



**Department of Management Sciences**  
**WORKING PAPER SERIES**

**Working Paper**  
**2016-10**

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# **Ethics as antecedent to organization public relationships(OPRs): Study of real estate organizations of Bahria town Lahore Pakistan**

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## **Abstract:**

This study explores the role of ethics as a antecedent to building Organization Public Relationship (OPR). We explore qualitatively the existing relationship variables in the context of ethical behavior as an antecedent to building authentic, long term relationships with publics that will eventually benefit an organization's effectiveness and reputation. These variables have not yet been explored in terms of ethics. We conducted interviews with CEOs or Communication officers at the top of responsibility in the public relations function. Previous studies show that trust is an important variable of OPR and building on that substance, we inspect in what way ethics and trust are related as part of complex relationship. This research aids to the foundation of ethics in building trust in both OPRs and the excellence theory within public relations. This study provides analysis and implications for the public relations industry in the use of ethics as an antecedent to OPR, to build relationships between organizations and publics.

**Keywords: public relations theory; ethics; trust**

## **Introduction**

Ferguson (1984) called theory-building study for the relation between organizations and their publics, strategic management school of public relations "excellence theory" met the call (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This study shapes on the public relations theory of organization public relationships (OPRs) by discovering ethics role in building OPRs.

OPRs defined as "The state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" Ledingham and Bruning (1998).

OPRs are reviewed below but ethics assumed to be part of the process never explicitly studied in relation to what factors come first, shape, uphold, and withstand relationships between entity and their strategic publics. With this idea in mind, we explored the existing relationship variables in the perspective of ethical behavior and ethical values as predecessors to authentic, long term, relationships between entities and publics that will eventually benefit an entity's efficiency and standing. The authors posit that exploring ethics as a prior foundation for the other OPR variables is an oversight because ethics have the potential to form the very basis of other considerations in a relationship, such as trust or to make that relationship impossible when ethics are omitted.

## **Posturing an order for OPRs**

This research is an attempt to understand an order, or process, for the creation of, building, and cultivation of OPRs. Necessarily we ask, “Where does the process started?” Reviewing previous works on relationship management and relationship building from the systems theory perspective helps understand that process (e.g. Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2005). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified different dimensions of relationships, including trust, involvement, openness, investment, and commitment. The fact that they prominently situated trust among the dimensions naturally leads to the question of how trust is built. Other researchers have also highlighted trust as either part of the composition of an OPR (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) or as the indicator for effectively developing relationship online (Yang & Lim, 2009). In addition, Huang’s (2008) research on relationship indicators in a crisis context also showed trust to be one of the important factors in handling crises.

As the excellence theory explained Grunig, (2000) ethics was assumed as a foundational concept underlying the theory that should have been explicated as a stand-alone principle of what makes public relations excellent (Vercic, Grunig, & Grunig, 1996). Grunig et al. (2002), noted that “Bowen (2000) has made great progress toward such an ethical theory” (p. 556), but that study and its successors (Bowen, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2009) failed to be incorporated into later studies using the variables of OPRs. The study at hand seeks to rectify that omission and adds to the body of knowledge a crucial variable of OPRs: ethics. We pose the idea that ethics is essential not only as a foundational element that underlies all transactions, but as an explicit variable and an antecedent to the formation of authentic OPRs. Ethics must be present before authentic relationship can be built, otherwise they could be authentic but unethical, such as the case with Enron (Bowen, 2010).

## **Trust as the fundamental OPR antecedent**

Studies has recommended several antecedents to OPRs. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) proposed the following OPR antecedents: collective perceptions, social and cultural norms, needs for resources, perceived uncertainty in the environment, expectations, legal and voluntary necessity, and behaviors (p. 94). where relationship management is continuing process, scope of relationship quality has been identified as OPR antecedents: trust, involvement, openness, investment, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Hung (2005) argued that relationship types serve as an OPR antecedent. Face, favor, and power were identified as OPR antecedents in Chinese society (Huang, 2001; Hwang, 1987).

Trust is required between the parties to economic and social exchange where there is the inherent risk that benefits provided might not be returned (Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992). In the context of employee entity relationships, trust of employees in the entity (i.e. in management and in peers) directly led to employee loyalty and satisfaction Matzler & Renzl, (2007). A similar

linkage between trust and employee commitment was found in the context of employee entity relationships in China (Hui, Lee, & Rousseau, 2004). Studies on OPR in the Asian and Europe demonstrated trust to be an important factor in the relationship between publics and entity Seiffert, Bentele, and Mende (2011) found that the discrepancies between communication and actions of corporations led to loss of public trust and the behavioral changes of publics (e.g. termination of economic exchange with the corporations) toward the corporations.

