Public relations and philosophy: Parsing paradigms

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Abstract
This philosophical article examines how public relations researchers have engaged with Kuhn’s concept of a paradigm and have used it to set a research agenda for the field. I argue that Kuhn believed the social sciences to be inherently multi-paradigmatic, making the quest for a single, overarching paradigm for public relations research misguided. Instead, I lay out a four-paradigm schematic for the field, examining issues of semantic and cultural incommensurability and consequences for language use and research method and values. The article questions the definition of a mature discipline as often found in public relations literature and proposes that we might be more mature than we think if we are willing to accept a diversity of perspectives and their concomitant research values.

Keywords
paradigm, public relations research, semantic incommensurability theory, Thomas Kuhn

It’s not safe to assume you know what philosophy is, even if you have studied a good deal of it already. The reason is that there is nothing like consensus among philosophers about exactly what their subject is. (Rosenberg, n.d.: 1)

One could just as easily substitute ‘public relations’ for ‘philosophy’ in that sentence, as in fact many loosely have (e.g. Hallahan, 1993). The difference, however, is that the philosophical community accepts its lack of consensus as business as usual, whereas the public relations community decidedly does not. Pundits refer to philosophy as the search for a black cat in a coal cellar at midnight. Public relations scholars appear to be in a permanent state of befuddlement as to why they have not yet found the cat.

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This article, more philosophical argument than social scientific research in content and structure, examines the often uneasy relationship between public relations scholarship and Kuhn’s (1996) notion of paradigm. Since the early 1980s, many public relations scholars have been on a quest to distinguish a singular, overarching paradigm for the field. Such a quest, I argue, is based on a faulty understanding of Kuhn and does little to advance our body of knowledge. Of more benefit to practice and theory would be to embrace the inherently multi-paradigmatic nature of public relations, rather than searching for the one ‘correct’ approach. My point is not simply philosophical. What we believe to be the object of study (ontology) guides how we know it (epistemology), study it (methodology) and ultimately what we value about it (axiology). What we value in public relations scholarship is the issue at the heart of this article.

Public relations and the quest for legitimacy

History suggests that the road to a firm research consensus is extraordinarily arduous. (Kuhn, 1996: 15)

Contemporary public relations scholars’ search for the black cat in the coal cellar at midnight can be traced to the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in 1962. Social scientists writing about method cite it more than any other work (Rosenberg, n.d.); Google Scholar lists 44,849 citations of the 1996 third edition alone. The natural sciences community, however, gave Kuhn’s work a hostile reception. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was seen as a challenge to the philosophical underpinnings of the scientific method, which had dominated since the early 17th century when Descartes (1999[1637]) proposed his form of rationalism, stating that all matter, even the body, was machine-like, governed by the rules of physics. Laplace (1809) extended this mechanistic Cartesian worldview, comparing the world to a giant clockworks, reducible to its component parts. Science became the quest for understanding the laws governing an external, objective reality.

Comte codified this approach in the latter half of the 19th century, extending the notion from the natural sciences to the social sciences and terming it *positivism* (see Comte, 1988, for a reprint of his work). Carnap and others in the Vienna Circle of logical positivists refined it, terming it the *received view* of science (see Suppe, 1972). They viewed science (natural and social) as concerned with finding the immutable laws and logic that govern an independent reality by breaking down systems into their component parts and measuring them. Scientific knowledge was cumulative, progressing toward an ever increasing understanding of the external world.

Many in the scientific community reacted with dismay, then, when Kuhn rejected the cumulative view of science, proposing instead a more Darwinian perspective: scientific progress is measured by how well it adapts to its environment and competes, not by its evolution toward an ideal form or by a gradual accretion of knowledge. Kuhn proposed that scientific knowledge was a shared perspective among a group of scientists working in a particular area, as evidenced by their commitment to the same theories and tools. Kuhn termed this communal worldview a *paradigm*. Mature natural sciences, he said, are marked by members’ commitment to a dominant paradigm, which determines the
questions that can be logically asked (theory) and the means that can be used to answer them (method).

