ABSTRACT

Title of Document: **PUTTING OUT FIRES: HOW COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS UNDERSTAND AND PRACTICE CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Susan D. Allen, Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

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Do communication professionals fill the role of negotiators and conflict resolvers within their organizations? Some scholars (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Plowman, 2007) have claimed this role theoretically, but little research evidence has verified the negotiator role in practice. To gather empirical evidence, I conducted a qualitative research study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) using in-depth interviews and critical incident technique with thirty-one public relations professionals who had an average of 18 years of experience in a variety of organizations across the United States and overseas. Data analysis included open and axial coding and integration with prior research. Validity and reliability were enhanced through member checking, triangulation of data, and peer review of findings. Researcher bias was minimized through bracketing and audit trails. Findings showed that practitioners experienced most conflict within teams and other internal

audiences, practiced conflict avoidance rather than conflict engagement, understood individual level factors as major contributors to conflict, and avoided digital channels in conflict resolution. A model of practitioners as transformers of organizational conflict is proposed. This exploratory study leaves an important question unanswered: Can communication practitioners play a recognized role in transforming organizational conflicts rather than negotiating solutions? A quantitative survey with random sampling could be a next step in verifying the extent of conflict resolution in communication practice and in increasing our understanding of how practitioners can engage workplace conflict more effectively.

PUTTING OUT FIRES: HOW COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS
UNDERSTAND AND PRACTICE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

By

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Dedication

To my husband Philip who scrubbed our home, cooked my meals, put off vacations and scoured every sentence of this dissertation for confusions, infelicities, and pesky errors.

My love and gratitude.

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My first and deepest debt is owed to the communication practitioners who so generously contributed their time and insights to this study. One note I made after an interview expresses how profoundly their words have changed me: "Every time I finish an interview . . . I think, this was a fabulous, what a great experience to meet this person." These interviewees gave me a true sense of pride in my profession, one that contradicts the bad media stories about public relations professionals.

Above all, I thank my dissertation committee—a stellar team of scholars from the Communication Department at the University of Maryland who taught me with toughness and love during my training in our discipline.

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I also want to thank my colleagues and graduate students in the Advanced Academic Studies Communication Program at Johns Hopkins University. My colleagues gave me the emotional support I needed to continue this research while teaching. My thesis students taught me so much about conducting and writing about research that I am greatly indebted to each and every one.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Upper Chesapeake Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America who participated in my research and then offered me their friendship. Their high standard of professional behavior and deep dedication to our Annapolis community are truly wonderful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Putting out fires." One of my participants used this metaphor to describe what she did every day as a communication professional. Her metaphor expressed not only unrelenting problem solving, but—as I understood her narrative—intense job demands that burned with conflict. This research study began by exploring one activity that has been claimed for public relations professionals—the role of negotiator. It expanded into a broader study of how public relations/communication practitioners understand conflict and what roles in managing organizational conflict these professionals can legitimately claim.

Statement of the Problem

The exact roles public relations practitioners should enact within organizations continue to be hotly debated in the discipline (Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2007; Neil & Drumwright, 2012). Goffman (1959) defined a role, including a job or profession, as the rights and duties that are attached to a given social status. Scholars of public relations widely agree that practitioners *manage* communication to achieve mutually beneficial *relationships* with organizational stakeholders (Cutlip, Center, & Broome, 1985; Heath (2001). Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, and Toth (2007) added leadership to the management and relationship-building roles. In sum, the public relations discipline claims communication management, relationship management, and leadership in communication as primary organizational roles.

I proposed to study negotiation because that role has not achieved primary status in our profession. Researchers first systematically claimed the negotiation role

for public relations in 1985 (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Since then, very little evidence has surfaced that public relations practitioners routinely negotiate for their organizations or groups. Research studies claim *negotiation* as a public relations activity, often without definition or empirical evidence (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Plowman, 1998, 2007). Vasquez (1996) called for further categorization of that role in our discipline, starting with distinctions between formal and informal negotiation—a distinction also proposed by Gelfand and McCusker (2002). Still, little work has been done on exactly how the negotiation role actually functions in our profession. Moreover, we do not have a snapshot of what levels of conflict practitioners face in their everyday work.

Arguments for conflict management as a public relations role. Three areas of research provide theoretical support for conflict management as a wide-spread role for communication professionals: crisis communication, strategic communication, and public relations activism. Public relations practitioners play a visible role when organizations experience negative public scrutiny (Coombs, 2006; Johansen, Aggerholm, & Frandsen, 2012; Palenchar, 2007; Veil , Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). These crises often require negotiation with publics and stakeholders—a communication activity that Pruitt (2001) perceived to be growing out of a broader conflict situation.

Second, strategic communication has been claimed as a public relations role requiring managerial and decision-making power that generates conflict (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Neale, Tenbrunsel, Galvin, & Bazerman, 2006). One conflict management role identified by Hallahan et al. (2007) includes actively changing

organizational culture and values. Further, because digital communication and social networking sites have taken a prominent place in both strategic and crisis communication activities, Kazoleas and Teigen (2006) contended that conflict was integral to electronic media use while other researchers have investigated how to manage conflict in those media (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Olaniran, 2010).

Finally, *negotiation of meaning* to achieve organizational consensus has been claimed as a public relations role by activist scholars (Cammaerts, 2008; Smith & Ferguson, 2001; Zoch, Collins, Sisco, & Supa, 2008). These communication efforts often require transforming employee attitudes and emotions until a mutual understanding of the goals of an organization and its motives has been reached (Jameson, Bodtker, Porch, & Jordon, 2009). Taken together, research and theory on crisis communication, strategic communication, and activist public relations give credence to the claim that conflict management is a vital public relations role.

Goals of the Research Study

This study has two goals: one academic and one in practice. First, our discipline needs evidence to fill in research gaps about how practitioners engage in negotiation, what that negotiation entails, and what understandings of negotiation or other conflict management roles apply in public relations practice. Second, I hope the participants' insights and recommendations can reach a wide audience of communication professionals, add to their understanding of practice, and perhaps improve their work lives.

To those ends, this exploratory study has the following goals:

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•To investigate assumptions and claims that public relations

      activities involve or should involve conflict resolution,

      including overt negotiation.

•To increase our knowledge of how public relations/communication

      practitioners understand conflict, its management, its

      processes, and its causes within their profession.

•To document how public relations/communication practitioners

      describe conflict resolution activities they experience in

      their everyday work, including those involving digital

      channels.

•To explore whether conflict management and negotiation are

      major roles in public relations practice that could be usefully

      added to the accepted roles of strategic communication and

      relationship management.

      Rationale: These goals were best achieved through a qualitative research study involving 31 public relations/communication professionals with five or more years of experience who could describe and illuminate their experiences with circumstances of conflict. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) defined qualitative research as a way to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 1). Qualitative data collection included triangulation of in-depth interview transcripts, critical incident narratives, printed materials, and website information (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis followed a qualitative research method designed to generate

constructs and "build theory from data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1). In order to eliminate leading questions about negotiation as a role, interview questions did not use the term *negotiation*, but allowed participants to find their own language in describing conflict.

Research questions. The following research questions guided my inquiry. They were designed to gather rich descriptive data from the participants and to insure depth in my analysis of their understandings of conflicts within their professional lives (Creswell, 2007; Miles et al, 2014). Although the language of these questions was refined based on reiterative data analysis and reduction, the questions cover the research areas approved by my dissertation committee in the proposal I submitted—including digital communication.

RQ1: How do public relations/communication practitioners with at least 5 years of experience describe their job activities and roles in the context of conflict management?

RQ2: How do public relations/communication professionals understand conflict management and negotiation as roles in their practice?

RQ3: How do public relations/communication practitioners understand their use of digital and social media in roles that involve conflict management or negotiation?

RQ4: How do communication practitioners understand conflict processes and apply conflict resolution techniques in critical incidents they have experienced in the workplace?

Sub-questions and probes explored many factors in conflict, conflict processes, and conflict management, as well as contributing variables, including external and internal audiences, use of communication channels in conflict, personal skills in conflict management, and training in conflict resolution.

Voices and standpoint. Voice is "the overall tone, mode, and orientation of the report" (Miles et al., 2014). Wolcott (2001) argued that the *voice* and *standpoint* are interchangeable terms. These concepts describe the researcher's authorial choices that, in turn, reveal what role she takes in reporting the data—omniscient narrator, interviewer, or storyteller (Tierney, 1997).

Several goals of the study—comparing the roles of practitioners with assumptions in communications research and developing a grounded theory model— led me to structure the report using the traditional formal sections in research articles. Throughout the data analysis and writing of the results, I viewed myself in the struggling-to-be-objective interviewer role—a standpoint that required me to reflexively deal with my bias in order to give authentic voices to my participants. Because of my close involvement with practitioners in my role as practicum supervisor in a professional graduate school of communication and my work as a member of the Public Relations Society of America, I viewed my interviewees as co-researchers and myself as a co-participant.

Extensive quotations in the Results section allowed the individual voices of my participants to be heard above the formal tone of an academic writer that my own voice often took in this document. To allow the voices of my participants to speak to the reader directly without compromising their confidentiality, I created a fictional

first name for each participant and used that name consistently. By identifying interviewees by (fictitious) first names and quoting liberally, I hoped to give each participant the distinct personality and voice that I experienced.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapters in the dissertation have three major goals: 1) to review past and current research on negotiation and conflict management from a variety of social science disciplines and applied fields; 2) to establish qualitative research and grounded theory method as effective strategies for producing credible, reliable, and valid answers to the research questions; and 3) to generate results that satisfy standards for "rich, thick description" and faithful interpretation of the participants' meanings during data reduction.

To meet these goals, the Literature Review (Chapter 2) covers factors in conflict and negotiation across social science disciplines and summarizes public relations theories and studies in negotiation. It also explores recent Internet and software developments in negotiation, as well as current research in conflict resolution and transformation. The Method section (Chapter 3) explains grounded theory procedures of data collection, data analysis, and strategies to reduce bias and insure reliability and validity. Objections to these procedures and to qualitative methods in general are addressed. The Results section (Chapter 4) liberally quotes from participant transcripts to substantiate themes, categories, and factors emerging from the data.

The Discussion section (Chapter 5) reviews the 13 major themes and factors that emerged from data analysis. It weaves those factors into a model for

transformation of conflict as a role for public relations practitioners. This model rests on participants' perceptions of audience conflict, conflict avoidance, conflict processes, and training needs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review should "make the case that a study is important" (Jones & Kottler, 2006, p. 26). Hofstee (2006) claimed it must establish originality, defined as significance or value. More precisely, the literature review should establish a *research gap*; that is, it should separate what researchers have done from what needs to be accomplished (Randolph, 2009).

One choice facing qualitative researchers is whether to conduct a literature review before or after the research design is planned and carried out (Charmaz, 2006). This study required a literature review in the proposal stage, so delaying the review was not an option even though scholars using similar perspectives argue that bias can arise from immersion in past research. Some phenomenologists (Georgi, 1985; Jones, 2005; Moustakas, 1994; Sanders, 1982) and grounded theorists (Gibson & Hartman, 2014; Goulding, 2005; Wolcott, 1994) dispute the value of literature reviews, especially those conducted before the start of a qualitative study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that literature reviews predispose researchers "to see [their] data through the lens of earlier ideas, often known as 'received theory' " (Charmaz, 2006, p. 165). If you delay writing the literature review until after data analysis, the argument goes, your results may be less contaminated by bias from preconceived ideas.

Other qualitative researchers (Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003) counter that no researcher can ignore her prior learning and experience, but she can take a highly critical stance toward prior research and use bracketing activities to reduce bias. I

followed this advice. Memos and bracketing activities were applied to prevent past research findings in this review from influencing the results (Miles et al., 2014).

In addition to using bias prevention strategies, I found that my literature review required updating twice after its original version. After completing the data analysis, I needed to include studies on themes developed by participants that had not been covered, such as team cooperation (Gallicano, 2013; Van Lange, Joireman, Parks, & Van Dijk, 2013). During the Discussion analysis, I added current research on organization-wide factors in conflict resolution that illuminated the macro implications of my findings (Gelfand, Leslie, Keller, & deDrieu, 2012; Tekleab & Quigley, 2014; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012).

As recommended by Randolph (2009), this literature review examines a research gap between theory about negotiation in communication practice (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) and studies showing solid evidence that the negotiation role is actually part of practitioners' work life (Vasquez, 1996). To document this research gap, the selected literature review articles aim to fairly represent the topic of negotiation/conflict resolution in communication practice and examine both "research outcomes" and "practices or applications" (Randolph, 2009, p. 2).

Specifically, this review of literature explores definitions of key terms, provides historical background that places the study in context of conflict management, and documents that the research questions have value in the communication discipline (Hofstee, 2006). It summarizes public relations scholarship on negotiation, intercultural factors within that research, and negotiation theories from other disciplines that have informed our discipline. The literature review

identifies gaps in public relations research on negotiation, including lack of empirical studies in the field, failure to distinguish formal from informal negotiation, and the need for a true process model. Research and theory from other social science disciplines provide additional perspectives on negotiation and conflict resolution. Moreover, recent developments in discourse analysis and electronic or automatic negotiation may push negotiation into a more central place in public relations.

Defining Negotiation

Negotiation is an activity that falls within the broader category of conflict management in organizations where communication practitioners work and in public relations roles that involve resolving conflict with stakeholders (Hargie & Tourish, 2009b; Montes et al., 2012; Posthuma, 2012; Rahim, 2011; Verčič et al., 2012). Conflict has been defined as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals" (Putnam & Poole, 1987, p. 552). Conflict has been widely viewed as an inevitable part of organizations (Gelfand et al., 2012). Consequently, conflict has to be managed and styles of conflict management have been studied both in personal life and in the workplace (Rahim, 2011). Paraphrasing Thomas (1976), Montes, Rodriguez, & Serrano, (2012) defined conflict management styles "as a general and consistent orientation toward the other party and the conflict issues" (p. 7). Within this study, negotiation finds its place as an activity within the communication/public relations workplace and its demands for conflict management and resolution.

Definitions of negotiation can be so broad they apply to any situation where two or more people are communicating. Gelfand & McCusker (2002) defined negotiation as "a communication exchange . . . [or] a pervasive form of social interaction that is conducted frequently in formal arenas, such as international relations, and manager-subordinate relations, as well as informal arenas, such as interpersonal relations and marital decision-making" (p. 292). This broad definition involving social interaction raises questions about what public relations scholarship means by negotiation. The *Encyclopedia of Public Relations* (Heath, 2012) has no entry for *negotiation*. We find only brief comments on multi-party negotiations under *conflict resolution* (Plowman, 2005), and negotiation is implied within *collaborative decision-making* (McComas & Derville, 2005). Distinctions between conflicts involving issues and conflicts involving meaning, or between problem solving and negotiation, are often blurred. The following questions are frequently ignored: what are the differences between formal and informal negotiations (Ury, 1993)? between the goals of conflict resolution and meaning-making (Wilson & Putnam, 1990)? and between negotiation and relationship building (Christen, 2004; Vasquez, 1996)?

Let's begin with the distinction between formal and informal negotiations—a difference that is often ignored in public relations research (Vasquez, 1996). One useful perspective distinguishes between *conflicts of interest* and *conflicts of viewpoint*. Kuula and Stam (2008) compared negotiation in the two types of conflict by using the adjectives *distributive* and *integrative*:

> . . . negotiation includes resolving both conflicts of interest between
>
> conflicting parties (i.e., 'hard,' 'distributive,' or 'win-lose'

negotiations) and conflicts of viewpoint between essentially friendly

parties (i.e., 'soft,' 'integrative,' or 'win-win' negotiations)" (p. 719).

The difference between distributive and integrative negotiations has been fully

developed in scholarship on formal negotiations. Lewicki, Saunders, Barry, and

Minton (2004) listed these characteristics of a formal or distributive negotiation:

1. Individuals, groups, or organizations can negotiate.

2. The parties perceive that their goals and interests are in conflict (p. 4).

3. Parties voluntarily enter into the negotiation because they hope to

    gain something that would be hard to get otherwise.

4. Negotiation allows parties to avoid a solution imposed by a powerful entity

    such as a court or regulatory agency.

5. Parties have to give and take in a negotiation and be willing to

    compromise.

6. Parties often want tangible results from a negotiation, but intangible

    interests are also in play (e.g., saving face and maintaining

    relationships).

The formal negotiation framework assumes that parties want a concrete

agreement at the end of the negotiation that will redistribute tangible and intangible

resources in order to reduce conflict (Lax & Sibenius, 2006). Social science

perspectives on negotiation widely accept the premise that resource allocation should

benefit all parties (i.e., a win-win agreement) and not only the most powerful party

(i.e., a win-lose agreement) (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011). Sycara (1991) explained

that each party wants to achieve its aspirations in a settlement, not just tangible

resources. At the same time, they accept constraints on their power. J. Grunig (1992) placed public relations squarely in this tradition by defining the negotiation process as collaboration (p. 316).

Informal negotiations operate outside a formal framework and without potential interventions by outside parties. Gelfand and McCusker (2003), who identify themselves as communication scholars, posited five elements at the core of all negotiations: "(1) the parties have, or perceive they have, a conflict of interests; (2) parties are engaged in communication; (3) compromises are possible; (4) parties can make provisional offers and counter-offers to each other; (5) parties are temporarily joined together voluntarily, and their outcomes are determined jointly" (p. 293). This shifts the frame of negotiation to elements such as perceptions and offers that may be temporary and that highlight communication.

Among public relations scholars, Vasquez (1996) most forcefully issued a call to study negotiation as an element in everyday social interactions, rather than as a feature of formal conflict resolution. This scholar rated negotiation theories in public relations as underdeveloped; Vasquez (1996) turned to the social interaction perspective to uncover conflict resolution dimensions that were missing from the excellence paradigm. Putnam and Roloff (1992) defined social interaction as communication that is directed toward understanding symbols and creating meaning both verbally and nonverbally. In contrast, formal negotiation has one concrete goal: bargaining to achieve agreement.

Public relations scholars widely accept the value of mutually beneficial outcomes in conflict resolution, as well as the use of *integrative bargaining* to

achieve self-interested outcomes. Katz and Pattarini (2008) labeled integrative

bargaining as an *essential* tool for public relations counselors. They define this

process as "identifying and prioritizing interests, developing options that might meet

those interests, agreeing on fair standards for evaluating options, and exploring both

alternatives and proposals to a negotiated agreement" (p. 88). Their article serves as a

guidebook to the principles and techniques of integrated negotiation that practitioners

can use to build relationships and establish trust with stakeholders. The most

important concept in integrative bargaining is the shift from asserting one party's

position on issues to exploring shared interests with the other negotiators.

Integrative bargaining scholarship underscores an essential divide in social

science thinking about negotiation. The difference involves formal theory-testing

versus model-building without replication. Kraus (2001) isolated this distinction by

creating two categories: (1) the formal theory of bargaining based on *game-*

theoretical approaches that is tested through experiments and simulations and (2) the

informal theory of *negotiation guides*—an approach that develops beneficial

strategies for a negotiator to use in specific situations. The standards of validity and

reliability are different in each approach. The majority of social science studies on

negotiation use game-theoretical approaches investigated through statistical analysis

(Buelens, Van de Woestyne, Mestdagh, & Bouckenooghe, 2008). The most famous

negotiation guides have been produced by scholars in the Harvard Negotiation Project

whose conclusions emerged from business and law case studies (Fisher et al., 2011;

Lax & Sibenius, 2006; Malhotra & Bazerman, 2007; Ury, 2007). Game theory and

negotiation guides based on case study experience have cross-fertilized, so we can

find statistical analyses based on concepts from negotiation guides (Donohue &
Roberto, 1996; Taylor & Thomas, 2008).

In public relations, studies on negotiation often sort into the same dichotomy
of game-theory versus negotiation-guide perspectives. These categories become
useful when we judge how to apply the conclusions of research studies. Game
theoretical approaches often surface in public relations studies that assume
organizations are rational entities operating in an uncertain environment (Okura,
Dozier, Sha, & Hofstetter, 2009). Public relations research favors the negotiation
guides approach because it offers pragmatic and often successful strategies that
negotiators can use to resolve conflict (Plowman, 1995).

Public Relations Perspectives on Negotiation

Over the last thirty years, public relations scholars have followed the lead of
other social scientists by studying negotiation as an activity of individuals in overt
conflict settings. One crucial theory—Pruitt and Kim's (2004) model of conflict
styles—posited "the strength of two independent individual difference variables: *self-
concern* and *other-concern*" (p. 42). Self-concern reflects how much an individual
values his or her own interests in conflict situations; other-concern reflects how much
genuine importance someone places on what happens to others during conflict. This
difference is at the heart of Pruitt's (1981) *dual concern model*. In general, individuals
moderate their self-concern because they cannot get what they want unless they help
or show concern for others.

Pruitt (1981, 2001) labeled this strategy of moderating self-interest as
instrumental or *strategic* and formulated a typology of negotiation strategies that

included various combinations of self-concern and other-concern. *Contending*
describes strategies based on pure self concern; *yielding* occurs when the other party's
interests take precedence; *problem solving* strategies are applied when a party asserts
both self-concern and other-concern; *avoiding* strategies surface when a party has
little self-concern or other-concern; and *compromising* involves trying to find a
middle ground even if an equitable split does not satisfy either party (Pruitt & Kim,
2004, pp. 40-41).

      Perspectives on conflict from the excellence model. Various elements of the
dual-concern model, particularly its strategic categories, have been folded into public
relations theory and practice (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Plowman, Briggs, &
Huang, 2001; Vasquez, 1996). In one of the few substantive models of negotiation in
public relations—the conflict resolution model of public relations—Plowman (2007)
has adapted the strategies and framework of public relations negotiation to new
developments in the excellence model. We have already cited Grunig and Grunig's
(1992) definition of "collaboration as the process of negotiation" in the context of
public relations. Subsequently, Plowman (1995) emphasized collaboration in
negotiation by linking individual conflict strategies to the four communication models
created by Grunig and Hunt (1984) as well as to the situational theory of publics
(Grunig & Repper, 1992). In other words, conflict strategies were linked to achieving
negotiation outcomes that both the organization and its stakeholders viewed as win-
win.

      In a simulated study involving Walgreen's goal to establish a mail order drug
business, Plowman (1995) adapted five individual conflict strategies—contending,

cooperating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising—to two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and its publics (p. 95). For example, a contending strategy relies on one-way communication that is essentially asymmetrical and non-collaborative. In 1995, Plowman also added two negotiation tactics called the *unconditionally constructive tactic* and the *win/win or no deal tactic*. The unconditionally constructive tactic added the element of altruism to an organizational strategy. When using this tactic, organizations must keep the interests of the contending parties in mind even if some stakeholders violate trust or other standards. Win/win or no deal requires that every party benefits; otherwise, no agreement can be reached. These tactics allow negotiators to handle stalemates and other problems that block collaboration in the negotiation process. Plowman (1995) placed these seven strategies on a simple continuum from symmetrical, or collaborative practices, to asymmetrical or contending practices.

When the excellence model developed the new paradigm of symmetry in two-way practice (Grunig, 2001), Plowman (2007) expanded the seven negotiation strategies to include the mixed motives of self-interest and other-interest. That model illustrated how mixed motives in communication between organizations and publics could lead to symmetrical communication and win-win outcomes for both parties (Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig, 2001). The new elements in this model included the tactic of principled standards that requires parties to act according to these standards even when they do not benefit. A principled tactic introduces ethics and social responsibility into negotiation, but the consequences may result in symmetrical or asymmetrical outcomes for the parties (Huang, 1997). A final strategy in the conflict

resolution model of public relations is perseverance—the obligation to work toward one's goals regardless of the other party's response. The nine strategies are arrayed on a continuum that places one-way strategies at either end and two-way strategies in a middle win-win zone. For example, cooperation, unconditionally constructive, and win-win or no deal tactics fall in the *win-win zone* that will result in positive agreement. If an organization acts unilaterally in self-interest, its tactics can include contention, avoidance, and principled action. When publics act with self-interest, they use accommodation, compromise, and perseverance tactics. Plowman (2007) introduced the strategy of *assertive pacifism* that can be used when publics act aggressively and with arrogance (pp. 96-97). The conflict resolution model of public relations continues to evolve.

Within the excellence model and the conflict resolution model of public relations (Plowman, 2007), *mediator* is the only specific role for public relations practitioners. Grunig and Grunig (1992) defined a mediator as a "neutral third party" who "enters the process of negotiation" and takes a neutral role and assists in negotiation like lawyers and counselors (p. 316). Plowman (2007) developed a more nuanced typology of mediator roles for practitioners including internal peer mediation to solve organizational problems and affiliated third party mediation in which a highly trained practitioner can resolve conflicts even when perceived as aligned with one party. Certainly, practitioners take other conflict resolution roles. The activist literature in public relations suggests the role of conflict creator (Holtzhausen, 2007), but to date we do not have an extensive list of roles in negotiation.

Another substantial model related to conflict resolution and relationship management is the *value of public relations* model developed by Huang (2001). Using structural equation modeling and questionnaire data collected during a legislative session in Taiwan, Huang's (2001) study established direct and indirect relationships between communication strategies, relationship building variables, and conflict resolution. The independent variable was public relations strategies. Following Grunig's (2001) new formulations of public relations dimensions, Huang (2001) chose five public relations strategies: symmetrical-ethical communication, two-way communication, interpersonal communication, mediated communication, and social activities. The practice of social activities is culturally based in Chinese concepts of personal influence and connections within a social network (Huang, 2001, p. 268). The three dependent variables were the conflict strategies used by counter parties: integrative, distributive, and non-confrontation-avoidance. Finally, as mediating variables, Huang (2001) selected five relationship factors developed in part by Grunig and Huang (2000): control mutuality, trust, relational commitment, relational satisfaction, and face and favor. This study is notable for using three Chinese cultural variables—social activity and the gifts of face and favor—that can be offered within a social setting. Many indirect effects were found among the 14 variables, but none of the public relations communication strategies had any direct effect on conflict resolution. The Chinese variables of social activity, face, and favor did have direct influence on the use of cooperative tactics. Huang's (2001) model of the value of public relations showed that relationships indirectly influence the use of

collaborative tactics, but the researcher called for much more testing of the model outside of Taiwan.

In contrast to tha more formal negotiations emphasized by Huang (2001) and Plowman (2007), some public relations and communication scholars have turned their attention to informal negotiation. Vasquez (1996) called for "the application of negotiation models to other, different communication contexts" that we do not usually identify as negotiations (p. 58). He pointed the way by calling on public relations practitioners to "construct frames of organizational information" that can "negotiate the relationships between an organization and key publics" (p. 72). Putnam (2005) proposed discourse analysis as the primary technique "to unpack the developmental and contextual features of negotiation" (p. 17). Discourse analysis bypasses the typologies of formal conflict resolution strategies and instead examines transcripts, audiotapes, and other evidence in order to uncover differences between ordinary interactions and negotiations. Some discourse analysts have tackled relationship building, trust, power structures, and organizational cultures in e-mail negotiations (Jensen, 2009) and in meetings among organizations with conflicting interests in waste management (Bennington, Shetler, & Shaw, 2003). Putnam (2005) asserted that these quantitative and qualitative discourse analyses will help us to understand the process of negotiation, not simply the individual motivations, tactics, and outcomes displayed in formal settings. Informal negotiations are captured in phrases such as *negotiating a relationship* (Vasquez, 1996, p. 72) or *engaging in dialogue* when conflicts arise (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Scholars will have to define what practitioners mean when they talk about negotiating in informal settings.

Perspectives from the contingency theory of public relations. The contingency theory of public relations (Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011) aims to understand decision-making processes used by practitioners during conflict situations. Various scholars (Cameron, Crop, & Reber, 2001; Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997; Caneron, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999) have described the complex of eighty or more variables that can influence conflict management in our field, the leadership styles that influence decision-making, and the ethical factors in conflict resolution. The contingency theory of public relations raises the following questions that bear strongly on the results of this study: are practitioners mostly involved in conflict at the individual, unit, organizational, or social level (Shin, Cameron, & Crop, 2006)? is conflict management a routine or non-routine role for practitioners (Shin et al., 2011)? what strategies do practitioners generally view as effective in resolving conflict (Cancel et al., 1999)? what ethical standards are applied in conflict management during practice?

Some public relations scholars have studied conflict resolution and negotiation in our profession using the *contingency theory of accommodation* (Cameron et al., 2001)*,* sometimes labeled the *contingency theory of conflict management* (Cancel et al., 1997). This model uses concepts from other negotiation perspectives described above, including *accommodation, cooperation,* and *compromise* (Fisher et al., 2011; Pruitt, 1981; Pruitt & Kim, 2001). Options for responses to conflict range on a continuum from pure *advocacy* to pure *accommodation*; the advocacy stance is adversarial because it unequivocally supports the organization's position while the opposite stance of accommodation is fully

cooperative (Cameron et al., 2001). In between are varying degrees of cooperation between an organization and its publics. This theory is interested in decision-making processes during conflict, but generally ignores the outcomes of negotiation; the conflict processes "may change rapidly according to the dynamics of the situation" and involve issues that "don't really have yes or no answers on either side" (Cancel et al., 1999, p. 176).

The contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel et al., 1997) challenges other models of public relations, particularly the excellence model, that view dialogue and symmetrical communication as normative strategies in dealing with conflict (e.g., Cutlip, Center, & Broome, 2000; Grunig, 1989; Shin et al., 2011). The theory's proponents (Cancel et al., 1999) have argued that the excellence model could not accurately represent best practices in public relations because of incomplete analysis of what constitutes an ethical or moral strategy during conflict. This position opens up a debate about what legitimate, ethical strategies can be applied by communication practitioners especially in conflict situations that involve extreme positions. Proponents of the theory generally support the use of *accommodation* (i.e., cooperation with other parties to resolve conflict), but view conflict situations as highly complex disputes in which dialogue may be ineffective and even unethical (Cancel et al., 1999).

Moreover, scholars within contingency theory question whether two-way communication can be effective in many conflict situations (Cancel et al., 1997). In a thought piece on dialogue in public relations, Stoker and Tusinski (2006) argued for engagement through one-way dissemination (i.e., unilateral) and reconciliation with

publics where no negotiated agreement or mutual understanding is possible. In these situations, symmetrical two-way communication could result in "moral cracks and contradictions" (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006, p. 158) and result in quid pro quo agreements that are unethical because, for example, important issues and stakeholders are excluded. In these extraordinary relationships, nonreciprocal forms of communication such as "suspended dialogue" or "dissemination" may have more value for both parties, as well as more ethical force.

Examples from Stoker and Tusinski (2006) illustrate the ethical quandaries that organizations and publics face in decisions relating to their conflict strategies. The authors pointed out biases in selecting publics with which organizations will engage in symmetrical two-way dialogue, often preferring engagement with like-minded parties that can offer reciprocation. By favoring engagement with "homogeneous publics," that is, those with similar viewpoints, the organization can more easily "achieve mutual understanding" and reach an agreement (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006, p. 163). More recalcitrant parties are ignored, often those with fewer resources to engage in campaigns and negotiation. In contrast, ethical conflict management can put aside symmetrical dialogue with like-minded parties, accept continuation of the conflict, engage in dissemination of information and arguments, and accept that no valid agreement can currently be reached.

In addition to these theoretical explorations of ethics in conflict resolution, the contingency theory of accommodation has developed a matrix of variables and factors of special interest to studies like this one about conflict resolution in the communication profession (Cancel et al., 1997). Researchers have explored these

variables in qualitative interview studies about conflict involving communication

professionals, including experienced public relations managers and journalists (Shin

& Cameron, 2004). Initially, the matrix developers identified 86 variables that could

influence conflict situations in communication practice. Cancel et al. (1999) defined

two broad categories that can be applied to these variables—*predisposing* variables

that "shape the organization's predisposition toward relations with external publics"

and *situational* variables "at work during a particular situation involving an

organization and an external public" (p. 177). Results of an interview study with 18

experienced public relations professionals showed that situational variables far

outweighed predisposition variables in decisions to accommodate external publics.

But many factors influenced the conflict strategy, including how threatening the

external public seemed to the dominant coalition (e.g., the strategy could affect

profits and reputation) and how internal stakeholders such as employees viewed the

public.

  Researchers who study the complex matrix of variables in the contingency

theory have struggled to make practical sense of how the 86 variables influence

everyday public relations practice (Reber & Cameron, 2003). Attempts have been

made to aggregate these 86 matrix variables. One study isolated 12 factors divided

along *external* or *internal* dimensions (Shin, Cameron, & Crop, 2006). External

dimensions include external threats, industry environment, political/social/cultural

environment, and external publics; internal factors include organizational

characteristics, management characteristics, and individual characteristics.

  Unfortunately, interview studies with experienced public relations

practitioners can result in a flurry of claims about the contingency theory variables that seem stereotyped and self-serving. For example, in a small interview study involving eight public relations professionals in high-income global corporations, Cameron, Crop, and Reber (2001) found support for criticisms of two-way symmetrical dialogue by the contingency theory of accommodation. The study tested six variables involving the disposition of organizations prior to conflict: moral conviction; awareness of conflicting demands from external publics; regulatory, legal, or judicial constraints; and management pressure on practitioners. The interviewers asked practitioners to recall episodes involving these six variables—for example, "Can experienced practitioners recount instances when the demands or needs of a public were not accommodated at all because to do so would violate the practitioner's moral convictions?" (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 248). Every participant recalled episodes that supported this conclusion: "*There are times when nothing good can come from dialogue*" (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 250). Several examples showed the drawbacks of engaging in dialogue that excluded more distant community stakeholders who were negatively impacted by the agreement between a for-profit and a non-profit organization.

More importantly, this research team (Cameron et al., 2001) found that participant descriptions of conflict episodes contradicted how the individuals explained those situations. The practitioners engaged in "platitudes about win-win or other lofty sentiments" that distorted "how professionals actually conduct themselves during conflict" (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 256). For example, the participants would describe their communication strategies as " 'two-way', 'win-win', or 'compromise'

when it is clearly an asymmetrical approach" (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 253). Some practitioners accused the opposing party of engaging in biased messages while their organizations were "getting 'the truth' out there" or "just trying to set the record straight" (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 253). The interview findings supported probing for details about what actually happened in conflict episodes, rather than accepting explanations by the practitioners. Further, the participants, who each had two decades of experience in public relations, did not show clear understanding of "terms like win-win, two-way, symmetrical and accommodation" (Cameron et al., 2001, p. 256). Because of conflicting answers and lack of knowledge about conflict resolution concepts, the researchers recommended future survey research to clarify what practitioners mean by the conflict resolution vocabulary they use on the job. Moreover, leading questions and excluded target audiences undermined the validity of this study's results.

In a larger interview study with public relations practitioners, Cameron et al., (1999) found more specific results on contingency theory variables, including the addition of new variables for situations. They asked 18 high-level communication professionals from large corporations about their understanding of contingency theory. The interview guide contained a checklist of the 80+ contingency theory variables. When participant responses flagged toward the end of the conversation, the three interviewers asked about variables on the list that had not yet been mentioned. As a result, many variables in the findings had only weak support from the participants. Major findings included (1) the use of philanthropic and community relations activities to accommodate publics in conflict with the organization; (2) the

emergence of characteristics of an antagonistic public—especially its relative power to injure the organization's reputation and earnings—as variables in how the organization handles the conflict; and (3) the impact of a large mix of variables, not just a small number, in the decision-making process involving conflicts with external publics. Also, line managers—not just the dominant coalition— often have decision-making power in dealing with external publics, so they can undermine public relations efforts to accommodate these publics. Finally, in these large corporations, certain individual personality characteristics of people in the dominant coalition (e.g., open-mindedness, ability to put aside personal biases, and past training) could create a positive outcome to conflict with external publics.

The contingency theory of accommodation in public relations accepts a complicated variable stew as operating in a public relations conflict situation. The model of contingency summarized above generates some predictions about what participants in this study may report. First, these participants may profess a preference for accommodation (i.e., a cooperative style) to advocacy (i.e., an adversarial style) in dealing with conflict (Cameron et al., 2001). Second, practitioners in this study may avoid symmetrical two-way communication in some conflict situations because of the unethical outcomes that may result (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Third, in making decisions, practitioners may rely more heavily on situational variables in the conflict situation rather than on factors established in advance by the organizational culture (i.e., predispositional variables). Fourth, practitioners will focus more on individual-level factors in conflict situations than on organizational- or societal-level factors (Shin et al., 2006). Finally, practitioners will perceive little if any difference between

how public relations leaders deal with conflict in routine work situations versus non-routine work situations, although practitioners may be more resourceful in crisis situations (Shin et al., 2011, p. 185).

Robustness and Gaps in Public Relations Research on Negotiation

The two major theories I have reviewed above—the excellence paradigm and contingency theory—both explored the roles that practitioners play in conflict management. In their recent overview of leadership styles supported by contingency theory, Shin et al. (2011) claimed that public relations scholars seek "to understand roles that practitioners play on behalf of organizations" (p. 167). Within this excellence model, this goal of establishing a specific number and type of public relations roles was examined by Broom and Dozier (1986) and Dozier (1992). However, Shin et al. (2011) contended that after decades of research, "the body of scholarly literature provides little explication of what specific behavioral characteristics and functions public relations professionals enact or are expected to enact" (p. 183). This statement implies that significant gaps exist in the current literature on public relations practice and conflict resolution roles.

The excellence model placed conflict resolution and negotiation at the center of public relations research and practice (Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Scholars like Plowman (1998) and Huang (1997) have robustly adapted integrative bargaining and negotiation tactics developed by scholars in social psychology (Pruitt, 1981), business (Fisher et al., 2011), and other disciplines (Rahim, 2011). More specifically, the conflict resolution model of public relations (Plowman, 2007) and the value of public relations model (Huang, 2001) have woven

integrative bargaining and tactics into core elements of the excellence paradigm: dimensions of public relations (Grunig, 2006), strategic communication, and relationship building (Brunig, Dials, & Shirka, 2008). Also, scholars have made convincing connections between various incarnations of the symmetry model and conflict resolution (Huang, 2007).

The literature covered in this essay has effectively conceptualized the role of mediation in public relations. Grunig and Grunig (1992) and Plowman (2007) recommend the mediation role as part of public relations practice. However, a study by Kelleher (2003) sheds doubt on whether a public relations practitioner will be accepted as a mediator in a formal negotiation. Kelleher's (2003) study documented the overt rejection of public relations practitioners as mediators in a labor dispute. We do not know how widely public relations practitioners are used as mediators between organizations and publics.

The public relations literature on negotiation leaves many gaps. Very little quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted on negotiation in the field as opposed to simulations (Christen, 2004; Plowman, 2008). For example, little work has been done on establishing the value of public relations in the environment surrounding formal negotiations (Lax & Sibenius, 2006). Equally important, the discipline lacks a process model of public relations negotiation that moves beyond the tactical strategies that are widely disseminated in popular guides (Fisher et al., 2011; Malhotra & Bazerman, 2007). Without a process model, we lack clarity on what happens in formal and informal negotiations within a public relations context, as well as what level of conflict—individual, unit, organization, societal—practitioners are

most effective in managing. The research gap between studies involving individual-level factors and group-level or multi-party factors in negotiation and decision-making has been documented in a literature review conducted by Caputo (2013). Her study concludes that while "most negotiations in business and political contexts . . . are performed by more than two parties," the role of cognitive and emotional biases in conflict situations was clearly "under-researched in the literature" (Caputo, 2013, p. 392) and so much of the complexity of these multi-party negotiation had been ignored in research.

Several gaps in research on negotiation mirror general problems in our discipline. With the exception of Huang's (2001, 1997) research, few models or studies tackle differences in culture, gender, and ethnicity in public relations negotiation. Studies of gender differences in public relations indicate that women may use different negotiation tactics and relationship building strategies to resolve conflict (Aldoory, Reber, Berger, & Toth, 2009; Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Kolb, 1993). Finally, advances in automated negotiation and virtual conflict resolution have been widely ignored in our field. The sections below explore two theories from outside public relations that could help our discipline develop a negotiation process model and bring virtual negotiation into its practice.

The Four-Phase Model of Negotiation Communication.

Scholars from several social sciences have tried to verify empirically the phases that occur in real life negotiations. Negotiation phases have often been based on broad beginning-middle-end or before-during-after models that seasoned negotiators have experienced (Donohue & Roberto, 1996, 1993). For example, a

typical phase article written for health facilities managers (Guernsey & Klare, 1995) listed three stages of formal negotiation—assessment of all parties' goals, exchange of information, and persuasion. These stages are commonsensical but may not accurately describe negotiations between organizations and publics. Simple negotiation phase models are intended to help individuals develop skills, such as active listening (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999).

Hostage negotiation scholars have led research into more sophisticated process models of negotiation. These scholars have developed numerous models that deal with coercive and cooperative relationships in hostage negotiation (Donohue, Ramesh, & Borchgrevink, 1991), with concepts of cylindrical communication (Taylor, 2002), and with the negotiation of order among participants (Donohue & Roberto, 1993). The purpose of these models is to help negotiators free hostages without violence. Although few of these models deal directly with relationship building or strategic management of crisis situations, most have been empirically tested through case studies.

One recently developed model—the four-phase model of communication (Madrigal, Bowman, & McClain, 2009)—has several characteristics that can apply to public relations. To date, the model has had minimal empirical verification (Borowsky, 2011; Madrigal, 2010), but its elements can be adapted to a variety of communication situations. The developers of the four-phase model intended to rectify several of the major problems in negotiation models. In their recent review, Madrigal et al. (2009) pointed out that these models are overly "complex and lack empirical validation" (p. 120); moreover, these scholars claimed that the negotiation "field has

not yet established a communication model that describes the communication process of negotiation while providing utility to the negotiation team . . . ." (p. 120). Consequently, Madrigal et al., (2009) proposed a four-phase model of communication behavior that is "flexible enough to apply to the vast majority of [negotiation] situations but with enough specificity to provide utility" (p. 120). Although this model was developed specifically for hostage negotiation, its four phases link closely with public relations perspectives and give excellent clues as to how public relations practitioners can actively participate in formal and informal negotiations. These phases are not linear, but can be recycled many times in different orders. Moreover, the scholars claimed that this model can supplement other negotiation models.

The four phases are described below and adapted for stages in public relations practice through my commentary.

Phase 1: *Establishing Initial Dialogue*. The model assumes that initiating dialogue will be a difficult phase in hostage situations because the hostage taker often avoids communication with the negotiator. In the conflict resolution literature of public relations, we sometimes read of parties and stakeholders in a crisis situation who avoid dialogue (Cancel et al., 1997). As boundary spanners (Dozier et al., 1995), public relations practitioners and managers can be assigned the role of establishing the initial dialogue.

Phase 2. *Building Rapport*. Negotiation scholars have spent considerable effort in understanding this phase of negotiation (Donohue & Roberto, 1993); the general goal for the negotiator is to establish trust and a

shared mutual "positive regard" (p. 129). Public relations scholars

have identified this goal as part of interpersonal communication

(Grunig & Huang, 2000; Toth, 2000).

Phase 3. *Influencing*. This concept describes "a key phase that has been

overlooked by previous [hostage communication] models" (Madrigal,

et al., 2009, p. 129). Public relations scholars have covered influencing

largely through the typology of negotiation tactics, such as avoidance

and accommodation (Plowman, 2007). Madrigal et al. (2009)

operationalize these tactics by highlighting persuasive techniques

such as active listening, making suggestions, making promises, and

reframing the way parties view the problem. Some conceptions of

framing the problem insist upon including culture as a factor (Van

Gorp, 2007).

Phase 4: *Surrender*. This phase, of course, means that the hostage-taker

surrenders and the hostage is freed. How can this be translated into a

public relations context? We might call this *resolution*.

