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# IMAGINING THE LIVES OF OTHERS: EMPATHY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

## Abstract

This paper asks how we might theorise empathy in public relations (PR) in the light of a widespread 'turn' towards emotion in the academy, as well as in popular discourse. Two distinct notions of empathy are explored: 'true' empathy as discussed in intercultural communication, is driven by a human concern for the *other* in order to understand experiences, feelings and situations that may be different from our own; whereas 'instrumental' empathy, reflecting a *self* orientation, is said to characterise much neoliberal market discourse in which corporations are urged to understand their customers better. Thus, while empathy may seem highly desirable as a means to enter into dialogue with an organisation's publics, particularly during times of social upheaval and crisis, it is important to pay attention to empathy in public relations discourses including whose goals are served by empathetic engagement; and the type(s) of empathy called upon within a PR context. A literature review identified a socio-cultural definition of empathy as 'imaginary effort'. A review of the public relations literature, however, found that while empathy is considered an important principle and personal attribute, notions of empathy, with a few exceptions, are under-explored. Nonfunctionalist, socio-cultural research which examines the meanings that practitioners associate with empathy is distinctly lacking; therefore in order to gain further insight into empathy, two sources of data were explored. The analysis of a popular online practitioner blog showed that other-centred empathic skill is discursively framed as instrumental in achieving clients' business objectives. The analysis of three empathy statements drawn from 12 in-depth interviews with practitioners revealed complex empathic discourse in practitioner-client relationships. While the findings are limited to illustrative analyses only, this paper challenges researchers to develop conceptualisations and perspectives of empathy as imaginary effort in public relations.

## Keywords

Emotion, empathy, public relations, critical-interpretive paradigm, phenomenology, discourse

## Introduction

What kind of empathy is suggested in public relations discourse? Empathy is valorised in political and business discourse as a commodified interpersonal skill and it would appear that such discourse has entered public relations practice. In examining empathy in public relations discourse, this paper adopts a critical-interpretive perspective, which assumes discourse as a disciplinary mechanism; a 'system of representation' which governs the ways in which a topic is talked about and socially constructed (Hall, 2001: 72). The paper comprises a literature review which highlights a research agenda for this compelling, contemporary topic, followed by a discussion of emerging, though limited, empirical evidence which demonstrates the need for further work in this area. The literature review begins by examining contemporary interest in, as well as conceptualisations of empathy before going on to assess how empathy is conceptualised in the public relations literature. The methodological problems associated with researching empathy precede an analysis of select practitioner texts that illustrate empathy discourse in public relations practice. A discussion and conclusion follows.

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The ‘affective turn’ or the turn to emotion in organisation studies, cultural studies, and the social sciences is widely acknowledged (e.g. Putnam and Mumby, 1993; Turner and Stets, 2005; Ahmed, 2007; Greco and Stenner, 2008; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012). Emotions influence and shape every area of human activity – including decision-making, persuading, selling, and negotiating (Fineman, 1997). Emotions are used to build interpersonal relationships and empathy is an important quality in building relationships (Rogers, 1995). A popular term for empathy is ‘stepping into another’s shoes’ to experience the feelings that another person might feel in relation to a situation that they confront.

Empathy has taken centre stage as a focus of contemporary concern; it is heralded as an essential emotional skill and is relevant to ‘a wide range of issues, such as the nature and conditions of morality and moral judgments, how we understand one another, what makes certain political candidates appealing...’ (Coplan, 2011:41). While Western sociopolitical discourses frame empathy as a solution to a number of social ills and as a ‘central component of building cross-cultural and transnational social justice’, the discourse of neoliberal market ideology encourages companies and their employees to empathise with the needs of their customers in the quest for opportunities and growth, potentially reducing empathy to an instrumental relational technique (Pedwell, 2012: 280-287).

Therefore, while the notion of behaving empathetically towards others is seen as socially desirable and perhaps *the* mark of emotionally intelligent behaviour in contemporary social life, there are problems associated with empathy and in particular the nature of the relationship between the concepts of self and other. Concern in the social sciences appears to centre on what constitutes ‘real’ or ‘true’ empathy in social life. Coplan (2011), for example, writing from an interactional perspective, classifies self-orientated empathy as ‘pseudo-empathy’ because it requires less imaginary effort to truly understand the other person. Meanwhile, Pedwell’s (2012) examination of the *discourse* of empathy in politics, society and business demonstrates that the framing of empathy denotes different motivations according to different societal goals, raising questions concerning true interest in the ‘other’ (motivated by social justice goals), versus self-interest (motivated by market goals). While approaching empathy from different theoretical perspectives, both writers share a concern with inauthentic empathy.