Kuhn’s thesis set off a firestorm of critique during the 1970s. Scientists and philosophers of science alike accused Kuhn of promoting pure relativism (Laudan, 1981) and ontological nihilism (i.e., denying the very existence of reality), making science indistinguishable from witchcraft as a means of knowing the world (Feyerabend, 1999). Suppe (1977: 151), perhaps the most cited of these critics, called Kuhn’s work ‘an antiempirical idealism,’ making science an irrational enterprise (McKelvey, 1999) because it denied the possibility of objective verification (Dreyfus, 1980). Although most current thought contends these criticisms were based on a faulty reading of Kuhn that mistook his epistemological stance (how we know) for an ontological one (what we know; see Nickles, 2003 for a good overview), Kuhn remained a controversial figure in the philosophy of science throughout the end of the last millennium.

While the natural sciences were railing against the notion of a paradigm, however, the relatively young social sciences embraced Kuhn’s concept of paradigm as a way to achieve academic stature: ‘Kuhn’s analysis was popular among those seeking legitimacy as a science (and consequently kudos and funding) for their new disciplines’ (Bird, 2004: para. 32). Multi-paradigmatic disciplines were regarded as having lower status in the scientific community and suffering negative consequences as a result (McKelvey, 1999, p. 384). A singular paradigm held out the promise of rescuing the social sciences from their ‘perpetual identity crisis – or rather legitimation crisis’ (Peters, 1993: 133). Social sciences thus adopted the axiomatic assumption of the natural sciences: Human behavior must be governed by laws, and the goal of social science research should be a singular comprehensive theory or paradigm (Little, 2010). Kuhn’s thesis sparked the “itch” to discover the universal paradigm of communication behavior’ (Miller, 1983: 35), and communication scholars began to suffer from ‘a widespread allergy to theoretical pluralism’ (1983: 37).

Public relations scholars were not immune. At the time they were still grappling with a chronic identity crisis, as witnessed by Harlow’s (1976) research that uncovered 472 distinct definitions of public relations Litle wonder that four years later Van Slyke (1980) lamented that public relations couldn’t be regarded ‘as a scientific discipline, social, or “pure.” The body of universally-accepted theory or paradigms in public relations is virtually nonexistent’ (1980: 6). Ferguson (1984), in what has to be one of the most cited conference papers that has never been published, expressed the need for public relations scholarship to adopt the Kuhnian notion of a paradigm so that ‘eventually, perhaps the field of public relationships will one day also have its Grand Unified Theory as does physics’ (1984: 21).

Ferguson’s 1984 paper seemed to crystallize growing sentiment in the field of the need for a unified identity, establishing a widely held research agenda for public relations scholars to delineate a singular paradigm. Since then, those same scholars have debated, at times heatedly, whether the field has achieved one. It’s impossible within the confines of this article to trace everyone’s contribution to the debate. Suffice it to say that Public Relations Review ran a special issue on ‘the paradigm struggle in public relations’ in 1993, in which Hallahan reiterated the need for a predominant paradigm in order ‘to meet Kuhn’s test of having a common perspective from which to address unsolved issues’ (1993: 203). Recent examinations of public relations scholarship have concluded
both that public relations is a mature science, as evidenced by a dominant paradigm (Steyn, 2004), and that public relations is not even ‘within striking distance of being called a mature science’ (Zoch et al., 2006: 659). Perhaps more cautiously, another study and its follow-up four years later concluded that ‘no dominant paradigms per se have emerged’ (Sallot et al., 2003: 51, 2007: 368), a conclusion immediately contested by other scholars (e.g. L’Etang, 2005).

Zoch et al. (2006) suggest abandoning the quest altogether, arguing that the professional nature of public relations may preclude its status as a social science. The situation is reminiscent of mass communication scholarship in the 1960s, when Klapper (1960) observed that despite scholars’ best efforts to establish large, direct effects of mass media, none were to be found and scholars would be better off putting their efforts elsewhere. Borrowing from Klapper, I would suggest the problem may lie in our pursuit of the wrong goal — a grand unified theory that assumes the social sciences operate under the same laws and principles as the natural sciences.

