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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Muskat, B. (2014). Emotions in organization-public relationships: proposing a new determinant. *Public Relations Review*, 40(5), 832–834. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.06.004>

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This a post-print version of the manuscript published as:

Muskat B. (2014). Emotions in organization-public relationships: Proposing a new determinant. Public Relations Review. 40(5): 832–834.

DOI: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.06.004. ABDC ranked A.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0363811114001155>

Emotions in organization-public relationships: Proposing a new determinant

Abstract

Emotions have been left largely out of debate over the indicators that make up organization-public relationship (OPR) frameworks. This exploratory study analyses the importance of emotions in OPR. Results show that emotions are highly influential in this relationship. On these grounds, the paper suggests expanding existing conceptual analyses of OPR to include emotions.

Highlights

- This study uses exploratory qualitative content analysis to evaluate the importance of emotions in OPR.
- This is one of the first studies to propose the integration of emotions as determinants of future OPR models.
- The paper highlights several new avenues for future research, on why to integrate emotions into future relational models of communication.

Key Words

OPR, emotions, exploratory qualitative study, content analysis, Australia, Murray-Darling Basin

1. Introduction

Within organization-public relationship (OPR) research, government-community relationships tend to be conceptualized using relational frameworks that are founded on effective communication and partnership (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997). Multiple studies suggest relevant indicators for determining the quality of OPR. However, with the exception of Ledingham's study (2003), one potential indicator that has been neglected in discussion so far is emotions. In other areas of management research, emotions have received growing attention. Studies show that understanding the contribution of emotions to social interaction is indispensable as emotions are highly relevant in social interaction and relationships (Fisher & Ashkanasy 2000).

This paper probes the role of emotions as a potential determinant for OPR. The case this paper is drawing upon is the relationship between the Australian Government Agency Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) and the community-public. With the Basin providing water for over three million people and supporting the production of more than a third of Australia's food (MDBA, 2011), the MDB is of great national agricultural importance. However, there are competing agricultural and eco preservation imperatives that highly impact upon the relationship under discussion.

The development of the relationship has been influenced by the community-public's concern and fear about the social and economic implications, as well as their quality of life, opportunities, service provision, and the very viability of the communities (Commonwealth Inquiry, 2011).

The study is guided by two consecutive research questions: *how and why do emotions matter in OPR?* and *which emotions are displayed in the case of Australia's Murray-Darling Basin government-public relationship?*

2. Method

Qualitative purposeful sampling strategy was used (Patton, 2002) and the sole criterion for selection of sample articles was the total number of readers. Total readership reflects the importance, outreach, and potential influence of an article. The first step in data collection was a Google search for news articles on the Murray-Darling Basin, using the key words “Newspaper articles on the latest Murray-Darling Report.”

Directed and deductive qualitative content analysis was considered the most appropriate approach. It is best suited to a targeted research question such as is found in this study, and to explore “a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1281).

3. Findings

The results demonstrate complex relationship between government and the community-public in the Murray-Darling Basin context. The following section presents the dominant emotional themes that were identified in the analysis: The emotions of being ignored, doubt and betrayal, as well as anger and outrage.

Theme 1: Emotion of being ignored

Community members opposed to the MDBA plan expressed feelings of being ignored, in some areas more than others. As a result of this, the community appeared to feel overruled and subject to unethical treatment, which they described in legal, ethical and moral terms. As one source described: “[a]lthough legally it may be open to the MDBA to take this path, it is against the spirit and intent of the Act”. Another stated that the “[g]ood faith of the community is not rewarded”. The feeling of being ignored and treated unfairly actually resulted in the end of the community’s “consultation willingness”. To the extent that communications and consultation subsequently broke down between the MDBA and the community for the MDBA’s perceived ignorance of the community, these data show the influence of feelings/emotions on the health and quality of the OPR.

Theme 2: Emotions of doubt and betrayal

The community expressed the feeling of doubt towards the scientific rationale for the plan and its implementation, particularly over whether climate change was actually real: “many [...] sought to question the validity of the science”. Some community stakeholders who were against the plan expressed doubt: “It was clear that the plan had failed the test of being based on the best available science”. Doubt arises, as stakeholders fear that the economic situation is worsening in the MDB. Stakeholders are uncertain about the current circumstances, which is expressed through feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

The feeling of betrayal manifests in statements that “the draft Murray-Darling Basin plan does not comply with the Water Act in several respects” and leaves some communities “possibly in a worse state”. The following emotions were uttered by a variety of community stakeholders directed at the Government Agency. Examples of statements that reveal these negative emotions include “the MDBA has been such a colossal failure”, and they “always

make the wrong choices”. In addition, “The Murray-Darling Basin Authority (MDBA) appears to have consistently made the weakest interpretation of the Act's provisions”.

Theme 3: Emotions of anger and outrage

Another core theme among responses from the community was anger and outrage directed toward both the plan and the MDBA. The draft plan, released in November 2011, “triggered much outrage” as it was perceived that the plan’s implementation would worsen the living conditions of the community. Hence, even from an early stage the proposed plan was deemed by the community to be unacceptable and “sparked a furious reaction from [the] basin”. The previous plan from 2010 was also ridiculed and deemed “laughable”. Some sources described the anger and hostility towards the plan in terms of military metaphors, such as “states are threatening to torpedo” the plan. As the leading or implementing authority, the MDBA was likewise a target for the community’s anger and derision: “[h]ave a look at their website – playing God here and there with water – pathetic”.

4. Conclusion and Future Research

The aim of this paper was to draw attention to the important role that emotions play in OPR. Findings of the qualitative content analysis of media data revealed emotions as drivers in the relationship between the community and the organization under analysis.

How and why do emotions matter in OPR?

As the data revealed, emotions feature strongly in this OPR and appear to have influenced or driven the community’s reaction and engagement with the government (i.e. the MDBA). Hence, emotions are a highly relevant construct in this case of OPR. Emotions matter in this

OPR, because they are underlying in the conversation and influence motivation, behavior and commitment of the community-public in this relationship, and as demonstrated, have led to unsupportive behaviors – for example the community-public’s apprehension to engage in consultations. Emotions fuelled and predicted their behavioral response and verbal reactions. Emotions became influencing obstacles in this OPR.

What forms of emotions are displayed in the particular OPR case of Australia’s Murray Darling Basin government-public relationship?

Various negative emotions were apparent in this case but no positive emotions. The results showed that the community-public put forward emotionally charged arguments, on the basis of feeling ignored (Theme 1), feeling doubtful or betrayed (Theme 2), or feeling anger and outrage (Theme 3). This particular OPR case shows that negative emotions strongly determine relationship quality. These emotions also affected communications between the government-public to the point where the community refused further consultations. These findings suggest that for conceptual purposes, emotions are an important factor in OPR dynamics.

Three future lines of enquiry lie in the following areas:

(1) Future research could integrate emotions explicitly into theories of organization-public, and evaluate whether emotions between two entities are a precursor to or outcome of a relationship or arise in the evolution of an existing relationship. Further studies could explore how managing and dealing with emotions contribute to relationship ‘quality’.

(2) Studies could take advantage of social psychology theory to better understand the functional aspects of emotions in those relationships.

(3) The role of negative emotions could be further investigated. Negative emotions have specific functionalities and can often be reframed as positive conditions or circumstances.

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