ABSTRACT: We conducted 18 interviews with public relations professionals to provide grounding and refinement of the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations. Support was found for a continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy and for a matrix of variables affecting the continuum. Pre-disposing and situational categories of variables were identified that affect the degree of accommodation and advocacy undertaken by public relations practitioners in a given situation. Overall, the findings suggest that practitioners are quite sophisticated in considering a welter of factors affecting accommodation of publics. Findings also provide additional factors to add to the matrix of 86 variables in the contingency theory, while calling into question some variables offered initially in the matrix. Although generally overlooked in the literature, philanthropic/community relations functions are viewed by practitioners as important opportunities to be accommodative. Overall, the practitioners' view of their communication world offers validity to the contingency theory and suggests further theory development is in order.

Amanda E. Cancel works in public relations in the private sector, Michael A. Mitrook is an assistant professor at Central Florida University, and Glen T. Cameron is the Maxine Wilson-Gregory Chair in Journalism Research at the Missouri School of Journalism.
Purpose of the Study

Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, and Mitrook offered the contingency theory of conflict management as a new direction for research in public relations to better understand how the public relations field manages conflict and reaches out to publics in the external communication environment. This qualitative study is a first attempt to learn from 18 practitioners whether the contingency theory makes sense to them. The study also tested whether any of the 86 factors enumerated in the theory (see Appendix) would be offered independently by the interviewees, and if other factors would be volunteered. We also elicited identification of factors that respondents considered minimal or nonexistent influences on the degree of accommodation a practitioner will employ in a given situation with a given external public. In effect, we set out to see whether "there is anything to the contingency theory" and if so, to see how the theory can be grounded in the words, experience and perspective of practitioners.

The Contingency Theory in a Nutshell

The contingency theory of accommodation is a logical extension of work to date on models of public relations. The theory provides a refinement of the normative theory of excellence in public relations and builds on Hellweg, Murphy, and Dozier, L. Grunig, and J. Grunig's arguments calling for a more realistic portrayal of public relations strategies or models based on a continuum. As such, the continuum tested here represents an organization's possible wide range of stances taken toward an individual public, differing from the more prescriptive and mutually exclusive categorization necessarily found in a limited set of models of communication.

Precedents for a continuum are advanced by Hellweg and Murphy. Hellweg suggests that the perspective of the organization and the perspective of the involved publics are better measured by points on a continuum rather than only one or the other strictly symmetrical or strictly asymmetrical view. Murphy supports the concept of symmetric communication working along the less formal lines of a continuum, based on mixed-motive games reflecting the interaction of the players involved. Such a continuum ranges from pure conflict at one extreme to pure cooperation at the other with a balance to be found in the middle. This mixed motive view is supported as an improved conceptualization of the two-way symmetrical model wherein some flexibility regarding levels of accommodation or cooperation is allowed, as noted by J. Grunig, L. Grunig, and Dozier.

The contingency theory argues for a continuum of accommodation (see Figure 1) as a more accurate model of how public relations is practiced. The contingency theory also offers 86 factors that affect the location of an organization on that continuum at a given time regarding a given public. Notably, the con-
Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations

Advocacy  |  Accommodation
----------|------------------
Pure      | Pure

Figure 1.

contium offered in the contingency theory depicts the stance of one organization toward a given public, not the outcome of interaction with that public. The outcome (win-win or win-lose or lose-lose) is beyond the purview of the theory, with its focus on decisions leading to an organizational stance in terms of greater or lesser accommodation of a public.

The contingency theory suggests that many factors affect whether more accommodation or more advocacy will be effective in achieving departmental and organizational objectives in the short and long term. The theory further proposes that an accommodative stance, arguably a key element of two-way symmetrical communication, may not be inherently ethical; on the contrary, accommodation of morally repugnant publics may be unethical, at least from the deontological perspective of those who hold some positions to be morally absolute. From the worldview of an organization and its public relations professionals, the organization’s position may be the only morally defensible one. This position holds greater moral force than a belief in dialogic process. Further, in spite of charges of paternalism, the organization’s conviction that it operates in the public interest and that it knows more about the situation comes into play. The organization may hold a conviction that advocacy is best for all concerned and this conviction may be the basis of ethical claims that advocacy is morally superior to symmetrical communication.

Communication processes such as dialogue, compromise, collaboration, and cooperation connote goodness. Like others, we find the moral obligation to engage in such dialogue often compelling, but such manifestations of varying degrees of accommodation are not universally the highest moral position. For some issues, taking a moral stand means not engaging in two-way symmetrical communication because to do so would place communication process above ethical principle.

We would add that accommodation may also be legally prohibited under antitrust laws (one author has seen two instances in the past year where fruitful discussions among competitors were curtailed by the realization that legal charges of collusion might result from further talk). Finally, we suggest that accommodation is logically impossible in certain situations when an organization faces two publics locked in an intractable moral conflict. To accommodate one might only be done at the expense of the other. For example, a property management company may face the prospect of renewing a lease to a Planned Parenthood clinic while facing protest and boycott from an antiabortion group.

The contingency theory claims to offer a structure for better understanding the dynamics of accommodation and advocacy, the ethical facets of accommoda-
tion, as well as the efficacy of accommodation in public relations practice. We went to the field for data that would test this claim.

METHOD

Sample

The purposive sample for the study consisted of 18 subjects who were middle- or upper-level public relations managers at 18 different corporations in a major southeastern city. The practitioners selected for the sample represent a variety of large corporations with nationwide presence ranging from industrial manufacturers and suppliers to service/consumer-oriented corporations. All corporate practitioners were selected for two reasons. First it was assumed that corporations, by virtue of their size and profit motive, are equally exposed or possibly more exposed than other organizations to positive and negative experiences with external publics. Practitioners in this environment are assumed to have experienced a variety of interactions between their corporations and external publics. Second, in-house public relations practitioners from these corporations were selected on the assumption that they would be more knowledgeable about the over-all culture and specific history of their corporation than a practitioner in an agency servicing a corporation on a part-time basis.