The problem of authentic/inauthentic empathy and instrumental discourse in public relations is a central concern of my paper and this concern arises from a seemingly casual use of ‘empathy’ in practice discourse and imprecision in the public relations literature. Before going on to analyse empathy in PR in greater depth, it is important to first examine concepts of empathy in an attempt to

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explain why the concept is ‘difficult to grasp’ (Calloway-Thomas, 2010: 8) and ‘slippery’ (Coplan, 2011: 44). Mapping concepts of empathy alongside related concepts such as sympathy, role-taking and perspective-taking provides frameworks for a critique of empathy in public relations practice discourse as well as in the public relations literature.

### **Conceptualising empathy**

Much of the literature on empathy emanates from the fields of psychology (e.g. Eisenberg, 2000; Smith, 2006), cognitive neuroscience (e.g. Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004; Lawrence et al, 2004; Baron-Cohen, 2012) and moral philosophy (e.g. Hoffman, 2000; Goldie, 2011; Prinz, 2011). While these perspectives examine empathy at the level of the individual, they do not successfully address the particular challenge of the emotional turn and empathy in particular which requires ‘the imaginative leap into the minds of others’ (Clark, 1997:34).

Clark’s ‘imaginative leap’ definition draws on the work of three sociologists – Weber (1947; *verstehen* or ‘understanding’), Mead (1934; ‘role-taking’) and Scheff (1990; ‘outer search’). Support for the ‘imaginative leap’ notion of empathy is also found in the work of Coplan (2011:40) who, drawing on a body of empirical evidence from social neuroscience (e.g. Decety and Hodges, 2006) argues for a definition of empathy as a ‘complex imaginative process through which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self–other differentiation’. Further, Calloway-Thomas (2011:11), an intercultural scholar, for whom an understanding of ‘difference’ is central to the purpose of empathy, invokes Vico’s ‘sufficient effort of imagination’ conceptualisation, specifically to understand the values and visions of past generations (Berlin, 1991).

The ‘imaginative leap’ notion resonates with contemporary advice to PR practitioners who are urged to imagine the lives of others in order to empathise – both on an interpersonal level with clients and journalists, and when thinking about targeting specific publics (Matthews, 2009; Holmes, 2012; Parker, 2013). A socio-cultural definition of empathy is therefore argued for in this paper in an attempt to understand what empathy might mean for the PR practitioner in making such an ‘imaginary leap’.

Only relatively recently has empathy, derived from the nineteenth century German, *Einführung*, and coined by the American psychologist Tichener (1909) taken on its current meaning (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). Earlier theorists, including Adam Smith and David Hume, are cited as using the concepts of

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empathy and sympathy interchangeably, although Clark (1997) notes that social scientists still disagree on how these concepts are used. Clark (1997), a sociologist, drew on a range of research strategies, including the analysis of fiction, as well as detailed empirical studies to explore the micropolitics and microeconomics of sympathy as an emotion in everyday life. Indeed Clark's interpretation of empathy as a precursor to sympathy (i.e. instead of vice versa), is an example of how these two particular concepts can be confused.

There are three broad approaches to empathy: cognitive, physical and emotional (Clark, 1997). Following Adam Smith, Clark regards cognitive empathy as a precursor to physical and emotional empathy, although numerous individual and social factors, including the degree to which a person shares similar characteristics with the other person, such as ethnicity, nationality and social status, play a role in how much actors are motivated to empathise. *Cognitive empathy* as defined by Clark (1997: 36) 'involves the thought or recognition that another person is in difficulty'. Cognitive empathy has been extensively researched in cognitive neuroscience, with prominent researchers such as Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004) identifying the problems that arise from a lack of cognitive empathy among people with autism; while highlighting the psychopath's advanced cognitive empathy and lack of emotional empathy for their victims (Baron-Cohen, 2012). Cognitive empathy is therefore the capacity to understand that another person has a problem, and to recognise what might be causing that problem. *Physical empathy* is defined as 'experiencing the distress of another at a physical level' (Clark, 1997), also known as 'emotional contagion' or 'catching emotion' (Coplan, 2011). The expression of physical empathy might involve unconsciously 'mirroring' the behaviour of another person, and given that it is an automatic response, it may change our own emotional state. *Emotional empathy* is feeling what other people might feel or 'actually having an emotional reaction to a person's plight' (Clark, 1997: 45). For some intercultural communication scholars, who are concerned with such as Calloway-Thomas (2010), it is the 'feeling' level of empathy which really marks out empathic skill, particularly in a situation where the cultural other is suffering, and where being other-regarding (cognitive empathy) is not enough for true empathy to take place.

Following the work of Hochschild (1983), Clark's studies of sympathy also draw attention to the implicit 'rules' or *socio-cultural* norms of everyday life that strongly influence how we *should* feel in a given situation, and the emotional effort that is required to align our feelings to the occasion, if they do not already align. Clark (1997) highlights the need for impression management (Goffman, 1959) or

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surface acting (Hochschild, 1983) to display the appropriate demeanour towards the other person if emotional or physical empathy is not experienced. The notion of surface acting draws attention to the routine nature of fake empathy in everyday life and the circumstances under which public relations practitioners put fake empathy to use through their professional interactions with clients (Yeomans, 2011).

