research, other boundary spanning research on public relations has not seemed to address why and how boundary spanners experience and negotiate with role conflict. Berger (2005) has even contended that power relations in the workplace affect much of public relations work. He noted that some public relations managers found themselves severely constrained in their attempts by what they could and could not do in organizations because of existing power relations in organizations. Again, the research seems to have not addressed in detail the real complexities of the boundary spanning role of public relations practitioners.
Complex process filled with tensions.

To better understand the overwhelming evidence of the connection between stress and role conflict in public relations work and boundary spanning, an examination of the broader institutional view of public relations as boundary spanning work is important. Specifically, the dominance of the prevalent definitions of public relations as a management function needs to be more carefully examined, and understood from the perspective of academic scholars and practitioners alike. For example, Kingsley (1971) alluded to the fact that many managers and practitioners in organizations think of public relations professionals as having an essential task of neutralizing or eliminating voices of dissent. According to him, this “constant emphasis on the objective of neutralizing critical opinion opens the practitioner to attacks from elements in the community who, among other motives, apparently resent competition in the field of ideas” (p.18). More recently scholars, such as Curtin and Gaither (2005) have noted that the dominant and normative definition of public relations as a management function has led to much theory building that has been driven by corporate goals, strategic planning, and a managerial bias (Botan, 1992; Holtzhausen, 2002; Hutton, 1999; L’Etang & Pieczka, 1996). On the other hand, many in the profession have expressed their belief that public relations in reality fulfills an important role of giving voice and legitimacy to organizations in today’s competitive, globalized, and mediated society. Berger (2005) has even suggested that the existing roles of technician and manager were not enough and that public relations needed a third role, that of an activist. He argued that public relations professionals were in a conundrum because of the dualistic assumptions of technician-manager roles and that
they “must go beyond advocacy of doing the right thing to carrying out actions and to support and supplement advocacy in the organization and larger social system” (p. 24). However, some scholars have argued that this is an ideological position that is not accepted and shared by all public relations professionals, and only expresses a speculative view of a public relations professional’s viewpoint without much empirical support (Hoffmann, Rottger, & Jarren, 2007).

Taking on this activist role as suggested by Berger (2005) can be extremely difficult (Hoffmann, Rottger, & Jarren, 2007). In a compelling case study, Shwom, Hirsch, and Messick (1998) talked about Rae Severns, a female account executive with a public relations firm. Rae Severns handled the State Chamber of Commerce as a client and had an excellent working relationship with the Chamber’s management. At one point in time, the State Chamber of Commerce wanted to run a campaign opposing two bills that mandated employers to provide additional health insurance benefits, and cover pregnancy costs for employees. Rae’s boss asked her to help the State Chamber of Commerce with its campaign, in spite of her personal disagreement with the Chamber’s stance. As a professional, Rae could not separate her work from politics. As a boundary spanner she did not want to use her expertise for the State Chamber of Commerce’s agenda because she personally disagreed with its actions, but at the same time she did not want to jeopardize her job and promotion by disagreeing with her boss and possibly being fired. In the case of Rae, there was a clear conflict between self interests and organizational interests. Rae is just one example of how the work life of a public relations professional as a boundary spanner can be filled with conflicts of interests, paradoxes,
dualities, tensions, and contradictions. This example illustrates the complexity of role conflict experienced by public relations professionals, i.e., working in the interest of an employer versus the larger public good. Martinson (1995) has also alluded to an ethical dilemma faced by public relations professionals, i.e., of siding with one’s client or with what is good for the public. A further conflict of interests that is associated with this is how one remains a good employee by simultaneously being critical of one’s employer and the clients. Krider and Ross (1997) studied the work life of seven women from a major Midwestern public relations firm and found evidence of significant role conflict and stress. They found that women’s expectations and behaviors in the workplace were negatively affected by the influence and representation functions of the boundary spanning work. This in addition to work-family priorities, created internal role conflict. Krider and Ross (1997) argued that although information gathering and representation seem to appear unique and mutually exclusive, they are tightly woven which creates a unique work role and experience. Thus, societal expectations, family expectations, and work expectations combined together to create great internal conflict for female boundary spanners. It is precisely this experience and voice of public relations professionals that seems to be lost in much research in the field of public relations, and the majority of other boundary spanning roles research.

**Need for critical examination.**

Some scholars have taken on the view that not only should we take into account individual perspectives and experiences of boundary spanners, but public relations practice should be looked at critically (Banks, 1999; Coopman, 2003). Most public
relations professionals or corporate communications professionals (boundary spanners) fulfilling the information and representative function exert significant power over the accuracy of information, and affect the overall portrayal of meaning to the public on various key issues that influence social, economic, and legal spheres. Thus, public relations professionals and corporate communication executives, as one type of boundary spanners, potentially could perpetuate a bias either through misinformation, limited worldview, or self interests. The communicative choices of these individuals have direct influence on the larger public and society, and it merits systematic research by organizational communication scholars privileging their lived experience. Their unique experience might affect many areas of social life, such as when dealing with disabled employees, handling critical resources in the organizing process, dealing with sensitive environmental and community issues, etc. (Banks, 1999; Coopman, 2003). According to Pieczka (1996) existing research on public relations workplaces has an undue emphasis on identifying practitioner roles that need to be part of the dominant coalition or aligned with organizational culture. In short, the claim of “empirical-administrative bias” (p. 8) in public relations work needs to be further understood and investigated. The term was coined due to its grounding in positivism and capitalism, and scholars have argued that it puts limits on alternative theorizing of communication in public relations (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Lindenmann, 2003).

Further, theorists such as Boton (1992) have suggested that most contemporary definitions of public relations privilege theory as practiced in highly developed nations with robust economies over alternative forms practiced in less developed regions.
Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) mentioned that an excessive focus on the economic perspective in public relations has led to an immense amount of academic research that is confined to a small number of developed nations. Pearson (1990) supported this claim by suggesting that a one dimensional model based on corporate practice operating within democratic nations has been privileged in a way that ignores the rich history of public relations as an ancient, worldwide practice in diverse cultures (L’Etang, 1996). And according to Duffy (2000) this further “excludes competing, marginalized, critical, or oppressed voices” (p. 312). In short, it is scholars that have argued for a critical examination of public relations work, have framed this discussion in the context of Western versus nonwestern perspectives. However I argue this discussion ignores the possibility that competing, marginalized, critical, or oppressed voices in public relations might exist in the Western context, in Western countries. Since much of the previous literature in public relations does not typically privilege the participants’ perspective, it is premature to make such claims. Plus, as a public relations professional and a boundary spanner who has worked within a Western economic model of public relations, I often found my critical voice to be muted, marginalized, or oppressed.

In sum, the assumption that literature on boundary spanning from a Western perspective forms a monolithic entity is problematic, and in fact fails to acknowledge the existence and diversity of alternative voices within the Western practice of public relations. Thus, a closer examination of these voices within the Western context is the first step towards verifying the argument made by Sriramesh and Vercic (2004) and Pearson (1990). In short, if public relations theory and subsequent boundary spanning
communication is to develop and prosper, we need different and robust ways of theorizing from within and outside of public relations practice, both Western and nonwestern.

*Shortcomings in public relations literature.*

In short, four issues seem to be evident based on this review. First, public relations research as boundary spanning work is scanty and restricted to post-positivistic tendencies. Second, research on public relations that framed it as part of the boundary spanning function, sees communication as an epiphenomenon. Communication is seen with a narrow exclusive focus on the transmission model that limits the dialogic, and deemphasizes the meaning making aspect of communication. This limitation particularly stems from the assumption that environment and organization are separate entities and communication needs to be transmitted from one to the other. Third, although a steady progression and acknowledgment of the political nature of public relations work can be observed, much literature still sees public relations professionals as rational actors who merely react to the environment and workplace conditions. Fourth, boarder issues about privileging participant perspectives, experiences, and emotions in public relations work seem to be almost nonexistent. Therefore, there is a strong need for privileging the perspective of the public relations professionals because their unique work experiences filled with tensions and contradictions will add substantially to our understanding of public relations and boundary spanning roles.
Summary.

Literature on boundary spanning in management, organizational communication, and public relations seems to have an intricately complex process, and much of the variable analytic approach simply glosses over. Another issue is that much of the management and public relations literature takes on a privileged position of an expert researcher imposing his/her priori assumptions on participants. This has resulted in a skewed understanding of boundary spanning that suppresses the participants’ perspective, largely ignoring questions of meaning making, tensions, voice, and identity as experienced by boundary spanners in their own work context. I suggest that as organizations become embedded in the larger global political economies, we as organizational communication scholars should acknowledge permeable boundaries of organizations and privilege critical analysis, multiple voices, and multiple rationalities. Keeping with the interpretive, critical-cultural tradition of organizational communication, the boundary spanning function and the role of communication can be further problematized for the benefit of scholars, boundary spanners, and the public in at least three ways.

First, based on the review of research in management most research to date has emphasized managerial and rationalistic models of communication. Further, most research on boundary spanning in management has relied on the heavy use of systematized variable analytic research procedures that further reinforce these assumptions of rational actors and the separation of the actor from the environment. Second, review of the research in organizational communication indicates that boundary
spanning communication has largely been treated as a secondary phenomenon; with a few exceptions, it has tended to not be the main focus of empirical research. Third, review of the research in public relations has suggested a steady acknowledgement of the role of communication in the boundary spanning function, but is still largely based on rationalistic, technical, and linear views of communication.

To summarize, my goal for this research is to advance our understanding of public relations work, which is a type of boundary spanning work that involves a high amount of information gathering and representation. Overall, it appears that uncertainty, role conflict, and stress have been found to be strongly associated with the boundary spanning function in management, contemporary organizational communication and public relations literature. These have been the subjects of research for more than three decades, but researchers thus far have approached the topic of the boundary spanning function and its connection to uncertainty, role conflict, and resulting stress with a unitary variable analytic perspective. Due to this monolithic epistemological approach, the relationships between these variables and its underlying causes have been too complex to uncover and have been deferred to future research. Based on our discussion of extant literature, it can be seen that public relations work is filled with complexities that result in tensions and contradictions, that seem to be related to uncertainty, role conflict, and stress.

In short, the underlying process of structure, agency, identity, and power in public relations needs to be examined to advance our understanding of existing research on boundary spanning in the context of public relations workplaces. In fact, Hoffmann, Rottger, and Jarren (2006) have argued that public relations is actually a response to the
challenges of a highly diversified and interconnected society, and understanding public relations as the management of interdependences within and for organizations requires a balance among professional identity, organizational alignments, and structural openness.

But the existing unitary, variable analytic definition of boundary spanning does not allow us to engage these types of issues in a meaningful way. To address this gap and to advance this line of research, first a suitable definition of boundary spanning is needed. Previous definitions (e.g. Aldrich, 1979; Finet, 1993) of boundary spanning are inherently problematic for reasons outlined in the literature review so far. Based on the purpose of this research, there is a need for a clear and coherent definition of boundary spanning that puts emphasis on the organizing of boundary spanning phenomenon; a definition that sees boundaries as social constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) achieved and maintained through communicative accomplishments without assuming the dichotomy of the organizational actor and the environment. Therefore, I propose a new definition that addresses several of these problems pointed out in previous literature on boundary spanning.

**Discursive Theorizing**

Traditionally, boundaries of an organization have been defined by membership in organizations or bona fide groups. Substantiated by our previous discussion and review, much of the traditional research in management and organizational communication has studied membership as a preexisting, necessary, and sufficient condition within which to study boundary spanning activities of organizational actors (see, for example, Cejda & McKenney, 2000; Smart, Brookes, Lettice, Backhouse, & Burns, 2002).
However, I argue that membership is only one of the conditions through which actors conceptualize the boundaries of their roles and organization. Research has shown that membership of organizations has largely depended on the perception of organizational actors (Masterson & Stamper, 2003). Masterson and Stamper (2003) provided an integrative model where they argued that perceived organizational membership reflected employees’ perceptions of their relationship with their employing organization. Need fulfillment, mattering, and belonging were three main motivators that played an important role in forming actors’ perception of organizational membership. Although a relatively helpful model, the Masterson and Stamper (2003) approach to organizational membership from a psycho-social perspective failed to fully capture the relational nature of membership. Thus, their model is not only heavily psycho-social with emphasis on the individual, but also partial in terms of the complexity of relational attributes.

In sum, from an organizational communication point of view, boundaries have not been clearly defined as pointed out earlier, and in more practical terms ownership and legal definitions of organizations have been the defining basis for boundaries of an organization (see, for example, Alexander, 1997). Further, I contend that the definition of boundaries is ever changing, since it is fundamentally an interpretive process where organizational actors engage with each other to create the “meaning” of boundary spanning work, which in the case of public relations professionals is acting as a bridge between two parties.
The above discussed limitations in conceptualizing boundary spanning in existing literature pose severe limitations on alternative ways of thinking about boundary spanning and communication. To put it in a broader context, extant review of literature has suggested that communication in the context of boundary spanning has been approached with a structural functional approach. This approach has many variants, including two opposing views (Giddens, 1984). The first view has focused on the importance of social structures and argued that structures give our lives shape and guide our actions in families, the workplaces, and other social settings. The opposite view has focused on the idea that it is impossible to explain the emergence of structures from functions in a coherent manner.

Most research on boundary spanning in management and public relations has preferred either the structural or functional view; while research studies in organizational communication have attempted to take a more balanced approach by avoiding extreme positions. Marino, Nekrassova, and Russ (2006) confirmed this tendency when they performed a semantic analysis of 341 research articles published in major organizational communication journals in the previous ten years. They discovered 12 themes, the top three of which were structure, implications, and management, and themes such as identity, culture, and health were at the bottom of the list. In short, extant research reviewed for the purposes of this research seems to have shown signs of a either a structural or functional approach without thoroughly examining participants’ experiences of boundary spanning work in the public relations work setting. Most studies in management have been preoccupied with structural characteristics of communication,
while studies in public relations have been preoccupied with theorizing boundary spanning communication as a function of the organization.

Additionally, the role of communication within the boundary spanning context has been largely conceived within the framework of these structuralist and functionalist tendencies and not viewed as a central constitutive process. Contemporary organizational communication has yet to theorize boundary spanning to make it suitable to align with the constitutive view of communication, i.e., as an organizing process. Broader trends in management, organizational communication, and public relations have compelled researchers to move away from these tendencies. For example, management scholars have started taking a more humanistic approach to managerial research. Public relations researchers have slowly begun to move from a mass communication orientation to a more interpersonal orientation (Toth, 2007). Organizational communication scholars have also begun to take a more critical approach that focuses on engaged scholarship. These trends allow scholars to ask different types of questions about boundary spanning, including: How do we redefine boundary spanning in such a way that it will make a difference and simultaneously address some of the theoretical problems facing organizational communication (see, Frey, 2009)? My response to the above question is to theorize boundary spanning communication in such a way that communication becomes the constitutive force through which we can understand boundary spanning. This enterprise then needs a reformulation of the definition of the term boundary spanning such that it avoids the biases in literature that have been so far perpetuated with the dichotomization of the organization and the environment. Further, the work of boundary spanning should
be fore grounded so that the constitutive communicative processes can be examined further.

In my view, boundary spanning work then is the communicative organizing of discursive constructions for (de)legitimacy of boundaries. This definition puts emphasis on the process of communicative organizing and casts boundary spanning as a type of work accomplished through the communicative organizing of discursive constructions for (de)legitimacy of boundaries. In short, this definition does not treat boundary spanning merely as a function involving information gathering and representation. This definition particularly has five advantages. First, it removes the forced dichotomy and separation between the organization and its environment. Second, it places communication as a constitutive force within a particular research setting by emphasizing the discursive nature of the phenomenon. Third, it focuses the organizing processes by treating communication as internal to organizing. Fourth, it allows researchers to focus on the micro (interpersonal) and the macro (structural) simultaneously. Fifth, it conveys a more realistic and experiential sense of the organizational work and communication, including legitimization and delegitimzation.

Boundary spanning communication here is conceptualized as a site or a field of experience that is discursively brought into being by organizational actor(s). Levina and Vaast (2005) used the term field for a similar conceptualization of boundary spanning based on Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (1992) work on the theorizing of practice and their concepts of habitus, field, and doxa. However, their theorizing of boundary spanning is overly limited by the context of information systems used in organizations and suffers
from limitations similar to the managerial literature reviewed earlier. Their heavy
dependence on “boundary objects” as tangible objects and products of information
systems design is highly restrictive. Their use of the word field also puts undue emphasis
on the separation of actors from the field. Thus, I prefer to use the word site to broadly
mean a discursive space created and/or existing for the possibility of boundary spanning
communication in a particular context.

The definition proposed above can help us explore alternative perspectives on
boundary spanning work that allows us to focus on the processes of meaning making,
tensions, voice, and identity as experienced by organizational actors while performing
boundary spanning work. This alternative definition of boundary spanning attempts to be
more inclusive, nonmarginalized, and attempts to bring multiple voices into the
foreground, including those of the boundary spanners in the practice and theorizing of
public relations work, unlike the traditional definition. With the proposed discursive
boundary spanning definition I make a case for a tension-centered perspective on
organizational life to study boundary spanning work of public relations professionals that
further accentuates the rationale for this study.

A tension-centered perspective on organizational life.

Trethway and Ashcraft (2004) contended that a tension-centered approach begins
with the premise that organizations are conflicted sites of human activity and
accordingly, foregrounding tension can lead to a richer understanding of actual practice
and thereby aid in theory building. Thus, in the context of boundary spanning work,
organizational tensions are not simply ruptures, anomalies, products, or processes that
distinguish modern organizations, but instead paradoxes and contradictions are assumed to be routine features of organizational life that attest to the fundamental irrationality of organizing. Trethway and Ashcraft (2004) further articulated both the growing necessity and the reason to neglect studying paradox and tension in organizations as follows:

As organizational environments become more complex and turbulent, and as diverse institutional forms merge and emerge, organizations and their members are pulled or are purposefully moving in different, often competing directions. Of course, while current conditions seem to intensify conflicting pressures, paradox, contradiction, and irony have long been a part of organizational experience—a point obscured by enduring myths of rationality and order that shape the prevalent logics of organization theory and practice. (p. 81)

In consolidating research on tensions and dilemmas in organizational communication, Stohl and Cheney (2001) defined five concepts: tension, contradiction, paradox, double bind, and irony. They used the term tension in the broadest sense to refer simply to a clash of ideas or principles or actions through which discomfort may arise. For example, “How can I be a good father and a good CEO at the same time?” By using contradiction Stohl and Cheney (2001) intended to identify situations in which one idea, principle, or action is in direct opposition to another. One example of this opposition, as mentioned by the authors, would be when an organization that operates on the principle of “equal pay for equal work, for all,” asks its employees to work without pay. The term paradox has been used in the sense of a pragmatic or interaction-based situation in which, “in the pursuit of one goal, the pursuit of another competing goal enters the situation
(often without intention) so as to undermine the first pursuit” (p. 354). Thus, for example, according to the authors, employees who value democratic workplace principles end up re-electing a very authoritarian boss who slowly but significantly changes norms, values and basic principles, and the nature of interactions within the organization, thus making the organization undemocratic. The word double bind was used to refer to situations wherein a primary and a secondary injunction conflicted directly with one another. For example, “If you want to be employed here, being serious about your work all the time is very important. However, at the same time I want you to have fun while you are working here” (p. 345). In this example, due to the presence of a tertiary injunction (either explicitly or implicitly), the person cannot exit the situation. Finally, Stohl and Cheney (2001) defined irony as a literary and rhetorical trope that refers to a stance toward paradoxes. This distinction between tension, contradiction, paradox, double bind, and irony further helps to discriminate between the subtle experiences of organizational actors.

However, studies that take a tension-centered perspective have not adhered to the strict definitions advocated by Stohl and Cheney (2001), primarily because tensions, contradictions, paradoxes, double binds, and ironies tend to be very contextual. Separating one from the other could be problematic because of the subjective experiences. It is observed that in research studies terms such as duality, paradox, and tension have been associated with describing situations that exhibit contradictions, dialectics, and oppositions in participant experiences. For example, Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabring, and Townsend (2008) substantiated this argument and claimed that the
difference between duality, paradox, and tension is not entirely clear “since these terms refer to the oppositional forces that are typically manifested in a conflict of perspectives, values, or actions” (p. 365). For the purpose of this research, however, terms such as paradox and contradiction need to be discussed and elaborated in detail because a large amount of research has used these terms with varying degree of agreement. In short, extant literature is not clear on the precise definition of the terms that have been used to characterize tensions, but paradox and dialectics generally subsume terms such as contradiction, double binds, and dualities, etc.

**Paradox.**

The term *paradox* came from the Greek words “*para+dokein*, which means to think twice; to reconcile two apparently conflicting views (Krippendorff, 1982; Stohl & Cheney; 2001, p. 214). According to the Oxford English Dictionary (Pearsall & Trumbull, 2002), paradox can be defined in at least three distinct ways. In our general understanding, paradox is something that is contrary to opinion or belief, especially one that is difficult to believe. In rhetorical tradition, it is a figure of speech that runs contrary to what an audience expects. In logic, paradox is defined as “an argument, based on (apparently) acceptable premises and using (apparently) valid reasoning, which leads to a conclusion that is against sense, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory…”(Pearsall & Trumbull, 2002, p. 327). Social paradoxes are another general category of paradoxes that are experienced in social life and are the result of interaction between the three layers of meanings of the term paradox outlined above (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Research on social paradoxes has grown in the past decade in organizational, interpersonal, health,
and even broad institutional and political contexts across disciplines (see, for example, Cronin, 2001; Duvall & Varadarajan, 2007; Lado, Boyd, Wright, & Kroll, 2006; McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006).

Poole and Van de Ven (1989) suggested that social paradoxes can be theoretically conceptualized in four ways based on arrangement, i.e., in opposition, spatial separation, temporal separation, and synthesis. These criteria have since been an integral part of many research studies that have investigated paradoxes and tensions. For example, Cronin (2001) examined paradoxes to analyze the relationship of two global institutions, the United States of America and the United Nations by conceptually arranging them in opposition and synthesis. He claimed that international organizations helped facilitate the development of hegemonic institutions, and the expansion of hegemonic world orders created inherent tensions and paradoxes. In his study, Cronin (2001) contended that conflicting expectations attached to international leadership created conflicting pressures in the diplomatic relationship between the United States of America and the United Nations. Applying the study of paradoxes and dialectical tensions to the health care setting McGuire, Dougherty, and Atkinson (2006) studied the dynamics of dialectics and paradoxes in nurses’ responses to sexual harassment by their patients. They conceptualized paradoxes based on opposition, spatial separation, and synthesis because they found that nurses distanced themselves from their patients, which in turn was in direct opposition to their care giving role and expectation of being close to the patients. Sools, Van Engen, and Baerveldt (2007) further examined paradoxes experienced by women in multinational firms who claimed to be ambitious. They found that women did
not relate ambition to working long hours on their own case, but interpreted other women working overtime as highly ambitious. Thus, many paradoxes in organizations were a result of role conflicts, for example, when individuals received incongruent messages about job expectations (McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006; Putnam 1986).

Barnard (1968) suggested that the complex settings of an organization made individuals compete, which made conflict unavoidable. If one is to truly understand these conflicts, the first step according to Barnard (1968) is to generate greater understanding concerning the individuals and persons experiencing these conflicts. Barnard (1968) claimed that “without such a preliminary survey, it is quite certain that there will be unnecessary obscurity and unsuspended misunderstandings” (p.9). Thus, Barnard (1968) emphasized a need to study the person or the individual actor first in order to truly understand conflicts that emerge in organizations.

Over the years, select groups of scholars have attempted to study participants’ perspectives as experienced by organizational actors. One of the earliest studies that took an interpretive approach to tensions experienced by professional women was conducted by Wood and Conrad (1983). The authors extricated six recurrent paradoxes that arose out of formal and informal organizational structures. These were paradoxes related to: powerlessness, marginality and minority, self definition, affirmative action, training programs and networks, and mentoring relationships. Wood and Conrad (1983) found that “each is potentially double-binding since it defines a professional woman in ways that ensure that accepting one aspect of her identity necessitates rejecting another aspect.” (p. 308). Further, they found evidence that women responded to these tensions by using
strategies of acceptance, counter disqualifications, withdrawal, and reframing. Wood and Conrad’s (1983) findings are echoed in Barnard’s (1969) influential book ‘Functions of the Executive,’ often considered by many as the first book recognizing the centrality of communication to organizations. Barnard (1969) summed up his argument at the end of the book with a list of many paradoxes.

This study without the intent of the writer or perhaps the expectation of the readers, had at its heart this deep paradox and conflict of feelings in the lives of men. Free and unfree, controlling and controlled, choosing and being chosen, including and unable to resist inducement, the source of authority and unable to deny it, independent and dependent, nourishing their personalities, and yet depersonalized; forming purposes and being forced to change them, searching for limitations in order to make decisions, seeking the particular but concerned with the whole, finding leasers and denying leadership, hoping to dominate the earth and being dominated by the unseen- this is the story of man in society told in these pages (p.296) and that the conduct of every man is governed by a private code (p.264).

I contend that it is not surprising that Barnard (1969) saw paradoxes as inherent in the very structuring of organizations because he fundamentally seems to have envisioned a communicative organization (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996).

Like Poole and Van de Ven’s (1989) conceptualization of social paradoxes, Stohl and Cheney (2001) argued that dimensions of structure, agency, identity, and power were also important in the study of paradoxes in the workplace. Still only a handful of studies
have elaborated on the creation and maintenance of such paradoxes in organizations on these dimensions (see, for example, Tracy, 2004). Cronin (2001) claimed that by better conceptualizing paradoxes and resulting tensions we can increase our understanding of perceptions and choices of decision makers in organizations. Some scholars also have advocated that paradoxical thinking can in fact advance our conceptual understanding. Lado, Boyd, Wright, and Kroll (2006) suggested that a paradoxical perspective has the potential to invigorate scholarship and advance understanding and serve as conceptual “tools” that enable us to gain greater understanding of our surrounding world (p.125-126). They suggest that paradoxes are illustrative of a growing trend in organization and management scholarship, as exemplified by other scholars’ work.

Powell (2001) summed up this argument succinctly, “the paradoxical perspective offers an epistemological framework that is better adapted to messy, ill-behaved, complex art and science of strategy research and practice” (Powell, 2001, p. 878). This is much like the boundary spanning work by public relations professionals. However, one issue in researching paradoxes, as with many other research studies, is not being able to distinguish between paradoxes and dialectics. A discussion on dialectics below will be helpful to understand how they are different from paradoxes and why this difference matters to the study of the boundary spanning function and public relations practice.

**Dialectics.**

Although dialectics and paradoxes are often undifferentiated in literature, noticing and acknowledging the subtle difference between the two can help scholars understand the complexity of the boundary spanning function. For example, Barge et al (2008) in
their study of duality in planned changed initiatives treated dialectics as a special type of duality that necessarily involved a contradiction within relationships. In contemporary organizational communication literature, terms such as duality and tensions have been interchangeably and synonymously used for social paradoxes.

