

“It’s difficult to put people in those boxes”: An examination of stakeholder theory in the local public sector organisation in England

Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the influence of stakeholder theory in public sector communications practice, from a critical interpretivist perspective.

Design - Using a social phenomenological design, five practitioners were interviewed about how they experience and understand their work to identify, classify and prioritise stakeholders. Transcriptions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, from which shared features were identified to consider the influence of the theory in practice.

Findings – Accounts construct a narrative centred around the assumption that stakeholder theory is applicable in the public sector in England because it is part of 'the logic of public relations'. This is despite it being ideologically situated in the private sector, reproducing the values of power relations, which threatens the ability of practitioners to fulfil their unique public duties.

Research limitations: While the specificity of this sample is acknowledged, individual accounts point towards a wider issue of the theory’s application to public sector practice.

Social implications - For the extent to which public relations can fulfil its public service role, notably towards the most vulnerable.

Originality/value – The ideological implications of applying stakeholder theory in the public sector has so far been unexplored and this paper intends to open debate and encourage further research.

Keywords Stakeholder theory, Public relations, Public sector, Institutional logic, Phenomenology, Marketisation

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A recent survey estimates that 33% of in-house public relations (PR) practitioners in the United Kingdom are employed by public sector organisations (CIPR, 2022) that govern and serve citizens at a national level and local level.

In this context, practitioners are faced with a unique set of responsibilities and challenges, centred around public service and accountability (Brown *et al.*, 2013), leading to different ways of working compared to those in the private sector, focused on profitability and shareholder accountability (Gregory, 2020a). They can be described as having a double duty to society, as a public servant (Nolan, 1995) and member of a profession .

Stakeholder theory is offered as a solution for identifying, classifying and prioritising all those with a stake in an organisation, not simply shareholders and is applied across all sectors (Cornelissen, 2023), despite its initial theorisation for the private sector (Moloney and McGrath, 2020). On first

inspection, its emphasis on reciprocity and Kantian principles (Evan and Freeman, 1993) could be well suited to helping a public sector practitioner to fulfil societal duties. But there is scholarly debate about the way in which power and organisational self-interest lay at the heart of the theory's conceptualisation (Lin *et al.*, 2018), and how the reproduction of its discourse is part of a wider erosion of democratic principles in society (Mackey, 2006; Pieczka, 2019). This intimates a problematic fit with a sector founded on public service.

However, no research has been found that considers the ideological implications of stakeholder theory being used in this context. Therefore, this article represents the first steps to exploring how this dominant theory influences the way public sector PR practitioners experience and understand their work to identify, classify and prioritise those who matter most to their organisations.

The article reviews literature on duty in the sector and within the PR profession in the UK, and the development of stakeholder theory, before setting out its methodology. It then presents a thematic analysis of interviews with practitioners working in English local public sector organisations to then explore the ideological implications of its influence on practice.

Public duty

Duty in the public sector

The public sector plays a pivotal role in people's lives, epitomised by the 'from cradle to grave' mandate of the British welfare state (Beveridge, 1942). This leads to specific duties set out in UK law, unmatched in other sectors (Wakeman, 2016) (see 'The Nolan Principles', 1995). Practitioners must act in the public interest, not private or organisational self-interest (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2017). Their practice is underpinned by openness and transparency (Fredrickson and Pallas, 2018), formalised through the Freedom of Information Act 2000, while there is a duty of care to protect an individual's privacy (for example, patient confidentiality, DHSC, 2003).

Public sector workers are described as 'servants of the public' (Nolan, 1995), who are 'super diverse' (Vertovec, 2007), simultaneously citizens, taxpayers, customers and voters (Fredrickson and Pallas 2018) with differing service use and emotional ties (Gyford, 1991). There is a specific duty to vulnerable people and a 'Public Sector Equality Duty' to those with protected characteristics (The Equality Act, 2010). This makes communicating with these a public service obligation, not a private sector "optional extra" (Brown *et al.*, 2013, p. 75).