**Singular paradigm: Square peg in a round hole**

Then and now, my acquaintance with the social sciences was extremely limited. (Kuhn, 1991: 17)

Kuhn denied the applicability of the normal science model, and thus a singular paradigm, to the social sciences, declaring that social scientists face an ‘immense variety of problems’ to be solved, rather than a focused research stream (1996: 165). Kuhn believed that the relative isolation of natural scientific research — scientific work is judged only by other scientists — allowed this insular community to develop a grand unifying theory or paradigm to guide their efforts. Kuhn viewed social science, however, as immersed in the ever-changing problems of society, with the result that ‘very little of what goes on in the [social sciences] resembles the normal puzzle-solving research of the natural sciences. Their aim is … to understand behavior, not to discover the laws, if any, that govern it’ (1991: 23). In short, Kuhn rejected the notion that any social science could have a grand unifying theory.

The many scholars who responded to Ferguson’s paper as a call to action, then, may have proceeded on a quixotic quest. Although where and how to draw the line between the natural and social sciences continues to be debated by philosophers of science (Bohman et al., 1991), many agree that because of the highly contingent nature of social interaction ‘the underlying conception of a domain consisting of law-governed regularities is not well suited to the real nature of social phenomena’ (Little, 2010: 301). The social sciences are too contingent, too embroiled in human activities, to make a singular paradigm a realistic or even desirable goal (Dreyfus, 1980; Hackett, 2005; Little, 2010). The result has been, as Miller (1983: 36) observes, that while ‘the lure of a universal paradigm is beguiling … current efforts to achieve this objective have probably retarded rather than accelerated progress. Much that passes for meta-theoretical debate fixates on pseudo problems instead of illuminating substantive issues.’

**Distinguishing paradigms and theories**

I seldom use that term [paradigm] these days, having totally lost control of it. (Kuhn, 1991: 22–3)
To conclude that a grand, overarching paradigm for public relations in inadvisable, however, is not to give up on the concept of paradigm altogether. But first, it’s necessary to define just what is meant by the term. Kuhn, having been accused of using the term 21 different ways in his first edition (Masterman, 1970), worked to clarify its meaning in the postscript to the second edition, calling it a disciplinary matrix. As noted in the quote above, however, he gave up on the term altogether in 1991 because others had appropriated it in innumerable ways.

Again, public relations scholarship has not been immune to the problem. In the new millennium, public relations theory articles refer to paradigm almost by default. The word, however, never seems to be used within the literature the same way twice. It appears as a synonym for communication style (e.g. Gibson and Gonzales, 2006/07), framework (e.g. Burger, 2009), cross-disciplinary integration (e.g. Martinez, 2006), theory (e.g. Marsh, 2008), theme or thesis (e.g. Garcia, 2010), and so on, ad infinitum it seems. If we adopt Kuhn’s use of the term as a disciplinary matrix, however, a paradigm is inclusive of compatible theories, not synonymous with theory (Botan and Hazleton, 2006). Within different paradigms, theory takes on different meanings and purposes (Rakow, 2005), and the tools used to study theory vary as well (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

A paradigm, in Kuhn’s use of the term then, is broader than how it is often defined in public relations scholarship. If we accept this broader conception and that the social sciences do not lend themselves to a grand unifying paradigm, what emerges in public relations scholarship is multiple, competing paradigms embodying different relevant questions to be asked (theories) and different means to be used to answer them (methods). Kuhn said of disciplines outside the natural sciences that ‘there are always competing schools, each of which constantly questions the very foundations of the others’ (1996: 162). As Botan and Hazleton (2006: 6) observe, ‘communication, like other social sciences, is naturally poly paradigmatic’.