However, I think McGuire and Dougherty’s (2005) criteria for differentiating paradoxes and dialectics is noteworthy because it gives a handle to distinguish the two and to advance applied communication scholarship. McGuire and Dougherty (2005) stated that “dialectical tensions tend to promise more agency while paradoxical choices suggest issues of power and control” (p. 37). Although paradoxes involve conflicting forces that are either/or decisions, dialectics allow for the simultaneous presence of such conflicting forces, including choice and negotiation between seemingly negating poles. These two characteristics distinguish dialectics from paradox. Thus, “understanding the relationship of paradoxes and dialectical tensions creates a more richly textured understanding of their impact in a variety of organizations” (McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006, p.417).

Dialectics have entered the realm of communication study primarily through the interpersonal scholarship of Baxter (1988, 1990) and has its roots in the notion of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981). Dialogism broadly has referred to the idea that “social experience” is constituted at the level of communicative exchange, i.e., dialogue between persons. Bakhtin (1981) observed that tensions between unity and difference are at play in all aspects of social life: in the construction of self, in our relationship to societal structures, and in our interplay with others in the social world. For example, Stohl and
Cheney (2001) in their scholarly review of workplace participation and conflict in a proliferating democratic structure in organizations found that some tensions are inherent and affected by the design, procedures, and configuration of the social order in organizations. They took into account (a.) managerially driven programs of participation, such as within the context of quality circles or Total Quality Management (TQM), (b.) organizations constituted by participation (such as worker co-ops), and to some extent (c.) the critiques from organized labor:

A close reading of the empirical work on workplace participation reveals tensions in the communicative practices of participatory and democratic schemes. Some of these tensions may be classified as irony, others as contradictions, and still others as genuine paradoxes, even double binds. In some cases, specific tensions seem inherent in participatory and democratic practices, and in other studies, emergent paradoxes seem to be a function of a particular design, set of procedures, or configuration of social forces (p. 351-352).

More specifically, in their review they focused on particular practices of participation (such as access to policy-making discussions), the ways programs were framed, (i.e., the way democracy or participation is defined in a particular organization; see Cheney, 1995, 1997, 1999), and opportunities for redefinition. Their treatment of employee participation and workplace democracy included examples from a variety of organizations and from diverse cultural milieus (e.g. From New Zealand and the Basque Country of Spain). Stohl and Cheney (2001) concluded “that diversity in institutional structures; and varying understandings of the relationship of the individual to society, startling and important
similarities may be seen in the encounters of paradoxes of participation across situations and cultures” (p. 353). In short, they approached participation as “broad and multiperspectival” (p. 353), and showed how fundamental dilemmas and possibilities may be encountered across different types of organizations despite significant social, political, and religious differences.

It is precisely through this concept of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) that Baxter and Montgomery (1996) built much of their theory of relational dialectics. They wrote that “phenomena are opposites if they are actively incompatible and mutually negate one another definitionally, logically, or functionally” (p.4). Dialectical tensions are primarily opposing or contradictory forces experienced by people in their relationships, such as the simultaneous need for autonomy and interdependence, for open sharing and privacy, and for change and stability (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) suggested that dialectical tensions are not to be resolved through choice, but they actually define the nature of relationships and sustain life of the relationship. Combining the works of Baxter and Montgomery (1996) and Rawlins (1989), it seems that contradiction, change, praxis, and totality form the four principles of dialectical thinking. The first principle has assumed that “contradictions are inherent in social life and not as evidence of failure or inadequacy in a person or a social system” (p. 7). The second principle of change has suggested interplay between our desire as human beings for stability and change within a particular relationship (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). According to Rawlins (1989) the third principle of dialectical thinking, praxis, was our ability to be active and proactive agents of action within relationships. Dialectical thinking has
advocated that “People are actors in giving communicative life to the contradictions that organize their social life, but these contradictions in turn affect their subsequent communicative actions” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14), i.e., decisions taken by human actors in the past constrain as well as enable future decisions and actions. The fourth principle of totality has suggested that dialectical tensions are interdependent with one another, and one phenomenon can only be understood in relation to other phenomena (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Several other types of tension that have been researched in organizational communication literature, include tensions between individual differences and conformity (see, for example, Smith & Berg, 1987; Stohl & Cheney, 2001), need for innovation as well as stability (see, for example, Kellett, 1999; Weick, 1979), and need for cooperation and competition (see, for example, Kellett, 1999). These tensions are shown to have operated at both individual and aggregate levels, i.e., some are more relevant to the interpersonal level (participation versus control) whereas others are more salient at the organizational level (stability versus change). For example, Kellet’s (1999) study attempted to develop a connection between organizational change dialogue and dialectical methodology and found that in the organization, the tension between innovation and stability exhibited at the organizational level was also manifested in the interpersonal communication, in the form of competition and cooperation. By extending the application of dialectical methodology beyond relational communication, Kellet (1999) provided a better picture of how people moved through the choices they faced in creating the future of their organization. Kellet (1999) suggested that future research
should extend the application of dialectics to organizational processes focusing on
dialectics of public and private, framing of dialectics used by management, dialectics that
address the power dynamics, and resistance and conflict that often occurs in
organizations. He suggested that “helping organizational members to learn to live with
the oppositions that connect them, and even draw creative energy from them in directing
change, is perhaps the most valuable contribution of future work in this area” (p. 229).

Beyond organizational change settings, organizational tensions have been
explored in for profit work settings and not for profit work settings, including temporary
work (see, for example, Butler & Modaff, 2008; Harter, 2004; Harter & Krone, 2001;
Ingram, Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Gotsi, 2008; McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006;
Tracy, 2004). For example, Ingram, Lewis, Andriopoulos, and Gotsi (2008) researched
innovation tensions in five product design firms and found that despite varied design
projects and specializations, overarching patterns were evident in informants’ depictions
of innovation tensions. They further theorized that organizations’ “shared paradox frame”
stemmed from social exchange among actors and sense making (e.g., Weick & Roberts,
1993; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Roberts, 2005). In Harter and Krone’s (2001) study of
Nebraska co-operative, dialectical tensions of stability and change, and cooperation and
competition emerged. In Tracy’s (2004) study of a correctional facility she found several
paradoxes and dialectical tension emerging from participant accounts. In the context of a
day care center and provider–parent interactions, Butler and Modaff (2008) discovered
core tensions for providers to be both independent of and dependent on parents. Thus,
research on tensions in organizations has varied from multinational firms, corporate
offices, and correctional facilities to community and cooperative settings and day care service providers in individual houses. However, practically no research exists that advances our understanding of tensions in the area of public relations workplaces, which extant literature has suggested is complex, filled with uncertainty, and where participants experience a high amount of role conflict and stress.

Framing of paradoxes and coping mechanisms of organizational actors are also strongly interlinked. Tracy (2004) advanced the idea that workplace dilemmas, contradictions, and ironies occur frequently in organizations but it is not paradox nor contradiction per se that is problematic. Instead, employees’ reactions to those contradictions in various ways should be the focus of research, i.e., framing of these inherent tensions by organizational actors determines the nature of paradox for organizational actors. Thus if we look at the framing processes in organizations, it is inherently an interpretive process. Tracy (2004) in her study of prison guards in a correctional facility found that the interpretation of the tensions by prison guards gave rise to contradictions, complementary dialectics, and double binds. This clearly suggested that paradoxes emerge and sustain themselves in interpretative processes that depend on the organizational actor’s framing of the paradox. Thus, these framing techniques of workplace tensions can have various personal and organizational effects on members depending on their unique context.

Extant literature on boundary spanning so far has led us to believe that research on paradoxes, tensions, duality, and contradictions is important in the public relations, organizational communication, and management disciplines. Public relations work is
fundamentally a type of boundary spanning function filled with paradoxes, tension, and contradictions that need to be further investigated. In order to fill this gap and extend application of tensions, contradictions, and dialectics to organizational life of public relation professionals, I choose the context of public relations work, which is a type of boundary spanning work that involves a high amount of information gathering and representation. In short, below I ask questions that attempt to unearth the interplay between duality, paradoxes, and tensions, and issues of structure, agency, identity, and power from the perspective of public relations professionals’ day to day experience of boundary spanning work.

**Research questions.**

Overall, research that examines issues of dialectics, voice, and identity of boundary spanners is needed to better understand micro and macro communicative processes that constitute boundary spanners’ interrelated worlds. With our renewed focus on discursive constructions of organizational boundaries, it is appropriate to formulate an empirical agenda. My project here is to give “agency and voice” to these organizational actors and investigate questions of “why and how they do, what they do.” In other words, how do these boundary spanning personnel navigate their work life by constructing, deconstructing, and transcending material and discursive boundaries in public relations work?

Leifer and Delbecq (1978) described boundary spanning personnel as gatekeepers, unifiers, change agents, regulators, liaisons, planners, innovators, etc. Traditional research on these functional categories has mainly focused on the question
“what do these people do?” and “how effectively do they do their job within organizations?” The majority of literature thus has focused on actors that are assumed to be passive and reactive agents. Scholars in organizational communication and management have found that organizational members experience inherent contradictions that are similar to the dialectical tensions studied at the interpersonal level (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Jemison, 1984). Experiences of professional public relations practitioners could prove to be very helpful to further uncover the messiness and/or tensions that might exist within this group of working professionals. Thus my first research question is:

RQ 1: Which dialectical tensions or contradictions do public relations professionals experience as boundary spanners?

Although theorists have defined dialectical tensions and paradoxes operating on interpersonal and organizational levels of analysis, the strategies offered for managing, responding to, or transcending them are quite similar (Jameson, 2004). According to Jameson (2004), this consistency is not surprising given that organizations are collections of individuals. Kramer (2004) in his ethnographic research applied dialectical theory to groups and found tensions related to appropriate and inappropriate behavior and inclusion and exclusion, which were distinct from interpersonal contexts. Thus, knowing how public relations professionals negotiate with paradoxes and tensions and what strategies they use in their specific context to accomplish these tasks might provide us with better insights about the categories and process of dialectical tensions. Thus my second research question is categorized into two related parts.
RQ 2a: How do public relations professionals negotiate organizational tensions and dialectics?

RQ 2b: What communicative strategies do professionals employ in navigating these tensions and contradictions?

Based on our renewed theorizing of boundary spanning as a discursive site where actors engage; participation of self and other is a key necessity for the possibility, and eventual success of boundary spanning communication. Thus, workplace participation that extends beyond the organization into personal, social, and political realms is a fundamental need as boundary spanners try to engage in spanning material and discursive boundaries. According to Stohl and Cheney (2001), contradictions are situated within the broader issues of identity, voice, and power. Since public relations professionals are embedded in a web of professional and social relationships, issues of voice and identity and its effect on boundary spanning communication are explored through boundary spanners’ accounts.
Chapter 3: Research Methods

As the purpose of this study is to understand how boundary spanning personnel experience and navigate through the paradoxes, dualities, tensions, and contradictions in their work life, taking an interpretative perspective seems the most appropriate. To better understand the complex issues pertaining to boundary spanning communication, it is necessary to use a methodological approach grounded in the socially co-constructed nature of reality. In the following sections, I will first discuss how Husserl’s phenomenology and Blumer’s symbolic interactionism provide the basis for the methodological orientation in this study. I will then discuss my proposed sample and procedures that I followed in the data collection and data analysis stages of this research study.

Qualitative Inquiry

Traditionally, interpretive practices have had diverse conceptual bases ranging from social phenomenology to Michel Foucault’s studies of institutional and historical discourses (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). Within this broad domain, I place my research at the intersection of Husserl’s (1970) philosophical phenomenology and Blumer’s (2004) symbolic interactionism.

A fundamental idea about qualitative ontology and epistemology that lay in Husserl’s (1970) work claimed that the relation between perception and its objects is an active process and that human consciousness actively constitutes an object of our experience. Schutz (1970) advanced Husserl’s idea with language use. Schutz argued that, “ordinary language use creates the sense among users that life world is familiarly
organized and substantial, simultaneously giving it shape and meaning” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005, p. 485). By this logic, since we co-create and experience our world through the use of language, intersubjectivity becomes a social accomplishment (Holstein and Gubrium, 2005).

Around the same time, Blumer (1986) coined the term Symbolic Interactionism (SI). He advanced three basic premises about symbolic interactionism. First, humans act towards things that have meaning for them, (i.e., a person acts because it carries meaning for him/her). Second, for human being the meanings of things are derived from social interaction because it is actions that work to define their social world. That is, symbolic interactionism does not regard meanings as emanating from the intrinsic makeup of things, nor does it see meanings as arising through a coalescence of psychological elements in the person. Third, meanings mainly emerge and are modified through a process of interpretation. In short, Blumer (1986) suggested that social actors are actively involved in interpreting, evaluating, and defining their own actions rather than being passive agents.

In this study, my focus is to understand how boundary spanning personnel experience and navigate through paradoxes, dualities, tensions, and contradictions in their work life; hence, I am fundamentally concerned with the meaning making processes that emerge through boundary spanners’ experiences. In order to allow public relations professionals to tell their own stories, face-to-face in-depth interviews seemed more appropriate than a survey questionnaire. In-depth qualitative interviews were used to explore individual’s reflections about their behavior as well as their internal thoughts and
feelings about interactions (Patton, 2003). Specifically, the moderately structured, open-ended in-depth interview attempted to “understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any apriori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.706).

According to Lindolf (1995), symbolic interactionism and the interview method situated within the interpretive perspective, identify human action as being inherently meaningful. That meaning is discovered from the viewpoint of actors themselves (Lindlof, 1995). Since the overall interview process is “inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound” the data gathered in this research is not objective (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p.695). Therefore interview accounts of participants’ experiences were treated as co-constructions, and the interview itself as a negotiated accomplishment. Thus, reflexivity and positionality of my presence was an inextricable part of the research process and affected my data, results, and interpretation. My role in what was valued as data was a subjective construction where I was embedded in the research setting and was affected by my own instrumentality.

**Participants.**

Forty-one public relations professionals from across the United States, primarily from the Midwest and Northeast regions, were recruited to participate in this study. In order to qualify as a participant, the person had to have worked full-time in a public relations agency or corporate communications department for at least two years. This requirement ensured that participants had sufficient and diverse experience to share during the interview process.
Due to the well-networked nature of public relations professionals, I chose online social networking websites as my primary avenue for recruiting participants. Several publicly available sources of information were also used, such as local telephone directories and referrals. A business networking website, LinkedIn, provided the primary pool of participants. I read publicly available profiles of participants who were members of the LinkedIn Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) groups, and invited them to participate in the study by sending a personalized email (see, Appendix B). This publicly available data gave me flexibility to review participant profiles and ensure that participants met the criteria of this study.

Number of years of experience, positions held, and company information were some of the criteria reviewed before an invitation email was sent. I also used snowball sampling and personal contacts within the public relations community to gain access to other agency and corporate communications professionals. Additionally, I also attended professional networking events hosted by local chapters of the International Association of Business Communicators and the PRSA to seek potential participants. Thus, a combination of purposeful, convenience, and snowball sampling was used in this study.

The participant pool consisted of 41 participants, 13 males and 28 females (see, Appendix C). The sample contained 39 Caucasian participants and two African American participants, both female. Participants’ average professional experience was 18 years. Seven participants had experience of five years or less. Eleven had experience from five to 15 years and 20 professionals had experience ranging from 15-30 years. There were also three veteran professionals who each had more than 30 years of public relations
experience. The average age of the participants was approximately 41 years and ranged from mid twenties to mid sixties. The terminology of designations varied significantly for each participant for the same type of work. Typical designations included junior account executive, senior account executive, account supervisor, manager, account director, vice president, chief executive office, CEO, and independent consultant. Some of the atypical designations were that of a communication and outreach coordinator, and interactive project manager. Based on participants’ level of experience, seniority, and position at the time of the interview, the participant pool was comprised of seven junior level executives, 11 mid-level executives, 19 senior level executives, and three very senior level participants.

The participants represented experience from both the public relations agencies and corporate communications set ups. Their industry experience covered all major industries such as banking, consumer goods, defense, engineering, entertainment, government, non-profit, sports, travel and hospitality, etc. Many participants worked for clients from multiple industries throughout their careers. Additionally, participants from smaller public relations agencies mostly represented clients from diverse sectors concurrently.

I do not aim to generalize to a larger population of boundary spanners, but rather to use this study and this sample as a launching pad to further investigate the experiences and communicative practices of public relations professionals and other boundary spanning professionals.
Procedure.

After the Institutional Review Board approval (see, Appendix D), initial contact with participants was made through an email explaining the purpose of the interview. The consent form was attached to the email. In some instances, the email was followed up by a phone call for scheduling purposes. If a participant was willing to be interviewed, a time and date was set up. Due to the busy work lives and the uncertain nature of public relations work, scheduling interviews, particularly in-person interviews, proved to be a daunting task. In many cases, it took several weeks of follow-up to finalize an interview. Given the tedious scheduling process and the busy lives of professionals, phone interviews were opted to overcome time and travel constraints in some cases. Of the 41 interviews, 32 were conducted face-to-face and nine were conducted over the phone. Before conducting each interview, I conducted background research on the firm and work history of the participant by performing a simple search on the Internet. Most professionals have their work history publicly available on several networking sites. At the meeting venue, immediately prior to the interview, the consent process was verbally explained to participants in accordance with the Institutional Review Board’s requirements. Protocol on confidentiality and anonymity was emphasized to put the participants at ease (see, Appendix E). During the process of obtaining verbal and written consent, I asked participants if they had any questions about the consent process.

Once consent was granted, each participant was asked a series of similar research questions based on the interview guide and some probing questions during the interview process. The moderately structured interview guide ensured that all areas relevant to the
research questions were explored during the interview process (see, Appendix F). I started the interview by giving them a brief account of my academic and professional background. Knowing that I had worked in public relations eased participants into the interview process.

The first section of the interview schedule aimed to explore participants’ typical work routine. After the participants warmed up to the interview process, I moved on to the second stage of the interview schedule. This second section asked participants to reflect on professional relationships that constituted his/her work. Once I had gathered relevant contextual details about the participants’ work relationships and daily routine, I moved on to the third stage where conflicts, tensions, and contradictions in the participants’ work context were explored. The questions in this section were devised to seek data relevant primarily for RQ 1 and also RQ 2b. I asked participants to describe the most challenging aspects of their jobs and some of the conflicts and tensions they experienced in the course of their work. I asked them to recount particular instances and relevant examples so as to ensure depth and clarity in their responses. Additionally, I asked them if they found it difficult to handle professional relationships and how did they overcome those difficulties. I also quizzed them about what were the satisfying aspects of their work. I asked them if in their opinion people outside the department understood the complexity of their work. The fourth stage of the interview contained questions to gather relevant information related to RQ 2a and RQ 2b. These questions focused on finding out how participants made sense of public relations work filled with tensions and conflicts. I further asked them what strategies they used to handle these tensions and conflicts. In
order to achieve this, I asked participants to think of a metaphor that best described public relations work. Additionally, I sought to explore the possibility that voice and identity issues affected or added to tensions in public relations work. I asked participants if in the course of their work life they felt overloaded with work, if their gender affected their professional interactions, and how they handled those kinds of situations. I further inquired if participants believed their opinions were heard and respected. I asked how they responded to situations when their views were ignored or sidelined.

At the end of each interview, I summarized what the participant had said, and shared with them and discussed the main points of the interview. I also requested that participants add any information that they thought was important and was not discussed during the interview. I further sought comments from the participants to improve my line of questioning for future interviews. Additionally, member checks were utilized to double-check that findings correctly represented the participants’ stories (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). All the participants expressed that it was a novel experience for them to be interviewed in the context of their work. All participants mentioned that never before in their careers had they been interviewed about their public relations work. Several of them expressed that it was a great experience to sit down and reflect on their work. Generally at the end of the interview, participants asked questions related to issues like what prompted me to take up this subject for research and what would be my future program of research. Many of them expressed desire to receive a synopsis of my findings.

Understanding the language and work culture of the participants in this study was important and affected my interview protocol and other contextual factors. Deciding on
the language use and framing of questions was a much more complicated issue because of the difference between, how I understood boundaries, and how participants were socialized to use the term in an everyday work context. Based on my training in organizational communication, I approached boundaries as fluid, ever changing, and internal to organizing, while most participants understood them as fixed, permanent, and external to organization. Given that privileging participant accounts was important for this research, I did not define boundary or impose my view on participants any time during the interview. This affected, how I presented the topic of boundary spanning to my participants, and in turn the narration of their accounts. Thus, I had to keep my contemporary theoretical conceptualization of the term boundary, and privilege participants’ traditional notion of boundary, which partially limited the phrasing of my questions. In order to make the interview questions relatable to participants, I phrased questions in simple terms avoiding theoretical jargon during the interviews. For example, the question “Do you feel caught up between clients and journalists, could be alternatively phrased as “Do you feel conflicted when negotiating boundaries with clients and journalists.” However, based on my own experience of participating in online professional public relations forums the latter phrasing made the questions unclear. In short, during the interview process, I was sensitive to strike a balance between privileging participant accounts and my critical sensibilities.

All of the interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and most were held offsite away from the work environment, so participants felt they could openly and honestly talk about their experiences. Offsite typically included public places such as
coffee shops and restaurants. My preference was to conduct interviews in public places, since this offered a neutral setting which boosted the participant’s ability to open up to me without fear of being watched by a boss or a colleague. However, in a few cases it was not possible to conduct the interview away from the work place because of busy schedules, travel time, and in two instances inclement weather. In these instances, I tried to create a setting where participants felt comfortable discussing the questions by reminding them that their responses would be kept confidential. The procedure for telephone interviews remained the same except that I requested them to email or fax the copy of the consent form to a private fax number. Typical interviews ranged from 45 minutes to one hour, depending on the extent of the information each participant chose to reveal. Interviews were conducted until I observed a recurring pattern of themes within the data set.

In this project, the names and identities of participants have not been disclosed and pseudonyms have been used for identifiable information. Along with using a digital voice recorder for the interviews, I also took written notes during the interview process which further aided data collection and analysis.

**Data Analysis.**

As this study concerned studying participants’ experiences and meanings they attached to public relations work, the principles of grounded theory formed the basis for analyzing gathered discourse. According to Carmaz (2005), grounded methods consist of “simultaneous data collection and analysis, with each informing and focusing the other” throughout the research process. In short, it involves comparing “data with data, data with
categories, and category with category” (p.517). After I transcribed digital audio recordings, the data/discourse was analyzed by using constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I looked for new patterns in the information gathered that could be used to cluster interview data into themes (Patton, 2002). I focused on participants’ linguistic choices and meanings throughout the interviews. I looked for commonalities such as those of explanation, perception, or communicative means of managing tensions.

According to many experienced qualitative researchers, the first step in analyzing data is to develop a manageable classification or coding scheme (Charmaz, 2006; Owen, 1984; Patton, 2002). In the past, several criteria have been employed by different researchers to arrive at these initial themes. Owen (1984) suggested three criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness to be present in order to establish a theme, while Charmaz (2005) suggested that coded themes should be focused on defining the action, explicating implicit assumptions, and seeing processes. In order to establish these themes, Charmaz (2006) and Patton (2002) both suggested that the researcher begin with line by line coding of data. Thus, throughout the research process all codes were compared, categorized, refined, and collapsed into themes that reflected the tensions present in the boundary spanning communication process. Approaching data analysis required working inductively from specific points in the data while simultaneously working deductively from the larger body of scholarship contextualizing the study.

First, I conducted several readings of the transcribed interviews to gain familiarity and a preliminary understanding of the data. In addition, I analyzed the data using a
tension-centered approach (Trethway and Ashcraft, 2004). This approach begins with the premise that organizations are conflicted sites of human activity and accordingly, foregrounding tension could lead to a richer understanding of actual practice and thereby aid in theory building. Based on extant literature and my own experience, it was deemed that the boundary spanning nature of public relations work and its existing commercial setup that included public relations professionals, public relations agencies, clients, and journalists created spaces for tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Second, while gaining a preliminary understanding of the data, it became clear to me that issues of contradiction and tension were inherent in the experiences of public relations professionals’ work life. I further studied the transcripts and coded the data by identifying and attaching recurrent references to a particular topic like importance of relationships, creative ideas, uncertain schedules, difficult relationships with journalists, opportunity to work for others, long work hours, strategy and planning, competition, measuring impact of public relations work, using humor, open communication, commitment to clients, issues of ethics, sense of responsibility towards clients, balancing multiple interests, fluid understanding of what public relations meant, tendency to avoid conflicts, etc. After isolating the codes made in the transcripts, I clustered them into subthemes by unifying codes relating to similar ideas, for example, the subtheme of relationship work emerged from various references such as importance of client relationship, building strong relationships with media, equating public relations with relationship business, etc. Thus, 16 subthemes such as relationship work, creative calling,
withholding information, for the greater good, strategic thinking, mutual distrust, difficult to measure, and clients don’t get it emerged from the codes.

Specifically in the context of RQ 1, I conducted a close reading of the subthemes, looking at what sorts of tensions and contradictions participants voiced. I looked for subthemes that dealt with seemingly oppositional tensions. In order to get at what constituted a tension, I paid close attention to the language used to describe situations like what is good and what is bad about public relations work; what participants liked and disliked about public relations work; what needed to be changed and what should have been left as is. Thus, I clustered the eight subthemes that dealt with opposing tensions into four major themes that dealt with pivotal tensions in public relations work. For example, subthemes like relationship work and measuring the intangible pointed towards the overarching contradiction of public relations work as tangible and intangible.

For RQ 2a, I followed a similar approach and grouped the subthemes that indicated the existence of a broader theme. For example, the subthemes of nurturing, caring and sharing, and difficult family members together fit well into the broader metaphor of public relations as a family. Thus four subthemes were grouped into two broader themes of public relations as family and public relations as a game. Similarly, the subthemes of people pleasing by suppressing emotions and using humor pointed to the broader tendency of using avoidance as a strategy to cope with tensions. Thus RQ 2b, was explained with the help of two broad themes of avoidance and reframing. In all, the findings of this study were grouped under 16 subthemes that were further collapsed into eight themes that answered the two research questions.
Thus, I did three things to enhance the accuracy, authenticity, credibility, trustworthiness, and dependability of claims and their support. First, I portrayed participants’ actions and meanings by focusing on relationships between human agency and social structure. Second, I offered abstract interpretations of empirical relationships. Third, I created conditional statements about the implications of my analysis. By remaining close to the studied discursive worlds of my participants, I attempted to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts that were gathered from the vast empirical material (Charmaz, 2005).

In sum, I conducted 41 in-depth interviews of public relations and corporate communications professionals and analyzed data using principles of grounded theory. The analysis rendered four broad themes relating to RQ 1: public relations work as tangible and intangible; public relations work as creative and controlling; public relations work as secretive and trustworthy; and public relations work as serving and servitude. Analysis in the context of RQ 2a, rendered the themes of public relations is like a family and public relations is a unique game. Finally, examination of the data with reference to RQ 2b rendered strategies of avoidance and reframing. In the next chapter, I will discuss these eight themes and 16 subthemes in greater detail.
Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, results from 41 in-depth interviews of public relations professionals are reviewed. These interviews were analyzed for broader themes that emerged from the responses of the participants. As suggested by Charmaz (2005) and Patton (2002), in these themes I looked further for codes and commonalities in participants’ explanations, perceptions, and communicative means of managing tensions as they carried out their boundary spanning work. Additionally, in these codes I looked for patterns, which were used to cluster interview data into elements that answer the two research questions discussed in Chapter 2.

This chapter is organized as follows: First, I present each research question with a brief overview of its rationale. Next, I explain which interview questions were used to answer that particular research question. Following that, I discuss the themes and elements that emerged from the data in response to each question. Throughout the discussion of themes and elements, I use quotations from the interviews for illustration and support.