Fundamentally, the goal is public good (Canel and Luoama-aho, 2019), leading practitioners to "one way of working, whereas working in the private sector, where shareholder accountability and profits are key, generates a different set of priorities" (Gregory, 2020a, p. 102).

As public accountability is critical, there are also heightened levels of public scrutiny. The local public sector (including local authorities, police authorities, emergency services, and National Health Service (NHS) trusts), being closest to citizens, has the most direct impact on their lives and the most frequent and important interactions with them (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2015).

Duty in PR

Brown *et al.* (2013) state that the PR profession and public services are "intrinsically linked to a belief in both the public service ethos and public interest" (p. 2). UK professional codes of conduct emphasise acting "with proper regard to the public interest" (PRCA, n. d.). This could be traced back

to the public sector's role in the establishment of PR in the UK (L'Etang, 2013), in contrast to the US where it grew from corporate need (Gower, 2023). The public sector practitioner could therefore be said to have a double duty to society.

However, this benign societal role is much contested (Ihlen et al., 2009; Edwards and Hodge, 2011; L'Etang and Pieczka, 2006). Professional bodies are accused of ignoring the practitioner's role as an advocate to serve organisational self-interest in a society of unbalanced power relations (L'Etang, 2013), which can lead to a divided ethical identity between idealised codes and the expectations to privilege clients and employers over society (Fawkes, 2012). This points towards public duty being less aligned to the generic role than is claimed.

Marketisation

Since UK government reforms in the 1980s, the sector has been transformed at all levels by the principles and practices of the private sector aimed at making it more efficient, accountable, and responsive (Fredrikson and Pallas, 2018). Public, private and voluntary organisations compete to deliver services and produce economic as well as social returns (Association for Public Service Excellence, 2019). This broadens the diversity of its stakeholders based on differing ties. For example, a local NHS trust has a range of other internal (clinicians, service staff and volunteers) and external stakeholder groups (patient representatives, non-care customers, primary care partners, contractors, regulators, suppliers and competitors, labour market, trade unions, professional associations and the media) in addition to patients (Wakeman, 2016).

PR is positively identified as central to this process, symbolised by a move from one-way public information to two-way communications flow (Fedorico *et al.*, 1991, cited in Kinnear, 2020), which reflects Grunig and Hunt's (1984) idealised two-way symmetric communications model. This can be located within 'the logic of public relations', a form of institutional logic, defined as a set of governing mechanisms, including "taken-for-granted activities, rules, norms and ideas" describing how all practitioners ought to behave (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2013, p. 189). However, critical scholars argue that 'marketisation' is part of a neoliberal agenda to privilege competition and power relations over public service values and "open, collaborative negotiation" (Roper, 2005, p. 69, also see Miller and Dinan, 2000;). Stewart and Clarke (1997) have claimed that a private sector mentality distorts the public sector worker's role, so they are at risk of 'overlooking' public duties.

Stakeholder theory

Theory development

The introduction of the concept of 'the stakeholder' to the UK public sector is arguably part of this market orientation process, most clearly signaled by Tony Blair's speech on the 'Stakeholder Economy' in 1996. Stakeholder theory is presented as a strategic tool across all sectors (Cornelissen, 2023), despite its origins in business (Moloney and McGrath, 2020). In his landmark publication, Freeman chose 'stakeholders' as a neologism to emphasise the legitimacy of "all those groups and individuals that can affect, or are affected by, the accomplishment of the organizational purpose" (2010, p.25), not just shareholders.

It is a key concept in the field of PR and is identified as part of 'the logic of public relations' (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2013), although there is on-going debate about whether 'stakeholders' differs conceptually from 'publics'; a foundational PR concept building upon Dewey's definition as a collaboration between private individuals brought together through a shared need or interest to resolve issues within a democracy (Johnston and Pieczka, 2019). In contrast, despite multiple

definitions, 'stakeholders' are generally defined in terms of their relationship to an organisation, only becoming 'a public' if active for or against it (Grunig and Repper, 1992). However, the terms are often used interchangeably (de Bussy and Kelly, 2010) and some argue that there is no sense in distinguishing between them in today's complex world (Valentini, 2021).