For the purpose of drawing a sample, the term corporation was limited to a traditional interpretation, thus practitioners from hospitals, nonprofit organizations, trade associations, etc., were not included. A successful attempt also was made to avoid those practitioners in lower-middle or entry-level positions and practitioners working for corporations which were suspected of using public relations as purely a marketing or publicity function.

A purposive sample of potential interviewees was compiled from the membership directory of a state chapter of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA); therefore all of the interviewees were members of PRSA. This directory was used as a source for the study's sample because it is believed that members of PRSA would be professional and knowledgeable about accommodation of external publics and thus would be valuable interviewees. The directory was also used because it was a readily available resource.

Data Collection Devices

The primary data collection device used in this study was an interview guide. The guide was used to assure continuity during the long interviews conducted by a single researcher. The guide was a set of general questions and probes relevant to the study's research objective. A variable check sheet also was used during the interviews. This check sheet was a systematic listing of variables proposed by Cancel et al. in their contingency theory of accommodation. These two devices, the interview guide and variable check sheet, helped to main-
tain some organization and control during each interview. The variable check sheet was revised periodically to include new variables that emerged in previous interviews.

**Data Collection Plan**

In order to test the utility of the interview guide and check sheet, pilot interviews were conducted. Following these interviews, the variable sheet was adjusted slightly to make it more user-friendly. The pilot interview data was not used in the general study.

Twenty-eight practitioners were contacted; 18 agreed to participate. The interviews were conducted at the practitioners' places of business. All interviews were recorded, with the permission of participants, allowing the researcher to pay careful attention to each practitioner's responses while taking minimal notes. Following the interview guide, the session moved from general to specific questions, affording the subject ample time to offer his or her opinions about accommodation and factors that might affect the stance of the organization. Toward the end of the interview, when the subject was no longer volunteering information about factors affecting the degree of accommodation, the check sheet was consulted. Each variable from the matrix of the contingency theory then was offered for the subject to evaluate as a factor.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The interview data analysis was performed by one researcher following Lincoln and Guba's constant comparative method for inductive data analysis of interview data. Before formal data analysis began, the researcher listened to and transcribed all interview tapes to become more familiar with the data and to create verbatim interview transcripts.

Guided by the constant comparative method, the researcher began the analysis by looking at the smallest details of each interview transcript, a process called unitizing. Unitizing, the researcher read through the interview transcripts and wrote down each unit of meaning on individual index cards and coded each card with the interview number for which the unit of meaning was gleaned and whether the unit was independently cited by the interviewee or was probed to discussion by the researcher.

The analysis then moved to identify more general observations. Applying Lincoln and Guba's method of categorizing, the researcher grouped each interview's similar unit cards into categories. After re-reading the unit cards assigned to each new category, the researcher then wrote a rule card which described the commonality of the cards in each category.

The researcher then compared the categories of data from each interview to the category findings of the other interviews. From this analysis, the researcher identified new, larger categories of meaning that were apparent across many or all of the interviews. Rule cards then were created for each new, larger category.
Finally, the researcher once again collectively scrutinized the remaining categories and rule cards for patterns and new categories.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Due to the study's attempt to investigate the validity of a large number of variables for their likelihood to influence how public relations practitioners and their respective organizations deal with their external publics, this study's findings are numerous and complex. To assist in better understanding these findings, they are presented in three logical divisions. The first section presents interviewees' impressions about the validity of the advocacy/accommodation continuum. The second section systematically covers the study's major findings on variables potentially affecting corporations' stances along the continuum, and the section relates these findings to the public relations literature on models and conflict management. Finally, the third section summarizes the findings in three groups: strongly supported variables; completely unsupported variables; and new variables.

Since all interviewees were promised confidentiality for themselves and for their corporations, no interviewees are identified in the findings section. Likewise, any information from the interviews, including direct quotes, has not been used or has been slightly altered so as to maintain a corporation's confidentiality without altering the meaning of the information.

Advocacy/Accommodation Continuum

When presented with the advocacy/accommodation continuum, all of the study's participants stated that the continuum is a valid representation of their interactions and their corporations' interactions with external publics. Each interviewee stated they are always, in one form or another, an advocate for their corporation; however, many participants also noted that their role at times involves some accommodation of external publics. For example, one interviewee said, "It varies between being an advocate and being an accommodator. What you have to do is look at each individual case that comes up, and take it on its own merit." All interviewees agreed with this sentiment—that an organization's stance toward its external publics, and thus the public relations practitioner's role, may change rapidly according to the dynamics of the situation.

Several participants also expressed that their organizations are faced with complex decisions on how to deal with numerous external publics. For example, one person said, "Many of these issues that a large corporation deals with in terms of a variety of stakeholders don't really have simple yes or no answers on either side. So there is a lot of gray." Another interviewee referred to these interactions as "delicate negotiations."
Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations

Findings on Contingency Variables of Accommodation

The heart of this study’s findings are related to the variables that interviewees cited as influencing the changing positions their corporations take in dealing with different external publics. These variables impact their corporation’s stance or stances along the proposed advocacy/accommodation continuum in these situations. During analysis of the data, it logically divided into two major categories, but not along the lines offered in Cancel et al.,14 where the distinction of the variables was between internal and external factors. The findings suggest a temporal distinction between predisposing variables and situational variables.

Predisposing variables refer to those variables which have their greatest influence on an organization by helping to shape the organization’s predisposition towards relations with external publics; different combinations and variations of these variables exist before an organization enters into a situation or interaction with a particular external public. In contrast, situational variables are the specific and often changing dynamics at work during particular situations involving an organization and an external public. Situational variables influence how an organization shifts its stance towards an external public as the situation plays out.