Critiques of empathy, however, question the idea of stepping into the other's shoes, arguing that an actor must have some knowledge of the other's mental state in order to empathise, otherwise they are merely projecting themselves in that situation (Scheler, 1958 cited in Aho, 1998). Self-orientated perspective taking, argues Coplan (2011), is pseudo-empathy. Pseudo-empathy makes attempts to understand the other person's situation, but in doing so the actor does not truly imagine the other person in their situation, but imagines *themselves* in that situation. In other words, we adopt an 'egocentric bias' in the empathising process, which is subject to errors in predicting another person's psychological state (Coplan, 2011: 55).

Writing from an intercultural communication perspective Bennett (1998) makes the distinction between sympathy, which he regards as self-orientated and based on The Golden Rule ('do unto others what you would have done to you'), and empathy, which is other-orientated. True empathy is therefore complex and involves, for example, the actor on the one hand consciously recognising the similarities and differences between self and other as well as having knowledge about the other (Bennett, 1998; Coplan, 2011). True empathy is seen as a process that involves a temporary letting-go of the self in order to inhabit, or share the feeling world of the other. Such imaginative effort may transcend time and space so that it is possible to overcome cultural differences (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). The temporary loss of the self in order to identify with another may be likened to Hochschild's (1983) notion of 'deep acting' whereby the emotional labourer conjures up emotional memories with which to focus on the situation of the client or customer. Advocates of true empathy (i.e. at the level of feeling) argue for this degree of identification with the other because it can help to shift understandings of power relations in social hierarchies and compel empathisers to recognise their complicity and act on their 'responsibilities and obligations' to others where unequal relations exist (Pedwell, 2012:283). However, the harmful psychological consequences of emotional labour in the workplace are well documented and Bennett (1998) argues that without the required knowledge and skills with which to

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consciously recognise the similarities and differences between self and other, the individual could be susceptible to harm.

The political nature of empathic discourse, the ‘the ambivalent grammar of empathy’, further problematises empathy (Pedwell, 2012: 294). Social justice goals, argues Pedwell (2012), were famously articulated by President Barack Obama in his early speeches and in his 2006 book *The Audacity of Hope* in which he referred to the United States of America as suffering the effects of an ‘empathy deficit’ and the need for the American people to develop greater empathy with those less advantaged than themselves. In making his appeal to American citizens for greater empathy, he employs the rhetoric of a ‘common humanity and equality’ in a vision of mutual empathy between the powerful and the powerless (Pedwell, 2012: 285). However, the ambivalence of Obama’s empathy rhetoric, Pedwell argues, is noticeable when he calls upon neoliberal, market ideology to encourage American citizens to ‘cultivate’ empathy in order to realise their ‘full potential’; not only because cultivating empathy is the ‘right thing to do’, but ‘also because empathy, as an emotional competency, has become part and parcel of being a self-managing and self-enterprising individual within a neoliberal order’ (Pedwell, 2012: 286). Numerous book titles espouse empathy or emotional intelligence broadly as a core skill to provide competitive advantage in a global economy: *Wired to Care* (Patnaik, 2009); *The Empathy Factor* (Miyashiro, 2011); and *Big Hearts, Big Profits* (MacDonald, 2013), to name a few. Olson (2013: 49) argues that ‘the self’ under neoliberalism is separated from the notion of being part of a common citizenry, and is instead free to ‘pursue economic self-realization’: thus, the appeal to empathy has to be linked to the vision of highly competitive workers building emotional skill, who are then able to trade their emotional competence, or ‘emotional capital’, into monetary capital (Illouz, 2007: 66).

In the light of a burgeoning empathy ‘industry’, comprising popular texts generated by politicians and management consultants alike in response to a perceived worldwide ‘empathy deficit’, as articulated by Obama in his early speeches (Obama, 2006, cited in Pedwell, 2012), there must be some scepticism exerted here, particularly if the main beneficiaries of empathy appear to be individual empathisers seeking self-actualisation through an improved emotional skill capacity on the one hand, and businesses seeking to ‘walk in the shoes of customers’ to increase opportunities for growth and profit. In other words, the empathic relationship is potentially one-way and self-orientated instead of a mutual seeking of common ground because it is humanely the right thing to do in order to reduce

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power inequalities and to overcome a variety of social and cultural differences and misunderstandings. That is not to say that businesses, CEOs and PR practitioners cannot and should not be humanely and genuinely empathic where the situation demands empathy, although this in turn raises the question ‘how does one know true empathy?’ since empathy has to be enacted in a convincing manner, whether instrumental or not. My point is that when empathetic capacities or skills are transformed into a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1988 cited in Motion and Leitch, 2009:91-92); as an instrumental technique of PR practice and career-building, then it should be a concern in terms of the effect it has on the individual and on the practice.