Donaldson and Preston (1995) identify three focuses across stakeholder literature: descriptive, to understand what the organisation is about; instrumental, to achieve corporate objectives; and normative, to "interpret the function of, and offer guidance... on the basis of some underlying moral or philosophical principles" (pp. 70-72).

Many theorists do identify ethical principles, based on "integrity, respect, fairness, generosity and inclusiveness" (Harrison and Wicks, 2021, p. 405) generally viewing the pursuit of "marketplace success" and "human decency" as "linked and mutually reinforcing" (Jones and Wicks, 1999, p. 209). Such an inclusive theorisation, on first inspection, with an emphasis on reciprocity and Kantian principles (Evan and Freeman, 1993), may be well suited to helping a public sector practitioner to fulfil societal duties.

Critical perspectives

Despite this, some argue the use of the term 'stakeholder' in PR undermines democratic principles, mirroring criticism leveled at marketisation. It is "a stabilising or congealing term" to minimise conflict and complex responses from an independent public (Mackey, 2006) and reflects a worrying focal change from public interest to organisational self-interest (Pieczka, 2019). Stakeholders are viewed instrumentally in terms of value creation for company benefit not intrinsic value and mutual collaboration (Lin *et al.*, 2018, p. 551) with a disregard for power imbalances (van Buren 2001, p. 484). From this perspective, it can be viewed as a self-serving mechanism to perpetuate the status quo (Topić, 2022).

Theoretical models

Imbalances are magnified in models intended to assist in identifying and prioritising stakeholders. There is a preoccupation with those with the most power to be a threat or benefit to an organisation (Mackey, 2006), power being the key organising element of the most frequently cited models (Derry, 2012, p. 261). These include the stakeholder map; the salience model (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997); and the power/interest matrix. In the latter, stakeholders are subdivided into two dimensions and those with high levels of both interest and power are those that require the most focus. Moloney and McGrath (2020) identify this as the most commonly used stakeholder model by practitioners.

Phillips (2003) suggests that one way to make sense of this complexity of stakes is to delineate between those with normative legitimacy (to whom the organisation has a direct moral obligation) and derivative legitimacy (based on their ability to help or harm the organisation and its normative stakeholders). A range of alternative models categorise according to moral claim (Frooman, 1999: Phillips, 2003; Lin *et al.*, 2018). Stakeholders are mapped in relation to 'issues arenas' (Lin *et al.*, 2018; Luoma-aho and Vos 2010) or as issue stakeholders (Yang *et al.*, 2023), de-centring the organisation to emphasises its place in interconnected networks (Anderson and Nielsen, 2009). One study demonstrates how a matrix can be used to analyse the power relationships experienced by marginalised groups to empower them to use their potential power (Bryson *et al.*, 2002, p. 568).

Stakeholder theory in the public sector

However, there is limited attention given to how stakeholder models are applied in the public sector at any level (Philips *et al.* 2006), reflecting a wider concern about a lack of PR research about the

sector (Canel and Luoma-aho, 2020) or models which reflect its unique characteristics (Liu and Horsley, 2007).

While this is starting to be addressed by publications such as the *Handbook of Public Sector Communications* (2020), the development of new communication models and approaches (Young and Pieterse, 2015; Farr-Wharton et al., 2020; Liu and Horsley, 2007; Sanders and Gutierrez-Garcia, 2020; Piqueras et al., 2020) and renewed interest in the value of communication in a post pandemic world (for example, Love et al., 2023), the focus is generally on the 'what' and the 'how', rather than the 'who' and the 'why' of communications.

