How dominant coalition members' values and perceptions impact their perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand the extent to which dominant coalition members' values and perceptions influence their perceptions of public relations participation in organization-level decision making. Research in this area has largely focussed on the relationship between practitioner roles and decision-making inclusion.

Design/methodology/approach – The population of interest was dominant coalition members of for-profit, government, and nonprofit organizations in the USA. Data were collected through a national survey to a nonrandom sample of 201 dominant coalition members.

Findings – Results indicate that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and perceived substantive autonomy of the organization positively predicted perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making. Perceived manager role potential of the public relations department also had significant predictive power.

Originality/value – While research has focussed primarily on the characteristics that public relations practitioners can develop to earn a seat at the management table, little is known about the characteristics of dominant coalition members that influence whether or not a seat is made available or the degree to which public relations is perceived to participate in decision making.

Keywords Openness, Autonomy, Communication management, Strategic decision making, Dominant coalition, Manager role

Paper type Research paper

Public relations scholars and practitioners have advocated that public relations needs a seat at the management table where it can participate in strategic decision making. When public relations has a voice in strategic planning, an organization's relationships with its publics are more likely to be considered in the decision-making process (Broom and Dozier, 1986) and organizations are able to secure sufficient autonomy to pursue their goals (Edelman, 2011; Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Notably, Richard Edelman (2011), CEO of Edelman Public Relations, explained that public relations is best suited to help organizations navigate their increasingly complex environments but can only do so if public relations managers operate within the C-Suite. Similarly, chief communications officers (CCOs) who belong to the Arthur W. Page Society (2007) believe that public relations is "central to the success of the corporation" (p. 2) and advocate for an executive management and policy-making role for the function. Furthermore, scholars have found that public relations is better able to cultivate relationships and maximize organizational autonomy when practitioners play an integral role in the strategic management of organizations (Grunig *et al.*, 2002).

Both trade and scholarly articles largely concentrate on the knowledge, skills, and abilities public relations managers must possess to merit participation in organizational decision making. The growing laundry list of abilities discussed in trade articles includes conducting issues management or environmental scanning (Siler, 2012), building relationships with other departments (Haiken, 2013), demonstrating the value of public relations (PR Budgeting, 2012), developing leadership skills (Berger, 2013), driving change within the organization (Goldberg, 2012), and understanding business operations (Yeatman, 2012). Likewise, research has found that practitioners' enactment of the manager role (Dozier and Broom, 1995; Lauzen and Dozier, 1994), as well as public relations departments' potential to enact the manager role (Grunig *et al.*, 2002), is related to participation in organization-level decision making. Additionally, scholars have linked practitioners' strategic orientation with organizational decision making (Brønn, 2014).

The development of necessary skills and abilities, however, does not guarantee that public relations will participate in strategic decision making. Scholars have consistently reported that an organization's dominant coalition – the group of leaders who have the power and influence to make strategic decisions – ultimately decides how public relations functions in the organization (Berger, 2005; Cameron *et al.*, 2001; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Kelly, 1995; Lauzen and Dozier, 1992; Plowman, 1998). Moreover, the impact of the dominant coalition can be seen in industry reports about the state of the public relations function. According to Edelman (2011), many organizations still do not include public relations when determining policy. Also, the Arthur W. Page Society (2013) found that not all CEOs include their CCOs in strategic decision making; however, they are more likely to do so when the CEO views "the public as a major stakeholder" (p. 12). Furthermore, the USC Annenberg Strategic Public Relations Center's (2014) GAP VIII study found that only about 40 percent of participants actively participated in strategic planning and only 13 percent reported playing "a key role in defining overall business strategy" (p. 21).

While the role of public relations in organizational decision making is continually studied by industry thought leaders, few recent empirical academic studies have been conducted (e.g. Brønn, 2014; Kohring *et al.*, 2013). In addition, while research has focussed primarily on the characteristics that public relations practitioners can develop to earn a seat at the management table (Berger, 2005), little is known about the characteristics of dominant coalition members (Berger, 2007) that influence whether or not a seat is made available (Lauzen and Dozier, 1994). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to build theory about the relationship of dominant coalition members' individual values and perceptions and their perceptions of public relations participation in organization-level decision making. Specifically, this study proposes that dominant coalition members' values of openness to the environment and their perceptions of organizational autonomy will predict the degree to which public relations is perceived to participate in organization-level decision making.