OPR research in Asia and in Eastern Europe, findings have been consistently showing trust to be an important factor for developing quality relationships, and how publics would be willing to communicate with their small circles of friends and family. We believe that trust warrants study in more depth as ethics and ethical behavior are the basis for trust. This paper argues that ethical behavior is a necessary condition before trusting relationships can exist. Ethical considerations must be used at the decision-making core of an entity before authentic relationships can be built.

### **OPR results**

Much research has been conducted on OPRs. The relationship outcomes constituting OPRs were defined by Hon and Grunig (1999) and Grunig and Huang (2000). They include: control mutuality or a mutual feeling of having some control over the relationship and its decisions; commitment to an ongoing relationship; satisfaction with the relationship and its outcomes; and trust on behalf of both the entity and publics. Researchers postulate that the more well-reported the OPR variables are, the better the long term outcomes for the entity in terms of efficacy, relationships, and standing (Yang & Grunig, 2005).

Although the relationship outcomes identified by Hon and Grunig (1999) have efficacy in modeling the construct constituting a relationship between the entity and public, the authors of this study argue that these outcomes should be expanded to include the concepts of ethics and authenticity inherent in the integrative decision-making of issues management by the CEO. Taylor (2010) have argued that public relations fits best within the rhetorical paradigm in which a rhetoric argues on behalf of an entity, creating dialog, as the basis for relationships. Grunig's (2006) symmetrical model of communication seems to encapsulate that idea alongside the management approach. Both approaches incorporate an assumption of ethics; that idea needs to be researched, expanded upon, and made explicit in our understanding of OPRs.

Ethics is an inherent component of symmetrical communication, but we believe that it should be studied in more depth as ethics and ethical behavior are the basis for trust. This paper argues that ethical behavior is a necessary condition before trusting relationships can exist. Ethical considerations must be used at the decision-making core of an entity before authentic relationships can be built.

### **Ethics as the basis of trust in OPR**

In discussing the idea that ethical decisions must be made at the core entity before authentic OPRs can be built, we must examine the concept of entities ethics. According to ethicists Neher and Sandin (2007) “Ethics refers to a systematic method for making judgments concerning voluntary actions of people” (p. 6). Ethics is rooted in moral philosophy as the study of right and wrong, justifying actions in an objective or systematic manner, having moral autonomy or a choice about those actions, and intentionally deciding upon one course of action based upon some rigorous means of analysis. Ethicists use moral analysis frameworks as means of creating consistent, well-analyzed moral decisions that can be understood and defended, and are based on an entity’s ethical belief system and core values. It is hard to imagine trust being enhanced without a basis of ethical behavior.

Goodpaster (2007) explained that ethics must be oriented, institutionalized, and sustained in a corporate culture, meaning that an entity operates with ethical values as a very central part of its consciousness. By orienting values, institutionalizing them throughout the entity’s cul-ture, and sustaining them through discussion and reward systems, consistency is built with regard to how an entity handles its responsibilities. That consistency becomes the basis of trust among publics because when an entity operates in a manner that is consistently in line with its values, it can meet expectations among publics, in those publics who in turn build trust, realizing that the entity is operating in a manner consistent with its values. Consistently, ethical behavior can be viewed as the basis of trust in entity relationships.

Although incorporating ethical values into the culture of an entity is an ongoing process and heavily rooted in the communication function, it is also the domain of the dominant coalition, especially the CEO. Goodpaster (2007) argued, “it is the leader who must ultimately make ethical awareness ‘happen’ when the values and behavior of the entity are at stake” (p. 7). For that reason, this research, as explained in the later methods section, centers on elite executives who are decision makers for their entities. Although CEOs are key in leading the ethical values of an entity, they cannot do so in a vacuum. They rely on the public relations and internal relations functions to help create a culture centered around ethical values. Often, ethical counsel is sought from the top public relations officer on ethical issues, some-times called ahead issues manager, for his or her insight into the ethical values of strategic publics and their potential responses to entities decisions (Bowen, 2008).