**Dimensions of a multi-paradigmatic research agenda**

Each paradigm will be shown to satisfy more or less the criteria that it dictates for itself. (Kuhn, 1996: 108)

Many communication scholars have outlined paradigmatic schema for the field. For the purposes of discussion, I propose one comprising post-positivist, constructivist, critical/cultural and postmodern paradigms, building on Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) articulation. My purpose is not to promote this particular schematic as the ‘correct’ one. Many others exist (e.g. Martin and Nakayma, 1999), some of them quite provocative (e.g. Nastasia and Rakow, 2004), and scholars have eloquently made the case for their particular typologies. What these share, however, is an expressed need to illuminate coexisting threads in communication scholarship and their wider implications, that is, how philosophical assumptions inform paradigmatic choices and the consequences of those choices. As Whitehead (1967) observed, our choice of paradigm involves buying into a set of too often unexamined ‘truths’ that we then use to establish what we promulgate as facts or knowledge. Yet as Habermas argued in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, social science by its very nature requires radical reflexivity on
the part of researchers concerning the paradigmatic worldviews that underlie any research endeavor (in Dreyfus, 1980).

For the purpose of discussion, then, I outline four paradigms in Table 1, along with their underlying assumptions. Of most import are ontology (the nature of what is real; what is the object of study?) and epistemology (the means of knowing; how do we know what we know?). These two shape the remaining characteristics of each paradigm.

The post-positivist paradigm is the modern descendant of the Cartesian worldview and logical positivism. The shift from positivism, which held that we could measure and factually determine the nature of being, occurred because of work such as Popper’s (1968) contribution that we can only falsify hypotheses, not verify them, and Heisenberg’s 1927 Uncertainty Principle, which demonstrated that scientists cannot measure matter accurately but only within the parameters of probability (see Heisenberg, 1958). Within post-positivism, an independent reality separate from the mind of the researcher still exists, but researchers can only know it imperfectly rather than completely. Research is valid only if researchers are objective, using theory to predict phenomena, which are measured and analyzed using statistical tests. As with its positivist predecessor, progress is made through the gradual accumulation of knowledge over time.

This paradigm is closest to that of the natural sciences, from which it borrows the scientific method as its approach. Within the social sciences, this paradigm drives much work in the cognitive sciences, such as cognitive psychology, and in macrosociology, such as the work of Durkheim at the turn of the century (see Durkheim, 1972 for a reprint). Many scholars have labeled it the dominant paradigm driving communication

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Note: Broadly adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994). The postmodern addition is my own.
research (e.g. Bineham, 1994; Carey, 1989; Deetz, 1978), including public relations research (e.g. Curtin and Gaither, 2005; Gower, 2006; Pal and Dutta, 2008). As a case in point, it is from within this paradigm that Ferguson argued for a grand unified theory, noting that the role of theory is ‘to predict future events based upon research findings’ (1984: 2). The underlying functionalism of role theory, systems theory and excellence theory places them squarely within the post-positivist paradigm. Relationship management, with its measurement of relationship outcomes, falls into this paradigmatic stream as well. Development of post-positivist public relations scholarship has been robust, particularly in the USA.

The constructivist paradigm draws from the phenomenological philosophy of Heidegger (see Dreyfus, 1980) and Husserl (see Bechtel and Herschbach, 2010), namely, that meaning resides not in an external reality but in shared consciousness. While not denying the existence of a physical reality, this paradigm is concerned with the shared social realities humans create by virtue of their interactions, meaning nothing can be understood apart from its historical and social context. Because meaning is created among social units and not in external reality, objectivity is a meaningless goal. The test of good theory is its explanatory power, not its ability to predict to a generalizable population. The paradigm borrows heavily from anthropology (e.g. Geertz, 1973) and micro-sociology (e.g. Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), with their focus on cultures and group interaction. Applied to communication, it forms, in Carey’s (1989) terms, a more ritual view of the field.

Although pockets of public relations research have been produced from within this paradigm around the globe (e.g. Falkheimer and Heide, 2006; Gordon, 1997), surprisingly little constructivist work exists. For example, while mass communication researchers produced a number of ethnographic studies in the 1970s detailing newsroom culture (e.g. Epstein, 1973; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), almost no extant work details the organizational culture of agencies or in-house departments (L’Etang, in press). Gower (2006: 180) notes that ‘relationship theory explains what we do, but not why.’ Answers to the ‘why’ question would likely spring from within this paradigm as well. Framing has engendered some constructivist research, but much of it has been situated within the positivist realm. Work remains to be done demonstrating how it is used in public relations practice to create shared realities (Johansson, 2009). Other areas, such as promotional culture, remain understudied, despite their promise to illuminate the world of professional practice and provide insight into the world views of publics, among other areas of research (L’Etang, in press).