Literature review
Participation in strategic decision making
Grunig and Repper (1992) defined strategic management as the process through which organizational decision makers balance their concerns with the concerns of an organization's publics. Because strategic management requires decision makers to have information about the organization's environment, public relations practitioners, as boundary spanners, have an important contribution to make in terms of "helping to define the mission, goals, and objectives of the organization" (p. 120). According to

Steyn (2004), the organization's environment "is a key concept in the strategic management process" (p. 171) because strategic decision making must take into account an organization's various stakeholders, as well as the issues, trends, and ethical considerations that are related to that organization.

Broom and Dozier (1986) explained that participation in strategic decision making is "more important to the profession of public relations than any other measure of professional growth" (p. 42). The reason for this is that public relations cannot effectively manage the interdependencies of an organization and maximize its autonomy unless it plays an integral role in strategic management (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Including public relations in strategic decision making enables organizations to operate as open systems, facilitating adaption to environmental changes (Dozier, 1992) and ensuring that "information about relations with priority publics gets factored into organizational decisions, policies, and actions" (Broom and Dozier, 1986, p. 42). Recent research on the role of the public relations function in strategic decision making has been almost exclusively theoretical (e.g. Steyn and Niemann, 2010, 2014).

Manager role and decision-making participation
Much of the public relations literature focusses on the relationship between manager role enactment and participation in organizational decision making. Notably, Broom and Dozier (1986) found that participation in strategic decision making was strongly correlated with the three conceptual manager roles (i.e. expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem-solving process facilitator). They also reported that increased participation in organizational decision making was positively related to increased manager role enactment. Later, Dozier and Broom (1995) found that even when controlling for the influence of other variables, such as gender and professional experience, manager role enactment still had a strong positive relationship with participation in organizational decision making. Similarly, L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002) reported that manager role enactment by an organization's top communicator was positively correlated with participation in strategic planning when using data gathered from top communicators. However, when using data gathered from CEOs, the relationship between these variables was much weaker, although still significant.

While much of the practitioner roles research has been conducted at the individual (micro) level of analysis, some researchers have adapted the concept for measurement at the departmental and organizational (meso) levels of analysis (Gordon and Kelly, 1999; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Kelly, 1994). According to L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002), studying roles at the organizational level eliminates some of the difficulties in measuring at the individual level because "manager role enactment involves a wide range of competencies, all of which may not reside in a single individual but may be spread among a number of communicators" (p. 225). Following this perspective, Gordon and Kelly (1999) examined the role potential of public relations departments in hospitals. They reported that both the manager role potential and the strategic planning potential of the department had significant positive relationships with organizational effectiveness. In addition, L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002) observed that participation in strategic planning was positively correlated with department manager role expertise as evaluated by the top communicator; however, it was only weakly correlated when using evaluations from the CEO. This led the researchers to conclude that CEOs possibly "do not fully recognize the capability of their public relations department, even in excellent organizations, or they are not fully aware of the contributions their communication departments make to strategic processes" (p. 154).

Influence of the dominant coalition on decision-making participation
Public relations scholars have adopted a power-control perspective to understand how power within organizations influences the practice of public relations. A key concept in the power-control perspective is the recognition of a dominant coalition, composed of individuals who have "power to influence decisions, set organizational goals, and decide how those goals will be met" (Dozier, 1990, p. 9). According to Berger (2005), the concept of a dominant coalition is important in public relations theory because "this group of powerful insiders makes strategic choices, allocates resources, and influences public relations practices" (p. 8).

As a result, scholars have used a power-control perspective to study the impact of dominant coalition attributes on public relations participation in organizational decision making. Lauzen and Dozier (1994) studied how the outer-directed, issues management orientation of the dominant coalition, as evaluated by a public relations practitioner, affected the participation of public relations in organizational decision making. They hypothesized that dominant coalitions that were open to their environments would practice outer-directed issues management "to provide managers with information necessary to respond to environmental complexity and turbulence" (p. 169). Public relations departments would be involved in this endeavor at the organizational level. Conversely, they posited that dominant coalitions that were closed to the environment would engage in inner-directed issues management for the purpose of "justifying decisions already made by dominant coalitions or positioning organizations as environmentally responsive when they are not" (p. 168). They found that outer-directed issues management by the dominant coalition and a participative organizational culture had a mediating influence on public relations participation in organizational decision making and public relations manager role enactment.