### **Role-taking: an alternative concept to empathy**

The discussion has, so far, centred around the concept of empathy in everyday life, and some of the problems raised by explanations of empathy, including the use of empathy within a business context. I now go on to discuss role-taking, a concept closely related to empathy, in order to assess whether an alternative concept might be more appropriately used in relation to the PR context. Clark (1997), for example, regards empathy as role-taking (Mead, 1934). Role-taking refers to the socialisation process through which children pass to acquire the skill of empathy. The socialisation process involves three stages which are: play, games and the generalised other (Aho, 1998). The first stage, play, involves the child adopting the roles of significant others in their lives (e.g. mother, father, teacher). Through play, the child learns the meaning of what it is to be in the social world and thus anticipate others’ actions. The second stage, games and team sports, in particular, enable empathy to be developed further: the different players’ roles and teams’ positions are considered together and constitute the meaning of playing the game. Adults continue to refine their empathetic skills through party-going, argues Aho (1998: 59-60), citing Simmel (1964) in the observation that the ‘heart and core of party-life is artful conversation, rapid word-play: deftly reading one another’s signs, and responding to them with discretion, tact, and sensitivity’. Such sociable acts function to rehearse ‘for the serious affairs of business and politics’.

The third stage of Mead’s role-taking theory refers to the ‘generalised other’ interpreted as the ‘culture of a situation (values, beliefs, norms) that provides a framework or perspective for evaluating self’ (Turner and Stets, 2005:103). Role-taking within broader cultural frameworks involves actors adjusting their conduct accordingly; masking aspects of themselves in relation to how they anticipate



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others might see them. The reflexive nature of role-taking provides an understanding of how PR practitioners behave in professional situations; an idea closer to Goffman's (1959) strategic self-presentation where the actor considers the impression they are making on people they regard as important, referred to earlier.

### **Empathy in public relations literature**

The public relations literature broadly fits into the categories of 'functionalist' and 'nonfunctionalist' research (Edwards, 2012). 'Excellence theory' (Grunig, 1992) represents the large and dominant body of functionalist research in public relations. This research is characterised by a systems theory framework and of central importance, the alignment of public relations with formally structured organisations; their objectives and ideologies, including the 'effectiveness' of PR practitioners and their campaigns (Edwards, 2012). Therefore, much functionalist research could be said to be 'instrumental' in its motivation, given the dominant discourse of the need for public relations research to recommend solutions to problems in public relations practice, such as a lack of access to the Board (Vardeman-Winter, 2015). Therefore, in examining empathy in public relations discourse, we should be mindful of the paradigms that underpin the discourses: functionalist, nonfunctionalist as well as the 'blurred' boundaries between these two paradigms (Edwards, 2012:11).

Within the public relations literature, empathy is seen as a human variable (attribute or trait) or an interpersonal process, capacity or skill which is learned and developed. It is a key principle in engaging publics, providing an 'atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed' (Kent and Taylor, 2002: 27) and building organisation-public relationships (Bruning, Dials and Shirka, 2008). Empathy is regarded an important part of an organisation's response in crisis communication (Martinelli and Briggs, 1998; Seeger, 2006). Furthermore, there are attempts to measure empathy as part of 'personalizing' organisation-publics relationships (e.g. Bruning, Dials and Shirka, 2008: 29). While there are very limited attempts to explore empathy conceptually within the public relations literature, particular strands of thought can be teased out of the relatively limited literature to determine how empathy is viewed. What follows is not an exhaustive appraisal of empathy in the PR literature, but an indication of the research paradigms it has so far aligned with.

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### *Empathy as part of intercultural dialogue*

Kent and Taylor (2002:27) first mentioned empathy as part of the dialogic process in pursuing a ‘communal orientation’ and yet it received very little conceptual definition in this much-cited paper. In recent work, however, Kent and Taylor (2011: 68-71) draw attention to the salience of empathy in interpersonal and intercultural communication scholarship, and its relevance in transcending the ethnocentric worldview of PR practitioners in global contexts, particularly in ‘third culture building’ (Casmir, 1978). Third culture building emphasises dialogue and ‘shared meaning construction [with publics] and shared outcome’ in dealing with ‘chaotic, unpredictable environments’ (Kent and Taylor, 2011: 69), thus advancing the notion of empathy as part of a ‘dialogic orientation’ which ‘takes on an empathic orientation to the “other” and seeks to understand his or her motivation, values and expectations’ (p. 70). Further, the authors argue, it is part of relationship building that is instigated from a nonfunctionalist, co-constructionist approach.