Research Question 1

RQ 1: Which dialectical tensions or contradictions do public relations professionals experience as boundary spanners?

Findings of this research suggested that a knot of tensions and contradictions surfaced as public relations professionals interacted with clients, journalists, supervisors, and colleagues. Four themes emerged from the data that answered this question. These
relationships provided a useful anchor and an organizing framework to understand the themes.

Research question one specifically focused on two aspects: What tensions public relations professionals experienced and within which relationships they experienced these tensions. To answer this broad question, public relations professionals were asked to describe their work, with whom they dealt regularly in the course of a workday, and what seemed to be some of the difficult and enjoyable aspects of public relations work. Participants were further asked to describe instances in their careers when they found public relations work to be the most challenging, frustrating, and enjoyable.

Four important tensions emerged in the data. The first tension stemmed from participants’ experience of public relations work as both tangible and intangible. A strong focus on building relationships with journalists and clients, and trying to measure these relationships to gauge their effectiveness were the two primary drivers behind this tension. The second tension emerged from the participants’ view of public relations work as creative and controlling. In this theme, participants talked about the lure of creative freedom in their work, but also the controlling aspect that required them to predict, manage, and even limit their creative free will. The third tension was about public relations professionals’ wanting to be secretive and transparent in relationships. In many situations, participants had to withhold some information to further clients’ and personal interests. However, they also felt that transparency and open communication were necessary to build long-term trust, specifically with the journalists. The fourth tension emanated from the professionals’ desire to achieve greater good by serving clients and
the clients’ inability to understand public relations work and the tendency to dictate the terms of servicing. In this theme, participants felt that public relations work presented opportunities to be instruments for positive change; however, to do meaningful work, participants depended significantly on the clients they serviced.

Public relations work as tangible and intangible.

Most public relations professionals usually work in two distinct set ups: in-house communication department of an organization or a public relations agency set up (Botan & Hazelton, 2009). These communication professionals are in charge of building relationships with stakeholders and performing activities like media relations, employee relations, community relations, etc. The public relations agency typically works as a contracting agency for several companies. However, in both of these set ups the emphasis remains on relationship building, which participants in this research found to be an intangible goal, meaning difficult to recognize and measure.

Participants recounted several incidents where they felt a constant tension between maintaining relationships and demonstrating the impact of public relations work in measurable terms to clients and supervisors. Participants reasoned that a large portion of their work emphasized relationship building, but because relationships were difficult to measure, they found themselves in a complicated position of showing how their work helped client businesses. At the same time, the day-to-day activities geared towards attaining and measuring this abstract goal were perceived as tangible because participants could readily label, list, and experience the activities they performed. Participants also mentioned that the tangible and intangible nature of public relations work was one of the
trickiest aspects of their professional lives. Elements in this theme included relationship work and measuring the invisible.

**Relationship work.**

According to Reil Van and Fombrun (2007) public relations and corporate communication professionals are hired by companies to build and maintain key relationships that operate in the interest of the organization. These relationships include a set of stakeholders such as the media, community, shareholders, activists, and employees. In short, relationship building for maintaining and enhancing the image of the client organization is always a key part of public relations professionals’ mandate (Riel Van & Fombrun, 2007). Further, senior professionals in agency settings are appraised on how well they maintain relationships with clients, to ensure continued business (retainer fees) for the agency and potential business development opportunities.

Relationships emerged as a central focus for most of the public relations professionals. Sharon, an African American corporate communication professional in her late forties with thirteen years of experience, defined public relations as “the science of relationships and attitudes.” Several participants echoed Sharon’s characterization and agreed that public relations is a relationship-intensive profession. Participants such as Kathleen, who is a white female in her mid forties with eighteen years of experience and the director of a medium sized public relations firm, gave a rank order of important relationships in her professional public relations work. “Clients of course are most important and then my teammates within the office and media with whom I work on a day in, day out basis,” said Kathleen. Excluding one, all participants mentioned
repeatedly in their respective interviews that client relationships were very important to their work.

The importance of relationships with clients, journalists, and colleagues depended on a variety of factors, such as participant’s rank and work setting (i.e., whether they worked in a public relations agency or a corporate communications department). Joyce, who is a white female in her early forties with two decades of experience in the profession and the owner of a boutique public relations firm, gave a sense of how important client relationships were to the overall public relations business. Joyce owns a public relations firm in the northeast part of the country. She stated: “I’ll tell you, having excellent client relationships matters.” Margaret, a former account supervisor and now a communication consultant with nine years of experience, stated:

I had one client who kept in touch for a very long time after we stopped working together…he was a good networker. I was in Aruba and he was in Nuvi. After I stopped working on his account, and left the agency and went to another agency, he is still in touch.

Margaret later mentioned that just a couple of months before my interview with her, her former client called to inquire if she was interested in handling public relations for his friend’s company. Margaret said, “Yes, we got the account.” Like Margaret, a few other participants also recounted similar instances where former client relationships provided business prospects.

Participants in junior positions, typically below the rank of an account manager, emphasized media relationships more because these participants were primarily involved
in carrying out day-to-day tactical client servicing activities. A key part of their daily routine was engaging with journalists for securing mentions for their clients in news stories. Helen, who is an African American female in her forties with nine years of experience and an assistant account manager of public relations, stated that being on the “good side” of journalists was very important:

When you’re on the public relations side, you bring a different perspective and so you have to work with your media. That’s the person (journalist) you want to hear back from, so you have to learn that relationships are most definitely important in this industry.

Agency participants saw relationships with journalists as very critical. Building relationships with the media always remained a key task, even when they switched jobs. Diana, a white female with four years of experience and an account executive in a public relations agency, described her experience with changing jobs:

When I started at my new agency, I was reaching out (to journalists) because I had worked on a government agency (as a client), but then I was coming on board with some clients that I never worked for, you know, with technology reporters, TV reporters, entertainment reporters.

The work setting also affected which relationships the participants perceived as more important. Participants who had spent significant time working in a public relations agency emphasized relationships with journalists more than participants who spent most of their career working in corporate communications departments of large corporations.

As one participant mentioned, large corporations often outsourced their media relations
work to public relations agencies because it was more efficient for their business. Due to this arrangement, participants working in a public relations agency experienced more media relations activity compared to a corporate communications executive. Stephanie, a white female and a public relations professional with fifteen years of experience, said, “Having worked on both sides, I can tell you that agency work is focused a lot on media relations. That’s a typical agency’s bread and butter you know…” On the other hand, Tom, who had spent eighteen years of his thirty-five-year career in the corporate communications division of a leading manufacturing firm, emphasized more on internal relationships. He said, “When I was at Tools International, my focus was on working with the CEO, internal communication, and a little of media relations. The CEO and company employees were my clients, so to speak.” In short, findings suggested that participants’ experiences, arising from different work settings, greatly affected which relationships they valued more. When participants described characteristics of this intangible, relationship-focused work, they talked about three issues: how relationships were inherently personal, how language played a key role in building and maintaining relationships, and how their work was generally all “soft stuff.”

Participants emphasized that inherently relationships are personal in nature and therefore mean different things to different people. Margaret said, “It is like happiness, you know, it’s different for different people. Everyone is happy for different reasons.” Donna, a CEO of a midsized public relations firm put Margaret’s comment in the context of media relationships and said, “You know, the client does not talk to the journalist every day, we do.” With this comment, Donna implied that because public relations
professionals work closely with media, it is difficult for clients to understand and emulate public relations professionals’ personal relationships with journalists. Later in the interview, Jennifer, who is director of a nonprofit, and Margaret tried to reinforce the point that relationships are realized in personal interactions and experienced by individuals in different ways. Further, participants such as Anna, a white female senior account executive with six years of experience working as a contractor for the defense and military agencies, said, “It’s all about relationships and it’s about using language in situations, but done the right way.” Anna distinguished prudent language use from inappropriate/incorrect language use and pointed out that this required a set of skills, just like in any other profession. Thirty-seven of the 41 participants echoed Anna’s point in one-way or the other. For example, Maria, a white female with more than 25 years of experience in public relations, mentioned that “talking with a reporter in the right way with right information” helped her move towards building a strong professional relationship. Betty, a white female account supervisor with just less than seven years of public relations experience, gave a glimpse of how her work had shifted from being tangible to intangible. She talked about how she had to deal with the soft stuff, as she had advanced in the profession:

As a junior account executive I was writing emails, writing press releases, and now I’m an account supervisor so I head up teams and I manage the, you know, strategic thinking and the bigger ideas. It’s kinda strange to see yourself doing the soft stuff more as you stay longer (in the profession). I mean it’s sort of the whole thing is about relationships, you know.
Like Betty, other participants considered their work relationship intensive and used adjectives such as soft, diffused, and intangible to describe their work. When I asked others what “soft stuff” consisted of, more than half of the participants used the words “just talking” as an explanation. Diana mentioned this point and expressed a bit of her frustration. She said, “public relations is all about talking, it’s all talking and communicating that’s all.” For several participants like Diana “just talking” connoted triviality, generally associated with gossiping and socializing. Because of this negative attitude, public relations work was seen as casual or non-technical, and lacking depth.

Participants did list several tangible activities they performed routinely, such as calling a journalist, calling a client, writing plans, doing preliminary research, and measuring the impact of a public relations campaign. However, the responsibilities of public relations professionals were certainly not limited to these tangible tasks, and the overarching goal was always building and maintaining strategic relationships, which was considered intangible. It was this overall emphasis on relationships that required diligent use of communication and language that made public relations work intangible in nature.

Thus, participants thought of public relations work as very relationship intensive. They also reported that interacting with journalists and clients was a personal experience and hard to recapture for other people. Participants mentioned performing several tangible activities; however, interactions and conversations were a dominant form in which public relations professionals accomplished their relationship work, which was perceived as intangible and difficult to explain to others.
Measuring the intangible.

Like any other business, public relations professionals too are compensated based on performance evaluations. Public relations professionals have to prove how they are helping the client organizations in building good relationships, which hopefully helps with improving image or public profile. For example, this can be illustrated through using media coverage. Further, public relations professionals are also evaluated on their ability to retain existing clients so that the revenue stream for an agency continues. This means that it is in the best interest of the professional for clients to renew their contracts with the public relations agency. Corporate communications executives are evaluated by their CEO or senior management based on an objective demonstration of the results of their work. In both settings, the overall need for measurement and accountability to demonstrate productivity is seen as key for internal and external evaluation.

In this study all participants expressed that relationships could not be captured and measured. Participants also argued that because of the relationship focus of public relations work, measuring the end product was much more difficult compared to other “hard” professions like accounting, engineering, and advertising. Patricia, who is a white female in her mid forties with twenty-seven years of experience and a vice president, aptly described her experience of being caught up in the tension of experiencing public relations work as tangible and intangible:

It is sort of gray area, you know. It’s not advertising. In advertising, you know, you pay your money and the ad is there. It’s clear. People know what that is. It is
sort of tangible. Public relations is all about relationships so, it is so intangible. It is hard to measure.

Here, Patricia compared public relations to advertising and distinguished public relations as a relationship business that is much more difficult to measure.

Participants also expressed their frustration in demonstrating to others that their public relations work affected the client’s business. Debra, who is a white female in her forties with fifteen years of experience and an independent public relations professional stated, “My job every day focuses on specific tasks like face to face talk with newsmakers, phone conversations or e-mails, you know. But there’s never a tangible product at the end of the day.” Experiences like these seem to be common occurrences for participants. Particularly for Edward, a white male in his late sixties with more than four decades of experience in public relations work, in the manufacturing sector mentioned:

Working in the corporate communication department was tough, you were constantly being asked what you do, to which I had no real explanation in their (workers) terms, you know. They (workers) spent all day making a product, what did I make, make people look good (laughs)?

Likewise, more than half a dozen participants in this research echoed the frustration that Debra and Ed felt because they did not produce a tangible product. This further reflected the great difficulty participants had in measuring, capturing, and demonstrating their relationship-focused work.
Further, participants mentioned that because they had to demonstrate the value of their work in “numbers,” measuring these relationships in some fashion was imperative for them. As a result of this implicit requirement, participants often felt frustrated. Ryan, a white male in his late twenties with three years of experience, who is a senior account executive in a small boutique firm, stated, “I couldn’t show the community-wide impact of whatever I was pitching in this relationship business, which is really frustrating.”

Ryan here talked about “pitching,” a term given to a set of tasks that typically culminate with a public relations professional presenting a potential story idea to a journalist. The act of pitching primarily involved brainstorming key messages with one’s team, identifying the publication, writing a pitch, sending the pitch to journalists, and following up. A typical outcome of pitching is a story being published in a newspaper, magazine, blog, or some other media outlet by a journalist that is likely to influence the readers/audience of the media. These sets of activities are very tangible and concrete in nature. It is also possible that the pitching process is unsuccessful but in the process, a public relations professional may develop a better relationship with a journalist, an intangible gain which may prove helpful for future pitching activities. However, it is difficult to capture or measure the value of this intangible gain especially in the event of a failed pitch.

On the other hand, if the article is published with the client mentioned in it, it appears to be a tangible outcome. However, after the article is published, it may be difficult to attribute specifically how much impact it had on a client’s business or community. To demonstrate that the article had a positive influence requires capturing
the intangible into tangible data. In short, participants such as Ryan experienced pitching as a set of concrete tasks, but felt frustrated that the intangible nature of the end results made it difficult to measure. This, in turn, restricted their ability to know if they were having a wider impact on the community or society.

Participants also reasoned that because relationships were inherently intangible, providing evidence for maintenance and growth of these relationships remained a difficult task for many public relations professionals. Debra stated, “Sometimes it is showing that public relations works to clients. Um, it's hard to measure; it’s hard, really hard, when you can’t see a direct impact from it.” Another participant mentioned that the difficulty in measuring the impact of public relations work sometimes affected the services a public relations agency could define and offer to their clients. Joyce mentioned that, “we have struggled internally within our own organization where we offer other services to clients.” She went on to state how difficulty in measuring the agency’s work further played a role in pricing her services of her public relations firm:

It’s an intangible. I’ve explained to some clients recently this statement, to say it’s easy to offer somebody that I will sell you this toy for a $1.49 or I’m going to sell you an insurance policy for $10,000. It’s the idea of strategy that is such a challenge for individuals.

Overall, several participants felt that showing the value of their work was directly tied to measuring or capturing relationships in some demonstratable way. However, because of the focus on measuring productivity to demonstrate value, participants were sometimes
forced to focus on tangible, measureable tasks and activities at the cost of the broader relationship building.

Evidence for this theme strongly suggested that public relations professionals were constantly experiencing tension between the tangible and intangible aspects of public relations work. Participants acknowledged that public relations work was highly relationship-centered. Measuring the effort in building relationships and capturing the value of these relationships was extremely difficult. Focus on conversations and interactions to build and maintain relationships meant that often there was no tangible end product. Additionally, ideation and strategizing were at the core of public relations work. Nevertheless, putting a price tag on the value of the ideas and strategies developed for a client organization proved a daunting challenge. Further, measuring the broader impact from a client’s mention in a news article, in terms of changes in the attitude of the target audience, also proved quite challenging. However, because supervisors and clients measured success in terms of hard/direct results, participants were forced to capture and measure their work in some fashion. Specifically, the extensive relationship focus did not lend itself very well to an objective, measurable, and tangible basis for evaluating success. Thus, the relationship focus and measuring various soft aspects of public relations work were the primary drivers that made public relations work tangible and intangible.

Public relations work as creative and controlling.

Public relations work require that professionals were communicating in an engaging, creative, and relevant fashion (Riel Van & Fombrun, 2007). At the same time,
participants engage in strategizing and planning to ensure control over the communication process to guarantee desired outcomes. Thus, this tension primarily surfaced from the fact that public relations work required participants to be creative and strategic at the same time. Participants described their workday as filled with opportunities for being creative, although, always with the thought of serving the broader strategic vision. Participants mentioned that they chose the vocation of public relations with a desire to bring their creative vision to life. They saw the profession as an instrument for channeling their creativity; however, while writing a pitch or responding creatively to unexpected situations, participants also had to be mindful of the strategic impact of their creative actions. The creative solutions had to be managed and controlled for optimum results. Thus, the experiences of participants in this study illustrated the creative and strategic aspects of public relations work. Elements in this theme included creative calling and strategic thinking.

Creative calling.

The participants associated creativity in public relations with thinking of novel, innovative ways of carrying out many day-to-day activities such as writing a pitch, talking to a reporter, or managing resources. Many participants also related creativity in public relations with the opportunity to constantly shape and adapt communication for their clients in the face of unexpected events. Because of this, a typical workday was considered “atypical” and more creative in comparison to other professions, such as accounting and engineering. Many participants liked the nonroutine nature of their workdays as the unexpected events offered them a chance to use their creativity.
Several participants stated that it was difficult to describe a typical workday for them because it largely remained a big surprise as the day unfolded. Overall, activities that public relations professionals performed were a mix of routine and unexpected tasks that gave participants little sense of normalcy. Rita, a white female in her late forties with thirty years of experience, and vice president at a major corporation, stated the contradiction of what normality means to her:

There’s normally a few meetings, either internal or with clients. There’s normally a lot of writing involved. There’s normally, you know, doing some sort of strategy; even it is as miniscule as, how do I respond appropriately to this client’s requests. That’s the kind of general day I guess. But I can tell you that in public relations typically that day doesn’t happen and that, normally, something else comes up.

Rita talked about the fact that a typical day is generally comprised of responding to contingencies that develop on a routine basis. Participants like Maria mentioned, “There is no typical workday.” Maria viewed this as both good and bad and conveyed a sense of normalcy like Rita:

One of the good things and bad things about what I do is that there is no typical workday. There’s always something new, different, unexpected, off the wall. You think you’re gonna spend the day pounding at press releases and something happens and then you are pounding at other press releases or calling people to get comments, you know. It all depends.
Most participants characterized their workday as “atypical,” and mentioned that it was largely shaped by activities mostly beyond their control. Stephanie described this phenomenon and considered public relations work creative because there was no “average day” at work:

Coming to the corporate world from outside having been on the agency side, I think this is much more creative, definitely. However, I didn’t say it’s ever an average day; we had large pricing issues, we were dealing both internally and externally with issues, sending supplies to US and Canadians, working with the world’s largest producers from every country. The organization changed, and well my department was reorganized four times in the four years I was there. So yes there was a lot of communication work to do.

Beyond the uncertainty and nonroutine nature of the work, participants also talked about a strong connection between uncertainty of events and how they saw it as an opportunity for creative potential. Participants emphasized the creative aspects of public relations work while talking about their workday. For example, Patricia talked about the fact that her uncertain workday never made her work boring:

What I always love about public relations is that no days are ever the same and you might come in thinking of having to work on this client all day and you got it all totally different, some people drag on that, I don’t, I really like that. I try to keep it interesting. It’s never boring, never dull.

Another participant, Stephanie, agreed with Patricia and talked about how the creative aspects made her work more interesting:
I think what excites me is the creative aspect. I knew that you could have a profession with some creative capacity and I knew that’s kind of what excited me because things were always happening around you (news), and you are always thinking of different ideas and you are trying things that do not lead to a typical outcome of a problem.

James, who is a white male in his early thirties with nine years of experience, and vice president at a bank, stated that creativity was central to his work, even going to the extent of saying that he missed it if things were too normal. James stated: “We’re always thinking of different ideas so I think there’s always creative thinking involved in public relations. Because of that you are trying to do things that do not lead to the typical outcome of a problem.” Participants such as James emphasized that creativity was a central part of public relations work. Joe, a white male in his late twenties with five years of experience who worked as an account manager, talked about the importance of maintaining the creative aspect in public relations work. He stated:

I sometimes like very plain business writing, there's a formula, so there's no creativity… It’s brainless! You just type it out and get work done, you know, but I write the three speeches and like if I do this continuously my work will make no sense because I miss creativity.

Not all participants saw this uncertainty as an opportunity to be creative. Michelle, who is a white female in her late twenties and a senior associate with four years of experience at a midsized public relations firm, talked about how this uncertainty and dependence on external events controlled her workday:
I understand and love the fast-paced news driven environment like ours, it’s good, but I get caught up in it. Sometimes it is the only thing I think about, you know. After a time it gets routine and reactive and sort of less creative. You ask yourself, what am I doing?

Michelle acknowledged that she enjoyed the uncertainty of her workday to an extent, but also spoke to the fact that this uncertainty sometimes became a controlling and limiting factor because it made her work more reactive. A handful of other junior participants shared Michelle’s view. However, senior participants like Maria, Rita, and Mandy looked at the positive side of uncertainty. However, most of the participants expressed that dealing with uncertain workdays was a crucial factor that made public relations work creative.

Overall, in this element participants reported that unexpected events gave them an opportunity to respond creatively. They enjoyed using their creative instincts to come up with new and spontaneous solutions.

**Strategic thinking.**

A typical workday of public relations professionals consists of making several task-oriented decisions that have the potential to affect the broader strategy. For example, although using a particular word in a press release or a blog could be considered a creative decision, it had broader strategic implications on how the media picked up the press release. Therefore, the creative freedom was controlled by overarching strategic thinking and considerations. Public relations work was experienced by participants as both creative and strategic, with creativity and strategy often being mentioned in the same
sentence. This was because no matter how creative a solution was, it had to fit well in the overall strategy. Apparently, participants accepted a truncated notion of creativity, applying it only so far as to serve a rational strategic cause. Participants used phrases such as “strategic creativity” or “creative strategy” giving rise to a tension.

When asked why they liked public relations work, participants mentioned the process of simultaneously being creative and strategic as one reason for them being in the profession. Richard, a white male in his early fifties with close to three decades of public relations experience in several top positions of government and private sectors, characterized the strategic nature of creativity and said:

So from day to day point of view, it’s always a creative process on how we gonna do it and right down to the wording of the advertisement or the news release, you know those words were selected based on a bigger strategy that I have inside my head.

Richard talked about how his day-to-day tactical work was geared towards a much broader strategy. Steven, a white male in his late forties, and a professional with more than twenty five years in the industry, used the phrase “creative strategy” and elaborated on Richard’s statement:

There is a lot more to it (creativity)… you come up with the overall creative strategy and it boils down to the fact that if the work gets published (by a journalist). So I have to be creative on the phone with him (journalist) and also have a broader creative plan of what I want from him (the journalist) in two months in the tech section.
Here Steven talked about creative strategy in the context of media relations work that he performed for clients over the years. He suggested that the ultimate success of media relations for him was not just being creative with the journalist during the interaction but having a strategy that will get the journalist to publish something about his client.

Cynthia, a white female in her late twenties with six years of public relations industry experience and a senior account executive, explained how she used creativity in a strategic sense:

But it was here (interacting with journalist) I try and be creative, so to speak in terms of media outreach. You know I wanna try and get in touch with journalists who are covering topics that are relevant to my clients and in this situation; and I noticed there was one of the journalist in the Main Street Journal.

Cynthia approached the journalist in creative ways, but with a strategic objective of getting the client in the Main Street Journal. In Steven and Cynthia’s case, both essentially thought about creativity with a broader strategic purpose of getting the client in the publication. In addition, for them, being creative meant approaching the journalist creatively whereas making a strategic choice involved pitching to a specific journalist covering a specific section of a specific news outlet in mind.

Participants also echoed that being strategic was strongly connected with being proactive rather than reactive. Ruth, a white female in her late fifties and more than two decades of public relations experience in the defense industry, stated, “In this strategic field (public relations) um, you didn’t wanna be constantly reacting…but be proactive, creative, and try and predict things as much as you can, you know.” In this case, Ruth
characterized public relations as a creative field yet simultaneously emphasized the strategic, planned, predictive, and controlling aspects of her work. Elizabeth, a white female in her late forties and an executive with fourteen years of experience, talked about how she has became strategic with writing and developing client proposals, a task she thought early in her career as very creative:

Early on, I struggled because it was extremely stressful to know if a client would like my idea or not. But over the years I have been able to be creative because I now know what the client will like in the proposal. And so I now am being more strategic about it. This certainly makes my life a lot more easy… but it is not fool proof.

Elizabeth’s experience suggested that she has been able to be creative with her clients not by being spontaneous, but rather in a planned way by trying to predict client reactions, which gave her a sense of control. Rita talked about being comfortable with her work by managing to factor in the uncertainty. She said she had to “tame creativity” to make her public relations work appear routine. Another participant, Elizabeth, characterized the tension she experienced by being creative and strategic in her work as a hybrid/mix of creativity and structure:

I think it’s the mixture of creativity and structure, it’s a hybrid. You have to be creative because you always have to figure out, you always have a challenge, and you got to figure out how to get through it. You have to be strategic.
Thus, although the participants enjoyed the creative aspects of their work they always seemed to think about creative solutions within the contours of an overall plan and strategy. The strategic thinking always guided their creative tactics.

Overall, participants mentioned that their uncertain workday gave them a sense of thrill, excitement, and an opportunity to be creative, barring a few who also mentioned that an uncertain workday limited their creativity. Participants also emphasized strategic thinking that controlled their creative decisions, to ensure that they were able to achieve the communication goals of clients. The tension between the creative and controlling aspects of the work emerged as participants moved back and forth between the creative and strategic posts.

**Public relations work as secretive and transparent.**

The role of public relations professionals requires them to act in the interest of their clients/organization. Although they believed in honest, transparent, and ethical communication, sometimes professionals had to withhold information for legitimate reasons. Not divulging the full extent of information made their communication inherently problematic. Several participants were caught between the constant struggles of being secretive and transparent at the same time.

Public relations agency and corporate communications professionals stated that because public relations work involved both information withholding for strategic reasons at some level and required transparency to build long-term trust, they were constantly experiencing this tension. Participants talked about how they engaged in withholding of opinions and information. They recalled several instances and events
where they experienced a strong need to withhold their views and sometimes even critical pieces of information. Participants felt that open and candid communication was key in order to build long-term trusting relationships between the agency, clients, and journalists. Relationships that were trusting went a long way in successfully managing communicative goals of clients. However, this was much more difficult to achieve due to the inherent contradiction that mandated withholding in some cases and transparent communication at a broader level. Elements in this theme include withholding information and mutual distrust.

**Withholding information.**

Public relations and corporate communications professionals need to use information strategically to build relationships with journalists, clients, and colleagues to achieve communication goals. This in turn meant that sometimes participants could not share certain types of data or information with journalists. Beyond the interest of the organization, self-interest and office politics also became a motive for strategic withholding, especially while communicating with supervisors and colleagues. Acknowledging this sentiment, a considerable number of participants mentioned that withholding information was part of the work, legitimately or not.

When information was not shared, it negatively affected participants’ relationships with journalists. Jennifer, an African American female in her mid for forties, with twenty-four years of experience and the director of a nonprofit recalled an incident when she could not disclose information about failing charities, but the journalist insisted she share the details with him:
So by December 2009, a lot of charities were failing. We had a few actual cases, but we couldn’t talk about it due to privacy issues. It felt like some of the journalists were looking for dirt, you know in terms of organizations that were failing. I said to the journalist that we can’t even talk about it and the journalist kept pushing me for information.

Alan, a white male approaching sixty and close to four decades of public affairs experience in the military and defense industry, illustrated the point of strategic withholding. “There was just no way I could tell the reporter things about national security.” He went on to mention that some reporters understood this but others pushed it too far, and questioned the legitimacy of dubbing certain type of information as classified:

Once a reporter asked me, “can you tell me why such a simple piece of information is classified?” I was mad and said to the reporter, “How do I explain to you, without actually disclosing some information?” I said, “Sorry, you just have to believe me.”