Additionally, Kohring *et al.* (2013) examined the influence of public relations departments in German universities by sampling university administrators. They theorized that administrators would value public relations more than their academic colleagues would because administrators pay attention to how their university is covered in the media. They found that public relations' influence on decision making in these universities was low but that their expertise was above average. Additionally, they found that as academic administrators paid attention to and placed importance on media coverage of the university, "they ascribe[d] executive influence to their PR managers, opening the 'gates of power' for the young profession" (p. 6).

Similarly, Brønn (2014) surveyed dominant coalition members in small, medium, and large businesses in Norway to examine their perceptions of the strategic perspective of their public relations managers and the involvement of public relations in the strategic planning process. She reported that public relations managers were involved in making final strategic decisions in only 44 percent of the 1,343 organizations considered in the study. However, she explained that public relations managers were involved in suggesting alternatives as part of the strategic planning process. In other words, dominant coalition members "believe communication managers have something to add to the process but that they are not really 'there' when decisions are made" (p. 67). She also found significant moderate correlations between the dominant coalition members' perceptions of the strategic orientation of their public relations managers and their public relations department's participation in strategic planning. She noted that the higher the perceived strategic orientation of public relations managers, "the earlier communication executives are brought into meetings and the more likely they are to participate more often in meetings at the top level" (p. 72).

Impact of the values and perceptions of the dominant coalition
Research in organization theory has explained that the strategic choices of organizations reflect the values and cognitions of their top management teams. Specifically, the upper echelons perspective (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick and Mason, 1984) identifies factors that influence the decision making of top managers. According to Hambrick and Mason (1984), managers' values and cognitions act as a screen between the actual environment and their perceptions of the environment. Managers only selectively perceive certain aspects of the environment within their narrow field of vision. As a result, the information managers pay attention to is "*interpreted* through a filter woven by [their] cognitive base and values" (p. 195, italics in original). This theory has been used predominantly to argue that the senior leaders of the organization "provide an interface between the firm and its environment, and are relatively powerful, and therefore their choices and actions are likely to have an impact on the organization" (Carpenter *et al.*, 2004, p. 753). A few studies by public relations scholars have adopted the concept of top management teams from this literature (e.g. Porter and Sallot, 2005); however, public relations researchers have not yet adopted the upper echelons framework as a way to study members of these teams. The present study adopts the upper echelons perspective to explain the impact that dominant coalition members' values and perceptions have on public relations participation in strategic decision making.

Of the many values held by members of the dominant coalition, the value that potentially has the greatest bearing on public relations participation in organizational decision making is the value of organizational openness. Public relations scholars have long made a connection between an organization's degree of openness and the public relations function (e.g. Cancel *et al.*, 1997; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Lauzen and Dozier, 1992). From a systems theory perspective, an organization's level of openness impacts the degree to which the public relations function, part of the adaptive subsystem, is linked to the managerial subsystem (Dozier and Grunig, 1992). An open organization requires information from its environment to adapt to changing environmental conditions. Moreover, because the managerial subsystem needs this information, organizational managers will value the adaptive subsystem and seek information from it. It should be recalled that Lauzen and Dozier (1994) found that outer-directed issues management and a participative organizational culture, both of which can be seen as indicators of the dominant coalition's values of organizational openness, had a mediating influence on public relations participation in organizational decision making and public relations manager role enactment.

In terms of perceptions, dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy reflect a sense of the organization's situation within its environment. These perceptions seem likely to have an impact on public relations participation in strategic decision making. Because of the complexities of the current business environment, organizations must deal with a wide variety of stakeholders and publics, some seeking to limit an organization's autonomy and others attempting to enhance it. Scholars have proposed that the public relations function contributes to organizational effectiveness by ensuring that the organization has sufficient autonomy to pursue its mission and goals (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). A loss of autonomy not only makes it harder for an organization to accomplish its goals but can also result in significant financial loss as the organization is compelled to make costly changes to accommodate pressure from stakeholder groups (Grunig *et al.*, 1992). However, stakeholder groups that support an organization and trust it to make good decisions typically allow that organization more latitude to pursue its goals.