Well-Supported Predisposing Variables

Corporation Size

All of the interview subjects were from large, nationwide corporations, with many doing international business. The interviewees had from 20 to 40 years of experience. Typical titles were National Manager of Community Relations and Public Affairs, Vice President of Corporate Communications, Director of Public and Investor Relations, Senior Manager Corporate Communications. The interviewees reported an integral role in developing their company’s public relations strategies and communications with publics.

While corporation size may or may not influence visibility to the general public, many interviewees cited their corporation’s large size as causing high visibility and that size and visibility are intertwined. The two variables offer small but constant influences on the nature of their corporation’s relationships with external publics.

Many practitioners believed that due to their corporation’s large size and associated high public visibility, the general public expects their corporations to be more responsive to public demands than other, smaller businesses. For example, one interviewee said the following about his corporation’s large size and high public exposure, “It makes us more aware and more sensitive to a variety of publics, and we must be more responsive to a lot more groups than we would have to be if we weren’t as visible.” Whether this compelling need to respond leads to an accommodative or more adversarial response depends upon other variables. Explo-
sure does not necessarily lead to more or less advocacy, but makes it more difficult to simply ignore an issue or a public.

A few of the interviewees also said they believe that their corporation’s large size causes them to be a target of interest or issue groups. Despite possible higher public expectations for larger companies, most of the interviewees stated that due to their corporations’ large size, the business has a seemingly infinite number of publics. They and their corporations are unable to accommodate every external public’s request made to the business or respond to every claim made by external publics. Corporate exposure presses the organization to be responsive in some way, but at the same time, the visibility and size may evoke so much attention from diverse publics that not all can receive a response.

These findings support the idea that the size of a corporation may have a small influence on how an organization initially approaches situations with external publics and may therefore influence how the corporation chooses to deal with particular publics. The findings also point to the argument by Cancel et al. that a monolithic approval of two-way symmetrical public relations is not sustainable given numerous publics—nor likely to lead to effective public relations.

**Corporate Culture**

In nearly half of the interviews, corporate culture was discussed as a possible contingent variable. All of the interviewees who addressed corporate culture as a variable agreed that it does have some underlying effect on how corporations approach their interactions with external publics.

Interviewees offered a variety of explanations for what is responsible for shaping their corporations’ cultures. Several stated that the culture is set by a corporation’s current CEO and is added to by various levels of management. However, others claimed that their corporations’ cultures were set by the founder of their companies, and over time, the cultures have become ingrained into their companies.

**Business Exposure**

During each interview, participants described their corporation’s product mix, customer mix, and geographical mix to the interviewer. Thirteen of the eighteen interviewees explained how their corporation’s particular business exposure influences its relations with external publics.

The practitioners’ responses, although diverse, have commonalities. What a corporation produces, who its customers are, and how widely it services customers all influence how exposed their business is to the general public, how responsible to the public their business is expected to be, and how often their business is targeted by interest groups. This business exposure does appear to influence a corporation’s predisposition toward external publics.

Several interviewees independently gave responses which offer support for Miles’ assumption that companies whose products or services are regarded as
necessities or near necessities for the consumer will have a higher exposure to the corporate social environment. These respondents said that since every consumer needs their service and thus is a potential customer, their businesses must be highly responsive to consumers and regulatory agencies. Several interviewees also stated that because the products or services they provide naturally have negative environmental impacts, their corporations are larger “targets” of interest groups and consumer groups.

Many statements made by interviewees supported Miles' claim that businesses that produce consumer products are more exposed to interest groups than companies producing commercial or industrial products. For example, one interviewee stated, “We are not a manufacturer; we are not a business that sells to other businesses. We sell to the general public. It is different that way because we are much more visible.” Again, these findings appear to support the notion that some corporations' business exposure significantly influences who their publics are and possibly influences how responsive and accommodative their publics expect them to be.

Public Relations Access to Dominant Coalition

Although most of the respondents were probed to consider public relations access to upper management as a potential variable, all of the interviewees enthusiastically stated that they believed this is a significant variable influencing how corporations view their external publics and how their public relations practitioners tend to deal with external publics. Why? Because a majority of the dominant coalitions for corporations were described as having the final decision power on how much time, money, and staff resources public relations may expend in dealing with external publics. This finding also positively correlates with R. Pollack’s findings that a public relations department’s representation in the dominant coalition and autonomy are both significant factors in determining how an organization practices public relations.

Several of the interviewees did say that they often advise management to be open and accommodative of publics, but without access, management would not be aware or responsive to their recommendations. One such interviewee said, “I think that the key here is that I have easy access to those people who can authorize those kind of things (accommodation of certain publics).”

What is this access dependent upon and what can public relations do to improve its access? Variables cited as potential answers to this question received mixed support. Many of the practitioners had degrees outside public relations (five in public relations, six in journalism, seven in other majors). The findings did not support education in public relations as a variable positively correlated with representation in the dominant coalition. Gender of public relations practitioners, also cited as a possible variable, was not adequately tested, because only five of the 18 participants were female.

Out of the variety of variables that interviewees offered as ways public relations may be able to increase its access to the dominant coalition, the variable
cited most frequently was how well public relations educates or enlightens dominant coalition members on the role and benefit of public relations and the importance of a corporation's external publics. Other variables cited by interviewees regarding access to the dominant coalition included public relations practitioners having business training or being able to understand business, public relations having successfully proven its value to management through past examples, and public relations using persuasion to gain support of management. Other variables offered by interviewees, which are quite intriguing, included public relations having a lean staff so that the department's responsibility is highly centralized, focused and accountable; public relations handling investor relations, taking on tasks that will give it high visibility in the corporation; public relations banking favors from other managers; public relations having the ability to relate to management in concise terms and show upper management clear results; public relations not being under the marketing umbrella; and the public relations department offices being physically located near the CEO's office.