The critical/cultural stream owes much to neo-Marxism, particularly as developed by Birmingham Centre theorists such as Hall (1982), and French Structuralism (e.g. Saussure, 2006) and semiotics in general (Peirce, 1991). Within this paradigm, reality is the construction of a hegemonic imposition of ideology, and the goal of research is to uncover the ideology inherent, yet often invisible, in political and economic structures. Such research is action-oriented – the goal is not to learn more about the world but to change it, to revise history as given. The researcher in this case is both advocate and activist, exposing inequalities and injustices in an attempt to enact radical social change.

Public relations research from within this paradigm has, broadly speaking, stemmed mainly from Europe and Australia/New Zealand. In the USA, critical approaches have
been slower to take off, perhaps largely due to the predominance of post-positivist public relations research. Some scholars note that the role of public relations practice in a liberal market economy is often taken for granted in post-positivist work (Gower, 2006; Richter, 2010), but it is subjected to scrutiny within the critical/cultural paradigm. Political economic approaches, for example, have illustrated the interplay of public relations and ideology within texts and the larger role public relations plays in maintaining an unequal power structure in society (e.g. Edwards, 2006; Weaver, 2001). Other researchers have examined public relations’ broader political and economic role in transitioning economies (e.g. Ławniczak, 2009). Forms of feminist theory can be found within each paradigm, but recent work has evolved within the critical paradigm (e.g. Aldoory, 2005). Less research has addressed issues of race, although Pompper (2005) demonstrated the applicability of critical race theory to the field, and a forthcoming special issue of the Journal of Public Relations Research dedicated to race promises to help fill the gap. Also lacking are studies of class, despite the oft-noted fact that public relations expertise is available usually only to those who possess the necessary resources (Gower, 2006; Spicer, 2000).

To label postmodernism a paradigm is inherently ironic, if not oxymoronic. But certainly some generalizations can be made about postmodern research that serve to delineate it from the last three paradigms outlined. Postmodernism, developing as a reaction to the rather strict determinism of critical/cultural perspectives, has denied the existence of meta-narratives and focuses instead on context and contingency, building on the work of Lyotard (1984), Baudrillard (1988), and later writings of Foucault (1978[1975]), among others. Of import is the flow and play of power and discourse in a given situation; power is not found in structures or things but in articulations, that is relationships as situated within contexts. In this way it differs substantially from the other paradigms, positing the need for ‘ground up’ approaches and valuing dissensus rather than consensus as an outcome of public relations practice (Curtin and Gaither, 2005).

Vanguard public relations scholars working within the postmodern paradigm include Holtzhausen (2000, 2002) and Mickey (1997). The influx of chaos and complexity theories (e.g. Gilpin and Murphy, 2008; McKie, 2000; Murphy, 1996) and postcolonial approaches (e.g. Bardhan, 2003; Dutta, 2009; Munshi, 2005) have enriched this perspective. Some branches of third-wave feminism fall within the postmodern paradigm, such as Pompper’s (2007) work on standpoint theory, although public relations scholars have yet to embrace queer theory, with its emphasis on continuums. Overall, postmodern work has developed in pockets around the globe and is gaining critical mass.

**Ramifications and incommensurabilities**

I do, in short, really believe some – though by no means all – of the nonsense attributed to me. (Kuhn, 1991: 21)

This overview of research paradigms is brief and therefore necessarily simplistic. (For a more historical overview of how these paradigms have developed in public relations research, see Bardhan and Weaver, 2011). My outline skims the surface of much of the research being done in each area, and I apologize to the many scholars whose work I couldn’t mention because of space limitations. It provides a broad overview, however, of
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public relations scholarship and outlines a paradigmatic structure for it based on ontological and epistemological concerns. As shown in Table 1, these concerns inform our research in every way, from delimiting the questions we can ask to the tools we can use to answer them. (L’Etang, 2005) observes that a paradigm choice is also a political decision. For example, what gets published, funded and recognized is, in large part, dependent on whether the researcher’s paradigmatic perspective is congruent with that of editorial boards, granting agencies, or promotion and tenure committees.