While the concept of organizational autonomy has been used to explain the contribution of the public relations function, only a few public relations studies have attempted to measure it (e.g. Kelly, 1995; Wilson *et al.*, 2013). The present study adopted Stainton's (1994) definition of organizational autonomy: "the organization's freedom from both internal and external constraints to formulate and pursue self-determined plans and purposes" (pp. 21-22). In addition, as the literature from multiple disciplines consistently differentiates between substantive and procedural autonomy, this study adopts the two-dimensional structure of autonomy (e.g. Berdahl *et al.*, 2011; Lumpkin *et al.*, 2009). "Substantive autonomy" is the power of an organization to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities. "Procedural autonomy" is the power of an organization to determine the means by which it will pursue its mission, goals, and objectives and implement its policies and priorities.

Hypotheses

Based on the review of the literature, the current study proposes that perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making will be influenced by dominant coalition members' perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department, as well as their values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of organizational autonomy. Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1. The more dominant coalition members value organizational openness to the organization's environment, the more they will perceive that the organization's public relations department participates in organizational decision making.

H2. The greater dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy are, the more they will perceive that the public relations department participates in organizational decision making.

H3. Dominant coalition members' perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department will be positively associated with their perceptions of the department's participation in organizational decision making (Figure 1).

Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design to test its hypotheses. All of the scales used interval measurement, specifically five-point Likert-type scales.
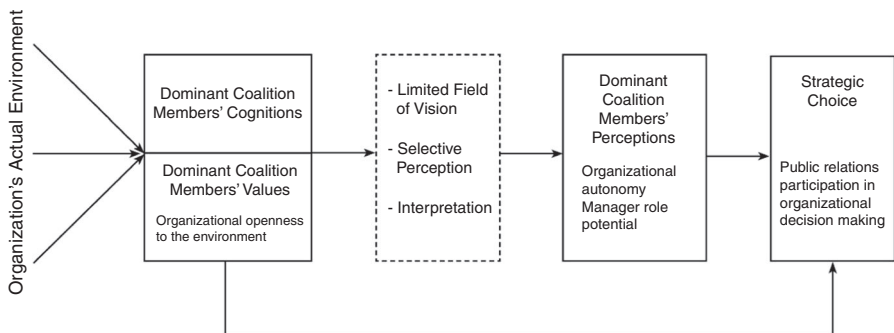
Figure 1.
Upper echelons model

Source: Adapted from Hambrick and Mason (1984), applied to public relations participation in organizational decision making

Population and sample
The population of interest for this study was dominant coalition members of for-profit businesses, government agencies, and tax-exempt nonprofit organizations in the USA that employ at least one full-time public relations practitioner. This study employed a two-stage nonprobability sampling procedure, as drawing a random sample of the population was not feasible. The first stage involved the identification of organizations from each sector with at least one full-time public relations practitioner. In total, 32 prospective organizations were identified based on the researcher's prior work experience and his membership in professional associations. The researcher made a conscious effort to include a variety of organizations from different industries and subsectors, as well as different geographical regions of the country. Ten organizations agreed to participate: a public biomedical company in the Southeast, a private health and fitness company in the Southeast, a public energy company in the Midwest, a school district in the West, a state government agency in the Mountain West, a convention and visitor's bureau in the Southeast, a public university in the Mountain West, a public broadcasting network in the Midwest, an art museum in the Northeast, and a hospital in the South.

The second stage focussed on identifying members of each participating organization's dominant coalition. This study adopted an operational definition of the dominant coalition that harmonized the broader public relations and more limited upper echelons approaches. The dominant coalition was defined as the top two levels of an organization's management structure (Carpenter and Fredrickson, 2001), members of the organization's board of directors or trustees (Bergh, 2001), and individuals outside of the formal structures of power who had considerable influence on decision making (Berger, 2005). The researcher worked directly with a contact person in each organization to identify dominant coalition members based on this definition, which provided a concrete structure on which to base the identification. Following this process, the researcher produced a sampling frame of 201 dominant coalition members from the ten participating organizations. Because of the difficulty in gaining access to and getting survey responses from this study's elite population, the researcher asked each contact person to choose the type of questionnaire that would yield the highest response rates for that particular organization (online or paper based). In all, two organizations chose the paper-based questionnaire, while the remaining eight chose the online questionnaire.

Questionnaire development
The questionnaire for this study included measures of the four concepts of interest (values of openness to the environment, perceived organizational autonomy, perceived manager role potential, and perceived participation in organizational decision making) as well as questions to gather demographic information. It was pretested by six public relations and management experts. Following the pretest, a pilot study of 60 senior managers of a utility company in the Southeast was conducted to further refine the questionnaire.