**Dominant Coalition Enlightenment**

The variable cited most frequently by interviewees as the most important key to a public relations practitioner gaining access to the dominant coalition and being able to influence an organization to accommodate external publics was the dominant coalition's enlightenment on the value of public relations and the importance of maintaining positive relationships with external publics. As one interviewee said, "If management does not see the need of communicating with a group, then it will affect the way we are going to work." Many interviewees stated that public relations must educate management on the value of public relations. However, one interviewee said that many CEOs are enlightened on the importance of public relations and external publics without being educated by public relations practitioners.

**Line Managers**

The influence of line managers, those managers just under the dominant coalition, on corporation decision making is not to be overlooked. In many of the represented corporations, line managers have a wealth of power to handle or assist in handling interactions with external publics. These interactions ranged from dealing with customer complaints to dealing with protesters outside of a corporate plant. One respondent said that with over 100 operations in his corporation, he must rely on the managers of those operations to "have enough sense" to let him know "when something is going on."

**Line Manager Enlightenment**

Those interviewees citing line management involvement in corporate decision making as a variable stated that public relations' influence over line managers may be subject to several factors. Essentially, line managers will be more likely to value
public relations advice to accommodate publics if the line managers see that public relations is supported by upper management.

Another variable cited as a means to gain access to line managers is to earn the trust of line managers by educating them on the value of public relations and the value of accommodation through actual example. As one participant said, "In the past five years, the (line managers) have come a long...way in seeing that if they involved the PR people in the beginning (of a situation), they won't have problems in the end (of the situation)."

**Individual Characteristics**

Three interviewees said they did not believe that individual characteristics have any significant effect on the decisions that corporations make. Of the remaining fifteen interviewees responding to this variable, all agreed that individual characteristics have some influence. The majority of responses supporting this variable related to the characteristics of individual dominant coalition members and not characteristics of individual public relations managers.

Those individual characteristics cited most frequently were the CEOs or other important dominant coalition member's ability to be open-minded, ability to screen out personal bias in order to think strategically, and past training or education.

**Less Supported Predisposing Variables**

Unlike those variables presented earlier, the study's findings provide only minimal support or no support for the validity of the following predisposing concepts.

**Corporation Age and Value on Tradition**

A few interviewees noted that they believed this variable may at times slightly impede their businesses from changing to adapt to the demands of their businesses. A small number of participants also noted that respected managers, who advocate strongly for their corporations' traditional or historical business methods, at times may diminish public relations' ability to influence decisions and successfully advocate for new, more accommodative ways to deal with external publics.

The study's findings provided weak support for the variable, age of the corporation. A few interviewees, when probed, noted that it was possible that an older corporation would have a more entrenched culture valuing tradition and thus would be less willing to accommodate new ideas from external publics.

**Product/Service Environment**

Only when directly asked by the researcher did interviewees discuss the validity of this variable as a contingent factor. Of those that did respond, all stated they believed that a lack of stability in their industry due to heightened competition or
the threat of competition had influenced their corporation or would influence their corporation to be more willing to accommodate publics, especially customers and potential customers.

**Issues Management**

Early on in the data gathering process, the researcher noted a problem in adequately testing the validity of this variable because many of the interviewees' corporations did not utilize issues management processes on a regular basis. The small number of participants whose corporations regularly use issues management claimed that it helps their corporations be more proactive in accommodating external publics.

**Decentralization of Decision-Making Power**

This study's findings support J. Grunig's rejection of centralization of decision-making power in an organization as a variable influencing how organizations practice public relations. Interviewees expressed that if an organization is highly decentralized, as theirs are, decision-making power is pushed down beyond the dominant coalition and to the line managers, potentially weakening a public relations departments' influence on how publics are dealt with for major issues decided ultimately at headquarters. Essentially, different dominant coalitions may be identified, depending upon the purview of an issue. For example, if an issue affects only one decentralized operation such as the community of a single manufacturing plant, then that plant's management might serve as dominant coalition.

**Legal Department**

There was little support for influence of the legal department as a contingent variable influencing how open and accommodating organizations are with external publics. A small number of interviewees stated that dealing with a legal department infrequently slightly impedes public relations' interaction with external publics.

**Past Experiences with Publics**

Due to the mass of variables being tested in this exploratory study, the variable past experience was not adequately tested for its validity. The variable received only minimal support in the research findings when discussed.

**General Social and Political External Environment**

Two surprising and somewhat counterintuitive tendencies were found in the interviews. The claim by Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Buffington that external culture or external social environment affects the environmental interdependencies of an organization was not supported as a potentially influencing variable by these interviews. The political/regulatory environments' influence on accommodation was also not supported.
Predisposing Variables Directly Associated with Community Relations

In every interview conducted for this study, interviewees cited their corporations' community relations activities as examples of accommodative or positive interactions between their corporations and external publics. The interviewees also divided descriptions of their corporations' interactions with external publics into community relations activities and more negative or potentially negative interactions. Although the predisposing variables previously presented may influence an organization's community relations decisions, the following predisposing variables were specifically cited by interviewees as influencing factors in community relations accommodation.

Dominant Coalition Support of Community Relations

In addition to citing the power of a corporation's dominant coalition as a contingency variable influencing how corporations deal with potentially negative publics, interviewees also cited power of a corporation's dominant coalition as a predisposing variable influencing how corporations approach and choose to deal with potentially positive external publics like non-profit, charitable organizations. For example, one interviewee said, "If they [the dominant coalition] don't see the value in doing it [community relations], then it will not be done." Another interviewee said, "The corporate CEO and other officers set the community relations standards. They definitely want you [employees] to be community minded."

Corporate Culture

Half the interviewees independently cited corporate culture as being a predisposing variable which influences how corporations approach community relations interactions with external publics.

General Public Expectation

About one-third of the interviewees said that their corporation's interactions with potentially positive external publics are influenced by what they perceive as a general public expectation for large, well-established businesses to give back to communities through philanthropic efforts.