Two studies offer some support for the four-phase model. Both studies used

hostage negotiation transcripts and content analysis to test whether the four phases

surfaced. Madrigal (2010) coded successful negotiations using the *Crisis

Communication Rating Scale* (CCRS; McClain, Callaghan, Madrigal, Unwin, &

Casterano, 2006) that allowed him to systematically examine the communication

variables. His findings gave support to the first three phases in hostage negotiations,

as well as some indication that the surrender phase could be established with

additional analysis. In a case study involving a single male hostage taker who was trapped during a bank robbery, Borowsky (2011) found support for phase 2 when the negotiators used *conversational flexibility* (i.e., the ability to act out several roles within a conflict event) in order to establish rapport with the hostage taker. While these content analyses of law enforcement negotiations seem extreme, the findings support the concept of phases within negotiations and the importance of having an arsenal of communication tactics when managing conflicts.

The logic of the four-phase model asks us to take the negotiating team's perspective because the team has little control over hostage-takers' behavior. However, public relations scholars urge us to understand multiple perspectives in conflict resolution, including contending parties such as activists (L. Grunig, 1992; Holtzhausen, 2007). Unfortunately, many negotiations involving organizations and publics are predicated on understanding only one position—the goals sought by a single party (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). The four-phase model does privilege one party's views, but it can apply to a multi-party perspective. This model perhaps offers a starting point for a process model of negotiations in public relations—especially in situations involving crisis communication (Coombs, 2006) and aggressive, zero-sum tactics (Fisher et al., 2011). It illustrates how another practical discipline—law enforcement—develops process models.

Awareness of process is a cornerstone of training and practice in negotiation (Fisher et al., 2011; Gupta, Boyd & Kuzmits, 2011; Gross, Hogler, & Henle, 2013; Raffia, 1982; Ury, 2007). The study raises the question of how its participants

understand the process of conflict resolution or conflict management and whether they view it as consisting of phases such as those proposed by Madrigal et al. (2009).

Individual and Group-Level Factors in Conflict Management

This section covers an array of factors that in theory affect conflict management within groups. Many participants in this study described conflicts occurring within teams in their workplaces. Before assessing these narratives, several caveats should be noted. First, the literature on teams, their composition, and performance is so vast (Caputo, 2013; Stewart, 2006) that major concepts will have to be summarized briefly. These theoretical concepts will be compared with what my participants understood was important in their jobs.

Second, much of the research reviewed in this section has been conducted in laboratory settings, not in field circumstances. A majority of the 89 studies on team performance between 1980 and 2006 covered in Bell's (2007) meta-analysis took place under laboratory conditions (e.g., for many variables 66% or more were studied in lab settings). Moreover, Bell (2007) found some differences between results in the two settings; in particular, personality variables moderated team performance in field settings, but had negligible effect in lab settings. Consequently, researchers such as Bazerman and Moore (2009) have argued that studies of multi-party negotiation and group decision-making should move beyond experimental methods based on rational assumptions and instead establish useful conflict resolution strategies based on real-world experiences (Caputo, 2013). My study asked participants to reflect on field settings.

A third caveat is that the research literature on conflict management within groups crosses many disciplines—communication (Olaniran, 2009), social psychology (McGrath, Arrow, Gruenfeld, Hollingshead, & Connor, 1993), economics (Caputo, 2013), and business (Griffith, Connelly, & Thiel, 2014; Martinez-Moreno, González-Navarro, Zornoza, & Ripo, 2009) among others. These studies examined many factors and variables in team conflict management that are rooted in theories not fully linked to communication processes. Still, some variables at both the individual and group or team-levels have shown significance in my participants' understanding of conflict on their jobs. Here is a partial list.

Relationship building in negotiation (Kurtzberg, et al., 2005)

Team psychological safety within relationship conflict (Martins, Schilpzand, Kirkman, Ivanaj, & Ivanaj, 2013)

Type of tasks in which people experience conflict (Hollingshead et al., 1993; McGrath et al., 1993)

Team composition factors that individual members bring to the group, such as agreeableness (Bell, 2007; Stewart, 2006)

Cognitive ability, biases, or cognitive diversity within team composition (Caputo, 2013; Martins et al., 2013)

Group/team interaction patterns, including confrontation and cooperation (Olaniran, 2010)

Personality factors (Antonioni, 1998; Cogliser, Gardner, Gavin, & Broberg, 2012; Swaab, Galinsky, Medvec, & Diermeier, 2012)

Emotional influences and regulation (Bazerman & Moore, 2009; Griffith,

Connelly, & Thiel, 2014)

Conflict management culture (Choi, 2013)

Team performance as an independent and outcome variable (Hollingshead et

al., 1993; Martinez-Moreno et al., 2009)

Conflict management processes in teams (Martinez-Moreno et al., 2009;

Olaniran, 2010).

Many more factors and variables could be added as categories to the list

above, including trustworthiness (Cogliser et al., 2012), team heterogeneity (Stewart,

2006), and experience levels of the team members (McGrath, 1993). A review of

some recent meta-analyses and literature reviews provides a concise snapshot of

which factors might be most relevant in communication within team conflict

management in public relations.

Three types of conflict in teams. Public relations practice involves extensive

teamwork (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). A recent meta-analysis by De Wit,

Greer, and Jehn (2012) can illuminate my participants' understandings of conflict in

team interactions. Drilling down into types of conflict and their impact on team

performance, these scholars (De Wit et al., 2012) conducted meta-analyses in three

categories: relationship conflicts, task conflicts, and process conflicts. My

participants covered some of these areas of team conflict in their narratives and, to

some extent, reflected the definitions found within research studies analyzed by De

Wit et al. (2012).

Relationship conflicts have particular resonance in public relations theory and practice because of our profession's emphasis on relationship building (Condit, 2006; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Lewis, Isbell, & Koschmann, 2010; Toth, 2000). In a broad base of studies, *relationship conflict* was generally defined as "disagreements among group members about interpersonal issues, such as personality differences or differences in norms and values" (De Wit et al., 2012, p. 360). Stated from a somewhat different perspective, Martins et al. (2013) and others limited relationship conflict to factors involving the affective climate among team members where *affect* refers to "emotions, moods, traits, and emotion-based preferences such as likes and dislikes" (Authayarat & Umemuro, 2011, p. 433). Put more bluntly, Behar, Mannix, Peterson, and Trochim (2011) state, " . . . relationship conflict is interpersonal animosity, tension, or annoyance among members" (p. 128). The key concepts in these definitions include interpersonal interchanges, personality differences, the affective climate, values, and norms. In their literature review of relationship conflict research, De Wit et al. (2012) found no positive outcomes because, they concluded, "these conflicts are strongly intertwined with the self-concept" (p. 362). In short, these conflicts can create anxiety, hostility, reduced commitment, and restricted team problem solving—all factors that negatively affect team outcomes.

In contrast, *task conflicts* occur when group members disagree about what's involved in the task at hand and how to think about its outcomes (De Wit et al., 2012, p. 360). In a meta-analysis of task conflict research findings in 116 intragroup conflict studies published between 1990 and 2010, De Wit et al. (2012) reported that factors in task conflicts could actually benefit team performance. For example, task conflict

can help group members put aside their pre-existing biases about the project, increase their understanding of its requirements, and evaluate others' ideas more fairly. As a result, task conflict can lead to innovation, individual expression of perspectives, increased commitment to the project, and enhanced satisfaction with working on it. On the negative side, task conflicts can distract team members and use up resources and reduce satisfaction if people feel their contributions or skills are challenged (De Wit, Jen, & Scheepers, 2013).

Finally, process conflicts involve disagreements over how tasks, responsibilities, and resources are assigned to group members (Behfar et al., 2011). In other words, process encompasses the task strategy or procedures that the team develops to distribute work, to schedule and handle workflow, and how the team coordinates personnel to undertake the project. According to Behfar et al. (2011), process disputes arise when people perceive that other team members aren't meeting deadlines or fulfilling their assignments. Questions remain about whether process conflicts lead to predominantly positive or negative outcomes for a team. Research on group process by De Wit et al. (2012) found largely negative effects on outcomes because task delegation communicated messages about how personal competence and respect were perceived within the team. Other scholars reported negative consequences such as reduced innovation, "increased anger, animosity, negative attitudes toward the group" (Behfar et al., 2011, p. 129). On the other hand, Behfar et al. (2011) reported a mixed impact of process conflicts on group performance within the small number of studies found on this factor. For example, when process conflicts

developed early on in a task and were resolved early, the team could deal more effectively with questions and concerns about roles and strategies.

These three types of conflict—relationship, task, and process—have to be understood in the context of their effect on team outcomes. A significant body of research indicates that conflict impacts team performance in expected and unpredictable ways. De Wit et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis of 116 empirical studies on intragroup conflict examined how different conflict types influenced team outcomes. Within the research stream of intragroup conflict, group performance or outcomes are often divided into two types: *distal* and *proximal*. According to De Wit et al. (2012) distal outcomes focus on group performance (p. 361), including traditional measures such as productivity and effectiveness. Proximal outcomes, on the other hand, are linked to *emergent states* and *group viability*. This distinction is very important to this study because my interlocutors explored proximal outcomes more fully than distal outcomes. In the language of practitioners, emergent states include trust, motivation, satisfaction, commitment, cognitions relating to individual abilities, and emotions (De Wit et al., 2012, p. 362). Group viability involves affect and behaviors that indicate whether members want to continue working in the group.

Results from De Wit et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis suggested that all three types of conflict studied have much more negative impact on proximal outcomes such as trust than on distal outcomes—although moderating variables had statistically significant effects. Teams can still be productive and effective at high degrees of conflict, but members' trust, motivation, and satisfaction levels can often plummet. In other words, trust and commitment can potentially suffer more than team

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performance measured by objective productive and effectiveness standards (De Wit et al., 2012, p. 367). Many moderators, of course, were shown to affect distal and proximate outcomes within this meta-analysis and literature review of 116 intra-group conflict studies over twenty years (De Wit et al., 2012, p. 364).

Three specific moderators were tested across the conflict types: task type, the organizational level of the group studied, and cultural context. These moderators showed what a complex pattern can emerge in trying to understand how conflicts affect outcomes, particularly when types of conflict are strongly correlated. For example, when task conflict and relationship conflict were highly associated, more negative effects surfaced on several outcomes. Notably, a strong correlation between process conflict and relationship conflict negatively impacted group performance. Individual moderators also seemed to influence outcomes, including level in the organization. Task conflict among top managers revealed stronger performance results than task conflicts among teams further down the organizational hierarchy. Finally, process conflicts seem particularly resistant to the influence of the three moderators studied, although, according to Behfar et al. (2011), process conflicts negatively influence group performance, coordination, and satisfaction.

This section covered three types of team conflict and the moderators that might affect group outcomes of various kinds. The results from the meta-analysis by De Wit et al. (2012) and extensive literature review by Behfar et al. (2011) demonstrated that practitioners in this study would benefit from understanding the types of intragroup conflict and the many factors that can influence how a conflict type affects their team's performance.

Personality factors in team performance. Participants in this study offered *personality* as part of their understanding of conflict in communication organizations. Concepts of *Personality* have been employed among a substantial number of organizational conflict scholars to explore conflict management styles (Antonioni, 1998), team performance (Bell, 2007), management decisions (LePine, Buckman, Crawford, & Methot, 2011), and trustworthiness (Cogliser et al., 2012). Personality has proved challenging to define (Antonioni, 1998), but LePine et al. (2011) stated that it "refers to structures and propensities that reflect or explain characteristic patterns of an individual's thoughts, emotions and behaviors" (p. 312). Bell (2007) classified personality as a *deep-level team composition* variable similar to values and abilities. These personality patterns and variables become important for this study because they can create conflict when individuals are managing tasks, as well as inhibit relationship building and disrupt relationship maintenance (Judge & LePine, 2007).

Researchers have asked a question that bears on some perceptions of my participants: how does diversity or uniformity of personality characteristics influence team functioning? According to Judge and Lepine (2007), many laypeople and even scholars believe that diversity "enhances team creativity and problem solving ability" (p. 344). Findings from other research beginning in the 1950s has shown negative effects of diverse employee personalities depending on the context or the task demands—for example, when effectiveness and other outcomes depend on "interpersonal processes and social integration" (Judge & Lepine, 2007, p. 344). Moreover, differences in personality may accrue negative effects over time, although

Haythorn (1968)—a pioneer in personality and group composition research—warned that "the effect of homogeneity per se, however, cannot be divorced from the individual personality characteristics or value under consideration" (p. 124). In other words, because personality has many facets, personnel homogeneity within a team does not guarantee harmony or successful outcomes.

One commonly applied model of the factors involved in personality is called the *Big-Five* or *Five-Factor* model of personality or FFM (Cogliser et al., 2012). Judge and LePine (2007) gave an overview of the history of FFM that revealed how the model added depth of analysis to studies of homogeneity or diversity of personality in teams. The Big-Five model revealed, for example, the negative side of traits that undermine agreeableness and high conscientiousness during group work (Judge & LePine, 2007, p. 345). For example, team members may react intensely to poor performers, especially when they perceive low conscientiousness as a trait in these employees. These negative perceptions of personality traits can create conflict when other team members perceive unfairness in work-load or low agreeableness (Bell, 2007).

The Big-Five Factor model of personality posits the following factors as features of personality: *extraversion*, *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, *openness*, and *neuroticism* (Antonioni, 1998). These factors have been summarized, operationally defined, and tested "significantly in the last 20 years" until the five FFM traits have "become the generally accepted taxonomy of personality characteristics" (Judge & LePine, 2007, p. 313). While my participants named several of these personality factors in their answers, these factors have special definitions within the FFM.

Antonioni (1998) pointed out that each factor could be viewed dialectically in two dimensions: extraversion and introversion, agreeableness and antagonism, conscientiousness and undisciplined behavior, openness to experience and closed to experience, emotional stability and neuroticism; hence, the following snapshots of each factor:

1. Extraversion: ". . . the extent to which people are gregarious, assertive, and sociable"

2. Agreeableness: ". . . the extent to which individuals are cooperative, warm, understanding, and sympathetic"

3. Conscientiousness: " . . . the extent to which individuals are hardworking, organized, dependable, and firm"

4. Openness: " . . . defines individuals who are reflective, creative, and comfortable with theory"

5. Emotional stability: "defines individuals who are calm, self-confident, and patient" (Antonioni, 1998, p. 358).

While different facets of these factors emerge in the literature on FFM (Cogliser et al., 2012), these snapshots seem to describe characteristics of employees who would be highly valued on most teams. Bell (2007) provided some concise descriptions of how the dichotomies involved in these personality factors can reduce or foment conflict in teams. Conscientious behaviors among team members, for example, can result in more effective problem-solving and goal achievement, in part because this personality factor can enhance the task process. Agreeableness and extraversion, according to Bell's (2007) meta-analysis, lead to more effective interactions among

team members. A team with a high number of agreeable members will more likely "engage in positive interpersonal processes" (Bell, 2007, p. 597). Extroverts tend to be attracted to teamwork and promoting help-seeking in the group. Bell (2007) further cites studies that indicate how emotionally stable people "create a relaxed atmosphere" that promotes cooperation (p. 597). Finally, the openness factor among team members can result in greater creativity and adaptability when change is required.

This study raised the question of how practitioners understand personality as a factor in conflict within communication practice. The research reported above provides insights into how personality factors can impact team performance and outcomes (Stewart, 2006), but many caveats remain. Findings on personality factors differ somewhat between experimental and field settings (Bell, 2007). Consequently, successful real-world applications of findings from FFM research become difficult because of the many "uncontrolled" interactions among setting, task features, team configuration, organizational climate, communication channels, and individual-level factors, including personality (Cogliser et al., 2012).

Emotions and beliefs in teams. In the critical incidents reported in this study and in answers to the final question summarizing advice on conflict resolution, participants used phrases depicting emotions such as anger and hostility, as well trust and other beliefs. A substantial body of primary research explores the influence of emotions and beliefs on conflict, team performance and outcomes (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Chen & Ayoko, 2012; Jameson, Bodtker, Porch, & Jordan, 2009; Posthuma, 2012; Montes et al., 2012; Tekleab & Quigley, 2014; Yamagishi, 2011).

Obviously, this review cannot summarize the rich and varied analyses of the effects of emotions and beliefs on organizational conflict. However, the following brief overview will give context to the discussion of this study's results concerning emotion and trust in communication practice.

Posthuma (2012) has argued that emotions "are a needed and important addition to conflict management research—above and beyond cognitions and behaviors" (p. 4). He listed some emotions recently studied in investigations of how positive and negative emotions can be regulated effectively during conflict: "anger, enthusiasm, excitement, guilt, and remorse" (p. 4). These studies on conflict management and emotions assume that affective variables (i.e., feelings) will impact the way individuals respond during conflict.

Emotional communication and conflict transformation. Some studies of emotion in team or group conflicts are rooted in concepts of *transforming conflict situations*, rather than achieving instrumental agreements on behaviors in the context of a win-win solution (Jameson et al., 2009; Jones, 2000; Fisher & Shapiro, 2005; Martins et al., 2013). The studies or reviews covered in this section offer a different perspective on what role communication practitioners might play in conflict situations within their organizations—the role of conflict transformation defined as modifying the characteristics of the conflict situation by "inducing change in the parties' relationship through improving mutual understanding" (Botes, 2003, p. 3). In contrast, resolving conflict—a goal common in negotiation—requires solving "the problems that lead to the conflictual behavior in the first place" (Burton, 1990, p. 203 as cited in Botes, 2003, p. 2). Rather than being directly involved in formal

negotiations or even conflict resolution, practitioners might be instrumental in transforming the relationships among their teams or other organizational employees.

In 2000, Jones published a review of literature on emotional communication in conflict. This scholar re-issued a challenge to conflict and communication scholars to dig deeper into the connection between how we communicate emotions during conflict situations and the outcomes. Jones (2000) substantiated that the field of conflict studies had only recently delved into emotional components because of a bias toward "the rational over the emotional" (p. 82). Emotion, Jones (2000) admitted, is difficult to define, but many scholars including Lazarus (1994) theorize that it has three components: cognitive, physiological, and behavioral. Building on these elements, Jones (2000) viewed communication as an essential part of emotion as socially constructed and contended that at its core, conflict is an emotional process (p. 81).

In the principles that Jones (2000) set forth, we get a glimpse into how communication and emotion interact in conflict processes and what techniques can be applied to transform the conflict within teams.

1. Emotions are socially constructed.

2. Emotions are responses to how we evaluate events and circumstances—
   either positively or negatively (p. 87).

3. Emotions are rule-governed—that is, within organizations, we have
   cultural rules about how we should feel and other rules about how to
   communicate emotion (p. 88).

4. Emotional experience is communicated through discourse—defined widely as all kinds of communication both verbal and non-verbal.

5. Emotional experience expresses values that are informed by a moral frame we bring to the conflict (p. 93). Examples of emotions that involve values can include disgust, anger, and contempt.

6. We can develop emotional competence, learning how emotions are negotiated in settings, including the workplace (p. 89).

Through these principles Jones (2000) arrives at the thesis that emotion and identity are inextricably connected in the conflict process. Lazarus (1994) made that point in his contention that emotion requires the self and/or ego, but Jones (2000) adds the concept that emotional communication can strongly affect group identity and even create conflict with out groups (p. 95). Jones (2000) proposes an important research question about how communication of emotion such as shame and pride impacts the development of identity in groups. More importantly, she asks how the process of communicating emotions can act as a constructive intervention in conflict transformation. Her review ends with a substantial list of exploratory questions on the connection between identity, conflict processes, cultural differences, and communication of emotion that scholars have been investigating since the late 1990s.

One group of researchers has explored specific strategies to address negative conflict situations through emotional processes. Jameson et al., (2009) proposed transforming conflict situations by priming parties to talk about emotions, often with the help of mediators or conflict coaches. Through these conversations, the authors hypothesized that group members could move beyond an impasse and establish a

more positive relationship in the long-term. The goal within the Jameson et al. (2009) model was not a negotiated agreement or an instrumental document that specifies behaviors each party will fulfill within the realization of a win-win outcome (Fisher et al., 2011). In conflict communication models of transformation (Jones, 2000), the goal of mediation or other kind of intervention can be an improvement in affect within the relationship and a willingness to affiliate with team members who had previously been viewed with antagonism.

In contrast to the definitions summarized earlier in this review, Jameson et al. (2009) defined emotion "as how a disputant describes subjectively experienced feelings toward the other party of the conflict issues" (p. 169). The researchers used anger as an example to explore a number of essential factors in the process of conflict transformation, including acknowledging and owning emotions, empowerment, recognition, and pinpointing underlying identity problems (Jameson et al., 2009, pp. 169-170). The five core concepts that can trigger conflict—appreciation, affiliation, autonomy, status, and role—mirror factors within the transformation conflict models of Galtrung (1996) and Bush and Folger (2004) (reviewed in Jameson et al., 2009). Transformation models focus on modifying subjective experience so that people achieve better working relationships.

In *Beyond Reason: Using Emotions as You Negotiate*, Fisher and Shapiro (2005) present strategies particularly for dealing with problems of affiliation and autonomy. In positive affiliation, both parties see one another as colleagues rather than adversaries, or at least connected positively in the negotiation process. In positive autonomy, each party respects the right of the other to make independent

decisions based on what he or she deems to be important. One warning offered by Fisher and Shapiro (2005): do not base agreements primarily on emotion because these are prone to manipulation. On core concept within Fisher and Shapiro's (2005) emotion transformation guidebook is role choice. Role choice requires an individual to identify his or her traditional role in the situation and then to create or adopt a role that will be more effective in bringing about resolution of the conflict. Since this study explores roles that public relations practitioners can fulfill in resolving conflict with internal and external stakeholders, Fisher and Shapiro (2005) offer insight into adopting temporary roles in conflict situations—a creative action based on flexibility and the intent to transform an impasse in the negotiation.

One research stream has explored how emotions are related to the conflict management styles that individuals apply. A variety of emotions have been linked to conflict styles such as the five delineated by Rahim (2011): *integrating* (high concern for self and others); *obliging* (low concern for self and high concern for other); *dominating* (high concern for self and low concern for others); *avoiding* (low concern for self and others); and *compromising* (middle concern for self and others with the goal of trading off wins and losses) (as summarized in Montes et al., 2012, p. 8). These conflict styles can be understood as behaviors that indicate a "consistent orientation toward the other party and the conflict issues" (Montes et al., 2012, p. 7). Without getting too far down into the definitional weeds of emotional states and various affective responses, researchers have tended to focus on how positive or negative moods—defined as longer-lasting affective states—influence styles and strategies for resolution of conflict situations (Montes et al., 2012).

Emotional communication and conflict transformation models explored in this section (Jameson et al., 2009; Jones, 2000; Fisher & Shapiro, 2005; Martins et al., 2013) offer insight into how practitioners in this study understand their roles in conflict management. Rather than fulfilling highly prescribed conflict management assignments specified in job descriptions, practitioners could enact flexible roles involving conflict communication and transformation of the conflict situation that enable employees to work together over the long term.

Communication Channels and Conflict Management

This study's interview guide asked participants directly and indirectly to explore their understandings of how communication channels influence conflict management and resolution in their workplaces (Purdy, Nye, & Balakrishnan, 2000). Some articles (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008; Geiger & Parlamis, 2014; Olaniran, 2010; Martinez-Moreno et al., 2009; Swaab et al., 2012) have examined how communication media influence the outcomes of individual or team performance when conflicts are present. These studies attempt to clarify the variables that enhance or impede the process leading to successful management of a conflict. Channels and communication media in these studies include email (e.g., Olaniran, 2010), face-to-face (Galin, Gross, & Gosalker, 2007), video conferencing (Martinez-Moreno et al., 2009), and computer-mediated communication or CMC (Kurtzberg, Dunn-Jensen, & Matsibekker, 2005). Several other studies examine the effect of verbal and non-verbal channels in the communication media (Bronstein, Nelson, Livnat, & Ben-Ari, 2012; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005).

To understand the factors that influence conflict negotiation in computer-mediated communication (Purdy et al., 2000), researchers have drawn on the model of media synchronicity (Dennis et al., 2008). This model moves beyond the assumption that only channels such as face-to-face situations create rich exchanges of information that allow for greater understanding. Because communicators receive many aural, visual, and nonverbal cues, videoconferencing and telephone conversations are also considered to be rich media channels (Purdy et al., 2000). Media richness includes *media synchronicity* defined as communication that enables parties in a conflict situation to convey relevant information effectively as the negotiation evolves and then to engage in discussion until the participants "agree on the meaning of the information" (Geiger & Parlamis, 2014, p. 71). According to Geiger and Parlamis (2014), media synchronicity relies on two factors: conveyance of relevant information among parties and convergence of meaning so that parties agree on what the information means.

Dennis et al. (2008) have explored how media synchronicity theory can extend beyond the acceptance of face-to-face communication as the gold standard during conflict resolution to an appreciation of the advantages of computer-mediated communication in conflict resolution. These researchers assume that all communication media are valuable; one is not better than another. They do acknowledge that high synchronicity channels such as face-to-face and telephone are potentially well suited to helping practitioners converge information during conflict management and reach mutual understanding. Specifically, the parties can give and take information more easily and compare their understandings of the situation.

Email, on the other hand, is viewed as low in synchronicity or as asynchronous because of the time differences in giving and receiving. However, Dennis et al. (2008) contend that email can be more effective than synchronous media in conveying information and then allowing the receiver to analyze it and consider its potential meaning before reentering into communication with a negotiating partner.

While the media synchronicity model effectively explains how conveyance and convergence influence outcomes in conflict, critics contend that the model leaves out individual-level factors. Geiger and Parlamis (2014) examined a cluster of three individual-level factors in the use of computer-mediated conflict resolution that extend beyond variables in the media. These three factors—labeled as the *email affinity scale*—influence conflict resolution outcomes because individuals enter the negotiation holding these attitudes and beliefs: 1) preference for a channel like email; 2) comfort with using the channel like email; and 3) belief that the channel can convey a clear message. After developing and testing a valid and reliable scale to measure the impact of these three factors in negotiation situations, Geiger and Parlamis (2014) tested their impact in a quasi-experimental study involving pairs of graduate student negotiators from U.S. and German universities (n=92; pairs=41). Participants were tested using the email affinity scale and then paired based on their total score on the scale with high scorers designated as buyers matched with high scorers designated as sellers, and so on down the range of scores. The pairs were asked to negotiate a price for the sale of an energy-efficient pump using email over a 10-day period. Results were analyzed using a combination of correlation and regression analysis to determine the impact of email affinity variables on joint

outcomes. Geiger and Parlamis (2014) found that only comfort with email use showed statistical significance in increasing joint gain in the negotiation outcome. Liking email as a communication channel and believing email can clearly transmit information were NOT significant. Also, statistically significant in positive gains for both negotiators was a larger number of emails exchanged. The duration of the email messages, however, actually negatively influenced joint gains.

Geiger and Parlamis (2014) and other studies have challenged perceptions that only face-to-face or other synchronous channels will yield strong joint gains during negotiation or conflict resolution. Individual-level variables can determine how effectively practitioners use any given communication channel. Bronstein et al. (2012) support this conclusion in their findings that individuals adapted verbal communication strategies in negotiation depending upon characteristics of the negotiation partner. The verbal strategies were not dependent on the channel itself. The studies in this section indicate that communication professionals have much to learn about the interaction between communication channels and individual-level variables during conflict resolution.

Digital Conflict Resolution

My study includes an examination of digital media in the work life and conflict management activities of a selected group of public relationship professionals. Digital technology increasingly dominates public relations practice (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2007). Okura, Dozier, Sha, and Hofstetter (2009) pointed out that "digital technology has radically transformed the tactical challenges facing public relations practitioners" (p. 51). Because public relations

scholars have identified conflict resolution and problem solving as major public relations functions (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), we need to pay attention to software innovations and artificial intelligence research that will allow organizations to resolve disputes and negotiate without face-to-face contact. Further, research from many disciplines examines how digital communication channels have affected conflict resolution and negotiation in the workplace (Geiger & Parlamis, 2014).

Conclusion

The opening of this literature review set a major goal of demonstrating that negotiation and conflict management in public relations is a topic worthy of a dissertation because it reveals significant research gaps that a qualitative study could address (Hofstee, 2006; Jones & Kottler, 2006; Randolf, 2009). This literature review revealed the crowded field of factors and moderating variables covered by the models, theories, and practical strategies or tactics summarized above (e.g., Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Kraus 2001; Fisher et al., 2011). Several research gaps were identified in our understanding of (1) how practitioners describe their workplace roles and activities that involve conflict, (2) how conflict management can be defined and understood in every day communication practice, (3) how digital and social media influence conflict situations in practice, and (4) how practitioners understand the strategies for resolving conflicts in their workplaces.

The examination of the literature began with problems in defining negotiation in public relations (Katz & Pattarini, 2008; Vasquez, 1996) and models of negotiation in our field (Dozier et al., 1995; Huang, 1997; Plowman, 2007). Grunig and Grunig (1992) specified *mediator* as a role for public relations practitioners within

negotiation contexts where they would take on a neutral position to facilitate an agreement. The exploration of definitions of negotiation revealed difficulties in establishing practical understandings of what negotiation might mean in the every day work lives of communication professionals. Gelfand and McCusker (2002) and Vasquez (1996), proposed a continuum of formal to informal negotiations that could cover highly formalized situations leading to formal agreements as well as interpersonal situations that may result in temporary solutions in areas of agreement.

Later sections of the literature review on emotion and transformational conflict management (Jones, 2000) added layers of complexity to definitions of negotiation because these studies did not focus on agreements and performance outcomes, but on negotiation of identity (Jameson et al., 2009) and relationships (Martins et al., 2013). The literature on definitions of negotiation reviewed here indicate a gap in understanding of how communication practitioners—as opposed to academics in the communication field—describe negotiation or conflict resolution/management activities in their work lives. The overview of definitions and terminology in communication workplace conflict generated the following research question that will address the understanding of practitioners.

RQ1: How do public relations/communication practitioners with at least 5 years of experience describe their job activities and roles in the context of conflict management?

A second literature trail led beyond definitions involving negotiation to studies that positioned my research within the larger category of conflict resolution and management inside organizations (Rahim, 2011) and within the subcategory of

conflict management styles (Montes et al., 2012). This arena of conflict resolution and management tackled models exploring situational, rational, cognitive and emotional factors in workplace settings. These factors were examined in the sections on public relations perspectives in negotiation, identity, alternatives to the strategic perspective, and individual and group-level factors. Because public relations practice is widely argued to deal with conflict (Cameron, Pang, & Yin, 2008; Dozier et al., 1995; Huang, 2001; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Plowman, 1998), formal and informal negotiation have been claimed as part of its practice.

To date, public relations research has developed models that illuminate formal negotiation (Plowman, 2007; Huang, 2001), but scholars (Putnam, 2005; Vasquez, 1996) have challenged the field to develop concepts and methodologies that will help us understand informal negotiation and problem solving. Overall, public relations scholars have been adept at incorporating theoretical perspectives on negotiation from social psychology, business management, and other fields into the dominant paradigm of our field—excellence. Two models developed by Putnam (2006) and Huang (2001) include negotiation tactics and frameworks developed in other disciplines. However, we lack the practical process models of negotiation and conflict resolution that guide hostage negotiators and practitioners in other fields. This review raised the question of whether process models such as the four-stage model of communication (Madrigal, Bowman, & McClain, 2009) can be adapted to public relations practice.

Further, individual-level and group-level factors that have been studied in other academic and practical disciplines have often not been integrated into our understanding of conflict in communication practice. The sub-section on such factors

in this literature review documented a range of elements in conflict studies that are relevant to communication practice: relationship conflict (Kurtzberg et al., 2005), team composition, tasks, and psychology (Bell, 2007; Hollingshead et al., 1993; Martins et al., 2013); personality factors (Cogliser et al., 2012; Swaab et al., 2012); emotional influences and regulation (Bazerman & Moore, 2009; Griffith et al., 2014): organizational conflict culture (Choi, 2013) and conflict transformation processes (Jameson et al., 2009). The contingency theory of public relations (Cameron et al., 2008) acknowledges the complexity of conflict situations by positing eighty or more variables that influence conflict management in our field (Cancel et al., 1999). However, scholars (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006) have questioned the assumption in contingency theory that dialogue will be an effective resolution strategy. Moreover, a variety of studies involving interviews with practitioners revealed many contradictions in how to make practical sense of contingency theory (Reber & Cameron, 2003; Shin et al., 2006).

Given the difficulties in applying conflict theories to communication practice, this study proposed the following question that allowed participants to express their understanding of conflict management and resolution outside the confines of established theory.

RQ2: How do public relations/communication professionals understand conflict management and negotiation as roles in their practice?

Third, scholars studying technology factors in conflict resolution were included because of rapid development in digital and computer-assisted negotiation and conflict resolution (Dennis et al., 2008; Geiger & Parlamis, 2014; Olaniran, 2010;

Martinez-Moreno, et al., 2009, Swaab et al., 2012; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2011).

Berger and Iyengar (2013) claimed that long distance channels shaped messages to consumers in substantially different ways than face-to-face strategies. Paulson and Naquin (2004) identified the problems in establishing trust using long distance channels when attempting to resolve conflicts. Geiger and Parlamis (2014) added to analysis of the digital channels by exploring individual-level factors in computer-mediated conflict resolution, including preferences for asynchronous channels and the belief that a channel can convey a clear message. Moreover, innovations in automated and simulated negotiation help organizations solve everyday problems with stakeholders (Kraus, 2001). Because of the rapid changes in technology in communication practice, this study will explore the following research questions on digital and social media use in practice.

RQ3: **How do public relations practitioners understand their use of digital and social media in roles that involve conflict management or negotiation?**

Finally, the literature covered in this review explores the processes of conflict resolution as studied in experiments and also in guidebooks based on case studies and the experience of experts. Awareness of process, as I stated above, is the foundation of training and practice in negotiation (Fisher et al., 2011; Gross et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2011; Raffia, 1982; Rahim, 2011; Ury, 2007). A research gap exists between the processes modeled in empirical research and the strategies for practical conflict resolution offered in guidebooks. Many of the guidebook style publications have little foundation in empirical research (Gross et al., 2013; Madrigal et al., 2010), while the

preponderance of empirical studies have been conducted in laboratory settings rather than in the field (Bell, 2007; Stewart, 2006). Evidence from meta-analyses of conflict research demonstrates that results in the two settings can be significantly different (De Wit et al., 2012). Caputo (2012) claimed that most negotiation models have been built prescriptively, instead of through descriptive qualitative or case study methods than can capture the complexity of negotiation processes. This study contributes to the building of conflict resolution models by providing some of the descriptive qualitative evidence on conflict processes in the field that Caputo (2012) called for. The following research question allowed participants to explore how they understand conflict resolution processes.

> **RQ4: How do communication practitioners understand conflict processes and apply conflict resolution techniques in critical incidents they have experienced in the workplace?**

Chapter 3: Method

To meet the goals of this study, I applied qualitative research as a way to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 1). The major perspective I used as researcher derived primarily from (1) grounded theory data analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Clark, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), (2) its related theoretical and practical frameworks (Denzen & Lincoln, 2005; Starks & Trinidad, 2007), and (3) inductive processes recommended by other qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano, 2007; Koerber & McMichael, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Potter, 1996; Wolcott, 1994). For an overview of my authorial voice or standpoint, please see the introduction.

Data were collected through 31 in-depth interviews and follow-up questions, as well as printed materials provided by the participants, and information from websites linked to the participants' organizations or professional activities. To create more substantial results and enhanced verification, these three types of data enabled *triangulatio*n or multiple lines of sight bearing on conflict in public relations practice (Berg, 2007).

Moreover, I used multiple techniques for qualitative research data collection and analysis to enrich the material and deepen my findings. Data were analyzed in several stages: (1) through notes recorded during the in-depth interviews; (2) through reflective notes written immediately after the interviews (Faÿ & Riot, 2007; Finlay, 2002); (3) through qualitative content analysis,

involving constant comparison of interview transcripts to generate study-specific categories and themes; and (4) through qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts, applying concepts and themes derived from previous research studies (Gelo et al., 2008).

Importantly, while my study varied from grounded theory because I conducted a literature review in the proposal stage, I followed the nine strategies that Charmaz (2014, p. 15) listed as standards for conducting grounded theory. These strategies are described in detail below or documented in the Results and Discussion sections of this dissertation: (1) iterative data collection and analysis (see Data Collection and Analysis); (2) analysis of actions and processes (see Instrumentation); (3) comparative methods of analysis (e.g., constant comparison; see Analysis Stage One); (4) development of new conceptual categories using narratives and descriptions (see Critical Incident Data Collection); (5) inductive analytic categories (see Concepts and Factors in Results); (6) theory construction (see Transforming Conflict Model in Discussion); (7) theoretical sampling (see Sampling Procedures); (8) variation in the studied categories or process (e.g., minority viewpoints, see Results); and (9) category development rather than coverage of an empirical topic (see categorical findings under each RQ in Results).

This section reviews the steps followed in the process to collect and analyze data, as well as strategies for reducing bias and increasing internal and external validity.

Method Overview

Unit of Analysis

Individuals who work as public relations practitioners are the unit of analysis. Babbie (2010) defined units of analysis as "the what or whom being studied" (p. 95), noting that most social science research used individual people as their units–as opposed to groups, organizations, or social artifacts. Creswell (2007) identified individuals who share experience of the same phenomenon as the units of analysis for grounded theory data analysis. Individuals in this study share work experience of at least five years in public relations and communication.

Participants

In a qualitative study, a full description of participants allows readers to judge the credibility of results (Holsti, 1969). For this study, I recruited thirty-one (31) public relations practitioners with five or more years of experience to participate in in-depth interviews and to provide critical incident narratives. Information about the thirty-one participants was gathered in two ways in this study: during questions and probes within the interview and with an information sheet that participants completed at the end of the interview.

Gender was an important variable during the interviews. Twenty of the 31 participants were women (64.5%); eleven (35.5%) were male. National estimates of the proportions of women and men in the profession vary, but the clear majority is female–72 percent of the 21,000-member Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) (Working, 2013), a close match for my ratio. A 2010

PRSA report indicated that "14% of the membership self-identified as Hispanic, black/African American, Asian/Asian American" (Tindall, 2012). In this study, 16% of my participants identified with one of these categories.

Gender and race or ethnic identities are summarized below in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Identities of the Participants

Identity	Percentage of Participants	National Statistics
Female	64.5%	72%
Male	35.5%	28%
Hispanic, Black/African American, or Asian/ Asian American	16%	14%

Age and number of years in the communication profession were determined by questions on the participant's personal information sheet. Those who had changed jobs over several decades had some difficulty calculating their precise longevity in the profession. Several of these participants had begun working at for-profit public relations agencies during or immediately after finishing secondary school. In one case, the individual's father owned a communication agency; in another case, the participant grew up in a European country where many young people entered the work world in their late teens.

Table 3.2

Participant Ages and Professional Experience

Category	Number	Average	Range	Median
Age	31	48.77 years	27-70 years	51.5 years

Years in Profession	31	18.32 years	5-44 years	20 years

Most participants in the interviews referred to multiple jobs held during their careers in communication and public relations. The following chart enumerates only the frequency of organizational settings for their principal *conflict incident* narrative. Of the 31 interviewees, 18 (58%) narrated incidents that occurred in for-profit organizations; 13 (42%) reported on incidents in non-profit organizations.

Table 3.3

Type and Purpose of Principal Organizations Reported by Participants

Organization Type	Organization/Professional Purpose	Frequency
Organization Type	Organization/Professional Purpose	Frequency
For-Profit	Communication/PR General Services	3
Corporation	Consulting for Federal Agencies	2
	Global Business (health products, minerals)	2
	Insurance	1
	Negotiation for County/State Consortium	1
	Social Change and Activism	1
	Health Promotion & Research	1
Small Business	Social Change & Activism	1
	Media Relations	2
	Research Analysis & Campaign Development	1

Non-Profit	Diplomacy (Public Affairs)	2
Government	Security (Defense and Intelligence)	2
	County Conference & Travel Bureau	1
	State Health & Aging Bureau	1
Non-Profit	Labor Union, Labor Association	2
Private	University/College (PR/Marketing)	2
	Environmental	1
	Community Service	1
	Performing Arts	1

Participants were free to report on any job held in communication or public relations, not merely their current employment. Some chose to discuss work they had done, or incidents that had transpired, in previous work settings. The following list enumerates the categories of organizations cited by participants in their communication and public relations careers.

Categories of Organizations Cited by Participants

Government agency: Federal

Diplomacy (Public Affairs)

Security (Global)

Government agency: State or County

Education Departments

Health and Aging

Public School Boards

County Conference and Travel Bureau

For-profit organization: Corporation or Small Business.

Insurance

Global Business, including health products and strategic minerals

For-profit organization: Communication or Public Relations Firm as Employee

Communication Consulting for Federal Agencies

Negotiation for County/State Agencies

Health Promotion and Research

Media Relations

Research Analysis and Campaign Development for Small Businesses

Strategic Communication and Relations

For-profit organization: Communication or Public Relations Firm as Owner-CEO

Small Business Communication Consulting and Services

Social Change and Activism

Non-profit organization

Performing Arts or Museum

Community Service

Environmental

Labor Union

University/College (Directors of PR/Marketing)

The majority of participants described their experiences with conflict resolution in one organization, although the more experienced professionals mentioned conflict within several organizations where they had worked. The study was especially enriched when the same individual could recount conflict instances in two organizations. For example, one participant worked in communication for state employees and then was hired to communicate for government management that negotiated with these employees. Another participant worked as a journalist on the school board beat and then as a media communication specialist for a county's school boards. These practitioners offered insights from both sides of the conflicts that arose between their organizations.

Participants reported the exact title of the jobs they held. The list below shows the diversity of titles.

Job Titles of Participants

Executive Director

Executive Director of Public Relations and Marketing

Consultant for Military Organizations

Communication Consultant

Communication Coordinator

Communication Field Coordinator

Director of Communication

Director of Marketing and Public Relations

Director of Public Relations and Reputation Management

Information Officer

Media Relations Specialist

President

Senior Analyst for Small Businesses

Senior Director of Marketing and Communication

Senior Vice President for External Affairs

Strategic and Media Consultant

This diverse list of job titles is typical in communication/public relations. Doyle (2013) listed 47 separate job titles that covered employment in the field, and college career centers have listed a dizzying number of job titles that communication graduates could qualify for. Because the responsibilities covered under these titles vary widely, interviewees often spent significant time describing what they did on a typical day (Appendix A: Interview Protocol, Question 2). Their daily job descriptions are captured in the Results section (Research Question 1).

Moreover, these job titles did not always indicate where the participant fit into the organizational or career hierarchy. In 1993, PRSA outlined five basic levels of growth in public relations or communication careers: *technician* (two levels), *supervisor* (two levels), *manager*, *director*, and *executive*. Where did my participants fit in this scheme? Some participants had job titles implying that they were managers or directors when, in fact, they had few if any supervisory duties. Perhaps because of the minimum requirement of five years experience, no one fit exclusively in the category of *entry-level technician*. Every participant

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had broader responsibilities than writing text for various communication channels, although all of them continued to write and edit text regardless of their career levels. Surprisingly, one participant with eight years of experience and a title of vice president continued to function largely as an entry-level technician in a small organization. She routinely took photographs, shot video for media outlets, and copy- edited text for the other employees. At age 57, this professional worried that her lack of supervisory experience and up-to-date technical skills would prevent her from getting a better job. Personally, this was the most painful interview I conducted because the interviewee laid out the problems facing older professionals who perceive that their skills do not meet the demands of new technologies and advanced management. Her senior title did not mask the participant's daily entry-level duties.

A number of participants performed the responsibilities of *second-level technician* that include analyzing issues, conducting research, and overseeing staff in completing the various messages required in publications, campaigns, presentations, video productions, and the like. According to the Professional Career Guide (PRSA, 1993), these advanced technicians continue to use their technical and craft skills, but expand into coordinating and planning project tasks, budgets, and schedules. For example, several participants functioned as liaisons with government agency personnel on contracts implemented by their for-profit employers. Another participant worked as a media specialist communicating his environmental organization's goals to journalists in three states, but he also acted as an event planner.

The levels of *supervisor* and *manager* were sometimes difficult for me to capture from descriptions of the participants' responsibilities. These roles can be identified by job title in large public relations agencies with multiple divisions such as Edelman—the largest public relations firm in the United States (Edelman, 2013, Main Website Page, www.edelman.com). But the duties assigned to these jobs are not consistent across smaller public relations firms or government agencies.