This study measured dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment by adopting ten indicators from the external responsiveness scale from the open organization model (Mink *et al.*, 1994). The original scale items were modified to reflect organizational values rather than behaviors by turning the statements into gerund phrases. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each statement generally applied in

their organization. Stubbs (2007) reported a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.91 for this specific scale. See Table I.

A new scale was created to measure dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy. Using Stainton's (1994) conceptual definition of autonomy, the researcher made an initial selection of 20 items: ten to measure substantive autonomy and ten to measure procedural autonomy. These items were adopted from existing autonomy measures (Breaugh, 1999; Cloudman and Hallahan, 2006; Grunig, 1987; Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Huang and Su, 2009; Kelly, 1995; Johnson, 2012; Lumpkin *et al.*, 2009; Shane *et al.*, 1995; Spreitzer, 1995). Items were modified to reflect an organization's ability to determine and pursue its mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities. To ensure that the scale assessed the overall autonomy of the organization, both dimensions were measured by asking respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each item applied to their organization. In addition, respondents were asked to consider the combined impact of all organizational stakeholders (e.g. consumers and employees) in their responses to each item. The pretest and pilot study allowed the researcher to reduce the scale to eight items: four for substantive autonomy and four for procedural autonomy. See Table II.

The manager role potential of the public relations department was measured by adopting the four-item scale developed by Kelly (1994). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed that the public relations department in their organization had the expertise or knowledge represented by the four items on the manager role potential scale. Kelly (1994) reported a Cronbach's α of 0.82. See Table III.

Perceived participation in organizational decision making was measured by adopting a modified version of the four items used by L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002). The pretest and pilot study showed low reliability for the scale ($\alpha = 0.59$). Therefore, one scale item was dropped and replaced by another item from Lauzen and Dozier (1994) that better reflected a potential area in which public relations can contribute to strategic decision making at the organizational level: adoption of new policies. Furthermore, the last item in the participation in organizational decision-making scale was changed from

Items	M	SD	α
Values of organizational openness scale	4.34	0.55	0.89
Innovating and experimenting in order to cope with changes in the organization's operating environment	4.50	0.73	
Appointing task forces (or other such work groups) to help the organization understand new situations or problems	3.94	0.91	
Modifying organizational structures, policies, and procedures in response to changes inside and outside the organization	4.25	0.80	
Demonstrating responsibility for the organization's impact on its stakeholders	4.39	0.73	
Responding swiftly to organizational opportunities	4.26	0.79	
Regularly and systematically seeking new information to improve the organization's products and services	4.45	0.69	
Providing enough energy and resources to support the organization's commitment to a new way of doing things	4.42	0.78	
Adapting to changing situations rather than functioning in a mechanical or preprogrammed manner	4.46	0.76	
Demonstrating a real interest in the needs of the organization's stakeholders	4.54	0.74	
Supporting the community by providing help where needed	4.17	0.83	

Table I.
Means and standard deviations of values of organizational openness to the environment

Items	M	SD	Factor loadings	α
Overall perceived organizational autonomy scale	4.01	0.56		0.86
Substantive autonomy scale[a]	4.06	0.63		0.77
The organization has the ability to determine its own objectives	4.04	0.78	0.81	
The organization has the authority to determine its own mission	3.85	1.08	0.80	
The organization is free to make decisions about its goals	4.14	0.73	0.74	
The organization's decision makers are primarily responsible for establishing the priorities of the organization	4.22	0.66	0.59	
Procedural autonomy scale[b]	3.96	0.63		0.84
The organization is free to choose the methods it will use to implement its policies	4.00	0.80	0.82	
Stakeholders expect the organization to use its own discretion in establishing its policies	3.65	0.93	0.64	
The organization is able to choose the way it goes about accomplishing its goals	4.08	0.64	0.89	
The organization is empowered to decide how it will achieve its objectives	4.09	0.68	0.82	

Notes: $n = 117$. Principal axis factoring was the extraction method and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization as the rotation method. [a]Eigenvalue $= 1.12$, percent of variance $= 13.97$; [b]eigenvalue $= 4.16$, percent of variance $= 51.99$

Table II.
Means and standard deviations of perceived organizational autonomy

Items	M	SD	α
Perceived manager role potential index	3.59	0.83	0.86
Manage people	3.40	0.99	
Conduct evaluation research	3.16	1.02	
Develop strategies for solving public relations problems	3.79	0.95	
Manage the organization's response to issues	4.03	1.01	

Table III.
Means and standard deviations of perceived manager role potential of the public relations department

routine operations to general operations to better reflect the integration of public relations into the day-to-day operational decisions of the organization. Respondents were asked to estimate the extent to which their organization's public relations department participates in four policy-making areas of their organization. See Table IV.

