Cognitive communication competence within public relations practitioners: Examining gender differences between technicians and managers

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Abstract

This study examines gender differences within public relations practitioners. Of specific interest was the role that cognitive communication competence played within public relations managers and public relations technicians. Public relations practitioners completed a questionnaire that included the Duran and Spitzberg’s [Duran, R. L., & Spitzberg, B. H. (1995). Toward the development and validation of a measure of cognitive communication competence. Communication Quarterly, 43(3), 259–275] Cognitive Communication Competence Scale. Participants self-identified whether they were a technician or a manager. Results showed that male public relations managers had significantly higher cognitive communication competence than male public relations technicians. However, the hypothesis that female public relations managers would have higher cognitive communication competence than female public relations technicians was not supported. Also, this study found no significant gender differences with levels of cognitive communication competence. However, female technicians have significantly higher cognitive communication competence than male technicians.

Keywords: Public relations roles; Cognitive communication competence; Communication competence

Gender has continued to play a significant role in research into the public relations profession for more than 15 years. It is well documented and widely accepted that gender inequities in the form of salary, promotion, and role designations exist in the public relations field (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998). This is perhaps even more marked a concern as women represent more than 70% of working public relations professionals (PRSA/IABC Salary Survey, 2000, p.23).

1. Literature review

Public relations is a profession wherein roles of expertise and responsibility exist. Early investigation into the kinds of work performed by public relations professionals identified four specific roles: the expert prescriber, the

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communication facilitator, the problem-solver, and the communication technician (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Broom & Smith, 1979). After extensive additional research it was concluded that the roles of expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem-solver all represented strategic, managerial capabilities. Consequently, the four roles could be collapsed into two categories of work activities: manager and technician (Dozier, 1992; Toth & Grunig, 1993).

Additional investigation suggested that a third role, the agency role, exists (Toth et al., 1998). This third dimension includes many of the job duties that were originally included in the expert prescriber but none of the job activities defined in the role of technician.

Toth et al. (1998) identified the following as work activities included in the managerial-based roles of manager and agency: planning and managing public relations programs, implementing new programs, planning and managing budgets, evaluating program results, counseling management, and supervising the work of others. Technician activities included disseminating messages, writing, editing, and producing messages, making media contacts and implementing the decisions made by others.

Public relations professionals functioning as managers have responsibilities that likely call for a sophisticated, broad range of communication skills. Communication decisions, program design and management, and meeting with peers, executives, and clients, entail sophisticated, effective interpersonal and negotiation communication skills.

While good communication skills are no doubt important to a PR technician, the job activities often allow for a lower level of functional communication behaviors. Disseminating messages, writing, editing, and producing messages, making media contacts and implementing the decisions made by others is often viewed as less strategic, but not less important, than the work that is done by managers.

While this dichotomy of managers and technicians is frequently used to categorize public relations practitioners, it has come under scrutiny. Over simplification (Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000) and evolving professional roles (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) are two concerns that researchers have examined. A recent study of public relations practitioners in the United Kingdom (Moss, Newman, & DeSanto, 2005) examined what work managers actually do. They developed a five-dimensional model that included overlap work between managers and technicians. This gives credence to the growing belief that public relations operates in a less vertical and more horizontal hierarchy. While it is safe to assume that there are not two mutually exclusive roles in the practice of public relations, it can also be assumed that most managers need a set of skills that is in addition to the skills required for more technician-based work.

While women represent the majority of PR practitioners, they are over represented in the role of technician and under represented in the manager/agency roles. It has been reported that 40 percent of managerial positions in public relations, advertising, and marketing are held by women (Wootton, 1997).

Public relations scholars Aldoory and Toth (2002) recently investigated possible theory-based explanations for gender inequities by surveying 864 practitioners and then using six focus groups to assist in interpreting the survey findings. Discussions that focused on promotion helped the researchers identify eight factors that could explain why gender differences exist. These were: (1) socialization; (2) sex discrimination and sexism; (3) unrealistic expectations of women who balance family and work; (4) biological determinism; (5) skill differentials; (6) favoritism toward men due to their low numbers; (7) type of organization influences access to promotion; and (8) gender discrepancies in promotion do not exist (p. 123).

1.1. Skills

Past research has shown there can be little doubt that the skills needed to perform effectively as a manager are different from the skills of a technician. Managers need to be able to exhibit strategic communication skills in their interpersonal communication interactions both within and outside their organizations. While a technician needs solid communication skills to focus on disseminating information, writing and editing, the work activities of a manager generally require a higher level of interpersonal communication competence (Moss et al., 2005).