Situational Variables

The following variables are associated with the dynamics of individual situations or moments within situations involving a corporation and an external public. Again, variables cited as being related to potentially negative interactions with external publics are presented first, and those variables cited in relation to more positive interactions are presented second.
Public Relations Review

Potentially Negative Situations

Urgency of situation. All of the interviewees began their descriptions of potentially negative situations involving their corporation and a disgruntled external public by telling how they or someone else in their organization became aware of the situation. Many interviewees next described how their corporation attempted to determine the specifics of the situation and, based on their findings, assess the situation and determine its urgency. The data from all 18 interviews strongly support the idea that the outcome from an organization’s assessment of the urgency of a situation significantly influences how accommodating a corporation will be of the external public in that situation. The data also repeatedly show that the corporations represented in the study base their actions toward external publics on the level of a situation’s urgency because they fear the corporation will be harmed by the external public. As one interviewee said, “When anything arises and comes to my attention . . ., my first inclination is to quickly make an assessment and to investigate.”

Many variables may influence a corporation’s perception of the urgency of a situation, and the data from this study supports the idea that situational variables influence this decision more strongly than those predisposing variables discussed earlier. Another interviewee supported the notion of how situational variables impact accommodation decisions by saying, “You have to sort of individually evaluate any one of those situations and determine which adds up to where you put your resources.”

Threats. All interviewees in this study agreed that their organization’s actions in dealing with potentially negative situations involving publics have at some time been influenced by a threat to the organization. In fact, 13 of the 18 interviews cited threats to their corporation as a contingent variable without being probed by the researcher to discuss this topic. The findings associated with this variable offer strong support for the notion that the greater threat a public presents to an organization, the faster the organization will respond to that public and the more accommodating the organization will be of that public. For example, one interviewee said this about the threat of negative publicity: “You [a corporation] can’t divorce yourself from it. You can’t say everyone [every public] is equal and not notice that one of them has 60 Minutes at your door.”

The threat cited most frequently by interviewees was the threat of negative media coverage. In numerous accounts of past, potentially negative experiences between their corporations and external publics, threat of negative publicity was cited as a major force behind their corporation’s decision to be accommodating.

The variable which often is the resulting effect of negative media coverage, marring of the corporation reputation, also was numerous cited by interviewees as being a powerful influencer in how willing a corporation is to accommodate an external public. For example, one interviewee said, “We are very concerned about being seen as the socially responsible corporation that we think that we are. It is important to our long-term reputation, and our long-term profit.”

Other threat-related variables cited often by interviewees include threat of
Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations

government regulation and threat of litigation. Finally, threat of economic loss was cited by many as the variable underlying other threats. For example, one interviewee said, “What is a threat if it doesn’t have the potential to damage the corporation’s ability to do business and make a profit?”

Potential costs/benefits of strategies. Yet another variable that received strong support is a corporation’s weighing of the possible costs to the organization and benefits for the organization created by taking stances on the advocacy/accommodation continuum. Apparently the interviewees agree that organizations will prefer to engage in those behaviors or assume those stances which promise the highest rewards and avoid the most costs.

Balancing of interests. Several interviewees described their corporations’ interactions with multiple external publics as a balancing of interests. These interviewees stated that when their corporations make decisions on how accommodating to be of various publics, their businesses attempt to balance the interests of various publics, the business interests of the corporation, and the general interests of society. For example, one interviewee described how her corporation balances the corporate and environmental interests, “We do everything that makes sense from an environmental and economic point of view.”

General public perception of the issue under question. Five interviewees stated, without probes from the researcher, that when they and other representatives from their corporations make decisions on how to respond to potentially negative situations involving one of their external publics, one factor frequently weighed is the general public’s perception of the issue under question. For example, several interviewees said that if an external public approaches the corporation about an issue that has received a lot of publicity and is seen by the general public as an important issue, the corporation will be more willing to accommodate the external public in some way and will be more willing to rapidly address the concerns of that external public.

Corporation’s public reputation. Several interviewees shared examples typifying their corporation’s interactions with potentially negative external publics in which their corporation’s choices of actions were slightly influenced by the corporation’s public reputation. One interviewee told how his corporation accommodated, to a small degree, an environmental activist group that had verbally attacked the business. The decision to be slightly accommodating was made in that situation because of a sincere fear that any action taken by the corporation other than accommodating action would help fuel the corporation’s less-than-positive reputation.

In contrast, another interviewee said that because his corporation has a positive public reputation, that it is less willing to accommodate disgruntled external publics. He said, “You know if an outside group comes in and starts picketing, if you have a good relationship in that community, I think people are more apt to listen to what you have to say about the issue.”

Characteristics of external public. This study’s findings strongly support the notion that interaction patterns between a corporation and a potentially negative public are significantly shaped by the corporation’s perception of that public’s
characteristics. In fact, various characteristics of potentially negative publics were among those contingent variables cited most frequently by interviewees. Of those participants citing various external public characteristics as contingent variables, all but two offered the variables without any interviewer probes.

The most frequently cited characteristics of potentially negative publics were those characteristics which may influence an external public’s power to significantly impact, either positively or negatively, a corporation’s ability to do business and make money. For example an interviewee said, “When you are approached by an external public, you have to entertain their size, their impact, you know will they have clout? Can they make it tough for me? What’s their history? Is it a group that you can just kind of discount?”

Other external public characteristics cited by interviewees as being related to an external public’s power to negatively impact a corporation were the following: public’s size, public’s level of organization, public’s ability to get media coverage, public’s clout or support from influential people or groups, and public’s reputation. However, one characteristic of publics was not cited by any interviewees as being a variable that would influence how they dealt with an external public; that characteristic was having or not having public relations counsel.