Because the operational definition of the dominant coalition adopted in this study included boards of directors and trustees, the top two levels of organizational

Items	M	SD	Factor loadings[a]	α
Perceived public relations dept. participation in organizational decision-making index	3.40	0.92		0.90
Strategic planning	3.45	1.11	0.90	
Adoption of new policies	3.28	1.02	0.89	
Major initiatives	3.45	1.09	0.86	
General operations	3.39	0.97	0.84	

Notes: $n = 117$. Principal axis factoring was the extraction method and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization as the rotation method. [a]Eigenvalue $= 3.05$, percent of variance $= 76.30$

Table IV.
Means and standard deviations of perceived public relations department participation in organizational decision making

management, and individuals outside of this hierarchy with informal power, it was highly likely that there would be differences in dominant coalition members' familiarity with the operation of their organization's public relations department. Therefore, a one-item measure was adopted as a control variable for the differing levels of dominant coalition member familiarity with their organization's public relations department. Respondents were asked about the extent to which they were familiar with the workings of the public relations department in their organization.

Results

Demographic profile

A total of 118 usable questionnaires were collected. This represents a response rate of 58.71 percent. The 118 total dominant coalition members' responses included 18 responses from for-profit organizations (15.52 percent), 66 responses from government agencies (55.93 percent), and 34 responses from nonprofit organizations (28.81 percent). There were 74 (63.79 percent) male respondents and 42 (36.21 percent) female respondents. A large majority of the respondents were Caucasian ($n = 107$, or 92.24 percent). With regard to education, more than half of the respondents had graduate degrees ($n = 68$, or 58.12 percent). In terms of the participants' current positions, more than half were either chief officers ($n = 16$, or 14.95 percent) or senior managers ($n = 52$, or 48.6 percent). The average age (in years) of the respondents was 50.47 (SD = 9.75), and ages ranged from 27 to 71. The average number of direct reports was 17.27 (SD = 53.29). The number of direct reports ranged from 0 to 380. The average number of years respondents worked at their current organization was 13.98 (SD = 9.57). Finally, the average number of years respondents have been in their current position was 6.41 (SD = 7.38).

Hypothesis testing

The study's three hypotheses were first tested using Pearson product-moment correlations. *H1* posited that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment would be positively related to their perceptions of the public relations department's participation in organizational decision making. The correlation matrix in Table V shows that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment were not significantly correlated with perceptions of the public relations department participating in organizational decision making ($r = 0.17$, $p > 0.05$, $n = 113$).

Next, *H2* proposed a positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy and their perceptions of the public relations department's participation in organizational decision making. Table V demonstrates that there was a moderate positive relationship between perceived organizational

Variables	1	2	3
1 = values of openness to the environment	1		
2 = perceived organizational autonomy	0.17 ($n = 113$)	1	
3 = PR manager role potential	0.19 ($n = 112$)*	0.32 ($n = 115$)**	1
4 = PR participation in org. decision making	0.17 ($n = 114$)	0.34 ($n = 116$)**	0.75 ($n = 115$)***

Notes: *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table V.
Pearson correlations among the study's four variables

autonomy and the perceived participation of the public relations department in organizational decision making ($r = 0.34$, $n = 116$). This relationship was significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

Finally, *H3* predicted that there would be a positive relationship between dominant coalition members' perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department and their perceptions of the participation of the department in organizational decision making.

Again, as shown in Table V, there was a strong positive relationship between perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department and perceptions of the department's participation in organizational decision making ($r = 0.75$, $n = 115$). This relationship also was significant at the $p < 0.001$ level.