### *Empathy as a process in communication planning*

An example of empathy discussed within the functionalist paradigm is Windahl and Signitzer’s book on communication planning. In this, Windahl and Signitzer (1992: 21) observe that ‘empathy is more valuable to a communicator than sympathy’ offering a definition: ‘the capacity to understand how other people perceive and interpret reality [...] without giving up one’s own view of this reality’. This definition aligns fairly closely to ‘other-orientated’ definitions of empathy (e.g. Bennett, 1998; Coplan, 2011). Both empathy and *social perspective-taking*, which is ‘the ability to understand the options available to others’, are considered important processes for the communication planner who often has ‘no direct contact with the people with whom they communicate’ (Windahl and Signitzer, 1992: 21-22). These authors go on to hint at the problems of disparities, or dissimilarities, between sender and receiver in communication, citing social perspective-taking (Reardon, 1987) as particularly helpful in attempting to address these disparities. However, in conceptualising empathy and social perspective-taking as cognitive processes (‘capacity to understand’ and ‘understand the options available to others’), there is no ‘getting at’ the level of *feeling* involved in the imaginary effort of empathy discussed earlier in this paper (Clark, 1997; Calloway-Thomas, 2010; Coplan, 2011).

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### *Empathy as role-taking*

A concept closely related to empathy, and explained earlier, is that of role-taking (Mead, 1934). Elsewhere, Yeomans and Topić (2015) note that Culbertson (2009: 3) defines role-taking as the process of ““psyching out”, understanding, or predicting another’s attitudes, behaviors, and points of view’. Although Culbertson’s understanding of role-taking clearly points to a self-orientated, even manipulative, version of empathy, he argues that it is important for PR practitioners to focus on (i.e. identify, measure and control) the *processes* of interpersonal role-taking, rather than merely examining the *outcomes* of interactions. Described in this way, role-taking, like social perspective-taking, is a form of empathy, but there is no suggestion that the actor lets go of the self and engages with the ‘other’ through feeling: rather, the practitioner retains full, cognitive control – standing back to observe the minutiae of their role-taking interactions with the other person and its effects upon that person.

### *Empathy as a personal attribute or trait*

Recent functionalist research by Tench and Moreno (2015) and Jin (2010) approach empathy from an attribute or trait perspective. Tench and Moreno’s qualitative study, involving 53 semi-structured interviews in six European countries, identified empathy as among the top three ‘personal attributes’ across four communication manager roles. While this European ‘competency’ study asked participants whether empathy as a personal attribute could be developed, was an inherent trait, or subject to upbringing (eliciting mixed responses), there is no conceptual exploration of empathy in this paper.

As Yeomans and Topić (2015) have noted elsewhere, Jin’s (2010) study identified empathy as a core emotional trait and communication competence of a ‘PR leader’. Empathy, according to Jin (2010: 179), enables leaders to both assess employees’ emotions and respond to them ‘with sensitivity and understanding’. Empathy also enhances PR leaders’ communication effectiveness with top management. However, theories of emotion, and empathy in particular, remain under-examined. Furthermore, when measuring preferences for certain types of leadership behaviour through a questionnaire, there is an inherent bias towards the notion of empathy as a ‘good thing’: each of Boyatzis’s (2001) empathy statements in Jin’s study might be regarded as socially desirable behaviours, a limitation also raised by scholars in cognitive neuroscience (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright, 2004).

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From the foregoing review of the public relations literature, a functionalist, instrumental tendency towards emotion and empathy emerges, however, this is also true of much of the broader literature on emotion in management and organisations. The 'EQ' (emotional quotient) literature, popularised by Goleman (1996), gave rise to an interest in the concept of emotional intelligence which, as Burkitt (2015: 146) argues, is 'highly seductive' in a business environment which requires employees to be more flexible and use their emotion intelligently. Within such a business environment, emotional competency (or EQ) contributes to 'productivity and profits' (p. 148). It is therefore of little surprise that the very few empirical studies of empathy in public relations tend to view it as a personal attribute or trait, and a communication skill or competence which can be developed and measured.

As mentioned, the orientation in much of the literature on management and organisations is instrumental rather than critical: emotions are conceived as 'within-person phenomena' to the detriment of societal issues (Fineman 2010: 24). 'Emotionologies' defined by the British sociologist Stephen Fineman as 'politico-ideological constructs', refer to institutionally-approved emotional discourses which are often reflected through the media (Fineman, 2010: 27). An example of emotionologies is the way that society feels towards specific social groups, for example, migrant workers, but also occupational groups such as bankers, estate agents and public relations practitioners. In examining emotional discourse, and the discourse of empathy in particular, we can interrogate how PR practitioners are both shaped by emotional discourse as well as actively construct it.

A microsociological study of an occupational group such as public relations (PR) consultants should take account of the ways in which PR consultants emotionally construct their work *in relation to* professional, business and societal discourse(s), including emotional discourse. In doing so I draw upon the work of Sieben and Wettergren (2010: 8) who identify a research agenda for a body of work that is characterised as interpretive ('construction and meaning of emotion (management) in the social life of organizations') and poststructuralist ('emotion management as a discursive formation: power effects of management and research practices'). By examining empathy discourse in public relations texts at the micro and macro levels, we can begin to theorise empathy.