Sampling

Sampling procedures. This study used purposive sampling – "a type of non-probability sampling in which you select the units to be observed on the basis of your own judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative" (Babbie, 2010, p. 183). Grounded theory data analysis rests on *purposeful* or *purposive* sampling because a basic requirement is that the participants have experience of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003, p. 125). In this study, participants were purposefully chosen because they had at least five years of experience as communication professionals and, consequently, could provide authentic perspectives on conflict in practice. Put another way, a selection and recruitment of experienced professionals insures that the findings will not be "entirely idiosyncratic" (Koerber & McMichael, 2008, p. 454).

While non-probability sampling restricts the generalization of results to a larger population (Stacks, 2011), it has several advantages in qualitative research. I could select participants who would generate data with the highest potential for discovery, deeper understanding, contradictions, and implications

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for practice (Merriam, 2009). Also, purposeful sampling technique has the power to enhance contributions to grounded theory analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommended a theoretical sampling procedure that gives researchers the flexibility to "maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts" (p. 143). In other words, researchers have to identify people and situations within a general target population that will help them accumulate their data and reach saturation or the stage when no new discoveries are being made (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Purposeful sampling allowed me to achieve saturation as defined in grounded theory data analysis.

Several kinds of purposeful sampling were used in this study: convenience and snowball sampling. I generated a typical sample of communication professionals with five years of experience by starting with people who were convenient based on their availability, location, and professional connections to my colleagues or myself. I moved beyond convenience sampling because it can produce information-poor data from highly similar participants (Merriam, 2009). By asking my interviewees to recommend other professionals for the study, *snowball sampling* expanded the pool of participants (Stacks, 2011). I added theoretical sampling strategies to insure that my data reflected some diversity in gender, ethnicity/race, type of communication practice, and geographical location (Charmaz, 2014).

Consequently, all potential participants were asked what public relations employment they had experienced (see Appendix A, Interview Protocol). Those

who had never held a paid position as a public research practitioner were excluded. Participants completed a brief information sheet at the end of the interview that documented their employment in public relations (see Appendix B).

Standards for sample size. I employed three standards to determine when my sample was large enough to represent the population: quantities suggested by other researchers, saturation, and ability to credibly analyze the data collected. Recruiting continued until all these standards were met, for it was clear that one standard alone would have been difficult to rely on with any certainty.

Numerical standards are not widely recommended by writers on qualitative research methodology. Merriam (2009) advised "those with low tolerance for ambiguity" to accept that "there is no answer" to how large the sample size should be (p. 80). Nevertheless, Creswell (2007) examined a number of studies to determine how many units had been included by researchers from different methodological positions. Numbers might range from one to 325, but most studies used from 3 to 10 (Creswell, 2007). For my second perspective–grounded theory data collection–Creswell (2007) recommended "20 to 30 individuals in order to develop a well-saturated theory" (p. 128). Charmaz (2006) pointed out that many grounded theory studies had incorporated much larger numbers of participants.

Participant recruitment continued until a minimum *saturation* was reached at 31 interviews based on richness of the data for analysis. *Saturation* is

a qualitative research term often employed as a standard for when the researcher can stop adding participants. Corbin and Strauss (2008) defined it as a stage "when no new data are emerging . . . but it also denotes the development of categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (p. 143).

My third criterion was the manageability of the sample. On the one hand, significant numbers of participants can bolster the study's credibility. On the other hand, Kvale (1996) warned that qualitative researchers often collected so many interview data that they could not possibly analyze their findings. He gave the hypothetical example of qualitative researchers-in-training who conducted 30 to 40 hours of interviews and produced 1,000 pages of transcripts. Kvale (1996) commented, "One thousand pages of transcripts are generally too much to handle. The material is too extensive to overview and to work out the depth of meaning of what was said" (p. 277). Fewer interviews or critical incident narratives may be sufficient to achieve what is called *saturation* of data–a condition in which additional interviews seem to produce no new understanding (Creswell, 2007).

Recruitment. Participants were recruited using criterion convenience method, a snowball technique, and opportunistic recruitment (Creswell, 2003; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Although scholars describe these techniques as mutually exclusive (Koerber & McMichael, 2008), I believe they work together to yield a strong purposeful sample. Criterion convenience sampling involved recruiting people known to me or to friends or colleagues because they fit the standard of experienced public relations practitioner within one of the

applicable organizational categories. Convenience participants are often selected based on ready availability that saves time and money (Babbie, 2010). Participants who completed an interview were asked for names of other practitioners who could be recruited–a technique called snowball, chain, or network sampling (Merriam, 2009). Finally, I used opportunistic recruitment at professional meetings and conferences that public relations practitioners attended.

Materials and Procedures

This section explains how the choice of instruments was made, what data collection instruments are used, where and how the data are collected, and what privacy protections the participants can expect (Creswell, 2003).

Instrumentation. According to Miles & Huberman (1994), "Instrumentation comprises specific methods for collecting data . . . and may be loosely to tightly structured" (p. 36). Grounded theory data collection relies heavily on in-depth interviews because individuals can express their understanding of a phenomenon most fully through language (Creswell, 2007). Interviews are loosely structured or unstructured because the data collection process should be informal and interactive; questions posed by researchers are always open-ended (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Initial contact. Initial contacts with potential participants proceeded via mail, email, or telephone. Examples of initial contact messages can be found in Rubin and Rubin (2005). Individuals who agreed to participate received a follow-up letter that documented the date, time, and place of the interview.

Interview protocol. A written interview protocol guided the interview (Appendix A). It included open-ended questions to establish rapport and to encourage participants to explore their experiences of negotiation and how they understood them. I organized the protocol using main questions to ensure that conflict in practice was thoroughly explored, as well as follow-up questions to expand detail and clarify meanings about ideas, and probing questions to "complete an idea, fill in a missing piece, or request clarification of what was said" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 137). I found that probes led me to new themes (e.g., mentoring and personal skills in conflict management) that turned into major follow-up questions.

Charmaz (2006) identified two main questions that have to be posed in any grounded theory interview: What did you experience and how do you understand that experience? To explore these questions, the protocol was divided into five sections that covered descriptions, definitions, and understanding of the roles practitioners play in conflict situations in their work lives. RQ1 on a participant's current job/role included four sub-questions that covered the organization's purpose and mission, her daily work activities, the audiences she wanted to reach, and a challenging project she recently had worked on. These questions allowed me to compile portraits of the workplaces of my participants, the audiences that could be sources of conflict, and whether conflict surfaced in challenging projects.

RQ2 explored conflict with internal and external audiences and the amount of time practitioners devoted to dealing with conflicts. Literature

covering the functions of public relations practice have focused on publics and building relationships with audiences in both routine practice and conflict situations (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Leitch & Morton, 2010; Ni & Kim, 2009). RQ3 collected data on participants' use of digital and social media–in some cases, perceived use of digital media in dealing with conflict. RQ 4 centered on gathering critical incidents and deepening our understanding of how conflicts affect work life. The critical incident technique is described in detail in the data analysis section below. The conclusion section of the protocol allowed participants to add further comments they would like to make on how public relations practitioners work to deal with conflict on the job. This question turned into a major source of data because many participants wanted to express their general understanding of conflict and offer personally successful strategies for resolving it. Participants also could add questions they wanted me to ask and then often answered those questions.

At the end of the interview, I collected background information (see Appendix B) that allowed me to collect systematic information about the age and work experience of all participants.

Pilot of interview protocol. A pilot refines the protocol so that the study results reflect the "lived experiences" of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Using the protocol (Appendix A), I conducted interviews with five public relations practitioners whose characteristics matched the sample (Kvale, 2007). I added the following questions (Appendix C) (Sampson, 2004): How did you experience the interview?

How well did the questions help you describe your experiences? What issues did I miss? What would you omit? After analyzing data from the pilot, I made modifications to the protocol. For example, based on a recommendation from the pilot, I added a probe about what percentage of time each participant spent in management as compared to practice activities. I added a follow-up about whether conflicts arose inside the organization over money because several practitioners in public agencies mentioned reduced budgets after the 2008 economic recession. Several participants recommended that I add a probe about conflicts involving cultural and gender differences. Some of these probes only produced marginal information in the data analysis stages, but they added depth to the participants' answers.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews. Interviews in this study were in-depth and person-to-person. DeMarrais (2004) defined an interview as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (p. 55). Depth is created in interviews when participants are allowed to explore significant topics without limitations on their answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The in-depth interviews in this study were semi-structured: they featured main questions about negotiation and its meaning, but allowed these questions to be posed in a flexible order with the addition of any probing questions that could clarify meaning and fill in gaps in the experience (Merriam, 2009). Rubin and Rubin (2005) listed several types of probing questions to aid in elaborating and clarifying responses (pp. 164-171). Probes were also used to

clarify the sequence of events and add examples to the answers. Rapport

between researcher and interviewee was established and maintained so that the

conversation could flow freely and rich data could emerge (Rubin & Rubin,

2005).

Overview of data. The 31 interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 170

minutes; total interview time (including introductory and concluding dialogue)

was 2,899 minutes (48 hours, 19 minutes). All interviews were audio-recorded. I

made post-interview observation notes to clarify data and my personal

experience of the interview, then reviewed transcripts and undertook coding of

the findings. Full transcripts consumed 668 typed, single-spaced pages (46 lines

per page).

IRB permission. Before any interview took place, the interviewees read

and signed the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board permission

document for this study. It explained the study's purpose, the rights of the

participant, the confidentiality protections that apply to participant identity, and

the audio-taping requirement. Before conducting interviews by telephone, I sent

the IRB permission forms to participants via email along with the interview

questions. See Appendix D for IRB approval form.

Setting. The interview setting can influence a participant's comments

and the researcher's impressions. Stacks (2011) recommended that researchers

conduct in-depth interviews in the participant's office or home; the participant

may feel more relaxed in a familiar setting and the surrounding objects can "tell

you much about the person you are interviewing" (p. 176). Researchers

increasingly prefer on-location data collection for qualitative studies (Krueger &

Casey, 2009). However, Debus (1988) warned against noisy places and those

where the participant feels exposed to observation by passers-by. Fifteen of my

31 interviews were conducted face-to-face in various locations. The other

participants lived too far away to be interviewed without expensive travel; they

were reached by telephone. When the interview was face-to-face, I asked

participants if I could come to their workplaces where the real-life setting could

bolster their reflections on work experience.

Critical incident data collection.   The interview protocol contained a

critical incident (CI) question intended to deepen my understanding of conflict

events that participants had experienced during communication work

(Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005).

> Question 9: Can you tell me about a time when you played a role in trying
>
> to resolve a disagreement in your public relations or communication
>
> work? Or could you tell me about an incident that you witnessed and
>
> know a lot about?

However, participants provided critical incidents in their answers to a number of

questions, not just to question 9.

Critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) is a qualitative research

method that uses interviews (individual or group) to understand "significant

occurrences (events, incidents, processes, or issues" (Chell, 2004, p. 48)

identified by participants to help researchers understand the topic (Butterfield

et al., 2005; Hughes, 2012). To qualify as a critical incident, the episode must be

"sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions," "the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer," and "its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327). These qualities separated the critical incident from many examples or illustrations that participants gave in their answers to other questions.

During probes of the critical incident narratives, the interviewees were asked to reflect on who was involved, the course of events, the result or outcome, and the causes of what happened (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). In answer to my critical incident question, the participants told stories about "organizational dramas" (Chell, 2004, p. 58) that spurred self-reflection and yielded insights into the processes of conflict resolution. More importantly, the participants revealed the emotions they experienced and the effects of these workplace conflicts on their lives and careers.

In addition to collecting details about and responses to the incidents, I asked participants how "the outcomes could have been better or worse" (Appendix A: Interview Protocol). In critical incident method, this question produces a *Wish List* (WL), defined as items that a participant thought would have improved the outcome if they had been added to or eliminated from the situation (Butterfield et al., 2009, p. 267). Wish List items could include people, information, tactics, supports, policies, interventions, and the like; these same items could also be taken out of the situation, rather than added (e.g., I wish that coworker had butted out).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In qualitative research, analysis generally means the "process of examining something in order to find out what it is and how it works" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 46). Analysis is viewed as a dynamic inductive process which yields concepts or themes that develop over time through systematic examination of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Researchers who want to describe a phenomenon usually begin with an examination of the whole and then examine the components that indicate how the whole works (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The strategy of whole to part applies to this research project's analysis of conflict resolution in public relations practice.

In this study, qualitative content analysis reduced data collected from interview transcripts and other written texts so that participant information and insights about conflict resolution could be conveyed reliably, credibly, and as objectively as possible. Data analysis followed the two-stage process recommended by Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014): analyzing the data using categories and themes developed from the participant data (i.e., the *emic* stage) and analyzing the data using codes, categories, and themes derived from prior research (i.e., the *etic* stage).

Qualitative content analysis procedures rely on specific definitions and goals. *Content analysis* has been defined as "a method of analyzing written, verbal, or visual communication messages" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). *Coding*, or "deriving and developing concepts from data" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 65) required generating codes from segments of the data. *Codes* are "tags or labels

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for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 65). According to Krippendorf (2004), content analysis of data should result in a "condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon" (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 108). More simply stated, the goal of qualitative content analysis is to turn raw data into concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Guides or handbooks often describe qualitative content analysis of large verbal data sets as overwhelming at first (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2003; Kvale, 1995; Merriam, 2009). I found this to be true. By dividing the analysis process into stages, I was able to capture the descriptions and meanings of the participants first. Then, in the second stage, I established credibility by comparing the study-unique categories/themes with results from past studies on conflict resolution.

Analysis stage one. My first analytic stage–the *emic* procedure–involved a repeated process of reading and analyzing the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The goal was to generate a reduced group of *in vivo* codes: that is, concepts captured by the actual words of the participants and not created by the researcher. Because my participants were experienced and articulate professionals, they provided vivid, precise phrases to describe their experiences and understanding. I felt that to deviate from their exact words in generating codes could compromise the objectivity of my analysis. In this first stage, I generated words/phrases/concepts that captured the meaning of data segments,

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compared and contrasted those meanings, collapsed the meanings into codes

that could guide analysis of other segments of the data, and finally–through

iteration–arrived at a smaller, workable set of key words, phrases, and examples

that could answer the research questions with fidelity to the participants'

descriptions and understandings.

To be more precise, I applied several strategies from the thirteen tactics

recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) for generating meaning from

qualitative data; these included (1) noting patterns and themes, (2) clustering,

(3) making contrasts and comparisons, (4) recording metaphors, (5) "subsuming

particulars into the general" (p. 255), (6) "building a logical chain of evidence"

(p. 260), and (7) making conceptual coherence of the reduced data. I excluded a

number of analytic strategies as incompatible with my theoretical stance that

grounds theory in inductive data collection. I did not count or treat word data as

variables that could be manipulated during analysis or whose relationships

could be expressed in word equations (Miles & Huberman, 1994, pp. 256-257).

Moreover, I used the strategy of *constant comparison* from grounded

theory data analysis. Simply defined, constant comparison is "the analytic

process of comparing different pieces of data for similarities or differences"

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 65). While this data analysis tactic is similar to

making comparisons and contrasts as recommended by Miles and Huberman

(1994), grounded theory data analysis developed more specific strategies

including *open* and *axial* coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). *Open coding* is applied

in the initial analysis of the data in order to break data apart and delineate

categories and concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 9). *Axial coding* is a second

stage that involves making connections among the categories. In particular, axial

coding requires analysts to look at the context of the

categories/concepts/themes, to uncover the relationships among them, and to

explore how these relationships illuminate the participants' understanding of

conflict resolution in communication practice. Axial coding furthered my

understanding of the behaviors, interpretations, strategic recommendations, and

insights the participants revealed during our interviews. Theoretical strands

emerged in the results as a set of constructs and factors. The data yielded

enough evidence to articulate a descriptive model and conflict transformation

theory comparable to the grounded theory examples provided by Glaser and

Strauss (1967, p. 213) and Corbin and Strauss (2008, p. 271).

Analysis stage two. Once the major construct and factors solidified, stage

two considered concepts and themes from the results of previous research

studies on conflict resolution in work settings (Creswell, 2007). This analysis

aided me in what Corbin and Strauss (2008) called *integration* in which

researchers add "missing links in the logic" of their grounded theory models (p.

274). New sections were added to the literature review to investigate emotion,

conflict avoidance, and transformation of conflict–themes that emerged in stage

one analysis. I kept a concept journal on research studies that connected to the

study's major themes. For example, the journal covered studies on e-mentoring

(Srivastava & Jomon, 2013), team personality (LePine et al., 2011), detoxifying

negative relationships (Gallicano, 2013), and the use of communication audits to

uncover organizational conflicts (Hargie & Tourish, 2009). This stage of examining existing research allowed me to get a bigger picture of the workplace conflict terrain. Using this research information, I was able to refine my participants' understanding in ways that helped me create a logical structure for my final theory.

Analysis of critical incidents. As explained under Data Collection, critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) was incorporated into my research through a single question augmented by probes in the interview protocol. Critical incident technique employs many of the same data analysis techniques used in other qualitative methods that rely on interviews. These include phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study (Creswell, 2008).

Still, other data techniques are specific to CIT because its origins were in job effectiveness analysis, selection of pilots, and other organizational applications involving employees (Flanagan, 1954). Because its method strategies have been geared to practical results, the data analysis has been more standardized and has even included specific numerical standards for including a category in the final analysis of the data (Butterfield et al., 2005). Strategies involving counts of participant responses have been excluded from my data analysis because they contradict theoretical underpinnings of my study in grounded theory. However, I have adopted other method analyses from CIT and its newest development *Extended Critical Incident Technique* (ECIT; Hughes, 2012). These tactics include using several pre-existing categories to analyze the critical incidents and several strategies developed as credibility checks.

Specific coding categories in critical incident technique. Butterfield et al.

(2009), Hughes (2012), Miles & Huberman (1994), and others have compiled

pre-existing categories that bolster the analysis of critical incidents. Some of

these categories are meant to create homogeneity of descriptive details across

the critical incidents. I used the following detail categories:

Topic of the incident

Context, including any triggering factor

People involved and their histories

Organization

Time period (short-term versus long-term)

Tone or affect of the incident (positive, negative, neutral)

Turning points or differences (e.g., age, gender, culture)

Outcomes and explanation of outcomes

Wish list items to improve the outcomes

Other coding categories were added as needed.

Selected credibility checks in critical incident technique. Credibility or

trustworthiness checks have been highly evolved in CIT because many

applications have focused on behavior measurement (Flanagan, 1954).

Butterfield et al. (2009) listed nine of these checks (pp. 274-276); a number of

them mirror reliability/validity strategies that are widely used in other

qualitative method approaches (e.g., saturation, audiotaping and complete

transcription, evaluation of researcher bias). However, I found several of the

credibility checks of critical incident method highly applicable and feasible in the data analysis.

1. Incidents were analyzed in batches of three and categories were organized on a table that included the participant identification code, the date categorized, and new categories that emerged. Separate tables were kept for the critical incident narrative and for the items that participants included in their wish lists to be added to or eliminated from the conflict resolution process to achieve a better outcome.

2. An independent analyst with a PhD and previous faculty tenure acted as a check on categories in at least 25% of the interviews (Butterfield et al., 2005). His checks included distinguishing critical incidents and wish list items (e.g., *independent extraction of CIs*); placing incidents into categories; and determining if the categories were exhaustive.

Analysis of print and digital materials. A variety of print and digital materials were collected throughout the study. Prior to interviewing each participant, I examined organization websites, LinkedIn pages, and other Internet evidence. During face-to-face interviews, I collected print materials from the participants' offices that documented the current activities and communication campaigns of the organization. In person and on the telephone, I asked for organizational charts and other materials that the practitioner thought would be useful in helping me understand his or her everyday work life. At several stages in my constant comparison data analysis, I incorporated

information from these sources and other digital materials such as newspaper articles and professional publications. For example, I used these materials to check the accuracy of statements or to deepen my understanding of the outcome of a news event that a participant offered as critical incident.

Triangulation. I used a number of data triangulation procedures to boost the internal validity of my results (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation strategies occurred throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Merriam (2009) listed four types of triangulation including the use of multiple sources of data. In this study, I used interview data, observations, and artifacts/documents/records (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 12). Before interviews, I reviewed organization websites to familiarize myself with the workplace context, During interviews, I collected organizational charts, mission statements, pamphlets and other materials. These proved invaluable in clarifying exact job titles, hierarchical relationships, and other details about the work lives that participants described.

After interviews, I conducted extensive fact-checking of details and events described by participants. For example, one participant described conflicts surrounding his communication work after a high-profile plan crash. I located newspaper and magazine reports that helped me to clarify this event and the participant's role. I was also able to trace a public dispute over closing of schools during a flu outbreak and the sale of a health insurance company. These artifacts allowed me to authentic results.

Finally, I used observation to triangulate data. No only did I interview in the workplace of as many participants as possible; I attended several conferences and events where participants presented or were actively involved. In one case, I observed the agency where a participant was actively dealing with clients. In another case, I attended two different panel discussions where the participant was a speaker.

Standards of Validity and Reliability (Internal Validity)

This section briefly covers the theoretical debate over the standards for judging qualitative research, traditionally conceptualized as *validity*, *reliability*, and *utility* (Potter, 1996; Wolcott, 1994). The following paragraphs define validity as an ethical construct and reliability as a form of *internal validity,* subsequently proceeding to explain the strategies I used to boost internal and external validity and minimize bias.

Among qualitative research scholars, concepts of *validity* and *reliability* have been vigorously disputed and theorists have proposed alternative frameworks to judge whether the findings and conclusions of a study are "possibly or probably true, reliable, valid, dependable, reasonable, confirmable, credible, trustworthy, useful, compelling, significant, empowering (add others of your choice)" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 310). This section cannot cover the complex debate over what criteria of truth or objectivity should be applied to qualitative research studies like this one (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Even a review of the alternative terms used by qualitative scholars to designate validity and reliability would require a lengthy essay (Creswell, 2007, p. 203).

However, I was guided by concepts of internal and external validity and reliability that I believe apply logically and ethically to the goals of this study.

First, I defined external *validity* in two contexts: *fittingness* (or fit) with other people's understandings and values (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). External validity is a highly contested construct in qualitative research, but its meaning seems to center around whether the conclusions are trustworthy enough to be applied in the real world (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The question that I asked myself about external validity while conducting this study was whether I had applied enough rigor to make links with other studies, other communication work settings, and other professionals. Another perspective on fit as an external validity standard is *transferability*—a concept from qualitative research approaches that assert conclusions are applicable to other settings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The ethical context of external validity considers "how we [qualitative researchers] are able to improve the lives of those we study" (Tierney, 1997, p. vii). Ethical validity is very closely tied to applications of the conclusions in communication practice (Lincoln et al., 2011). At the very least, the interview process should have expanded the awareness of my interviewees on how the conflicts they experience benefit or detract from their everyday work lives. One participant already told me that he had improved his hiring practices after our interview. I hope the conclusions of the study can influence practice if and when I can describe them to communication professionals through conferences and

meetings of professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America.

Another element of validity that I stressed in the process of completing this study is *credibility* or *authenticity*—a component of *internal validity* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Internal validity in qualitative research is a standard of reliability because it demands consistency between the results and the data collected—just as replication of a study in quantitative research demands reliability in producing results consistent with those found in the original study (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). As a researcher, I asked the following questions to determine if this study's conclusions have internal validity: Do the conclusions make sense to me? Would the conclusions seem credible to the participants of the study? Does the study authentically depict the conflict and its manifestations in the work lives of these communication professionals?

Strategies to increase internal validity. *Internal* validity–also called *credibility* and *authenticity*–has been defined as the "truth value" of the research that includes insuring that the "findings of the study make sense," that they appear "credible to the people we study," and that they create "an authentic portrait of what we were looking at" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldano, 2014, p. 312). I used several qualitative method tactics to insure that the descriptive results of this study are "reliable, dependable, reasonable, credible, [and] useful" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 277).

Because grounded theory and related qualitative research methods privilege the participant's understanding of the experience (Creswell, 2009), my

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internal validation activities first included asking for clarification of answers shortly after the interview. After each interview, I typed up my notes from the conversation, noted any confusing passages, and crafted a thank-you note to the interviewee summarizing a main point or insight that had surfaced. If I needed clarification of a point, I asked for it in the email or, in several instances, in person. I received only two responses to email requests, both including additional details about the interviewees' work experience.

Further, I checked facts and filled in details about the participants' organizations from website information and printed materials that I collected during face-to-face interviews. For example, I checked job titles, mission statements of the organizations, key stakeholders, and organizational charts.

Strategies to increase external validity. Qualitative researchers such as Miles and Huberman (1994) have sought verification of findings through twelve "operationalized tactics," such as checking for representativeness in the data and "triangulating across data sources and methods" (p. 28). Creswell (2007) listed the following strategies for improving external validity: "prolonged engagement and persistent observation," triangulation of data, peer review or debriefing, providing disconfirming evidence, clarifying researcher bias (see section below), member checking, and providing rich, thick description (pp. 207-209). To varying degrees, I applied all these external validation strategies during the conduct of this study. Triangulation of data is described in the data collection section of this chapter while clarifying and researcher bias is described in the next section. The results section (Chapter 5) provides evidence of rich, thick

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description for each theme and critical incident. I included extensive narratives and plentiful quotations to verify my analysis of the actual words spoken by participants.

I achieved prolonged engagement and observation, continuing my contact with participants and practitioners by joining and becoming actively involved as an officer in a local chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. The membership provided me with national leadership training and exposure to many communication practitioners in my region. Through PRSA and supervision of graduate communication practicum interns, my knowledge of practice has been deepened over the course of this study and has helped me verify themes and constructs.

I also used member checking to test the validity of the findings—a technique recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Peer checking involved asking participants if they deemed the findings credible and representative of their understandings (Merriam, 2009). After completing the second stage of data analysis, I spoke with eight participants informally to review the study's discussion of conflicts with internal audiences, conflict avoidance, conflict transformation, and informal versus formal conflict resolution techniques. These participants confirmed the results and added further understandings, especially about conflict avoidance.

In addition, I used peer review or debriefing as an external check of the findings (Creswell, 2007). I made a formal PowerPoint presentation of my

results to a group of colleagues in communication and government at Johns

Hopkins University. The presentation included brief quotations from the

interview transcripts, data analysis notes, and relevant literature (Merriam,

2009). The feedback from these participants and colleagues helped me to assess

how well I applied the method, as well as to judge the depth of understanding

and the credibility of the results. Their comments helped me understand how

readers will absorb or reject the meta-themes and the transformation of conflict

model (Eisner, 1991).

   Reflective strategies to reduce personal biases. *Reflexivity* in

qualitative research has been generally defined as a strategy used by researchers

to reduce their personal biases in the collection and analysis of data. Finlay

(2002) described it as "an explicit, self-aware meta-analysis of the research

process" (p. 531) that requires qualitative researchers to put aside the belief that

our methods are "objective" processes and to accept instead that "we actively

construct our knowledge" (p. 532). Biases in data collection and analysis can

result from the researcher's emotions that influence participants' responses

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008), from personal values about what is good or useful, and

from expectations about what the results should be (Maxwell, 2005). The

theoretical underpinnings of reflexive practice cut across many traditions in

communication research, including *critical*, *social constructivist*, *participative*,

and *postmodern* (Finlay, 2002; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

   A main approach in qualitative research to reduce researcher bias is

called *bracketing*. Fischer (2009) described it as "an investigator's identification

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of vested interests, personal experience, cultural factors, assumptions, and hunches that could influence how he or she views the study's data" (p. 583). The goal is make sure that the findings remain "as faithful as humanly possible to the participants' description and that the essence of their description is reported accurately" (Hamill & Sinclair, 2010, p. 23). Researchers have developed extensive bracketing activities. These include developing an audit trail, clarifying one's personal value system, describing role conflicts, identifying "gatekeeper's interests," exploring feelings, narrating events in one's personal history that influence the research, reflecting on post-analysis bias, applying guided imagery after data collection, and exploring biases absorbed from literature review articles (Ahern, 1999; Gearing, 2004; Hamill & Sinclair, 2010; Moustakas, 1994; Wall, Glenn, Mitchinson, & Poole, 2004; LeVasseur, 2003).

Because no single researcher can engage in all these activities without weighting the researcher's perspective too heavily in the study (Clegg & Hardy, 2006), I used the following activities throughout the project. The activities created a bracketing practice that I believe allowed me temporarily to suspend my personal beliefs, prior knowledge, and assumptions during data collection and analysis.

1. I kept a reflective journal. My journal began before data collection and continued throughout the research process. Bracketing through pre-research writing included reflections on the following aspects of my experience and the research context: gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, power, hierarchy,

value system, and problems that may arise in the research process (Gearing, 2004).

2. I wrote observational notes and memos during data collection. Bracketing activities included keeping a set of observational notes during and immediately after in-depth interviewing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and writing memos after interviews to record "personal, methodological, and substantive" issues (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 72).

3. I maintained an audit trail during data analysis, recording the details of data analysis and the bases for decisions made during data reduction (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2004; Wolf, 2003).

4. I engaged in more formal and systematic *memoing* during data analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994) described *memoing* "as a rapid way of capturing thoughts that occur" through all stages of data reduction and development of the final conclusions (p. 74).

Although these activities included reflection on the specific content of data and their interpretation, bracketing reflexivity must focus heavily on filtering out my "internal suppositions" (Gearing, 2004, p. 1433) as a researcher, including personal knowledge, experiences, cultural assumptions and values, as well as academic and scientific ideas gleaned from the communication discipline.

Reflexive observations. This section examines some of my personal biases, assumptions, and research perspectives that can help the reader understand more about how I arrived at my conclusions. These observations emerged during the reflexivity strategies described above.

First, I assumed that some of this study's results would have been different if I had interviewed my participants prior to the severe U. S. economic downturn beginning in 2008. While pundits have debated to what extent the public relations industry suffered financially during this recession (Rudawsky. 2011, August 11), public relations practitioners and educators in the Mid-Atlantic region where I live have reported that recent graduates in communication studies are having a tough time finding jobs. The Public Relations Society of America in this four-state area plus the District of Columbia has developed an employer survey to find out how these recent graduates with BAs and MAs can be made more employable. The recession, linked to my graduate students' difficulties in finding or changing jobs, may have influenced the attention I paid to intergenerational conflicts in my data analysis. In addition, some older participants in this study reported fears over finding new jobs in a tough job market that places strong emphasis on technology. As an older employee myself, I may have been especially sensitive to intergenerational conflict.

Second, I made assumptions about the skills of communication professionals that can be challenged by research and real world experience. Because communication is often cited as a major factor in successful conflict resolution and management (Jones, 2005; Putnam, 2006; Ruck & Welch, 2012; Verčič et al., 2012), I assumed that communication practitioners/managers have an edge over other managers in dealing with conflict. The skills practitioners use in their direct practice role—such as audience segmentation, message crafting,

and persuasive techniques— should enhance their skills in managing disputes within teams, resolving employee conflicts, and even using conflict to enhance performance. This assumption seems to underpin previous negotiation and conflict theories in public relations scholarship (Cancel et al., 1997; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Huang, 2001; Plowman, 2005). During this study, I did not vigorously challenge the assumption that public relations practitioners will be skilled conflict managers because they've been trained in communication with external audiences, the media, and even during crisis situations. Participants in this study acknowledged the powerful influence of emotions, identity, and even childhood experiences in their ability to manage conflict. I underestimated these highly personal, non-professional factors in conceptualizing this study.

Last, I found that the dissertation genre both limited and distorted my research process. I had not adhered to the strict requirements of the grounded theory philosophy and method as set forth by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and did not realize how the prospectus' literature review would—in the opinion of some scholars—distort my ability to generate a true grounded theory model from the data (see Charmaz, 2014, pp. 306-310, for the pros and cons of preparing the literature review in advance of a grounded theory study).

These assumptions and sensitivities highlight some common biases I believe I share with my participants, many other public relations scholars, and even my readers. Through reflection, I am questioning my negative perception of bias, and am exploring more positive constructions of bias in qualitative research. Any qualitative study may reflect many kinds of bias. Although

researcher bias can distort results—especially when it mirrors participant

bias—the biases of participants provide data that can lead to credible insights. I

claim to explore the *understandings* and *perceptions* of my participants, but from

another vantage point, I realize that I have been documenting their biases and

the biases inherent in a specific era and professional culture. No doubt my

results on conflict reflect this difficult post-2008 historical period in the United

States.

Generational conflict offers one example of potential distortion created

when the biases of participants overlap my own. I am an older professional

whose career has involved teaching literature, writing, and communication to

graduate and undergraduate students. Because I have worked so long with

younger people, I have a strong commitment to their future success and a

sensitivity to difficulties that gatekeepers create. This may have affected my

analysis of generational conflict. But, as seen in my sections on strategies to

increase internal and external validity, I worked hard to sideline my biases in

order to allow the biases of my participants to emerge.

Chapter 4: Results

This results section summarizes data collected during 31 interviews with communication professionals. A complete profile of the characteristics of the participants was included in the Methods section. The data collected through the interviews helped me to summarize participants' answers and develop themes in the following areas:

Description of the communication practitioner's role and job activities (RQ1)

Understanding of conflict management and negotiation in communication

practice (RQ2)

Understanding of how digital and social media are used in conflict

management, transformation, and negotiation (RQ3)

Perspectives from critical incidents on processes used to manage conflict in

practice (RQ4)

In order to achieve in-depth analysis, the interview protocol expanded the four general research questions specified in the Literature Review into 12 questions that covered participants' current job/role in the organization, problem solving or conflict resolution on the job, and critical incidents involving conflict resolution or negotiation (see Appendix A). This section systematically covers results from each research question and sub-questions. It reports details and themes that developed during the data analysis process described in Methods.

RQ1: How do public relations/communication practitioners with at least 5 years of experience describe their job activities and roles in the context of conflict management?

Five interview protocol sub-questions helped me find out what kind of organizations the participants worked for (RQ1.1), what were their daily work activities (RQ1.2), what audiences they wanted to reach (RQ1.3), how important digital communication was in their daily work (RQ1.4), and what challenging projects the practitioners were currently facing. Although the questions for RQ1 did not specifically deal with problem solving and conflict resolution, participants provided many data relevant to their experiences with conflict in their answers to these descriptive questions. Table 4.1 summarizes the major themes, variables and conflict sources that emerged during the analysis of RQ1 that described the work environments of the practitioners.

RQ1.1. How would you describe your organization to someone who doesn't know anything about it? What is its mission?

Interviewees currently worked for a diverse group of organizations at the international, national, statewide, regional, and local levels. The majority were employed by for-profit (20/31 or 64.5%) enterprises. Nonprofits totaled 11 and represented 35.5%.

International organizations

Profit: 4

Non-profit: 3

National organizations

Profit: 7

Non-profit: 1

Regional organizations

Profit: 6

Non-profit: 3

Statewide organizations

Profit: 2

Non-profit: 3

Local organizations

Profit: 1

Non-profit: 1

The missions of the international organizations divided into two main groups: U.S. Government organizations (e.g., State Department and military) and global integrated communications firms that provide public relations, marketing, research, and advertising services to clients worldwide. One firm distributed personal care products and vitamins globally.

National organizations were more diverse. They included pharmaceutical and engineered wood products manufacturers, a digital development corporation, and several integrated communication firms. One interviewee worked for a U. S. agency with an international security mission; another worked for a major national political party.

Regional organizations were located in heavily populated areas and included a theater, an environmental group dedicated to water quality, and a community college. For-profit regional organizations included four public relations firms.

Most statewide organizations—both profit and non-profit—had missions of providing services to state residents. These included health and education. One public relations firm specialized in advertising only to state residents and one consulting firm represented government agencies in California.

The study included only two local organizations: a Hispanic community center and a public relations agency that serves only town businesses.

RQ1.2: Please tell me what you do on your job every day? How much of your job is working on projects and how much is management?

According to my interviewees, work in a job labeled as *communication* or *public relations* involves a welter of activities that were not logically linked to the job titles of the interviewees. High-level professionals in large international communication firms reported writing press releases and conducting environmental scanning just like professionals at the beginning of their careers in small organizations. Others—a very few—conducted formal negotiations or directly lobbied elected officials to change features of legislative bills. The categories of job functions—defined as routine tasks or activities performed by interviewees—reveal significant overlap. For example, member communication might well involve significant relationship building. However, this research question asked participants to identify their job activities using their own language, not categories that were prompted by the interviewer or a survey.

Six job functions surfaced as common to sizeable numbers of the participants. In particular, two job functions (i.e., routine tasks or activities performed by the interviewee) were identified most often as tasks the participants completed

frequently: *media relations* (23/31 or 74.19%) and *client or member communication* (23/31 or 74.19%). Next, participants reported engaging in *strategic planning* (16/31 or 51.61%) and in *promotion and marketing* (16/31 or 51.61%). The third largest job function categories were *relationship building* (14/31 or 45.16%) and *general management* (14/31 or 45.16%). One other function stood out as fairly common: *crisis communication* (10/31 or 32.26%).

Sixteen other job activities were identified by between one and eight participants. Eight (8/31 or 25.81%) indicated *environmental scanning* as a job activity. Categories mentioned by seven participants (7/31 or 22.58%) were *crisis planning*, *communication to staff*, and *policy research*. Six people (6/31 or 19.35%) indicated one of the two following categories: *event planning* or *briefing managers*. Five activities occupied four people each (4/31 or 12.90%): *website management, lobbying*, *training*, *formal teaching*, and *interpreting information for managers*. Three people each (2/3 or 6.52%) reported *mentoring* or *mediation* or *policy analysis*. Finally, one person (1/31 or 3.23%) engaged in formal *negotiation*.

Further analysis showed that participants clustered their roles or job functions into three main categories: direct practice, management, and training/mentoring. These major roles give additional clues into where conflict management activities can occur in everyday practice.

Direct practice

1. Media relations

2. Client and members communication

3. Promotion and marketing

4. Relationship building

5. Crisis intervention

6. Environmental scanning

7. Research

8. Event planning

9. Website management

    Lobbying

10. Negotiation and mediation

11. Program assessment

    Policy analysis

Management

1. Strategic planning

2. General management

3. Briefing and interpreting information for managers

4. Crisis planning

    Staff communication

Training and Mentoring

1. Training

    Formal teaching

2. Mentoring

Participants were not asked to define each activity but only to provide a label

for their everyday job assignments. These categories were collected to aid in analysis

of the major research questions on conflict resolution. Some activities could fall into more than one category.

RQ1.3: Can you describe some of the audiences you want to reach through your job activities?

This question provided a database of audiences that could be sources of conflicts and communication problems for participants. Audiences were analyzed using two dimensions: (1) whether the audiences were internal or external and (2) whether the organizations were profit or non-profit. These dimensions emerged from answers to this question only. The participants indicated two types of for-profit organizations: public relations (or communication) agency and corporation. Non-profits included government agencies, NGOs, arts and education, and other. These dimensions revealed significant matches between type of audience and type of organization. In examining these data, it is important to remember that the participants were divided among 20 for-profit and 11 non-profit organizations. Further, the category labels were not crisply distinct because of word definitions. For example, did the participants mean to indicate a significant difference when they mentioned a *client* in contrast to a *customer*?

Internal audiences were similar in profit and non-profit organizations. Most important were the *participant's team* or *department* and *other departments* in the organization. Non-profit employees mentioned the *C-suite* or *top management* more often than those in for-profit organizations. Further, non-profit practitioners also listed board members or similar internal stakeholders more frequently than those in for-profits (7/31 from non-profits as opposed to 1/31 in the for-profits). Finally,

students were mentioned as an internal audience in one for-profit organization and two non-profits.

Types of external audiences revealed more differences among practitioners who worked in profit and non-profit organizations. Without question, external audiences involving company clients under contract formed the major external audience for for-profit communication agency staff. However, government officials were an almost equally important external audience. In contrast, corporate communication staff were also involved with clients, but with far fewer government audiences. The non-profit employees dealt with far fewer client audiences, but a fairly strong number of government officials.

Media was an important audience for both profit and non-profit practitioners. The corporate communicators reported media audiences more strongly than did public relations agencies. All categories of non-profits (i.e., government, NGOs, and arts/education) were equally involved in media outlets as audiences.

The *general public* was identified by both profits and non-profits as a major audience. However, government agency employees cited the general public more frequently than did other communication practitioners. Corporations also showed strong interest in the general public as audience.

Another category of audience that was mentioned frequently by interviewees was *leaders of other organizations*. These include business leaders, civic leaders, and other influencers or opinion leaders in outside organizations.

Some categories listed by small numbers of participants showed the most striking contrast between profits and non-profits. Only participants from for-profit

communication agencies and corporations mentioned *customers*. Moreover, only one employee of a corporation mentioned an *opposing negotiator* as an audience; no non-profit employees mentioned this category. Finally, young communication professionals or students counted as audiences for a sprinkling of non-profits and one for-profit.

Some conclusions emerged from the extensive data on audiences that participants indicated they wanted to reach in their communication work.

1. Regardless of the type of organization they worked for, participants identified a broad spectrum of domestic and global audiences.

2. The main audience was the clients or customers of the organization.

3. Government communicators in this study reported internal audiences more frequently than employees in other types of organizations.

4. Corporate, government agency, and NGO communicators identified media as audiences more often than did PR agencies and arts/education organizations.

5. Few interviewees cited top management as one of their audiences.

RQ1.4: What is the most challenging project you have worked on lately? Probe: What was so challenging about these projects?

The data analysis revealed two general areas where participants experienced challenging projects. The first type of projects involved communication difficulties within the internal hierarchy of their organizations. Difficult external relations characterized the second type of projects that were challenging. Only about a third of participants answered this question after it was asked, but many others gave examples

of challenging projects in response to other queries. More challenging projects involved internal audiences than external.

Challenging *internal projects* were characterized by the goal of persuading colleagues toward or away from an action. Themes involving challenging internal projects included:

1. Dissuading colleagues from acting on a bad idea

2. Persuading staff to accept a social media policy

3. Establishing guidelines on whether the creative staff or the public relations staff would make final decisions on the social media messages within a client's campaign

4. Dealing with crisis responses when systems go offline

5. Implementing website and social media plans within departments that resist change, to make platforms more user friendly

6. Developing new taglines and other organizational identity slogans in the face of resistance from internal stakeholders

7. Creating communication links with staff working in distant locations

Challenging *external projects* often required persuading stakeholders to support decisions or engage in behaviors requiring commitment. Themes involving projects with difficult external relations included:

1. Convincing external stakeholders that cutting an academic sports program would be beneficial to the community

2. Controlling information about a merger so it is not leaked prematurely

3. Implementing a pest control program about the dangers of moving firewood as a

    behavior that spreads the insects

4. Managing summer promotions and ticket sales for the fall theater season

5. Recruiting union members when potential enrollees fear retaliation from other

    employees

       Summary of main themes in RQ1. Table 4.1 summarizes the major themes,

variables and conflict sources that emerged during the analysis of RQ1 that described

the work environments of the practitioners.

Table 4.1

RQ1: Themes, Variables, and Conflict Sources

Themes	Variables	Conflict Locations
Organization types	Profit/Non-profit Local to national	Loose or hybrid structure
Job activities	Project vs. management Mentoring, training	Overlapping responsibilities Little formal negotiation
Audiences and collaborators	Internal vs. external Profit vs. non-profit	Internal: Organizational teams Internal: Higher management External: Clients including

		government, media, general public especially in tax-supported organizations

Note. Profit includes agencies and corporations. Non-profit includes government, NGOs, arts, and education.

The participants' type of organization—for-profit versus non-profit—played a significant role in themes that surfaced in answer to this first RQ about how experienced professionals described their job activities and roles in the context of problem solving and conflict resolution. Two-thirds of the participants worked at for-profit organizations, so analysis did break down somewhat along organizational lines. A second important factor connected to claims made for the negotiation role of public relations professionals (Grunig & Grunig, 1991; Plowman, 1995): very few of the participants reported formal negotiation as a role in their job activities and these individuals worked for labor organizations or for employers.