In addition, as values of organizational openness to the environment, perceived organizational autonomy, and perceived manager role potential of the public relations department were predicted to have an effect on perceived participation of the public relations department in organizational decision making, multiple regression was used to examine the individual influence of each independent variable on perceived participation in organizational decision making while holding the other variables constant. Multiple regression also allowed the researcher to control for dominant coalition members' familiarity with the public relations department. Furthermore, because the two-dimensional measure of perceived autonomy was significantly correlated with perceived participation in organizational decision making, the two dimensions of perceived autonomy, substantive, and procedural, were entered into the regression equation as independent variables to examine the contribution of each dimension to the relationship.

Prior to conducting the analysis, the variables were screened for outliers using a preliminary multiple regression to calculate Mahalanobis distance. In addition, a scatterplot matrix and residuals plot demonstrated that the data met assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

The results of the multiple regression, presented in Table VI, found that values of organizational openness to the environment ($\beta = 0.14$, $t = 2.11$, $p = 0.04$) and perceived substantive autonomy ($\beta = 0.19$, $t = 2.23$, $p = 0.03$) positively predicted perceived public relations department participation in organizational decision making. In addition, perceived manager role potential of the public relations department ($\beta = 0.75$, $t = 9.93$, $p < 0.001$) positively predicted perceptions that the public relations department participated in organizational decision making. Furthermore, familiarity with the public relations department ($\beta = -0.16$, $t = -2.19$, $p = 0.03$) negatively predicted the dependent variable. The standardized beta weight for the public relations

Variables	B	SE B	β	t	p
Values of organizational openness	0.28	0.13	0.14	2.11*	0.04
Perceived substantive autonomy	0.27	0.12	0.19	2.23*	0.03
Perceived procedural autonomy	−0.07	0.12	−0.05	−0.57	0.57
Management role potential	0.85	0.09	0.75	9.93**	< 0.001
Familiarity with public relations department	−0.20	0.09	−0.16	−2.19*	0.03

Notes: $n = 105$. Multiple regression analysis of variables predicting dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.001$

Table VI.
Multiple regression analysis

department's manager role potential was nearly three times larger than the standardized beta weight for substantive autonomy and nearly six larger than the standardized beta weight for values of organizational openness to the environment.

The regression model was a good fit for the data, explaining 60 percent of the variance in the public relations department's participation in organizational decision making ($R^2 = 0.60$, $R^2_{adj} = 0.58$, F (5, 100) = 29.97, $p < 0.001$). Multicollinearity among the control variable and independent variables was not an issue in this analysis as the variance inflation factor (VIF) was less than 10 (VIF < 1.86) and tolerance statistics were greater than 0.1 (Tolerance > 0.54). Therefore, based on the results of the Pearson correlations and the multiple regression analysis, *H1*, *H2*, and *H3* were all supported.

Discussion and conclusions

The present study found that dominant coalition members' perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department were the strongest predictor of their perceptions that the department participates in organizational decision making. However, the results also show that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of substantive autonomy were positively related to perceptions of the public relations departments' participation in organizational decision making. These findings indicate that when dominant coalition members perceive that the public relations department has high levels of knowledge and expertise in enacting the manager role, value open information exchange with the environment, and perceive that the organization has power to determine its own mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities, the public relations department will be seen to have a high level of participation in organizational decision making.

The finding of this study that perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department were positively correlated with perceptions of the department's participation in organizational decision making corresponds with previous research. It should be recalled that L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002) reported that public relations participation in strategic planning was positively correlated with department manager role expertise as evaluated by the top communicators. However, they found that these variables were only weakly correlated when using data from the CEO. This led the researchers to conclude that CEOs possibly "do not fully recognize the capability of their public relations department, even in excellent organizations, or they are not fully aware of the contributions their communication departments make to strategic processes" (Grunig *et al.*, 2002, p. 154). However, different from previous research, the current study included only dominant coalition members as respondents and found a strong relationship between their perceptions of the manager role potential of the public relations department and their perceptions of the department's participation in organizational decision making. Using the logic of L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002), it appears that in the ten organizations represented in this study, dominant coalition members have an informed understanding of the capabilities of their public relations departments and are fully aware of the contributions their public relations departments make to organizational decision making.