Coorientation of external public and corporation. Three interviewees offered as contingent variables characteristics of the interaction between a public and the corporation. These variables illustrate the coorientation theory concept that the perceptions two parties have of each other in an interaction influence the strategies they choose when interacting. One interviewee stated that the more frequently corporate and external public representatives meet together, the more they can trust one another and be open with each other by breaking away from role playing. Consequently, it will be easier for the two to reach some mutual accommodation.

Another interviewee indirectly identified the reasonableness of the public and the corporation, saying, “There are some people that whatever you do will never be happy... You just have to know the difference. This is someone that you just don’t worry about.”

Characteristics of the public’s claims or requests. Like those variables related to the characteristics of external publics, variables related to the external public’s claims or requests were among the most frequently cited and most independently cited variables in the study’s findings. A majority of the interviewees’ examples of their corporations’ past experiences with publics noted how the corporations’ perceptions of external publics’ claims or requests influenced how the corporations chose to deal with situations involving potentially negative publics.

The characteristic of external publics’ claims cited most often by interviewees was whether the claims were true or false and the associated characteristic whether or not the corporation perceives that it is in some way at fault or responsible for wrong doing. The second most frequently cited characteristic of external publics’ claims was the corporation’s perceptions of whether or not the external public’s claims are reasonable or not. The findings support the idea that corpora-
tions are more willing to accommodate an external public’s claims or requests that
the corporation perceives as reasonable.

Feasibility of accommodating. An additional variable cited by a large
number of interviewees as influencing how their corporations deal with external
publics which make negative claims about them is the corporation’s perception of
how feasible it would be to accommodate the external public. The findings show
that these corporations’ accommodation is dependent upon their ability to accom-
modate the public’s request. This ability is closely related to whether or not the
corporation has sufficient monetary or staff resources to accommodate the request.

Characteristics of the public’s actions. In most experiences described by
interviewees as examples of their corporation’s interactions with external publics,
the corporation’s actions in these situations were significantly influenced by the
actions of the external public. Many interviewees stated that their corporations
base their strategies on the actions of an external public, and many interviewees
described how their corporations altered their strategies after some action by the
public. This supports the idea found in conflict, game and coorientation theories
that interaction between participants is sustained by their moves and counter-

Situational Variables Directly Related to Community Relations

External public’s power to positively impact corporation. A large num-
ber of the interviewees independently cited, in various ways, an external public’s
ability to positively impact the corporation as an important variable which influ-
ences how accommodating corporations are of various community relations re-
quests made by external publics. In general the findings suggest that corporations
are more willing and more likely to accommodate the community relations re-
quests of those publics which either by virtue of their identity of by virtue of their
actions present an obvious benefit for the corporation and for society. For example,
one interviewee said, “We need to be involved in the community, but it needs to
support our overall mission as well.”

Through examples, the interviewees described numerous ways in which
external publics might either naturally have the power to positively impact a
corporation, or might acquire the power to positively impact a corporation
through various acts. Two ways for an external public to positively impact a
corporation’s ability to do business, thus increasing its chances of being accom-
modated, were frequently cited. That the corporation’s association with this public
will in some way benefit the corporation by helping it build political alliances was
one way; the other method dealt with favorable publicity helping to market the
business to target audience members. For example, one interviewee said they base
their philanthropy on “how we can use it as a marketing tool, and how are we going
to reach the most customers. Is it something customers support and in turn would
appreciate us supporting?”

Support of dominant coalition and employees. Another situational vari-
able cited by a large number of interviewees as an influence in how accommodating
public relations practitioners are of community relations requests is the support of the particular public by the corporation’s employees and dominant coalition. The findings support the idea that corporations generally are quicker to accommodate and will accommodate to a greater degree external publics which the corporation’s CEO or employees support, or are familiar with.

**Availability of corporation resources for accommodation.** Corporate resources were cited by a majority of interviewees as a contingent variable influencing community relations activities. As noted in the previous discussion of situational variables influencing potentially negative interactions with external publics, interviewees referred to corporation resources as including money, staff members, and time.

Referring to availability of resources, one interviewee said, “There are a lot more requests for money than there is money to accommodate requests, and so, a lot of times you have some very painful decisions on who you are going to say no to.” Referring to the number of staff members, another interviewee said that the number of public relations or community relations staff members a corporation has influences how much interaction that corporation is able to have with the community. Corporations are more willing and more likely to accommodate those community relations requests made by external publics that the corporations are financially able to fulfill.

**Politics.** A large number of interviewees said that one of the most influential factors in community relations activities a corporation should support or fund is the political connections of a public. It is suggested that corporations often accommodate the philanthropic requests of external publics which are in some way linked to the corporation.

For example, several interviewees said that their corporations had supported various community relations initiatives because someone important to their corporations supported the non-profit organization or was on the board of the non-profit organization. As one interviewee said, “A lot of it is political...the whole ‘who knows who’ and all of that.”

**Tradition.** Many interviewees stated that some of their community relations accommodation decisions are influenced by tradition. For example, one interviewee said, “We just have some major things that we do year in and year out...a lot of them are annual events that we have done for years and years.” Another interviewee said, “We support that organization because we have a history of supporting the arts.”

**External public’s characteristics.** A large percentage of the participants in the study said that their corporation’s decisions on how to relate to various, potentially positive external publics is influenced by the characteristics of the external publics in question. One interviewee said that he looks at “what the group stands for and what the group is trying to do.”
Other Less Supported Situational Variables

Other variables which a small number of interviewees said influence their corporation’s willingness to accommodate community relations requests of external publics included the following: whether or not there are other community relations requests being made by more powerful external publics at the time, whether or not the external public’s position on an issue is viewed as a politically correct stance by the general public, and whether or not the corporation’s public relations managers and/or dominant coalition members believe that fulfilling an external public’s request is the way the corporation can have the largest, positive impact on the issue under question.

Summary of Variables

Numerous variables were explored in this study, however only a small number of variables were highly supported by the study’s data as being valid influences on a corporation’s treatment of various external publics. Also, interviewees cited situational variables independently of researcher probes more often than they independently cited predisposing variables. This may have been the result of interviewees simply being able to recall situational variables with more ease than predisposing variables. Predisposing variables form a background that may become invisible to the practitioner while the situational variables are more apparent and problematic.