Job functions, roles, or activities clustered into three areas: direct communication or public relations practice, management, and training or mentoring. Within these clusters, six specific functions surfaced: media relations, client or member communication, strategic planning, promotion and marketing, relationship building, and general management. Crisis communication ranked somewhat below these six functions. Interestingly, these job functions were reported by participants in both for-profits and non-profits regardless of their formal job titles in the organization.

Participants identified a broad range of specific domestic and global

collaborators. Audiences that the practitioners were trying to reach divided along two

axes: internal versus external audiences and profit versus non-profit audiences.

Participants in for-profits identified their departmental teams or other departmental

teams as their primary internal audiences while more non-profit practitioners reported

top management or the C-suite as one important internal audience. Still, relatively

few participants mentioned top management among their major internal audiences.

Predictably, the external audiences were different for practitioners in profits

and non-profits. For-profit communication agencies focused on their contractual

clients, including government agencies; corporate communication professionals

identified clients or customers as their major external audiences; and non-profits

reported various external stakeholders, including a fairly strong number of

government agencies. In both profits and non-profits, the practitioners identified the

media and the "general public" as major external audiences.

In describing recent challenging projects they had undertaken, the participants

cited persuasion as a major goal. Internally, for example, they had to persuade staff to

accept a social media policy or changes in the organization's digital platforms.

Externally, challenging projects included controlling information about mergers and

convincing external stakeholders to accept cuts or change behaviors in their personal

lives.

RQ2: How do public relations/communication professionals understand conflict

management and negotiation as roles in their practice?

Questions 6 through 10 in the interview protocol were aimed at finding out what conflict situations the participants experienced on the job and how they understood the process and outcomes of these situations. The protocol separated questions about conflicts within the organization from those with external stakeholders. The protocol allowed me to explore the processes involved in conflict situations, as well as the time and resources devoted to solving problems that went beyond those normally encountered in getting the work done. Participants early in the interview process asked to clarify what I meant by problem solving because their daily work required making decisions frequently to complete projects. For the majority of interviews, problem solving was defined as treating disagreements and conflicts that went beyond the usual matters that had to be handled to get the work done. Finally, the data for RQ2 were enriched by gathering critical incidents, as well as by the participants' perspectives on what influenced the outcomes.

RQ2.1: What activities in your public relations or communication work have involved solving problems or resolving disagreements INSIDE the organization?

Data from an earlier question (RQ1. 4) revealed that participants reported more challenging projects involving internal than external audiences. Results for RQ2.1 confirmed the dominance of internal conflicts in the everyday work lives of communication practitioners. While the interview protocol asked about *activities* that involved resolving disagreements, participants responded as if the question were meant to explore work *situations* or *conditions* that triggered conflict. The following themes emerged during data reduction and analysis of responses about solving problems and resolving disagreements inside the organization: (1) rigid or loose

organizational structures; (2) function of the public relations department; (3) inter-departmental rivalry; and (4) intergenerational and ethnic conflict.

Conflict within the organizational structure. A majority of participants reported conflicts arising from the rigid or loose hierarchical structures within their organizations. While data analysis revealed mixed opinions on sources of conflicts in the different types of structures, the few participants who worked in mixed hierarchical and bottom-up decision-making structures reported the highest degree of conflict.

Some participants explored the pros and cons of strong hierarchical structures. One participant gave the example of the "rigidity of the Marine chain of command" compared with the "more open authority" that requires "a higher degree of supervision." Keith who reported on his work as a public affairs officer overseas described conflicts between the communication team and the dominant coalition that did not want to engage media representatives. The dominant coalition viewed every encounter with the media as a "win/lose situation" and often disagreed with the communication staff's objectives and vetoed press conferences. Sam—currently a vice president for strategic communication at a public relations firm—remembered working for locally elected officials who established hierarchy and reduced conflict by firing the staff from the previous administration. The current president of a social marketing firm reflected on her past experiences working within a hierarchical public relations firm with "a male culture of confrontation and rigid management roles." This structure in Jayme's opinion "induced conflict" because leaders failed to understand "there are three sides to everything."

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Hierarchical structures, on the other hand, included elements that reduced conflict and increased opportunities for persuasion. Katie who works for a performing arts organization described its hierarchical structure as reducing conflict because the communication flowed fluently down to the staff whose job was to implement decisions. A research and development director for a chemical corporation viewed "meetings with management as opportunities for persuasion" to convince "leaders that an idea is bad." Sandra insisted that these meetings were not negotiations, but that "good managers make decisions to end conflict."

Participants also expressed differences about the value and drawbacks of more open structures of authority in dealing with conflict. Supporters of top-down decision-making approaches included Daniel who worked for a government security agency. He described "peripatetic managers" whose job was to see and hear conflicts. These individuals resolved conflicts through "open-ended conferences discussing strategy and organizational risk." These managers benefited because they resolved conflict in conferences "without risk to their careers." The communication director of a for-profit think tank valued the "entrepreneurial spirit" supported by her CEO who encouraged "people pitching outside their own specialties" and debating proposals. The CEO made the final decisions after these open strategic planning meetings, but "the debates enforced confidence in recommendations" that were subsequently acted on. The open authority structure in this think tank was reinforced by the open floor plan at the central office that allowed for "transparency, informality, and discussion."

A few dissenters pointed to problems with looser authority structures. Lynn, the CEO and president of an integrated marketing firm, firmly believed that looser

structures undermined privacy in decision-making and created fear. Employees, he claimed, "instinctively want to avoid conflict"—a point Lynn made again in his critical incident narrative—and so will be reluctant to "raise concerns" in open discussions. Sarah, a marketing director of an intercontinental digital public relations firm, reported that global time pressures undermined the chain of command. She and her staff had to make "quick decisions without reference to supervisors" and this "entailed the risks of policy deviation and misunderstanding."

Mixed structures of hierarchy and independent decision-making ranked high for creating conflict as reported by staff in labor federations and other contexts dependent on union negotiation. While only a handful of participants had served in these organizations, they noted that communication professionals "worked under both top-down authority" at the state and national levels, but had to "beg locals to get volunteers and resources." According to Lisa who worked for both labor unions and unions of employers, local union members created serious internal conflicts over negotiated agreements that "often needed resolution by subversion" on the part of the communication staff. Gabriel agreed that message crafting was a major conflict resolution tool in these dual structures. She was obliged to use "constant compromises in the language of messages" in order to minimize internal conflict situations and to "persuade members to join common efforts."

Conflict around the function of public relations. Public relations professionals in this study experienced internal conflict around the reputation of public relations as a profession, the viability of communication strategic plans, the perception of public relations within the organization, and disputes with other departments over work

responsibilities. Taken together, these themes created conflict by challenging the credibility of public relations practice.

Several participants identified negative images of public relations and communication professionals that undermined their credibility internally. One public affairs officer described his duty to produce "public relations spin" about a political situation overseas that "masked the messy conflict resolution" process there and to assign credit for success. Another practitioner compared her work as a strategic consultant "who gives the best advice and then is let go" with communication staff who implement the plan, but only sometimes "help make policy."

Public relations staff can face low reputations among faculty at universities and colleges according this study's respondents. Matthew compared his experience in public relations at a small liberal arts college with "lawyers who defend axe-murderers." Another communication director at a college in transition between presidents described being "an ambassador" among the academic departments who "behave like clients" seeking unrealistic marketing campaigns.

The second source of conflict around the function of public relations occurs when senior managers challenge the viability of strategic plans offered by the communication staff. Sophie has worked for over a decade at a regional tourist board that is financed by membership dues from local businesses. Her latest CEO has demanded "shorter messages, less detailed content, doesn't recognize segmentation of audiences, so let it go." Moreover, the CEO "is satisfied with glitz, quick, not entirely accurate messages" and wants results "without spending too much time on anything." Consequently, Sophie objects to the short-sighted decisions made by the CEO who

often ignores what the communication staff says. "As a communicator," Sally said, "you look at the whole image of the whole organization." Ted, employed by an environmental activist organization, felt similarly that the communication department's recommendations were being ignored. He claimed "the communication staff was brought late into controversies and gets little credit for what it achieves." All respondents described "confrontational meetings" with decision makers.

Several participants addressed the perceptions or stereotypes of the public relations departments in their organizations that created conflict or worked against its resolution. Sandra, a communication practitioner who has worked at the vice president level in corporations, complained, "Conflict is inevitable, but public relations people want to be liked." Their accommodating style handicaps the search for resolution. On the other hand, Kira has found that public relations practitioners are "not always popular with other staff" because of the reputation they have for "efficiency." And Ted continued his critique of negative attitudes toward the communication department in his environmental activist organization by contrasting the "aggressive media strategy" advocated by his group with the belief by others that it will undermine support from major stakeholders.

Finally, practitioners in this study described disputes that arose from rivalries with other departments in the organization. Major disputes were reported with the creative team, the marketing department, and accounts or legal staff. The major source of inter-departmental conflict involved control of digital and social media. These conflicts will be covered in depth in the results for RQ3, but several points deserve mention here. First, smaller agencies may experience more inter-

departmental conflict than organizations with more specialized groups. Ginger's integrated marketing and public relations agency seems to experience frequent encroachment on areas formally assigned to public relations. Accounts and legal in particular "blur the roles of departments over control of SM [social media]." Ginger called for "restructuring by top management." Inter-departmental conflict also arose over clients. Kira described problems when labor was divided between the creative team who developed campaigns and public relations staff who also interacted with clients around project development and implementation. "Overspecialization makes it difficult to coordinate strategy," according to Kira, and results in "time-consuming and delayed implementation."

Whether or not these themes of conflict around professional status and roles are unique to public relations practitioners, they underscore the sense of *we* versus *them* that a group of participants experienced and expressed strongly.

Conflicts created by inter-generational and ethnic or cultural differences. Over half of participants identified conflicts arising over inter-generational or cultural differences. These two themes generated opposing perspectives and even negative appraisals of other groups who differed by age. Several comments by participants highlight the importance of age and culture in communication practice. One project director for a federal government agency stated, "Intergenerational conflicts abound." Another employee of a federal security agency believed that "you can reduce conflict" by hiring people who are similar in gender, ethnicity, and age, but "at the cost of diversity and quality products." Two participants appeared to disagree with the previous appeal to diversity in hiring. Sarah and Micah whose for-profit public

relations agencies work extensively with external clients advocated "careful hiring of people" to "build cooperative team culture" and "head off conflict." Macey described "eliminating those who don't fit, even after hiring them." Neither of these participants revealed their understanding of what qualities an employee would need to fit into the team culture.

Cultural differences emerged mainly in comments made by practitioners in global communications. Conflicts arose over non-compliance involving agreements signed by international clients, the unreliability of local employees, misunderstandings around messages drafted at U.S. corporate headquarters, and the dominance of white men in public relations. Some conflicts were contextualized by a geographical region or by conditions in developing countries. For example, two participants working for U.S. government agencies noted problems arising from "lack of civil society" in countries that "approach conflict differently" and "have no structures for resolution, see no need for it, and can't afford it." One of these participants noted, "agreement by handshake and no enforcement." Rick, a director of global public relations, described conflicts arising from the difficulty of translating central management's messages deployed from the U.S. to local employees in Japan and Eastern Europe. Specific narratives involving cultural differences are included among the critical incidents covered in RQ4.1 and RQ4.2.

Two participants countered conventional perspectives on public relations culture. One particularly pointed comment on public relations practice was made by Lynn who owns his own communication and marketing firm. He stated that "white men dominate the leadership of the communication profession." He has experienced

conflict from this dominant culture because white men "will promise what they cannot deliver." Lynn's comment resonates with Mike's observation at the beginning of this section that conflict can be reduced by hiring people who are highly similar. Natalie who currently works in the Hispanic television industry in the U.S. clarified cultural misunderstandings of Latino cultures. She noted that "Latino cultural boundaries are more malleable than White American, and that the main medium in the Hispanic community is word of mouth."

The second theme, intergenerational conflicts, revealed significant criticism of older and younger professionals in our field. Older professionals were criticized for pride and inability to adapt. Younger professionals were criticized for lack of basic skills to do their jobs and communication deficits in the workplace. Kira who works in a large independent public relations firm claimed that "seniority comes with excess personal pride" and insistence on "precedent." She found senior staff had "difficulty in adapting to changing conditions." On the positive side, older staff had experience that "enables professionals to tolerate conflict despite discomfort." As an older practitioner in environmental protection, Ted agreed that he had "to swallow my point of view" to be successful in working with younger professionals.

Participants agreed that older professionals had an obligation to take on the role of mentoring. However, that role could create conflict because, as Caitlin explained, in political consulting "mentoring requires a sense of precedence" that younger professionals lack. Emily, who has eight years of experience in digital media public relations, agreed that "raw youth" requires "good mentoring that includes ethics."

Younger professionals, identified as Millennials, were faulted for "not thinking of the outcome of their actions" or "the long-term commitments required in the professions." Lynn, in particular, found that interns and younger employees created conflict because "they have not learned how to craft direct communications or sell a point of view." Consequently, the burden of dealing with clients falls on senior staff. Michael agreed that younger professionals lacked "adequate communication skills" and their inadequacy creates conflict. He contended that good communication skills require "mentoring of younger staff, but there's no money for it."

These observations on intergenerational and cultural conflicts in practice underline the role some public relations practitioners have as mediators between age groups and cultures. Mentoring was mentioned as one solution, but one respondent doubted mentoring would be funded.

RQ2.2: What activities in your public relations or communication work have involved solving problems or resolving disagreements with EXTERNAL audiences?

External conflict had a lower profile in the interviews than internal conflict. However, a smattering of participants—especially those who work in crisis communication—pointed out how conflict with external audiences can create internal disputes. Barbara provided a notable example of the internal conflict created when external stakeholders wanted to buy a health insurance provider business.

Themes involving external entities included conflict (1) with external stakeholders in direct contact with practitioners, (2) with potentially hostile audiences, and (3) with situations involving public monies. External audiences included clients, students and parents, divisions of large corporations, government

agencies, community activists, media representatives, competitor public relations agencies, voters, customers, environmentalists, employers of union labor, members of Congress, and state and federal regulators.

Conflicts with external stakeholders in direct contact with practitioners. Conflict resolution with external stakeholders who were directly involved in the everyday work of practitioners appeared to occupy a relatively small number of participants. In these instances, external stakeholders were sometimes viewed as colleagues who shared responsibility for carrying out the organization's goals. For example, Rick, a communication director for a global franchise corporation, developed crisis communication responses because of the frequent "unethical or illegal activity" by distributors of the company's products. "Consumers complained to authorities or the media" about health problems they believed were caused by the products. These distributors had independent contracts and were external stakeholders, but the company could punish them "through fines or revoking their licenses."

Several practitioners described conflicts with government agencies that had regulatory power over the organization's operations. Sam recalled the problems a superintendent of schools faced when the Center for Disease Control ordered schools closed during the swine flu epidemic. As the public relations specialist for the district, Sam had to advise the superintendent on a media campaign that would answer parents who complained to reporters that this school closing created hardships for their families. Consequently, the superintendent launched a public debate over what conditions would allow him to reopen the schools. After a 24-hour news cycle, the

superintendent declared that he had met CDC guidelines and the students went back to school.

The work of another practitioner included advising clients on how to negotiate compliance with government regulators on safety issues in their businesses. Safety regulators were integrated into clients' daily operations. This communication professional developed persuasive tactics to mitigate the hardship his clients would experience from these safety regulations.

Another example involved the complex interactions of government agencies involved in security and defense. As Daniel explained, procedures specified how inter-agency negotiations would be held "to iron out disagreements about the interpretation of evidence-based positions" on things like whether "to invest in a weapons system." As a representative of a security agency, Daniel witnessed how "a persuasive style could derail strong evidence" in the decisions leaders made. "Once a spokesman small in stature with a weak voice lost his agency's case."

Within this theme, external stakeholders become directly involved in decision-making and can be viewed as competitors and barriers to achieving the organization's goals. However, these stakeholders cannot be sidelined to resolve the conflict.

Conflict with potentially hostile external audiences. A majority of participants described episodes involving potentially hostile external audiences. Interestingly, the respondents sometimes contrasted the perception of hostility within their organizations with their impression that these external audiences could become supporters. However, in all these anticipated conflicts, participants expressed fear of a negative mass media campaign directed at their organizations.

In some industries, the press was viewed by top management as unvaryingly

hostile. As media representative for an environmental protection foundation, Ted

described hostile interchanges with "a very negative press which enjoys conflict." A

typical question from an editor was "Do any of your solutions not require tax

increases?" To counter this hostility, Ted "writes letters—some ghost-written [i.e.,

published under a supporter's name with his or her permission] that explain the

organization's position." At other times, Ted "seeks frank exchanges with reporters"

so that he learns their thinking about his organization's initiatives and can counter

them. Keith routinely prepared top military officers in a combat zone for press

conferences with regional and local media representatives. These media "were biased

and wanted to produce what audiences wanted or expected." U.S. spokespeople "had

to be prepared for hostile questions and learn how to play to the audience."

Even when the organization believes the press can be useful in solving a

problem the management may not understand how to harness mass media support.

One participant was hired by a federal entitlement program to convince media to

"help prevent leaks." The government agency believed that a video presentation

would convince media representatives to withhold publishing leaks; the public

relations professionals wanted to hold a live question and answer session that would

be cheaper and more effective. Both strategies were tried with mixed effect and the

retainer contract ran out without positive results for the government agency.

Some interviewees contrasted expressions of audience hostility reported in

mass media in contrast with social media platforms. A communication practitioner,

Matthew has routinely worked with non-profit organizations such as colleges and

public museums to create communication strategies to deal with crisis events publicized in the media. These events have included physical attacks on students overseas, insect infestations on imported fruit, and the theft of valuable historical documents. In contrast with Ted and Keith, Matthew prefers strategies that evade mass media coverage. For example, Matthew avoided publicity around the student attack "by off-the-record briefings with key press outlets that hinted at motives of the plaintiffs in the case." On the other hand, Matthew believes "controversy attracts attention" in social media platforms and communicators "have to use it to advantage or get it offline ASAP." The political consultant Caitlin also recommended direct engagement with social media during political crises: "Join the conversation; change the conversation. Use outside validators and surrogates who help reinforce your point." Caitlin offered this conclusion about whether to engage or avoid media when audiences turn hostile: "Media conflicts become emotional and emotion must be dealt with." Sarah supported that view. Her public relations firm operating in a large city got into "a spinning match in the press" with a competitor agency. Sarah explained that her agency was in the wrong; it "confronted the accusations factually and honestly without spreading gossip. The best policy is to own up and explain that the agency understands the audience point of view."

Other interviewees preferred communication interventions to prevent open conflict with community groups, customers, competitors, and business opponents that could become hostile around organizational actions. Kira provided one notable example when her public relations firm represented a large-scale developer of a shopping center that did not hire union employees. She anticipated opposition from

union and community members who would "block rezoning action needed to build the project." Kira created a five-stage crisis prevention plan that included "appealing to the community and stressing job creation and organizing meetings for stakeholders with the client." The shopping center has subsequently been built with little controversy. Similarly, Katie avoided subscriber backlash about a major change in her organization's theater venue by handling all customer complaints personally and immediately. However, her organization was prepared "if community wide problems occurred" to respond "by press relations to communicate its side."

Potentially hostile external audiences, according to my interviewees, gain their power from their ability to use mass media or social media platforms. While interviewees offered different strategies to deal with conflict from these audiences, most agreed that understanding the opposition was crucial. "Grasp the needs of the opponents without losing loyalty to the company," Sandra offered. "Directly address long-standing hostility. Sustained attention and patience can result in changed community attitudes," Matthew advised. Finally, Keith recommended a strategy of helping your hostile media practitioners develop their craft of reporting objectively.

Conflicts over the spending of public monies. Another theme developed out of situations where spending of public monies caused conflict requiring communication interventions. A number of these conflicts involved practitioners in for-profit communication agencies holding contracts with external government agencies. Conflicts involved government accounting procedures, money spent on campaigns, employee pay and benefit contracts, budget cuts, and activist publics who were suing government agencies. Practitioners faced monetary conflicts that developed in their

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own work with government agencies, but also were called in to help resolve conflicts that entailed public spending.

Participants gave detailed accounts of conflicts with "preoccupied, demanding government clients" who were "being pressed by timelines and budget constraints." Merit, who worked in a national public relations firm, experienced "incremental demands from the client" who would then become "uncommunicative about the delivered products." Her agency could not get approval of its work either because of "confusion and competition" within the government agency or because the client "was merely unsure or preoccupied." Because the "agency's reputation was at stake, it risked angering its clients by demanding a response." Merit said her agency "often played therapist to the client, sometimes to avoid lawsuits or sanctions." Another communication employee of a major national firm was charged with convincing a defense agency to change its accounting procedures. David encountered stiff resistance from his defense agency contacts who preferred "the way it's always been done." David's arguments calling for short-term documenting of costs that would result in long-term survival of the agency were not effective. "The conflicts became emotional" and could not be resolved without intervention by "top management or a mediator."

Government agencies sometimes needed the help of communication professionals in high conflict situations. Lisa worked on behalf of state agencies that had to negotiate labor contracts with their public employees. Although pay scales were at stake, "rights [i.e., benefits and work conditions] were harder to negotiate. People got more polarized." Lisa's communication skills were applied in formal

negotiations, but also in dealing with media to sustain the government agency's credibility. She explained the elaborate negotiation process where "nothing is scripted, [so] be prepared for surprises." On the other hand, the negotiators had to honor traditions and expectations valued by public sector audiences. "Negotiations could be shortened by rational decision-making," Lisa explained, but often dragged because "the dance has to go on." Communication staff for both government and union had a major goal of "maintaining good relationships for the future" because these professionals would be meeting frequently and "wanted to make [the opponent] feel safe." In safe spaces, the negotiators could communicate "informally, regularly, but in strict confidence" so that an agreement could be worked out that was acceptable to stake-holders sensitive to public spending.

Other communication practitioners were called in to advise on strategies for dealing with Congress or with activist groups who were suing a government agency. Paige conducted focus groups and interviews with activists and populations affected by government programs to determine "what was needed, really needed" to settle these disputes. Caitlin unsuccessfully recommended strategies for persuading members of Congress to include additional parts suppliers in the recent federal auto bailout. The top management of the auto parts manufacturer who hired Caitlin's agency had never done direct political lobbying before, so he held back. The strategy of appealing to the auto companies instead did not work and the manufacturer's products were never covered by the bailout. Caitlin expanded this story when asked to report a critical incident.

Problem solving with external audiences navigated conflicts with closely connected external stakeholders, potentially hostile audiences, and situations where public monies are at stake. Generally, the closer the relationship with the external stakeholders, the more likely conflict will arise and the greater the need for conflict resolution. Also, the press and other mass media representatives were often viewed as hostile audiences. Some participants worked hard to avoid conflict with external audiences rather than allow disputes to surface in mass media platforms. Others engaged accusations and negative comments immediately when they appeared on social media,

RQ2.3: How much of your current job do you think is dedicated to resolving conflicts or working through disagreements about how to solve problems?

This question emerged from literature review sources that claimed public relations practitioners can fill a negotiation role for their organizations (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995; Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Huang, 1997, 2001; Plowman, 1995, 2007). Participants were asked to explore their experiences of time spent in conflict resolution. They answered this question both as a percentage of their daily work and in word descriptions. The data clustered into three themes: distribution of conflict resolution between internal and external audiences, time devoted to conflict involved in practice as compared with management, and estimates of conflict situations built into the job.

Distribution of time spent in conflict resolution with internal audiences. Estimates of percentages of daily job time spent in dealing with conflict involving internal audiences ranged from 10% to 100%. About equal numbers reported that

conflict required less than 45% of their time as participants who reported percentages above 50%. The divide between fairly low and fairly high percentages of conflict resolution was strikingly bimodal. The highest number of participants either estimated 10% of their workday or 60-70% of that time as devoted to conflict resolution.

Job types involving fairly low reports of conflict (less than 45%) among internal audiences included media specialist, director or vice president of communication marketing, communication director for a think tank, agency communication research analyst, communication director for a global franchise, public affairs officer for the U.S. State Department, and senior vice president for communication in an insurance company. In contrast, job types with fairly high reports of conflict (above 50% of time) involving internal audiences included public affairs officer for the U.S. military, communication for a labor federation, and executive director of communication for colleges and universities. A sizeable number of participants reported higher percentages for situations in which they dealt with management issues involving personnel disputes and team disputes. These personnel issues generated conflict percentages ranging from 60% to 90% or 100%. Several participants also reported that during crisis situations the need to resolve internal conflicts became extremely high for weeks or even months.

Distribution of time spent in conflict resolution with external audiences. Fewer participants (about half the number) estimated percentage of time spent on conflicts with external audiences. Further, these percentages clustered more obviously into bimodal estimates. About half estimated between 10% and 20% while the other

half indicated 75% to 100%. Job roles with low levels of external conflict resolution included media specialist, communication specialist to the military, communicator in corporate research and development, and CEO of a public relations and marketing firm. Participants who reported higher percentages of external conflict resolution held jobs as director of marketing, communication manager and negotiator for an employer consortium, information officer at a county health agency, and senior vice president for communication at a health insurance company.

Time devoted to conflict in practice and in management. Participants described some differences between the conflict resolution they experienced in getting their communication projects done and the conflict that developed during their duties as managers. The data revealed clear distinctions between levels of conflict in practice and management, but no clear patterns emerged. One CEO of a public relations firm reported very low conflict with his clients: "Clients are my bosses." On the other hand, he found extensive conflict in dealing with management of volunteer programs sponsored by his firm and with mentoring young professionals. In contrast, a public relations employee at an environmental protection organization reported spending 80% of his time resolving conflict in practice and only 20% during management.

Time spent in conflicts sometimes depended on how much public funding was involved. A vice president of a small public relations agency said that conflict rose to 100% of time with practice in public sectors. An information officer for a public agency described major conflicts in staff management when the state legislature voted

"resource cuts" and "passed guidelines that kept the employees from talking about those cuts with the decision-makers."

Other comments revealed a few practitioners who worked to avoid spending time with conflict or had to accept social conditions that produced it. One person engaged with NIH communication contracts spent significant time building teams so the members worked together with less conflict. This same practitioner described spending 40% of her time in "serious problem-solving, but less in real conflict." Two practitioners described conflict that arose in both practice and management because of language and cultural differences. One said, "These misunderstandings create conflict." Another commented, "There's lots of emotion in this work" that created conflict.

Summary of themes in RQ2

Table 4.2 summarizes the main RW2 themes that surfaced in the data analysis.

Table 4.2

RQ.2: Conflict Management and Negotiation Roles

Conflict Source	Internal to Organization	External Stakeholder
Structure	Mixed and bottom-up decision making	Direct client contact, especially with government agencies
Status of the profession	Doubts about expertise, credibility, control of digital media	Hostile media, general public; suspicions over use of public money

Personnel disputes	Intergenerational and ethnic differences; abuse of social media	Favoritism in contracts International cultural differences
Positive role for the profession	Advocacy Mediation	Explanation of role Damage control
Time spent on conflict resolution	Wide fluctuations, but increases with personnel issues and internal crisis management	Intense time commitment during critical incidents

Participants reported many more conflicts with internal audiences than external audiences. Internally, understandings of conflict situations requiring conflict management centered on organizational structures and decision-making, conflicts with marketing and other departments involved in communication over work functions; and intergenerational conflicts.

Externally, understandings of conflict situations and management involved stakeholders who had direct contact with practitioners, potentially hostile audiences who could mobilize mass media and social media platforms, citizens concerned with spending and activities of tax-supported organizations including schools.

When asked how much time in the workday was spent in resolving internal conflict, estimates varied widely with internal and external audiences and across jobs. Internally, time was largely devoted to personnel and team disagreements. The time

spent resolving conflict with external audiences was bifurcated between 10-20% and 75-100%.

RQ3: How do public relations/communication practitioners understand their use of digital and social media in roles that involve conflict management or negotiation?

Three interview protocol questions allowed me to explore how digital and social media have been used by practitioners in their daily jobs and how these platforms have been used to resolve conflict. Results showed that digital communication filled two functions for these participants: disseminating information and relationship building. Participants rarely used digital platforms for attempts to resolve serious conflicts. Finally, except when distance intervened, practitioners preferred face-to-face communication during conflict because they can gain more information and can respond to non-verbal cues.

RQ3.1: How important is digital communication in your job? Does your job involve communicating with audiences through digital channels such as Facebook, Twitter, organizational intranet, or other social media?

This question aimed at establishing a database of digital communication that might be the source of conflict in the everyday jobs of the participants. The data collected from this question turned out to be complex because participants not only reported the benefits and drawbacks of the digital technology they used, but the multiple contexts in which they used it. Similar to RQ2, data seemed logically organized along two dimensions: (1) whether the digital technology was used to communicate with internal or external audiences and (2) whether the participant's organization was profit or non-profit.

The participants described using the following digital technologies when communicating with both internal and external audiences: email, Facebook, Twitter, Flikr, and blogs. Intranet (by definition) and YouTube were only mentioned with internal audiences. Websites were reserved for external audiences. When discussing internal audiences, communicators from both for-profit and non-profit organizations indicated a strong preference for face-to-face communication over digital formats.

Further analysis revealed that participants used digital communication for three main purposes: (1) disseminating information; (2) interpersonal communication in social media; and (3) crisis communication.

Disseminating Information. The participants identified four factors as the main sources of conflict in disseminating information over digital platforms: the quality of the information, speed of transmission, accuracy and clarity, and its permanence on the Internet. The interviewees revealed these conflict areas indirectly when they described the benefits and drawbacks of digital communication in reaching external audiences. Internally, conflict was created between Communication and Marketing departments over who would control various digital platforms such as the organization's website or Facebook page. Communication practitioners "could be marginalized" in these turf wars.

The threat of conflict increases with the speed of information and the need for controlling its effects. Communication staff need to "keep information current and create buzz" in the digital environment, said one academic information officer. This "quick turn-around" in turn increases the risk of distortion, misinformation, falsification of information and "mere rumors," as one public relations staff member

described it. Turning messages over quickly on digital platforms results in "information that tends to be shallow" and of low quality. Because stakeholders can misinterpret these messages, conflict arises quickly around information that "is hard to control," especially "when media go viral." The slower speed of transmission and audience control allowed by some digital media, particularly email, was a great advantage mentioned by many participants. As one PR practitioner explained, "Emails can be ignored or deleted, but they allow time to respond. They serve as a record of communication especially to the press." Given these characteristics, email can help reduce conflicts.

Finally, interviewees worried about the permanence of digital information and the security risks that arise with information on the Internet. "Issues need straightforward description" in digital platforms, said one interviewee because while "broad audiences provide opportunities," the digital record remains to be examined over long periods by these large audiences. Government agencies, in particular, "fret over security" of their digital platforms, but these channels also offer opportunities "in all sectors to provide accuracy" in the information that the organization transmits to its audiences.

Even though digital media provide increased opportunities for conflict, these practitioners found websites and social medial platforms "essential today."

Relationship Building on Social Media Platforms. Some interviewees viewed social media as beneficial in building relationships and thus avoiding or reducing conflict. Social media were defined by the participants broadly to include email, intranet, and social networking media. In particular, the media could be used to

manage (1) staff morale, (2) client recruitment and maintenance, and (3) networking opportunities of the organization. Among the participants who used social media on the job, comments were generally positive about using these platforms to improve communication among stakeholders at a more personal level.

Social media sites were also viewed positively as tools to maintain staff morale even when the communication was one way. One respondent commented, "They [social media] provide visibility and transparency." For example, intranet and email were mentioned as a way to "provide information and encouragement to staff and contractors" even when no response was possible. Globally, corporations use "central-source messaging," but then provide "local market exchanges" with their franchise managers and employees in other countries. As I understood this global communication manager's point, social media allowed him to communicate with local employees about more formal messages they received from corporate headquarters—a strategy to reduce conflict.

The employees of public relations agencies among my participants indicated that social media are preferred when relationship-building goals with clients are at stake: for example, "to start dialogue about products, events, even go viral." One participant described these as "affinity links," although she believed these "links were under-exploited by corporations." Moreover, social networking media such as Facebook and Twitter allowed these agencies "to piggyback on the social media of partners and cooperating organizations." This piggybacking allows organizations to build relationships with the established audiences of partners. To build relationships

with some clients, interviewees had to comply with their "demand for social media use," especially with motorcycle distributors, students, and labor unions.

Potential conflicts arose when the interviewees implemented social networking sites in their organizations. First, while the sites are a growth area for corporations, NGOs, academe, and arts organizations, these media "require resources, technology, and staff guidance" that are often not available. Consequently, the platforms are poorly maintained or abandoned. Second, while these media provide staff solidarity in government and corporations, supervisors are obliged to oversee their junior staff so that they do not reveal privileged organizational information to their networks or use work time for personal messaging. As one interviewee put it, "social media requires emotional intelligence."

Overall, the minority of participants who answered this question perceived overwhelming value in using social media to build relationships with clients, improve staff morale, and network with partner organizations.

RQ3.2: Could you describe a situation where you have mainly used digital channels, like email or instant messaging or texting, to resolve a conflict that arose?

Very few participants provided incidents involving situations where they used digital channels to resolve a conflict. In responses to RQ3.1 and RQ4 on critical incidents and to sketch perspectives on how to manage and resolve workplace conflicts, participants tried to describe face-to-face conflict situations and to indicate a preference for face-to-face contact during serious conflicts.

Controlling Crises with Digital Media. A handful of participants described social media tools that they used to deal with crisis situations. According to one

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participant, social media allow "wide distribution of responses and explanations."

Tim, Lisa, and Gillian reported that labor unions, in particular, used social media

liberally to engage their employees in political crises. One practitioner gave advice

that websites should "convey policy to staff and client audiences" but that during

crises, emails and social networking "especially when packaged together, provide

rapid alerts and prompt response." Two warnings about digital media use during

crises emerged: in complex situations, understanding cannot be assured, especially

when messages are distributed hastily. Second, according to Matthew, an experienced

public relations professional, social media should "not entail anonymity or deception.

The speaker must identify himself."

Although this question on digital media was meant to be descriptive,

participants revealed their understanding of how these platforms could create or

minimize conflict. Social networking media were embraced by several participants as

essential to practice, but generally not identified as major sources of conflict—except

when staff were misusing them for personal tasks or showing lack of "emotional

intelligence" in the content they posted.

RQ3.3. Does most of your conflict solving work occur in face-to-face situations or

through more distant channels (e.g. over the telephone, in email, through instant

messaging, via texting)? Problem solving is done in many routine jobs; conflict

resolution involves more serious disagreements.

Although virtually all participants made use of email, websites, and/or social

media from time to time, the majority—16 of the 23 who answered the question

explicitly—expressed preference for face-to-face discussions of internal

organizational problems. These respondents often acknowledged the complexity of those conflicts, requiring a versatile toolkit of remedies. The choice among those tools, as we might expect, depended on the circumstances of the disagreement and the parties involved in it.

Ginger, who manages public relations for a small private agency, admitted that problems "might start in email (e.g., budget negotiations with clients), or maybe through the phone. [But] I like dealing with people. Too much gets 'lost in translation.' The body language. You are forced to listen, act with civility." Sam, working in a similar firm, found that face-to-face contact resolved most conflicts. Daniel, who recommended training in social relations as a "charm school, teaching employees to play well with others," recounted resolving a conflict between two subordinates by isolating them in a room alone, and requiring them to emerge after a specified period of time; although he never asked what was said or transacted in the room, the outcome was a healthy improvement in relations.

Within her large agency, Paige acknowledged that email had to be copiously used, but found that telephone contact allowed a more personal, efficient, probing approach to internecine disagreements. "Let's try to get a verbal agreement," she said, but if the response is hostile ("they can cut you off"), email was the obvious alternative. In her service to regional labor organizations, Gillian needed frequent recourse to digital and social media, but "would not send an email to deal with conflict; the message may get through but you wouldn't." She considered face-to-face contact most effective, but "it's the words you use," and in telephone calls "you can't read the body language." She admitted that indirect connections might lower

emotional levels and facilitate compromise, but "if you are making an ask it's much more difficult to say no face-to-face."

In her own labor/employer negotiations, Lisa sought to reduce the circle of interlocutors and witnesses: to reduce "the fishbowl effect" while bargaining. When they have witnesses, she says, negotiators "tend to take strong positions favored by their constituents." In his labor organizational work, Todd found face-to-face contact essential, even among his clientele of university students, who were typically thought to "know and use technology to communicate with the leadership."

In serving as public affairs officer for diplomatic missions, Jean found that "personal relationships are the key to your success," partly because not everybody in host countries has access to digital media, and power outages can kill cellphones. Natalie pointed out that many Hispanic Americans also don't have Internet access; although they too use cellphones, they still preferred face-to-face discussion. In Anna's government agency, digital media proved useful, but there were never enough staff or other resources to maintain websites properly. Keith referred to the military's need to deal with conflict in meetings and press conferences. At his university, Brandon started the week with a staff round-robin. Macey, project manager for a government contractor, strove to "get it out on the table" promptly, finding that email sometimes "takes too long," and that it gets details wrong. So, "tailor your communication differently to people who don't like email—or some other channel."

In his work at a community college, Duncan viewed "email as a necessary evil" that solves many conflicts but can be misunderstood, especially when the subject gets batted back and forth over time or is treated emotionally. Social media,

he said, are illusory: "An avatar can say anything and it's not you." Caitlin pointed out that face-to-face treatment within an organization "conveys seriousness." For problems of less gravity, telephone or email contact should suffice.

Of course digital channels have advantages, too. In her service with an international think tank, Drew found that email allows contact with all who need to know, that it provides time to think, to compose one's responses, to track the comment thread, and to speak one at a time. Lynn praised email for "reducing conflict because the tone may appear neutral;" he tended to avoid Tweeting, however, as the content restrictions of the channel produce a high degree of miscommunication. Although choosing whichever medium is most efficient for a task, Katie considered emails and text messages to be crucial in communicating within her performing arts organization, for anything important should be reduced to writing. Although her agency inevitably used digital channels, Sarah sought in problem contexts to avoid texting and social media platforms, regarding them as "an intimate channel used with family and friends, and often conducted on privately owned phones."

Coping with external problems, interviewees tended to accept the utility of email and social media channels more readily than in their internal relationships. Conceding that face-to-face relations build the trust needed to resolve many difficulties, Rick's global corporation required the immediacy of electronic media. "If something happens, you get on your own site, you get on other people's sites . . . and just say 'Let us tell you what happened, from our viewpoint.'" Caitlin's dealings with political and government audiences required a broad range of online channels. In her contractual work, Kira found government interlocutors prone to initiate conference

calls, a kind of hybrid mode that features voice-to-voice immediacy combined with technological diffusion.

As vice-president of an insurance company, Barbara preferred email as a medium that, unlike telephone calls, establishes a record of what is said. While arguing that "conflicts are never resolved with email," she found that medium "good in terms of saying 'Hey, here's a problem that has come up. Here's our response to the problem.' It doesn't allow for a dialogue . . . if you're trying to resolve the problem, it requires a conversation." Conversations make "it easier to hear pauses in the cadence of their language – sighing, or if they're scandalized by something." Moreover, phone calls allow prompt answers to questions and can be held short. Hence, the phone line was important in crisis situations with legislators or regulators who should never learn about conflicts first from newspapers or letters of complaint. However, when dealing with reporters, she did not use telephone: "I don't want them to hear any anxiety in my voice."

Matthew also understood external conflicts as delicate, particularly when representing clients vulnerable to critical opinion. He tended, however, to shun digital media in such situations. When crises arose, he sought to move the controversy offline as quickly as possible, to save the client from a spreading stain of Google listings. Moreover,

> I would do everything in my power not to use emails – not to use anything written that can't be taken back. You can be frank in a discussion with someone, but if that discussion is an email discussion that can be forwarded to the world, it can come back to bite you very easily. So I almost never do a

conflict resolution in any modality other than verbal. It could be telephone, it

could be face-to-face, but it has to be verbal.

Summary of themes in RQ3

The following table summarizes the main themes that surfaced in the data

analysis related to RQ3 on digital media and conflict.

Table 3.3

RQ.3. Practitioners' Understanding of Conflict in Digital/Social Media

Themes	Digital Understandings About the Internal Organization	Digital Understandings Around External Stakeholders
Importance of digital communication	All channels essential; digital useful in profits and non-profits if well managed. Value of intranet questioned	Essential, especially websites and email; less so with social media
Purposes	Information, interpersonal contact, and crisis communication. Relationship building	Information, interpersonal contact, and crisis communication. Client recruitment and networking
Conflict Sources	Lack of training and guidance. Abuses in digital use	Lack of quality, speed, and accuracy. Permanence on web.

	(caused by lack of emotional intelligence). Disputes over who controls digital use	Risks of anonymity.
Utility in conflict management	Social media (includes email) useful to build relationships, staff morale, and provide wide distribution	Relationship building. Useful as informal, backchannel communication.
Digital preferences	Face-to-face for serous conflict. Email and social media useful if controlled for accuracy	Face-to-face, including telephone. Email and social media useful if controlled for accuracy

Although this question on digital media was meant to be descriptive, participants revealed their understanding of how these platforms could create or minimize conflict. Social networking media were embraced by several participants as essential to practice, but generally not identified as major sources of conflict—except when staff were misusing them for personal tasks or showing lack of "emotional intelligence" in the content they posted. Participants' understanding of conflict management through digital and social media included the positive benefits of building relationships with stakeholders, managing employee morale, and networking

with partner organizations. Themes pointed up the complexity of problems in our field; they entail an array of remedies, from simple face-to-face confrontation to broad, technologically mediated message strategies. All remedies have their advantages and disadvantages; they have to be applied as circumstances demand.

RQ4: How do communication practitioners understand conflict processes and apply conflict resolution techniques in critical incidents they have experienced in the workplace?

This research question prodded me to seek real depth in participant responses. The Methods section describes the strategy of asking about critical instances and explains its benefits in qualitative research (Butterfield et al., 2005; Butterfield et al., 2009; Chell, 2004). Results from the critical incidents gathered in this study are summarized in RQ4.1. The closing section of the interview protocol proved to be a surprising source for my participants' understanding of conflict in their workplaces. When I asked each interviewee if he or she had anything to add, the answers were often lengthy and included broad themes and advice that they hadn't previously touched on directly. The closing remarks of my interviewees are summarized in RQ4.2.

RQ4.1: Can you tell me about a time when you played a role in trying to resolve a disagreement during your public relations or communication work? Or could you tell me an incident that you witnessed and know a lot about?

The critical incident (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) protocol question asked participants to identify and then describe a conflict incident in the workplace. Prompts focused participants on details and circumstances, images that came to mind

as they remembered, communication problems, and outcomes. The incidents added depth to the results because interviewees reflected on the people involved, on how events evolved, and on the outcome and its causes (Butterfield et al., 2005; see also Critical Incident Data Collection in the Method section). Although interviewees offered many examples and illustrations, the critical incidents described in this section met these standards of CIT: (1) the interviewees gave an account "sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327); (2) the interviewees described the conflict in the situation clearly and in detail; and (3) the interviewees portrayed a definite outcome to the incident. Some interviewees provided several incidents that are included in the analysis.

Interviewees recalled incidents involving people within the organization (internal) slightly more often than incidents involving external individuals (external). Four categories of incidents emerged: (1) conflicts involving personnel who were incompatible (internal); (2) conflicts generated by clients (external); (3) conflicts generated by external audiences hostile to the organization (external); and (4) conflicts involving overt negotiation among parties (internal and external). Names in this section, as elsewhere, have been changed to protect the identities of participants.

Incidents involving incompatible personnel (internal). More participants described incidents involving conflicts among employees than any other category. These seventeen conflicts involved individuals, teams, departments, and the dominant coalition. The incidents broke down almost equally into two main subcategories: conflict with peers (no overt power differences) and conflicts with superiors or subordinates (overt power differences). One incident involved an internal conflict that

started after an external agency recruited an employee. The conflict issues ranged from promotion to ownership of projects or activities, performance problems, decisions viewed as arbitrary, to top management behaviors that disrupted the work of subordinates.