Paradigm distinctions, therefore, are far from trivial, yet their ontological and epistemological assumptions often remain unnoticed and unexamined (Nastasia and Rakow, 2004). Kuhn (1996) believed most researchers are busy trying to solve puzzles, not thinking about the paradigm in which those activities take place. Yet at the base of each paradigm lie philosophical assumptions about the nature of being and how we can know that being. Because they are assumptions, it is impossible to prove a paradigm – a paradigm is matter of faith. For that reason, Kuhn equated switching paradigms to a leap of faith, ‘a conversion experience than cannot be forced’ (1996: 151). Paradigms, then, ‘must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness. If there were, the philosophical debates … would have been resolved millennia ago’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994: 107–8).

Because researchers seldom spell out the philosophical assumptions undergirding their work, confusion easily arises over terminology. For example, gender acquires quite different meanings within each paradigm. For post-positivists, gender is an essentialist term – one is of a particular gender. Gender can then be quantified, used as an independent variable, and become a predictor of behavior. Within a constructivist paradigm, gender is a socially constructed notion, involving cultural norms and expectations. Gender is important not for what it predicts but for what it means and conveys in a culture. From a critical/cultural standpoint, gender is one way in which unequal power structures are reified, usually leading to a male-dominated hegemony. Postmodernists view gender as a fluid notion constructed through discourse; the multiple discourses that arise may be enabling or disabling, empowering or disempowering.

This brief example illustrates what Kuhn (1996) termed semantic incommensurability. Lexicons developed within one paradigm do not simply translate to another. There is no ‘neutral language’ adequate to allow proponents of different paradigms to converse in a meaningful way. For example, constructivists don’t view objectivity, validity and reliability as meaningful terms in their research; the concepts simply don’t transfer over from the post-positivist paradigm. When Kuhn (1962) first proposed semantic incommensurability, some philosophers of science challenged it based on its similarity to Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, which stated that many translations were possible, making no single one correct. In fact, Kuhn (1976) developed the concept in later work to distance it from Quine: For Kuhn, it’s not that there are many adequate translations, the point is that there are none (Bird, 2004). Because paradigms are holistic, the same term used within different paradigms provides totally different frames of reference.

Public relations scholarship has been most plagued by two instances of semantic incommensurability: the meanings surrounding the words relationship and power. Ferguson argued that ‘we will have to come to agreement as to what we mean by our most basic terms: public, relationship, organization, communication and public issue’
Given that Ferguson was pursuing a singular paradigm, such an approach would be necessary. But if we accept that the social sciences are inherently multi-paradigmatic, then such agreement is impossible across paradigmatic boundaries. A *relationship*, for example, within the positivist perspective is a thing that can be cultivated and its outcomes measured. Within a postmodern perspective, a relationship is not so much a thing as a state of flux that defies measurement and is idiosyncratic to the situation at hand, forever being constituted and re-constituted in differing articulations.

The problem of semantic incommensurability across paradigms is a point eloquently made by Aldoory (2005), who applies a critical feminist lens to one branch of relationship management theory – organization/public relations (OPR). The theory, based in the post-positivist paradigm, treats gender as an essentialist notion and power as a characteristic of individuals. Aldoory (2005) notes that the name OPR puts the emphasis on the organization, with the results of relationship measures dichotomized in terms of the organization’s perspective as either exchange or communal. None of this translates, however, to her critical paradigm. From within that framework, ‘the units of analysis in research should be gender, power, and diversity, and studies should examine how they are communicated and how they are constitutive of relationships. First, relationships are gendered’ (Aldoory, 2005: 679). From a critical/cultural perspective, then, the term *relationship* takes on a wholly different meaning.