### **Methodology**

For the purpose of this paper, texts were analysed using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach.

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According to Motion and Weaver (2005), critical approaches to public relations are concerned with power, and in particular how discourses in public relations practice may be explained in relation to broader socio-cultural and political contexts, as well as the professional context (Edwards, 2014). Following Foucault, I view discourse as a ‘system of representation’ or the rules governing the ways in which a topic is talked about and socially constructed (Hall, 2001: 72). Moreover, discourse produces knowledge through the meaning and practices relating to topics; these meanings and practices are rooted in historical contexts and are subject to ‘discursive shift’ over time (Hall, 2001: 74). In producing their own discourses, actors are simultaneously influenced by, and subjected to the rules of discourse, itself a form of power. A Foucauldian approach to empathy must therefore consider its multiple meanings and practices, which are in turn shaped by discourses associated with certain practices. By questioning the discourse of empathy in public relations practice (and how in turn it has been shaped by broader empathy discourses), it is possible to identify how empathic discourse in public relations ‘produces and employs concepts, objects, and subject positions’, including the kind of social relations with the ‘other’ it is intended to construct (Mayes, Pini and McDonald, 2012: 845). The analytical method used in this paper follows the ‘microdiscursive’ critical questioning approach articulated by Motion and Weaver (2005:54) as: ‘*who* is used to express a particular viewpoint and *why* they are used to perform this discursive role, *which institutions*, if any, do they represent, and *what* are the positions and viewpoints from which they speak?’

In order to gain an understanding of the ‘rules’ of empathy discourse in public relations practice – how empathy is publicly constructed among practitioners – I selected a piece from a popular and apparently influential (‘20 to 25,000 unique users a month’) UK blog *PR Moment* as indicative of the professional context of public relations (PR Moment, 2014). While a blog is a relatively ephemeral text, I argue that a popular blog of this kind contributes to the structuring of the profession, through discourse, in a similar way that popular business and management texts influence practice, as mentioned earlier. (See also Matthews, 2009 and Holmes, 2012 as further examples of online empathy discourse in public relations.)

For illustrative purposes in this paper, I also used empirical data taken from a micro-sociological study approached within a critical-interpretive paradigm using an emotional labour theory perspective (Yeomans, 2013a; Yeomans, 2013b). This small-scale exploratory study examined how six public relations consultants experienced, practised and understood professional relationships with their clients,

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journalists and colleagues. This project was initiated in 2006 because little was known about everyday interactions within the PR consultancy environment (See also Pieczka, 2002 and Sissons, 2015.) In adopting an interpretive phenomenological approach, this study addresses research into ‘PRP’ lifeworlds to discover the meanings that practitioners assign to their practice (Hodges and Edwards, 2014:98). From this interpretive phenomenological study, empathy emerged as a recurrent, salient theme of emotion management in PRP relationships with clients and journalists. Within the constraints of this paper, three empathy statements from a body of 12 interview transcripts were chosen to illustrate empathic discourse relating to the clients of three PR consultants: John, Emma and Alison.

As a means of accessing the nuanced emotional dimensions of participants’ professional interactions, a series of open questions was developed. Some questions sought to elicit specific examples of how participants handled ‘difficult’ professional relationships, how they felt in particularly difficult situations, and why they handled relationships they way that they did in order to understand the ideal-typical courses of action of practitioners in their lifeworlds (Schütz, 1970; Schütz 1972).

Adopting a positivist paradigm and protocol might have elicited socially desirable responses. In cognitive neuroscience, where empathy scores have been measured through a self-report postal questionnaire, Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright (2004:171) acknowledge the possible limitation of an individual’s self-reported beliefs of empathy ‘or how they might like to be seen or think about themselves, and that this may be different to how empathic they are in reality’. As a qualitative researcher in the sociology of emotions, Clark (1997: 261) makes a similar methodological point.

However, it is important to acknowledge that getting beyond the ‘professional mask’ in researching the emotions using interpretive qualitative methods is also problematic. Both Clark (1997) and Lutz (2007), an anthropologist, argue that empathy and emotion in Western societies is intertwined with cultural assumptions about emotion (i.e. as subjective and female gendered), therefore ‘emotional talk’ will be shaped by social, cultural and occupational norms. Coupland et al (2008) argue that professional emotional display rules for masking negative emotions differ according to professional group and that emotion is used as a strategic resource to influence others’ perceptions of that profession. PR practitioners may be more alert to issues of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), performativity (Butler, 1990) and the need to control their ‘display’ of emotional language and the enactment of empathy in particular.