Studies that seek to assist in identifying and prioritising stakeholders are few. This review found a single study on stakeholder model adaptation in the UK public sector; Winstanley *et al.* (1995) adapted the salience model using two power dimensions: criteria power of decision-makers, and operational power of contractors and suppliers. A study of UK local authority chief executives concluded that citizens and service users would be recognised by this adapted model (Gomes, 2004). de Bussy and Kelly (2010) applied the salience model to Australian politics to find that power played a far greater role than legitimacy in determining stakeholder salience.

Reviewed public administration textbooks present stakeholder models as useful tools without consideration of the implications of a power-based approach (for example, Johnson and Scholes, 2001; Pasquier and Villeneuve, 2012). Those high in the power/interest matrix hold the most legitimate claim and should be engaged with 'collaboratively'; those with low power/interest require 'minimal effort' (Johnson and Scholes, 2001, p. 156), with no regard for moral claim or whether groups have the agency to demonstrate an interest.

In her discussion of the power/interest matrix in a general PR textbook, Gregory (2020b) notes that in the public sector, attention needs to be given to those who lack power, who would otherwise be given minimal attention (p. 176), which does intimate a problematic fit. A corporate (not public sector) textbook by Johnson and Scholes (2008) also briefly considers a moral dimension, suggesting an 'ought to be' as well as 'need to be' matrix, but this is only briefly mentioned (p.183).

Notably, the voices of practitioners are absent from this discourse. How they make sense of their work to identify and prioritise stakeholders and the role of stakeholder models are rich topics for research.

To conclude, this review has identified the unique duties of the public sector practitioner and how these must be performed within a complex organisational context, in which private sector principles apply. Despite this, no research has been found that considers the ideological implications of a theory created for the private sector being applied to a public sector organisation, with a fundamentally different purpose. This article aims to explore this lacuna in scholarship.

Method

This is a qualitative study conducted within "the emerging 'socio-cultural turn' of PR inquiry" (Yeomans, 2019, p. 6), seeking to make sense of its positive and negative social impacts, including the relationship between practitioners and social forces, and the influence of institutional logic (Ihlen et al., 2023, p. 127-128).

The research objective is to explore how PR practitioners experience and understand their work to identify, classify and prioritise stakeholders in the public sector, and the influence of stakeholder theory in this work.

From a critical-interpretivist paradigm, it recognises the subjectivity of individual experiences, while considering how stakeholder theory, as part of institutional logic, might enable and constrain shared experiences of practice. It contributes to an emerging focus in the field on the intrapersonal (Sommerfeldt and Kent 2020; Yeomans, 2019).

The study adopts a social phenomenological methodology, which posits that everyday phenomena are “mostly hidden”, and the aim of research is to uncover these through discourse (Frechette et al., 2020). Five participants took part in online semi-structured interviews (Table 1), a recommended phenomenological sample size (Dukes 1988, cited in Creswell and Poth, 2025, p. 192) to enable in-depth interviews (45-80 minutes), which, while unique, produce rich descriptions, from which shared features can help to uncover “general or universal meanings” (ibid, p. 53). PR practitioners were recruited who work in PR roles at differing levels of seniority in a range of local public sector organisations in England. To explore variance, this included local authorities, a regional police service, an NHS hospital trust and a public sector body acting on behalf of multiple local authorities. Most were interviewed during the Covid pandemic (2022). Therefore, they were recruited by direct email invitation rather than open call. Such purposive maximum variation sampling is common in exploratory research. It was not a requirement for participants to know about stakeholder theory as the primary aim was not to obtain an ‘expert view’, but rather to understand the underlying role of the theory in everyday accounts of lived experiences. To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms are used and organisations not identified.