### **Complex convergence of concepts**

In summary, the literature reviewed above only scratches the surface of an exceedingly complex concept at the intersection of communication, public relations, and relationships. Admittedly, the OPR model and the relationship variables themselves are simplifications of an interrelated web of interactions, thought, beliefs, emotions, and communications of many kinds. However, the beauty of simplicity is needed to theorize about the interlinkages of how these concepts work together to form a relationship. We assume that the OPR model is roughly correct, based on the large number

of studies examining these concepts. However, despite being assumed as part of a general “ethics” concept, trust is insufficiently examined. But where does it come into play? How is trust built?

we can conclude from studies that ethics is central to an entity acting with integrity and consistency, and those constructs help build trust. The literature reviewed above argues that long term, enduring OPRs need trust to survive and flourish. Where ethics and trust enter this complex confluence of variables is little understood, this exploratory research seeks to add insight and understanding on how ethical behavior relates to trust, and how trust enhances OPRs.

### **Research questions**

Based upon this review of literature, OPR, we sought to explore the role of ethics in expanding the model of OPRs. Because this research is exploratory and qualitative in nature, we do not offer hypotheses, but explore broad research questions that can shed light on the order of factors in the complicated processes of forming relationships, and how trust is involved. We pose the following research questions:

**Q 1:** In building authentic relationships between an entity and its publics, how is trust involved?

**Q 2:** Where does trust stand qualitatively in relation to ethics and the quantitative variables as OPR antecedents?

### **Research Methodology**

20 in-depth interviews were conducted with 2 types of Individuals (1) CEOs and (2) Communication officers at the top of responsibility in the public relations function. These elite interviews were specifically designed into the method as a way to access those with the most and highest level experience in the public relations industry. Their roles as leaders and thought leaders offered valuable insight into what those at the pinnacle of the profession deemed important with regard to relationships, ethics, trust, and how they saw the complex interplay of ethics and communication between entities and publics. These data are therefore not generalizable to a larger population, but are indicative of what the elite thought leaders in the field see and do with regard to OPRs.

In-depth interviews continued until we reached the point of theoretical saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), when no new information is revealed by continuing additional interviews (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis, and participants were offered confidentiality. Interview duration range is 31 min to 01 hours. The researcher designed a semi-structured interview guide using a funnel approach (Lindlof, 1995). The researcher conducted all interviews, and they were conducted in person. Using qualitative data coding and analysis methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994), we compared and contrasted resulting views and beliefs as described

in the interviews about where ethics falls in the building of relationships in the participants' professional experience. Using open, axial, and selective coding, the researchers were able to distill results into main thematic areas.

## **Findings**

### **RQ 1**

Ethics is a core, foundational concept of entity: "In the entity GENETIC CODE."

Numerous participants described ethics as foundational to the entity, a basic part of the fabric of why it exists, the core of a belief system, or in terms of the values the entity holds and how these add to society. Termed as GENETIC CODE ethics were described as the building block of their entities and relationships with internal and external publics. One current CEO of a consultancy used the term as part of the active creation of culture saying: "You need to embed ethics into the fabric of the entity GENETIC CODE." One communication explained: "So it's always been part of our GENETIC CODE. I don't know if we have a big push that says, there is ethics; we do have ethics training, mandatory training for people that are new and come into the entity. But ethics is part of the everyday value chain." Another interviewee explained: "One has core values and this notion of beliefs that helps drive to what, you know, is entities purpose. So we did go through a recent codification. Nobody looked at those and said how or where did this come from, because it was very simple, it's in our GENETIC CODE." Another explained, "Everybody has to own the ethical constructs that they apply; there is a functional GENETIC CODE that goes along with senior-level positions." One interviewee explained, "Ethics is more embedded, it comes up when something does not feel right, it is just part of our GENETIC CODE." Participants clearly stated that being ethical allows the possibility of OPRs. As a participant said, "(To) be ethical is a given." Under this general agreement, some elaborated on the role of ethics in relationship building as "core value for our group, not just the external rules."

Several participants posed a time order question about which concept under study here must come first in order to build OPRs. A principal of her own firm explained using a visual analogy: "Ethics is the core beliefs of right and wrong so that is like the foundation of a house; whereas authenticity is the framing; and, character is the whole house." Similarly, one CEO said: "The core foundation is strong ethical behavior, and an ethical foundation means that you can meet all these other challenges." Another CEO added, "if there is one concept that must come first, I would say ethics because if you were just using authenticity, what are you being authentic about?" Another explained, "Conventional wisdom says ethics comes first. It gives the sustainability of authenticity to protect the brand." Another argued ethics is always first, but they are often intertwined with authenticity because "they are inextricably tied together." Another elucidated the interrelations of the concepts in a holistic view: "Ethics starts with the CEO and permeates your management model and it is how you get things done. Trust is the outcome." Because ethics appears to be a foundational concept, its importance at the beginning of a causal chain in relationships cannot be

overstated. One CEO echoed this point by arguing that ethics or core values lead to building a competitive advantage.