There were instances when participants simply did not have related information. Often, the practice of not disclosing details created distrust among the participants and the journalists. For example, James was asked about information regarding a meeting when he worked for an airlines company. He responded to the reporter that he was not aware of a meeting, but the reporter did not believe him and they got into a heated exchange:

This moment really sticks out for me, in particular. There was an interview with a reporter at the Bookmore Times and he was asking me to speculate on a meeting
between the person who ran the airport and our chief executive. And I didn’t participate in the meeting, I talked to our executives and no one was aware of the meeting and you know, and we finally got to the point at which he said, “Well, I’m gonna report that, you know, you couldn’t confirm the meeting that I think existed.” And I said, “You can report it however you want, but here are the facts as I know.” And that was it and we got into a heated exchange because he wanted me to speculate on the discussion but I couldn’t. I didn’t know. Maybe it happened, maybe it didn’t.

Thus, participants such as Jennifer and Alan narrated the incidents that show how withholding information strained their relationship with journalists. Similar incidents were recounted by participants from all industries and were not just confined to critical sectors like defense. Thus, withholding of information in comparable instances such as the above is part of public relations work but it does affect relationships with journalists in a negative way.

However, there were also instances of withholding information internally from clients and colleagues. In order to service clients effectively, strategically withholding certain information from the client was deemed necessary. Mary, a white female in her late thirties with eleven years of experience and an account manager working for a midsized public relations firm in the Midwest, stated: “Each client wants to probably think that they are our only client. We don’t really tell them, ‘Oh, you know, I was here and I was there…because they want you to be focusing on their accounts.”’
Open, honest, and transparent communication was advocated by the industry on behalf of clients, but generally public relations agencies themselves did not tell clients how many other clients a particular account manager was servicing at a time. Patricia said,

One time, the client didn’t want to give away the sales figures to the journalist. I advised the client to give the reporter what he wanted on this story knowing that it’s gonna build the relationship and we’ll continue to foster that relationship.

A few participants reported having trouble with uncommunicative clients who were not willing to disclose or share information with their own public relations agency. Cynthia told me about an unresponsive client she was facing at the time of the interview who made her feel hurt. “You know I still get hurt, sometimes like, why won’t they tell us, we’re their agency, we’re looking out for their best interest, we should have the open communication.”

Some participants revealed instances of a unique kind of withholding of information that probably was a result of agency culture. In this particular research study, both happened to be African American females. They reported instances where the agency for which they were working did not provide them a complete picture of why they were hired, and carried overtones of racism in the workplace. Jennifer stated: “My assessment of a vendor was dismissed because of being female and the color of my skin.” Jennifer recalled an instance in another agency position where she was hired to service a client purely because of the color of her skin:
You know when I was working; I had no say in planning, meetings…I was just a show piece for the satisfaction of the client. I was like, not sure what is going on. In fact, after I left I got to know that I was hired because they only wanted to show to the client that they had a person on the team who could communicate ideas to minority populations. That’s it. I wasn’t doing any of that. Wish they could have just told me.

Sharon recalled her experience as an account manager with an agency and stated that she felt like an “appendage to the organization.” Sharon mentioned that ironically, as the person managing a major account in her agency she had little say in deciding who would be the members of her team. “I had no say in the hiring of staff except maybe an intern.” This was very atypical because usually participants at the account manager level mentioned a great deal of autonomy and power in making major decisions related to their account.

Except one, all other 22 female participants reported that withholding of information and communication was a common occurrence in their experience, especially while dealing with clients and supervisors. One of the reasons stated by participants was to maintain boundaries in professional relationships. Participants communicated with supervisors with caution and calculative judgment. The extent of openness in communication with supervisors depended on the participant’s individual sense of professional boundaries. For example, Maria recalled her experience during the early years of her career:
Well, I don’t know. I try not to make my bosses my friend. My client is not my friend. As a very young woman…there are work friends and friend friends. Work friends, are you know, six inches deep. And friend friends are miles deep and you can’t go from one to the other, otherwise your feelings get hurt.

Thus, participants disclosed a variety of reasons for withholding information. A few participants narrated how withholding of information had a negative impact on their relationships with journalists. Other reasons for withholding information were embedded in client-agency relationship dynamics, agency culture, and personal choices of public relations professionals.

_Mutual distrust._

The mandate of public relations professionals is to facilitate and enhance communication between clients and stakeholders. Naturally, public relations professionals act as formal and informal points of contact for several stakeholders. Although sometimes public relations professionals withheld information from media and team members, at a broader level they emphasized being open, upfront, and transparent with journalists and colleagues. However, the extent of openness was largely governed by the element of trust in the relationships, which often took some time to cultivate. In most cases, public relations professionals and journalists had a hard time readily trusting each other.

Participants mentioned that when they were too open and honest journalists interpreted this behavior as public relations professionals leading the journalist in a
direction that was in favor of their clients. Scott, a white male in his early forties with eighteen years of experience and vice president, described this tension best:

Being honest and truthful, saying this is what happened you know, is tough too. I think a lot of times some reporters have a certain level of distrust for a public relations person, you know, and they think you are trying to send a story in that direction when you are just kind of trying to explain the situation.

Ronald, a white male in mid forties, and with two decades of experience and running his own sports public relations firm, talked about how tricky it is to build and establish trust:

You’re hanging out with the writers (journalists) and the players. The writers (journalists) think you can’t be trusted, and sometimes the players and the front office might think you can’t be trusted, so it’s a real, I mean, it’s a real challenge.

Umm… there is a lack of trust of the media, generally speaking.

Several participants noted that being communicative and disseminating information was not as easy as it seemed because journalists were distrustful of them.

However, a few participants noted that public relations professionals were also distrustful of journalists. As one participant mentioned, “it’s a two way street.” Paul, a white male professional in his mid thirties with ten years of experience as a public information officer for a large metropolitan city office, mentioned how he was suspicious and distrustful of reporters who were overly communicative. Paul recalled several incidents in the past that eroded his trust especially with TV journalists. Paul mentioned that he used labeling information “on and off the record” as a tool for judging how
trustworthy a journalist was, especially early in his relationship with the journalists. He said:

The good tool we have is on the record and off the record, you know, dealing with the journalists, whether if you can trust the journalist (or not). You can’t do that with everybody. In my experience, you can’t be off record with 90% of television reporters.

Paul later detailed that in the past he had divulged information to journalists off the record with the understanding that the information would not be published or shared with public. It was strictly for the use of the journalist to understand the context of a story or situation better. Paul thought that by doing so he was being transparent with the journalist and in turn gaining the trust of the journalist. However, Paul found out that in his experience 90% of TV reporters did not adhere to this verbal promise and disclosed information in their TV reports. This eroded Paul’s trust in TV journalists and now he does not disclose any information to them other than what is strictly necessary.

Typically, it took time to build trust and establish the relationships. What further complicated the situation for participants was that even if the reporter put forth difficult requests, they still needed him/her in the future and therefore had to sometimes give in to their demands. Maria talked about how a new TV reporter at a station wanted to interview a 10-year-old child who had witnessed a horrible incident. Maria, as the communications officer for a federal agency, wanted to build trust by giving what the reporter asked:
The producer actually said to me, that “I am from eyewitness news, and therefore have to talk to an eyewitness.” And that was her explanation for wanting to stick the poor kid’s face (on camera) and ask him about something that traumatic. It sort of disgusted me personally. And that’s disappointing because you have to turn around and deal with the same producer the next week on something that’s a positive story for your client.

In Maria’s case, she was in a dilemma between giving access to the reporter in order to build long-term dependability and her personal opinion that making a child, who had undergone a traumatic experience, face a camera was unnecessary.

However, paradoxically most participants also stressed that building a trustworthy experience with journalists was important. Margaret talked about this when she mentioned:

So I guess, you know, over a period of time, you get to know who you can trust and who you can work with, and one of the things that I really appreciated was that over time, I built up a reputation, I could be relied upon. So that reputation, you know, spread around and it helped me bridge relationships.

Many also mentioned that they looked forward to openness in communication in their professional relationships. Honest and open communication formed the basis for participants to differentiate between good professional relationships and bad ones. Ruth illustrated how reciprocal communication transformed her relationship with a veteran journalist:
And finally my boss called him up on the phone and said to this journalist, you know, “you’re right. You got the information exactly right. But if you print it, you’re gonna make a lot of trouble with our client in certain parts.” It wasn’t known that the satellite was gonna be sold to somebody else. And we just really screwed it up. And the journalist said, “Who am I to judge?” and he didn’t print it. You know, so...you know you can, that’s the time you know you can trust this journalist. You know it.

Ruth provided a good instance where transparent and honest communication with the journalist made a material difference to the outcome of the event. The journalist, in the quote above, did not mention the company’s mistake in a news report. Thus, he saved millions of dollars and possible loss of customers for her company.

Thus, participants emphasized that building trust among journalists was the key to exercising open, honest, and transparent communication. However, many participants stressed that being transparent and honest in relationships with journalists was not very easy. Data showed that public relations professionals did not trust journalists easily and vice versa. Both treated their relationships as opportunistic. Due to this, open and transparent communication became a problem. However, participants’ experience suggested that building trust especially in the initial phase of the relationship emerged as the key to successful open and transparent communication with the journalists.

To sum up, participants experienced tension between being secretive and transparent. Participants could not share certain types of data or information with journalists and others in the organization because of client-agency relationships, internal
agency culture, and personal preferences. Mutual distrust between journalists and public relations professionals especially hindered open and transparent communication. Withholding information was also used as a tool to maintain distance in professional relationships. However, paradoxically, participants stressed that transparent communication was very important to them to build trusting relationships.

**Public relations work as serving and servitude.**

One of the important aspects of public relations work is exercising influence on broader societal issues through the effective use of communication (Riel Van & Fombrun, 2007). Most public relations professionals are involved in activities that have a positive impact on policy or organizations, eventually benefiting the communities that they live in. Participants felt that public relations work gave them the ability to serve for the greater good, but at the same time, to produce meaningful work participants depended heavily on the clients they serviced. Typically, clients’ business and understanding of public relations determined the account servicing terms. Therefore, although they desired to bring positive change through their client servicing work, the extent to which they could accomplish this objective was largely dependent upon what the clients dictated. Thus, this tension stems from participants’ vision to achieve greater good and trying to achieve the vision amid the constraints created by clients. Elements in this theme include for the greater good and clients don’t get it.

**For the greater good.**

Public relations professionals work for organizations whose operations affect society on a local and global level. By helping their clients make the right policy and
communicative choices, public relations professionals’ influence goes beyond individual clients, and has the potential of positively influencing a much wider community. Some professionals get into public relations work for the primary purpose of working for the greater good. Participants reported a sense of idealism about public relations work, and mentioned that it gave them a chance to influence and serve others beyond their immediate clients.

Participants talked about the fact that they liked servicing clients that influenced the world positively as it gave them immense satisfaction. Steven stated: “I kind of work with green companies or people who are doing something good.” Diana shared similar views, “I think that’s a huge responsibility and a very important one and I mean some of my favorite clients are always the ones that are always dealing with the positive things.” Cynthia said:

Six months ago I started working with a client, which was a school for children with special needs… I feel like promoting that company is helpful to parents and children all over the state of Pennsylvania. So, in that case, that can be a little more rewarding than going in the other direction of products like shoes, in my case.

Cynthia here suggested that she finds promoting a client more meaningful because her work can have a wider positive impact than just promoting products, which is quite marketing driven. Some participants like Martha, an African American female professional in her late thirties with three decades of experience, chose to be in the non-profit sector rather than the for profit sector. Martha has a decade of experience in the
nonprofit sector. She stated, “I like advocacy work and I’ve done a lot of advocacy work with non-profit organizations, so I like helping them resolve issues and you know get to where they need to be.” James, vice president at a leading bank, stated:

I am extremely pleased with the position that I’m in right now. It’s a position that allows me to counsel our most senior executives. It’s a position that allows me to affect and impact policy in entire states. You know, that impacts residents of all those states. So, I feel like I’ve got a good position of influence where I am, which is rewarding.

Participants such as Paul, stated that working for a client is part of public relations work, but it is much more important and satisfying if the client really “does it right.” Paul stressed that getting it right was very important. He said, “It is very rewarding when a company does it right and it shows some real result like it turns something around or it launches a product or… solves a problem.” Even in cases where the organization does not get it right, professionals like Martha stayed on with the organization. The government agency that she was working for made a mistake and she thought of quitting public relations, but continued with the job for opportunities to serve:

Yeah I came really, really close to quitting...but I saw a real strong responsibility to the people you know who needed services to stay and kind of advocate for them internally. And actually, when we had new leadership that became possible. Martha reasoned that she did not quit because she wanted to use her job to influence the lives of people her agency cared for and there she had the power to do greater good.
Participants such as Ryan really valued public relations work that gave them opportunities to help other people, beyond their clients. Ryan stated that he had difficulty doing public relations work that was purely product promotion. Due to the marketing-driven nature of promotion, he had a hard time approaching a journalist for a news story. He mentioned:

I sometimes have a hard time promoting the more marketing type of stuff. I like to commit to journalists with actual stories that I think are interesting and that I think, they will like. I’ve been in several situations where like I know that I am pitching kind of weak.

Participants such as Betty felt a sense of social responsibility and found public relations work unrewarding when she had to promote one of her casino clients:

You know there are times I just have a problem because I represented the casino company and I’m not really a big proponent of gambling, you know. I would go through these promotions or events at casinos and you know you see these poor people who are spending their money and for me it upset me, I felt bad about myself. It’s like representing a cigarette company or something you know and promoting something like booze to young kids, like you just feel bad about yourself.

Barbara, a white female in her early sixties with more than twenty-seven years of experience and former head of a large corporate communication division, summed up the tension public relations professionals faced when they are thinking of the greater good and rewarding work experience while doing client servicing work. She said:
It is like you always have one foot in and one foot out. You work for your organization and client but if you’re any good, you really do care about what’s gonna happen with the other people. You always have this tension.

In this element, participants expressed that through public relations work they hoped to further policies that brought positive changes to a wider community. In fact, the power to positively influence society was one of the reasons why many of them chose a career in public relations. Participants said they liked client-servicing work that provided them with opportunities to advance the greater good, not merely work for a client’s gain. Participants were aware of their social responsibility and felt uncomfortable doing marketing-oriented promotion or publicizing activities like gambling.

*Clients don’t get it.*

Participants commented that many clients did not understand how public relations worked. Further, the clients have a tendency of pushing their demands without taking into consideration the public relations professionals’ expertise. In corporate communications settings, the CEO or the board of directors carried a similar attitude towards the in-house communication professionals. Many participants felt that they were constantly in the state of being a slave to the clients’ or managements’ whims and fancies. Because of this servitude, public relations professionals were not able to completely follow their vision of achieving greater good by doing good things for their clients. Simply put, clients severely restricted public relations professionals’ ability to engage in meaningful work that could have a broader positive societal impact.
The main reason given by participants for their trouble with clients was that many did not understand how public relations worked. One of the most common difficulties participants reported was meeting client expectations because according to participants, clients did not understand “what public relations work was all about.” Many clients regarded public relations professionals as servants just to promote their business. Participants such as Kathleen stated, “You know there’s always a compromise place and really the dilemmas are all about client relationships.” One participant went on to say, that it was sometimes more challenging to work with a client than it was with a journalist because one had to reconcile unreasonable client demands with participants’ view of public relations work. Martha stated:

I would say that it is difficult to deal with clients more than dealing with journalists. Journalists know their profession, clients hire public relation agencies, often, you know have unrealistic expectations of what can be accomplished. And this makes connecting client (stories) to the broader world more difficult.

Ronald, who owns a sports public relations firm, stated, “They (clients) don’t really understand what public relations is and what it’s gonna do for them, so there are some unrealistic expectations.” Amanda, a young white female in mid twenties with four years of experience and an account executive, provided a glimpse of how unrealistic clients can be. “I mean I definitely had clients that you know they think that they should be in New York Times or they should be in Oprah magazine or they should be on Oprah’s TV show.” Anna stated, “We joke all the time that our job would be so much easier if we didn’t have clients. Of course, we wouldn’t have a job if we didn’t have clients.” Anna
here described the ironic nature of public relations professionals’ relationships with clients.

Participants mentioned that there are two types of clients. Mary, based on her experience, talked about this categorization clearly. “One set of clients are clear about what they want, typically a tangible communication product, for example, a brochure. Then there are clients who ask for your services, strategy and expertise.” In the first category were clients who hired the agency or professionals to do a very specific task. Participants observed that different kinds of problems and opportunities emerged with these two sets of clients. By demanding a narrow, purely business-driven service, they restricted public relations professionals’ ability to achieve a broader impact on society.

The second category of clients sought expertise of public relations professionals in deciding the course of action. This category of clients gave participants a chance to connect client-servicing work to the greater good for society. Later in the interview, Mary mentioned that she preferred working with the latter type of clients because she could combine her broader charitable goals with clients’ business. She said, “This only helps their business be seen by the press.” However, as discussed earlier many of these clients do not understand much about public relations work and carry unrealistic expectations.

Betty stated her frustration with clients not understanding public relations and recounted a recent incident where she was planning a “Twitter advice for teens” event that combined highlighting the client’s products and giving advice on etiquette of using Twitter for teens in general. Betty thought it was good to go beyond mere promotion and offer helpful advice to teens. She said, “The more people know about it the more they are
likely to use it.” However, she also mentioned her frustration with the client who second
 guessed her expertise and failed to understand what she was trying to achieve:

   So I came up with this creative tactics and they were like Twitter? I mean Twitter
   has now sort of become accepted and a lot of clients still don’t understand why
   it’s necessary. And you say like, “you really need to have a Twitter handle.” The
   client says, “why would I need to have a Twitter handle?”

Donna, the CEO of a midsized public relations firm with branch offices pointed out a
common misunderstanding clients have regarding the public relations agencies’
relationships with journalists:

   Clients think that somehow because she’s been in the business for a long time and
   have lots of journalist relationships that …you can and somehow get them what
   they want. Clients don’t just see our media relations’ capability as we do.

Donna further talked about how her clients determined how much of an impact she could
have on her community and society in general:

   Because of this mismatch, it just takes more time for the client to understand that
   you operate in an ecosystem; just thinking about you doesn’t work. And frankly, I
   don’t like to work with clients who see their business this narrowly.

Patricia talked about a dilemma she faced with a client who complained about
competitors mentioned in a news story where the client was also featured. She stated, “I
definitely have a client now, whom I would call difficult. Many times the client has said,
the competitors were mentioned. It’s not an ad. There’s no make good in public relations.
So that is awkward.” Patricia quickly followed up her statement and mentioned that she
herself thought if she were a journalist that is how she would write a story because it makes the story more credible and balanced. She reasoned that it was good for readers and better for society to have a balanced perspective. However, she said, “but the clients don’t get it.”

Participants such as Edward further stated that not being the ultimate decision makers also restricted their ability to make decisions for the greater good. Edward, who is a professional with more than four decades of experience with several government and private companies, recalled one incident where his advice was not taken and proved to be a big mistake for the company employees later on. “I knew it was wrong, I knew it was the wrong decision that the board had taken, I mentioned that but, I was kind of quickly told to shut up and told, don’t worry about it. I was intimidated.” Edward mentioned that later the company came under intense public scrutiny and lost credibility because of going with the wrong advice from the lawyers. Thus, in Edward’s case he could only provide strong prescriptive advice, but the ultimate decision rested with the client. Edward felt as if he was a slave to the company structure. Scott talked about how his clients hesitated to accept public relations professionals’ advice although that’s what they hired them for in the first place:

This is always awkward. We know that there are some things that we need to say to them (clients) that are probably not what they want to hear, but at the same time that what’s they kind of pay for. The customer sometimes says “why do we need to do that and how does that work? I already know who my customers are.” We have to explain why it’s different and that’s a whole new unclear territory that
makes our job good and difficult all at the same time because there are so many
different ways to communicate with people now to get your message across.

Similarly, Donna brought up a point where clients always wanted more without paying
more. “I really enjoy working with her, but she is a client who always wants more for less
money. Unfortunately I can only give what the client is willing to pay for.” Mandy
mentioned that this type of business attitude severely restricted her ability to think about
bigger ideas that would benefit the client and society. Adam, a white male in his early
forties, talked about how communication professionals are not decision makers, and this
adds another layer of complexity to the public relations work:

Well, we don’t make the decision to reduce the workforce, for example, we do
help fashion the way the information would be passed along to impact the
individual, but we don’t make major financial and managerial decisions for the
client.

Linda, white female in her mid forties, and an independent consultant, summed up the
tension between finding rewarding work and dealing with difficult clients best. “I can’t
make them do anything. My challenge is that I’m not their boss; I’m their servant. I’m
there to serve them.”

Thus, in this element, participants felt that the opportunities public relations
offered to serve a wider community were largely dependent on clients’ understanding of
public relations. Many clients ignored or doubted advice of public relations professionals
and pushed their own decisions instead. This attitude of clients evoked feelings of
servitude in participants’ minds.
In short, in this theme, participants revealed that public relations work gave them the ability to serve clients and through them, the wider community. In fact, the prospect of achieving the greater good acted as a motivating factor for participants to choose public relations as a career. On the other hand, participants’ ability to make positive contributions was largely dictated by clients’ demands, which were often unreasonable. Thus the tension between serving and servitude emerged because participants felt that their ability to serve for the greater good was heavily influenced by account servicing terms dictated by clients.

**Summary.**

To summarize the discussion of RQ 1, which was set up to discover various tensions experienced by public relations professionals, four tensions emerged. The tensions revolved around four relationships: public relations professionals’ relationship with their work, public relations professionals’ relationships with clients, public relations professionals’ relationships with journalists, and public relations professionals’ relationship with their self.

The first tension that emerged was participants’ experience of public relations work as both tangible and intangible. The two primary drivers behind this tension were a strong focus on building and maintaining relationships with journalists and clients, and the difficulty in measuring these relationships because of their soft and intangible nature. Participants reported that they made an effort to somehow capture the relationships through the daily activities and tasks that were tangible. They could not fully measure value of the relationships in achieving the desired communication goals for clients. In
addition, many times they could not even measure positive effects of their work on society objectively. The two elements in this theme included *relationship focus* and *difficult to measure*.

The second tension emerged from the creative and controlling forces operating in public relations work. Participants were attracted to public relations because of the creative freedom it offered in their daily work life; however, the necessity to predict and manage this creativity towards a strategic end acted as a controlling force for them to contend with. Elements in this theme include *creative calling* and *strategic thinking*.

The third tension participants experienced was between being secretive and transparent particularly in relationships with journalists. Participants expressed views that although public relations is about both transparent and strategic communication, withholding information or not communicating in the workplace was a common occurrence. Elements in this theme included *withholding information* and *mutual distrust*.

The fourth tension participants experienced was between serving and servitude as participants’ ability to serve for the greater good was greatly governed by the account servicing demands of clients. This tension mainly emanated from the professionals’ desire of serving a wider community through public relations work and clients’ unreasonable expectations with regard to servicing work, without much understanding of public relations. Elements in this theme included *for the greater good* and *clients don’t get it*. 
The next step after uncovering tensions was to comprehend how participants negotiate and understand their work to get a true sense of these tensions in the context of each participant’s professional experience. The following research question emerged:

**Research Question 2a**

RQ 2a: How do public relations professionals negotiate organizational tensions and dialectics?

This question sought to understand the communicative means by which participants negotiated tensions experienced in public relations work. “Negotiate” was intended to capture how participants made sense of tensions experienced in public relations work. For this reason, questions asked to capture this information included: Did the participants like public relations work? How did they feel when caught between journalists, clients, and supervisors? How did they feel when they were overloaded with work? Did supervisors and colleagues listen to participants’ views? To further capture the subtleties in these communicative processes, participants were asked to describe public relations work metaphorically and were given the opportunity to compare public relations work with a word or an object that summed up the essence of public relations in their opinion. Overall, participants had difficulty conveying to others what they did as part of public relations work, but asking them about their work in the context of familiar objects/things helped shed light on how they perceived and negotiated tensions in their work.

Two major metaphors, public relations work as managing a family and public relations work as a game or sport, were uncovered that help us understand and establish...
how participants made sense of their work. The metaphors also provide insights into how they negotiated stress and tensions. In the first metaphor, participants understood their relationship with clients, supervisors, and colleagues in the context of their family. Public relations professionals talked about dealing with clients and client servicing activities as similar to raising children, invoking notions of nurturing, caring, and sharing for clients. On the other hand, relationships with supervisors and colleagues were explained and rationalized in terms of dealing with difficult family members. In the second metaphor, participants viewed public relations work as a game or sport, however they also emphasized how their work was different from a normal game because of its never ending nature and the subjective rules and standards it followed.

**Public relations is like family.**

Family emerged to be a dominant metaphor through which public relations professionals understood and explained their interactions with clients and their dealings with bosses and colleagues. A typical public relations professional is mandated with several client servicing responsibilities. Broadly, this entails extensive interactions with clients to facilitate planning and execution of communication strategies. As part of his/her client management responsibilities, the professional is also expected to report activities to his/her supervisors and update the internal team regularly. Thus, as part of public relations work, a professional has to deal extensively with clients, boss/supervisor, and internal team members. Naturally, these relationships are key for the success of public relations professionals.
In this study, data suggested that public relations professionals mainly thought about these relationships in the context of a family. Public relations professionals talked about client servicing responsibilities as similar to raising children, something that one does with careful attention and thought. On the other hand, working with difficult supervisors and colleagues was described as dealing with difficult family members. Elements in this theme included *nurturing, caring, and sharing* and *difficult members*.

**Nurturing, caring, and sharing.**

The primary responsibility of public relations professionals was servicing the client—understanding communication requirements and providing solutions through strategizing, planning, and execution. Interestingly, the idea of servicing clients was mainly infused with notions of nurturing, caring, and sharing. Most participants compared client servicing with taking care of children. They seemed to think of themselves as caretakers of clients’ overall growth. Participants associated themselves with these paternal and maternal roles.

Diana mentioned that her priority was to ensure client growth. She compared client-servicing work with taking care of children. She said, “Like for most parents, children come first. Same is the case with clients.” Diana further elaborated:

I mean they are like children; need to take good care of them. So for me, my first responsibilities are the client, and to help our client grow in as many ways as possible. Provide opportunities for them in the media so that they can get the exposure they need to grow, especially smaller companies.
Here Diana captured the essence of nurturing and the growth of clients by comparing them to children who need the help of adults /caretakers to mature and grow. Donna said that she worked towards ensuring client’s growth and keeping the client’s interest in mind. “It’s to work with my clients, and figure out what would work best for them and you know, to fulfill their goals in the checklist.” Similarly, Mary talked about her focus on offering help to the client as she would to any of her close family members:

I think that you’re kind of always thinking about how to help your clients, like you’re always thinking about how to help your family members. If there’s a client event that you’re trying to plan, you plan it like you’re planning a family event. You get yourself as worked up over the client event as you do with family events because you feel like it needs to be perfect, just like you would want for your family.

Joe suggested that keeping clients happy was his key responsibility and compared clients to his family:

Clients are like family members, you know. In the agency world, my responsibilities are keeping my clients happy… whatever that means if that means they need to be in the media, they stay in the media, if that means that they need to get a newsletter written for their internal purpose…whatever is key to my clients being happy.