This inquiry is informed by the researcher’s own ‘horizons of significance’, in particular a tension experienced between her prior work in the sector and what is taught at the university where she lectures. A key phenomenological device is to bracket preconceptions, bias or judgements (Daymon and Holloway 2011, p.184) in research design. Therefore, personal memos were kept. Instead of scripted questions, participants were presented with a diagram of three topic areas and invited to choose what they wanted to talk about, to facilitate an open, collaborative approach. Probing questions were used to clarify and elicit depth. Talk about ‘People’ (‘those that matter’ rather than ‘stakeholders’ in earlier parts of interviews) and ‘Duty’ foregrounded the theoretical concept of ‘Stakeholder’, to encourage authentic accounts. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) reflexive thematic analysis method was applied to interview transcriptions. This theoretically flexible and inductive method minimises the imposition of pre-determined ideas (Saunders et al. 2019, p.639) and so is suited to phenomenological study (Landrum and Davis 2023). Transcriptions were organised into 194 codes, categorised and then clustered into five themes, which are discussed in Findings. Shared features were then considered in relation to structural influence in the Conclusion.

Findings

Five themes were developed:

1. Governing mechanism
2. Private sector identity
3. Public sector duty
4. Prioritisation difficulty
5. Emotional labour

1. Governing mechanism

Stakeholder theory was relatively undefined but pervasive in four of the five accounts, each using the term repeatedly, even before the topic was explicitly introduced. Alex explained that terms such as “publics, audiences, communities, stakeholders” were “often interchangeable, rarely well defined, not always understood even within the organisation”, attesting to the ambiguity highlighted in the literature. He reflected that he used ‘stakeholders’ to denote “more in-depth and two-way” communications and ‘audiences’ for “broadcast, one-way, generic, scattergun, big picture, short message, mass media” communications. Carrie made a similar connection between stakeholders and two-way communications, while Georgina associated it with market segmentation, a concept derived from business marketing.

Paul was the only participant to express some discomfort with the term’;

I suppose the first thing is stakeholder is such a horrible word, isn't it? I almost hesitate to use it. [...] I almost kind of blanch a little at it because I think it's one of these words that doesn't actually mean anything. ((Laughing)) It doesn't mean anything does it? But then what else would you say? It's difficult.

His organisation used terms that specifically describe a group, such as patient or visitor, lending a humanity to their identities. Jane used the term stakeholder frequently, but only in relation to groups other than residents:

So in our sector, *your audience* is your visitors through the door, the kind of people you're trying to get to come to see your exhibitions and your venues; *your community* is the people who are in need, who live around your venue or who you serve, who you're trying to make a real difference to; *your stakeholders* are your funders, your partners in the sector [etc.]
[italics for emphasis]

The association of ‘stakeholders’ with funders and partners confines the term in her account to business relationships.

Stakeholder theory was framed within the occupational domain, four advocating its potential value:

Yeah, stakeholder theory is really, really important, it needs to be done at top-level, which isn't probably being done at the moment for a variety of reasons. [Carrie]

I must say I'm not an expert on it and I wouldn't profess to knowing everything [...], but certainly it feels really important when we're dealing with such big numbers. [Paul]

Most were quick to emphasise – sometimes apologetically - their lack of knowledge, which denoted an expectation that they should know and use it. Carrie, Georgina and Jane had not used stakeholder models, attributed to time constraints, poor strategic leadership, and particularly a gap between theory and practice. Georgina explained, “[it] is how you're told to start to go about doing your comms plans”, but laughed about having to ‘Google it’ before the interview;

I think if you haven't done something like a chartered institute qualification or done marketing or comms as part of a degree you wouldn't have a clue.

While the communications managers, Alex, Jane and Paul's accounts are somewhat divergent, they build a strong narrative of personal agency, in the choice, adaption and subsequent ownership (or rejection) of theoretical models. Jane confidently and rather dismissively explains how practitioners develop their own approaches:

We do a lot of these things you've been through. We just don't follow the academic model. We just do our own version.

This was echoed in Paul's ambivalence about the choice of model. He explained the matrix had been helpful in a prior role, but he now used the government's OASIS campaign planning model, which includes audience identification. Alex said he used the matrix "a lot" but adapted it with a third dimension to consider sentiment; his was the only account to strongly emphasise its practical value. In contrast, Georgina and Carrie's accounts as technicians highlighted practical constraints, but otherwise frame it uncritically as a potential solution to problems.