If women in public relations are having trouble making the leap from technician to manager because they do not have the skills needed for the positions, it makes sense that those skills involve the ability to engage in highly effective interpersonal communication interactions as writing, editing and disseminating information are more often the responsibilities of technicians. Consequently, communication competence should be a worthwhile concept to investigate.
2. Communication competence

Communication competence has been the source of scholarly inquiry and disagreement since the early days of communication research. While debate on the topic continues to be part of the communication competence research landscape, there has been general agreement that whatever else communication competence may or may not be, it does have three domains—affective, cognitive and psycho-motor (Spitzberg, 1983, 1990). Additionally, while communication competence has been conceptualized in several ways, adaptability has become a universal component in defining the concept (Hale & Delia, 1976).

In his investigation of the cognitive communication process, Greene (1984) identified two types of knowledge that are important components in effective communication—conceptual and procedural. He goes on to state that individuals develop procedural knowledge based on past outcomes and experiences in communication events and are able, to varying degrees, cognitively use that ever-growing repository in subsequent communication interactions.

Duran and Spitzberg (1995) identified three components of the cognitive process involved in communication: (1) perception and anticipation of situational variables; (2) monitoring of the interaction as it takes place; and (3) reflection immediately following the interaction. Using this conceptualization of the cognitive process, the researchers developed and tested a measure of cognitive communication competence which included five separate mental activities present in successful communication interactions: (1) planning cognitions which include mental rehearsal of communication; (2) presence cognitions or awareness of how participants are reacting to the encounter; (3) modeling cognitions which deal with the ability to use contextual variables; (4) reflective cognitions which provide assessment of the encounter and ways to use that experience for future communication interactions; and (5) consequence cognitions which is a person’s assessment of the effects of his or her own performance in the communication encounter (Duran & Spitzberg, 1995). The results of their work supported a “temporal sequences of communication cognitions—cognitive considerations prior to, during, and after social interactions” that “contributes to the development and refinement of an effective social repertoire” (p. 272).

3. Hypotheses

Research has identified two major job functions in the public relations profession—managers and technicians and while there often can be some overlap depending on job circumstances, the core job activities identified with each of the positions tend to be quite different.

An argument put forth to help explain the inequities in the hiring and promotion of women is that they lack the skills required for manager positions. It is logical to assume that these skills include the necessary level of cognitive communication competence needed to manage the complex, sensitive communication encounters that are part of managerial job activities. To investigate the role that cognitive communication competence plays in defining skill sets and its impact on gender inequities in public relations the following hypotheses were developed:

**H1.** Public relations managers will have significantly higher cognitive communication competence than public relations technicians.

**H2.** Male public relations managers will have significantly higher cognitive communication competence than male public relations technicians.

**H3.** Female public relations managers will have significantly higher cognitive communication competence than female public relations technicians.

**RQ1.** Is there a significant difference between males and females and levels of cognitive communication competence in public relations practitioners?

**RQ2.** Is there a significant difference between male and female technicians and levels of cognitive communication competence?

**RQ3.** Is there a significant difference between male and female managers and levels of cognitive communication competence?
4. Method

This study proposed that there would be a significant difference in cognitive communication competence between public relations managers and public relations technicians. A quantitative survey was distributed to 579 public relations professions, members of Ohio chapters of the Public Relations Society of America. One hundred and ninety three of the surveys were returned \((n = 193)\) for a participation rate of 33 percent.

4.1. Participants

Participants included 65 (33.7 percent) males and 128 (66.3 percent) females. Participants were asked to self-select their own job classification based on brief descriptions. Almost half of the participants self-identified themselves as a technician \((n = 91; 47.1\) percent) defined as “I handle the aspects of producing public relations materials, including brochures, pamphlets and/or other publication, maintain media contacts and write press releases”. The remaining participants identified themselves as a manager \((n = 98; 50.8\) percent) defined as “I plan and recommend courses of action for solving public relations problems, diagnose public relations problems and explain them to others, and take responsibility for the success or failure of my organization’s/clients’ public relations program”. The years of experience as a public relations practitioner ranged from 1 to 40 years, with 56.8 percent \((n = 100)\) of the sample working 10 years or less and 43.2 percent \((n = 93)\) of the sample working in the public relations industry more than 10 years. Data were collected on salary of the public relations practitioners and 38.9 percent of the sample indicated that they make below $49,000 \((n = 75)\), 33.2 percent make $50,000–74,999 \((n = 64)\), 12.4 percent make $75,000–99,999 \((n = 24)\) and finally, 12.4 percent make more than $100,000 \((n = 24)\).