While no previous research has directly examined the influence of perceived organizational autonomy on perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making, Kohring *et al.* (2013) came the closest. It should be remembered that they reported that public relations managers gained influence in a university setting as academic administrators paid attention to and placed importance

on media coverage of the university. The current study found that perceptions of substantive autonomy among dominant coalition members predict their perceptions of participation in organizational decision making by the public relations department. This relationship suggests that when dominant coalition members perceive their organization to have the latitude to determine its mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities, they also perceive the public relations department to play a greater role in decision making as it relates to strategic planning, adoption of new policies, major initiatives, and general operations. While the results of this study cannot demonstrate causality, the fact that this relationship exists supports the findings from previous research that dominant coalition attributes are related to perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making (Brønn, 2014; Kohring *et al.*, 2013; Lauzen and Dozier, 1994). Furthermore, the results of the current study highlight the importance of the relationship between substantive autonomy and decision-making participation, as well as provide some empirical support for the understudied notion that the public relations function contributes to organizational effectiveness by ensuring that the organization has sufficient autonomy to pursue its mission and goals (Grunig *et al.*, 2002).

In contrast with organizational autonomy, previous public relations research has addressed the relationship between organizational openness and public relations participation in organizational decision making (Dozier and Grunig, 1992; Lauzen and Dozier, 1994). The results of the current study, namely, that increases in dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment will lead to increased perceptions of the public relations department's participation in organizational decision making, are in line with previous research. Moreover, the results of this study indicate that the upper echelons perspective framework provides a fruitful perspective from which to analyze the impact of dominant coalition members on the public relations function.

Implications for public relations practice
The first implication of this study for public relations practice is that dominant coalition members in the ten organizations studied have low to moderate perceptions about the management-related capabilities and activities of their public relations departments. It should be recalled that the mean scores for these variables showed that dominant coalition members perceived that their public relations departments have moderate manager role potential ($M = 3.59$, SD $= 0.83$) and moderate participation in organizational decision making ($M = 3.40$, SD $= 0.92$).

In addition, dominant coalition members who participated in this study reported a high familiarity ($M = 4.36$, SD $= 0.75$) with the public relations departments in their organizations. Therefore, it appears that these moderate scores are not the result of dominant coalition members lacking awareness of the management capabilities and activities of their public relations departments; rather, these scores seem to indicate that dominant coalition members are not impressed with the management capabilities of their public relations departments. In addition, they do not see their public relations departments participating frequently in management-related activities. These findings seem to suggest that public relations practitioners are still lacking in the skills and abilities related to manager role potential which can lead to increased participation in organizational decision making.

A second implication of this study is that a key to perceived participation in organization-level decision making is to enhance the manager role potential of the public relations department. However, public relations practitioners seeking access to the

management table need to be aware that a demonstrated increase in knowledge and expertise of the public relations department will likely result in increased expectations and communication demands from the dominant coalition (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). This means that public relations managers need to be able to deliver on increased expectations from the dominant coalition so that the dominant coalition will demand more from the department in the future. Furthermore, these opportunities may come more often to prepared public relations departments as CEOs look to senior public relations officers for guidance more than they have in the past (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007).

A third implication of the study is that dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to their organization's environment and their perceptions of substantive autonomy influence the extent to which public relations departments are perceived to participate in organizational decision making. In essence, these values and perceptions may temper the dominant coalition's expectations and demands of the public relations department. For instance, dominant coalitions that perceive that their organization has low substantive autonomy and do not value organizational openness to the environment may be less likely to include public relations managers in discussions about strategic planning or policy formation. As a consequence, public relations managers backed by departments with high manager role potential need to understand dominant coalition members' values of organizational openness to the environment and their perceptions of substantive autonomy in order to effectively communicate with them about the value of including a public relations perspective in organizational decision making.

Limitations and future study
Because a nonprobability sample was used, sampling error could not be calculated to understand how different the dominant coalition members who participated in this study were from the entire population of dominant coalition members. While the sample included many more dominant coalition members from government organizations than from nonprofit and for-profit organizations, the demographic composition of dominant coalition members in the sample did not differ noticeably from the characteristics of senior executives reported in other studies (e.g. Cook and Glass, 2011). Moreover, as membership in the dominant coalition is often in a state of flux, the contact people used in the study may have identified different dominant coalition members at different points in time. Additional research is needed to test the application of the upper echelons framework in a public relations context. For example, scholars should examine additional values and perceptions of dominant coalition members that can impact public relations' ability to contribute to organizational strategy. Also, research should seek to examine the relationships among dominant coalition values and perceptions and more objective measures of public relations participation in organizational decision making.

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