As indicated, Joe here compared client happiness with family happiness. For Joe, keeping clients happy was indicative of his overall success as an account supervisor, and was very important to him.
In all the three cases above, Joe, Diana, and Mary seemed to compare client-servicing work to raising children and caring for family. In doing so, they experienced notions of caring, nurturing, and growth, which are typical characteristics of parental roles in the family. Tom, who is white male with close to three decades of experience and a former director, further elaborated this nurturing role as part of his CEO communication mandate:

You have to be close to them (CEOs) in order to be able to help them and provide what you can in that environment. It’s very stressful, but very satisfying at the end of the day because you helped someone. The feeling is similar… when you help your kid study for a quiz, you know.

For Tom, one important part of his CEO communication mandate was to prepare CEOs for media interviews, where the reporter essentially quizzed the CEO about the company. As Tom had coached the CEO, Tom explained and understood his work in the context of his paternal role as a father.

Parental roles were often associated with effectiveness in running a family. This was exhibited when Alan mentioned that, “Good public relations, effective public relations is like the Ozzie and Harriet of television.” He reasoned that like Ozzie and Harriet, one needs to have an effectively functioning family that “recognizes and shares day-to-day issues and resolves them on the spot, and not let them drag out, drag on, and turn into crisis.” Similarly, Ruth talked about public relations work as running a household. When I asked Ruth to explain what she meant, she responded:
You know because you happen to hold a bunch of tasks, you have a whole series of tasks you have to accomplish, and to accomplish them you need to communicate with everybody around you, basically, yeah, you need to communicate with everybody around you.

Ruth, here, found similarities between accomplishing daily public relations work with getting daily household tasks done. Interestingly, in both these cases, the family metaphor came from two veteran industry professionals with a strong defense background that privileged centralized and effective systems of communication. Further, both participants inclined to speak from the position of a caretaker of the family, for whom, effective communication was necessary to carry out responsibilities. Paul talked about how he protected his agency like his family: “My job is to protect the organization against bad headlines...like you would protect your family.” He further elaborated, “It’s taking a more proactive approach. Try and avoid disasters before they happen.” A few participants, like Paul, also exhibited protective instincts typically associated with parental roles.

Overall, participants distinctly thought about client servicing in the context of raising children and taking good care of family. They emphasized notions of nurturing, growing, sharing, caring, and protecting their clients as if the clients were like their own children. In doing so, participants also envisioned themselves in parental roles, where they committed to put their clients’ interests first and protect clients from any adverse situations, just as they would do for their own children and family.
**Difficult members.**

Dealing with coworkers and supervisors is an essential aspect of any profession. In public relations, the professionals typically report to one or two supervisors and collaborate with coworkers who are part of different client servicing teams. Just as every family consists of a few difficult members, participants revealed that such members also exist in the workplace. Supervisors and colleagues, who were particularly hard to deal with, were rationalized as difficult family members.

Participants reported having great difficulty working with supervisors. Barbara, when working for a government agency, talked about the fact that her boss would typically not listen to her. She said, “I knew they won’t listen to me, ah, that place was like one big dysfunctional family.” Barbara talked about several such incidents where she, as a public relations professional, had great difficulty convincing executives to make them listen to her suggestions. Barbara rationalized the workplace in terms of a family and dealt with difficult bosses and colleagues as if she would with a difficult family member. Ruth talked about the difficulties she had with her boss and related them to the difficulties she had dealing with her father when she was growing up:

When dealing with my boss, I always thought of how I dealt with my father. My last boss, I think he was addicted to work, and he couldn’t stop himself, he was addicted to the rush of stress. My father was an alcoholic, and unfortunately I came from a family that was very, very dysfunctional and my dad was, just a very belligerent, very difficult man to get along with.
Ruth here drew from her childhood experience of dealing with a difficult family member to understand the behavior of her boss. Her prior experience of a deeply personal and difficult relationship with her father facilitated how she endured working with her bosses. Later in the interview, Ruth mentioned that she always saw difficult peoples’ behaviors in the context of her childhood experience. In short, Ruth clearly demonstrated that she negotiated and interpreted her supervisors’ workplace behaviors in the context of her personal relationships. Participants having extensive corporate communication experience reported that their supervisors typically came from a technical background. Therefore, most of them did not know a great deal about public relations. They narrated incidents of negotiating and dealing with supervisors who would not listen to them. Tom commented:

The CFO to whom I reported didn’t really care about public relations, most CFOs don’t. But like a family member, I saw him every day and had to get along. He came over from the company’s treasury department and had no experience in public relations. So here I am with twenty plus years in the field and I’ve got two people above me who either don’t care about public relations or don’t know anything about public relations, so in my particular case, yeah, it was a huge struggle.

Tom acknowledged the individual differences that existed between him and the CFO boss in the context of his family. He further differentiated his experience with that of his boss, who did not care much. Although Tom seemed upset about the situation, he rationalized and made sense of the situation in the context of the family metaphor and dealt with his
supervisors as he would with someone in his family. Linda talked about a similar experience when she handled public relations for a law firm:

I would say that certain lawyers were very difficult. Some of them have just very distinct personalities, just like in a family. Some attorneys are not very easy to get along with and are very confrontational. Actually, one of them reminds me of my brother growing up; you know always fighting on the little things.

Linda compared her interactions with a particular lawyer to that of her brother’s personality and made sense of how she should communicate with him.

In addition to supervisors, participants also reported colleagues to be like family members and difficult to get along. Kimberly, a white female in her later thirties with eighteen years of experience and owner of a boutique public relations firm narrated an incident when a person who reported to her refused to cooperate and share information with her while working on a joint client project. Kimberly compared this particular interaction with two sisters fighting:

For some reason this person was very upset about me joining the organization and was not going to cooperate with me whatsoever. She had to work very closely (with me) on one particular client. It was like two sisters fighting. She said, “I’m not gonna share information with you. I’m not going to help you. I don’t think I need you and I don’t want you here. And I’m going to walk away. And I’m not gonna show you my work, and I’m not going to” you know… obviously there was no way she was listening to me.
Thus, a few participants reported instances where they compared difficult coworkers with their siblings. Participants further compared the size of a workplace with the size of families and its effect on their relationships with coworkers. Almost all of the participants who had worked at larger public relations firms or companies mentioned that they faced more politics and difficult relationships in those firms than at smaller firms. Steven put this aptly in the context of the family metaphor as he talked about the rift he experienced between his colleague and him at a very large global public relations agency. Steven contrasted his experience of working in a small agency versus a large one:

> I can confidently say, bigger the family, bigger the problems; working as global public relations head was difficult. It was more political in the bigger agency so not only am I dealing with higher level colleagues all around, but then I am also dealing with more politics. I represented a public relations division as VP, and there was another VP that represented the advertising division, and she always took control and reduced public relations to just the press release… so instead of dealing with the client issues I was spending more time dealing with agency dynamics.

Later, Steven acknowledged that he left the large public relations agency and joined a much smaller firm because of this particular stressful relationship. After the move to a smaller firm, he said he was “much happier” due to relatively less stressful work relationships. Similarly, Adam, a white male in early forties with eighteen years of experience and senior vice president of a midsized metropolitan public relations firm, compared working in a large public relations firm to a family living arrangement:
I think in a way there are cases where you work with partner agency because they work with clients that have business agreements with yours and 95% of the time you share the same objective and 5% of the time you don’t. That 5% of the time you potentially warrant the conflict that you have to resolve. It’s like husband and wife need to be on the same page to run the family. But if they are not, it causes problem (chuckles). Uhh… it’s very difficult.

Adam gave this example because in the public relations business one company often owns several other smaller firms that offer specialized services, for example, an advertising agency, a public relations agency, or a media research firm, etc. Sometimes these smaller firms service the same client. As a result of such business agreements, heads of different firms of that holding company need to work with each other. In this case, the husband and wife Adam refers to are the heads of two servicing agencies who might disagree on a particular aspect of communication strategy for a particular client.

In this element, participants reported having difficulty dealing with supervisors and colleagues, and compared them to difficult family members. Further, participants compared the size of the organization with the size of a family and noted that they experienced more tense relationships in bigger organizations than smaller ones. In sum, participants communicatively understood and interpreted their actions and workplace context as dealing with difficult family members.

In this theme, family emerged to be a dominant metaphor through which public relations professionals made sense of their interactions with clients and their dealings with bosses and colleagues. The servicing role of public relations professionals
highlighted parental notions of growth, nurturing, and care giving as clients were often compared to children in the family. On the other hand, working with difficult bosses and colleagues was rationalized as dealing with difficult family members. The family metaphor brings out the relationship-oriented nature of public relations work and describes how participants perceive the issues of responsibility, stress, and tensions in work relationships.

**Public relations is a unique game.**

The competitiveness and skillful character of public relations work emerged through the game metaphor. During interviews, participants consistently used phrases like winning the game, losing the game, rules of the game, etc. However, there were a few unique features of public relations work that made participants characterize public relations as unlike any “other game.” Further, participants characterized public relations work as a never ending game that employed subjective rules and standards. These two elements made participants’ lives very stressful. Elements in this theme include *never-ending* and *subjective rules*.

**Never-ending.**

Participants revealed that public relations work can be never ending and exhausting because journalists, supervisors, and colleagues continuously request information. Participants emphasized this never-ending cycle of public relations work in the context of a game, such as running a marathon and playing soccer. They drew parallels between the long drawn, exhausting nature of public relations work and being involved in games that demanded endurance, strength, and perseverance in good
measure. As one participant put it, “I do think that this is a job that never ends…you are in a game that goes on. You could put in 12 hours a day and it still wouldn’t be done.”

The never-ending nature of public relations work was mainly attributed to servicing the client with great dedication and keeping the agency business growing. For example, Scott mentioned how public relations work is a twenty-four hour job that never ends, even during the holidays:

I can think of many occasions where you know, for Thanksgiving or Christmas or whatever it is, I’m talking to a reporter on the phone about something around e-mail and somebody’s something. We’re trying to track somebody down and get an answer for a reporter, so, you know, I think it’s just part of the responsibility you have to take on, you know, if you’re gonna work with clients and be there, it is 24/7.

This urge for working nonstop for clients was driven by several factors. Joe, an account manager, mentioned public relations work as a game and that “keeping clients happy and getting more clients and growing the agency business was very important” to him and was “part of the game.” Carol, a white female in her late forties, with more than two decades of experience and owner of a boutique public relations firm, compared public relations work to a marathon and riding a bike on a difficult terrain:

I mean, you know it is something like a marathon, you know, like riding bike up a hill or playing up a football game or a soccer game. Because you're gonna have obstacles in your way, you know, the wind current may be strong at some point or
another. The hill may be steeper at some point or another. But having an eventual goal, having the crowd cheer (laughs); is what’s worth all this.

Carol above created a picture of the hurdles and obstacles and implied that public relations work required great strength and persistence since it was a long-drawn game. Mary further elaborated how public relations work puts constant pressure on people to perform. “You are in the shower and thinking of how to write that article, or thinking about a client email while driving to work.” Several participants mentioned that the time sensitive nature of their work was one major reason why they had to take work home or think about work constantly. Betty, who has a nine-month-old son, narrated a detailed incident that gives a glimpse into how she cannot pull away from work even on her day off because of the time sensitive nature of the work. Betty said:

But there are some times when you can’t help it. You have to be in a meeting on a Friday. You have to be in a conference call. Reporters are emailing you or asking for things or calling you and life doesn’t stop just because you’re home with your kid. We don’t have that kind of job. If I was an insurance sales person, on Friday I don’t work because nothing is that critical or you know time sensitive, but in our job, it is. People are on deadline. People have questions that need to be answered so you have to be in touch. So especially on Fridays, I can’t do travelling a lot because I got my child who’s running around like crazy but I need to look up a media contact because my clients want the press release to go out. You know all of a sudden, the client says I want press release to go today. You need to write it
and you need to send it out. Okay. I have to figure it out, you know, or the only
time an interview could happen is on a Friday.

Thus, the time sensitive nature of work and dedication to clients were two important
factors that made participants say that public relations work was never ending and
stressful.

Aside from the time sensitive nature of the work and dedication to serve clients,
competition in the business was another key factor that contributed to the participants
feeling that public relations work is never ending. When I asked Mary why she felt
pressured, she responded, “Your clients run the game. You have to play the game or
clients will find another agency if we cannot deliver.” Cynthia, a mother of two and a
professional at handling clients in the technology and travel industry, talked about how
after the second maternity leave she was not supposed to work on Mondays, but now she
had to and it was affecting her work and personal relationship with her second young son.
Cynthia couldn’t complain about it:

So, I’m home with him (her son) and it was my arrangement that on Monday’s, I
don’t – I’m not suppose to work at all. I’m not supposed to do meetings,
conference calls because I don’t have coverage and it’s hard to take care of a kid
who’s screaming and be on a conference call. But I don’t complain about it, if you
are not there, then they will hire someone who will be there for them all the time.

Thus, a few female participants in this study who had young children found public
relations work especially challenging and difficult to handle. The competitiveness and
inability to take time off caused a lot of stress. In Ruth’s case, this caused an autoimmune disorder:

  Really, I think I was in a position where um, I was responsible for eight different areas in external communications, it was crazy. And, you really needed to be able to work like eight o’clock in the morning to seven o’clock every day, and take work home. I got an autoimmune disease because of the stress and then I had to have surgery and be operated on.

But not all participants chose to be players in this long-drawn game. One particular participant, Linda, was very reflective about a life changing moment that made her revolt against the ensnaring nature of work:

  I would get home at night and worked all night till 1:00 in the morning. I saw no friends. I saw no family. I started having what probably in hindsight was nervous breakdown. I just thought at that time that I can’t live this way. I don’t want to live this way. And it became a very life defining moment for me. I just said, “I don’t have to!”

A few months after, Linda quit her job and started her own agency. She currently works as an independent consultant. However, going independent did not work for all professionals. Carol mentioned that in her case she thought going independent would help her choose her work hours, but that did not turn out to be the case. Later she took up a position with a firm rather than working independently:

  Even as an independent practitioner, I had this publisher client, a book author, who had me up at three o’clock in the morning doing plans for him, you know.
Only for him to come back and try to do it himself or just some other aspects and you just couldn’t set him in one place and say, this is what we’re going to do. He didn’t know what he was doing tomorrow. So that was a little crazy.

Further, there seemed to be a difference in the way young professionals and experienced professionals responded to the never-ending nature of public relations work. Participants in a typical public relations agency set up early in their careers approached public relations work as a highly competitive game. They mentioned that they were in it “to win.” For example, Ryan, who has been in public relations for just a couple of years, said, “I am in this to win, win the argument, win the game you know, so I think it is worth staying late.” Veteran professionals have made peace with it and accepted it as an inevitable part of their job. For example, Scott, a vice president with eighteen years of public relations experience stated that the never-ending cycle of work did not seem to bother him anymore. “I think I am just kind of used to it, it’s not that bad now.”

In this element, participants emphasized the long-drawn nature of public relations work. Time sensitive tasks, dedication to clients, and competition were the factors that made public relations work exhausting and never ending. Therefore, participants compared it to a never-ending game. While younger participants viewed working late as necessary for a successful career, older participants possessed a more passive attitude towards the unending nature of public relations work.

Subjective rules.

A significant challenge for public relations professionals was to deal with the subjective rules of public relations work emanating from individual choices. Public
relations professionals had to deal with several stakeholders and issues, including certain external uncertainties; however, the manner in which they approached a particular situation was largely governed by their personal interests and judgment. Although public relations seemed like a game to participants, the subjective nature of the rules made it unique and added a layer of complexity. For example, Mary illustrated the idea of subjective rules well when she said:

As a public relations person, you kind of have a lot to keep up with, and you’re expected to know a lot about lots of things, especially in an agency. I do feel like you’re trying to be everything to all people a lot of times. It’s a struggle to be everything to everyone and play along their rules. It’s like chess, but without strict rules. Imagine that, it sometimes drives me insane.

Mary pointed out that public relations professionals had to work around diverse interests and expectations. They had to follow separate rules depending on who they were interacting with, which made their jobs quite stressful. Kimberly further reasoned and explained that subjective rules existed because, “what’s difficult about public relations is that, it is so much about human behavior, perception, and interests. Dealing with these is like walking on several tightropes at once.” Ryan related Kimberly’s comment to his specific work context, and said, “Every journalist and client that I have interacted with has a different sense of public relations and that it’s important for me to kind of play by their rules.” Ryan further mentioned that within a couple of years he understood the existence of different perceptions about public relations work and now does a better job of servicing clients.
Scott compared his daily work to solving a puzzle. He argued that because he has to react differently for each of his clients, he has to take a unique route each time to have a successful outcome in the eyes of the client, just like a puzzle:

Public relations is like a puzzle or that sort of game, you know because aa…like anything else there is a process. I think there is a right way and a wrong way to go about it, you know. So ,ummm…..hopefully we’re doing it the right way, and aaa… (laughs) you know. So I would say something like that, public relations is a math puzzle or a, you know, or even maybe a game, you know, there’s rules, there’s process.

According to Scott’s interpretation, there is a unique way of solving a puzzle each time one attempts it. Thus, there is no set way of thinking and strategizing in public relations. For Sharon this became apparent in a very different fashion. Sharon talked about how she had a supervisor who disregarded the true role of public relations in a crisis. He instead set a bad example for professional conduct based on his personal choice. She mentioned that when she was working for this particular individual, the agency was at fault in a workplace accident, but her boss denied the agency’s responsibility. She said:

Complete screw-up from beginning to end, solely the department’s fault. He sort of bent the rules and denied responsibility for the incident during a press conference. Having an executive who does not understand the responsibilities of public office and the media as an extension of the people, is just a bad boss to deal with, in such a situation.
After evading the truth in the press conference, Sharon’s boss asked her to deal with the media. Naturally for Sharon, it was a very tense and bad experience. She felt very stressed during this time because her boss misunderstood public relations work and the rules of engagement with journalists. Sharon left the organization three months after this incident. The subjective understanding of public relations work and the absence of set guidelines made it very challenging.

Participants talked about how they had to balance their tasks because of the subjective rules. Ryan talked about the fact that servicing clients is a fairly difficult task: “I’m in-charge of promoting the events and interests of you know multiple clients at one time and sometimes they compete with each other and it’s about finding a balance for that.” Beyond labeling public relations work as a balancing act, Betty sheds light on the interest-based nature of these interactions that create the motivation for journalists, clients, and supervisors to interpret public relations as they please. Betty summarized the complexity this way:

I think it’s always just a balancing act. You balance your client’s interest versus the media and your own interest in working with the media and you want to service everybody. You want to service your client, you want to service the media and sometimes that doesn’t jell and you sort of figure out ways around it and it can be, this could be a very, very stressful job because you play on people’s emotions and their work and I can’t do my work without a journalist but a lot of the times a journalist can do his work without me, you know. So it’s like a lot of give and take and I don’t know it’s just, it can be very, very difficult. I mean you
can have a client who doesn’t want to do something, but you know it’s the right thing.

Thus, the data suggests public relations professionals interpreted and believed that public relations was a different and a unique game due to the never-ending nature of the work and subjective rules. These two elements made public relations work more complex than other types of work, in turn making the life of public relations professionals stressful in a unique kind of way.

Summary.

To sum up the discussion of RQ 2a, so far two distinct metaphors, managing a family and playing a unique game, emerged through which participants made sense of their work and negotiated tensions they experienced in their work life. RQ 2a, as discussed previously specifically sought to understand the communicative means by which participants negotiated tensions or issues experienced in public relations work.

Family emerged to be a dominant metaphor through which public relations professionals communicatively understood and explained their interactions with clients, bosses, and colleagues. Elements in this theme included nurturing, caring, and sharing; and difficult members. The second metaphor participants used to negotiate and make sense of the tensions emanated from the competitive, challenging, and exhausting nature of public relations work; therefore, participants aptly characterized public relations as a game. However, a few unique qualities about public relations work that participants experienced made public relations unlike any “other game.” Elements in this theme included never ending game and subjective rules.
Research Question 2b

RQ 2b: Which communication strategies do the professionals employ in navigating these tensions and contradictions?

This question sought to understand the communicative strategies employed by public relations professionals to deal with the tensions they experienced in their work. In other words, how did participants communicatively manage these tensions? For example, participants were asked how they tackled interactions with journalists, clients, and colleagues to maintain functioning relationships. If they felt stressed, what did they do? If they felt relationships were not going well, how did they make them work? What were other points of tension? What did they do in such cases? Further, participants were also asked what steps they took to resolve a particular issue or manage a relationship.

Participants used several strategies that could be clustered into two themes of avoidance and reframing.

Under avoidance, participants suppressed their emotions in order to avoid discomfort in relationships with supervisors and subordinates. Participants also employed humor as a strategy to avoid discomfort. Further, humor was mostly used with journalists and subordinates and less with colleagues and supervisors. In reframing, participants reframed many of the potentially problematic situations as media opportunities for clients. Participants in critical sectors such as defense, nuclear energy, mining, etc. engaged in reframing through rationalizing and distancing strategies.
Avoidance.

Several participants chose to avoid discomfort in working relationships, and used it as a strategy to cope with tensions they experienced with clients, supervisors, and colleagues. Largely, the avoidance tactics used were subtle, fine-tuned, and varied based on the exact tone of the conversation and issue at hand. Public relations professionals stated having used some kind of avoidance strategy internally with both their supervisors and colleagues and externally with clients and journalists. Participants revealed that their people pleasing nature and strong dislike of any discomfort in relationships were the major reasons for using avoidance. A second strategy participants employed was using humor when dealing with a journalist, a difficult colleague, and subordinates. Thus, the elements in this theme include people pleasing by suppressing emotions and using humor.

People pleasing by suppressing emotions.

The ability to manage client relationships and working well with people is heavily emphasized and cultivated as part of the enculturation process in the public relations profession. In many large firms, participants are administered several psychological tests before they are hired (Shuit, 2003). People skills are greatly emphasized during the recruitment process because of the centrality of relationships in public relations. Not surprisingly, participants reported the implicit expectation of maintaining smooth relationships at any cost. Oftentimes participants suppressed their true emotions, compelled by the innate desire to avoid discomfort in relationships. Most participants
described the relationship-oriented nature of public relations work. Naturally, their success depended on their ability to sustain these relationships.

Several participants such as Linda used the term “people pleasing” to describe themselves. Linda talked about her early career days when she was a “people pleasing” person. She said that she “struggled with being too much of a people’s person and still, after all these years struggled with it.” She also characterized herself as a person who avoided conflict as much as possible:

I try not to deal with it (conflict) as much as possible. I keep being put into situations where I have to deal with conflicts so I think that’s my life lesson (laughs). I tried to avoid it. I tried to make sure everybody is happy so I don’t have to deal with the conflict.

When asked why she avoided conflict, Kimberly said “it’s sort of a negative you know.” Later in the interview, Linda talked about the negative aspects and said “being negative I mean when people labeled me a negative or an unpleasant person whom they always tried to avoid.” Jessica, a white female in her late twenties with seven years of experience and who specializes in tourism and hospitality public relations said:

I don’t like upsetting other people. So when a tense moment is about to happen, I basically just try to count to ten and try to find a way to avoid the conflict. I don’t know if that makes sense but that’s how I handle it.

Jessica here reinforced Linda’s point that participants are always thinking about avoiding any kind of discomfort in the situation. Amanda provided a very good example of a particularly difficult situation where she chose to conceal her frustration to avoid any
trouble with her boss. Amanda had recently wanted to write an article for another organization but her boss refused. She characterized the issue as “very discomforting.” She said:

I mean, I was pretty frustrated at that point. You know I understood her point certainly. I understood that you know she didn’t want me writing for an outside organization as it may be competition for her company but like I said I also took the time to think through and make sure it wasn’t competition and it wasn’t competing with any of the clients at the time. And so you know I was pretty frustrated because I was excited to write the article and you know be a part of it and you know for me it kind of seemed like she hadn’t thought through it as much. But what can you do. She’s the boss.

Instead of openly discussing the problem with her boss and explaining how she really felt about her boss’s decision, Amanda chose not to question her authority because it was not in her nature. Although upset, she wanted to avoid any obvious standoff that could result from confronting her boss. Rita, a white female with three decades of experience and vice president of a large corporation, recounted a similar incident involving the CEO of a company. The CEO was furious because his company was not included in a Forbes magazine survey and some of the company’s competitors were. The CEO called her into his office and questioned why the company was not in the survey. “‘Well,’ the CEO said, ‘Fortune Magazine didn’t pick us and what are you going to do about it?’” She talked with her boss for forty-five minutes about the issue and left the office ultimately agreeing
to talk to the journalist. When I asked her what was she thinking during those forty-five minutes, she said:

I thought the CEO was nuts, you know. You’re just, you’re idiots, you know, I thought. It’s as if one said the magic words and we will have better relationships, and other things (organizational factors) simply won’t matter. And it’s just crazy, you know.

I also asked her why she didn’t talk to her boss about what she really thought during the meeting. She responded, “I avoid confrontations, I hate them.” Here, Rita chose to avoid the discomfort in the interaction over actually addressing the substantive problem.

Similarly, Amanda, who did a short stint at a small public relations agency, shared a difficult relationship with her boss. She summed up the idea of avoiding discomfort within interpersonal relationships in a public relations agency setting:

We (agency) were great communicating with the media, with clients but internally we’re just, not. I don’t know because everyone kind of has their own agenda or because everyone is working with different clients or what it is but I pretty much found that every agency I worked at, there’s kind of some internal things that are going on and people just don’t talk about it.

Amanda’s observation summed up her experience that within public relations agencies people do not talk openly about issues to avoid over uneasiness in relationships. Even Alan, who was in the defense services, talked about avoiding discomfort his entire career. Particularly, Alan’s professional relationship with one of his bosses was so bad that he believed the tension and agony caused by that relationship was more damaging than a
bomb hitting his vehicle. “A bomb hit our vehicle in Iraq. The bomb was scary, but that lasted only a couple of minutes. But dealing with a difficult boss, it is slow and more painful with no end in sight.” When talking about his most tense moment Alan said:

The most tense moment was when I was resigning from a position when I finally, finally got my boss to admit that we weren’t made for each other because I knew it, I felt it, and I sensed it over a period of time and I finally went to her and I said, “you know what, it’s not working for me and I sense it’s not working for you.” So I put it on me instead of putting it on her and she said “you know you’re right.” I said “thank you for finally admitting it. Let’s do what we need to do to wrap things up in the most gentle professional way.”

Alan, who finally brought up the topic with his boss, still chose to put the blame of the relationship on himself to avoid bitter feelings from the boss.

Overall, participants were averse to communicating their true feelings that could cause discomfort in their work relationships. One participant said, “No, no, no. You don’t confront your boss. Never.” Participants talked about avoiding discomfort by mostly hiding their true feelings in their working relationships. Some participants went to great lengths to postpone discussing issues or problems with their boss. They hoped they could avoid the unpleasantness of confronting a boss and the fear of reprisal altogether.