Highly Supported Variables

Of the predisposing variables cited by interviewees, the following variables received the most support in the overall data analysis: corporation business exposure; public relations access to dominant coalition; dominant coalition’s decision power and enlightenment; corporations size; and individual characteristics of involved persons. Of those situational variables cited by interviewees, those that received the most support were the following: urgency of situation; characteristics of external public’s claims or requests; characteristics of external public; potential or obvious threats; and potential cost or benefit for a corporation from choosing various stances. Of those variables cited as being particularly pertinent to community relations decisions, the following variables were highly supported by the interviewee data: public’s power to positively impact the corporation; support of the public by dominant coalition and employees; and availability of resources in the corporation.

Unsupported Variables

A large number of variables were cited only in a few interviews with a small number of variables not cited in any interviews. Variables with little support included: influence of legal department; general social or political external environment; corporation being publicly traded versus privately owned; homogeneity or heter-
and marring of employee's perception of their corporation.

New Variables

Many of the variables supported by this study’s findings are not cited in existing public relations literature. However, a majority of these variables are cited in coorientation theory, game theory, and conflict theory literature. For example, the relationship of corporation and external public is found in coorientation theory, and the cost and benefits of various strategies is found in game theory. In contrast, all variables labeled as situational variables in this study are quite new to most existing public relations theory. Also, line manager influence and individual characteristics, two predisposing variables from this study’s findings, were cited in conflict theory literature, but they are new to public relations theory.

Several of the situational variables, although not specifically cited in existing coorientation, game, or conflict theory literature, can be linked to theory about the effects of the relative power of two sides in an interaction. For this reason we argue that the following new variables frequently cited in the study’s findings are manifestations of this relative power variable: corporation’s reputation, external public’s characteristics, characteristics of external public’s claims or requests, external public’s actions and urgency of the situation.

It is not new for corporations to handle their community relations activities separately from other relations with external publics; however, this separation has long been ignored in public relations theory. For example, none of the literature reviewed extensively in Cancel et al. makes a distinction between potentially negative and potentially positive interactions with external publics. The interviews here revealed a number of new variables related to community relations: politics, tradition in philanthropic giving, availability of resources in a corporation, and general public expectation for corporations to accommodate community relations requests.

DISCUSSION

The interview data support the depiction of the public relations practitioner and thus corporate accommodation of external publics as shifting along a continuum between pure advocacy and pure accommodation with the direction and degree of shift on the continuum depending upon a number of variables. Those variables labeled as predisposing, such as corporate business exposure and public relations access to the dominant coalition, are most likely to influence a corporation prior to interaction with a specific external public. Therefore, predisposing variables influence location along the continuum before the corporation enters into a particular situation involving an external public. The findings also suggest that those variables labeled as situational are most likely to
Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations

influence how a corporation relates to an external public. Throughout a particular episode, situational variables bring about shifts from the predisposed stance on the continuum, especially as an interaction with that external public unfolds.

The data also support that the interaction between an organization and an external public can be and most likely also will be influenced by the dynamics of simultaneous interactions with other external publics. This study's findings also offer strong evidence that a corporation's and its public relations practitioner's situational decisions regarding a particular external public at a particular moment result from dynamic combinations of variables at work in a situation at any given juncture in the episode. This finding supports the argument that how organizations relate to their external publics and thus how organizations practice public relations often is not simply the result of the influence of one variable or even the result of the influence of a small number of variables.

The findings further suggest that the likelihood that an organization will accommodate an external public is first dependent upon the predisposition to more or less accommodation. That is, predisposing variables influence an organization's stance before a specific interaction with a particular external public. Secondly, the situational variables determine how much closer to pure accommodation or farther away from pure accommodation the corporation's stance moves. It is possible that an organization's stance may not move from its predisposition stance if none of the situational variables are powerful enough to influence the position or if the situational variables cancel out each other's influence. To illustrate, Figure 2 depicts a simple, hypothetical progression through time from predisposing to situational variables as influences on accommodation of a corporation to a public.

Here we provide evidence from practitioners about how organizations practice dynamic public relations. Organizations in general deal with their external constituencies in situation dependent ways. In addition, this study's contingency model of organizational accommodation adds to existing literature on coorientation theory, game theory, and conflict theory by illustrating a logical link between the principles of these theories with the principles of existing public relations theory.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This is an exploratory study. Many questions regarding the theory remain unanswered or require generalization with a larger, more diverse sample. It is not presumed that every contingent variable influencing accommodation has been found. This study is also limited by its inability to investigate or discover how various contingency variables interact with each other to influence an organization's stance toward an external public.

Similarly, this study did not generate any findings that explain how those variables influencing an organization's more generous community relations activities and those variables influencing the same organization's interactions with more
negative external publics differ or are similar. As previously noted, situations involving an external public and an organization do not always involve just the organization and the public; often, there are several actors involved. Therefore, this study is limited because it did not investigate how other publics and other organizations may influence the interaction between an organization and an external public in a particular situation. Yet another limitation of this study is that it only investigated how American corporations relate to their external publics. There are many different kinds of organizations that may interact with their external publics in a different way.

FURTHER RESEARCH IDEAS

With so many questions left unanswered, there are many possibilities for further research. Research could be conducted to identify additional contingent variables, but also to further test the validity of those variables presented in this study. More research needs to be conducted in an effort to further explain how the advocacy/accommodation continuum works by investigating exactly how different combinations of predisposing and situational variables combine to influence an organization's accommodation decisions in both potentially
negative and potentially positive situations. Research could also be conducted in an attempt to explain the differences between how corporations make community relations decisions and how they make decisions about more potentially negative external publics. Studies could be conducted to explore how a number of corporations and a number of external publics all influence each other in interaction situations. Finally, a multitude of studies could be conducted to further apply this study’s advocacy/accommodation continuum to a variety of organization types to develop a more complex and comprehensive contingency theory of accommodation.