### **Consistency is an anticipated result of ethics**

Many participants mentioned consistency: consistency of implementing ethical behaviors and of communicating about ethics as a main part of their functional responsibilities. One CEO elaborated on consistency in this way:

I see our commitments in terms of behaviors and values. What are the explicit and implicit promises you made to stakeholders? How well do I keep that promise? You have to fulfill that relationship with consistency or you can damage the entity and get into trouble.

Another Interviewee elaborated on the idea of consistency as what he termed a “transcendental principle” and the value that he brings to the job. He explained: “My consistency is in knowing the organization itself: to be on the look for all of the functions and behaviors that do not connect with the overall mission of the entity.” Another Interviewee noted that “actions following on words is important, you have to be consistent” and one interviewee explained: “I view ethics as how we are behaving; the entity has to have consistency with multiple stakeholders.” A number of others seemed to agree with one Interviewee who stated “consistently ethical behavior allows the business to prosper and grow.” As a result, having ethical guidelines enhancing consistency could help build trustworthy and responsible communication.

### **Ethics in action, across relationships, and storytelling**

Numerous participants explained that ethical behavior should be enacted, modeled, and lived in the entity and conveyed through storytelling. One CEO explained: “I think it is important to use ethics as a learning moment, the essence of change management is to create experiences to emulate.”

Several participants related ethical actions to protecting the standing of an entity or client. One interviewee considered that ethical behavior is not only about how ethical one individual acts. The view was shared by a Bahria town Lahore authorized dealer. Numerous participants mentioned the role of narrative, or storytelling about ethics, as how often they communicate about ethical values. One CEO offered:

I think part of how we preserve a culture of ethical behavior and a culture of doing the right thing is by the stories that we tell. We do have an example of employees who really made a great decision or put the customer first or did the right thing. We really try to celebrate that and tell the story throughout the entity. So that people will see that ethics is something that we value and helping others is something that we value.

## RQ 2

### Trust

Almost all participants commented that trust is “central in communications,” “trust plays a huge role,” and “is a main driver” of OPRs. One CEO explained, “I think the core values enterprise-wide we emphasize are around being trusted. I mean clearly that this is important and in a highly regulated industry, as well.” Participants had different views on the timing of relationships and trust. Many CEOs offered opinions similar to the following: “trust is only earned over time, and is not based on outputs or products.” One explained, “It starts with an ethical CEO and board, and that allows for trust and standing to form.”

Another CEO declared, “Absolutely everything in an entity starts with a set of values; they give direction to decision-making and shine a light on policy, doing the right things and doing them correctly, being sensitive and empathetic to multiple entities—then you are going to start seeing trust.”

One participant claimed that, “Saying you can just create trust is a joke. Ethics from a PR standpoint needs to be constantly vigilant before we can claim to establish trust.” Contrary to that position, a CEO commented that trust is the first step in developing relationships: “building trust is not easy. But it is the first step. You need to develop different programs to earn trust. Once you’ve earned trust, you can start developing the relationships.”

A participant explained the relationship between ethics and trust by pointing out the subjective nature of trust: “even with good products or services and ethical behaviors, it does not mean people will necessarily trust you. Trust contains a level of favoritism...it is the basis for credibility (word-of-mouth or standing) that leads to brand loyalty and relationships.” Another CEO in Lahore argued that having “values” is basic for establishing trust. This participant’s view reflected the social exchange perspective on trust (Blau, 1964): The so-called “value” means “keeping in mind what is good for the publics and how to satisfy and entertain them.” It is only when the publics are satisfied and consider that the entity feels for them that they will be willing to trust it. Furthermore, in the relationship building process, trust is “absolutely critical,” inasmuch as, without trust, one interviewee considered the situation would be “volatile and the entity would not be able to last long.”

There are clear cross-cultural differences in how the concepts are enacted, with most Western participants claiming that trust must be earned and built over time. Therefore, earning and building trust on the basis of consistent ethical actions and value inside an entity are foundational to the OPR model, according to the comments of many participants.

## **Discussion**

We found support in this research for extending the OPR model to include ethics or values as a foundational construct or as an “antecedent” to OPR that is linked to the variable trust. Building trust is assumed to be a correct component of the OPR model, based on the research reviewed earlier, but we asked where and how that trust was generated. Ethical behavior and consistency arose in numerous interviews with these elites as to how trust is earned, created, or enhanced, whereas authenticity was seen as a later outcome of a time-tested ethical approach. Support for this finding extended cross-culturally and included concepts such as integrity, consistency, authenticity, narrative, and modeling ethical behavior. Therefore, the theoretical framework for understanding OPR should be extended to include the foundational variable of ethics as central to building the relationship component, trust.