These issues sound like typical disputes in organizations. However, the results were enriched by the intense emotions that made them memorable and by the subthemes that participants wove into the narratives. Intergenerational conflict, for example, surfaced in a surprising number of these incidents. Clashes of values and personality conflicts abounded. Conflicts were sometimes embedded in troubled organizations where people peripheral to the incident were quitting or demoralized. Participants also identified differences in ethnicity and gender that intensified conflict.

Promotion conflicts. Promotion conflicts did not end happily in these narratives. In these four incidents, promotion conflict arose when employees were pitted against each other for promotion or when top management promoted an individual without consultation or adequate support.

Sarah reported an incident that started when top management sponsored a promotion contest that it hoped would improve the performance of all employees in a large non-profit agency. This marketing/communication director reported that she got caught up in the contest and felt "pressure to make an impression" even though she was not eligible for the promotion. Two men at the firm began competing heavily for advancement, especially in meetings where their contest "became increasingly noisy and even rude [because] . . . they wanted their ideas to be validated." Sarah repeatedly

emphasized a quality she believed motivated the employees: "The people in my current agency are very bright and like to be told that their ideas are good even if they won't work in the campaign." The competition culminated at a meeting where among others, Sarah, a senior supervisor, and the two men were present. The men began "behaving rudely" over how to handle a work assignment. The supervisor asked everyone to leave but Sarah and the two men. Together, the senior supervisor and Sarah communicated that neither would be promoted while their conflict was so open and disruptive. "Eventually, we got through to them, but it took some time." According to Sarah, the competition to improve performance was highly "destructive. It brewed hostility between the two men." The men could not modify their behaviors and neither was promoted to the higher position.

Another promotion conflict occurred when an international personal care products corporation selected a manager from New Zealand to supervise operations in Australia. At the meeting in Sydney where the New Zealander's promotion was announced, the man wore a jersey with a silver fern that represented New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team—a national rival of Australia for the Bledisloe Cup. According the interviewee, "Now that's like coming onto the stage and throwing blood or something like that. I mean horribly offensive. You think the manager [the Kiwi who was promoted] would have had better brains than that." The top management in the U.S. did not consult with the communication team or the staff in Australia when making the promotion. "The Australian market did not recover quickly from this insult." In other words, the corporation lost money for a number of years.

In the context of these promotions, both interviewees faulted decisions by top management that either distorted employee communication behavior or did not adequately predict and prevent communication disasters.

Personal conflicts. Some interviewees framed conflicts as attributed primarily to incompatible personalities among employees with similar job rankings. When encouraged to dig deeper, the participants found attributes of the employees that produced a richer analysis.

Daniel, a team leader and communication trainer, described two women he supervised in a U.S. security agency. He noted their conflict immediately when the younger woman was promoted into his team. "They hated each other's guts from the day they met each other and they had nothing in common with each other except for a very, very good professional understanding of their issue, and the tolerance level wasn't there." When the women communicated, they talked past one another, neither hearing the message of the other. Daniel summed up the situation as "an older person who repeated herself 3000 times and a younger person who didn't have time to listen to the 3001st time." Although the interviewee noted the generational difference, he emphasized essential personality differences. "You can't fix a broken egg," he said. He worked "very hard to get them together," but when that failed, he worked "very hard to get one of them a different job." In the end, the older woman "was hired as an advisor at the White House and left."

Another supervisor encountered a similar problem when an older worker was hired as a manager to join a communication training team. The government client hired him, but his job was to support the agency's staff in reaching its contract goals.

Macey, the project director, immediately heard complaints from her staff that the older worker was disrupting their work. Every morning he stopped by to chitchat and give updates on his hobbies, particularly his woodworking projects. More importantly, the new manager offended team members with his communication style. "His way of communication was a little different. He was not big on e-mail communication," Macey said, "even though email was a major channel in keeping in touch with clients around the country." His email messages were "very very direct." The recipients "felt like he was barking orders" and "set very short deadlines." He also did not like to be "copied on anything" although he had to keep current with the office activities. The new manager preferred to communicate face-to-face which he had relied on in his previous work in the military. In addition, during the weekly team meetings, he deflected the talk away from work to his personal life.

Macey felt that "her group was stuck in their attempts to solve the problem" with the new manager. Because she "wanted to make the [government] client happy," Macey was highly motivated to integrate him as a productive team member. After she consulted her immediate supervisor, she decided to hold a meeting to resolve the problem. Because "emotions were running high," Macey prepped the team for the meeting. She emphasized that "they had to walk out of the room with a resolution so that they could work with this person."

The meeting resulted in the team gaining new understanding of their coworker and in setting guidelines for the team's interactions with him. The older man explained that he "was new and wanted people to get to know him. The other team members emphasized [sic] with this and what he was going through." The manager

felt that email was "just a cold way of communicating. He preferred face-to-face."

The team explained the negative impact the manager's emails were having on them.

After explaining to the new employee that if the interrupting behaviors continued, he

would be "written up," Macey and her team agreed to accommodate his

communication style in specific ways. First, the office would distribute his

handcrafted wooden boxes as "small rewards for excellent work." Next, they

established "artsy-fartsy" days when all employees would bring in their crafts and

showcase them.

In hindsight, Macey offered several explanations for the "high emotions"

involved in this conflict. "I don't know if it was maybe a trust thing," but the

interviewee "felt tension was created by a difference in the ages" of the team. Macey

placed blame on both sides in this intergenerational conflict. Older people "like to

talk. They like to share stories, and these younger people, they just want to be in front

of the computer, and that's how they communicate: text messages and Office

Communicator." The conflict, according to the interviewee, was effectively resolved.

These incidents both involved personal characteristics of employees that

created hostility. In the first, Daniel was unable to explain the conflict between two

employees using any factor other than personality incompatibility. Macey analyzed

the conflict between her team and the new manager as intergenerational, but also as

differences in communication preferences.

Supervisor and subordinate conflicts. Most of these internal conflicts pitted

subordinates against supervisors. The conflicts arose when supervisors wanted an

employee to behave unethically, when employees were abused verbally, when CEO

actions undermined employee work, when supervisors cut pay, and when employees failed to meet benchmarks. In all but two incidents, the interviewees recounted situations in which they had been the subordinate.

These episodes sometimes showed the participants endeavoring to avoid conflict. Ted who works for a non-profit activist organization sized up the potential conflict with his boss this way: "I calculated that I had to play nice with her and make her feel important; that challenging her was going to make my life miserable. But I also think it helped that after the fourth person quit she began to understand that she was part of the issue . . . and she was willing to be a little bit more self critical." Ginger related a serious conflict among six employees that seemed to have been created and sustained by the CEO/founder of a public relations agency. The CEO was "difficult" and may have been "bipolar," but Ginger continued to work in the agency for two years even though she spent about 70% of her time resolving conflict in this environment. She knew "the difficulties going in," but the "job market was tight." Ginger got "good experience" and then "moved on." In a third incident, Catherine, the owner of a public relations agency terminated her work with a non-profit service organization abruptly when the new "leadership screamed at staff and misused staff time." The participant described the finances as "a real mess." Although she had been connected to this organization for many years, Catherine said, "I walked away. I felt I was too much in the middle and was too emotionally involved."

Other incidents revealed employees who directly challenged bosses. In most cases, the employees had only small success in changing the behavior or attitudes of bosses. Two episodes illustrate how intense these conflicts can become. In the first, a

former journalist was working at a public organization that replaced its long-term president who "had a national reputation and was good at communication." Sam described the new president as "sinister at times, arbitrary and punitive." The communication staff that Sam managed "strategized about how to make suggestions that would not result in retaliation." When the president's financial decisions came under press scrutiny, Sam encountered "unpredictable responses to decision-making." The president became abusive when Sam disagreed with his orders on how to resolve the press crisis. In the end, this Vice President of Communication "did not see any way of remedying the conflict or modifying the CEO's behavior." Sam quit, along with many other top managers. Two years later the president was forced out.

Jayme—a consultant at a major government science agency—encountered similar abusive language from her boss when she earned the highest score on a national evaluation of team leaders. Her boss called Jayme into his office and "was ranting. 'Isn't this a good thing?' I [Jayme] asked. 'You need to get a good ass-kicking,' he said, 'because it's not like this everywhere.' What I thought was a success was not what he considered a success. . . . My EDP [i.e., ranking on the evaluation] seemed like something soft or unsavory." The interviewee explained that her boss's view of good management was equated with "fear and aloofness." After this event, the boss asked Jayme "to do unethical things. The first time I refused he said okay. The second time he said, 'You have one more time to say no to me.' I said, 'You can fire me or accept me.' I was not emotional and not afraid of the consequences. He did not speak to me for several days." Jayme stated that her

response to the boss's demands arose from "values that came from my upbringing." She was not fired and continued to work with this agency.

On the other side, bosses or supervisors remembered conflict incidents in which they could not modify employee behaviors that were undermining the organization's goal attainment. In a privately owned integrated communication firm, the CEO wanted to reduce his own workload and offered to promote a long-term employee into the presidency of the public relations division. He met with this employee to create her yearly professional plan. The employee said she wanted this promotion and together they set the goals that would allow her to become president in one year. After the year, the employee had "missed 80% of the metrics" in her professional plan. "She had forgotten about the money part of running three different offices. She had 17 years of performance reviews . . . and had enough information." The CEO analyzed his employee's behavior: "Her motivation was not there. She was not committed." During a discussion of what professional goals the employee wanted to meet in the next year, the CEO asked, "What drives you?" The employee indicated that she did not want the promotion, largely because of the financial responsibilities. The CEO reorganized the office. The long-term employee became the Chief Creative Officer and another person became the Chief Financial Officer. The CEO expressed frustration that this trusted employee had not immediately stated that she did not want promotion. However, he waited one year before evaluating her progress on meeting the metrics for becoming president.

Julia, a public affairs officer in a U.S. embassy in Africa experienced similar resistance by a local employee to meeting performance rubrics. The local employee

worked in an English-language library sponsored by the U.S. government. In spite of being involved in planning a concert event where books by American authors would be raffled off, the employee did not bring the books to the event or hand out raffle tickets to the invited guests. Julia at first assumed "this was an intercultural communication problem and did not come down hard on the employee." However, the local employee continued to ignore Julia's instructions. She called in the human resources staff at the embassy because she "was afraid that the librarian employee would accuse me of cultural bias." In fact, the supervisor of the library who was also a local employee had accused Julia in a meeting of "primitive thinking" about the African country. Over the next year and a half, the employee received benchmarks for performance and Julia "gave feedback several times during a document review telling the employee that his performance had not improved." Finally, "a warning of firing was given" and the employee was fired. This firing lowered Julia's reputation and her "level of trust with the non-American staff in the library. . . . The local staff in the library never forgave me."

Employee turnover was one frequent outcome in these supervisor/subordinate conflicts even if the interviewee did not personally resign. In addition to the incidents described above, a communication director for a county agency for the aging and disabled described quitting after her contract salary was cut by 10% even though her earnings were significantly below local standards. A vice-president for communication expressed personal distress over an event press conference she was forced to organize under orders by the CEO of a destination marketing firm. The vice president objected that the press conference was deceptive because the event in

question was going to be cancelled. Although this participant had threatened to quit just before the interview, a follow-up meeting with our interviewer revealed that she was still working at the destination marketing firm.

Throughout these conflict incidents involving incompatible personnel, the narrators conveyed serious impact on their work lives. In a handful of incidents, the interviewees expressed satisfaction that they had resolved the conflict without harm to themselves or the teams for which they were responsible. However, the outcomes for the preponderance of employees involved serious disruption to their lives, including finding new jobs or dealing with unwelcome changes in their workplace culture. As one interviewee said, "This was not the place I knew."

Incidents generated by clients. Four participants working for public relations or integrated communication firms narrated incidents about conflicts with clients external to their organizations. Three of the four related problems over campaign plans, conveying some very rich data. The fourth described a conflict over public relations responses during a crisis. As an example in one less complex incident, a client rejected findings from focus group research conducted by a campaign designer. The research indicated that the target audience preferred to receive a nutrition message from older girls, not from girls of their own age group. The research was robust, but the client wanted young girl models delivering the ad messages even though ads with older models would have persuaded the teens more effectively.

Caitlin recounted an incident from her job as a strategic consultant to a client whose business provided services for automobile manufacturers in Ohio and Michigan. During the recent "meltdown of the auto industry that got a bailout by

Congress," this peripheral business was not covered by the Congressional action. The client hired Caitlin's agency "to have this service industry included in the bailout." Caitlin and her team developed a two-pronged plan that "highlighted the existence of this side industry" and that recommended "meeting with key members of Congress to explain why the bailout should include the client's employees." In particular, the media campaign was designed "to put a human face on the people who would lose their jobs and to show them as unidentified victims." Caitlin proposed collecting stories from the employees to be integrated into the campaign messages. The client immediately rejected the plan. Why? "The client had never engaged in strategies like this before. The past ruled." Moreover, the client was afraid this campaign would compete with negotiations underway between Congress and the unions and the automakers—even though this type of business was not included. Caitlin took some responsibility for the rejection. "We've got a problem as communication practitioners. We talk too much about things in the abstract." Consequently, the client rejected the plan and the business never received funding through the bailout.

In another incident, told by Merit, a communication project director, a health campaign development firm had to scrap a campaign that was close to being implemented. Before the project could start, the contract stipulated that Merit's firm subcontract with a consultant who was a friend of managers in the client's organization. Moreover, Merit's firm "had put a lot of resources in producing the original contract plan and our firm stood to lose a lot of money." As Merit worked toward implementation of the health campaign, she noted that the client's department assigned to the project "could not manage the whole scope of the project" and the

client's immediate project director "lacked skills to implement it." This project director was fired.

The new project director immediately announced she was scaling back the campaign. Merit remembered a contentious meeting with her to present actual deliverables including educational materials.

> She ripped into our creative team in particular. I mean she was angry, she was vicious, she was really. I think it's fair to say that we all felt she was acting like a bully. I mean people were visibly shaking around the table. It was probably one of the most contentious meetings I've ever had. But when she really started getting angry, we just basically were silent and so I guess there were strategies [to resolve the conflict], that silence was a strategy. And by the end of the meeting, the agreement was that we would go back to the drawing table because we wanted to ensure that we met her needs as a client.

This incident also revealed how indirect communication can inflame conflict. The client's new project director decided to interact almost exclusively with the consultant/subcontractor who had been hired under the contractor's requirements. "The client and subcontractor joined into an adversarial relationship" with Merit's firm. The client and consultant "had been friends and received the same background training" that they wanted to see reflected in the campaign—although they did not explain this to Merit's firm. "We just didn't realize," Merit said, "that this altercation. . . where one pits against the other and vice versa, we just didn't see it coming."

The outcome required Merit's firm to redo the project. Merit acknowledged that "we went over budget, but they [her managers] really wanted to do it so we could come out of it with a happy client." Merit identified several communication problems in this incident. Use direct communication, she recommended, "to establish some kind of trust that people are going through the proper channels." If trust can't be built through communication, "then don't take the contract. . . . Because the—quite frankly—emotional baggage that happens if you don't insure that trust and if you don't set up the chain of communication, it's just not worth it."

Finally, a public relations director I've named Matthew related an incident where his personal behavior undermined the crisis campaign he had launched after a plane accident. He worked for an agency that represented an airline when one of its planes rolled off the end of the runway at a large urban airport. "I did public relations for that organization. I had heard probably minutes after the accident what happened." Disputes erupted almost immediately over the details of the accident and what responsibility the airline should take for passenger injuries. In a bizarre twist, "two passengers appeared to be missing. They were in the front of the plane that broke off." Matthew immediately wanted to distribute the airline's version of the story. As the airline's spokesperson on the ground, he arranged an interview with a major national newspaper. He delivered the facts as the airline understood them. Matthew described unconsciously pulling on the end of his moustache because he was nervous during the newspaper interview and did not notice that a photographer had taken his picture. The next day his unflattering photo appeared on the front page of the

newspaper. He appeared to "be twirling his moustache like Snidely Whiplash"—a cartoon villain.

> This was my lowest point on being on the wrong side of public relations. My photograph completely undermined the airline's valid position that I had communicated to the reporter. My picture showed that the airline was untrustworthy and that was the picture, the PR guy twirling his moustache.

More importantly, Matthew's photograph almost certainly increased the conflict that swirled around the parties involved in the accident. Afterwards, few media reports gave credence to the airline's statements and Matthew's client suffered serious financial consequences.

These incidents with clients were narrated in notable detail and involved failure for the participants who experienced the conflicts. Although this category was under-represented in number of incidents, other research questions in this study elicited examples and illustrations of conflicts involving clients of public relations firms.

Incidents with external audiences hostile to the organization. Thirteen participants narrated conflicts with external audiences that held negative views of their organizations or clients. Participant organizations in this category include universities, an environmental protection group, a theater, a social service agency, a health insurance company, a federal government agency, and a labor union. Many of these organizations are operated primarily through public support. One interviewee

pointed out that whenever tax money is involved, "the public feels it has the right to [an] opinion about how money is spent. They're empowered stakeholders."

Educational institutions in these incidents experienced significant conflict with parents, students, and community members. In several incidents, stakeholders objected when a college cut tuition benefits to senior citizens or passed on $100 fees to international students in order to pay its share of a federally mandated student database. In the international student case, the institution backed down after student protest supported by one communication practitioner in this study. The executive director of communication for the college that had eliminated tuition discounts for retired citizens strongly protested to top management because these senior citizens were strong supporters of the institution.

Two other incidents involved conflict with specific groups of students who experienced crises while attending college. As a vice president for marketing and public relations at a smaller state university, Matthew faced a media outcry when students had to vacate a residence hall rendered uninhabitable because of mold. Stakeholders like "alums and parents" demanded a resolution; the university was under threat of "loss of reputation." Keeping the students in local hotels was too costly. But, "the PR team heard about a cruise ship that was traveling from Maine to Florida and thought that living on a cruise ship for a semester [would] create a positive communication campaign." The president and his staff adopted the cruise ship solution and a media campaign diminished conflict from stakeholders.

A more serious incident at the same university involved students traveling in South America on a summer program. "The students were robbed on a bus and three

or four of the girls were raped." Rather than relying on Matthew and his team, the university immediately hired "a professional crisis communication consultant who handled the media at the time the story hit the papers." According to Matthew, there really wasn't a lot of negative publicity at that particular moment." However, the interviewee had to deal with media when several of the parents sued the university. Matthew's public relations strategy was to reduce conflict with a wider audience by keeping the lawsuits out of the media. He succeeded by pointing out to his media colleagues that the students involved were young and deserved privacy. He also offered negative characterizations of the people who "attacked the organization" he worked for. To journalists, he used phrases like "deep pockets" when describing the suing parents.

Communication professionals working for labor unions reported some predictable conflicts with external groups when union leadership supported federal legislation involving the Employee Free Choice Act and the Affordable Care Act (ACA). An interviewee named Gillian who serves as a Communication Director of a regional labor federation was tasked with persuading its membership to support these national bills that would aid workers who wanted to unionize and provide some workers and their families with affordable health insurance. A number of external groups in Gillian's state opposed the union's position on the Employee Free Choice Act. These included most members of Congress in her state, the Chamber of Commerce, corporations like Home Depot who operated in her state, construction companies, and transportation companies like FedEx. More importantly, "Media outlets were neutral or hostile at best." Gillian developed a strategy that could

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inform voters of the kinds of people who would be affected by the legislation: "their mail deliverer, nurses at hospitals, and others. You know these people! I explained how legislation would benefit regional people not in unions. The goal was to change images of the people who belong to unions."

On a second front, Gillian developed messages under the supervision of the officers of her organization to persuade members of the regional federation of unions that they should support the two pieces of legislation. The strategy appealed to group loyalty and obedience to leadership.

> Groups within the organization had different priorities. We made it clear that our leadership had a firm position. Some groups wanted to be more diplomatic. They wanted to use "campaign speak"—trying to disagree, but say to friends, don't hate me.

Gillian reported that her campaigns to reach voters failed to reduce conflict. The Employee Free Choice Act failed to pass Congress. The Affordable Care Act is still being contested in her state. She learned from this experience that she "didn't like press relations. Getting their attention is a pain in the neck. They will show up and still not write the story you want." Gillian knew that "unions had to counteract a negative identity," but she felt her campaign had no impact on hostile audiences.

Conflict with media outlets surfaced in two other incidents. Sandra had frequent conflicts with the press as a Director of Corporate Communications for the research department of a major chemical company. Her incident showed an acceptance of this conflict in the context of relationship building. After scheduling an

interview with Sandra, a newspaper reporter called at the end of the workday. The man said,

> I need to see if we can do this later, I have to leave and pick up my
>
> child from day-care. And I said, oh gosh, no problem. I'm a working
>
> mom with three children and I understand child care issues completely
>
> and we chatted for a couple of minutes. Now do I think this changed
>
> his story? Of course not, but I think it allowed us to view each
>
> other as human beings and honestly the relationship was better
>
> after that.

On the other hand, Barbara and her company never were able to mitigate the hostility of the press. As Senior Vice President for External Affairs of a major regional health insurance provider, Barbara accepted that "the press dislikes health insurance companies." She identified the conflict inherent in cases involving coverage for certain services and "the company's decisions about whether the services are medically necessary." Barbara's strategy was to "stay away from the press as much as possible" and "assess whether the press could be objective on an issue." One incident captured the difficulty the company faced in trying to place a positive newspaper article. The conflict began when a woman was injured in a fall while she was hiking. The woman did not show her insurance card at the hospital and Barbara's company refused the policyholder's claims.

> The hiker went to the press to make a complaint. We did have
>
> some responsibility for the error and I agreed to give a press
>
> interview. I gave the company's side in detail about the pro-

cedures for filing a claim. The newspaper article did give a fair

analysis, but not until the end of the article. Our CEO and

chairman said, "We're never gonna get a fair shake."

This perception by Barbara and her bosses resulted in press communication largely through email in order to "establish the message transmitted" and to "determine how the message was re-engineered when it went to press." The distrust between the health insurance company and the press narrowed the opportunities for communication.

Several incidents involved conflict with audiences that were normally sympathetic to the organizations. The directors of a regional theater decided quickly to renovate their facilities so that within a month performances had to be moved to a temporary building. This move would require some patrons to travel a much longer distance. Local media "revealed the new location before notification of the member base." The Senior Director of Marketing and Communication said, "We could not follow the usual procedure" that would have prepared ticket holders far in advance. The communication department used a three-stage strategy to resolve the conflict with patrons and prevent cancellations of season tickets.

We apologized through emails and phone calls.

We worked to raise the comfort level patrons would feel at the
new location.

We used surveys to see how customers responded.

This campaign effectively kept ticketholders from jumping ship. The director explained the success this way: "Invest in your patrons. Call them. . . . The product is

important, but they have to buy into your brand and show commitment to the organization."

In another incident, however, an environmental organization lost the support of companion groups when its staff worked with state politicians to craft legislation that would improve water quality in the region. The legislators invited staff in the policy department of this organization to advise them on a state bill that eventually passed into law. According to a communication coordinator in this organization, "The press and other environmental groups viewed this as unacceptable." The coordinator said, "There was not clear communication channels with other organizations. There are many, many [environmental] organizations [in his area]." Moreover, the communication staff "did not know about the arrangement between the upper management and legislators." The other environmental groups met to resolve how these "backdoor agreements" could be avoided, but the meeting did not result in any resolution. The leaders of the communicator's organization realized that they needed to repair trust with the environmental community and they "tried to form a coalition with some other groups, but the drawback is that decision by committee is less effective. But the coalition attempt was a direct result of the negative press and the environmental activists' response to unilateral work by the organization."

The outcomes of these conflict incidents with external audiences showed mixed results. The press or other news media turned out to be major antagonists in these narratives.

Incidents requiring negotiation. Participants reported four incidents that required direct negotiation with an adversary. Two situations involved universities

that wanted to change traditions. Participants in the two other incidents engaged in clearly defined negotiations to resolve salary or health care disputes.

In one university dispute, several faculty in a graduate communication department campaigned to change the curriculum to offer a professional project option in addition to the thesis. The faculty succeeded in lobbying for the change, but it proved a hollow victory when the option was not effectively marketed and no students selected it. The persuasive campaign seemed to work well with faculty, but no similar campaign was directed at the students.

A more challenging university dispute arose when administrators tried to change a popular athletic slogan. According to higheredtaglines.com, a slogan or tagline is "a concise and memorable phrase that embodies your brand's position." Brandon, the Vice President of Marketing and Communications, argued against this change because the slogan or tagline was an integral part of the university's brand much like *Be a Maverick* represents the University of Texas or *Fighting Irish* is inseparable from Notre Dame. The administration, however, "didn't like it [the existing tagline]. It was not appropriate" to the organization's educational mission. An alternative was proposed similar to *Heading to the Top* and *Aiming High*. Brandon and his marketing staff conducted a survey about the new tagline and "students hated it." Moreover, because the students showed strong loyalty to the old tagline, the change "would require dealing with angry students, a powerful consumer group."

Under Brandon's direction, the communication office managers decided to launch "a campaign to get acceptance of the existing tagline." Staff went on "a listening tour to every major administrator and interviewed them individually. They

asked, 'How does the tagline make a difference in your marketing?'" The staff

listeners agreed not to criticize the proposed new tagline. The listening revealed that

academic administrators felt the old tagline was "too generically applied to every part

of the university. It did not apply to individual departments." The communication

office then developed a marketing strategy that showed how the tagline could be

adapted to advertise academic, financial, support services, and other departments. The

staff organized group meetings with the administrators and showed a marketing

PowerPoint as part of a persuasive campaign to save the tagline. Brandon reported

"unanimous support for the tagline by the administrators."

This negotiation over the university's brand involved surveys, a fully

developed persuasive campaign, individual and group meetings, and finally an

informal up-or-down vote on retaining the original tagline. Why was this extensive

effort with students and administrators needed? Brandon implied that the slogan

conflict could be resolved only when stakeholders were convinced the tagline could

communicate their respective identities.

In a salary negotiation for county employees, *Pink Power* became the rallying

cry for a communication campaign to gain wage equity for women workers.

Interviewee Lisa was part of a three-woman negotiation team that met with the Board

of Supervisors to work out an equity pay agreement based on a state-wide study that

"showed a significant inequity between male dominated and female dominated jobs."

This team was involved in year-long face-to-face negotiations with the Board

members. Confronted by employer statements that "the study recommendations

would not be implemented," the team also directed "a vigorous media, political, and

pressure tactics communication campaign" outside the negotiation room. Lisa, a communication professional in a county department, said, "The situation required dramatic things." Because "wage equity is technical and relies on data hard to understand," the team developed catch phrases such as *Pink Power Rally* and *Pink Collar Ghetto* to make the issue accessible.

> The group staged rallies in the Board of Supervisors meetings. We carried a small black coffin to illustrate the death of comparable worth. We rallied politicians and relied on the woman politician on the Board to educate her colleagues and support us. These tactics were used primarily when things stalled in the negotiation room.

In the end, the team reached a 3% equity settlement with the county employer. The negotiators developed a strategy to declare victory to the women employees who were the stakeholders. "We called this 3% a 'down payment' on future equity payments, even though the Board made it clear no more equity would be implemented. The Board wanted the employees to shut up and go away." The team, Lisa explained, "had to spin this compromise as a success to engage the employees and make this fight seem as worth the effort." At a second negotiation,

> the Board made it increasingly clear that no more concessions would be made. So the negotiating team asked for another study to further document wage inequity. This seemed like another step, but, in fact, it is a common tactic when no further agreement can be reached. Still it had value as a PR tactic—something more had been done.

Lisa claimed she "learned the art of compromise in this incident." Her team "had to learn the process of getting some benefits when they had little power." In answer to the question whether she felt a disconnect between being a negotiator and a demonstrator, Lisa said, "It did not feel like a conflict."

In a final critical incident about negotiation with an external audience, a Senior Vice President for External Affairs met with a surgeon who wanted his patients treated in a hospital setting, not in the outside facility that the interviewee's insurance company had mandated in its latest guidelines for reimbursement. Barbara, the vice president, recounted their conversation about the conflict this way:

> The surgeon said, "You're killing my patients because you're not letting them get these AM [lower-level ambulatory] surgeries in hospitals." I said, "Then, okay, really. Are we? Let's think about it. You wanna be able to get the surgery scheduled within a timely manner within your day. Your patients want to have things scheduled timely. They wanna get out. They want to get on about their lives. They don't want any repercussions. Can't this be done outside the hospital? Your problem is that you don't think that you can accomplish the goals you've set for yourself. Isn't it really that you can accomplish your goals, you might just have to do it in a slightly different way. Is that really bad?"

The goal of this conversation and those with other physicians was "to get them no longer to say mean things about the company to their patients. That was essentially it. Or no longer to complain before the legislature. Of if they'd asked for

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an audit from a regulator, they would back off." Did Barbara succeed in negotiating these outcomes? "It depended. Sometimes I was called the *princess of darkness*. Sometime I was called the *princess of light*." She was called the *princess of darkness* when "the physicians lost." Barbara accepted the label of the *princess of darkness* as part of her role as the representative of an insurance provider.

Barbara described tactics that she used to gain compliance from surgeons so that they would stop attacking her insurance company and work with regulators to achieve compromises on costs. "I'm trying to make them look like they are the person in the wrong." She would say, "Look, you have an appeals process, and you didn't use the appeals process." Or, "You went through the appeals process . . . and that independent medical expert didn't agree with you. What are we supposed to do?"

This Senior Vice President for External Affairs explained that she had to use these tactics because she "had very few options to negotiate a settlement." Her bosses gave Barbara very little room for independent decision-making.

> The more independence you have in negotiation, the more ability
> you have to modify the company's decision, the better off you are.
> That's a rare company that will allow an employee to walk into
> a negotiation [with decision-making power].

In addition to in-person conflict resolution, Barbara explained further how negotiation was essential to her communication job. She offered a broad definition of negotiation. "Influencing public opinion is a form of negotiation. The public opinion, right, is a mediator of sorts." Her team's work in media relations aimed at getting a fair argument of her company's position in the press on or on television. "In the court

of public opinion, your job as a PR person is to make sure the company—at least—if the people don't agree at least they say, 'Okay, they did it for the right reasons.'" In short, media relations practitioners engage in a media debate after which the public viewers express their opinions to stakeholders such as political decision-makers, court officials, and regulators.

RQ4.2: Are there any comments you would like to add about how public relations/communication people work to solve conflicts? Or about your role in the public relations/communication field?

In the closing section of the interview protocol when asked if they had anything to add, the interviewees often summed up their understanding of workplace conflict in general and offered considerable advice on how to resolve conflict. They talked at length about (1) what personal qualities and skills they possess that helped them deal with conflict, (2) what strategies proved effective in conflict resolution, (3) how mentors—including family members—had shaped their conflict resolution strategies, and (4) how to avoid conflict especially through team and relationship building. Participants early in my data gathering suggested that I ask about mentors and personal traits or skills that benefit people who are faced with conflict. These probes resulted in rich data that explored the highly personal perspectives my participants hold on conflict resolution. Based on their professional experiences, many participants offered *principles* of conflict resolution or advice to other practitioners.

Personal qualities and skills. During their critical incident narratives, many participants revealed personal skills and qualities that they believed made them

effective conflict resolvers. About one third of participants succinctly listed a handful of personal characteristics that proved invaluable in resolving the critical incidents. Senior managers underscored the impact of personal qualities as a theme in these quotations:

> "We have to use our individual strengths as communicators."

> "Knowing your weaknesses is key."

> "I was born to do this, I think. . . . It was a gift I think of this cross cultural communication. . . . And to me it just seemed so natural and logical."

> "I'm a personable person, and I strive to get along with everybody I work with and I strive to treat people the way I would want to be treated."

> "I don't like conflict and arguing."

> "I want to raise awareness. I do not give up."

> "I don't take rejection personally."

Many of the personal qualities can be grouped in categories of cognitive abilities (e.g., listening), emotions, and values.

Cognitive qualities. Most frequently participants identified *good listener* as the personal quality most valuable in conflict resolution. Scholars in listening research connect this ability to a variety of cognitive functions (Bodie, Washington, Imhof, & Cooper, 2008). During iterative data analysis (i.e., constant comparison), I discovered that many participants did not operationally define *good listening* or express clear understanding of how that personal quality affected conflict resolution. I began to probe participants on what they meant by listening and how it influenced conflict. Catherine, the owner of a boutique public relations firm, explained, "Being

able to listen really means being able to understand." Jayme also connected listening to cognitive skill of clarifying: "Listen and clarify. It's not that deep. Point out what doesn't make sense. Being a manager is not different than being a person." Lisa described listening as "keeping my pores open" and elaborated on it as an activity that allows her "to scan the emotional environment, to see who is who, who has vulnerability, what people need." As a communication practitioner for a state-wide labor union, Tim used listening to become skilled in "prioritizing the needs of the potential members." Barbara who has worked for many years in the for-profit health industry expressed the cognitive purpose of listening as establishing the motivation of the speaker.

> Some people think listening means like you never cut off the other person and you let them talk all the time. I'm not like that. I cut people off. I interrupt them. . . . In listening, you're trying to get to the core, the essence of what'd drive them to say whatever it is that they're saying. You have to understand their problem.

Good listening as a personal quality gained resonance primarily when the participants linked it to other cognitive or job skills. Without prompting, however, many participants simply mentioned *listening* as if it were a widely accepted requisite skill for a communication professional.

A number of other *cognitive abilities* were mentioned as traits that participants said helped them in conflict resolution: "good judgment," "prediction of the consequences of actions," grasp and application of "objective information," "rational thinking that convinces clients," "strong problem-solving skills," and "accurate

assessment of the needs of people" involved in conflicts. Caitlin summarized these cognitive assets as her "ability to see the big picture of the forest, rather than the trees." In addition, participants mentioned their mastery of "local knowledge" obtained in inter-cultural experiences in Asia, Africa, South America, and on immigration into the United States.

Emotions. The theme of emotions in conflict was detected in almost all interviewee transcripts. Participants talked about their own positive *emotions* as beneficial contributors to conflict resolution, but admitted to difficulties in controlling emotions that sparked conflict. One participant claimed to possess "emotional intelligence" that, in turn, helps her "know how to make people feel safe." Duncan, a director of PR and marketing, described "a sense of humor and enjoyment" as a personal quality he brings to workplace problem solving. Sam and Kim who both work in public relations agencies listed "enthusiasm" as an invaluable personal characteristic that seemed to dampen conflict among staff. Macey who directs communication on a federal project likes to work in a "warm, happy environment" and tries to create one for her staff. The value of "niceness" in asking was practiced by Sandra in her corporate communication work.

On the other hand, an equal number of participants warned against emotional disruption. This perspective was summed up by Jayme and Sarah: "Emotions get in the way" and "Take the emotion out of it." The director of an overseas media and communication firm stated, "I always keep a calm demeanor." Natalie who currently works in Spanish-language television stated, "I do not like conflict and arguing." Lynn warned, "Don't piss people off." Rick gave a direct appraisal of his own

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"biggest problem in keeping my cool." He described a situation where he "lost my cool with a coworker" and she has "not forgiven me." He has to "be very, very careful to keep on an even keel." In crisis situations, he can "feel like it's a personal attack on me." While he used to be "better in crisis situations," Rick remarked that it's "getting more difficult" as he ages.

One participant, Ted, articulated the importance of emotion in dealing with conflict and called for HR programs to help people overcome "interpersonal problems." He analyzed the importance of emotional responses in the frequent conflict his environmental organization experiences internally and externally.

> A lot of it comes down to what's going on inside, emotionally, and it's not always strategies and planning documents for crises. It's sort of how two people get along and we don't have any official formal-like personal development programs, but I think that's a really big part of it.

He felt that "people are trying to work out things on their own instead of being supported by their organizations." He argued that human resources should provide personal development programs that would, in turn, improve "good performance."

While Ted supported training, Duncan who has worked in non-profit and for-profit settings questioned whether positive emotional skills applied in conflict could be taught. More than any other participant, Duncan placed high value on emotional intelligence.

> Emotional intelligence I guess is kind of the heart of what we're talking about. The emotional ability to relate to people in such a way

that you fully understand where they're coming from, maybe

empathize and try to become—you know, from their point of view

understand—can that be taught? I'm not enough of an expert to

know. . . . I mean I think there are some children that have this

amazing sense of empathy and understanding and can really relate to

people and others just don't. They have no clue.

Later, Duncan criticized professionals who avoid face-to-face communication because they fear the emotional content. "I think the non-verbal is the key to successful communication. If my dog can pick up on emotions, then, I mean come on!" Again and again, Duncan returned to emotions that he experienced on the job ("It makes you want to pull your hair out.") and how his emotional responses enhance his job. "In fact, my boss knows how I get irritable when I get hungry . . . and I was really fired up. She actually said 'Don't go eat lunch, go call them right now' because she wanted me to convey the anger. It was the opposite. Don't calm down. Go get 'em, tiger." Emotional intelligence and manipulation raised serious questions for Duncan about human nature and its effect on the job.

Although only a small number of participants like Jayme, Lisa, and Duncan delved deeply into emotion in conflict situations, interviewees quoted in this section and most other participants held clear views on whether emotions should be suppressed or encouraged in such situations. Generally, these observations on emotions were given in short specific guidelines: "Emotions get in the way."

Personal values. In comparison with cognitive skills and emotions, personal values were not often directly explored, although values were often implied. For

example, Lynn remarked, "I don't take rejection personally" and "I do not give up" as a way of expressing his value of being an effective leader in the communication profession. Julia identified "fairness" as her personal quality that she applied in overseas embassy jobs. While offering guidelines on resolving conflict, Sarah commented, "Try to build trust and forge alliances." Her statement does not reveal whether trust-building is a practical tactic or an expression of a personal value. Similarly, Barbara indicated that she gained "trust and credibility organically over time" as opposed to claiming that a trust value guided her actions. Other participants expressed rules of conduct that could have implied either values or simply personal preferences in conflict situations: "I don't like complaining" and "I draw the line on bad behavior."

However, for some participants, personal values surfaced as the bedrock of individual conflict resolution strategies, as well as a source of conflict. Jayme, a PR agency owner, spoke most extensively about personal values—how they developed and functioned on the job. She attributed her professional success to "the strong set of values I gained from my upbringing" in "a segregated city." Because of her father's experience with bi-racial identity, he gave Jayme advice such as "Be smart and know who you are." Her family values applied in the workplace initially created conflict. "People don't know I'm bi-racial. I come in a different form than you expected. Early on it was a problem." Jayme related several critical incidents in which she applied personal values to resolve conflict involving racial prejudice and disrespect. Another personal value has functioned primarily as a conflict-reduction device: "I won't work on something I don't believe in. This is a blessing and a gift." Throughout her

interview, then, Jayme used personal values as a touchstone for her success in our profession.

Lisa, a labor communication director, also traced personal values useful in conflict resolution to early family experiences. "People who seek out the job of negotiator have often grown up in difficult families where they acquired skills that can be applied in negotiation." These skills include "hypervigilance, reading the signals of others, gaining what you need without having power to compel the agreement of the other." In describing the high value she places on resolving conflict in the workplace, Lisa said, "What makes this job attractive is that I can remake the family type and get a good outcome in the current situation, so that I feel satisfied when the conflict is overcome." Lisa, then, perceived negative experiences as the laboratory in which solid conflict resolution skills could be learned.

Personal qualities and abilities included cognitive skills, emotional intelligence, and values. Cognitive skills revolved around listening, judgment, problem-solving, assessment, and contextual understanding. Many participants mentioned emotional abilities and perspectives, but a few delved deeply into the emotional components of conflict resolution. While personal values were clearly articulated by a few notable participants, the majority expressed conflict resolution rules or tactics that could be interpreted as values or simply practical guidelines.

Conflict resolution strategies. A political communication professional, Caitlin insisted that "conflict strategies have to match the situation; you can't use mechanical judgments." Her analysis illuminates the diversity of strategies that participants recommended for dealing with internal conflict. RQ2 established that internal

organizational conflict occupied communication practitioners more heavily in their

job roles than conflict with external stakeholders. Consequently, the participants'

understanding of how to resolve conflict focused primarily on internal conflict,

including how to improve the resolution process, and the need to supervise and

mentor staff in conflict resolution.

Improving the conflict resolution process. The participants offered general

advice on how to improve the methods that practitioners apply to resolve conflicts.

Two major themes emerged: (1) using informal versus formal conflict resolution

processes and (2) improving the specific steps in the conflict resolution process.

Several participants expressed unique opinions on recourse to "subversive" tactics to

reach an agreement and the need for self-reflection about one's own contribution to

the conflict situation.

Formal versus informal processes. Several participants disagreed on the

benefits of using formal as opposed to informal processes to resolve conflicts that

arise during communication practice. Supporters of formal processes argued that

specific formal procedures prevent misunderstanding, foster top-down conflict

resolution, and facilitate communication among parties. Catherine, who learned

public relations practice in Great Britain, praised Americans for being "the first to

have formal conflict resolution procedures." She explained further, "Americans are

good at formalizing strategies to deal with conflict that include team building and

involvement of communication." Catherine also recommended "dealing with

complaints from the top" in a predictable process. Matthew agreed that formal

procedures work best because they "avoid decisions made outside meetings"—that is,

decisions that do not include all relevant actors. He believes that by "including key personnel in formal decision meetings," we can "avoid misinformation when your words are filtered by others." Michael praised the formal process because "it permitted a record of decisions."

Other participants advocated informal conflict resolution processes. Michael described using informal approaches first and then applying more formal remedies. "When conflict arises, talk informally at first; then, when necessary, take it upstairs." Macey recommended an informal process involving "jumping into disputes, even unpleasant ones." The divide between these two positions reflects the preference of some practitioners to rely on a well-defined structure and the perception of others that when conflicts first arise they can be resolved interpersonally.

Improving the steps in the process. Sandra, who has worked as a research and development communication specialist, expressed a remarkably detailed list of steps and strategies that practitioners can use in the conflict resolution process:

> 1. Find "what the disputants have in common."
>
> 2. "Explain the context to reveal the reality behind the conflict."
>
> 3. "Lay out the options."
>
> 4. "Keep focused on the organizational goals."
>
> 5. "Agree to disagree and move on unless it's required by the standards to persist."
>
> 6. "Good conflict managers make decisions, but hear every point of view."

Natalie agreed directly with this sixth point; she commented, "See all angles before reacting." Sarah added to items #1 and #2 when she recommended using the "discovery conversation" to determine the sources of conflict. These points and others made by the participants resonate with concepts developed by Fisher et al. (2011) and others in the Harvard Negotiation Project. Their concepts include establishing the context, identifying the parties involved and their respective interests, the issues to be decided, and the standards the parties can apply.

Participants filled in several other important factors in the process, including timing considerations. Paige said, "Choose when to engage in conflict, but only when you are in the position to effect change." Sam cautioned practitioners to limit the length of the conflict. "The longer you fight, the more you risk the organization." Lisa also advised practitioners to "let bad consequences play out, dissipate," rather than intervening to prolong the conflict.

Finally, several participants championed using creativity, subversion, and even increasing conflict through debate. Lisa whose work had included formal negotiation for both labor and management, strongly advocated using creativity and subversion in the conflict resolution process. For example, she described building long-term friendships with opposition leaders that her employers might have viewed as subversive, but that resulted in less stressful, rationally directed negotiation sessions. Sarah, who worked in a global consulting and public relations firm, insisted that intensive debate in her organization increased conflict but resulted in more effective strategic plans.

Conflict resolution through staff supervision. Communication managers in this study offered strategies using performance evaluations and sanctions to resolve conflict among staff. A number of participants enjoyed positive relationships with co-workers, describing staff they supervised as "extended family" and working "indirectly to prevent conflict among internal audiences who face difficult working conditions" (Anna, regional office for the aging). In spite of positive working relationships, many participants described using criticism to change staff behaviors that they believed cause internal conflict.