As Aldoory (2005) notes, *power* is another term that experiences semantic incommensurability within public relations scholarship. Post-positivist theories of public relations measure power as a characteristic of individuals; in critical approaches it is inherent in ideological structures and hegemonically reinforces the status quo. In postmodern approaches it is micropolitical, to use Foucault’s term, residing not in entities but as a characteristic of the relationship between and among them, making it a fluid part of articulations. These examples suggest that many of the current arguments to be found in the public relations literature could be resolved by clarifying paradigmatic assumptions and spelling out how terms such as *relationship* and *power* are used within each perspective.

Additionally, I would suggest extending Kuhn’s (1996) notion of perceptual incommensurability, that we perceive the world differently from within different paradigms, to include cultural incommensurability. My argument is that simply adding *guanxi* or Hofstede’s (2001) indices as variables to an extant theory does not address the inherently different worldviews of various cultures, with their disparate ontological and epistemological assumptions. The paradigms I’ve offered for consideration, for example, stem from western thought, which privileges those particular philosophical approaches. If we are to truly study global practice, however, we need to be inclusive of eastern thought, the worldviews of indigenous peoples, and other cultural perspectives.

Bardhan (2003; Bardhan and Patwardhan, 2004) makes this argument in her work on public relations practices in India; theory to guide practice differs in many ways that are not transferable when developed from within a paradigm consonant with the host culture. Chung and Ho (2009) provide an Eastern paradigm using the *I-Ching*, which informs Taoist, Buddhist and Confucianist thought, and the notion of chi/qi/ki, the basic life force or energy. Succinctly stated, within this worldview public relations is a circular process that tries to achieve a state of relationships as harmony, not balance. Public relations
scholarship is woefully lacking in non-western paradigmatic approaches such as this one and the concomitant conceptual richness they could bring to bear on our understanding.

Distinguishing ontology from epistemology

If things were simple, word would have gotten around. (Derrida, 1988: 119)

The notions of semantic and cultural incommensurability are crucial to expanding our scholarship in meaningful ways; that terms and cultures don’t simply translate, however, should not serve to straightjacket us into rigid modes of thinking and separate armed camps. (L’Etang, 2005: 524) has warned of the ‘dangers of being caught like the fly in amber in endless paradigm debates’, and Guba and Lincoln observe that ‘to argue that it is paradigms that are in contention is probably less useful than to probe where and how paradigms exhibit confluence and where and how they exhibit differences, controversies, and contradictions’ (2005: 192). Certainly productive crossover exists; or at least I like to think so given that much of my work in cultural economy combines strands from the critical/cultural and postmodern paradigms (e.g. Curtin and Gaither, 2005).

Numerous communications scholars have outlined ways to productively move past the seemingly never-ending controversies surrounding different paradigmatic approaches. Martin and Nakayama (1999), for example, outline four solutions. The first, liberal pluralism, encompasses a live and let live attitude. Each paradigm is seen as contributing to the whole, but there is no attempt to cross the lines. Inter-paradigmatic borrowing is the second stance, in which researchers are committed to one paradigm but open to limited borrowing from others. The third, multi-paradigmatic collaboration, draws on the contributions and limitations of each. Using this approach, researchers rotate among the paradigms to harness the strengths of each to balance their weaknesses. As Martin and Nakayama (1999) observe, however, the result is too often a huge project that lacks depth.

They call their preferred approach dialectical: ‘A dialectical approach accepts that human nature is probably both creative and deterministic; that research goals can be to predict, describe, and change; that the relationship between culture and communication is, most likely, both reciprocal and contested’ (Martin and Nakayama, 1999: 13). They suggest that by letting go of rigid binary thinking and engaging in the uncertainty that results from engaging multiple, but distinct paradigms, researchers will be able to take a more comprehensive view of the field and produce more insightful work. A dialectical approach, they argue, represents a major epistemological shift.