### **RQ 1: Ethics as an antecedent**

There was wide agreement among participants that ethics was a formative construct for building good OPRs. Many participants elaborated that ethical values should be defined, codified, focused, modeled, and understood by all parties before attempting to create OPRs, so that these relationships could be enduring and create trust.

### **Ethics at the core**

There was wide agreement among participants that ethical values must drive entities behavior from the very core or foundation of the entity. Many participants saw ethics as so vital to an entity that they explained it as “in the GENETIC CODE” or the most vital building block of an organization. We can conclude that ethics preexist relationships, and should be considered an antecedent or foundational variable of OPR.

### **Consistency is an appreciated outcome**

Participants described how, using ethical values, reliable and consistent decisions could be made. Publics could then know the entity, and the entity could understand how to meet the expectations of publics. Further, consistency was linked to standing as a way to enhance both relationships and the entity’s standing among publics.

### **Ethics must be active**

Ethical behavior should be discussed, modeled, enacted, and lived within the entity in order to maintain it as a vital part of an entity’s culture. Some ways of making ethics more active include dynamic leadership on ethics, particularly from the CEO, follow through on words with actions, and storytelling about ethical decisions and processes in the entity.

### **Future research is needed**

More research is needed to understand how public relations executives view the exact variables in OPR theory and models. Perhaps due to cultural understandings, use, definitional issues, and level of experience, much confusion exists among the related concepts of ethics, trust, authenticity. For example, one CEO said authenticity should be the antecedent of ethics because ethics is “a defined set of standards or a behavioral guideline.” However, others claimed the opposite, such as in the following examples: “You can’t have authenticity without examining your own values first” or “Authenticity is an outward demonstration of ethics, and how you interact with publics must be based on your ethical beliefs.”

## **Conclusions**

First research question was successful in offering ethics as an antecedent variable for OPRs: ethics is the foundation upon which trust can be built and flourish. We offer ethics as an antecedent of OPR in order to more fully contextualize the excellence theory and OPR models to include the existent and core ethical values of an entity that drive its decision making. We offer ethics as new antecedent variable to the current model of OPR to more fully align our understanding of relationship with the nature of reality and the expectations of stake-holders. Quantitative studies should be undertaken to further understand the foundational role of ethics in building trust.

Whether second research question was unsuccessful in determining a definitive order for the concepts supported by ethics: trust and authenticity. The researchers note that cultural influences impacted data collection in this area and offered a wide range of opinions and contradictions in the data. Although trust was widely supported, a model order could not be established; hence, we recommend continuing to pursue the variable trust as the desired normative relationship outcome. We recommend contextualizing the term “authentic” OPRs as a desired outcome until further research can be completed on the cross-cultural understanding of the term authenticity.

Future researchers should include ethics as an antecedent variable, a foundation from which an entity moves forward in building excellent OPRs. The addition of an ethics variable as foundational to OPR has the practical implication of allowing entities to better hone in on their ethical values, mission, understanding, and decision-making processes in order to enhance integrity, responsibility, and consistency, ultimately cultivating more trusting relationships with publics.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **List of Interviewees**

1. Ahmed Hassan Sabir CEO Village Value & Associates
2. Ahmed Raza CEO Legend Estate
3. Atif Ali CEO Lynx Associates
4. Babar Gujjar CEO Pearl Associates
5. Babar Sajjad Mahad CEO Estate
6. Chaudhary Israr CEO Albait Associates
7. Dr. Manzar Alam CEO Manager Group
8. Fahad Pervaiz Qureshi CEO Irtasam Associates
9. Faisal Anwar Communication Officer Hafiz Brothres
10. Hanif Qadri CEO Jubilee Estate
11. Kamran Rafiq Communication Officer Haroon's Estate
12. Mailk Sadaqat CEO Him Properties
13. Mian Athar CEO Athar Associates
14. Naeem CEO Anss Marketing
15. Naeem CEO Enem Real Estate
16. Rana Sher Afzal CEO Subhan Marketing
17. Rao Adeeb Communication Officer Friends Associates
18. Shahwar Communication Officer Alnoor Associates
19. Shakir Qadri Communication Officer Ali Saqlian Real Estate
20. Zafar Chohan CEO Chohan Estate