2. Private sector identity

Marketisation was presented as an inescapable reality. Alex's discourse repeatedly returned to relationships with commercial and third sector "suppliers" of statutory services and the need to prioritise them in the upper tier of stakeholders. In balancing the needs of service users with the demands of the service suppliers, he could be framed as the "hard-nosed" negotiator.

There was a degree of 'othering' the public sector by technicians when discussing organisational problems, suggesting some practitioners may draw upon the private sector as a source of identity. In this example, Georgina's language places her outside (bold for emphasis):

But it's quite unique in so much as police services want to communicate with the public as a whole, *whereas in other sectors we are very smart* at segmenting our audiences and identifying exactly who we want to talk to. [Georgina]

Carrie positioned herself in similar terms and identified that her future private sector employer was better at mapping; "I think the private sector can sometimes be just a bit more savvy at making sure that it, you know - its survival as well isn't it?"

The communications manager accounts did not display this dissonance, which may reflect their positions. However, two extracts highlight Alex's need to resist a latent sense that public sector PR is the poor relation of its private sector counterpart; public service is "unapologetically what we do" and we "don't need to be embarrassed about what we're doing".

3. Public sector duty

'Duty' was generally situated in the organisation; public service as a public sector employee was central to each account. Participants associated doing their duty with helping the organisation to fulfil its objectives, which they aligned with its public service obligation of improving the lives of primary stakeholders: public, residents, and patients, particularly vulnerable people. Duty was specifically situated in relation to statutory obligations: Freedom of Information (Georgina and Carrie); Equality Act 2010 (Alex); confidentiality, particularly in criminal cases (Georgina); and public consultation (Alex, Jane and Paul).

There was limited association between duty and PR,:

I think it's partly my own upbringing and who I was anyway. And then I think it's the organisation, I don't think that it's got anything to do with being in comms. [Jane]

I think my sense of duty stems from the organisation I belong to, rather than being a comms professional per se. That's because I know that the comms we produce can have a profound and lasting impact on someone's life. [...] That same sense of duty isn't something felt whilst working at [not-for-profit organisation] for example. [Georgina]

Personal duty was particularly strongly situated in Jane and Alex's accounts. Alex distanced himself from the generic role; he did not "always think it's easy to see how communications professionals help to deliver public good"; his role in public service being the opposite of 'spin doctor'. Jane's repeated use of "we" reflects a close alignment between her own sense of duty and her public sector identity:

I certainly feel that sense of duty and even to the point where we feel a sense of duty to raise the profile on topics that we think are important currently, [...] and we don't think museums are neutral or should have a neutral voice, we think museums should take a stance. [italics for emphasis]

Jane was also keen to emphasise how public sector priorities lay diametrically opposite business's:

Because we're not all about profit, we're trying to engage with people who don't even know they might be interested and we are about using our resources to the best effort, but the best effort might be hard. It might not be just about the easy win. [...] it's not always just about them getting the most people through the door or whatever. Sometimes it's about working with five people and making a massive difference to their lives, but that will be really hard work.

All participants identified the need to get communications "right" more strongly in this context than others, and expressed a deep sense of personal fulfilment: we help "solve people's problems" (Georgina); make "people's lives are a bit better" (Alex); ensure "everybody is safe and [...] that life is, you know, bearable" (Carrie); "all stuff that actually has an impact and pulls the levers on people's lives" (Paul). This sense of personal fulfillment is embodied in Paul's account of a patient's feedback: "My wife forced me to come in because of your [screening] campaign and actually I would be dead now if I hadn't seen that."

4. Prioritisation difficulty

As previously stated, identification of primary stakeholders was recurrently framed in terms of those to whom the organisation has a duty.

There was a tension between the need to engage with all the public and to focus strategically on specific groups, as well as a hesitancy to prioritise one group against another:

Local government is so complex that there's rarely a stakeholder group who matters most, so much as they all matter in different ways. -I suppose they do matter to different degrees. [Alex]

I'm always really nervous about that [prioritisation] from an NHS perspective because, as kind of in the broader sense, everyone is our stakeholders and actually it's probably the first job I've worked in where I wouldn't want to necessarily prioritise anyone above anyone else [...] because effectively we provide cradle to grave services for the UK. [Paul]

This is reflected in Paul and Carrie's accounts that describe the need to communicate at once with everyone, and the most vulnerable, during the Covid pandemic.