Participants used diverse strategies to supervise staff in an effort to reduce conflict. Catherine stated, "Criticism is more useful than praise in changing behavior." Lynn described personnel evaluations as "a way to tell employees what they did wrong." Although Sandra agreed that communication staff should be given "honest, timely feedback," she urged other professionals to "keep style humane, let people know it's okay to fail. Be mindful of the needs of younger staff." Several public affairs officers mentioned the conflict that Americans experience "when they have to give feedback on poor performance by employees from other countries."

Brian, who works as a VP for communication at a major university, had serious concerns about personnel evaluations on two fronts—relationship damage and effect on creativity. He acknowledged that "some people are better at receiving criticism than others" and recommended that we "give and receive criticism without breaking the relationship that allows ideas to emerge even if they're dumb." Personnel evaluations can curb team creativity—an asset that Brian believes intrinsically motivates people. "People want to enjoy their jobs and part of the reason

they enjoy them is because they get to be creative." His staff supervision incorporates a team exercise each morning that allows people to "build room for the free-flow of ideas" by portraying their successes and current concerns about work assignments. Staff stand in a circle for this exercise to symbolically "close the creative circle." Brian believes that a "creative environment can "enhance problem solving and lower conflict" because "it encourages positive thinking." But he also recognized that creativity can "cause conflict when people are asked to change."

Other participants openly advocated punishment as a conflict resolution strategy. For the handful of participants who endorsed such sanctions, they were most appropriate against staff who violate the organizational culture. "Adapt to the organizational culture or be fired," Jayme recommended in her critical incident about a consultant who by-passed her agency supervisor. Caitlin was equally firm about political communication personnel who violated campaign ethics. "Warn prospective leakers they'll be fired." Paige who works in health communication advocated having "a set of rules to apply when conflict arises." This cluster of participants attributed failure to comply with workplace culture to a responsibility of the organization to train employees about what's expected. Drew explained, "Employees are informed about the style of business here [in an overseas media and public relations firm] and the style of communicating here." Her critical incident involved conflict between the founder/president and a senior research staff member who objected to the boss breaking the cultural communication rules and creating conflict.

Finally, several participants recommended that the ability to resolve conflict be included in performance evaluations of communication practitioners. Very few of

them found conflict resolution skills included as part of their evaluation exercises. One notable exception were practitioners who dealt directly with elected officials and who had to negotiate agreements or understandings with them. This included Barbara who managed communication in profit-motive health insurance, Sam who developed communication strategies for county executives and school boards, and Lisa who negotiated for an association of state employers.

Participants talked about using performance evaluations, criticism, punishments, training in organization culture, and motivational activities as strategies for managing conflict through staff supervision. One final strategy involved hiring practices that excluded people who would cause conflict. Jayme stated, "Hire people without baggage who know how to play well with others." Macey advocated "hiring practices [that] build a team that can work together without conflict." She recommended "background checks before hiring, explaining the organization's culture, and setting a time limit for expiration of negative energy." In other words, if individuals find it difficult to adapt to the team and "create negative energy," they should be fired.

Mentoring around conflict resolution. Participants invoked *mentoring* as an important factor in conflict resolution. By the end of the third interview, I noted that interviewees had started to establish mentoring as a variable when exploring conflict on the job. When this variable continued to surface, I added mentoring as a probe and sought feedback from previous interviewees. Mentors in communication included bosses in the profession, fathers, newspaper editors, academics, a Quaker, union officers, and public relations consultants. Participants (1) discussed how mentors

helped them master the processes of conflict resolution, and (2) gave profiles of an effective conflict resolution mentor. A few participants were skeptical of mentors. "I had no mentors." "I learned from experience, not mentors, to deal upfront and set expectations." Sam who works in strategic communication at a small agency pointed out that "mentors can also function poorly, so you must be able to learn from bad examples, too." Brandon concurred: "I've learned from bad examples. I've never seen a perfect mentor."

Two practitioners observed professionals who were good at conflict resolution and then applied the skills they witnessed. As CEO of an integrated public relations/marketing firm, Lynn has had the opportunity to watch "many skillful people and adapt their approach." Anna also observed "many successful people and probably modeled them" when she encountered conflict. Drew admired her current boss "who welcomes debate and uses it in making decisions and accepts criticism without becoming hostile." Sandra also witnessed the success of a mentor who embraced conflict and the existence of enemies as a mark of effective management. Her mentor explained his philosophy of conflict this way.

> You are going to pick up etiological adversaries along the way, people who don't agree with you. And the fact that you have these conflicts sometimes also means your ideas have weight.

Other participants experienced indirect mentoring. Keith, for example, who has had experience in military and for-profit communication, described reading to acquire conflict resolution skills.

I did not have a mentor, but wished I had. I learned from books and

then had the opportunity to put skills into practice because of the jobs

I've had. But commonly people need models because most people are

not good negotiators.

Brandon mentioned a specific entrepreneur whose positive attitude in the face of

conflict inspired him. His role model Kevin Plank had founded a successful athletic

apparel and footwear corporation against great odds. This vice-president for

communication liked to quote from his role model when conflict became intense: "No

loser talk, ever." This strategy of using pithy quotations to guide behavior in the face

of conflict applied in Brandon's critical incident during an organization's search for a

motivating tagline.

Participants who had been directly mentored gave glimpses into the processes

of conflict resolution that had been passed to them. Sarah remembered a music

mentor who said, "People are motivated by two things: fear and love." In her current

job at a large digital media agency, Sarah's mentors believe instead it is important to

"teach critical thinking and take time to think matters out." In Merit's work as a

communication research analyst, she encountered a mentor whose conflict resolution

skills were largely revealed through effective staff management. This mentor lowered

conflict by "refusing to micro-manage or to bother competent people." She "assigned

tasks systematically and intelligibly" and "used a constructive approach festooned

with praise; but had high expectations." A communication manager for a global

franchise corporation described a mentor from academia "who was attentive,

conciliatory, and able to calm disputers down." Rick identified this conflict resolution style as "an inherent gift."

Macey had a similar experience with her mentor who oversaw communication pertaining to large government health contracts. Her mentor used an "open door policy, asked directly about problems, was shy yet very personal, valued casual conversations, and used praise." These qualities that Macy has adopted as a manager created an environment in which staff conflict could be resolved quickly. A public relations consultant in the insurance industry also mentored Barbara, "remaining calm" during conflict and inviting her pupil to "bounce ideas off her." In dealing with external stakeholder conflict, Gillian was mentored by union officers at a regional labor federation through their "experience in dealing with decision makers" on many levels of state and national government. She described how these mentors adjusted tactics in response to current political climates. Ted and Katie appreciated their mentors because "he had our backs" and "it's valuable to have a mentor as one's safety net."

In these quotations and other interview responses, participants revealed the personal impact of these mentors' actions and conflict resolution approaches on their concept of our profession and even the course of their lives. For example, Natalie who followed her father into the communication field said, "I didn't get much mentoring from my father but he influenced my choice of profession." According to Duncan, "Good mentors helped me to understand my strengths."

Other participants gave profiles of what a good mentor should be rather than examples from specific mentors they had known.

> Mentors are there to coach and emphasize your personal strengths (Duncan).

> Mentors and conflict solvers have much in common; they're hands on, work with adversaries, and help the other side reach agreement with them (Lisa).

> Mentors accept all viewpoints, avoid rushing to judgment, but don't hesitate to decide. They keep conflicts from escalating (Sandra).

> Mentors exemplify fairness, steadiness, calm, knowledge of the context, and focus on outcomes (Jean).

These quotations take on the form of items in a guidebook or handbook on mentoring.

Significantly, some participants advocated mentoring through conflict resolution *training*. Catherine specifically mentioned training in the Managing Interpersonal Conflict (MIC) approach by William H. Donohue (Donohue & Roberto, 1996), combined with Gordon Mack's Strategic Improvement approach. She has applied this training in her public relations consultation and volunteer work with a legal conflict resolution organization. Ted spoke extensively about the need for "personal development training" to help staff manage conflict. Keith follows up on his belief that "people are not good negotiators" by implementing "training in negotiation and conflict resolution through scenarios." Barbara described and recommended "taking workshops where we modeled problem-solving strategies."

While the participants covered many strategies of mentoring, the data supported the use of mentoring as a tool for transmitting conflict resolution

techniques to other professionals. Mentoring can be buttressed by training in conflict resolution.

Conflict avoidance techniques. Participants offered many strategies and guidelines that would enable practitioners to avoid conflict with both internal and external stakeholders. Paige offered a useful metaphor to illustrate the difference between direct action to resolve conflict and these conflict avoidance techniques: "Most situations don't require emergency medicine." If we extend Paige's conceit, conflict avoidance strategies are preventive medicine as opposed to the emergency medicine required in open conflict. Gillian adapted her metaphor to include knowing when a conflict is beyond medical treatment. "Avoid conflict that can't be fixed."

Strategies for conflict avoidance entail creating a non-toxic work environment in which the staff understands the cultures of different departments and where clients are respected. Avoiding conflict also requires personal discipline and self-knowledge in the workplace. Drew summed up the main point: "Communication is key in heading off conflict."

Participants have examined the importance of organizational culture in conflict resolution. Some seemed to be applying the definition used by Deal and Kennedy (2000): "the way we do things around here" (p. 4). Consequently, they saw the pertinence of organizational culture in forming conflict avoidance strategies. Jayme advised "creating an environment of low goal conflict." Strategies to reduce goal conflict included "exchanging communication about goals" and "getting people to see themselves as part of a team with consistent values." Building teams and relationships are covered as themes in the next section.

Building teams and relationships to reduce conflict. In previous sections in this data analysis, participants have discussed building relationships and teams as part of their workplace activities. Building relationships, including teams, has been a major element in scholarly constructions of communication practice (Hung, 2007; Ledingham, 2006; Scott, 2007). Participants commented on team relationships primarily in RQ2.1 when they were asked to explore problem solving and conflict within their organizations and in RQ3.1 when asked about how they used digital communication in the workplace. In response to this latter question, practitioners described relationship building primarily in their use of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The themes in this section extend the data analysis beyond details participants provided about their workplace activities. In their final comments participants provided general advice about how to reduce conflict through team and relationship building.

Several participants articulated the obligation of employees to work as part of the team. Drew most clearly expressed the centrality of teamwork in achieving organizational goals.

> You should be on the same team, and you know we work for the same company. You know, and so we have to find what is best for the company. Employees are told about the style of business here and the style of communicating here.

Macey described a compatible team as "primordial, like a family." Like Drew, she viewed team building and support as a major activity of communication managers. "I want to create a happy work environment for my team." While Gillian admitted she

lacked authority to "compel compliance with requests that help implement

campaigns," she advocated internal persuasive campaigns to convince affiliate teams

to work together or suffer goal losses.

> Internal audiences have to be persuaded to join a common effort. They
>
> have to see their identities as linked to common action. They have to
>
> understand issues in certain ways. We have to use specific kinds of
>
> language in conflict situations and our internal audiences help craft
>
> language in messages and position statements.

This emphasis on developing common language and identity was echoed in Jayme's

distinction between creating common values rather than simply enforcing

organizational rules. As owner of a communication firm, she believed in "negotiating

identity" of the staff and in helping them become "socialized into the organization's

culture." Keith also emphasized establishing "the common goals that people share"

while Macey explained, "Organizational culture can reduce conflict." If a relationship

breaks, Catherine advocated dismissing members who don't fit in and "trying to get

exit interviews" that determine what went wrong. Caitlin also recommended firing

employees who showed disloyalty to the organization's goals.

Several participants emphasized personal bonding in teams. Ted called for

going beyond formal team building to promote activities that "allow people to

become intimate, to interact." Further, Ted advocated "personal development" of

team members that Human Resources should support by offering specific programs

beyond skills training. Samantha encouraged bonding through meetings of staff

comfortably seated on the office couches "to learn in the moment and create workable

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compromises and decisions." Macey advised bringing personal experience into the workplace through "water cooler discussions about kids, things like that." Anna agreed that "chitchat" and other "morale-boosting activities" like "supplying ice cream" were effective in team building and reducing stress and immediate conflict.

According to many participants—especially those who had worked in global communication—team and relationship building provides long-term benefits for reducing conflict internally and externally. Jean had developed the metaphor of solving conflicts "by building relations as you would weave a necklace." The completed circular necklace would link many segments of society. Rick stated directly that building relationships in Asia reduces conflict. In overseas communication work, Jan agreed that building relationships with "lower-level employees" was highly valuable because they could indirectly influence "top-level decision-makers." Natalie viewed Hispanic communication practitioners as attuned to the time investment needed to create solid relationships—"often spending hours at lunch getting to know each other." The payoff includes helping "people on both sides of the cultural divide" reduce "their fear that they won't be understood." In other words, relationship builders can act as translators between cultures.

Not surprisingly, participants advocated building relationships that could cushion fallout from crises and reduce conflict. Matthew said, "Keep trust of allies for support against the infidel"—presumably those who are hostile to the organization. As an employee of a government agency, Macey recommended "reinforcing relationships" that would be useful when the organization was "faced with budget

cuts and layoffs." Practitioners can "use external networks to support the agency" during conflicts over resources.

While some vivid metaphors of necklace building and cultural translation emerged in these closing themes, the interviewees largely supported a major understanding of communication practitioners as relationship builders, either within their immediate work teams or in larger social networks. While one interviewee, Caitlin, stated directly, "I prefer working alone rather than in teams," most participants placed emphasis on strategies for reducing conflict through team building and establishing long-term work relationships.

Summary of themes in RQ4. The data from critical incidents yielded the themes below on conflict processes and resolution in answer to RQ4.

Table 4.4

RQ.4. Conflict Processes & Resolution Techniques in Critical Incident Narratives

Themes	Processes Internal to Organizations	Processes Related to External Stakeholders
Conflict sources	Incompatible personnel Resentment by subordinates or supervisor decisions, conflict styles	Client generated disputes Hostile external audiences Issues of public money, unpopular institutions or actions Negotiation involving contract or policy disputes
Conflict Management Strategies	Increase understanding of participants Develop personal qualities and skills involving cognitions (listening), emotions (managing) and values	Applying advice about conflict management Training
Conflict Resolution Strategies	Staff supervision Performance evaluations.	Build external conflict resolution into job

	Sanctions Enhancing creativity and workplace culture	expectations Apply both formal and informal strategies. Improve the process steps
Mentoring	Models and advice important, but not always beneficial	Mentors need training.
Conflict Avoidance	Selective hiring for compatibility Team and relationship building to establish common language and identity	Recruitment and HR policies to ensure process skills and ability to translate between cultures

Five significant themes emerged from the extensive critical incidents narrated by the participants. Participants understood the major goal of conflict processes as avoiding or minimizing conflict. Many incidents involved incompatible employees, supervisor and subordinate conflicts, and some conflict with clients or hostile audiences. A few incidents dealt with formal negotiations—that is, conflict processes that ended in agreements or recognized resolutions of the problem. Themes pertaining to conflict resolution included improving the resolution process, using staff supervision, mentoring, building team relationships, hiring compatible team members, and training to improve conflict resolution skills.

Gender, Racial, Ethnic Influences on Conflict in Practice

This section summarizes how some participants understood gender differences and racial or ethnic discrimination as variables influencing conflict in their workplaces. Because the participants claimed many identities, often the understandings of what happened in critical incidents or other responses did not privilege one identity over another. For example, Daniel described a conflict between

two women in a government agency, but age differences seemed more salient than gender. Consequently, data results from these identities have also been reported in the Result sections for specific RQs.

Understandings about gender, race, and ethnicity fell under an umbrella concept: assumptions about minorities create conflict. These understandings were offered by a small number of participants who expressed strong opinions. The assumptions about minorities covered three areas: language and ethnic characteristics, employment, and women's conflict resolution abilities.

Assumption 1: People who speak the same non-English language share the same experiences and culture. Natalie, a media specialist and communication director in a Hispanic community center, was the only informant on this assumption. She said, "I act as translator between two language groups." Her job involves "translating government regulations and other expectations to Spanish-speaking clients." Natalie warned against lumping all Spanish-speaking communities together. "We have to have specific knowledge of individual Hispanic communities we want to reach. No generalization possible." As part of triangulating data in this study, I attended two of Natalie's presentations delivered to communication practitioners who wanted to reach Hispanic/Latino audiences. Rather than making assumptions about Spanish speakers, Natalie urged us to think differently about Spanish-speaking immigrants who flew into the United States in contrast to those who walked into the country. The needs of these two groups require different communication campaigns.

Assumption 2: Minorities are expected to hold only certain kinds of jobs in communication practice. Among the five participants (16% of total) who identified

their racial or ethnic category, three related incidents in which they had experienced discrimination in the workplace. Research has documented lack of diversity among practitioners in our field (Austin, 2010; Hon & Brunner, 2000). Two Black participants— both currently presidents of their own integrated communication and social marketing firms—perceived racial discrimination in the public relations profession. Jayme described discrimination by her erstwhile manager in a major government science agency, behavior that included criticism both for winning the highest personnel evaluation for communication consultants and for not following his unethical orders. Again, the conflict seemed to engage Jayme's identities as both a woman and racial minority. Lynn candidly criticized white men who "dominate the leadership of the communication profession," commenting that in conflict situations, "Whites will promise what they cannot deliver." Lynn's firm devotes two departments to working on problems of race equity, but does "not engage around issues of gender or sexual orientation." This CEO offered evidence of discrimination in the lack of invitations to Black professionals to speak at major public relations conferences and the failure experiences of Black professionals he has recruited for jobs in major corporations. Both Jayme and Lynn reported actively challenging discrimination when it was directed at them in the workplace or in professional organizations.

Assumption 3: Women communication professionals deal with conflict differently than men.

Gender was not a major research focus of this study, but probes did bring out some gendered interpretations. As reported in Method, 64.5% of participants were

female, 35.5% male. Several women participants confirmed research findings that gender inequality exists on many levels in public relations practice (Aldoory, Reber, Berger, & Toth, 2009; Al-Jenaibi, 2011; Working, 2013). Lisa's critical incident involved a specific communication campaign to achieve wage equity among female county employees in California. Lisa served as both campaign manager and member on the three-person team that negotiated the wage contract with the Board of Supervisors. As described in detail in the RQ4 results on conflict processes, Lisa's group won only a disappointing 3% equity increase, but used mainstream media to "turn a loss into a victory." However, Lisa conveyed an even stronger attachment to other formal negotiators whether male or female because many shared a common childhood experience of conflict in their families.

A small number of women and one man among the participants expressed both positive and negative assumptions about the opposite gender in workplace conflict situations. Kira, a media relations professional, described the male staff in the creative department as "ego-sensitive" and "less skilled in personal relations." They tend to work toward "self-advancement" and "enrich their CVs through awards." Lisa agreed that her negotiation and communication work took place largely in a "testosterone-laden environment" where she advocated humor as an essential conflict resolution tactic. Two younger participants viewed women as better conflict managers than men. After six years of experience, David described women as "more objective, more demanding for evidence, and better negotiators." Sarah, an 8-year veteran of managing digital media and communication, credited women with being "better at seeing both sides to a controversy, heading off conflict, and seeing

the human element." Other participants did not offer dissenting opinions about women's leadership capabilities nor did they describe an experience of promotion barriers for women communication professionals as a source of conflict (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010).

Table 4.5 summarizes the understandings of a small number of participants concerning gender, racial, and ethnic influences on conflict in communication practice.

Table 4.5

Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Influences on Conflict in Communication Practice

Themes	Conflict Situations	Processes in Management
Assumptions about minorities create conflict	Managers assume you are a low-level employee Top managers in public relations are white males	Use strategic responses when confronting discrimination Withdrawal when no change is possible
Beliefs that language determines ethnic identity fuels conflict	Spanish-speaking groups are lumped together, not segmented	Practitioners act as translators between language groups
Perceptions that women professionals manage conflict differently than men	Conflicts between departments where women and men dominate Women as better conflict resolvers because of objectivity, seeing both sides, and preventing conflict	Emulating women leaders' skills in working toward collective good, using objectivity, gathering evidence, and heading off conflict
Dominance of white men in communication practice	Access by minorities to leadership roles in professional	Individual challenges to discrimination in the workplace and in

| organizations Unfair evaluation practices involving racial minorities | professional organizations |

Conclusion: Conflict Constructs and Factors

Chapter 4 has systematically covered findings for the study's four research questions on how public relations practitioners understand their roles dealing with conflict in the workplace. Data from approximately 1,000 double-spaced pages of text were condensed into patterns for each research question and displayed as themes or metaphors in subheadings. The themes were further condensed in the summary section of results for each RQ.

This section reports the final stage in qualitative data analysis—drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The goal is to make comparisons and contrasts across themes that will produce a smaller number of *factors* and to develop constructs that will yield a more conceptual vision of the practitioners' understandings of conflict. Miles et al. (2014) defined *factors* as "disparate but related pieces of data [that] have something in common" (p. 286). A final goal in drawing and verifying conclusions involves "making conceptual/theoretical coherence" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 292) from the metaphors, factors, and constructs derived during the analytical process.

Drawing a conclusion required connecting themes to yield factors and subsequently to develop *constructs* underpinning a coherent theory of how public relations practitioners understand conflict in their work lives and why they hold those understandings. Constructs in the grounded theory approach used in this study reveal

dimensions in the data and cluster the factors that "show the range and thus parameters of the data" (Miles et al., 2014, p.173). Outliers, surprises, and negative evidence emerged as factors to disconfirm findings in the conclusion (Miles et al., 2014). Figure 4.5 displays five main constructs and the factors that emerged within each construct.

Figure 4.1

Conflict Constructs in Public Relations Practice

Construct 1: Organization Factors
- Conflicting Organizational Decision-Making Structures
- Function of Public Relations

Construct 2: Audiences as Sources of Conflict
- Hostility from External Audiences Involved with Tax-Supported Organizations
- Team Conflicts

Construct 3: Individual-Level Factors
- Intergenerational Conflict
- Emotion
- Personality
- Channel Preferences

Construct 4: Conflict Processes
- Conflict Avoidance
- Informal Processes
- Negotiation and Mediation

Construct 5: Mastering Conflict Management
- Mentors
- Training

Construct 1: Organization Factors

Findings did not reveal strong understandings of how organizational structures contributed to conflict, but some critical incidents pinpointed organizational culture

and values as an element in reducing conflict. However, two factors connected to decision-making and division of functions among departments were believed to increase conflict in the workplace.

Factor 1.1 Conflicting organizational decision-making structure. One major factor that emerged in conflict within organizations was the structure of decision-making. Participants underscored conflict that developed when mixed structures of decision-making were accepted in the organization. Conflict arose when practitioners experienced strong hierarchical decision-making along with acceptance of independent decision-making within departments or horizontal structures.

Factor 1.2 Conflicts over the function of public relations. Conflicts with the creative team, the marketing department, and legal staff were reported. The major inter-departmental conflicts involved control over the use of digital and social media to disseminate information and to build relationships with important publics and stakeholders both internally and externally. Digital media and social networking sites (SNS) were viewed as a growth area in communication in organizations of all kinds. Larger organizations had tried to reduce conflict by establishing highly specialized departments for these functions. Practitioners in smaller organizations experienced repeated encroachment on their communication functions when social media were involved.

Construct 2: Audiences as Sources of Conflict

Participants' descriptions of their jobs and their critical incidents resulted in some paradoxical findings about audiences as sources of conflict. The main audiences for all practitioners regardless of the type of organization were external.

However, practitioners' perceived internal audiences as the main sources of conflict in their workplace. In short, findings revealed a contrast between the participants' ratings of the most important audience (i.e., clients or customers) and the audience that produced the most conflict (e.g., internal audiences).

Results were complicated because a single audience was labeled as internal or external depending on the situation. Shifting perceptions of the same individuals as internal or external to the organization suggest fluid boundaries between within the group and outside it.

Factor 2.1: Hostility from external audiences dealing with tax-supported organization. A number of participants feared hostile messages directed at their organizations from negative mass media or social media platforms. Government entities and their clients or stakeholders were both sources of hostile attitudes for practitioners. This notable finding applied to consultants providing services to government agencies and to organizations involved in the spending of public monies. Almost all participants who worked for tax-supported organizations faced notable conflict with a variety of audiences.

Factor 2.2. Team and department conflicts dominate. Participants reported more employee conflict than any other category. Team conflicts and conflicts among employees surfaced frequently in reports of how work time was spent and in critical incidents. Percentage of work time spent on dealing with internal audience conflicts tended to pool either around low percentages or high percentages. Personnel disputes and team disputes increased the percentage of time spent on conflict. Themes included conflicts involving personnel who showed incompatibilities or personality

clashes with other employees, promotion and other HR disputes, and disputes between immediate supervisors and employees over challenges to authority and behaviors that were undermining goal achievement. The critical incidents involving serious team conflicts did sometimes have positive outcomes, but generally the participants reported serious disruptions in their lives including finding new jobs.

Construct 3: Individual-Level Factors

The factors in this construct show a range of individual characteristics or responses that participants understood as affecting conflict situations. These factors include age, emotional responses, personality characteristics, and preferences for communication channels.

Factor 3.1 Intergenerational and ethnic conflicts. Participants pinpointed differences in age and generational background as a major source of conflict among employees in communication workplaces. Half the participants reported intergenerational or ethnic factors in workplace disputes. Intergenerational conflicts involved differences in communication styles, disputes over social media use, and the sense that older employees dominated. Practitioners in government agencies experienced intergenerational conflicts more prominently. People in global communication noted incidents of ethnicity and cultural differences as sources of conflict. Black practitioners reported facing prejudices while working in the communication field.

Factor 3.2 Emotions. Emotions were prominent individual characteristics that had a largely negative impact. A sizeable minority of participants reported emotion as

a factor in the conflicts they encountered. Only one person out of the 10 who commented viewed emotions as adding positively to the management of conflict.

Factor 3.3 Personality characteristics. The term *personality* was used to describe individual differences that had an impact on conflict. One notable aspect of the personality factor was that it influenced the conflict management styles of individuals in the critical incidents.

Factor 3.4. Preference for face-to-face and distrust of digital communication. Many participants viewed face-to-face communication as the gold standard when resolving conflicts with internal audiences. Few participants used digital communication to negotiate or mediate serious disagreements. They endorsed telephone and digital channels to resolve conflicts with distant parties, but with reservations over digital communication. Some viewed email messages as too prone to misinterpretations; a few endorsed email as promoting a less emotional exchange of options to resolve conflicts.

Construct 4: Conflict Management Processes

Participants expressed their understandings of how they had experienced conflict and how processes to manage conflicts had evolved to culminate in a successful or unsuccessful resolution. RQ4 questions elicited general observations and principles about how participants believed workplace conflicts could be prevented or alleviated. Notably, only a few participants focused on the steps in conflict resolution or offered systematic explanation of how processes could be managed and changed.

Factor 4.1. Conflict avoidance. Avoidance of conflict was both embraced and criticized as management strategy. This factor was mentioned often, but only a handful of participants represented strongly expressed poles of opinion on conflict avoidance. Participants who represented the avoidance pole wanted to suppress conflict through hiring practices and socialization of team members. A corporate vice president representing the outlier embrace-conflict pole criticized public relations practitioners for the desire to be liked in a conflict-laden profession and pointed to practitioners' failures to use conflict to strategically produce better outcomes.

Factor 4.2. Informal processes and steps. The critical incidents question asked participants to recount situations that had definite endings. With few exceptions these narratives revealed the use of informal conflict management processes and spontaneous steps in trying to manage the most prevalent kind of incident—conflict among employees. The recommendations for managing conflict focused on informal processes, such as setting up meetings between employees in conflict. Practitioners implied they wanted to transform conflict situations so that some conflict resolution could be achieved. A small number of participants recommended improving the steps in the conflict resolution process.

Factor 4.3. Negotiation and mediation. Conflict organized around formal negotiation and mediation was an outlier. Only individuals who worked in certain types of organizations including labor unions and health insurance businesses were involved in formal negotiation or mediation. Negotiations were described in four incidents about salary or health care disputes. A mediation incident occurred over faculty, student, and administrator differences involving changes in a university

symbol. Practitioners who reported these incidents had received little, if any, training in negotiation or mediation, although one agency owner had been trained as mediator volunteer by a local conflict resolution center.

Construct 5: Mastering Conflict Management and Resolution

Participants offered suggestions on how communication professionals could manage conflict and achieve resolutions of workplace conflict. Specific strategies for conflict management varied widely, and participants offered a variety of suggestions to improve the process. Two specific factors were commonly mentioned: mentoring and training.

Factor 5.1. Mentoring. Participants introduced mentoring as a factor that could help practitioners develop skills in managing workplace conflict. Mentors included family members as well as professional bosses and colleagues, and the benefits of mentoring were controversial. Younger participants reported resentment of mentoring undertaken by older employees. Some participants argued that bad examples were more powerful than positive ones in showing how NOT to resolve conflicts.

Factor 5.2. Training. Training in conflict resolution was widely supported by participants, but the preferred type of training varied from negotiation and mediation to mentorship to personal development activities. One metaphor described training in conflict resolution as "charm school." In addition, training in staff management was recommended for team dispute resolution.

The constructs emerging out of the findings require further analysis in the Discussion section which compares these findings with existing research and explores a model that proposes relationships among these factors.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Qualitative research informs our understanding of practices in communication and should improve those practices (Merriam, 2009). These principles represent the two broad aims of this study. In response to in-depth interview questions (Appendix A), 31 communication practitioners with an average of 18.32 years of experience in regional, national, and global organizations explored their roles and their understanding of how to manage conflict in their respective workplaces. Because public relations research emphasizes segmentation of audience it is not surprising that internal and external collaborators represent a main source of conflict. As research in social sciences suggests (Deutsch, 2006), conflict processes clustered into constructs or meta-themes.

After analyzing over 48 hours of interviews through the grounded theory approach, 13 themes emerged to be distributed over five categories (meta-themes) ranging from individual to team to organizational levels.

The organized meta-themes are:

Sources of Conflict: Organizational Level

Sources of Conflict: Audiences

Sources of Conflict: Individual Level

Conflict Processes

Mastering Conflict Management Skills

From the complex of factors within these five categories I propose a grounded theory model (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) for applying transformation strategies (Jameson et al., 2009) to manage conflict in public relations and communication

practice. *Conflict management* is most simply defined as "a social process to handle and resolve disagreements (see Robey et al., 1989)" (Olaniran, 2010, p. 44). Following Rahim (2011*), conflict management* within this model is defined as applying strategies that moderate effects of interactions that reveal "incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.)" (p. 207). This model is constructed from elements of practice emphasized by my participants, including the types of audiences involved, whether relationships are long or short-term, and whether the processes are formal or informal (See Appendix F for a full-page version of the model).

Figure 5.1

Transformation Model of Conflict Management in Public Relations Practice
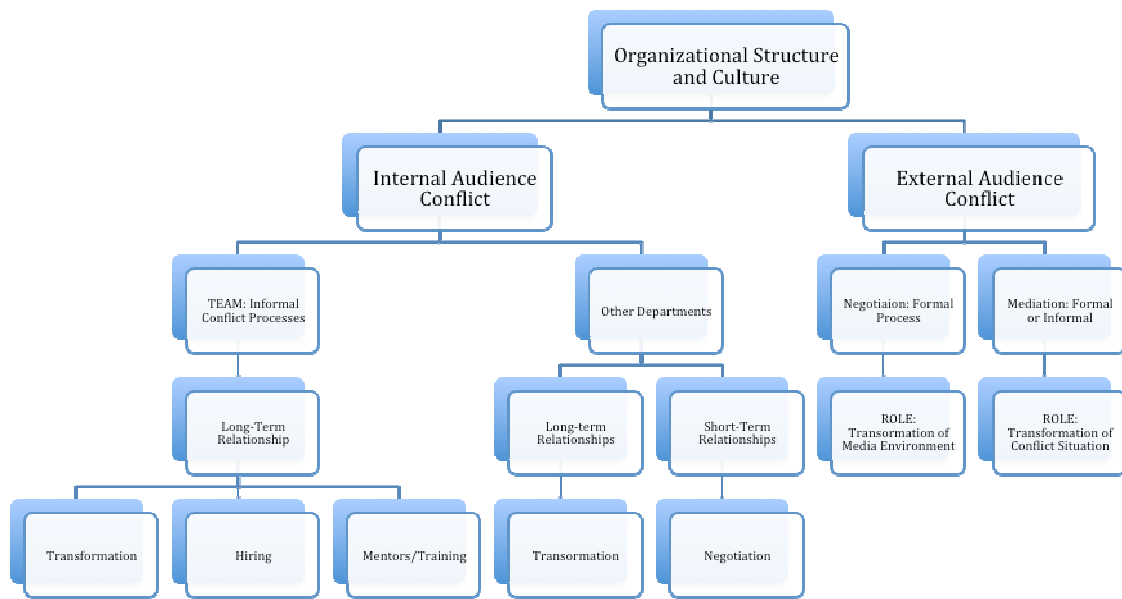
This model situates conflict within organizational structures or cultures and in interactions between teams and within teams. In other words, the model deals with the meso-level of the organization, the meso-level of between-team or intergroup

interactions, and the micro-level of within-team interchanges (Babbie, 2010; Lyon,

DeChurch, & Thompson, 2010). Shein (1990) defined culture as the norms, values,

beliefs, attitudes, and expectations operating in the organization.

The model does not include the macro-level of inter-organizational tensions

(Bennington, Shetler, & Shaw, 2003; Lewis, Isbell, & Koschmann, 2010; Ferguson,

1984) or the micro-level of individual-level factors that are typically covered in how-

to guides produced by the Harvard Negotiation Project and mass-market publishers

(Fisher et al., 2011; Lax & Sebenius, 2006; Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010; Ury, 19963;

2007). Data on inter-organizational conflict did not reach a level of thematic

significance. The individual-level conflict themes were applicable to professionals in

many contexts and require further research to identify those specific to

communication practice.

Transforming conflict as relationship change. While my cohort of

practitioners did not specifically identify *transforming* conflict situations as a role in

their work lives, recent research in conflict transformation (Botes, 2003; Fisher &

Shapiro, 2005; Jameson et al., 2009; Jones, 2000; Martins et al., 2013) helped me find

a label for the more informal processes of conflict management that most of my

participants favored. While transformation research has focused on intragroup

conflict (de Wit et al., 2012), emotion in organizational conflicts (Jameson et al.,

2009), and large-scale social conflicts (Pluut & Curseu, 2013), the concept of conflict

transformation—defined as "inducing change in the parties' relationship through

improving mutual understanding" (Botes, 2003, p. 4)—has applications in many

fields of practice. My model operates on the basic principle from conflict

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transformation research that changing relationships among participants offers more long-term benefits than simple conflict resolution and that it increases the potential for changing structures that create the conflicts (Greer et al., 2011).

Further, the transformational model of conflict management in public relations practice emphasizes the dichotomy between conflict within internal versus with external audiences. The organizational and audience elements of the model are explicated below.

Organizational structure and culture model overview. Participants' understandings helped me establish links between the organizational structures in the workplace and the roles they fill as communication practitioners in conflict management. The importance of organizational-level factors in creating and resolving conflict did not surface early in my data analysis. Several participants subsequently introduced the impact of organizational-level factors; other participants added the strategy of conflict avoidance (Choi, 2013) as a mitigating element of conflict cultures where they worked (Shein, 1990).

Research in several disciplines confirms that conflict is a factor emerging from organizational structures and from dominating, avoiding, and collaborative cultures (Choi, 2013; Gallicano, 2013; Gelfand et al., 2008; Gelfand et al., 2012; Grunig, 1992; Hofstede, 2010; Huang, 1997; Huang, 2001; Pruitt & Carnavale, 1999; Rahim, 2011). Because this study explores roles in communication practice, *organizational structures* in this model are defined as "the relationships among people who assume the roles of the organization and to the organizational groups or units to which they belong (e.g., departments, divisions") (Hatch, 2012, p. 101).

Hatch (2012) listed seven common dimensions of organizational structure including administration, levels of hierarchy and decision-making, coordination of activities, standardization of activities, procedures, and specialization (p. 108). Choi (2013) divided conflict management cultures along three dimensions used in the conflict styles model by Pruitt and Carnavale (1999): dominating, avoiding, and collaborating. Some participants used similar language in describing the conflict cultures in their workplaces.

Further, researchers have also identified communication as a causal factor in organizational tensions involving negotiation order (Bennington et al., 2003), engaging audiences (Bruning, Dials, & Shirke, 2008), organizational success (Hargie & Tourish, 2009a, 2009b) and media use (Olaniran, 2010; Purdy, Nye, & Balakrishnan, 2000). Aula and Siira (2010) claimed that communication was the bedrock of conflict management, but described how communication could both bolster the meaning-making structures in organizations and break down these structures to bring about change. These researchers labeled this the *dual-function* of communication in conflict management. This model contributes to our understanding by suggesting that communication practitioners fill a special role in transforming organizational-level conflict rather than resolving, avoiding, or eliminating it.

Internal audience conflict sub-model. The transformation model of conflict management in public relations practice follows my participants' emphasis on team or group conflict as prevalent in everyday practice. Their predominant goal was to maintain long-term relations through informal conflict resolution processes, hiring policies, and socialization practices that insure common understandings and values

among team members. In addition, they advocated training or mentoring programs to increase team conflict resolution skills and self-awareness about personal contributions to conflict.

The structure of this model is supported by the research described above on the meso-level of conflict among teams and the micro-level of conflict within teams (Lyon et al., 2010). The model emphasizes relationship building as a major role in public relations practice (Briones et al., 2011; Bruning et al., 2008). In the bottom tier, the model posits three conflict management strategies: transformation, hiring, and training/mentoring.

Further explanation is needed about why I placed mediation as a factor with external audiences, not internal audiences. Mediation models in the public relations literature and its findings both influenced my choice. A number of participants expressed dislike of internal mediation because they wanted to solve conflicts without interference from uninvolved parties. It was my understanding that mediators could weaken feelings of self-efficacy among those employees involved in the conflict. Moreover, organizational models of mediation, especially in public relations, aim at eliminating conflict—conflict resolution—not conflict management or transformation. For example, Plowman (2007) reviewed three approaches to the role of *mediator* in public relations: the public relations manager as *peer mediator* who meets with parties in conflict to find possible solutions, as *inside facilitator* who helps parties prevent formal conflict resolution, and as *provider* of information and insight in conflict resolution efforts by virtue of his/her professional experience. The outcomes that the mediators seek involve win-win or no deal, altruistic, and

principled concepts linked to the Harvard Negotiation Project (Fisher et al., 2011) and

dual-concerns conflict management styles (Pruitt & Carnavale, 1999). My

participants preferred informal processes with less defined outcomes in dealing with

internal conflicts.

External audience conflict sub-model. In contrast, conflict with external

audiences played a less prominent role in the model, often involving the more formal

processes of negotiation and mediation. This sub-model has only two tiers that

specify the role of communication professionals as transforming the environment

through formal negotiations and as mediating formally and informally with external

audiences to transform the conflict situation.

The negotiation tier of this model reflects the finding that few of my

participants were actively involved in negotiation to reach formal agreements such as

a labor or health insurance contract. Instead, a fair number of participants endeavored

more often to modify the environment around formal negotiations or disputes about

policies in tax-supported organizations. In other words, my participants sometimes

understood their roles as persuading and changing attitudes of publics who were not

immediately engaged in the dispute, but who were stakeholders able to impact the

outcome. These stakeholders were often journalists and other media professionals.

On the mediation tier, practitioners are engaged in mediating or moderating

conflict situations involving external audiences. According to Plowman (2007), we

usually think of mediators as disinterested or neutral third parties who offer support to

reach a solution in disputes. In the context of conflict transformation, mediation has

also been defined as "the degree of willingness to entertain change for the benefit of

others" (Shin, Jin, Cheng, & Cameron, 2003, p. 9). The literature on external

mediation in public relations is sparse. In a study summarized in the literature review,

Huang (2001) found that public relations conflict management strategies—

distributive, collaborative, and non-confrontational/avoidance—applied by

communication practitioners with members of the Taiwanese legislature had no direct

effect on the resolution of the conflict. Instead, relationship factors similar to those

used in conflict transformation (e.g., increasing trust, relational commitment, and face

gifts) did affect use of cooperative tactics. Consequently, my model uses conflict

transformation as a strategy in contexts requiring mediation with external audiences.

The remainder of the Discussion section examines the efficacy of this

model and its viability in communication research and practice. The examination

(1) summarizes the major findings; (2) compares this study's results with the

theories, models, and findings of research surveyed in the literature review; (3)

discusses implications of my findings; (4) describes limitations; and then (5)

makes recommendations for future research and applications in practice.

Summary of Major Findings

The research questions of this study delved into conflict situations that

the 31 practitioner participants had experienced with internal and external

audiences. The inquiry probed into their understanding of conflict processes and

examined their use of digital and social media in conflict situations. According to

Guest et al. (2012), qualitative data coding should result in meta-themes that

exist at a "higher level of abstraction and [are] not directly observed in the data"

(p. 255). These meta-themes should represent the complexity of the data and

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their contradictions. The empirical narratives of my participants, reflecting their

professional understanding of conflict in communication practice, induced

thirteen themes grouped into five categories or meta-themes. These meta-

themes formed five dimensions summarized in Figure 5.2 and described below.

Figure 5.2: Dimensions in the Constructs Derived from the Data
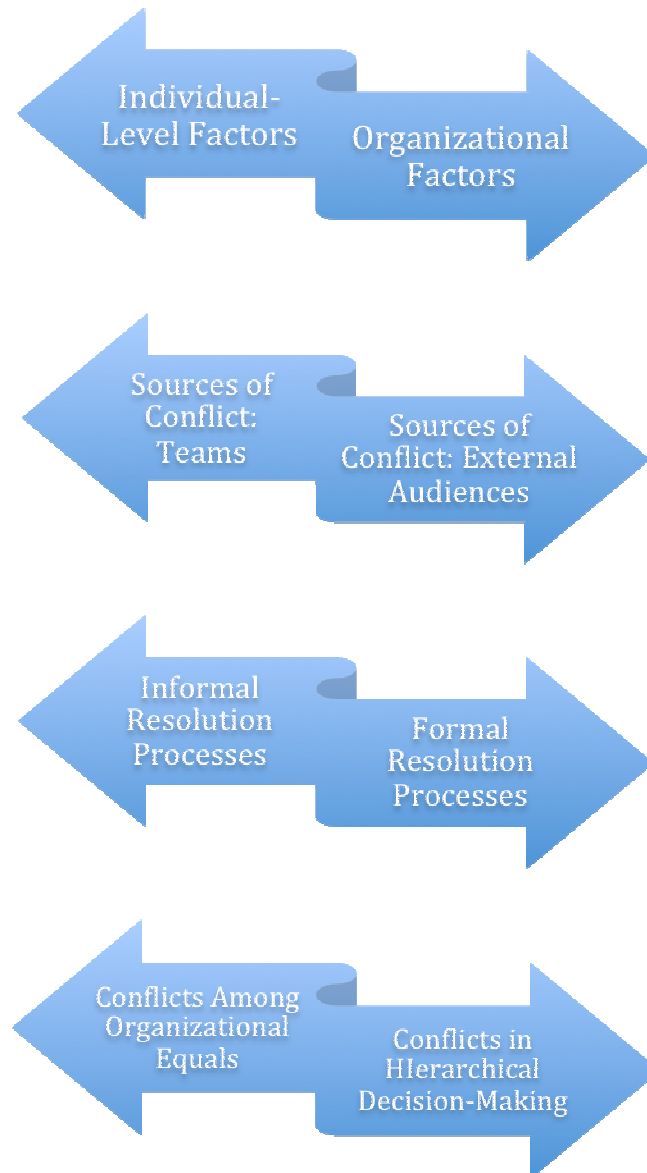
Sources of Conflict: Organizational Level

1. Conflict arises from mixed decision-making structures. That is, organizations that require both hierarchical and independent decision-making experience more conflict.

2. Without clear divisions of labor, serious disputes can arise over the function of public relations/communication departments in access to new media.