4.2. Instrument

Duran and Spitzberg’s (1995) Cognitive Communication Competence Scale (CCCS) was used to measures cognitive communication competence. This scale is composed of 27-items. These items are Likert-type items with answer categories ranging from “never true of me” (1) to “always true of me” (5). There are five dimensions: (1) planning cognitions (“Before a conversation I think about what people might be talking about”); (2) presence cognitions (“During a conversation, I am aware of when a topic is going nowhere”); (3) modeling cognitions (“When I first enter a new situation I watch who is talking to whom”); (4) reflection cognitions (“After a conversation I think about what the other person thought of me”); and (5) consequence cognitions (“Generally, I think about how other might interpret what I say”).

4.3. Principle components analysis and reliability

A principle components analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was employed to confirm the factors. For a factor to be retained at least two items must “load” on the factor and for an item to “load” on a factor the minimal item coefficient was set at \(\pm 0.60\) and it must not appear on any other factor loading greater than \(\pm 0.40\). The planning cognitions factor \((\alpha = 0.64)\) retained four items. The presence cognitions \((\alpha = 0.63)\) retained three items. The modeling cognitions did not retain any items. The reflection cognition \((\alpha = 0.87)\) retained 5-items. The consequence cognitions \((\alpha = 0.76)\) retained three items (see Appendix A for full rotated component matrix).

5. Results

Cognitive communication competence seems to be a necessary component for managers in public relations. This study set out to measure the extent to which there is a difference between cognitive communication competence between public relations managers and technicians. Three hypotheses and three research questions were developed to examine if there are any gender difference between public relations roles and levels of cognitive communication competence.

Hypothesis one predicted that public relations managers would have higher cognitive communication competence than public relations technicians. This hypothesis was supported \((t(181) = -2.512, p < .013)\). The mean for the public relations managers was 3.97 and the mean for the public relations technicians was 3.81.
Hypothesis two predicated that male public relations managers would have higher cognitive communication competence than male public relations technicians. This hypothesis was supported \((t(59) = -2.906, p < .005)\). The mean for the male managers was 3.96 and the mean for the male technicians was 3.65.

Hypothesis three predicted female public relations managers would have higher cognitive communication competence than female public relations technicians. This hypothesis was not supported \((t(120) = -1.237, p < .219)\). The mean for the female managers was 3.97 and the mean for the female technicians were 3.88.

The first research question sought to determine the differences, if any, between gender and levels of cognitive communication competence with public relations practitioners. A \(t\)-test was used to determine that there are no differences \((t(185) = -1.582, p < .115)\). The mean for the females was 3.93 and the mean for the males was 3.83.

The second research question sought to determine the differences, if any, between male and female technicians and levels of cognitive communication competence. A \(t\)-test \((t(86) = -2.583, p < .011)\) revealed that females (mean = 3.89) have significantly higher cognitive communication competence than males (mean = 3.66).

The last research question sought to determine the differences, if any, between male and female managers and levels of cognitive communication competence. A \(t\)-test found no significant differences \((t(93) = -.193, p < .848)\) between male managers’ (mean = 3.96) cognitive communication competence and female managers’ (mean = 3.97) cognitive communication competence.

6. Discussion

The results of this investigation demonstrate that cognitive communication competency (CCC) fits into the equation of skills that public relations professionals need to do their jobs, whether they are managers or technicians. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that although managers are higher in CCC than technicians in general, and although male managers are significantly higher in CCC than male technicians, there is no significant difference between female managers and female technicians in CCC. Also, female technicians have significantly higher CCC than male technicians. Therefore, this study suggests that females have the necessary communication skills for promotion. However, gender inequities in the public relations industry still exist.

Aldoory and Toth (2002), in their search for a theory-based explanation for gender inequities in the public relations profession, identified eight factors that study participants felt could explain the gender differences in salaries, promotions and role designations. This study investigated the skills factor. The results of this study give quantitative support to the notion that something besides lack of communication skills is holding women back from rising through the ranks in the PR profession.