Two participants identified the concepts of power and interest in the matrix as particularly problematic, especially in the case of the most vulnerable:

What I would say is that it is not completely infallible, particularly from the NHS perspective, because someone with low power or low interest that might be, but if they die, then

suddenly they're not. So it's difficult to put people in those boxes because on a traditional one like this, you'd say a local MP with no interest in the health services what so ever would be a key player because they're the local MP, but actually, have they got more power than someone that might be a patient, a member of the public, people with a life-limiting disease? You know, it's difficult isn't it? [Paul]

But actually some stakeholders with low power and low levels of interest would be our primary community audience who don't have any influence. [They] currently, haven't thought of culture as a thing that could help them or be something great in their lives. But that's something that we put an enormous amount of energy into because it's part of what we do, it's who we are. Uhm. I can see how it [the matrix] makes sense in a business sense, but we're not a business. [Jane]

When Alex was asked about where adults with learning disabilities or care workers would be mapped on the matrix, he reflected that it can offer the temptation "to reward the loudest people". He conceded that relative power for some groups would never change;

People with learning disabilities are almost by definition not articulate, they're not going be able to knock on the door of their next-door neighbour, who is a journalist, and tell them about a story, and shame us [...] for not doing the right thing. So they're not in communications terms powerful, they're not economically powerful. (Alex).

Carrie, Jane and Georgina also evoked the difficulties of balancing public duty to the vulnerable with the weight of public opinion, residents not recognising the council's obligation to its "most vulnerable residents, if it means they're getting a council tax increase" (Carrie).

Residents, patients and communities were at the top of a complex web of other stakeholders such as suppliers, funders and voluntary organisations, whom the organisation could be dependent upon to provide goods and services or to act as intermediaries to reach vulnerable groups:

We serve them as means to an end, to get the funding and or whatever to be able to do the thing for the audience. They're not the people we care about most, they're really important and we have to have a brilliant relationship with them, and we have to meet on their objectives and align our objectives to their objectives, etc. But ultimately, everything we do is about the audience and the community. [Jane]

These relationships were not straight forward. Alex articulated the challenges of balancing the needs of service users with keeping 'happy' those commissioned to provide their care. Accounts included the co-opting of the voluntary sector into a supplier role (Alex, Carrie). Carrie reflected that her organisation had a preoccupation with inward investors. Jane talked of the need to "appease" funders.

5. Emotional labour

Participant accounts of balancing the needs of the most vulnerable with wider public expectations and supplier demands, of beleaguered practitioners suffering 'grief' and online abuse, and the toil of work during the Covid pandemic (Alex, Carrie, Jane) emphasises their work as emotional labour, a concept developed to identify the way in which the management of personal feelings is a central yet "invisible" competence (Hochschild, 2003).

The management of internal expectations was a recurrent narrative. Georgina's story of resistance against internal actors with opposing priorities included using "the bureaucracy against itself"; "it

was called unprofessional by one of the superintendents, which really (...) stuck in our throat". Carrie felt 'deflated' that community engagement was considered just a communications issue. Alex had to challenge colleagues to think about the needs of stakeholders, and said he was embarrassed about their lack of knowledge about their lives. Carrie also expressed strong discomfort in being required to 'ask for something for nothing' from a third-sector partner, whose funding her organisation had recently cut. It was only Paul and Jane's accounts that articulated an uncomplicated synergy between their work domain and that of the rest of the organisation, perhaps consistent with their positions of authority.

Conclusion

These findings provide rich insights into how its participants understand and construct meaning about their work to identify, categorise and prioritise those who they consider most important to their organisations.