Sources of Conflict: Audiences

3. Conflicts within teams are the most prevalent, followed by conflicts with adjacent departments.

4. Practitioners in tax-supported organizations experience the most conflict with external audiences.

Sources of Conflict: Individual Level

5. Disputes between generations (intergenerational conflict) represent a major source of conflict, particularly in government agencies.

6. Emotions generally have a negative impact on workplace conflicts.

7. Personality can be a major causal factor in conflict, in part because it influences conflict styles.

8. Personal preferences for mediating channels can affect outcomes of conflicts, but face-to-face conversations are best in dealing with serious conflicts.

Conflict Processes

9. Avoidance can be an effective strategy for conflict management in public relations/communication practice.

10. Informal processes of conflict management are preferable to formal processes.

11. Negotiation and mediation skills are required in specialized types of organizations (e.g., those that require labor contracts or in diplomatic missions), but are not used in general communication practice.

Mastering Conflict Management Skills

12. To learn conflict management skills practitioners should have direct or indirect access to mentors.

13. Formal conflict management training should inculcate a range of skills from negotiation to personal development – including "charm school" or playing well with others.

Robust Findings and Contradictions

Discrete findings within these themes and meta-themes prove to be robust as well as problematic and even contradictory. The critical incidents and other narratives revealed much less conflict with external audiences than with internal audiences, even though participant work assignments dealt mainly with external stakeholders. A contradiction arose, however, over whether to label some audiences as external or internal. Depending on the context, participants

viewed stakeholders as "one of us" or "one of them." In particular, communication consultants applied flexible labeling because they worked so closely with people outside their organizations. Public relations officers within universities, on the other hand, frequently found themselves dealing with academic departments as in some other workplace.

Another robust finding involved digital communication, especially social media sites (SNSs). Professional recourse to digital communication, particularly email and websites, was common. However, participants disputed its benefits and drawbacks and seemed uncomfortable using digital platforms to resolve conflicts. They overwhelmingly preferred face-to-face and/or telephone channels in serious conflict situations. Moreover, role conflict arose over whether communication, marketing, or design departments should manage social media platforms.

Data about processes used in conflict situations also generated some salient findings. Almost all participants plumbed the effects of positive and negative emotions in workplace interactions. The majority regarded emotions as negative influences in creating and prolonging conflict. Rather than examining specific emotions, they posed this question: "Should emotions be suppressed or encouraged in conflict situations?" A handful asked, "Can we train practitioners how to manage emotions?" Answers to these questions showed no consensus. A handful of participants viewed emotion as a positive factor that could exert a favorable effect on conflict management.

The conflict management processes that participants recommended largely involved prevention and avoidance—for example, hiring compatible employees and using reward and punishment in staff supervision. Almost none of the practitioners reported conflict resolution as a skill covered in their performance evaluations. By far, the participants preferred informal resolution processes such as information gathering, discovery conversations with the antagonists, and decisions based on organizational goals. Only two participants valued conflict as a boon to creativity and to the development of effective strategic plans. One of these participants—clearly an outlier—criticized communication professionals for preferring conflict avoidance because it helps them achieve a personal goal of being liked.

Primary finding. This study's main research question asked what role public relations and communication practitioners should play in dealing with conflict in their everyday work lives. The main finding was that practitioners experienced most conflict within work teams and in relation to other departments. These internal conflicts could prevent professionals from achieving their goals of strategic communication with an external constituency.

This main finding is somewhat paradoxical. In their classification of six kinds of strategic communication—defined as "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission" (p. 3)—Hallahan et al. (2007) isolated the role of public relations practitioners as "establishing and building relationships with key constituencies" (p. 4). These are mostly external audiences such as customers, consumers, investors, donors, politicians,

community leaders, and the media. My participants, however, did not understand the preponderance of conflict in their work lives to be with these external constituencies. Only a smattering of participants in tax-supported organizations and the health industry faced hostile audiences. Instead, their conflict partners were close co-workers.

Given this primary finding, my model shifts away from formal conflict resolution and direct engagement with external audiences during crises (Coombs, 2006) toward the transformation of conflict dynamics (Botes, 2003) in work place relationships. Transformation of conflicts involves modifying emotional responses, sharpening perceptions of the conflict situation, and de-escalation of relationship conflict (Pluut & Curseu, 2013).

Comparison of Findings with Existing Literature

According to Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2012), "A common goal in scientific inquiry is to compare two or more things and see how they are similar and how they are different" (p. xv). This section examines convergences and divergences between this study's results and its theoretical model against those of existing literature.

Negotiation as a role for public relations practitioners. Should negotiation be a major function that public relations practitioners discharge for their organizations? This study's descriptive findings on negotiation in practice partly fills a research gap on this function that was identified by Vasquez (1996). With the exception of practitioners who worked in organizations where formal negotiations were held with stakeholders (e.g., labor unions and employers),

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negotiation was not described or understood as a major role among the communication practitioners in this study. This does not devalue the models for negotiation in public relations practice developed by Grunig and Repper (1992), Huang (2001), and Plowman (2007). It simply means that the majority of practitioners may not be asked to fill the negotiation role. It leaves open the question of what role practitioners should play in dealing with conflict inside and outside their organizations.

Participants described various conflict management and resolution roles and analyzed their processes. Communication practice itself involves significant conflict. Vasquez's (1996) distinction between formal and informal negotiation applies somewhat to this study, but more recent research in cognitive and emotional factors in conflict management (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Bell, 2007; Jameson et al., 2009; Martins et al., 2013; Posthuma, 2012) emphasizes transformation of the perceptions of the parties rather than overt agreement on the issues in dispute. For example, after conducting an experimental study on how task conflict influenced trust among group members, Chen and Ayoko (2012) advised managers that they could increase trust by stimulating task conflict among employees. According to *affective events theory* this strategy increases levels of perceived trust by arousing the positive emotions of "enthusiasm and excitement" (Chen & Ayoko, 2012, p. 19). This focus on transforming the affective perceptions of people in conflict situations opens up a positive role for practitioners that already emerges in the experience of communication professionals as shown in some meta-themes from my

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interviews. That role is reflected in the transformation model of conflict in public relations practice proposed by this study.

Relationship building and maintenance as roles for practitioners in conflict management. Many participants identified relationship building as a strategy to reduce and avoid conflict. One public affairs officer used "building a necklace" as a metaphor for the process of adding community people into her network to resolve conflicts. This insight reflected Toth's (2000) concept of relationships as "reservoirs of credibility and trust" (p. 217) that can be drawn upon when conflict arises. Gallicano (2013) expressed a similar concept in her theory of *insulation*—or viewing relationships as an investment that insulates the practitioner when disgruntled communication partners make heavy withdrawals on the relationship (p. 383).

In general, participants' understanding of relationship building and maintenance paralleled conclusions found in communication theory, research, and professional publications (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Leddington, 2006: Scott, 2007). Although the findings did not add to our knowledge of relationships, the participants did show familiarity with relationship building and maintenance as a major role for our profession. They confirmed the dialogic communication model developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and extended to the Internet by Kent and Taylor (1998). Many critical incidents and other narratives in these interviews described building or failing to build relationships in conflict situations with journalists, coworkers across generations, employees in marketing and design departments, and other engaged parties.

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Finally, these participants confirmed the need for dialogue in resolving conflicts by showing strong preferences for the most immediate channels for contact: face-to-face and telephone.

Organizational level sources of conflict. Only a few participants explored organizational structures and climate as sources of conflict in their work lives.

Research confirmed that social media have created highly-prized platforms for conducting two-way communication with major stakeholders (Wright & Hinson, 2008). A stream of literature in our discipline stretching back to the 1970s (Kotler & Mindak, 1978) predicted that the boundaries between public relations and marketing would continue to blur and cause conflict (Grunig & Grunig, 1998). This study's finding that communication professionals were contesting control of social media with their marketing colleagues implies that disputes over new technology will continue.

Internal organization conflicts and their causal factors. Team interactions are a common source of conflict in many organizations. Reports from my participants confirmed that team and other in-house interactions were the major source of conflict in the workplace for communication practitioners.

Participants in this study failed to express deeper understanding of how the variables actually provoke disputes. For example, they did not describe task or process conflicts that cropped up in their work lives (Martinez-Moreno, 2009). Abundant research on team conflict—a major source of conflict that emerged in this study—provides fairly detailed understanding of what variables

create conflict and what effect the conflict has on team outcomes (Behfar et al.,

2001; de Wit et al., 2012; Greer et al., 2002; Martins et al., 2013; Olaniran, 2010;

Pluut & Curseu, 2013). Apart from disputes over division of labor, the

manager/practitioners in this study explored very few types of disruption in

getting the job done.

Intergenerational conflict. This study substantiated in public relations

and communication practice the same intergenerational conflict that has been

documented by research in human resources (Gibson, Greenwood, Murphy, &

Riddle, 2009; Tolbize, 2008) and in nursing (Leiter, Price, & Spencer, 2010).

Many studies in intergenerational conflict review popular literature and stop

with defining generations and their characteristics (Tolbize, 2008). A notable

exception was a study by Murphy (2012) that depicted a strategy of *reverse*

mentoring that develops leadership skills in younger employees by allowing

them to mentor older employees. Nelsey and Brownie (2012) also recommended

mentoring across generations, as well as leadership training and team

development to foster productive working relationships among generations.

The meta-theme of intergenerational conflict raises several questions

that affect practitioners. Do generational conflicts in public relations have special

characteristics that make them different from other professions? What are the

variables that create these conflicts? Findings in this study isolated generational

differences in communication styles, perceptions of attempts to dominate, and

professional standards of conduct in using social media. One result of

intergenerational conflicts has been well documented in nursing where staff

retention has suffered (Nelsey & Brownie, 2012).

Based on this study's findings, however, a research gap exists in our

understanding of intergenerational conflicts in communication practice and its

remedies.

Individual level sources of conflict. Participants identified several

individual level factors that contributed to conflicts in their workplaces. These

included positive or negative emotions, personality, and preferences for/against

communication channels. Existing literature in a variety of disciplines confirms

this study's findings on the impact of emotional responses and personality

factors in workplace conflict. For example, Antonioni (1998) connected the *big

five* personality factors with conflict management styles. Judge and LePine

(2007) confirmed my participants' recommendations for hiring policies that

consider personality as a way to reduce team conflicts. And more recently,

Bradley et al. (2013) examined how the personalities of teams themselves

foreshadowed conflicts over tasks and success in resolving those conflicts.

Moreover, research has supported my participants' understanding of the

importance of emotions in intra-group conflicts. In an introduction to an issue of

the *Journal of Conflict Management* devoted to emotions, Posthuma (2012)

argued that the influences of positive and negative emotions on conflict

management were strong and complex. Chen and Ayoko (2012) lend support to

this study's findings that emotional factors affected our perception of trust

during conflict. One understanding of many of my participants—that emotion

was primarily a negative influence in conflict situations—was not confirmed. Griffith et al. (2014) found that managers who used several emotional regulation strategies could moderate the negative effects of relationship conflict.

Findings on the impact of communication channel preference when dealing with conflict may have opened a new line of inquiry. My participants' preference for face-to-face interactions or telephone conversations is substantiated in the literature (Ting-Toomey, 2005; van Es et al., 2004). However, the benefits of email and other distant channels in conflict management have not been widely studied (Geiger & Parlamis, 2014).

Impact of digital channels and social media on conflict. Findings confirmed the widespread use of Twitter, Facebook, and other social media to build relationships with publics. However, participants contested the benefits and drawbacks of using new media in conflict management. These new media caused disputes with other departments that wanted to take control of these channels from communication staff. Also, my participants showed little knowledge of the research on using digital platforms (e.g., email) and software to enhance the outcomes from decision-making or negotiating agreements (Benyoucef & Verrons, 2007; Cheung et al., 2004; Dorado et al., 2002; Gabuthy et al., 2008; Jensen, 2009).

Filling Research Gaps Identified in the Literature

One goal of this dissertation was to enrich our understanding of practices against negotiation theories and models developed within public relations research. This research focused on the roles of communication practitioners

within organizations, including the role of negotiator or mediator (Huang, 2001; Plowman, 2007) and the role of decision-maker during conflict situations (Cameron, Crop, & Reber, 2001; Shin, Heath, & Lee, 2011). A very small number of participants in the study filled formal negotiation roles in their organizations. This majority worked for specialized organizations involved in labor contracts, health insurance, and higher education. Their roles involved negotiating signed agreements or coming to verbal agreements to remove or put aside the sources of conflict.

The study did establish that communication and public relations practitioners experience varying degrees of internal and external conflict that can be attributed to their job duties in the organization. Although smaller in number, conflicts with external audiences claimed much more time for conflict management. But the professionals also experienced the same types of conflict as other employees/managers experience who do not work in communication.

Implications of Findings

Theoretical implications. This study established its theoretical roots within grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), its predecessors in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and its post-modern incarnations (Clark, 2005). While the study generated a conflict transformation role in public relations practice, the complexity of the findings resulted more realistically in what Lincoln and Guba (1985) called a pattern theory. A pattern theory "contains an interconnected set of concepts and relationships, but does not require causal statements" (Creswell, 2009, p. 64). Neuman (2010) maintained

that the system of ideas in pattern theory succeeds when it provides information

and when themes and concepts are interconnected. The patterns revealed within

this study included a bifurcation between internal and external audiences

common to public relations practice, as well as roles of relationship building and

negotiation that have been well developed in the literature.

Contradictions and outliers. Four themes captured significant outlying

understandings of conflict in public relations workplaces: (1) impact of

organizational structure and culture on conflict; (2) appreciation of conflict and

emotion as positive elements in practice; (3) the value of digital communication

in conflict management; and (4) the distrust of mentoring as a means of learning

conflict management skills. With the exception of confusion over who makes

final decisions, participants reported on conflict elements "close to home" in

their departments rather than in leadership and culture (Choi, 2013; Gelfand et

al., 2012; McMillan et al., 2012; Shin et al., 2011). In fact, almost no one

mentioned conflicts with top management, as opposed to supervisor-

subordinate conflict (McMillen et al., 2012).

Further, only a small minority of participants understood the positive

value of conflict in their work settings and appreciated how emotion could be

used to enhance relationships and outcomes even though research increasingly

supports this appreciation of dissonance (Chen & Ayoko, 2012; Griffith et al.,

2014; Tekleab & Quigley, 2014).

Outlying participants also appreciated the benefits of digital

communication in resolving conflict because email and other channels could

provide much-needed distance as well as a record of the parties' responses. Almost no one saw the value of communicating about conflict over social networking sites.

Finally, some participants expressed strong contradictory views of the value of mentors in learning effective conflict management strategies. One person highlighted the bad advice she had received from mentors; another pointed to learning what NOT to do from mentors.

Implications for practice. The conflict transformation model of public relations implies a more conscious role for practitioners in transforming conflict situations for both internal and external audiences. The findings suggest that communication practitioners are already engaged in managing conflict within their teams and across departments. However, my participants reported the need for training in conflict management strategies and had fairly superficial interpretations of how to transform employee emotions and perceptions to create real long-term change in team relationships.

Further, communication practitioners need to assess whether they have a special role to play in transforming or detoxifying conflicts within their organizations. The implication for practice revolves around this question: Do public relations professionals have special communication skills that would make them exceptionally valuable in transforming and detoxifying conflict situations in their workplaces? Does their training in relationship building and maintenance equip these professionals to deal more effectively than others with intragroup conflict?

Certainly, my participants did not claim the role of conflict transformation even when their critical incidents showed that they transformed disputes among internal publics. As the findings showed, the participants attributed skillful conflict management to individual-level factors like positive emotions, personality, generational attributes, and preferences for communication channels. They did not claim that training and experience in communication practice made them especially adept at transforming or resolving conflicts.

My results did not support the claim that communication practitioners played a negotiation role in their organizations. Instead, practitioners might claim a special function as conflict transformers or detoxifiers in their organizations with increased understanding of that role and given adequate training or mentoring.

Limitations

I acknowledge the basic limitations of my qualitative research method: difficulties in developing a theory that could embrace contradictions and inconsistencies in the data; problems in achieving reliability and validity (described below); and obstacles in applying research usefully to communication practice. The analytical challenge in qualitative research, as described by Miles et al. (2014) is "to find coherent descriptions and explanations that still include all the gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions inherent in personal and social life" (p. 10). Personally, I felt daunted by the sheer weight of data—668 single-spaced pages of transcripts plus written and

web material—and faced risks in trying to force logical and reasonable interpretation on data that are random and contradictory.

Sampling. In addition, the study had sampling limitations. Although participants came from a variety of states including Florida, Utah, California, and New York, the majority worked in the mid-Atlantic region where the federal government is a major employer. This may explain the prominence of conflict in tax-supported organizations. Further, I did not limit the participants to professionals with the job titles of public relations practitioners. As I explained in Method, job titles vary widely in the public relations profession, but the results would have been different if I had eliminated some kinds of communication practitioners.

Measurement. Some of the results of this study seem generic to many kinds of managerial positions. It was difficult to distinguish during analysis whether the participants answered as communication professionals or as employees who also had managerial and other responsibilities. In hindsight, a crucial question had been omitted: How do conflicts in your communication job differ from the conflict experienced by other people in the organization or your clients' organizations? This question would have helped me understand whether communication practitioners can take on a specialized role in conflict management.

Self-reported data. A sizeable mass of data in this study came from narratives of critical incidents. This kind of self-report raises questions of selective memory, discrimination among several related incidents, attribution of

positive outcomes to the teller's actions, and exaggeration of some events

(Butterfield et al., 2005, 2009; Chell, 2004; Flanagan, 1954; Schluter et al., 2007).

While acknowledging that such incidents cannot be fact-checked and that

distortions can affect the validity of my results, these narratives added

immeasurably to the richness of the data and allowed the participants to explore

emotions and other personal understandings that would have been lost

otherwise.

Internal (reliability) and external validity. The Method section of this

study explained why *validity* is a contested term in qualitative research and

described the strategies I used to increase external and internal validity. Miles et

al. (2014) and Saldaña (2013) defined *internal validity*—or *truth value*—as

evidence that the findings of the study made sense, were credible to the people I

studied, and gave an authentic portrait of conflict within communication and

public relations practice. Internal and external validity bear upon the goal of this

study—to contribute to understanding of practice and improvement of

professional work-life.

Authenticity and truth value are evident in the candor and depth of

participants' responses. I was surprised by the willingness of practitioners to

speak with me at length—sometimes over two hours—and their generosity in

describing the trials and emotions they experienced during the workplace

incidents. Furthermore, the protocol questions and themes took unpredictable

directions. Participants led me to the importance of teams, mentors, and

personal skills in communication practice. I verified the credibility of the

interview data by fact-checking details against website and printed information. After the interviews were finished, I asked participants to clarify their statements in response to questions sent by email. I also checked and rechecked the transcripts when I had questions about whether I had accurately represented the data and duly recorded contradictions and outliers.

Reliability (*internal validity*) is defined in qualitative research as evidence that "the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable over time" so that audiences get a sense of "quality and integrity" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312). I tried to increase reliability by constant comparison of data across escalating levels of abstraction: words, themes, factors, and then the five categories/meta-themes. I returned again and again to the practitioners' transcripts to check exact words and phrases. I reviewed the lists of themes that evolved over time to insure that I consistently captured the understandings of participants during data reduction. In the journal notes kept during interviewing and at each analytic stage, I noted inconsistencies in how I understood the data, as well as contradictory opinions and singular insights offered by the participants. Even in the final analysis of the 13 strongest themes that emerged from the data, I returned to the fringe of Post-it notes on transcript pages, sending me to the original contexts in which I first caught sight of these understandings. The struggle for consistency, quality, and integrity continued as I continually tweaked the meta-themes and the transformational model in light of the evidence.

Standards for achieving *external validity* in qualitative research require the researcher to establish (1) the larger importance of the study's results; (2)

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the *potential* transferability of the findings to other contexts and individuals; and (3) its utility or application in the field—in this case, the work settings of public relations practitioners (Glaser, 2004). This is essentially a test of *fit* with accepted professional values (Miles et al., 2014). First, I tried to bolster validity by reducing my personal bias in generating the factors and model (see Method section). The strategies I used included keeping a reflective journal, bracketing my biases in observational notes and memos, keeping an audit trail during data analysis, and engaging in systematic and formal memo writing during all stages of research, including the writing of this dissertation.

External validity can also weaken when evidence is inadequate or not connected sufficiently to experience, when categorization and assumptions are implausible, and inconsistencies abound. The Results section recorded substantial evidence that was verified through quotations. The critical incidents allowed participants to explore their experiences more fully. Stage two analysis supported the plausibility of my categories and assumptions through examination of existing research and also through a PowerPoint presentation of the results to three colleagues in advanced academic programs at Johns Hopkins University. I also used member-checking to assure validity by informally chatting at various times with eight participants to get their responses to some basic findings. This practice required me to become actively involved in local and regional meetings of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA).

Future Directions for Research

Because this grounded theory study was largely exploratory, two broad areas of future research will help to clarify the components of the model I propose.

1. Investigate the role of conflict transformation in public relations and communication practice. Future research will need to investigate the role that public relations practitioners can claim in transforming internal conflict. The transformation model of conflict management in public relations is defined as *structural* in grounded theory (Miles et al., 2014). This implies that it has not reached the level of formal theory and requires much more investigation to prove its worth.

Consequently, a number of factors in this model and my research themes require further research. The tendency toward conflict avoidance among practitioners is one intriguing area. The specialized skill set that communication practitioners bring to conflict management is another. Also, quantitative methods (e.g., distributing a survey) could be used to measure the time communication practitioners devote to conflict resolution and their assessments of its importance in the profession.

2. Develop a model of conflict management specifically applicable to digital communication channels. Because this study and the existing literature document the increasing use of digital and social media in the communication profession, much more research is needed in how to manage communication on these platforms. Although my participants overwhelmingly preferred face-to-face interactions for serious conflict resolution, these professionals will have to

manage more and more conflict with audiences—external and internal—with whom in-person meetings are highly improbable. Very few communication research studies have investigated how practitioners should handle conflict on social networking sites, although some work has been done on adoption of social media (Curtis et al., 2010) as well as building and maintaining relationships (Briones et al., 2011). Researchers in other disciplines, however, have been robustly exploring digital negotiation and conflict resolution (Benyoucef & Verrons, 2007; Dorado et al., 2002; Taylor & Thomas, 2008).

Future Directions for Practice.

Michael Roloff (2009) wrote movingly on the profound difficulty of applying conflict management research to practice. I too perceived real limitations in using the findings of this study to help practitioners. The majority of research studies cited in this document used experimental or quasi-experimental research. While I believe this interview study has expanded our knowledge of actual public relations practice, its findings still seem separated from practice. This study demonstrated that research lags behind practice especially in applicability of social media.

The future directions for practice should increase communication professionals' understanding of sources of conflict in their work lives; help them define their special organizational roles, if any, in dealing with conflict; provide training in conflict transformation and management; and promote recognition of how public relations practitioners manage conflict during organizational change.

1. Increase awareness of transforming conflict especially at the team or department level as a realistic role of communication practitioners. Practitioners would benefit from learning about the theoretical frameworks of conflict transformation (Botes, 2003; Greet et al., 2008; Pluut & Crusue, 2013) and the related construct of detoxification (Gallicano, 2013).

2. Enable practitioners to appreciate and use conflict positively in improving outcomes in public relations and communication practice. For better or worse, practitioners in this study revealed preferences for conflict avoidance through hiring procedures, socialization, and staff management. Sensitizing communication professionals to the causes and benefits of workplace conflict could enable them to use their strategic communication skills in managing intragroup problems. Webinars and workshops in conflict management could be offered online and at professional gatherings such as the PRSA International Conference.

3. Train practitioners in steps involved in the conflict management process and provide opportunities for practicing and reflecting on effective conflict resolution. Very few practitioners in this study could describe steps in effective conflict resolution. Although they showed familiarity with some strategies from the Harvard Negotiation Project (Fisher et al., 2011), they lacked, for example, understanding of the four basic phases in the communication negotiation model devised by Madrigal et al. (2009). Organizations and degree programs could consider offering training in these and other conflict management strategies.

4. Participants often deplored the absence from job descriptions and performance evaluations of their contributions in mediating and resolving conflicts. Research in human resource and personnel policies could help create awareness of the conflict transformation role that public relations professionals fill and encourage rewards for it.

Conclusion

So, what?

What's new?

What do we know now that we didn't know before?

This conclusion answers these essential questions about my dissertation research. My study proposed to fill a research gap in our perception of how practitioners understand their roles and activities in conflict resolution and management. Its impetus included several models of negotiation in public relations that developed over several decades (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Huang, 1997, 2001; Plowman, 1995, 2005). This study's results only partly confirmed a formal or informal role of negotiator for a small number of practitioners in specific types of organizations such as health and unionized industries. These models continue to have applicability, but in restricted areas of practice.

By collecting data in the field rather than through experiments or surveys, and by covering a range of practitioners in various stages of their careers excluding beginners, new insights emerged into conflict management in everyday communication practice. Participants understood conflict as any serious disturbance in relationships and goal achievement that went beyond routine problem solving or

widely studied crisis communication roles with external audiences (Coombs, 2006; Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011).

Results of this study challenged the normative power and C-suite strategic decision-making roles that scholars have claimed for public relations and communication practitioners (Berger & Reber, 2006). Even though my participants had ample opportunity to explore conflict with top management over their blocked career advancement, including failure to be seated at the decision-making table, these practitioners did not demean direct practice as a job function. They did not express the tension between being locked in the "iron cage of practice" as "an order taker" (Berger and Reber, 2006, p. 218) and wanting to move into the powerful leadership role of "strategic advisor" (p. 13) where they might even negotiate on behalf of the organization (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Sison, 2010).

Instead, my participants, who mostly occupied mid-level jobs across a spectrum of organizations, portrayed themselves as firmly rooted in communication practice, not in advancement to top-level management. Three real work-world roles emerged: direct practice, management, and training/mentoring. All participants reported engaging in direct practice no matter how senior their positions. They also embraced training and mentoring as legitimate functions that could be recognized and practiced even in early career stages. The major managerial role did produce significant conflict in the work lives of participants, especially within teams and with closely linked departments. The value of decision-making power or influence surfaced thematically for less than a handful of participants and seemed linked with

conflict primarily as a factor in getting the work done effectively rather than enhancing status.

This leads me to the contribution of the *transformation model of conflict in public relations practice* that synthesized my data. The model suggests this normative conclusion: that practitioners must be prepared to manage significant short- and long-term internal conflict in their daily work, and that this responsibility may require transforming the conflict so that people can work together more effectively over time, rather than resolving conflict as a short-term fix. As stated earlier, only practitioners in specific types of organizations required high-level negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Another way would conceptualize these different organization types as distinct cultures that require different skills (L'Etang, 2012). To sum up this insight, all practitioners will have a high likelihood of dealing with internal audience conflict, while only a small minority will be called upon to resolve conflict through formal agreements. Subsequent studies could benefit from analyzing practice within organizational types or distinct cultures. In addition, these studies should not assume that internal audiences can be easily identified; labels of internal and external can shift depending on the conflict situation.

Readers may find much to question in the transformation model. Nevertheless, I was fully committed to exploration, and allowed participants to take the lead even though some descriptive results turned out to be too broad or shallow for theoretical application. The model emerged inductively and could be faulted for appearing unduly hierarchical or rigidly separated into factors relating to internal or external audiences. However, my participants perceived sharply divisive conflict within their

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work environment, even though scholars in crisis communication may argue that conflict with external audiences can generate internal conflict (Coombs, 2006). While such factors or dimensions as audience segmentation, relationship building over the long- and short-term, and strategic management roles are embedded in our understanding of communication practice, these variables have been re-contextualized in my practitioners' understanding of their daily work. I believe my results add depth to our debate over putative roles for public relations/communication practitioners as conflict resolvers and strategic leaders—roles that some argue can enhance the status of our profession (Berger & Reber, 2006; Gupta, 2011; Heide & Simonsson, 2014; Swerling & Thorson, 2014; Steyn, 2007). Status may be enhanced through practitioners documenting existing skills that add value to the organization and then marketing those competencies.

Finally, this study helped me to uncover insights about communication practice and conflict that I hope can guide me and other researchers in future studies. First, I question why I and perhaps other researchers assume that public relations/communication practitioners are more competent in or prepared for conflict resolution—and even internal conflict management—than other managers or professionals. My assumption seemed built on a belief that training in audience analysis, message construction, and persuasive techniques would prepare communication professionals for dealing with conflict across a variety of situations; that assumption should be challenged. This study showed significant differences across types of organizations in their need for conflict management and/or resolution skills. The factor of organization type or culture could be a useful addition to our

research. Most importantly, *conflict transformation* (Botes, 2003; Greer et al., 2008; Jameson et al., 2009; Pluut & Curseu, 2013) is a concept that could be added to the arsenal of strategies and tactics we practice. A research stream on transformation is developing outside our discipline, but its conceptual framework identifies emotions and other individual-level variables that my participants understood as highly important in dealing with conflict in their everyday communication work.

Understanding Negotiation in Public Relations
Interview Protocol Revised

Name of Participant:
Title:
Date of Interview:
Time Started:
Time Stopped:
Pre Brief:
_____ Thank the informant for participating.
_____ Introduce the study and state time limits.
_____ Ask participant to read the IRB, initial pages, and sign the document.
_____ Reconfirm audiotape permission.

Defining and Understanding Conflict in Public Relations

Critical Incidents: If the participant begins to tell a critical incident about problem solving or conflict resolution, that incident should be fully explored before moving to the next question. An incident is defined as *critical* when it occurs "in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects" (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327).

Questions on the Participant's Current Job/Role in the Organization (RQ1, RQ3)

RQ1.1. How would you describe your organization to someone who doesn't know anything about it? What is its mission?

RQ1.2. Please tell me what you do on your job everyday? How much of your job is working on projects and how much is management? ADDED QUESTION: WHAT PERCENTAGLE OF YOUR WORK INVOLVES MANAGEMENT AS OPPOSED TO DAILY PRACTICE SUCH AS CREATING CAMPAIGNS?

RQ1.3. Can you describe some of the audiences you want to reach through your job assignments?
> Probe: Do you communicate with publics/audiences both inside and outside the organization?

RQ1.4. What is the most challenging project you have worked on lately?
> Probe: What has made this project so challenging?

NOTE: THIS QUESTION OFTEN TURNS INTO A CRITICAL INCIDENT THAT SHOULD BE FULLY PROBED.

Questions about Problem Solving on the Job (RQ2)

RQ2.1. You've given me a good overview of your work. What activities in your public relations or communication work have involved solving problems or resolving disagreements with people INSIDE the organization?
> Probe: What about resolving problems with audiences INSIDE the organization?

Probe: Do these problems arise in formal settings such as meetings (e.g., "We are here to solve this problem") or more informally ("Hey, I think we've got a problem" in the hallway or in an email)?

Probe: Generally, what do these problems deal with? Tangible things like resources for an activity or staff time?

Probe: What about problems over how to understand a situation, what something means, somebody's role in the organization, cultural differences?

Note: Some participants in the first interviews ask what the difference was between problem solving and conflict resolution. Through discussion with these participants the following difference was established and confirmed in early content analysis: problem-solving is done in many routine jobs; conflict resolution involves more serious disagreements.

RQ2.2 Have you helped your organization resolve crises or disputes with EXTERNAL organizations such as government agencies, unions, ethnic, community, or consumer groups?

RQ2.3. How much of your current job do you think is dedicated to resolving conflicts or working through disagreements about how to solve problems?

Probe: If 100% of your time is spent problem solving, can you estimate how much time is spent solving problems about how to do the assignment? What about solving problems about who will do the work or conflicts with other departments?

Probe: What about time spent in resolving disagreements in other communication jobs you've held?

ADDED QUESTION OR PROBE: HOW DID MENTORS INFLUENCE YOUR HANDLING OF CONFLICT SITUATIONS?

Questions on Digital and Social Media (RQ3)

RQ3.1. How important is digital communication in your job? Does your job involve communicating with audiences through digital channels like Facebook, Twitter, an organizational intranet, or other social media? (RQ3)

RQ3.2 Could you describe a situation where you have mainly used digital channels, like email or instant messaging or texting, to resolve a conflict that arose?

Probe: How did you see your role in this type of digital or social media problem solving? How did communication differ from face to face problem solving interactions? Different from telephone interactions?

RQ3.3. Does most of your conflict solving work occur in face-to-face situations or through more distant channels (e.g. over the telephone, in email, through instant messaging, via texting)? Problem-solving is done in many routine jobs; conflict resolution involves more serious disagreements.

Critical Incidents (RQ4)

RQ4.1. Can you tell me about a time when you played a role in trying to resolve a disagreement during your public relations or communication work? Or you could tell me an incident that you witnessed and know a lot about.

Probes: Under what circumstances did this disagreement or dispute occur?
Just tell me what you remember.
Do any images come to mind about what people (i.e., you or others) did to
resolve the problem?
Did you experience any communication problems while you tried to work
out the dispute or conflict?
What was the outcome of the disagreement?

RQ4.1a. Can you think of some things that might have influenced the outcome?
Probe: Have you noticed that gender influences outcome? What about cultural
or   ethnic background?
Probe: Looking back, how do you think the outcome could have been
different—better or worse?
Probe: What personal characteristics do you have that has helped in conflict
resolution?
Probe: What did you think about the outcome of this incident?

Closing (RQ4)
RQ4.2 Are there any comments you would like to add about how public
relations/communication people work to solve conflicts? Or about your role in the
public relations/communication field?
Closing 1. If you had a chance to add some interview questions, what questions
would you have added? Is there a question you wish I had asked you?
Closing 2. Would you be available to answer some follow up questions? What would
be a good way for me to provide you with these questions?
Thank you again for your time and your thoughtful answers. It was great having a
chance to talk with you.

Understanding Conflict Resolution in Public Relations
Background Information Form

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. If you feel comfortable completing this form, it will help us with our future research efforts. All information on this form will be kept confidential under the IRB guidelines.

Thank you!

Please don't write your name on this form.

What was your age at your last birthday? _____

How many years have you worked in public relations or communication? _____

Please check any of the following organizations that you have worked in:

Check this column	
	Small business
	Corporation
	Government agency
	Non-governmental organization (NGO)
	Non-profit organization
	Activist organization
	Other:

Please check/write-in public relations activities you have been involved in:

Check this column	
	Organizational-level management and planning
	Producing media products
	Internet site development and maintenance
	Community programs
	Crisis management
	Other:

Appendix C

Understanding Negotiation in Public Relations
Interview Protocol
Additional Questions for Pilot of Protocol

This is the end our interview on resolving disagreements. I'd like your feedback on our interview and the questions I asked. There may be some things I didn't ask or could have done better. So feel free to say whatever comes to mind.

Overall, how did the interview feel? Too long? Confusing? Did anything make you feel uncomfortable?

How well did the questions help you talk about your experiences? What was the most useful question? Any questions that didn't seem useful or could be clearer?

What issues would you have included that I didn't touch on? Anything you would have cut out?

Anything else you'd like to add?

Again, many thanks for helping me with this study.

IRB Approval

UNIVERSITY OF
MARYLAND
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Initial Application Approval Notification

To: Principal Investigator, Dr. Elizabeth Toth, Communication
Student, Susan Allen, Communication

From: James M. Hagberg
IRB Co-Chair
University of Maryland College Park

Re: IRB Protocol: 10-0321 - Defining and Understanding Negotiation in
Public Relations

Approval Date: June 10, 2010

Expiration Date: June 10, 2011

Application: Initial

Review Path: Expedited

The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office approved your Initial IRB Application. This transaction was approved in accordance with the University's IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Please reference the above-cited IRB Protocol number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Recruitment/Consent: For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document will be sent via mail. The IRB approval expiration date has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please note that research participants must sign a stamped version of the informed consent form and receive a copy.

Continuing Review: If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects, beyond the expiration date of this protocol, you must submit a Renewal Application to the IRB Office 45 days prior to the expiration date. If IRB Approval of your protocol expires, all human subject research activities including enrollment of new subjects, data collection and analysis of identifiable, private information must cease until the Renewal Application is approved. If work on the human subject portion of your project is complete and you wish to close the protocol, please submit a Closure Report to irb@umd.edu.

Modifications: Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the

subjects. If you would like to modify an approved protocol, please submit an Addendum request to the IRB Office.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks: You must promptly report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others to the IRB Manager at 301-405-0678 or jsmith@umresearch.umd.edu

Additional Information: Please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 if you have any IRB-related questions or concerns. Email: irb@umd.edu

The UMCP IRB is organized and operated according to guidelines of the United States Office for Human Research Protections and the United States Code of Federal Regulations and operates under Federal Wide Assurance No. FWA00005856.

0101 Lee Building
College Park, MD 20742-5125
TEL 301.405.4212
FAX 301.314.1475
irb@umd.edu
http://www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Renewal Application Approval
DO NOT REPLY TO THIS EMAIL ADDRESS AS IT IS UNMONITORED

To: Principal Investigator, Dr. Elizabeth Toth, Communication
Student, Susan Allen, Communication

From: James M. Hagberg
IRB Co-Chair
University of Maryland College Park

Re: IRB Protocol: 10-0321 - Defining and Understanding Negotiation in Public Relations

Approval Date: June 16, 2011

Expiration Date: June 16, 2012

Application: Renewal

Review Path: Expedited

The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office approved your Renewal IRB Application. This transaction was approved in accordance with the University's IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

Please reference the above-cited IRB Protocol number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

Recruitment/Consent: For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document will be sent via mail. The IRB approval expiration date has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please note that research participants must sign a stamped version of the informed consent form and receive a copy.

Continuing Review: If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects, beyond the expiration date of this protocol, you must submit a Renewal Application to the IRB Office 45 days prior to the expiration date. If IRB Approval of your protocol expires, all human subject research activities including enrollment of new subjects, data collection and analysis of identifiable, private information must cease until the Renewal Application is approved. If work on the human subject portion of your project is complete and you wish to close the protocol, please submit a Closure Report to irb@umd.edu.

Modifications: Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the subjects. If you would like to modify an approved protocol, please submit an Addendum request to the IRB Office.

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http://www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

Please note that University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [336378-2] 10-0321 Defining and Understanding Negotiation in Public Relations
Principal Investigator: Elizabeth L. Toth, PhD

Submission Type: Continuing Review/Progress Report
Date Submitted: May 10, 2013

Action: APPROVED
Effective Date: June 10, 2013
Review Type: Expedited Review

Should you have any questions you may contact Andrea Dragan at
adragan@umd.edu.

Thank you,
The IRBNet Support Team

www.irbnet.org

Appendix E

Sample Transcript: Barbara (Fictitious name)

Interviewer: I'm going to just put this here if that's all right.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Before we start, this is my IRB from my university. What I need to have you do here is you have to sign and date this for each page and then sign at the end. Just so you get an overview of what we're doing here.

Interviewee: Not initial but just to sign?

Interviewer: Just on this page initial and then on the last page sign is the—

Interviewee: Today is the 21st. No, no, no, it's not the 21st.

Interviewer: No, it was the 11th—

Interviewee: Fourteenth.

Interviewer: Right.

Interviewee: I'm ahead of myself with the dates.

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. That's all right.

Interviewee: There ya' go.

Interviewer: Great. Thank you very much. Let's see how we're doing on our sound levels here. Looks like we're doing pretty good with that one. Let me just get this one going. This is a little touchier. It's my old one. All right. There you can see it. *[Laughter]*

Interviewee: Comes in loud and clear.

Interviewer: It does. That's good. That's good. I don't know why this doesn't go into *[fading voice 0:02:10]*.

Interviewee: Nope.

Interviewer: I'm sorry. This is not working. Let me just see what I can do here.

Interviewee: That's all right. It gives me a chance to eat.

Interviewer: Good. All right. I think this is the way that it goes. Then it'll give me a new folder. This is my old one. Okay. There we're going with that one, too. Barbara, I wonder if you could give me your current title or other title's that you've had in the past. Anything that you'd like to mention about your jobs.

Interviewee: I think the job that I was thinking of that was most relevant for this was when I was Senior Vice President for External Affairs, for COMPANY X, where public relations, government relations, were directly under my scope of responsibility. The other—after the merger between COMPANY X and United Healthcare I left and went to become the Deputy Insurance Commissioner at the State X Insurance Administration. I was not responsible for public relations, but I was essentially the primary person managing both our government relations staff person as well as our communications staff.

Interviewer: You would say you were managing communication staff—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: -as well as being maybe a person out there in the public.

Interviewee: Yes. Probably when I was deputy I was really not out there much in the public, other than in terms of government relations, but when I became Acting Insurance Commissioner, then I was doing a lot of public speaking, being interviewed by the press for the agency. Now my official title is Consulting Staff at LMI, where I'm really not doing anything related to public affairs.

Interviewer: Okay. Great. How would you describe COMPANY X—let's start with COMPANY X—to someone who doesn't know anything about that organization?

Interviewee: It's a health insurance company.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Where is its—is it nationwide?

Interviewee: No. It was a regional company. It's primary market was State X, STATE Y, northern State Z, but it also sold health insurance is State V, State W, a few counties in State Q, and State T.

Interviewer: About how many people worked for that company?

Interviewee: At its heyday I'd say 1,500 to 2,000.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: It was about a smaller end of a large company—mid-size company I suppose.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Could you tell me what you did on your job every day?

Interviewee: At COMPANY X?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I was responsible for—every day I would work with the sales staff to identify their needs for marketing material, for advertising, what sorts of advertising we should be planning for to help support the open enrollments season, particularly for the federal employees. Most of our outreach was around the federal employees program. I worked with the CEO and the general council as well as the chairman of the board to manage any crises that developed, particularly with regards to sticky provider negotiations. I represented the company in terms of all the legislatures in the various states, but primarily State X, STATE Y, and State Z.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Could you explain sticky provider negotiations? *[Laughter]*. That's really a wonderful term.

Interviewee: By that I mean—both parties know that they're not going to end the relationship on a permanent basis, but they're—a cliff has been reached in the negotiations, and the provider groups has decided that they are going to publicly terminate the contract with the health insurance company—in this case COMPANY X. Then it's a question of how do we manage the press, or would we manage the press around that possibility, what talking points would we put together for the sales staff so that they could reach out to the large employer groups to put their mind at ease, what would we say to public officials who would necessarily be concerned about the loss of a large provider group within the network. And of course, too, members who would be concerned about the loss of access to a provider.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. This is interesting because although the two parties realize they are not going to terminate the relationship, there is a threat of terminating the relationship on the provider part.

Interviewee: They don't really threaten, they just do it. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: Oh. *[Laughs]*

Interviewee: Maybe they realize—maybe they don't realize that it's not permanent, but the health insurance company knows that without certain providers they can't exist in the marketplace. State X Hopkins is probably the best example. In State Z, Enova is another. There is no health insurance company that can do business in either of those states without those two systems being in their network.

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: Since the provider group has the upper hand in the negotiations, the insurance companies will—from time to time—just refuse to accede to their demands. When they do that sometimes they are willing to let the provider group discontinue the contract, basically terminate the contract, but the insurance company has the full intent to go back to the negotiation table and strike a deal, but they're hoping that by the loss of the business for some period of time, that the provider group will accede—will be more reasonable, at least in their estimation. It never works, by the way.

Interviewer: It doesn't?

Interviewee: No. I just wanted to see who this was that was calling.

Interviewer: Oh, no. Please, go ahead.

Interviewee: I never get calls so I'm always worried. It's not a number I recognize.

Interviewer: No, it's fine. Please feel free to take a call. I understand.

Interviewee: It's a bit risky, because of course, if the insurance company allows a provider to terminate the contract and to do it publically, it now brings in all of their customers as well as the regulators who are responsible for make sure that the company can actually make good on its promises. It's a bit risky but they will do it from time to time.

Interviewer: So both sides could threaten.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: I see. It's not necessarily a unilateral strategy.

Interviewee: No. It could be both.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. It could be both.

Interviewee: I never really understood it myself. I'm sort of a risk averse person so, you know, but when you're presented as a person responsible for trying to maintain a positive image of the company, and essentially our provider group has fired the health insurer, or the health insurer has fired the provider group, the health insurer doesn't look good no matter what.