I believe, however, that their emphasis on epistemology over ontology obscures real differences and has been a problem with much work to date. We have become caught up in how we know, rather than in determining what it is we are trying to know. Recent philosophy of science approaches have all too often privileged epistemology at the cost of ontology, which falsely erases fundamental distinctions (Bohman et al., 1991; Dreyfus, 1980). Epistemological walls are more easily hurdled; for example, many post-positivists see the value of qualitative work such as interviews and focus groups, and mixed-methods studies and method triangulation are well accepted in many quarters. But as Guba and Lincoln (2005) point out, paradigmatic differences are not simply about
method, and real differences lie at the metaphysical level of the nature of reality and the concomitant values that such assumptions lend to the research endeavor.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggest, however, that researchers can keep ontological concerns to the fore and still use paradigms in conjunction under certain conditions of paradigm commensurability:

Is it possible to blend elements of one paradigm into another, so that one is engaging in research that represents the best of both world views? The answer, from our perspective, has to be a cautious yes. This is especially so if the models (paradigms) share axiomatic elements that are similar, or that resonate strongly between them. (2005: 201)

In other words, they believe paradigms must share some basic values (i.e. axiological principles) in order to combine to produce the resonance necessary to provide a useful research foundation. The call to action of much critical/cultural and postmodern research, for example, gives these two paradigms a point of conjunction, but they remain firmly at odds with post-positivist approaches that value objectivity and distance. Another example of a problematic axiological construct surrounds control of the research process and product. Post-positivists firmly own their data, often even paying subjects to obtain the rights to it. Critical and postmodern ethnographers, however, are at pains to empower their participants to share in the production of knowledge and its benefits (Markham and Baym, 2009).

When underlying values do not clash, Guba and Lincoln suggest a bricolage approach when ‘borrowing seems useful, richness enhancing, or theoretically heuristic’ (2005: 197). Such a process, however, requires a commitment to complexity to avoid reductionism: A firm understanding of the philosophical underpinnings is necessary for ‘bricoleurs [to] become smarter, more self-reflective about their own role and role of researchers in general in the knowledge- and reality-creating processes’ (Kincheloe, 2004: 8). Any paradigmatic combination, then, must stem from a philosophically informed, self-reflexive examination that looks beyond method to the core values of the research enterprise as defined by each paradigm. While challenging, it also suggests new ways in which we can increase the paradigmatic richness of public relations scholarship to provide new insights.

**Dissensus as the mark of maturity**

Ferment in the field is not something to be feared; rather, scholarly conflict, if constructively channeled, offers an opportunity for further growth and development. (Miller, 1983: 41)

Long before we had definitions of public relations that privileged management and organizations, Edward L. Bernays (1928: 153) defined public relations as ‘an art applied to a science’. This definition gets at the heart of public relations’ inherently interdisciplinary roots – we borrow from the sciences (post-positivism), social sciences (post-positivism, constructivist, critical/cultural), and the humanities (critical/cultural, postmodernism) to create a body of knowledge that is becoming our own. To privilege any one approach is to cut off the ‘opportunity for further growth and development’ that paradigmatic differences
enable (Miller, 1983: 41). Bardhan and Weaver (2011: 14) sum it up well in the introduction to their volume on global public relations: ‘Each of the paradigms in which public relations theory and research is based contribute to our understandings of the roles, foundations, and consequences of public relations in society in different ways.’

As Gower observed, ‘we have the opportunity to move forward onto divergent paths to embrace diversity in all of its forms’ (2006: 186). This is not to gloss over that embracing a multi-paradigmatic model of public relations research presents some very real difficulties. Paradigm choices are political, and the academy is structured to reward certain choices and not others. Paradigms also embody distinct differences that influence all aspects of the research project. Paradigms are, in fact, very much a matter of faith. Recognizing and valuing the contributions of diverse research paradigms, therefore, is not an easy path. If we are cognizant and self-reflexive concerning the politics and differences involved, however, embracing the multi-paradigmatic model may well prove a more fruitful, and no more difficult, endeavor than searching for the black cat in the cellar at midnight.

Kuhn (1996: 160–1) believed that the lack of a single paradigm in the social sciences ‘will cease to be a source of concern not when a definition [of science] is found, but when the groups that now doubt their own status achieve consensus about their past and present accomplishments’. Adopting a Kuhnian perspective, then, means that creating an environment within public relations scholarship that is inclusive of and values all paradigmatic approaches would form a critical stage in the maturation of the field.

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