Participants share a general acceptance of the concept of 'the stakeholder', with qualifications (for example, the term itself could dehumanise) and despite diversity of meaning. Its repeated use intimates how the theory is a pervasive part of the furniture of PR. Their accounts align it with other taken-for-granted mechanisms within institutional logic, such as the two-way symmetrical communications model, and concepts from other promotional cultures, such as marketing (see 1. Governing mechanism).

Primary stakeholder groups were described as the public, residents and patients, particularly vulnerable members, at the top of a complex web defined in terms of their help in achieving organisational objectives. The problematic nature of what constitutes power was strongly expressed, with those with the least agency, and ignored by dominant models, often those to whom the organisation had the greatest responsibility, and around which objectives are built. Balancing the needs of the most vulnerable against wider public opinion and the demands of private sector suppliers and 'louder voices' was a particularly knotty problem in this English context. A uniquely contradictory facet of public sector communications in the accounts was the pressure to simultaneously target specific groups and everyone. While practitioners advocated the *potential* value of theoretical models such as the power/interest matrix to prioritise with constrained resources, in practice they generally adopted their own approaches, used models specifically developed by the sector, or in one case adapted the matrix himself.

Public duty as a public service employee was central to each account, and doing their duty was associated with helping to meet organisational goals to improve the lives of primary stakeholders. This was a source of much pride. In this way, there was a synergy rather than dissonance between organisational purpose and their individual sense of duty, perhaps explaining why they felt no need to draw upon a professional code. However, most accounts place public relations identity itself within the private realm, contrary to its UK origin story.

The shared meaning in these accounts suggest that current 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to stakeholder identification ignore key features of the local public sector organisation and poorly serve the many practitioners working there, and those to whom they have a duty. Public sector textbooks should draw upon normative approaches, with a focus on the organisation's moral responsibilities (Donaldson and Preston's typology, 1995) and differentiate between normative/intrinsic stakeholders to whom an organisation has a moral obligation and derivative stakeholders with instrumental value (2006

2003). Models centred around societal issues, and which consider 'duty' as a key organising element, would also help to address this gap.

The themes also suggest certain ideological processes, situated socially and institutionally, which impinge upon the shared meanings of these accounts, which could threaten the ability of practitioners to fulfil their duties. Specifically, stakeholder theory with its fixation on 'power' can be viewed as proselytising a way of thinking and working that embeds the free market logic of the private sector into the UK public sector, running entirely contrary to the public service ethos identified by practitioners as their primary source of duty. While this promised the transformation of an outdated, out-of-touch state, critically it can be seen to privilege the principles of competition and power relations over public service values set out in The Nolan Principles' (1995).

Consequently, it is not only the local public sector organisation that is a site of conflict, but so too the practitioner (Figure 1), as they try to reconcile the dissonance between public duty (situated in the public sector) and private sector identity (where stakeholder theory and institutional logic is situated). They are subject to marketisation both without and within. This is an additional burden for those already in emotional labour on the public sector communications frontline.

This paper argues that if we are genuine in our commitment to supporting practitioners to fulfill their societal function, as reflected in theorisation and codes of conduct, then an examination of the way in which 'the logic of public relations' has been constructed to privilege one way of thinking at the expense of more divergent, collaborative and inclusive perspectives should be a priority. This preliminary paper is intended to open debate and encourage further research on its influence in the construction of meaning in practice.

Limitations

The limitations of drawing wider meanings from such a small sample within a uniquely local English context are acknowledged. The inclusion of practitioners of different levels from different organisation types and in a non-specific locality may have resulted in an overly broad scope for its sample size, given unique factors like the political context in local authorities. A second limitation is the potential for the 'social desirability effect,' where participants may have expressed what they perceived to be acceptable views. However, this itself could highlight the unquestioned legitimacy of the theory.

Further research

Further research is necessary to explore contextual differences in greater depth in England and the wider UK, and to examine the theory's influence in the public sectors of other nations. An examination of the role of public sector-created frameworks to identify and classify stakeholders could also provide a useful comparison.

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