With one notable exception in my study (the most senior, experienced and confident participant), the

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‘emotional talk’ of the six PR practitioners in discussing their professional role was relatively ‘controlled’ and ‘muted’ (Coupland et al, 2008): the word ‘frustrating’ was used as a synonym for mild irritation through to expressions of embarrassment and anger when describing particularly difficult situations. In my study, agency directors – practitioners’ bosses – were highly influential socialising agents in providing emotional cues to their staff, thus setting the tenor for appropriate emotional discourse. Therefore, I inferred that a degree of masking took place with me as researcher since participants’ accounts of their emotions were ‘politically sensitive performances of their selves’ (Coupland et al, 2008: 343) as serious-minded and aspirational individuals. Two practitioners in my study had been awarded Young Practitioner of the Year by one of the professional bodies, and a third had received an industry award for a successful campaign on behalf of his client.

In order to develop deep and rich understandings of practitioners’ lifeworlds, the study comprised a small sample of participants (Creswell, 2007): four female and two male agency practitioners who were based in a region of England. Only two were known to each other. Participants represented different levels within agency hierarchies, from a female senior account executive at the lower end through to a male account director at the top end. Their ages were between 23 and 34. This age band represents the largest group of PR consultants in the UK (CIPR, 2010). All were educated to degree level, with four out of the six possessing either a first degree or masters in public relations. As white, middle-class and youthful graduates, participants shared common cultural and social capitals (Edwards, 2008) which they brought to their professional roles.

After entering PR as graduates aged 21-22 all participants had received regular promotions which put them in responsible positions by their mid-twenties. Notable among the sample was Graham, who aged 23, had been promoted to account manager with responsibility for account executives and interns, just one year after graduating. His attentiveness to the emotional cues from colleagues above and below him in the agency hierarchy, and emotional display, was particularly acute since he was still learning the ‘rules’ of what to say to colleagues, clients and journalists, and how to say it, ‘Listen for the way they [“senior people”] do it, the sort of nuances of the way they say “I’ve got a story you might be interested in” and that kind of thing. And then just take it and adapt it to my own sort of phone manner and my own sort of conversation.’

A total of 12 semi-structured interviews took place between 2008 and 2011. To begin with, I conducted face-to-face hour-long interviews with each participant in order to elicit descriptions of their

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'lifeworld' as PR consultants from their own perspectives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). These interviews were followed up with a second round of interviews lasting between 20 and 45 minutes, which helped me to develop a richer understanding of the participant's perspective, using the first interview transcript, as well as participants' online diary entries and CV information as the basis for further discussion. Data were analysed inductively and thematically. To validate my findings, I sent a 2,000 word 'descriptive account of practice' to participants as part of the member checking process. Their comments on this document, including points of refutation and affirmation, were considered as new data (Creswell, 2007). All the names of participants were changed to protect anonymity. On reflection, and taking into account the methodological problems of qualitative methods such as intensive interviews, a broader range of methods is recommended in future studies.

### **The discourse of empathy in public relations practice**

The discourse of empathy has entered public relations practice. This is perhaps no surprise given that public relations practitioners' practical knowledge is influenced by a mix of data, including an 'extrapolation of ideas from management gurus', the business press and business peers, as well as data from research companies. Through the diffusion of these ideas at the practice level, professional training sessions produce and reproduce 'popular knowledge' (Pieczka, 2002: 305). Given the plethora of popular business and management texts on the subjects of emotional intelligence and empathy which contribute to the 'emotional turn', it is thus reasonable to speculate that ideas from these texts and online sources have found their way into in-company training sessions and thus everyday professional discourse, alongside other PR 'tools' that are understood to be essential to practise PR effectively (Pieczka, 2002). In analysing the following texts, my central question is: what kind of empathy is suggested by public relations empathy discourse?

#### *Empathy in the PR agency: the PR Moment blog*

In 2013, the *PR Moment* editor Daney Parker published a blog piece with the headline 'Is empathy the most important skill in PR?' The blog is noteworthy not only because it talks about the importance of empathy and how it can lead to better relationships in public relations, but it also provides advice on how to develop empathy as a skill. Parker as blog author does not offer her own opinion nor does she provide any contextual information on the topic, but constructs her narrative from a series of lengthy



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quotations from four senior PR agency personnel. The narrative is followed by a list of ‘sound bites’ of ‘why empathy is important to PR’ from a further four representatives working in PR. The following analysis is limited to the quotations from the four senior PR agency personnel.

The questions raised by these narratives include: who gets to talk about empathy and why? Which institutions do they represent? Who are the objects of this discourse? What are the positions and viewpoints from which they speak – in other words, what kind of empathy discourse(s) are represented in the *PR Moment* blog? The analysis starts with the speakers in this account. In the first part of the blog, those quoted are all senior PR agency spokespeople, and they *appear* to be ordered in sequence according to level of seniority and possibly agency size, starting with the Chairman of the Good Relations Group, followed by an associate director of Hill and Knowlton, an international public relations firm. Although it might be argued that empathy is important to all areas of PR, only PR agency representatives are selected for this blog. No justification is offered for this choice, nor is there an explanation as to why empathy is important in any business relationships. Implicit, however, is the commercial focus of the PR agency world, and the need to manage professional relationships, particularly clients. Turning now to the empathy discourses represented in the four quotations, these are summarised in Table 1 and discussed below.