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: No one in the public ever things, "Oh, this is a logical thing that the health insurance company did and I'm pleased as punch they fired them."

Interviewer: I see. What exactly would you be doing when you've got wind—first of all, how would you find out?

Interviewee: Typically when it's for larger provider groups the vice-president who's responsible for provider networks would obviously be keeping the chairman of the board—COMPANY X was run in a collaborative fashion between the chairman of the board and the CEO. The two of them basically operated as peers, which made things interesting. If there was a provider network negotiation going on, they would be kept apprised of it, as well as the general counsel. If they made the policy decision that it was okay to either allow the provider to terminate the contract or for them to terminate the contract—which essentially meant not coming to an agreement—they would call me and I would—normally in those kinds of situations I would—I had a contract with a crisis management firm who would basically help me think through what were our best arguments.

Sometimes we would go out proactively if we were the ones who were terminating the contract, we would put together proactive materials that we would send out to our sales force in particular, and be ready for press calls. Once or twice would proactively notify the press but that usually backfired, so we typically didn't go forward. If it was a provider group firing us—I wouldn't always have time to do a lot of advance work with the crisis management firm, so I essentially would take work from previous times and apply it to this situation.

Interviewer: I see. Can you tell me what your job was every day? What were some of the things you would do?

Interviewee: It really depends. It was very episodic. In this area the legislatures are typically in session between January and April, so I would say on a day-to-day basis during that time I was essentially coming to work every day and looking to see what bills had been introduced in the legislature, reading those bills, talking to my counterparts internally and developing a position on each of them. I would take it to the chairman or the CEO if I thought that it was a big enough issue. In that timeframe I relied basically on lower level staff to management the sales force from the marketing perspective to get them the materials that they needed. We really weren't doing any planning or any outreach during that time. We tried to not do any press outreach. If there was a—sometimes the press would call us about a bill that was up for discussion, in which case then I would work with the CEO and the chairman again to craft what my talking points would be with the press.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: When April came and that ended, then essentially I would start—on a day-to-day basis I would planning—holding meetings with the sales staff to identify their needs and to support them. I also had writers on staff who would work with the provider networks team to put together the materials that providers needed to work

with the health insurance company. I would start also meeting with them to make sure that they were engaged in prioritizing the projects in the right way.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: It's primarily—to some extent it was proactive but I would say that for most part, the whatever best-laid plans I had in terms of laying out projects and day-to-day activities, it all could be undermined by some particular regulatory activity or scandal or something that would push us into the press. We rarely looked for—we never went proactively out to the press to pitch our ideas. I think we did once and it didn't work out so well.

Interviewer: If I could just go over a brief list of the typical activities. Creating media messages?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Environmental scanning?

Interviewee: I would—

Interviewer: In the broader sense.

Interviewee: Yeah, I would not say that that was like a—environmental scanning and a—not a very—we don't really like doing formal research or anything like that. I would say it was—environmental scanning to the extent that we were talking to others within the company who were out and about with clients or with providers.

Interviewer: Traditional information sharing, where you would push information. I guess what I mean by that is—you told me you did not go to the media so that would be one form you wouldn't use, but were there other traditional sharing you might do?

Interviewee: With the media itself?

Interviewer: Yes. Or with your clients or with your providers, with your—

Interviewee: We would always have a press package, a press kit. While we wouldn't go out to the press proactively, we would have a press kit ready to provide.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: We updated that every six months or so.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. I guess the other thing is did you—you talked about your writers. Were they creating pamphlets about your organization, were they—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: So there was typical information about your organization.

Interviewee: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: They were doing the webs—they were providing content on the website—

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: -brochures.

Interviewer: Yeah. You did develop communication campaigns?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: That seemed to be a major part.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Was that the major part of your job?

Interviewee: Yes. Yes. I would say yes.

Interviewer: Okay. This one about relationship building, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

Interviewee: I think that—the truth is is that the relationship building—I didn't do much relationship building vis-à-vis the press. Although there were some—there was one reporter at *The Sun* who we felt was—not that he loved us—but that he was fair. I would talk with him from time to time to try to maintain that relationship. For the most part I would say that the relationship building focused more on legislators than it did on the media.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Did your organization feel that the media were generally hostile to your organization?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Could you give me maybe a reason, a couple of reasons why they experienced the press as hostile?

Interviewee: I—there is a delicate balance within health insurance between providing coverage for certain services and making sure that those services are medically necessary.

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: How do describe that to the press is a bit of a trick. Those were the days mainly of a lot of public scrutiny of managed care, a lot of public backlash. I think that the health insurance company felt that the press was not really willing to give—to be objective about the role of utilization review and when it was and when it wasn't appropriate.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: There was an instance where there was a woman who was hiking, fell off a cliff, went to the hospital, never showed her insurance card so her claims all got denied. She went to the press. It's a lot of—she had some responsibility for the error. The insurance had some responsibility for the error. We tried to describe it in a lot of detail to the reporter. The article came out. When you read the article overall it was fair, but the fairness wasn't really obvious to the reader until the end of the story. I think at that point the CEO and the chairman said, "We're never gonna get a fair shake."

Interviewer: That makes sense to me.

Interviewee: Yeah. *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: It does make sense.

Interviewee: Yeah. I think the environment is quite that hostile anymore.

Interviewer: Maybe not so hostile today.

Interviewee: Yeah. I think things have calmed down a lot. There are a lot more checks and balances in the system, a lot more opportunities for consumers to be heard. I just don't think that the press would quite have the same views.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. *[Dog growling]*. *[Cross talk 0:23:21]*, sh, sh, sh. Honey, we can't play right now.

Interviewee: Yeah, don't you think?

Interviewer: You're gonna have to go upstairs if you are not good. *[Laughter]*. You've talked about planning and management that really from certainly May through December that you were basically involved in strategic management. You've also talked about crisis communication. I think we've covered all those. Can you tell

me what your audience is? What audiences you were trying to reach? You've touched on them but I'd like you to tell me more directly.

Interviewee: Yes. I think for the most part the three main audiences that at least COMPANY X at the time worried about were large employer groups, the FEHB program, State X state employees, the counties and municipalities in State X and northern State Z. After that I would say it was agents and brokers, because COMPANY X did not use independent agents and brokers. If there was an issue in the press about COMPANY X the company felt that agents and brokers would try to use that to try to undermine sales. That was a—getting information out into the broker community was an important part of my role. The third was regulators, so make sure that whatever was being reported on the press didn't end up resulting in a legislative action that would hurt the business, or in a regulatory audit, which could result in large fines.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: On fourth, really, customers.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Can you tell me how customers might reach you, or did customers reach your department directly?

Interviewee: They would reach me, but they would call the member services line. One of my and my staff's responsibility was to make sure that we anticipated the questions that a typical person would have, and provide answers that seemed reasonable, rational and fair, and not scary to the people that we served.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. The two-way communication that went on with customers went through membership services.

Interviewee: Yes. The same would be true for sales. We would be creating questions and answers and scripts throughout the year. On a regular basis we would go out and talk to the member services representatives or to the sales people about how to talk about crises so that when a crisis happened and we were giving them material to use, hopefully they remembered how they were supposed to use it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. You were preparing them—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: -so that they weren't caught off guard when these crises arose.
[Laughs]

Interviewee: Yes. Yes. At the beginning we were not that organized. In the beginning it was really—we got a crisis and it was helter-skelter. We said really we don't have to go out and talk about this every day with the staff, but once or twice a

year we need to remind them that these things might happen, and that when they happen we're going to provide them with the following material, and if they questions how to contact us.

Interviewer: It sounds like you had a good crisis communication response package.

Interviewee: Yeah, I think we got to that point. It was a lot of crises—and we had coup d'états on the board. We had lots of things. Lots of crises to manage.

Interviewer: Did you have experience with that before you came to COMPANY X?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: So this was on-the-job.

Interviewee: Yeah. I would really say that for that I think I got a crash course in this from the contractors that we used. We used a couple of different PR firms that focused in crisis management. It came to me basically because a board member knew one or the chairman knew one or the lawyers knew one. I didn't really have a choice in the selection, but it was good to know that they were all consistent.

Interviewer: They were there when you needed crisis communication.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm going to just ask you very briefly about digital communication on your job. We talked a little bit before—

Interviewee: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: -that this was before the social media—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: -just slightly before the advent of social media.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Were there other things that you used—email, for example—

Interviewee: Email, I tried to do as much interaction with the press as I could through email rather than through a telephone interview, so that we would have a record of it and what exactly was said, so that in case there was ever a dispute between us and the publication we could say to the reporter's manager this is what we said and this is how it came about, this is how it was re-engineered when it went to press. We did that a couple of times, actually, and it made a difference.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Obviously on the marketing communications side we used web and—we weren't really pushing out email too much to potential customers back then.

Interviewer: I'm sorry. I'm just gonna turn this off.

Interviewee: It was really more mail at that point. Email communication was pretty common, but we weren't really using email as a way to generate leads or to—maybe relationship building. I might send an email, like this reporter that I mentioned at *The Sun*, just to kind of touch base.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Did you have a website?

Interviewee: We did.

Interviewer: For your customers?

Interviewee: Yes. It would hold the press kit and so forth. That would be available.

Interviewer: What about an intranet?

Interviewee: We had an intranet.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. How did you use that?

Interviewee: I think we—we used it primarily for communica—to tell happy news to the employees about the company. Also to post things about benefits and so forth, which I wasn't that involved with.

Interviewer: Was there two way communication on the intranet?

Interviewee: No. Like the web at that point, it was static.

Interviewer: Okay. What was the most challenging project that you worked on?

Interviewee: I think the most challenging project I personally worked on was in 1998 or 1999, when the then chairman of the board and CEO—it was one person at that time—was being sued for sexual harassment, had gone to the board to re-up his contract, and the board failed to reach a majority. The two issues cascaded and the board went to war with each other. Each side went to the press. The happy news was delivered to me that I got to represent the company, and it was my job to figure out who the company was.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Interviewee: That was interesting.

Interviewer: Who gave you that message, that you were to represent the company?

Interviewee: The two factions of the board.

Interviewer: Both factions?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Hmm. Okay. *[Laughter]*. You were to decide who the company was.

Interviewee: I figured the company is the shareholders, so I—

Interviewer: You were there to represent—yeah.

Interviewee: Yeah. Yeah. It wasn't too hard to figure that out. I figured my main role was to try to provide factual information when reporters called. I had confidence that the stalemate would be resolved on the board, but—

Interviewer: Did they ask you for any other help in contacting employees who might have heard about this crisis or were listening to it in the news?

Interviewee: All of them knew. That's a good question. I can't remember what we did on the employee side. I'm pretty certain I helped to write a letter that basically came from the officers of the company to say, "It's business as usual. We're here to provide the best service that we can to our customers. It's our job to keep doing that. Don't speculate. Just keep working." Which of course, everyone speculated.

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. Of course they did. *[Laughter]*. Did you consult with the crisis people at this time?

Interviewee: That was before the crisis communica—

Interviewer: This was before crisis communication.

Interviewee: Yes. I think this was our lesson learned. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: I see. *[Laughs]*

Interviewee: It's my lesson learned anyways. I said I'm not gonna do this again unless I have some assistance.

Interviewer: What did you personally experience that made this crisis so hard as you went in to work every day?

Interviewee: I think for me the biggest challenge was I had to imagine what would be in the shareholders' interest. There wasn't really anyone to talk about that with.

Interviewer: Hmm. Wow. I can't even imagine this.

Interviewee: It didn't go on for long. It was about a month.

Interviewer: Okay. It was about one month.

Interviewee: Yeah, so it wasn't the end of the world.

Interviewer: Did you go back to the mission statement?

Interviewee: We had no mission statement at that time.

Interviewer: You had no mission statement.

Interviewee: We got all of these things after that moment.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: I think really what I learned was we couldn't go through this again without being a modern, organized company. We needed to have a mission statement that we could rely on, that we could refer the employees back to, that could remind ourselves about—I did—I shouldn't say I was totally alone. I had a counterpart on the investor relations side. He and I would collaborate.

Interviewer: Did you think about quitting during this time?

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: Okay. *[Laughter]*. It wasn't as if you felt that your ability to work, your reputation or anything was at stake here.

Interviewee: Working for a health insurer at that time your reputation was already at stake.

Interviewer: I see. *[Laughs]*

Interviewee: This was just kind of icing on the cake.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: I really did have naïve confidence that it would work out. I just felt like if the board members themselves had to resolve the issue of who is going to lead

the company, and if they could not then the shareholders were going to vote in new board members, so one way or another it would get resolved.

Interviewer: I see. Did the CEO stay on?

Interviewee: He resigned.

Interviewer: He did?

Interviewee: He eventually came to his senses and realized that he was not going to survive the sexual harassment charges, which apparently were—who knows if they were true but there was a settlement, so there had to have been something there.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: He wasn't gonna survive a divided board. Essentially the divided board—that's why we have the chairman and the CEO who were sharing responsibility for day-to-day management of the company. Each one came from a different section of the factions of the board.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: They ended up getting along very well. I worked well with both of them. I think they both had the same goals and vision for the company in mind in the end. It turned out a relatively happy story. It was a mess during—and I think the fact that they went through that as well as all the other senior officers went through that, that it became obvious to all of us that we needed to take public relations—and particularly crisis communications more seriously.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Did you see your access to those senior managers increase after this?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. When you—

Interviewee: Even to the board.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Interviewee: I didn't interact much with the board, but I never interacted with the board before this. After, I would say about once a year I would go and make a presentation to the board about what we were doing about marketing communications, and the direction that we were taking in terms of emphasizing what the company did well and getting their buy in.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. When all this was going on, did you notice people at any time who seemed to be excellent conflict resolvers, people who seemed to be especially trusted or worked as intermediaries or mediators?

Interviewee: I really tried to stay out of the conflict as much as possible, but I would say that the general counsel in the end was someone who worked very hard. I don't know if she did it herself or she had assistance with other firms that—she was clearly very good, worked very hard to bring about a resolution that would be acceptable to everyone. But because I wasn't there to represent either faction, I really tried to stay out of it.

Interviewer: You tried to remain neutral.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. I want to—you've just given me a really great overview of your work. I really appreciate it. I'm wondering if you could tell me about how conflicts within the organization across departments, or with people within a working group or team, how were they—could you explain a little more about those?

Interviewee: In a small company like COMPANY X, really at the end of the day the final call was made—at the time when the CEO and the chairman of the board was one man, he made the call. When they were divided between two people, the two of them had to agree. It was not unusual to have meetings where senior vice presidents would disagree with each other. The final call came down to the two of them.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Once the call was made there really was a culture within the company of saying, "Okay, we took our best shots. We laid out what we thought was the right way to go. Now it's all of our jobs to figure out how to implement whatever decision was made."

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: It's not really a complete democracy.

Interviewer: Would you say that the structure of the organization was fairly hierarchical?

Interviewee: No, I think for the most part it was fairly—I know that that sounds a little bit funny because the call was theirs—but I think that—it was unusual when they would make the call. Typically—I should tell you that the chairman of the board was a psychiatrist. His management was to try to build a consensus. It was really only if a consensus couldn't be build that they would throw their weight around. For the most part the culture was really to arrive at a consensus.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. In looking back at that sort of cultural standard of seeking consensus, do you think that good decisions came out of consensus?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: What went on that made those decisions good?

Interviewee: Because I think that every person who has responsibility for a certain area sees the world from the vantage point of their area. Often times decisions that need to be made—particularly in the area of how a company is being viewed by the outside world—everyone has their own set of lenses. By developing a consensus you're far more likely to get to a decision that will be easily understood and explainable to others.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Not that that always happened, but—

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. It was really in the attempt of people seeing through different lenses to come up with a way of describing the decision.

Interviewee: Or a decision that was going to not—if a decision was going to have an impact across areas, the decision that maximized the outcome for all of those areas, and minimized whatever negative outcomes there might be. In doing that, that makes it much easier to explain to the various parts of both internally—within the organization—as well as externally to the partners, who this policy direction makes sense for them. It wasn't just because the CEO and the chairman of the board wanted to make millions and millions of dollars. It had to do with delivering value to the customer.

Interviewer: Do you have any sense of where this culture came from? Did you get any sense of the history of the company that might have led to this vision of reaching consensus, trying to provide to all constituents, rather than—

Interviewee: I think it really grew out of the first chairman and CEO who was overthrown was pretty hierarchical. I think the board and the ultimate chairman and CEO felt that he had not listened well to others. I think it came out of that.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. A crisis really brought about a change in the culture.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you think people overall were pretty happy or satisfied—I won't say happy—pretty satisfied and have longevity with that organization.

Interviewee: Oh, people worked there for years. They were devastated when it was sold. Not only did they—it was very much a company of hiring from within families and friends. There were people who worked with me who left high school and came to work there.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I don't think that's very typical anymore.

Interviewer: No. I think you're really right. When problems arose in formal settings such as meetings, were these largely about how to use resources or were they often about other things, like—

Interviewee: I don't think they were so much about resources as they were about strategy.

Interviewer: Mmm. Okay.

Interviewee: What kind of benefit plans. If the medical group thought that introducing pre-authorization of certain service should be done to improve quality and control costs, did the sales people feel as if that was going to create backlash with the employer accounts and with members. Trying to figure out how best to move things forward to improve quality and lower costs, while at the same time trying to minimize the fallout. That would be when I would be brought in.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. You would be brought in when there was—

Interviewee: Already a decision made that it was a sucky decision. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: I see. Then they brought you in. When the decisions sucked they brought you in.

Interviewee: Yeah. From time to time they would ask me my opinion. It was other people who had the line responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the company. I don't think it's unusual for PR people to be brought in at the end.

Interviewer: *[Cross talk 0:47:48]* at that point. *[Laughs]*. Here's what we've decided.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Were there ever problems over how to understand somebody role in the organization? Apart from the large problem with the CEO chair—things about people's roles or cultural differences among the employees—was that ever a part of the conflict that you saw?

Interviewee: Not that I saw. Maybe the HR side, but not for me.

Interviewer: Among the people that you worked with, there was a lot of understanding of their roles, what they were supposed to be doing, who was responsible for what.

Interviewee: Yeah. It wasn't really—if there was a big problem and someone else needed—for example, if the sales team needed help reaching out to customers, they would bring in the member services staff and train them and get them to make the calls. It wasn't really—I don't think that there was sense in which—this is my area and no one shall cross the line. It was a small enough company that I think there was a commitment to the growth and the development of the company enough among all of the senior managers that they worked pretty well together.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. We've talked a little bit about some external groups where there might be conflict. You told me about the press, for example, and your providers. Were there other groups as well where conflict might come from?

Interviewee: Only government, in terms of—

Interviewer: State X state gov—yeah.

Interviewee: Or any of the governments, the federal government and anyone who was responsible either for us in terms of a contract or in terms of a legal provision.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. When that conflict would occur—for example with the state legislature—how did you deal with that?

Interviewee: That I think was part of the crisis management, really. Sometimes issues that came before the legislature were not picked up in a broader sense, so they didn't go much beyond the legislature itself. Typically I would go down and testify, and I would do traditional lobbying—meet with the individual members. I rarely took anyone else from the company with me. Sometimes I would. If it was a big issue—for example, the company made a determination that one point all what's called lower level ambulatory surgical procedures should be done not in a hospital but in a freestanding ambulatory surgery center in State X, because of the all-payor system. That then raised the hackles of lots of people. Doctors were worried about if they didn't have admitting privileges at a stand-alone am surg center that they would lose that business. Customers weren't really sure about why they could no longer go to hospitals. The legislature was worried that we were saying hospitals in State X were not good and we were undermining the all-payor system, which is sort of the Holy Grail.

In that case when we knew—when the company made that decision that was an example of crisis communications where we would have a whole plan laid out, and the same talking points that I would give to the sales people I would use when I

talked to the legislature. Out of that actually I think we got pretty good. We actually ended up convincing the press that what we were doing was fairly reasonable and rational. It went away as an issue.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: That's probably our only time of success.

Interviewer: That was a major success. *[Laughter]*. Uh-huh.

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Were there legislators that just by temperament or by their political stance, took an adversarial relationship with you?

Interviewee: For the most part I would say no, except that when COMPANY X was sold to United—actually there were two times in which I would say that started to change. The one was when Ehrlich was governor and they had the special session on medical malpractice. As a part of that bill the general assembly decided to impose a premium tax on HMOs that went into effect the following January. During that debate we told them that we would make it clear to our customers that we were increasing their rates two percent because of an action of the general assembly, which was sort of declaring war. We went to the insurance commissioner at the time to show him the letter that we intended to send out to all of our customers. He approved it. We sent it out. That was—it took us about a year and a half to recuperate from that. Very quickly thereafter the decision was made to sell the company. The CEO and the chairman—it was covered in the press. This was a moment of crisis management, I suppose, but it was a little difficult to control—were each going to walk away with over $60 million dollars.

Interviewer: Oh, my gosh! Wow.

Interviewee: The legislature was—there were members of the general assembly for whom it was—it was a bad session. Those were the only two times.

Interviewer: When you say it took the organization two years to recover, do you mean their reputation—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: -with the legislature.

Interviewee: Yes. They felt as if—look, it's a democratic legislature, it was a republican governor. They felt like we had helped the republican governor and hurt them. It was very—not very partisan.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Was there a reputation management person in the company, or was that your job?

Interviewee: I think it was probably everybody's job.

Interviewer: I see. It wasn't put into a specific—

Interviewee: No. No. Maybe, again, because it's a small company.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: And because kind of PR, crisis management—or PR really grew out of problems. It wasn't like they were saying to themselves, "We have a brand and we need to protect the brand—

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. Okay.

Interviewee: -*[laughs]*, and how do we do that going forward?"

Interviewer: Maybe that wasn't—do you think that was as common on the minds of managers, this branding and—

Interviewee: No.

Interviewer: No.

Interviewee: I think for the most part it was really—I would say that they understood the brand, because they certainly felt as if they hurt in the marketplace because they didn't have Blue Cross/Blue Shield brand. They knew that there was a brand but I think that they felt that unless you were Blue Cross/Blue Shield, really the only thing that mattered was price.

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: The notion of reputation and developing a brand I think came about probably around the time as the company was being sold. Certainly United has that view, and had large teams of people doing what you're suggesting. I was there for only a short period of time.

Interviewer: In talking about—let me just go on with my questions. How much of your job do you think dealt with conflict resolution—not just resolving everyday problems—conflict resolution and negotiation, overall? About what percentage of your time did you devote to that?

Interviewee: You mean internal or external?

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Interviewer: In either, you could divide it if you wanted.

Interviewee: Externally say I would say about 75 percent, internally maybe 10.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Okay. That's great. Thank you. When you were resolving conflicts, what were the kinds of channels? You mentioned using email with newspapers, for example. I don't wanna—you could change that if you want. What other channels did you generally use when a conflict situation came up?

Interviewee: If it was a conflict that we anticipated we would, again, develop a communication plan that typically involved, at a time certain, having the sales people start calling large accounts. Me and my staff making sure that the member services group understood the talking points that we gave them to be ready to answer calls. Maybe provider networks, to start calling the major groups. Then I would call legislators who—if it was statewide we'd call the most important ones. If it was something that involved a particular area of the state we would call them ahead of time.

Interviewer: Calling was really important.

Interviewee: Calling was really important.

Interviewer: You wanted to have this—you wanted to have a two-way conversation.

Interviewee: Yes. Yeah. We really tried hard not to have anyone read something in the newspaper first, and not to receive a letter about it. With members we would—from time to time when you have a million members it's not really possible to call them. If they needed to be told, for example, that a provider was no longer available to them on a date certain, that would have to be done by mail. All of that would be part of the communication plan.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Were there times when you felt you had to have face-to-face communication with people?

Interviewee: Maybe only really with regulators. Maybe the sales people felt they needed to do it, but for me personally I would say just the regulators. Even there I think for the most part a phone call was adequate. If they felt that the conversation didn't' satisfy their questions, or if once whatever the situation was came out in the press and they started receiving more phone calls, we would go in. On a proactive basis we didn't really set up meetings.

Interviewer: Do you think that there was some advantage to a telephone conversation over a face-to-face meeting?

Interviewee: It's short.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: A face-to-face meeting usually means something more formal, where you're taking more people. A phone call, if someone wants to box you into a corner it's a little bit easier to get out of it.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. *[Laughs]*. Okay. Did you ever resolve conflicts through email?

Interviewee: No. I would say that conflicts were never resolved over email.

Interviewer: What wasn't that a good?

Interviewee: In the—look, when it's a conflict with—when it's a press report that's going out, and the reporter is going to report it in whatever way they're going to report it on, the email doesn't give you a sense of how they're actually going to pitch the story. Whereas if you have the phone conversation with them and listen to their line of question you can pretty much predict how the story will be written.

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: In the case of COMPANY X, I always figured it was going to be written in a way that wasn't gonna be flattering, so it wasn't really all that important. But again, I think the email doesn't allow for there to be—the email is good in terms of saying, "Hey, here's a problem that has come up. Here's our response to the problem." It doesn't allow for a dialog, which in my mind is—if you're trying to resolve the problem, it requires a conversation.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. You were getting information through the telephone, things about maybe attitude—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: I don't know. You were getting other information from this—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: -two-way interchange.

Interviewee: Yes. Yeah. Maybe you can get it from email, particularly if someone sends you an email that has a long list of questions you can kind of see what the bias might be. I think it's easier to get it—you can hear pauses in the cadence of their language, sighing, if they're scandalized by something.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. *[Cross talk 1:03:19] [Laughs]*

Interviewee: Face-to-face you can get that better, then maybe it's a little bit too close. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. It could be. Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about what qualities you bring as a professional that really help you to resolve conflict?

Interviewee: Oh, that's a tough one. I just think I've put in 20,000 hours.

Interviewer: Let me get—*[laughs]*—let me get you some more water while we are—while you're—

Interviewee: I think about that.

Interviewer: - mulling over this question about what you bring. Because clearly you're very good at what you do. You dealt with a lot of conflict.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: You did have some—

Interviewee: I don't know, really. I certainly wasn't trained for this. I didn't go to—I don't have a degree in communication or public relations. I've got a degree in sociology. Maybe it just—I lived in a very messy family and maybe that was it. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: Ah-ha. *[Laughs]*.

Interviewee: Maybe the truth is I think learned how to learn through graduate school. I got thrust into this situation. I had resources available to me through pretty skilled media experts, conflict management, crisis management. Maybe just the ability to be able to act like a student, to be able to go into a student role and to listen to the advice that they're giving and not feel as if my ego was being destroyed because someone else was saying something else to me.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Personality, one thing you said that you don't like maybe a lot of stressful interaction. Is that correct?

Interviewee: Yeah, I don't like a lot of stressful interaction.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: I would like to—I don't like people to walk away feeling angry. I guess I'm back to the sort of—we've all got a difference of opinion—everybody sees things in a slightly different way. My view of the world may be what I think is the

best but maybe objectively it isn't, and if we all just sit around and talk about it we can figure out a way to reach a conclusion that is better.

Interviewer: Are there people you encountered on your job who didn't respond to that perception, if we sit down we can work it out?

Interviewee: Mm-mmm.

Interviewer: No. You mentioned these consultants that you worked with. Did you consider them mentors as you were working with them?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Was there someone in particular that you thought was very skilled and you sort of wanted to say, "I'd like to be like that person?"

Interviewee: Yeah. There was this—now I can't remember her name, it's been so long—but, yeah, there was one women that I thought was very good. We used her for the longest time, 'til she got too busy for us. By that time I think I had a pretty good sense of what to do, and so was not using her so much and was just kind of saying to her, "Here's how I think I'm gonna respond to it, what do you think? How does that sound?"

Interviewer: What made her good?

Interviewee: All she did in her professional life was to develop crisis communication plans for very, very messy corporate situations. She worked with a lot of large companies.

Interviewer: It was her experiences that—

Interviewee: It was her—yeah. Her experience and I think she was very calm in the face of a storm, so she was—I think that she was calming both to me and to other people within the company. I don't think it's possible to do crisis communications without being calm. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. You brought that same calmness?

Interviewee: I was not as calm.

Interviewer: You were not as calm? *[Laughs]*

Interviewee: No. I would be a bit more hysterical.

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. Do you think the hyster—

Interviewee: I had to calm myself down.

Interviewer: You did.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Would you leave a meeting and calm yourself, or just say—

Interviewee: No. It was not so much a meeting it was just I would get very anxious whenever I had to speak to a reporter. I really had to spend a lot of time thinking and rehearsing and practicing what I was gonna say before I would call them back. I didn't want them to hear anxiety in my voice.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Lots of times I thought the company was wrong on a personal basis, but it wasn't my job to represent my personal views. That can be stressful.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. When you thought the company was wrong, did you try to craft mess—did you try to understand why that decision had been made?

Interviewee: I usually understood it.

Interviewer: You understood it.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: What would be at the basis of that decision?

Interviewee: Money.

Interviewer: It was when profit was the motive.

Interviewee: It was always money.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Do you think that in some way influences—not you particularly—but influences PR practitioners over the course of their careers, do you think they get accustomed to working for profit-seeking clients? How do you think that affects their longevity in the profession? Or affects them?

Interviewee: I think they understand the profit motive. I think they're pretty— when—at least the consultants that we used—when they come in they're pretty blunt about both the short-term and the long-term profit issue, and that making decisions like this emphasize short-term profitability, not long-term. They're pretty blunt.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: But, they also have to keep their jobs, so I don't think—and they're not in a position to make that call. I think they try to explain the difference between short-term profitability and long-term profitability to help management reflect on that. Again, each situation is different, and sometimes managers are willing to take a longer-term view, and other times they're not. They usually have pretty sound business reasons for doing that. Sometimes it's sad because they're trying to improve their negotiating position with another partner.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Sometimes what seems like an irrational decision is really not all that irrational.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. There is a roll for public relations people to set out the consequences of decisions?

Interviewee: Oh, absolutely. Oh, yeah. Yeah. I think you have to learn to do that in a very—I think as a practitioner starting out that's hard—you have to learn how to communicate that without seeming as if you are a know-it-all, or are saying that the person is stupid or that they don't care. I do think that you have to learn how to pitch that from within the culture of the organization. I do think that that—if a PR person or a communications person can't do that, I don't know that they will bring much value over time.

Interviewer: That is a way of adding value.

Interviewee: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Are there other ways that you think PR people can add value?

Interviewee: Again, I think that PR people are sort of like social scientist, they can see beyond one department or another. They will get to interact with the various departments and different constituencies within their professional years. That gives them a global view that other executives don't always have. I think that's valuable.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I think it helps—again, you have to learn how to do it, to say to a provider networks person, "Okay, it may feel good to you to go to war with Hopkins, but really, is this—*[laughs]*—the best time to do that. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: And it didn't work. *[Laughter]*

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: The last time. *[Laughter]*

Interviewee: Let's reflect that. Can I have this one? *[Laughter]*

Interviewer: Yes. *[Laughter]*. Do you think when you were being evaluated it was recognized that you were a good negotiator, that you were good at helping resolve conflict, or at least managing conflict?

Interviewee: I think that for the most part I was evaluated almost completely on my—on the job that I did with the legislature. Everything else was considered like icing on the cake.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: That was my—I was brought in to primarily do that, and I got these other jobs layered on. I don't think I ever got out of that.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Was there recognition that this was a kind of negotiating role that you had—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: So that was accepted—

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: -that that's what you should be doing when you went up there.

Interviewee: Yes. Yes. No one said to me, "Say no and stop it from happening." I think that they—and I guess I should—that I think was unusual I think about this company. It was because the guy who was the CEO had himself been a lobbyist before.

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: I think between the psychiatrist who wants people to be happy, and the guy who was a lobbyist, I think that they—the two of them themselves intuitively understood negotiations and the important role of negotiations in all spheres. I don't know that that's so true. I wasn't close enough to the top level of management to know if it was true after the merger, but the middle level management I don't think had that same kind of commitment that the COMPANY X culture had.

Interviewer: Hmm. In looking back at that, is that where you think this vision has to come from, is the top?

Interviewee: Yes. It's almost impossible to do if the top doesn't—you need somebody within the organization to back you. I think it is a dangerous thing to go into an organization and to try to be a change agent unless you have some backing.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Whatever job you're taking, you just have to understand, I think—if you're someone who wants to go into PR and help the company view their position in the world differently and modify how they're doing that, you need to know that the executives are behind you.

Interviewer: Is that how you would describe one of the great values that you added to COMPANY X, was the change that you were able to bring during crises or—

Interviewee: I don't know that I was able to bring cha—about how we—

Interviewer: How you operate.

Interviewee: Yeah, but I think it was really—I wish I could take credit for it but I think it was obvious to everyone. It was a decision to do more on crisis management that was recognized across the board. Essentially they said, "Okay, you get to do it." That was really only decision, who was gonna do it.

Interviewer: I have a feeling you're being far too modest here. *[Laughter]*. This is the moment for bragging. *[Laughter]*. I wanna ask you that question again, thought. What personally do you think you bring? Because people at some level have to trust you.

Interviewee: Yeah. I think people like me. I don't think people see me as a threat. I think they recognize that I'm a smart person. They listen to what I have to say. It happens organically over time. Organically over time if you've been saying something and you put together a plan of action with all of the material behind it, and it results in not losing all your customers, you gain some credibility. I don't think it is anything that comes to somebody just—you're peers look at you and say, "Oh, yes, we can organically trust you." You have to deliver something, but you don't have to deliver a big thing. If you deliver small things and then you don't screw up on the big thing, you're usually okay.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Interviewee: For me, I had a lot of credibility from the negotiation that I did in the legislature. Because I was able to do that, that translated into, "Well, if she can do that there, then she certainly can talk to a reporter," or, "She can certainly figure out talking to legislators and dealing with all the constituencies there, they're not much different than the employer groups that we would talk to or the provider groups that

we would talk to. Her experience there is gonna be relevant in these other settings."
I think I brought that credibility.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. For many PR practitioners, do you think it's always clear what the top job they are supposed to do is?

Interviewee: I don't know. I don't know. I'd say if they don't know it's a problem.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Have you seen a difference in the way men and women deal with conflict or work to resolve conflict?

Interviewee: I think women can tend to be a big whiney.

Interviewer: *[Laughs]*. Okay. Could you explain?

Interviewee: Women can sort of get hysterical and get animated. Of course men can do that, too. Resolving conflict takes the ability to be able to agree for a moment to step outside of your comfort zone and listen to someone else. I don't know if it's so much men and women.

Interviewer: It is that ability to step outside.

Interviewee: And listen.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Many people have talked to me about listening. I'm not sure what that means. What does it mean? What is the quality of listening that really makes the difference?

Interviewee: Some people think that listening means like you never cut off the other person and you let them talk all the time. I am not like that. I cut people off. I interrupt them. To me listening is more that you're not just hearing the person, you're trying to understand what that person is saying. You're trying to get to the core, the essence of what's driving them to say whatever it is that they're saying. You have to understand their problem. You have to listen enough to what they're saying to identify the problem, to know why they think it's a problem, and then talk to them about why it is that this problem that they perceive is not a problem from the point of view of the company or the point of view of the public at large, and how do we get to the point of keeping the common goal.

I would do this with providers all the time. They would say, "You're killing my patients because you're not letting them get these am surgery—lower-level ambulatory surgery in hospitals." Then, okay, really? Are we? Let's think about it. You wanna be able to get the surgery scheduled within a timely manner within your day. Your patients want to have things scheduled timely. They wanna get out. They wanna get about their lives. They don't want any repercussions. Can't this all be done outside of the hospital? You have to I think understand the topic enough as

well. Listen to somebody else to be able to say, "Okay, but can't we—your problem is you don't think that you can accomplish the goals that you've set out for yourself. Isn't it really that you can accomplish those goals, you might just have to do it in a slightly different way. Is that really that bad?"

Interviewer: When you talked to these providers, did you generally walk away with a good outcome, that they felt they were getting—their goals were being achieved?

Interviewee: It depended. Sometimes I was called the princess of darkness. Sometimes I was called the princess of light. It really depended.

Interviewer: What made the difference between being darkness and light?

Interviewee: I think—darkness meant I got them to agree that they could accomplish—that really what they were arguing for was not necessarily—wasn't really necessary. They didn't like that. If I was Princess of Light, it was that I said to them, "Okay, let's accomplish it this way," and the company would change and they would change. Nobody wants to change. Nobody wants to be forced to have to do things.

Interviewer: In the lightness it seemed more like win/win?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: In darkness it'd be more like you won, they lost.

Interviewee: *[Laughs]*. They lost, yeah. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: I see.

Interviewee: That's probably normal, right?

Interviewer: Yes. *[Laughter]*. When you went in to these—I find these fascinating—when you went in to these discussions, when would you know that that person was going to continue to see you as the princess of darkness?

Interviewee: I knew before I walked in because I knew how much latitude I actually had. If I had latitude—when I was working for the company I didn't have much latitude. I only became the princess of lightness when I went to work for government.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: There I was really empowered to do what I thought was the right thing to do.

Interviewer: I see. This is really—so when you don't have a lot of wiggle room to negotiate, you end up being princess of darkness. I see. Is this the power that you bring to negotiate more broadly? Does that make a difference?

Interviewee: I think the more independence you have in negotiation, the more ability you have to be able to modify the company's decision, the better off you are. That's a rare company that will allow an employee to walk in to a negotiation. Maybe in a legal setting they would be willing to do that, but PR would have to be— in my mind it would have to be a really catastrophic situation, for them to say to a PR person, "Yes, we're going to empower you to overturn executive decisions." I just don't see that as happening. I don't think PR people have that kind of status within a company.

Interviewer: When you walked in with these negotiations, and you knew your party, your provider party was not gonna like it but was ultimately was going to have to go along with it, what did you want to accomplish?

Interviewee: Basically to get them to no longer say mean things about the company to their patients. That was essentially it. Or no longer complain before the legislature. Or if they'd ask for an audit from a regulator that they would back off.

Interviewer: It was more laying out a rational case.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Most of the time they didn't agree, like a legislator would or an employer group would.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: I think it's hard in two-way negotiations to get each party to change their mind. It usually takes having a third party there. It tilts the balance.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Would you have a mediator there at times?

Interviewee: Not a mediator but—when you're before the legislature I supposed is the mediator.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Even though it could be implied in this conversation that there were these mediators out there—

Interviewee: Right.

Interviewer: -the legislature and the—yes.

Interviewee: The public opinion, right, is a mediator of sorts. The reporter is asking you a question, is asking other people questions, and it's gonna be the court of public opinion that makes the call as to which side was right. In that court of opinion, your job as a PR person is to make sure that the company—at least—if the people don't agree at least they say, "Okay, they did it for the right reasons."

Interviewer: Ah-ha.

Interviewee: It wasn't just 'cause they wanted to walk away with $60 million. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: Uh-huh. Yeah. *[Laughs]*. When these providers would say, "You're killing my patient," did you at least want them to get over that particular hurdle of thought?

Interviewee: Yeah. Normally by the time—yeah, but typically they weren't. *[Cross talk 1:29:04]*. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: They didn't get over that. *[Laughs]*

Interviewee: No. *[Laughs]*. There was mainly—they'd say, "You're killing my client," then you'd fall back on, "Look, you have an appeals process, and did you use the appeals process," or "You went through the appeals process and we went it to an independent medical expert that the state's sanctioned and said they are in fact independent. That independent medical expert didn't agree with you. What are we supposed to do? Apparently you're doing things that we have a responsibility to make sure that things are medically necessary."   Trying to make them look like they are the person who was wrong.

Interviewer: Uh-huh. *[Laughter]*

Interviewee: Harder to do.

Interviewer: Do you think that just facing the enemy and having a conversation did have salutatory affect?

Interviewee: Yeah, I do.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: Yeah, I do. The chairman of the company was a psychiatrist, so when things got really bad he would go an speak to providers, because after all, he's a doctor. He would say, "I know exactly what you're talking about."

Interviewer: Yeah. What is so fascinating about this is this is like where the rubber meets the road in this. So much emotion on the part of the patients. It really seems like just an extreme situation of conflict.

Interviewee: Yeah. Or a lot of conflicts.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Interviewee: I think by the end, really, the ability to be able to deal with individual conflicts, because of this appeals process that now is done around the country, but State X was one of the first. Really, individual cases are handled pretty well. People might not be happy at the end of the day, but if they feel as if at least they have a shot and that there's someone who's not in the company who's looking at their case.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. This mediation process really was essential to—

Interviewee: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: -resolving—at least having people to burn one another every day *[cross talk 1:31:20]*

Interviewee: Right. Right, right, right. *[Laughs]*

Interviewer: Those are all the questions I have. I know you might wanna go here and I wanna be sure and get done. Is there any question I didn't ask you that you wish I had?

Interviewee: No, I think it was pretty—

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything you'd like to add about public relations people working to resolve conflicts, or about their role in conflict?

Interviewee: No. I think that if I had actually been trained in this, I think I probably would have spent some time trying to take some classes in decision sciences, to understand about just how people make decisions. Because it is important to be able to influence—as a PR person, particularly in some companies where you're not at a level that's equal to the senior executives, you really do have to understand how those senior executives make decisions, and how you as a subordinate can try to influence those decisions. Again, it may be that during a crisis—you're handed the crisis, right. But if you handle the crisis well, that is an opening then to go back and say, "Okay, now as we deconstruct what happened, what might we have done to have avoided this?" Being able to talk about it in a way that a business person understands, not a social scientist, not a touchy-feely person, be able to put in in business terms I think is important.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. Understanding the business context—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: How those people are making the decision—

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: -and how they can be influenced—

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: -would be really useful.

Interviewee: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: Really useful.

Interviewee: If their goal at the end of the day is to walk away with $60 million, you gotta be able to show that if they did things differently they'd walk away with 100 rather than 60. You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Mm-hmm.

Interviewee: Otherwise they're just gonna say—to me I think that would be—it's a terribly frustrating position—I've been there—to just always be responding. It's not fun.

Interviewer: Always be responding—

Interviewee: I mean in other words the crisis is handed to you—

Interviewer: To crisis, yeah.

Interviewee: I felt much better when I was brought—I didn't always have the call but at least I understood how we got there.

Interviewer: Okay. If there are any other things that you come up with, "Oh, I wish I'd told Susan that"—

Interviewee: I will tell you.

Interviewer: I do have to have you fill in a form before you leave.

Interviewee: Okay.

Interviewer: I feel sorry that we didn't have a little more time here to get to know one another.

Interviewee: I know. I thought it was—I thought, ohhh.

Interviewer: That's okay.

Interviewee: -but then these guys—

Interviewer: No, this is great.

Interviewee: -wanna do this stuff about mandated benefits.

Interviewer: No, no, no. I understand. But we should get together again.

Interviewee: Yes. Relations or communications, I would say probably 11. You don't need me to sign this.

Interviewer: No. That's fine. It's completely confidential.

Interviewee: Okay. All right. Can I *[cross talk 1:35:16]*

Interviewer: Can I give you an apple to take with you?

Interviewee: No, no, no. I'm good. Thank you.

Interviewer: Chips? A bottle of water?

Interviewee: No, I'm good. I'm just gonna go home and get back on the phone again.

Interviewer: Okay. Okay.

Interviewee: The bane of my existence.

Interviewer: I also wanted to know whether you'd be interested in maybe coming to some of our PRSA meetings.

Interviewee: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: That'd be great. I think I would be very interested in doing that.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: If you let me know when they are I'll definitely—

Interviewer: I will. Some of them you might just think, "This has nothing to do with me," but others you might say are really interesting.

Interviewee: *[Cross talk 1:35:48]* always ready to learn something new.

Interviewer: So *[cross talk 1:35:50] [Laughter]*. Thank you so much.

Interviewee: Thank you. Thanks for the lunch.

Interviewer: You can tell me—I'm so happy with this, I can't tell you—

Interviewee: I hope it helps.

Interviewer: It does. It does. If you'd like to use the bathroom or—you're good to go?

Interviewee: No, no. I'm good.

Interviewer: Okay.

Interviewee: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: Thank you. I hope to see you again soon.

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: I'll send you those PRSA things.

Interviewee: Great. That'll be good. I'll look forward to it.

Interviewer: Okay.

[End of audio]

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