**Using humor.**

Public relations professionals often mentioned using humor as a strategy to avoid discomfort. Participants explained that when dealing with journalists, clients, and colleagues, they engaged in humor by trying to say something funny or playful. However,
the participants stayed away from humor when dealing with a boss. Participants used humor in the hope of minimizing discomfort and awkwardness in conversations. They used humor in different ways and in a variety of situations. For example, follow up calls to journalists are difficult because they eat up journalists’ time. Margaret talked about how she typically handled such interactions over the phone, to ease the awkwardness in the conversation:

Most of the time I made the call, I tried to be goofy or funny or clever. You know, I tried to find a way to make it worth their time. I tried to not make it be a typical follow up call. I tried to just say, “Hey, I am really sorry, I know you hate, or probably hate public relations people calling you but I just really need to know about how the weather is in New York today”…you know.

In the above conversation, Margaret used humor to ease the anxiety in the phone conversation. The use of humor by participants was governed by whether they had interacted with the journalist before. In Margaret’s case, she had talked to this particular journalist several times in the past.

In cases in which the relationship between the participant and the journalist was fairly well established, participants said that they used humor to break the monotony of a “simple hello.” Janet, a white female in her late forties with seventeen years of experience and a vice president handling consumer goods and clients in the foods sector, talked about how she handled such routine calls with the media:

I talk to the same journalists almost every other day. Asking what’s up or what’s new sort of gets redundant. There is one journalist whose wife is a good friend of
mine and so I once called him and mimicked his wife’s voice. And he sort of bought it for a second and then started laughing. He was very impressed with my imitation (smiles).

Similarly, in Janet’s case, she had a good established relationship and knew the journalist on a personal level because of which she was confident that her being humorous would not be misinterpreted.

However, the use of humor was also proved to be a risky strategy as sometimes seemingly funny statements caused uneasiness, rather than smoothing the relationships. Early in her career, Maria, tried to be funny with a reporter in the first interaction, but things backfired:

I can’t remember exactly, but he was from Nebraska and in the middle of the conversation I kind of joked about the Nebraska Navy and he kind of thought I was making fun of him, which I wasn’t. Long story short, it didn’t go very well from there (sighs). From then on I never tried to be funny in my initial interactions with journalists.

A few other female participants reported similar experiences. They thought they were trying to be funny but it was not interpreted in the right way. When asked if it had anything to do with their gender, none of the participants thought it had any particular connection to them being female.

Participants such as Maria also reported that they typically were more likely to use humor with colleagues than with supervisors. Maria said, “Generally I say something funny when talking with my colleagues and not with my boss. You know with a boss it
might seem a bit unprofessional. So I am more careful.’’ Here Maria conveyed a sense
that because colleagues are at the same hierarchical level in the organization, she was
more comfortable with using humor. However, using the same strategy with her boss was
riskier and complicated due to the inherent power dimension in the relationship.
Participants in supervisory roles also reported using humor more frequently to
communicate with subordinates, especially when a subordinate committed a mistake.
Helen said:

I mean it’s hard when you become a manager and you are friendly with
everybody in the office and then tell your subordinate who is not doing or
performing the way you need them to or they’re coming late all the time. When a
junior colleague came late for the meeting, I sort of asked him jokingly, “Too
much traffic in the elevator Joe?” We both smiled, but he got the point without me
lecturing him.

Helen used humor as a strategy to convey to Joe that coming late was not
acceptable. Overall, participants reported using humor as a strategy to deal with
awkwardness and to avoid discomfort while communicating with journalists, colleagues,
and subordinates. Generally, the use of humor indicated a level of familiarity in the
relationship. Surprisingly, there were no instances where participants talked about using
humor in dealing with clients.

In this theme, participants reported avoiding discomfort because of their people
pleasing nature and dislike for any uneasiness in relationships. They especially used
avoidance while communicating with difficult bosses. Further, participants also talked
about using humor in interactions to cope with awkwardness in media interactions and tensions while dealing with colleagues and subordinates. Participants emphasized that during their interactions with bosses they typically would not engage in humor and would be more formal.

**Reframing.**

The nature of public relations work meant that public relations professionals had to deal with multiple issues and viewpoints. To successfully overcome challenging situations, public relations professionals often viewed them as potential opportunities to achieve the communication goals of their clients. Further, they had to ensure that their personal opinion on issues, based on their value system, was not adversely affecting their ability to do their job. The nature of public relations work that required a constant need for advocating client viewpoints forced public relations professionals to continually evaluate their view of themselves. Although an instinctive process, it was extra work to constantly evaluate their personal stance on issues. Public relations professionals chose to reframe negative situations into positive situations so that they could better deal with the difficult issues—from purely transactional problems to complex questions of morality. Reframing was considered inevitable by some professionals because it helped them ease off the certain emotional, ethical, and moral stress experienced in public relations work. This was particularly true for professionals working in sectors such as defense, military, nuclear power, and mining. The strategy of reframing the issues and reframing their personal, ethical, and moral positions acted as a coping mechanism that enabled these
professionals to carry on with their work. Elements in this theme included *client opportunities* and *rationalizing and distancing*.

**Client opportunities.**

In this strategy, participants reframed the challenges they faced as opportunities in order to cope better in those situations. A pattern of reframing a situation emerged that when public relations professionals experienced tense or complicated interactions with media, they framed it as client opportunities. James, who routinely dealt with labor negotiations and political issues, said, “If you keep looking at problems in public relations as too difficult, then it gets very stressful. But seeing it as an opportunity helps you approach it in a different way.”

Most participants reframed challenges as media opportunities. Richard gave a meaningful example of how he transformed a problem into a media opportunity when talking to a reporter who had discovered a huge security problem at a shelter. Richard then was the public relations director for a large federal agency:

The reporter found that one key could open up several temporary houses in the shelter. It was a Friday and if the story aired, there would be havoc because workers wouldn’t be available over the weekend to fix that problem. So we (Richard and reporter) had a deal, that on Friday, he (the reporter) couldn’t say anything and postponed the story till Monday. We had workers fixing the issue the same time he aired the story on Monday. We literally saved a lot of pain to many people. So, you know I saw this nasty problem of a reporter trying to show
the agency in bad light, as a great opportunity to make things work and solve the problem.

Above, as Richard was talking to the journalist he reframed the security issue raised by the journalist as an opportunity for the reporter and helped solve a practical problem. In another incident, Betty talked about how she transformed a challenging situation with a blogger into a great relationship building opportunity with media for her client:

During a blogging event, bloggers hated the news my client shared with them. There were comments like, “looks like the company is on crack.” This was a major challenge and a problem for us as an agency. So instead of looking at it as a problem, we saw this as a great opportunity to engage these bloggers and continued talking to them. We sort of transformed the problem into an opportunity for the client and even wrote a case study on it!

Betty reframed the problem of bloggers not liking the client into a media opportunity for building relationships with bloggers and helping the client. Similarly, Jennifer talked about how she converted a major fundraising challenge into a media opportunity for a client through partnership with a church:

Last year the non-profit I was working for had a problem of raising funds. One week I was in church and just like that decided to talk to the minister. He agreed and you know in that instance the problem became a great opportunity for us to partner with the church throughout the year. I didn’t plan on doing it, but it just worked.
Jennifer later mentioned that this partnership also proved to be a good media opportunity and raised her agency’s media profile. In short, often challenges and problems become reframed and interpreted as media opportunities for clients. For example, Patricia mentioned that, “Sometimes with the client, if the journalist is going down the difficult way, I say to the client ‘look, let’s look at this particular problem as an opportunity.’”

Jennifer talked about how the non-profit she was working for suddenly had a budget shortage and how she reframed the situation for her colleagues:

My team felt deflated. But I tried to turn it into positive. You know I had to turn this as an opportunity. “It is a huge opportunity that we have to be more efficient,” I said (to her team), “and really think hard about what we are doing and make decisions about what we can and cannot do.”

Jennifer reframed the budget issue into an opportunity for being more focused and efficient. She later mentioned that after spending fifteen years in public relations she now “intuitively sensed opportunities” in problematic situations for the clients. James summed up the overall optimistic tone of many participants in the context of labor negotiations and legislative public relations work that he was involved in. He said:

It’s purely about challenges and opportunities. Mergers produce conflict because you’re merging a lot of people, systems, operations, philosophies, and cultures. In terms of working on the legislative side, conflict of interest between both sides, that’s essentially part of what you’re trying to bridge. Some issues are a challenge, but they are the real opportunities to prove that communication works.
James acknowledged that legislative and labor negotiation work were a great challenge, but in order to deal with the situation he reframed the issue as an opportunity for showing the potential of communication work.

Overall, the data suggests that participants reframed the difficult situations as opportunities for clients to do even better. Ronald summed up this attitude well: “To sustain and last in all these relationships for longer time, there is no other way out, but see them as opportunities in a positive light.”

**Rationalizing and distancing.**

During interviews, participants revealed instances where their moral or ethical stance did not completely coincide with the requirements of their work. This conflict was especially true for professionals working in critical sectors such as defense, military, atomic energy, and mining. These professionals had to be party to decision-making that could potentially affect other peoples’ lives in a negative way. Further, they also had to communicate those decisions to relevant stakeholders. The nature of these businesses caused an added level of difficulty in decision-making. The complexity in decision-making often forced them to reflect on their moral and ethical values. In order to navigate through the complex nature of decision-making, participants working in these sectors engaged in a specific type of reframing where they positioned themselves as either rational or distant from those decisions.

Rita was one such participant who had extensive experience in the nuclear industry. In the past couple of decades, Rita’s role evolved from strategic and financial planning to strategic communication. Rita was once part of the biggest nuclear program
in her agency, and was responsible for financial reporting to the US Congress. She talked about how it was difficult for a communications professional like her to separate her moral values from the rational thinking. She said:

Yes, there were tensions that resulted from different points of view and yeah absolutely many times and there were times when I felt conflicted on so many issues. You know, nuclear reactors and power plants are always a controversial topic, and there were certain aspects of it that were against my values. But overall, I really believe that nuclear energy is one of the answers to the future, especially with current advancements in technology.

Although Rita did not personally like some aspects of nuclear energy, she chose to focus on the positive attributes that in her opinion were more significant. On the other hand, working for a large foreign weapons company brought up a more poignant ethical dilemma for Ruth. She mentioned that one time she felt very uneasy with her role as communications manager, which required her to further the company’s objective of selling weapons. Ruth gave some details about her role and the uneasiness it caused:

I kinda just didn’t think about it early on. I kinda just…I did it, I did my job. I once had to deal with writing press releases for torpedoes. Mostly because of my English language abilities, some work for sonars on submarines, sonars that listen, but don’t do anything so if you can defend or attack, if needed. Um, so that wasn’t so bad.

However, a short while after she mentioned the severity of this internal conflict and mentioned she thought of quitting. “It really bothered me sometimes. I thought maybe,
you know, I shouldn’t work in the defense industry.” When asked what made her stay, she recalled a lengthy conversation she once had with a Church clergy that helped her look at her work in a different light and reframe her role:

The Clergy said, “the way you need to look at this, you know, countries need to have a defense system to protect their citizens, and if we are gonna have a defense system it’s good that we have thoughtful people, you know, whether they be Buddhist, or Hindus, or Christian but it’s good to be a thoughtful person working in such industries.” That changed my thinking. It’s a good thing I am in the defense industry because I am representing, my spiritual beliefs and not just blindly going along with anything the company tells me to do.

Here Ruth used the reframing strategy by rationalizing the problem through an emotional and spiritual lens, which helped her cope with the stress she otherwise felt was unbearable.

It is important to note that rationalizing and distancing occurred only in instances where participants reported ethical or moral value conflict. For example, Ruth stated, “I never would have worked for a division that made bombs or the missile division because they pretty much are designed to harm people.” In this case, Ruth did not encounter any ethical dilemma or stress because the course of action was clear to her. However, in the case of dealing with Sonar, a device used in submarines, she reframed her role as a person who helped protect people and not harm them:

In some ways, you can look at sonar as a defense system because there is…an active sonar that’s sending out signals to ships or I suppose they could send a
torpedo. Though, I always tell myself, “you know it really is, truly, defense you know, you’re trying to figure out where the enemy’s sonar, enemy’s ships are so you can keep away from them.”

In Ruth’s case, by reframing she tried to cast her work in an ethical frame that matched her own moral values. Alan was another participant with an extensive public affairs career in the defense industry. Early in the interview, Alan, who served as an aid in the apex defense establishment, talked about his role in advising the top military officials for several years. When I asked him if he felt ethically conflicted being party to decision making during the recent wars, he responded:

Never. Never because when I when saw issues, I’d take it to my boss or I’d take it to my colleagues who had the information and we would negotiate. I would explain the value, so they understood why something needed to be discussed or needed to be presented publicly.

Alan talked about taking the problem to his boss or colleagues and arriving at the solution in a rational, mechanistic way. Subsequently in Alan’s narratives, he frequently talked about how passing the decisions through the chain of command yielded results. Implicitly, he assumed that the right solution would emerge if the problem were to be passed through the bureaucratic machine, i.e., by taking it through the chain of command. Further, by reframing the decisions as rational, Alan distanced himself to be able to cope better because this minimized the impact of his role in the decision making process.

Generally speaking, participants tried to keep their values separate and not let their personal views and opinions affect their work. However, in the case of Rita, Ruth,
and Alan, it was more difficult to do so because of the nature of their industry and the severe negative effects of a wrong decision. In their case, all three engaged in distancing and rationalizing as a strategy to cope with the tensions they faced on a deeper level.

**Summary.**

Overall, in the course of their work, public relations professionals had to work their way out of many challenging situations and sometimes even ethical and moral dilemmas. Participants often tended to reframe challenges in terms of client opportunities to maintain a positive frame of mind. Additionally, participants in critical sectors used reframing as a strategy to rationalize and maintain distance from the decisions, to cope better with value conflicts.

This question sought to understand the communicative strategies employed by public relations professionals to deal with the tensions they experienced in their work. Two strategies emerged from the data in response to this research question—*avoidance* and *reframing*. Participants that engaged in avoidance did so in two ways: by suppressing their emotion and by using humor. In reframing, participants preferred viewing challenging situations as client opportunities. Further, participants working in critical sectors such as defense, nuclear energy, mining, etc. engaged in reframing their personal positions through rationalizing and distancing strategies.
Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, the results from Chapter 4 are discussed and interpreted in light of relevant literature. The chapter begins with a discussion of the literature gaps that this research intended to address and then proceeds with an analysis of the major findings from each research question. The findings are situated primarily within the interpretive framework of a tension-centered perspective and can be explained by dialectics, structuration, and sense making. The chapter concludes with several implications for future research.

Tension-Centered Perspective

The overarching goal of this research was to examine the paradoxes, tensions, and dilemmas experienced by public relations professionals in boundary spanning work. This was accomplished by investigating the different types of tensions and contradictions experienced, and the communicative means and strategies used by participants to negotiate these tensions.

The data revealed that public relations professionals as boundary spanners experienced four contradictions and double binds, which emanated from their ongoing work relationships. Public relations professionals also reported having experienced a great deal of internal conflict on various fronts as they tried to balance the needs and interests of several parties simultaneously. Skewed power distribution in relationships also surfaced. Public relations professionals considered journalists, clients, and supervisors as yielding immense power and saw themselves as subservient in the majority of interactions. Taking the tension-centered perspective and using the constitutive
definition of boundary spanning that privileged participants’ accounts, this study revealed that public relations professionals evoked notions of family and games/sports to understand the public relations workplace. The individual disposition of public relations professionals was found to affect the communicative choices and strategies they made professionally to negotiate and cope with tensions. The public relations agency and corporate communications context further affected the type of contradictions and the nature of challenges the public relations professionals faced. Participants working in the corporate communication set up had to negotiate with more complex client and supervisor boundary issues because unlike in agency set up their immediate supervisor was also happened to be their client. Industry specialization and the nature of clients’ businesses seemed to influence the complexities of the contradictions. Further, personal and professional boundary management issues emerged strongly in public relations professionals’ narratives that suggested immense struggle to maintain a work-family balance.

Overall, the data suggested that public relations professionals, as boundary spanners, were operating and trying to legitimize two distinct discursive systems with conflicting goals and priorities. The traditional system emphasized efficiency, technicality, and rationality while the second system emphasized relationships, emotions, and irrational aspects of organizing. I contend that the majority of interpersonal and organizational conflict found in this research can be explained by the perpetual straddling by public relations professionals between the boundaries of these two discursive systems. Thus, public relations professionals were boundary spanners in the truest sense. Their
work consisted of the communicative organizing of these discursive constructions and involved legitimizing and delegitimizing boundaries of these two systems. They had to operate and negotiate within two distinct systems with opposing and often conflicting priorities that were enacted in their interactions with journalists, clients, supervisors, and subordinates. Below, I discuss the findings in detail and contextualize them within extant literature.

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1: What dialectical tensions do public relations professionals experience as boundary spanners?

As discussed in Chapter 4, public relations professionals experienced four tensions that revolved around participants’ interactions with journalists, clients, supervisors, and colleagues. First, participants experienced tension between the tangible and intangible public relations work. Second, participants felt a tension as they experienced public relations work as creative and controlling. Third, participants experienced a tension of wanting to be secretive and transparent in their work relationships. Fourth, participants experienced tension between serving the greater good and serving the clients.

Research by Tracy (2004) suggested that there are three ways in which organizational tensions can be framed: as contradictions, as complementary dialectics, or as double binds. This study revealed two of the ways used for framing organizational tensions in a public relations context: as contradictions and as double binds. According to Tracy (2004), contradictions can be spotted when participants cannot do two actions at
once, but can alternate or choose one. Findings suggested that public relations professionals framed experiences of public relations in opposition to each other, giving rise to a contradiction. Due to this framing, public relations professionals constantly alternated between the two poles. This is in concurrence with previous research that used a tension-centered perspective on organizations. Specifically, the findings empirically support Tracy’s (2004) argument that employee reactions and framing of workplace dilemmas and tensions seem to determine the extent to which contradictions are experienced by organizational actors.

Double binds exist in situations where a primary and a secondary injunction conflict directly with one another (Stohl & Cheney, 2001). In this research, participants interpreted injunctions from these contradictions, giving rise to double binds. This process can be explained by the notion of duality of structure (Giddens, 1979). Within the domain of public relations, professionals were skilled and knowledgeable agents who possessed practical knowledge of their profession. Through interactional rules and institutional resources every time they engaged in public relations work, they produced and reproduced the institutional structures that undergird these opposing experiences; thus creating a double bind. Duality of structures involves interplay between the compositional characteristics of structure within which agents operate, as well as rules and resources agents utilize to practice in a particular manner and within a specific domain (Giddens, 1979, 1984).

Below I discuss these findings of the first research question, examining the four major tensions in the context of extant literature.
**Intangible-tangible.**

In the first tension, two seemingly opposite experiences of public relations work emerged in participant accounts. Participants emphasized the intangible relationship work in public relations and the tangible measurement of these relationships. Findings indicated that the tangible and intangible poles of the tension were framed in opposition to each other, giving rise to a contradiction. Due to this framing public relations professionals focused either on intangible relationship building work or the tangible measurement of work, and constantly alternated between the two depending upon the context.

Participants gave immense importance to client and journalist relationships, which strongly supports previous literature on public relations agency-client relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 2002). For example, Sung (2003) found that public relations professionals go to great lengths to maintain good relationships with individual clients in order to retain them. Most participants in this study expressed a similar attitude towards relationships. Bruning and Ledingham’s (2002) research suggested that client-agency relationships can be understood through five phases, starting with development and ending with decline. Within these phases conflicts and dilemmas typically marked the declining stage of a relationship which was observed in his research by participants physically, and emotionally withdrawing from the situation. However, this research suggested that client-agency relationships are much more fluid. Conflicts and dilemmas exist practically in all five stages because there is strong evidence that not all public relations practitioners tend to emotionally disengage from client relationships in the later
stages as claimed by Bruning and Ledingham (2002). This research suggested that public relations professionals in reality tend to be emotionally vested with their clients during and sometimes even after formal termination of relationships. This research also found that public relations professionals are emotionally vested in their clients’ success in more complex ways than previously thought. Findings of this research suggested that conflicts and dilemmas arose primarily out of clients’ lack of understanding of the public relations process between public relations professionals and clients. Arguably, this lack of understanding could possibly emerge at any stage of the relationship. In short, findings confirmed the relationship and emotional focus of public relations professionals, but also indicated that relationships are complex and do not follow a predictable pattern of progression in context of public relations work.

Further, findings have confirmed the growing need for making public relations work more measureable as reported by several studies (Radford & Goldstein, 2002; Vos, 2009). For example, Philips (2001) reported that public relations professionals as managers are today under constant pressure to develop models for return on investment (ROI) for client expenditure. Findings have strongly echoed these arguments. Consistent with Radford and Goldstein’s (2002) and Walker’s (1994) arguments public relations professionals in this research emphasized an increasing need for more strategic, value-added activities that can be quantified and linked to corporate revenues and profits. Thus, participants in this research seemed to experience this broader shift from relationship work to measureable work. However, participants also reported using “press clips” as a predominant measure which is consistent with Vos’ (2009) latest research. Previous
research has suggested that insufficient time, limited budget, a lack of ability to use the tools, and a lack of client interest has affected the adoption of sophisticated measurement and evaluation techniques by public relations professionals (Fairchild, 2002; Walker, 1994; Xavier, Johnston, Patel, Watson & Simmons, 2005). This research suggests otherwise, especially regarding the ability to use the tools. Findings indicate that the reasons speculated by previous researchers do not seem to be the main cause of non-adoption. Rather, the inherent nature of trying to numerically measure and evaluate intangible relationships seems to be the central reason that manifests itself in the slow adoption of these measurement and evaluation techniques. In other words, participants expressed frustration because they deemed public relations work as “soft” relationship work, and found it extremely difficult to capture and measure. Thus, because of this tension between intangible and tangible work it seems that the more sophisticated a measurement tool the more difficult it becomes for participants to measure (Dozier, 1990).

From these two seemingly opposite experiences in this tension, participants interpreted two injunctions, *focus on relationships is important and measuring this work is very important*. Further, participants’ experiences combined with public relations literature that is abound with simultaneous emphasis on relationship management and rigorous measurement of relationships seems to be one of the important reasons for these injunctions (Toth, 2007). Thus, through interactional rules and institutional resources, every time public relations professionals engaged in tangible-intangible tensions they
produced and reproduced the institutional structures that undergird these opposing tensions, creating a double bind.

Complementary dialectics were not observed in the data. One possible explanation for this is the significantly different contexts of the two studies; Tracy’s (2004) research was situated in an institutionalized prison context whereas this study was in a boundary spanning, public relations context. However, this study fulfills the three conditions required for contradictions and double binds to co-exist, and thus the two are comparable for theoretical purposes. According to Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967), for a contradiction and double bind to co-exist, the process requires three interactional ingredients. First, the interactants (narrated or observed) must be involved in an intense relationship. Participants certainly were involved in persistent professional relationships with journalists, clients, supervisors, and colleagues about whom they talked. Second, the message must be structured as a paradox (some sort of conflicting ideas, structures, etc.). There is substantial evidence in the data that participants framed their work as paradoxical in nature. Third, the recipient must be “prevented from stepping outside the frame set by this message” (p. 212). During the interviews, participants acknowledged that their busy routines and the difficulty of explaining their work to others seldom allowed them to reflect on public relations work. Thus, all three conditions for a contradiction and double bind to co-exist were fulfilled in the context of the tensions experienced by public relations professionals in this research.

Overall, the presence of contradictions can be explained by the participants’ framing of existing tensions as oppositions, and the existence of double binds can be
explained through the process of duality of structures. Participants experienced a double bind situation as their work focused on the tangible and intangible. Findings strongly confirm the relationship nature of public relations work. They also extend our understanding and suggest that client-agency relationships are complex and do not follow a set predictable pattern of progression in public relations work. Further, the slow adoption of sophisticated measurement techniques by public relations professionals seems to be more strongly connected with the intangible nature of public relations work than professionals’ ineptitude or lack of time.

**Creative-controlling.**

In the second tension, participants emphasized the oppositions experienced in the creative and controlling aspects of their work. Findings indicated that the creative and controlling poles of the tension were framed against each other, giving rise to a contradiction. Due to this framing public relations professionals focused either on the creative aspects of their work or were concerned with the controlling aspects of their work. Thus, participants constantly alternated between the two, depending upon the context.

Overall, findings deepen our understanding about public relations roles by proposing that creative and strategic functions undergird traditionally defined key roles of public relations practitioners. Extant public relations research has suggested a neat classification of public relations roles based on functions. For example, Broom and Smith (1979) conceptualized four roles of practitioners: expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator, and communication technician. Dozier,
Grunig, and Grunig (1995) put public relations professionals in two categories, technician, and manager, based on their extensive survey data. Later research has claimed that the distinction between the manager and technician role typically distinguished excellent from less excellent public relations departments (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier 2002). However, the nature of the work and interactions are largely ignored in these studies.

A tension-centered perspective suggests that irrespective of whether the participant is a technician or manager, he/she is mainly concerned about creative and strategic functions within any of these roles. For example, unlike Stephanie and James who were performing a managerial role, Cynthia, who was a junior professional and largely performed a technician’s role as characterized by previous roles research (Grunig, et al. 2002). However, Cynthia, mentioned that in her routine task of talking to a journalist, she was constantly thinking about how to creatively pitch the story to the journalist. Thus, findings indicate that irrespective of the level of seniority or position, public relations professionals experienced tension between creative and strategic functions. This finding significantly advances our understanding of the research on roles in public relations. This is because creative and strategic functions seem to subsume the categorization of expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solver, facilitator, and communication technician, rather than the other way around. Thus, the tension between creativity and strategy was the central concern for public relations professionals at all levels.
Findings also suggest that public relations professionals chose their profession because it allowed them to explore their creative potential (Mitrook, 2005). Emotional factors such as uncertainty, anxiety, boredom, and excitement were also strongly associated with the creative nature of public relations work (Shi, 2006). Uncertainty especially seemed to be a source of excitement and nervousness, and participants seemed to consider uncertainty an inherent part of public relations work. This is in concurrence with arguments made by scholars, such as Kramer (1999) and Bradac (2001). However, increasingly the strategic function in public relations work exerted a level of unobtrusive control over participants’ creative and spontaneous work. Unobtrusive control has been defined as “the process by which members of an organization are guided in making organizationally relevant decisions” (Bisel, Ford, & Keyton, 2007, p.138). Findings suggest that public relations professionals typically emphasized strategic thinking more because it was deemed organizationally more relevant, which in turn controlled their creative freedom. The reason for this emphasis is to reach their objective of achieving client goals. Thus, findings hint at the presence of unobtrusive control, but remain inconclusive. This is because they do not systematically fulfill three defining criteria of unobtrusive control suggested by Tompkins and Cheney (1985); the inculcation of premises, the ongoing feedback of employees’ decisions to management, and the influence of identification (Bisel, Ford, & Keyton, 2007).

Based on the creative and strategic oppositions, participants interpreted the injunctions as *my work is creative, but I have to be strategic*. Focus on doing creative work and being able to be strategic at the same time seemed to be one of the important
reasons for these injunctions. Thus, through interactional rules and institutional resources, every time public relations professionals engaged in creative and strategic tensions they produced and reproduced the institutional structures that undergird these opposing tensions, thus creating a double bind.

Overall, the presence of contradictions can be explained by the participants’ framing of tensions as oppositions, and the existence of double binds can be explained through the process of duality of structures (Giddens, 1979). Participants experienced a double bind as their workday filled with creative activity, but also required a simultaneous need to be controlling of their creativity through strategic thinking. Findings indicate that creativity and strategy are two intrinsic functions in public relations work, and tend to subsume previous role categories. Further, findings suggest public relations professionals typically emphasized strategic thinking more, which in turn controlled their creative freedom in achieving client goals. However, this unobtrusive control remains loosely connected to previous research.