On the plus side, female and male managers’ scores on CCC did not vary significantly so at least we can take comfort in knowing that the people in management appear to hold certain communication skills in common and in higher quantities than those who work as technicians who are traditionally less well-seasoned, generally given fewer and less complex responsibilities and make less money. The results of the \(t\)-tests go beyond the listing of job responsibilities used in the past to delineate roles in public relations. The scores on the measure of cognitive communication competence begin to define the kinds of capabilities used in work performance in the roles of a public relations practitioner. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether and/or how scores on the CCC measure change with length and breadth of experience in the field.

While this study provides strong and clear quantitative insights into an aspect of gender inequities in public relations, more research is required to identify other dimensions of communication and managerial skills that could impact on the climb up the professional ladder. There is consensus there is a gender problem. More work is needed to pinpoint the sources of the problem so that they are either corrected or eliminated.

Additionally, the researchers chose to use a one-item measure to determine professional role instead of a lengthy list of separate job responsibilities. This decision was made to help in hopes of encouraging participation by keeping the survey completion time to less than 8 min. The researchers understand that real life job responsibilities, and consequently roles, do not necessarily fit cleanly into two categories—manager or technician. Additional research in the future may provide a clearer understanding of the actual work performed by technicians and managers and help determine how much job responsibility and performance overlap exists and how that impacts on necessary job skills.

This study also stops short of investigating the correlation between CCC and salary. It would be an interesting investigation. Variations in salaries in the public relations field involve a myriad of variables including agency or corporate setting, full or part time employees, size of department or agency, scope of services provided, and for-profit
or non-profit organizations. Randomization or carefully conceptualized samples need to be incorporated into research methods approaches.

It is hoped that more quantitative research will be used to investigate the problem of gender inequities that has plagued the public relations field for decades. The profession and the public are served best if qualifications based on capabilities, rather than gender, drive the promotion process. Traditionally, the pool of technicians has served as the training grounds for future managers. But according to the results of this study and the preponderance of past gender research in public relations, the better candidate is not always likely to win the promotion. Additional research should also build upon Moss et al.’s (2005) work that identifies the overlap between the role of managers and technicians. Viewing the role of public relations practitioners on a continuum, instead of dichotomous groups, is more realistic to today’s boundary-spanning practitioner. Future research would benefit from a quantitative tool to measure this continuum.

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Appendix A. Factor structure for cognitive communication competence—principal component factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Reflection factor 1</th>
<th>Consequence factor 2</th>
<th>Planning factor 3</th>
<th>Presence factor 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis (Varimax rotation) ( n = 193 )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects on performance</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td>.327</td>
<td>.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects on others perceptions of subject</td>
<td>.784</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.152</td>
<td>.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects on what subject could have said</td>
<td>.747</td>
<td>.231</td>
<td>.211</td>
<td>−.082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects on what subject said</td>
<td>.734</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.224</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers others interpretations</td>
<td>.680</td>
<td>.292</td>
<td>−.069</td>
<td>.166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflects to make future improvements</td>
<td>.655</td>
<td>.418</td>
<td>.233</td>
<td>−.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices prior to conversation</td>
<td>.451</td>
<td>.344</td>
<td>.491</td>
<td>−.276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers effects of conversation</td>
<td>.377</td>
<td>.669</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans next topic during conversation</td>
<td>.369</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>.615</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans what to say prior to conversation</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td>.682</td>
<td>−.176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plans conversation for new situations</td>
<td>.233</td>
<td>.498</td>
<td>.631</td>
<td>−.199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers conversation affect on others</td>
<td>.229</td>
<td>.733</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks about what others will talk about</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.133</td>
<td>.657</td>
<td>.118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies people</td>
<td>.168</td>
<td>.557</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considers consequences of what subject says</td>
<td>.132</td>
<td>.663</td>
<td>.099</td>
<td>.235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of having said something inappropriate</td>
<td>.126</td>
<td>.086</td>
<td>−.033</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observes who talks to whom</td>
<td>.098</td>
<td>−.149</td>
<td>.654</td>
<td>.329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of others reactions to subject statements</td>
<td>.074</td>
<td>.285</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows when to change topic</td>
<td>.057</td>
<td>.156</td>
<td>.143</td>
<td>.657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sizes up” new situations</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.330</td>
<td>.557</td>
<td>.284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of topic “going nowhere”</td>
<td>−.48</td>
<td>.421</td>
<td>.055</td>
<td>.523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware of interests of others</td>
<td>−.052</td>
<td>.521</td>
<td>.265</td>
<td>.104</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent of variance</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>10</td>
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Total variance explained 58 percent.

References