**NOTES**

5. S. A. Hellweg, op. cit.
6. P. Murphy, op. cit.
7. S. A. Hellweg, op. cit.
8. P. Murphy, op. cit.

11. We offer only a cursory overview of the theory here because the findings of this study will present and evaluate all of the variables in the theory. See Cancel, Cameron, Sallot and Mitrook, op. cit. for a more thorough presentation of the contingency theory of accommodation.

15. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations


APPENDIX: POTENTIAL VARIABLES FOR A CONTINGENCY THEORY OF ACCOMMODATION

An organization’s stance with a given public lies on a continuum from advocacy to accommodation. The organizational stance is contingent upon a variety of internal and external variables from the pool of potential variables enumerated below.

External Variables

1. Threats
   A. Litigation
   B. Government Regulation
   C. Potentially Damaging Publicity
   D. Scarring of Organization’s Reputation in Community
   E. Legitimizing Activists Claims

2. Industry Environment
   A. Changing (Dynamic) or Static
   B. No. of Competitors/Level of Competition
   C. Richness or Leaness of Resources in the Environment

3. General Political/Social Environment/External Culture (level of constraint/uncertainty)
   A. Degree of Political Support of Business
   B. Degree of Social Support of Business

4. The External Public (Group, individual, etc.)
   A. Size/No. of Members
   B. Degree of Source Credibility/Powerful Members or Connections
   C. Past Successes or Failures of Public to Evoke Change
   D. Amount of Advocacy Practiced by Organization
   E. Level of Commitment/Involvement of Public’s Members
   F. Whether the Public has Public Relations Counselors
   G. Community’s Perception of Public: Reasonable or Radical
   H. Level of Media Coverage the Public Has Received in Past
   I. Whether Representatives of the Public Know or Like Representatives of the Organization
   J. Whether Representatives of the Organization Know of Like Representatives from the Public
   K. Public’s Willingness to Dilute Its Cause/Request/Claim
L. Moves and Countermoves
M. Relative Power of Organization
N. Relative Power of Public

5. Issue Under Question
   A. Size
   B. Stakes
   C. Complexity

Internal Variables

1. Organization's Characteristics
   A. Open or Closed Culture
   B. Dispersed Widely Geographically or Centralized
   C. Level of Technology the Organization Uses to Produce Its Product or Service
   D. Homogeneity or Heterogeneity of Employees
   E. Age of the Organization/Value Placed on Tradition
   F. Speed of Growth in the Knowledge Level the Organization Uses
   G. Economic Stability of the Organization
   H. Existence or Non-Existence of Issues Management Personnel or Program
   I. Organization's Past Experiences with the Public
   J. Distribution of Decision Making Power
   K. Formalization: No. of Rules or Codes Defining and Limiting the Job Descriptions of Employees
   L. Stratification/Hierarchy of Positions
   M. Existence or Influence of Legal Department
   N. Business Exposure (Product Mix & Customer Mix)
   O. Corporate Culture

2. Public Relations Department Characteristics
   A. Number of Practitioners Total and Number with College Degrees
   B. Type of Past Training of Employees: Trained in PR or Ex-Journalists, Marketing, Etc.
   C. Location of PR Department in Hierarchy: Independent or Under Marketing; Umbrella/Experiencing Encroachment of Marketing/Persuasive Mentality
   D. Representation in the Dominant Coalition
   E. Experience Level of PR Practitioners in Dealing with Conflict
   F. General Communication Competency of Department
   G. Autonomy of Department
   H. Physical Placement of Department in Building (near CEO and other top decision makers or not)
   I. Staff Trained in Research Methods
   J. Amount of Funding Available for Dealing with External Publics
   K. Amount of Time Allowed to Use Dealing with External Publics
   L. Gender: Percentage of Female Upper-Level Staff/Managers
Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations

M. Potential of Department to Practice Various Models of Public Relations

3. Characteristics of Dominant Coalition (top management)
   A. Political Values: Conservative or Liberal/Open or Closed to Change
   B. Management Style: Domineering or Laid-Back
   C. General Altruism Level
   D. Support and Understanding of PR
   E. Frequency of External Contact with Publics
   F. Departmental Perception of the Organization’s External Environment
   G. Calculation of Potential Rewards or Losses Using Different Strategies with External Publics
   H. Degree of Line Manager Involvement in External Affairs

4. Internal Threats (how much is at stake in the situation)
   A. Economic Loss or Gain from Implementing Various Stances
   B. Marring of Employees’ or Stockholders’ Perception of the Company
   C. Marring of the Personal Reputations of the Company Decision Makers (image in employees’ perceptions and general public’s perception)

5. Individual Characteristics (public relations practitioner, dominant coalition, and line managers)
   A. Training in PR, Marketing, Journalism, Engineering, etc.
   B. Personal Ethics
   C. Tolerance of Ability to Deal with Uncertainty
   D. Comfort Level with Conflict or Dissonance
   E. Comfort Level with Change
   F. Ability to Recognize Potential and Existing Problems
   G. Extent of Openness to Innovation
   H. Extent to which Individual Can Grasp Other’s World Views
   I. Personality: Dogmatic, Authoritarian
   J. Communication Competency
   K. Cognitive Complexity: Ability to Handle Complex Problems
   L. Predisposition to Negotiation
   M. Predisposition to Altruism
   N. How Individuals Receive, Process and Use Information and Influence
   O. Familiarity with External Public or Its Representative
   P. Like External Public or Its Representative
   Q. Gender: Female Versus Male

6. Relationship Characteristics
   A. Level of Trust Between Organization and External Public
   B. Dependency of Parties Involved

Ideological Barriers Between Organization and Public