**Transparent-secretive.**

In the third contradiction, participants emphasized the transparent nature of the work and the secretive aspect of public relations. Findings indicate that the transparent and secretive poles of the tension were framed in opposition to each other giving rise to a contradiction. Due to this framing, public relations professionals focused either on the transparent or the secretive aspect of public relations work and constantly alternated between the two.
Findings in this research concur with the broader literature regarding source-reporter relationships that address issues related to transparency and secrecy of public relations professionals. The relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists has been labeled as a mixed relationship, with elements of both mutual dependency and mutual mistrust (Shin & Cameron, 2005). A tension-centered perspective confirms the presence of such mutual dependency and mistrust. Findings are further consistent with several studies that corroborate the existence of misunderstanding, discord, and perceived conflict between public relations practitioners and journalists (Gandy, 1982; Kopenhaver, 1985; Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield, & Cropp, 1993).

However, most of the previous studies on source-reporter relationships have focused on the ethical dimensions, vilifying public relations professionals, and assuming journalists are neutral players in the pursuit of truth, credibility, and objectivity (Belz, Talbott, & Stark, 1989; Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Ryan & Martinson, 1984; Sallot, Steinfatt, & Salwen, 1998; Shin & Cameron, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005). Findings in this research suggest that like journalists, public relations professionals are aware of their responsibility to society and value the notions of balance and objectivity. Further, this research also sheds light on the dissatisfaction of public relations professionals with journalists for not being sensitive to situations, as in Maria’s case. Contrary to popular belief, findings support that public relations professionals were trying to act beyond narrow advocacy and think about greater good and emphasize ethical action (Berger, 2005). While the topic of public relations professionals withholding information from journalists remains a point of contention, this research draws attention
to legitimate reasons for non-disclosure by public relations professionals that previous studies have tended to ignore. Findings also suggest that public relations professionals and journalists are constantly engaged in a reinforcing cycle that over time either led to good relationships or bad ones.

This study found that being secretive and transparent was not merely an issue between public relations professionals and journalists, but between clients and agencies, hiring managers and employees, supervisors and subordinates, and among colleagues. In terms of client-agency relationship literature, this research found that due to an uneven power relationship, clients sometimes pushed public relations professionals to adopt ethically problematic stances. This was often considered a source of stress between the clients and public relations professionals. Further, findings suggest that information withholding was used by agencies resulting into discriminatory treatment of certain individuals. This highlights a new and serious problem with certain hiring and disclosure practices, particularly in the public relations industry. The problems with information withholding by clients is partially in concurrence with Bruning and Ledingham’s (2002) research that found clients tended to withdraw in the last stages of a relationship. As for the use of information withholding between colleagues and supervisors, female participants used information to signal professional distance with colleagues and supervisors. These findings add to the recent research by Dunleavy, Chory, and Goodboy (2010) that found withholding of information by supervisor and subordinates in their research affected perceptions of a coworker's credibility, power, and trustworthiness.
Thus, based on the focus on transparency and a need to withhold information, participants interpreted the injunctions *my work is promoting transparent communication, but I have to be secretive*. Participants focus on transparent communication, while having legitimate or strategic reasons to withhold information, seems to be one of the important causes of these injunctions. Thus, through interactional rules and institutional resources every time public relations professionals engaged in transparent and secretive communication, they produced and reproduced the institutional structures that undergird these opposing tensions, thus creating a double bind.

Overall, the presence of contradictions can be explained by the participants’ framing of tensions as oppositions, and the existence of double binds can be explained through the process of duality of structure (Giddens, 1979). Participants experienced a double bind situation as their workday filled with the need to transmit information and engage in transparency, but they also had to engage in controlling the legitimate or strategic withholding of information depending upon the context of the situation. Findings contribute to source-reporter literature and suggest that public relations professionals legitimately have to engage in secretive behavior. Contributing to the internal organizational communication literature, this study found clients, supervisors, and subordinates engaging in information withholding from other parties for various reasons. It was particularly noted that female public relations professionals used information withholding as a strategy to communicate distance with their colleagues and supervisors. On a macro-organizational level, findings indicate that public relations agencies engage in information withholding as a potentially discriminatory practice.
Serving-servitude.

In the fourth contradiction, participants emphasized the experience of serving in public relations work and the experience of being servants of clients. Findings indicate that the serving and servitude poles of the tension were framed in opposition to each other giving rise to this contradiction. Due to this framing, public relations professionals focused either on serving the greater good or the servitude towards clients and constantly alternated between the two.

Public relations professionals’ desires for the greater good and engaging in communities seems to be strongly characteristic of being a servant leader. Greenleaf (1977) conceptualized servant leadership as a collaborative and a noncoercive form of leadership. Participant accounts exhibited characteristics such as dedication to community building, a strong sense of mission or calling, and taking on challenging tasks; all are strongly indicative of servant leadership (Alston, 2005; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Greenleaf, 1977; Jones, 2003; Mabokela, 2003; Murtadha-Watts, 1999). According to McClellan (2007), a servant leader critically engages in action and advocacy, which several participants said was one of their reasons for choosing public relations as a career. The desire to work for the greater good and handle clients that influence society positively provided a sense of leading through serving among participants. The participants’ narratives generally reflected Greenleaf’s view of servant leaders: “the servant leader is servant first…It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve…” (p. 13). Thus, based on previous literature, the findings suggest a
strong connection between being public relations professional and characteristics of servant leadership.

However, based on critical feminist literature, findings suggest the existence of oppositions in servant leadership as well (Holmer, 1999; Marlene & Buzzanell, 2000). Specifically, findings support some of the claims made by Eicher-Catt (2005). She suggests that servant leadership tends to assume a positive and productive effect on leader-follower relations. She also claims that servant leadership promotes an ideology that is oppressive and patriarchal. This research found strong evidence for Eicher-Catt’s (2005) claims. First, in participant narratives, public relations professionals exhibited characteristics of the feminine role of serving, while clients tended to perform more patriarchal roles. Second, it was more difficult for professionals to voluntarily exit the relationships because clients operated as the patriarchs and providers, who evaluated public relations professionals’ work and performance based on the clients’ patriarchal standards. Third, given the heavy service and relationship oriented work of public relations, professionals were fulfilling a feminine role while being subjugated by clients. In short, this research found that the servant-leader relationship between professionals and clients further perpetuated the dominant-submissive relationship between the two. This argument fits well with previous research that has associated servant leadership with service and a relationship oriented work setting, and public relations certainly fits in these parameters. Thus, public relations professionals faced a great deal of tension between serving the greater good and being in the servitude of clients.
Based on the focus on serving and servitude, participants interpreted the injunctions as, *I have to serve the greater good, but I am also have to serve my clients.* Participants’ desire to serve their community and the greater good conflicted with their experience of feeling like servants to their clients, and usually being at the clients’ mercy, seem to be one of the important reasons for these injunctions. Thus, through interactional rules and institutional resources every time public relations professionals engaged in serving the greater good, and serving their clients, they produced and reproduced the institutional structures that undergird these opposing tensions creating a double bind.

Overall, the presence of contradictions within the serving-servitude tension can be explained by participants’ framing of tension as oppositions and the existence of double binds can be explained through the process of duality of structures (Giddens, 1979). In the serving-servitude tension, participants experienced a double bind situation as they felt conflicted about their need to serve the greater good and the experience of becoming servant to the client. This tension was further compounded by the fact that many clients did not know much about the process of public relations work and forced their views and decisions on public relations professionals.

Further, findings contribute to the critical feminist literature by enhancing our understanding of the type of conflicts and tensions a public relations professional faces. It also uncovers the connection between feminine and patriarchal roles enacted in the client-agency relationship. Thus, all four tensions together add substantially to our understanding of what public relations work entails.
Double binds seemed to be the root cause of participants reporting high levels of role conflict, stress, and anxiety. This finding is in line with previous research that argues that participants needed to exert significant energy to settle on either pole of the tensions (see, for example, Kellett, 1999; McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006). Findings also suggest the presence of a wide expectation gap between public relations professionals and clients. Public relations professionals in their narratives often characterized their work as relationship and service oriented. They argued that this seemed to be problematic because clients seldom understood the true nature of public relations work and instead focused on tangible outcomes, efficiency, and results.

On the whole, prior literature supports the characterization that dialectical tensions typically exhibit more agency on part of the organizational actors, while in double binds power and control are more evident (McGuire & Dougherty, 2005). Put more simply, participants, while experiencing these tensions, had to exert more agency as they implicitly questioned their role. Were they creative professionals or strategic managers? In their communication with others should they be secretive or transparent? Were they in public relations to serve the greater good or to be servants of their clients? This constant alternating between the dialectical poles required significant effort to exert agency. However, once participants settled on one of the poles the contradictions quickly turned into double binds, as participants were overpowered and controlled by these discursive structures. This occurred particularly because participants engaged in routines that institutionalized these discursive structures (Giddens, 1984). The choice of poles in these dialectical tensions, however, depended on specific contextual and interactional
factors such as the participants’ positions, work setting, and self-awareness. This is in accord with previous research in other organizational contexts that suggests these factors indeed play an important role in the participants’ choice of one pole over the other in a particular situation (Hirsch, 2008; Norton & Sadler, 2006).

Overall, findings suggest that public relations professionals as boundary spanners faced very complex situations that created contradictions and double binds. Further, dialectics provide additional explanation of how participants choose between the opposing poles of tensions. Structuration (Giddens, 1979) helps us understand how double binds are institutionalized through routines. However, based on analysis of data in this study, it seems, more than contradictions, double binds seem to be the main cause of role conflict, which in turn causes high stress levels and anxiety among professionals. These findings particularly bring more depth to Singh’s (1998) research that concluded that a curvilinear relationship exists between boundary spanning positions in organizations and variables that affected role conflict. Findings suggest that boundary spanners, such as public relations professionals, are faced with complex, unique, and challenging contradictions and double binds. Thus, findings from this research substantially contribute to previous literature on boundary spanning in management, public relations, and organizational communication to increase our understanding of boundary spanning work and role conflict.

**Research Question 2a**

RQ 2a: How do public relations professionals negotiate organizational tensions and dialectics?
This question sought to understand the communicative means by which participants negotiated tensions while performing the boundary spanning function in public relations work. Findings suggested that participants negotiated organizational tensions through the use of family and game metaphors. Further, findings can be understood with the help of the sense making process, as participants used noticing and bracketing, and labeling and categorizing processes (Weick, 1979).

Sense making helps us understand how participants create meaning for themselves in the face of the ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity they experience (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). According to Weick et al., sense making is inherently social and systemic for which action is important, and therefore sense making is fundamentally about organizing through communication. In this research, sense making for public relations professionals started with noticing and bracketing of events from a general stream of experiences. However, once they bracketed their experience, labeling and categorizing further acted “to stabilize the streaming experience” and became the currency of communication (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 411). Metaphors, on the other hand, helped public relations professionals visualize organizational processes from multiple perspectives and allowed public relations professionals to express similarities and differences between family and games, and public relations work, (i.e., one in terms of the other) (Chia & King, 2002; Morgan, 1980, 1986; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). According to Marshak (1996), metaphors provide people with a way to “express aspects both of themselves and of situations about which they may not be consciously aware, nor be able to express analytically and/or literally”
They also provide for conceptual and analytical depth and richness in expressing ideas (Czarniawska, 1997; Grant & Oswick, 1996; Manning, 1979; Tsoukas, 1991). In short, metaphors were used in this research because they fundamentally guide how public relations professionals experienced their world (Deetz, 1984).

The paragraphs below illustrate how public relations professionals made sense of public relations work using metaphors, through the processes of noticing and bracketing, labeling and categorizing. The metaphors of family and games discovered in this research enhance our understanding in terms of how public relations professionals experience boundary spanning work.

**Family metaphor.**

Family emerged as a dominant metaphor through which public relations professionals understood their interactions and relationships with clients, supervisors, colleagues, and themselves. Participants first noticed and bracketed abstract streams of communicative client servicing experiences. Then they labeled and categorized these experiences in their personal context of being a grown up family member.

Two prominent stages of the sense making process were evident in participants’ responses: noticing and bracketing, and labeling and categorizing. Catering to the clients’ needs and to help them do well, for example, was categorized as nurturing and caring for children. In short, participants made sense of responsibilities in relationship-oriented client serving work, such as preparing a client for an interview, ensuring the client gets appropriate media opportunities, and ensuring that clients are satisfied, with the familial relational experience of being an adult family member who diligently looks after
children. In a similar way, participants noticed and bracketed their unpleasant communicative experience with difficult supervisors and colleagues. They labeled and categorized these experiences as similar to the ones they had in dealing with difficult family members. Thus, participants understood experiences with supervisors as difficult and inescapable like in their personal context of having to deal with difficult family members, such as a parent or a sibling.

Hayden (2003) suggested that a person’s understanding about the roles, responsibilities, and his/her place in the world originate in one’s assumptions about the relationships, roles, and responsibilities of family members and the family structure. Hayden highlighted the centrality of the family metaphor in how individuals made sense of their other roles and experiences. The two major findings in this study strongly support Hayden’s (2003) argument because public relations professionals made sense of the complexity of their work relationships with clients, supervisors, and colleagues, by relating it to family roles and structures. Public relations professionals equated the rules of engagement with clients and difficult supervisors and colleagues, to the rules regarding family members. Recent research has provided strong empirical evidence that two types of associations exist within the broader family metaphor (Haidt, 2007). In boarder organizational family communication and feminist literature, two categories of styles, strict-father and nurturant-parent, have been associated with a person’s service orientation (Haidt, 2007; Haidt & Joseph, 2004). According to this research, the strict-father category roles are associated with rules, discipline, and conservatism, while the nurturing-parent category roles are associated with caring, empathy, and liberalism.
Findings in this research strongly support the existence of the nurturant-parent category in the public relations literature, but the strict-father category was not observed amongst public relations professionals interviewed in this study.

Thus, in the family metaphor, the presence of the nurturant-parent category explains the maternal, feminine, and relationship orientation of public relations work, but does not exhibit any strict-father traits, such as strict rules, discipline, and conservatism. Findings suggest the presence of a third subcategory of metaphor of the difficult big brother or sister. Participants often expressed a brother or sister relationship to describe the tension they had with colleagues and supervisors. The family metaphor that is most commonly found in empirical studies in health and business contexts tends to emphasize themes of healing and cohesiveness. However, findings from this study, for the first time, confirm the existence of family metaphor in the public relations context. I further argue that because participants envision themselves as nurturers they inherently assume the responsibility of being proactive and leading the client in the relationship. This inadvertently shifts the burden of success to the public relations professional, and tends to lessen the burden of responsibility on clients. The over nurturing maternal orientation of public relations professionals also tends to reinforce the feminine role of public relations professionals.

**Game metaphor.**

The second metaphor public relations professionals used in this study to associate their work with was the metaphor of a game. Public relations professionals related the
tensions, struggles, and competition of public relations work to a sport or a game.

Participants first noticed and bracketed abstract streams of communicative experiences like competition, long hours and uncertainty, and subsequently labeled and categorized these experiences in the context of a game.

Noticing and bracketing, and labeling and categorizing were evident as participants made sense of public relations work through the game metaphor. Participants noticed and bracketed the time sensitive nature, competition, and challenging work as exhausting and stressful. Because of the similarities between public relations work and playing a game, participants labeled and categorized these experiences in the context of a game or sport. They especially looked at the exhausting and uncertain nature of public relations work and labeled and categorized it as running a marathon or encountering steep slopes while riding a bike. Participants also labeled and categorized the nature of public relations work as an unending game with very subjective rules. Subjective interpretations of public relations work led public relations professionals to label and categorize this experience as playing a game with subjective or changing rules. Participants who identified public relations work using the game or sport metaphor were older and had several years of experience in public relations. Typically, participants below twenty-five years of age with five years or fewer of public relations experience were not found to associate or mention public relations work as a game. Evidence from interview data suggests that experienced participants were more sharply able to notice and bracket the unending and subjective nature of public relations work as a long and unending game. It can be argued that their vast experience made them see patterns between public relations
work as a game metaphor more quickly. Ching (1993) argued that metaphors of games and play pervade American discourse in diverse realms of life. The game metaphor is particularly widespread in business because it performs multiple speech acts in one condensed form (Ching, 1993; Hamington, 2009). This research confirms the use of game metaphor in public relations and boundary spanning work.

However, interestingly, the game metaphor was further qualified as never-ending and with subjective rules, which has not been found in any previous studies. By characterizing a game as never ending and with subjective rules, this research uncovered a major inherent conflict in the conceptualization of public relations work and the use of the game metaphor because a game cannot be conceptualized without rules and typically is not subjective. Therefore, although the game metaphor explains some aspects of public relations work, it is not the most suited metaphor. The game metaphor has also been associated with skill and chance (Caillois, 1979). This was particularly evident based on the frequent references to the skillful and unpredictable nature of public relations work. Further, previous research by Ching (1993) and others claimed that within American culture the game metaphor also has an overtone of being associated with masculinity. This was partly evident in some participant accounts that referenced to games that involved stress, intense activity, and endurance such as hiking or biking.

These findings help us understand the unique and inherently conflicted notion of public relations work—that it is a game, but because of its unending and subjective nature, it is also quite different from a typical game. Findings that public relations work is tricky, skillful, and based on chance can be broadly situated in previous rhetorical
literature. However, there seems to be an inherent paradox in the use of the game metaphor that by qualifying public relations work as never ending and subjective renders the use of the game metaphor problematic. Thus, this is a novel finding in the realm of public relations literature.

**Critical analysis.**

Several critical theorists have argued that the widespread use of metaphors is problematic because they are imperfect. The first observation is that there seemed to be tension and conflict between the two metaphors in terms of how participants situated themselves in two distinct and opposite roles. In the family metaphor, participants associated themselves with actions of nurturing, caring, and supporting each other. While in the game metaphor, participants associated themselves with actions of an individual player, competition, and rivalry. Thus, unknowingly, participants were enacting two opposing roles of a family member and a strong resilient player in a competitive game. Further, in both these roles participants projected individualistic thinking. The distinct absence of cooperation and team orientation in participant accounts can perhaps be explained by the Western context of this study (Akande, 2009).

Secondly, the presence of the two metaphors also indicated issues of boundary management between work and family roles. These metaphors reflected how public relations work places maintain a diffused sense of family and professional boundaries (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Findings clearly indicated that participants faced a work-family conflict (Greenhaus & Buetell, 1985). The work-family conflict was evident and resulted in added stress, as in the case of Nicole who could not stop working even on her day off.
(Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Kossek & Ozeki, 1999). The work-family conflict included extended hours, work overload, and other forms of job stress, interpersonal conflict at work, and unsupportive supervisors or organizations (Greenhaus & Buetell, 1985). Narratives of many participants also confirmed the much advocated spillover view of work-family conflict, which assumes that individuals with multiple roles are likely to blur boundaries between work and family roles and see home as an extension of work (Staines, 1980). Further, although participants strived to engage in high separation of boundaries, they were unable to do so and eventually wound up engaging in low separation of work and family boundaries (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Participants’ narratives suggested that the effects of work-family conflicts sometimes resulted in physical and physiological complications such as autoimmune diseases and nervous breakdowns.

In terms of the business context of public relations, Hamington (2009) argued that the game metaphor is especially problematic because metaphor foreshadows a deeper structure that greatly affects role perceptions. He suggests that the use of the game metaphor compartmentalizes morality, provides for truncated notion of fairness and ethics, and trivializes stakes (Hamington, 2009). However, due to this study’s focus on the tensions and personal experiences of public relations professions, findings cannot confirm or deny the effect of the conceptualization of public relations work in form of game/sport on public relations professionals.

Overall, public relations professionals as boundary spanners faced with ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity negotiated organizational tensions and dialectics through the use of metaphors of family and games. This research, for the first time,
confirmed the use of family and game metaphor in a public relations context. This research seems to concur with Voydanoff, (2005) a management scholar, who found that boundary spanning demands and work-family role conflict were strongly related. Specifically, the findings revealed the use of nurturant-parent metaphor that has previously been found in literature in rhetorical studies (Haidt, 2007). However, a new subcategory of difficult family members was also uncovered. Broadly, findings confirm observations of studies in organizational communication and occupational research regarding the consequences of work-family conflict through participant accounts expressed in this research (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton 2000). This research also supports the use of game metaphor to convey a sense of chance and the skillful nature of work as found in previous research (Ching, 1993; Hamington, 2009). The sense making process of noticing and bracketing, and labeling and categorizing (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) further explains how public relations professionals associated their abstract workplace experience with concrete life experience. The discovery of such metaphors helps us understand and see how public relations professionals experience work and negotiate tensions. However, it is important to note that judging metaphors by the standards of perfection makes us automatically see them as imperfect. In one sense all metaphors are imperfect in one way or the other. Thus, the value of metaphors should rather be seen in bringing forth a cross section of the experiential reality of participants in shaper focus. Findings also hint at a significant boundary management issue between work and family, which seems to have adverse effects on the personal well being of public relations professionals. Findings substantially contribute to previous research on
boundary spanning in management, public relations, and organizational communication literature. This study increases our understanding of how participants make sense of boundary spanning work through sense making processes and the use of metaphors. A critical examination also brings out key issues with the use of such metaphors.

**Research Question 2b**

RQ 2b: What communicative strategies do professionals employ in navigating these tensions and contradictions?

This question sought to understand the communicative strategies employed by public relations professionals to deal with the tensions they experienced in their work. Avoidance and reframing were the two major strategies used by participants to negotiate and cope with contradictions and double binds in public relations work. The analysis revealed that several public relations professionals experienced emotional labor as they dealt with issues that conflicted with their true view, as they put the interest of the organization first. In order to successfully deal with emotional labor, public relations professionals adopted communicative behavior in the form of avoidance and reframing.

**Avoidance.**

Largely, the avoidance tactics used were subtle, fine-tuned, and based on the exact tone of the conversation and issue. Historically, avoidance has been dismissed as inactive, passive, and an ineffective conflict strategy (see, for example, Blake, & Mouton, 1964; Fink, Cai, & Wang, 2006). However, this research found that participants indeed used avoidance strategically; a finding consistent with recent literature that argued avoidance is an active, deliberate strategy used to achieve a certain goal (Dailey &
Participants revealed that their people-pleasing nature and strong dislike for any discomfort in relationships were the major reasons for using avoidance. For example, Linda consciously avoided any conflicts with the strategic goal of maintaining a positive image among her colleagues. Public relations professionals stated they had used some kind of avoidance strategy internally with both their supervisors and colleagues, and externally with clients and journalists. In short, participants avoided conflict about an issue, a person, or both, either in an immediate situation or over time, as suggested by previous researchers (Qi, Fink, & Deborah, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel’s, 2001). Further, participants were found to be nonconfrontational, engaged in face saving, and experienced intense emotions as they dealt with a conflict or a tension. They valued maintaining relationships more and chose not to address issues that caused tensions and conflicts experienced in these relationships. Alan exemplified these attitudes when he chose not to confront his supervisor for a number of years and ultimately resigned from his position without ever fully resolving the issue. Alan’s resignation was one way of managing the tensions he experienced.

These findings improve our understanding of public relations professionals on a number of fronts. First, the finding refutes the stereotypical understanding of participants in a Western context as being aggressive and confrontational (Hall, 1976). Contrary to this stereotype, public relations professionals were found to be overly nonconfrontational and submissive but actively engaged in avoidance, a finding that supports recent research (Qi, Fink, & Deborah, 2007). Second, four of the five categories of conflict avoidance
suggested by Fink, Cai, and Wang (2006) were found in this study. Participants used withdrawing, pretending, yielding, and exiting strategies to avoid conflict. Only the use of the outflanking strategy was not found.

Third, by using the avoidance strategy participants chose to avoid discomfort and regulate emotions to cope with tensions they experienced with clients, supervisors, colleagues, and themselves. For example, although Rita was furious with her boss during an interaction, she concealed her emotions in order to avoid confrontation. These findings suggest that participants regulated their emotions in order to evoke an organizationally deemed appropriate response from their supervisors and colleagues. More specifically, in the context of the emotional labor literature, findings support for the argument that emotional labor originates from the control of coworkers or self, as long as the emotions displayed are in agreement with organizational goals (Miller & Koesten, 2008; Steinberg & Figart, 1999; Tracy, 2000). Participants suppressed emotions because they preferred being seen as people pleasing, they disliked uneasiness in the workplace, and thought that avoidance served personal and broader organizational goals of relationship building and maintenance. According to Hochschild (1979, 1983) emotional labor typically describes the conflict between experienced and expressed emotions. In concurrence with emotional labor literature, public relations professionals internal feelings collided or contrasted with the emotional expressions expected or required for their work role. Consequences of such emotional labor put extra pressure on public relations professionals and increased the risk of burnout and stress (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 1999).
This study also contributes to existing literature by discovering the presence of emotional labor in the boundary spanning work of public relations. Thus, it adds a new context to the study of emotional labor in organizations. Previous research on emotional labor has investigated emotional interaction in other areas, but not boundary spanning work. Further, in the boundary spanning roles, corporate communication executives seem to face a particularly difficult task. For them, their clients were also their supervisors or bosses. Negotiating tensions was a more delicate act for them. The experience of working in different types of set ups created a different boundary spanning experience for participants. Typically, participants in corporate communication set ups were found to have a diffused sense of boundary. It was observed that such participants seemed to have difficulty in separating and negotiating client relationships and supervisory relationships. However, this research remains inconclusive about other differences in boundary spanning work experiences of public relations agency professionals and those working in corporate communication departments. Confirming previous studies participants reported having experienced emotions such as irritation and disgust while engaging with their clients, supervisors, and coworkers (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Sandelands & Boudens, 2000; Tracy & Tracy, 1998; and Waldron, 2000). These findings are in congruence with previous research that emotional labor consistently produces negative emotional responses. Findings also confirm that public relations professionals use multiple means to deflect these negative emotions.

Humor emerged as a way of avoiding awkwardness, especially in relationships with journalists. Findings suggest that the use of humor as a strategy to deal with
awkwardness depends on the length of the relationship and the comfort level between parties. Further, use of humor was confirmed as a relatively risky strategy, similar to its characterization in the literature as a double-edged sword (e.g. Collinson, 2002; Malone, 1980). Some theorists suggest humor also reflects ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox in the environment and enables members to cope with the resulting stress (Hatch, 1997; Hatch & Ehrlich-Sanford, 1993; Martin, 2004). However, in this research, public relations professionals used humor more as a strategy to avoid awkwardness than to avoid stress. Within the incongruity literature, work context and hierarchy are found to influence whether humor is interpreted as appropriate or offensive (Cooper, 2008).

Findings in this research indicate that one of the contextual factors affecting the use of humor in the public relations professional-journalist relationship is the length or maturity of the relationship. How long a public relations professional and journalist have known each other and their comfort level seemed to affect the interpretation of humorous messages. In short, the length of the relationship played an important role in the interpretation of humor in work relationships. Within the public relations work context, no literature exits to compare this finding and is novel.

In sum, because of the service industry context of public relations work and the intense focus on relationships, participants seemed to be engaged in people pleasing behavior. This nonconfrontational behavior led public relations professionals to use avoidance to an extreme. In order to cope with the stress and discomfort, public relations professionals tended to regulate emotions and engaged in emotional labor. As for the use of humor in avoidance, findings suggest that public relations professionals used humor in
their interactions with journalists. The length of the relationship with a particular journalist played an important role in the interpretation of humor.

**Reframing.**

Reframing was the second strategy used by public relation professionals to cope with internal conflicts. Participants reframed problematic or challenging situations to cope with tensions experienced in public relations work. Findings confirmed the previous research that public relations professionals as emotional laborers developed many practices to close the gap between their true feelings about the situation and their “desired ways” required by their work role (Tracy, 2000; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). Some participants chose to reframe challenging situations as potential client opportunities, while some others reframed situations by rationalizing and distancing themselves from the perturbing nature of issues they dealt with in the course of their work. In both cases, they focused on their clients more than themselves to get through certain situations.

In fulfilling the public relations work participants generally reframed issues in terms of client opportunities and took pride that they were able to do so. According to Ashforth & Kreiner, (1999) reframing generally involves transforming the meaning attached to the emotional labor by negating or devaluing negative attributes and creating positive ones. Findings of this study supported Ashforth & Kreiner’s (1999) explanation. For instance, in the case of Alex, rather than seeing the situation as bleak and disastrous, he imbued it with positive emotions and viewed it as an opportunity for his organization/client. Thus, participants reframed situations in a way that actively transformed the unattractive aspects of emotional labor into something reasonable and
manageable. If this reframing technique did not work with the situation, they used an alternate technique.

Participants refocused their center of attention from problematic properties to nonproblematic ones through reframing (Shi, 2006). They did so by rationalizing and distancing themselves from difficult issues. For example, Sherry, despite some of her reservations about nuclear energy, chose to focus her attention from the problematic to the nonproblematic areas of nuclear energy. This was particularly true for professionals engaged in sectors such as defense, military, nuclear power, and mining. Further, rationalizing and distancing helped public relations professionals in critical sectors such as defense, nuclear energy, and mining to ease off the emotional, ethical, and moral tensions experienced in public relations work. Lauzen and Dozier (1994) argued that boundary spanning professionals were at the forefront of managing issues and were responsible for representing the view of their organizations, and understanding and interacting effectively with their environments. In doing so, public relations professionals had to act in ways that put the agenda of the organization first, even if the organizational actions or decisions did not match their personal views or value systems. Public relations professionals, especially in critical sectors such as defense, nuclear energy, and mining, engaged in a high degree of issues management work where participants had to deal with complexities unlike those in other sectors. Given the controversial nature of these industries, the issues management function often resulted in significant tension. To negotiate and cope with these tensions, participants engaged in discursive strategies, through which they could rationalize and distance themselves from the decision to better
cope with internal stress. In one sense, it can be argued that participants were more reactive to the external forces, seeing themselves as victims and rationalizing their position in place and time. Thus, this research provides important and unique examples of how participants reframed their point of view by casting themselves as rational human beings or distancing themselves from a difficult decision to cope with tensions.

In sum, participants used two strategies of avoidance and reframing. Participants avoided conflict about an issue, a person, or both, either in an immediate situation or over time. Withdrawing, pretending, yielding, and exiting strategies, excluding outflanking, were observed in this research. Largely, the avoidance tactics used were subtle, fine-tuned, and based on the exact tone of the conversation and issue. Studies in management and public relations that explore strategies used to cope with tension are far and few. Findings support Verbeke & Bagozzi’s (2002) research of boundary spanning professionals in sales where they found that boundary spanners used protective actions that included avoidance behaviors. However, they did not find any support for the use of reframing strategies. Overall, participants performing the boundary spanning function in the public relations work reported stressful work relationships. This seems to be the result of great emotional labor that resulted from the suppressing of “true” emotions. Humor was used more as a strategy to avoid awkwardness than stress. Findings suggest that humor can be a risky strategy, depending on the stage or maturity of relationships. Participants, while engaging in reframing, reframed issues in terms of client opportunities. While public relations professionals in critical sectors engaged in discursive strategies to help rationalize and distance themselves to better cope with
internal stress. The above findings indicate that conflict avoidance strategies, emotional labor, the use of humor, and reframing played an important role in the boundary spanning function of public relations. Overall, findings substantially contribute to extant research on boundary spanning in management, public relations, and organizational communication literature and increase our understanding of strategies used by boundary spanners to navigate through tensions, contradictions, and double binds in boundary spanning work.

**Limitations of Study**

Three limitations existed in this research project. These limitations relate to the sample, method of data collection, and the researcher’s positionality.

Sampling may be considered a limitation of this research project. The majority of the participants were from the Northeastern and Midwestern United States, so while data saturation was reached with 41 interviews, it is possible that this could have impacted the nature of data gathered. It is possible that the local culture of the particular firms and the area in which the participants resided and worked could affect how they conceptualized their experiences. For example, the presence of a large manufacturing belt in a region calls for more labor negotiation and safety focused public relations work. The presence of a large number of tourist destinations in a geographic region calls for more promotion oriented public relations work. The presence of a local, state, or national capital city, typically calls for more advocacy and public affairs public relations work. These regional and sometimes local differences could possibly provide different experiences of public relations professionals. Further, even within the United States context, this research study
was dominated by Caucasian participants. Of the 41 participants only two were African American. Interviews from a more diverse population may have yielded a greater variety of participant experiences. For example, claims of subtle workplace discrimination by the use of withholding information could have emerged as a potential important finding that could be further substantiated and problematized.

This research is also limited by the reliance on one data collection method: the interview. Consequently, the data reflects participants’ recollection of events and not the direct observation of participants in work settings. Without direct observation there is no way of verifying the participants’ interaction with journalists, supervisors, and colleagues. Observations over a period of time would have also been useful for discovering the communicative techniques that participants used.

The positionality of the researcher could also potentially be a limitation of this research project. For example, there were two instances where I felt that my gender and cultural background did affect the nature of interaction. The first one was when my positionality as a male researcher was very evident. The majority of the participants were females, while the researcher was a male. Here is a brief exchange between a female participant and I that gives a glimpse of caution expressed by her while deciding on a meeting place. Over the phone I said:

As for the venue, we should go for a place that will offer a relatively less noisy environment. I am not familiar with either the mall or Walters, since I have just moved here, and so I will go with whatever you suggest! However,
given the time conflict and distance, would meeting at my office work for you?

Just a thought, but a public place is definitely preferable.

Betty responded on the phone saying, “Ok, I will see you at your office next week then” and we ended the call. However, a couple of days before the meeting, I received an email from Betty that stated:

Keb, can I change my mind? I prefer to meet in a public place. Nothing personal, I would just be more comfortable. I hope you can understand. Not that I think you're an ax murderer or anything : ). Thanks, though. I appreciate that. See you at Stargates. I don't think it will be too crowded or noisy.

This brief exchange reflects certain notions about my being a male and my masculinity in the eyes of this particular participant. During the interview, the email was at the back of my mind and I was more reserved than usual. I spent almost half an hour talking about my life since I moved to the city. In short, I engaged in more self-disclosure than usual. This certainly helped put this participant at ease. This was my eighth interview and hence forth under no circumstances did I suggest to a prospective participant that we meet at my office.

Additionally, my cross cultural (mis)learning could have impacted the interpretation of nuances in participant accounts. I was born and raised in India and had lived in the United States for just over three years when the interviews were conducted. The second incident reported here reflects how my cultural background, my age group, and disconnect with old American dramas influenced my momentary inability to understand participants. Alan, a 40 year old veteran in the public relations profession,
stated that “an efficient communicator is like Ozzie and Harriet of TV. Keeping everyone informed and keeping things moving.” Momentarily, I could not place the meaning Alan was trying to convey about communicators and I asked him to elaborate. Upon my request, Alan explained to me that ‘The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet’ was a popular TV series of the 1950s when he was growing up. Further, in my interview notes, I misspelled Ozzie as “Ossie.” Perhaps this was a result of my complete unawareness of the existence of such a character. After the interview, I searched for information on the Internet and studied about the TV series to contextualize Arthur’s comparison more accurately. Subsequently, I also watched a few episodes publicly available on YouTube to get a sense of what Arthur really meant. In these two situations, I felt that my positionality as a male non-American researcher, and my age (much younger than Alan) momentarily affected my ability to interpret the substance of participant accounts. However, these two instances clearly were exceptions. I did not feel this way with any other participants.

Additionally, as noted in Chapter 3, participants’ socialization and understanding of boundaries seem to affect the experiences they chose to share during the interviews. Given that I did not define the term boundary or impose my views on participants in any of the interviews, participants shared experiences that largely consisted of examples in which the traditional notions of boundaries as fixed, permanent, and externally imposed were dominant. Participants seemed to invoke and share certain types of examples or stories that they saw these examples in line with their understanding of boundary. This restricted my ability to theorize boundary spanning as a discursive phenomenon.
Implications and Recommendations

This study has several theoretical and practical implications for boundary spanning research, the public relations work context, and our understating of tensions, contradictions, double binds, stress, and conflict in the workplace. Given the important role boundary spanners play in shaping discourse and policy, this research primarily advances an alternative discursive approach to boundary spanning and communication.

First, this study puts the process of communicative organizing in the foreground as it advances a new definition that casts boundary spanning as a type of work accomplished through communicative organizing of discursive constructions for (de) legitimacy of boundaries. Based on evidence of themes and metaphors boundaries thus are conceptualized as negotiated communicative accomplishments between emotional, affective, instrumental, logical, and rational experiences of participants.

This discursive definition of boundary spanning has several advantages that extend the constitutive view of communication as it relates to our traditional notion of boundary and understanding of boundary spanning work. Fundamentally, it removes the forced dichotomy and separation between the organization and its environment. Based on a review of extant literature, there is substantial evidence that previous research on boundary spanning across disciplines either has focused on structural aspects or the functional aspects of boundary spanning (Marino, Nekrassova, & Russ, 2006). Findings in this research strongly support an alternative framework where participants communicatively construct boundaries through discursive practices. Findings support the notion that fundamentally discursive constructions give rise to the boundaries between
how actors construct work, relationships, and family. In doing so, this definition rejects the notion of environment as external and given (Sutcliffe, 2000). The removal of this forced dichotomy then opens up avenues to reconceptualize boundaries as fluid and ever changing rather than fixed and given. This reconceptualization places communication as a constitutive force within a particular research setting where boundary spanning work is accomplished by emphasizing the discursive nature of the phenomenon. Thus, it focuses on the organizing processes by treating communication as internal to organizing and allows researchers to combine the micro (interpersonal) and the macro (structural) aspects of the process simultaneously. Lastly, this reconceptualization of boundary spanning work conveys a more realistic and experiential sense of the organizational work and communicative accomplishment, where struggles over boundaries, their constructions, and the tensions, stress, and paradoxes involved in the process can be brought into sharper focus. Thus, unlike previous research (Levina, & Vaast, 2005; Sutcliffe, 2001) boundary spanning work here is conceptualized as a site or a field of experience (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) that is discursively brought into being by organizational actor(s) and is accomplished in and through communication.

As a practical matter then, this definition creates a space for future management, public relations, and organizational communication scholars to research boundary spanning work from a discursive standpoint, as this study does by taking a tension-centered perspective on boundary spanning work of public relations.

A tension-centered perspective to boundary spanning primarily adds to our understanding of paradoxes and dialectical tensions experienced by actors involved in
boundary spanning work (Tracy, 2004). This study contributes to an under researched boundary spanning work context: public relations agencies and corporate communication. This research particularly extends our understanding of how contradictions and double binds emerge from interactions, and how such discursive constructions lead to the creation of boundaries around work and relationships. The struggle over the creation and maintenance of these boundaries connects strongly with the stress and conflict experienced by public relations and corporate communications professionals. Implications of this research can be understood on two levels: interactional and institutional.

This study brings forth the complex relationships filled with tension, contradictions, and double binds that constitute much of public relations work. Further, this study suggests that emotions tend to play more of an important role in public relations work than previously thought. In the context of public relations-journalist relationships (Shin & Cameron, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005), although public relations professionals are always on the lookout for client opportunities, this research suggests that public relations professionals are not necessarily biased and are concerned with objectivity and balance like journalists. This tends to shift our one sided understanding of public relations professionals as publicity hogs to moderators of interest and voices in society.

Client-agency relationships (Bruning and Ledingham, 2002) seemed to be the most tension filled and complex. Analysis of this relationship type contributes significantly to our understanding of contradictions and double binds. The concept of
servant leadership and the use of metaphors found in this research in particular provide for a new perspective to understand the client-agency relationship. For example, the servant leader characteristics are highly problematic and provide for a more critical examination of the client-agency relationship. Public relations professionals seem to show more emotional engagement with their clients’ work than previously understood which has implications on how we understand client-agency relationships as strictly professional, and the need to shift this thinking. Further, the client-agency relationship is complicated because the majority of the time clients do not understand the true nature of public relations work. Additionally, this research underscores one of the key concerns in the extant literature; clients’ disinclination to treat agency and corporate communications professionals as part of the dominant coalition (Bowen, 2010). This finding has implications on how public relations education is approached and calls for the greater awareness of public relations work for young business school graduates because they tend to be future business leaders and part of the dominant coalition.

There also seems to be a strong connection between tensions experienced and how public relations professionals think about their work in terms of family and games. On one hand, participants liked the uncertainty, excitement, and the opportunity public relations provided them to do greater good. However, participants’ excessive focus on relationships and a nonconfrontational nature prevented resolution of issues for the sake of maintaining their people pleasing image. This is not a healthy practice, as it tends to increase tensions and conflict and encourages passive aggressive behavior in client-agency relationships. The 24 hour on the job mentality, competitiveness of public
relations business, and the service orientation of public relations professionals explained by the use of family and game metaphor in this study, draws our attention to modern, high stakes workplace issues. However, the use of metaphor is not without problems. Maternal and paternal positions that participants envision taking in these metaphors implicitly assume that public relations professionals are responsible for ultimate success or failure of clients, thus adding extra stress to perform well. This has implications for the use of metaphors that open alternative spaces to understand public relations work. A disturbing trend of subtle discriminatory practices by virtue of withholding information seems to be a highly problematic practice and speaks to the broader power structures of race and gender that still seem to undergird a modern profession like public relations.

As for the broader institutional context, public relations work can be situated within two contradictory systems. Conflicting views about the tangible and intangible nature of public relations work, creative and strategic focus of public relations work, the presence of family and game metaphors, and the use of avoidance and reframing all indicate the presence of two opposing discursive systems. One system emphasizes efficiency, technicality, and rationality, while a second system emphasizing relationships, emotions, and irrational aspects of organizing. Simply stated, in this research public relations professionals as boundary spanners negotiate their role within these two distinct systems with opposing and often conflicting priorities, which manifest in their interactions with journalists, clients, supervisors, and subordinates. Thus, public relations professionals seem to be operating in two discursive systems with conflicting goals and
priorities that seem to be the cause of contradictions and double binds, resulting in stress and conflict.

Traditionally, the presence of contradictory experiences in the workplace has been viewed with suspicion and assumed to be suggestive of problematic reasoning (Cheney, 1995). In line with contemporary organizational communication scholars who recognize the dynamic interplays of opposing tendencies as enacted in micro practices of relating and organizing (e.g., Trethewey, 1999; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004), this study embraces such contradictions as important resources for theory development and praxis. Instead of treating the emotional and affective experiences of participants in opposition to instrumental, logical, and rational communicative experiences (Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young, & Rawlins, 2008), I treat these experiences in unison. Further, I also treat these experiences as knowledge producing resources that present for an insightful understanding of boundary spanning work. Thus, this research demonstrates that public relations work is more an interplay of emotional, affective, instrumental, logical and rational boundaries, which are primarily discursive constructions, and are achieved by participants delicately balancing their organized activities.

Based on the discussion above, there seems to be many theoretical and practical implications of this research, both at the practice and policy level. Practitioners at all levels will find this study helpful for it adds to applied communication scholarship, particularly to the practice and management of public relations agencies and corporate communication workplaces. The results call for some broad changes in how the client-
agency relationships are managed by public relations professionals. There are three specific recommendations.

First, in the short term there is an urgent need for public relations managers to institute orientation programs for new clients explaining what public relations work entails. The notion of public relations as mere publicity or marketing should be particularly dispelled. Instead, attention should be focused on the strategic nature of public relations work and the value it can provide the clients. The relationship and intangible nature of the work should be clearly explained to the client, and thus leveling the reporting and measurement expectation of public relations work. In the long term, public relations educators should strive to incorporate the value of public relations counsel to communication and business school students. This is because as part of the dominant coalition of tomorrow, if these future business leaders understand the true nature of public relations work much of the fundamental misunderstandings that cause unrealistic expectations and subsequent tense relationships can be potentially avoided to a certain extent.

Second, internal training programs need to be instituted, or existing programs need to be modified. Professionals should be trained about being more assertive with clients and frank with their colleagues and supervisors. Particular emphasis should be placed on moving away from an overlay nonconfrontational style of communication to being politely assertive. These internal programs could also periodically have one on one reflective practice sessions to discuss common problems faced by peers from other
agencies; to share and learn from each others experiences. This will create a community of practice and provide a space for experiential learning.

Third, human resources managers in large and small public relations agencies and corporations alike particularly should be advised to institute programs and work schedules that help ease work-family conflicts and avoid discriminatory policies. This is because work relationships within public relations agencies and corporate communications departments seem to be sites of stress, conflict, and tensions. Therefore, at the institutional level emphasis should shift from mere productivity of personnel to their overall physical and psychological well being and wellness. An organization wide policy to restrict the number of clients handled by one team member is one suggestion. This research cannot provide for a specific optimum number of clients that one person should handle, but studies undertaking this evaluation must be taken by public relations agencies. For corporate communication executives, especially in the critical sectors as described above, they should be provided with counseling opportunities and a space to discuss any internal issues they might be facing. Needless to say, sensitivity training and engagement of subtle discriminatory practices should also be highlighted.

Thus, the theoretical and practical implications, both at the interactional and institutional levels, are significant for boundary spanning research, public relations work, and our understating of tensions, contradictions, double binds, stress, and conflicts in the workplace.
Directions for Future Research

Future research can take several directions. First, researchers should utilize a cross-cultural sample to conduct future research on the contradictions and double binds found in this study. The comparative analysis is particularly important because contradictions and double binds are socially constructed and therefore culturally bound. Knowing how public relations professionals from different cultures frame tensions and how they understand their work, should further advance literature on the tension-centered perspective and boundary spanning work of public relations.

Additionally, this study found that the specific industry context of participants significantly affects the experience of tension in boundary spanning work. Thus, one suggestion is for organizational communication and public relations professionals to account for differences in the industry or sector. This can be achieved by clustering participants along industry or sector lines. For example, public relations professionals involved in the consumer goods industry might experience different types of contradictions and double binds than public relations professionals in the manufacturing or defense industry. Further, the metaphors unearthed in this research also might differ according to the industry or the sector specific experience of participants.

A second direction future researchers could take is to increase the breadth and depth of their boundary spanning research. As for breadth, researchers should consider exploring tensions and paradoxes experienced by members engaged in other boundary spanning roles. Research should be extended to other boundary spanning roles that involve extensive information gathering and representation functions, such as advertising
executives, marketing communication professionals, CEOs, etc. To increase depth, researchers should strive to combine interview and ethnographic methods of data collection, and should consider interviewing both parties involved in professional relationships. For example, interviewing public relations professionals and journalists in the participants’ network should provide insightful data. Similarly for client-agency relationships, researchers can strive to focus on a particular team member and interview clients they handle to get a richer and perhaps a more balanced perspective on how tensions manifest in those relationships. Traditional organizational communication researchers can further investigate communication and conflict between supervisor, subordinate, and coworkers’ communication. Moreover, the use of ethnographic in-situ (Tedlock, 2005) data in particular would help explicate the enactment of contradictions and tensions by participants. This could potentially involve being part of a public relations agency team and following the team’s activities for an extended period of time to get a thick description of the field (Geertz, 1973). This would also mitigate the issue of exclusively relying on either party’s narratives.

Third, rapid technological changes in media use and its effect on public relations practices further opens up avenues to explore how boundaries are created and affected by, for example, in the context of social media use. Questions such as, “What effect do such technologies have on the experience of tensions or paradoxes?” may be interesting and relevant to explore. It would be important to study the new social media technologies and see if they bring new conflicts or tensions. If so, understanding what new or different
metaphors and strategies public relations professionals use to understand and navigate through the ever changing discursive boundaries will be valuable.

To conclude, this research directly contributes to our theoretical understanding of what boundary spanning means to organizational actors within their work context. Specifically, it adds to extant literature on the relational orientation of public relations and advances research on the communicative organizing of public relations work. In short, this is the first systematic study that takes a tension based constitutive view of communication to the study of boundary spanning work in the public relations context.
References


Bruning, S., & Ledingham, J. (2002). Identifying the communication, behaviors, and interaction patterns of agency-client relationships in development and decline. *Journal of Promotion Management, 8*(2), 21-34.


Appendix A: Model of Boundary Spanning Research Variables

Organizational Communications Variables

Boundary Spanning
Internal
External
Formal
Informal

Model of Research Variables

Role Perception
Variables

Role Conflict
Person-role
Intersender
Intrasender
Role-overload

Role Ambiguity

Psychological Consequences

Job Satisfaction

Job-related Tension

Perceived Performance

Propensity to Leave

Moderating Variables

- Age
- Education
- Job Experience
Appendix B: Personalized Email to Participants

Dear XYZ,

I am a visiting faculty at Towson University and am writing to request for an interview in connection with my PhD dissertation, which I am pursuing at Ohio University. My research focuses on investigating dilemmas, tensions and conflicts experienced by public relations agency and corporate communication professionals as they build and maintain relationships with journalists, clients, supervisors, and subordinates. I request your participation because results from this study will be helpful to the public relations industry. All materials collected for this study (such as interview answers) will be treated confidentially.

In an hour long in-person interview (which will be audio recorded) you will be asked a series of open-ended questions about your professional experience in these work relationships. Please also let me know if you, or someone you know, would be interested in such an opportunity. If you live a life free of tension and conflicts, then this news is great and even more valuable for my research! Your experience when you started out in your career and the understanding the progression of your experience is extremely valuable for this study. Pseudonyms and generalities will be used to report data and you will never be personally identified. Plus, you have the choice of not answering a question or stop the interview at any time.

On the day we decide to meet, I will explain more about my research and answer any pending questions that you may have. You will also be asked to sign a consent form (copy attached) that acquaints you with your rights as a participant. The consent form was created mainly for medical research but is now applicable to social science research as well. For this interview, the consent form is just a formality. The interview can be conducted in your office, any other place or time that suits you. If interested, please let me know a couple of dates that work for you. In case of any questions, please feel free to write back or call me on my cell (XXX)-XXX-XXXX.

I’d be grateful if you can also refer me to other public relations industry professionals working in this region. Look forward to hearing from you! Greatly appreciate your help.

Sincerely,

~Keb

______________________________________________
Kaustubh Nande,
Visiting Instructor, M.C.C.S. Dept.
Towson University, MD-21252, USA.
Phone (O): (XXX)-XXX-XXXX
______________________________________________
Appendix C: Demographic Information of Participants

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<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Pseudonyms</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Approximate Age</th>
<th>Total Years of Public Relations Experience</th>
<th>Position at Time of Interview</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Industry and/or Sector Experience</th>
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Appendix D: Institutional Review Board Approval Form

A determination has been made that the following research study is exempt from IRB review because it involves:

Category 2 - research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior

Project Title: Boundary Spanning Work: An Interpretive Analysis of Tensions in Public Relations Workplaces

Primary Investigator: Kaustubh Nande

Co-Investigator(s):

Advisor: Claudia Hale

Department: Communication Studies

Jo Ellen Sherow, MPA
Office of Research Compliance

09E184

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your application for review. Any additions or modifications to the project must be approved (as an amendment) prior to implementation.
Appendix E: Ohio University Consent Form

Title of Research: Boundary Spanning Work: An Interpretive Analysis of Tensions in Public Relations Workplaces

Researcher: Kaustubh Nande

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
This study investigates tensions and conflicts experienced by public relations professionals in primary work relationships, i.e., with journalists, clients, marketing departments, supervisors, and subordinates. As part of the interview you will be asked a series of open ended questions about your professional work life. Your responses to these questions will be recorded with a digital audio recorder. At any point you can choose to stop the recording or discontinue with the interview. The interview is likely to last for about 60 minutes.

Risks and Discomforts
No risks or discomforts are anticipated. You can choose to stop the interview at any time.

Benefits
Although you will not personally benefit from participating in this study, your answers may help us improve services to the public relations community.

Confidentiality and Records
All materials collected (such as interview answers) for this study will be treated confidentially and original interviews will be destroyed within one year from the date of interviews. Original names will not be documented anywhere except for the recordings, and data will be reported in nonidentifiable aggregate form only. A copy of the final analysis will be provided to you upon request.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU.

**Contact Information**
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Kaustubh Nande at 740-994-0290 or email at k.nande@gmail.com

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions
- known risks to you have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no policy or plan to pay for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this research protocol
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is given voluntarily
- you may change your mind and stop participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Signature_________________________ Date__________________________

Printed Name__________________________

Version Date: 05/2008
Appendix F: Sample Interview Questions

Warm Up:
1. Please describe your typical workday in this firm/company? Has this been your routine over the years?

Professional Relationships:
2. Who do you work with most frequently?
   - You- Journalists
   - You- Marketing Communication?
   - You- Clients
   - You-Boss

Conflict, Tensions and Contradictions in relationships:
3. Do you find PR work appealing? What is the most rewarding aspect of your job/profession? Why? (RQ1)
   a. What is the most difficult part of your job/profession? Why do you think this is the case? (RQ1)?
4. Please describe an instance where it was difficult to handle people in certain professional relationships? What did you do? (RQ1 and RQ2b)
   a. Do you think others outside of this department fully comprehend the complexity of what you do as a PR professional? Why or Why not? (RQ1)
   b. Do you ever feel frustrated with clients or journalists? Please give an example/instance when this happened in the past? (RQ1)
5. As a PR practitioner, what do you think are your key responsibilities? Does your family see your job in the same way as you do? (RQ1 and RQ2a)
6. You earlier mentioned that you deal with XX regularly.
a. Do you feel caught up between xx clients and xx journalists? What do you have to say about it? Tell me more. Give me an example of such a situation? (RQ1, RQ2a, RQ2b)

b. Do you ever feel overloaded with lots of things? Can you tell me of an instance or two when you experienced this? (RQ2a)

c. How did you overcome this kind of a situation? (RQ2b)

(Questions about influence of Voice and Identity)

7. Please describe your relationship with your supervisors in this/previous jobs? Do you ever feel you are not heard by them? Give me an instance (RQ1 and RQ2a)

8. Could you please describe for me an instance where being a male/female made a big difference on the professional interactions? (RQ2a)

9. Professionally, what brings you satisfaction at the end of the day, month and year? (RQ2a and 2b)

10. If I asked you to describe your work as a metaphor, how would you describe it?

Conclusion:

11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your life that you think is important when talking about personal conflict and tensions in PR work?

12. Do you feel as though you have been given me a fair picture of your responsibilities as a PR professional?

13. What are your feelings about this interview process?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and experiences. Would it be ok if I contact you again in the near future if I have any questions or need clarification regarding our interaction today?