**Table 1.** Summary of empathy discourses in the *PR Moment* blog.

Speaker	1. Chairman	2. Associate director	3. Head of consumer	4. Managing director
<b>Empathy discourse</b>	Relationships are the engines of success and empathy is critical today. You need to understand people you are dealing with and where they are coming from.	Forget your own ego and focus on the other person. Find out what makes them tick. Think about <i>their</i> pressures.	Imagine the lives of others to create relevant campaigns in order to meet client’s business objectives.	Empathy is a skill that cannot be faked. Master the skill if you want to do well in your career.
	<i>Empathy as listening and understanding</i>	<i>Empathy as a learned, interpersonal skill</i>	<i>Empathy as commodified imagination</i>	<i>Empathy as essential to career success</i>

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The subject positions taken in these discourses are largely those of senior people offering advice, but also issuing warnings of the consequences of trying to build relationships without empathy. The objects of these statements, we might conclude, are young practitioners, or at least practitioners who are ambitious and want to aspire to the roles occupied by the speakers themselves. But what kind of empathy discourses are represented in the blog?

The first empathy discourse associates empathy with *understanding* in a relationship. Relationships are depicted as ‘engines of success’, suggesting a connection between empathy and the ‘bottom line’, thus emphasising the commercial nature of the PR relationship. Understanding, in turn, is associated with being ‘thoughtful’ and ‘acting considerately’ towards others. Although these terms do little more than suggest politely listening to the other person to ensure that their viewpoint is grasped, the quote ‘understanding where they are coming from’ implies a certain amount of imaginary effort on the part of the practitioner.

The second empathy discourse represents empathy as a learned, interpersonal skill. Here, empathy is not just about understanding the other, but involves a *process* of consciously forgetting ‘your own ego’ and thinking about the *pressures* of the client or journalist. Further still, the discourse is that of *helping* the other person ‘reach their goals and objectives’, suggesting that an ‘other’ perspective *must* be developed to understand the psychology of the other person: ‘what makes them tick’.

The third empathy discourse represents empathy as ‘imagining the lives of others’. The emphasis on imagination is thinking about the lives of those who are the target publics of campaigns. ‘Imagination brought back down to earth’ and ‘relevant campaigns’ suggests that imagination is being put to commercial use in supporting the client’s objectives: imagination here is represented as commodity.

The fourth empathy discourse represents empathy as a tool for career success in public relations. Furthermore, a warning is issued: if practitioners cannot master the skill of ‘genuine’ empathy, or are caught out ‘faking it’ by their clients or any other ‘key target recipient’ then their career might be shortlived.

All four empathy discourses in the PR Moment blog share an instrumental, commercial concern with the ‘other’: empathy within the PR context is put to use to build better interpersonal relationships with clients as well as to imagine the lives of the targets of public relations campaigns in order to create effective campaigns. Although there is a mention of forgetting ‘your ego’ in discourse 2 and the need for ‘genuine’ empathy in discourse 4, there is no suggestion that empathy in any of the four discourses

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presented is exerted at the level of feeling: at best, empathy is a learned, interpersonal skill which appears to require concentrated, exclusive focus on the ‘other’ during the key moments of interaction. In other words, a more cognitive focus is apparent.

### *Making the imaginary leap: practitioner accounts of empathising with clients*

The interview participants in my study on professional relationships in public relations (Yeomans 2013a) found it helpful to adopt an empathic mental attitude with a client in order to achieve the results desired, usually in the form of media coverage: this meant understanding their client’s daily pressures and navigating around the client’s own workload and status within their organisation. In the account below, John’s explicit reference to using empathy about his client’s rough ferry crossing suggests a conscious imaginary effort is being deployed to elicit the desired support from his client in order to ‘get actions moving’. The account perhaps best illustrates an ‘instrumental’ use of empathic interaction: ‘on the back of the humour, he knows I am on his case’.

[...] he said he’d been on a ferry it was the worst journey he’d ever had, and everyone was sick and we had a joke and a laugh and all this kind of thing, and we had some humour around that and I empathised around the fact that he’d had a rough journey. But at the same time, I needed something from him to get... to get actions moving. I shared with him my concerns and on the back of the humour, he knows that I am on his case because equally he knows that if he doesn’t respond to my questions we can’t action it and so he’s then going to challenge us for not doing the job...

Empathetic strategies such as John’s were a means of taking control to achieve media coverage, sometimes regardless of the client’s ability to assist in the process. This is also illustrated by the following account of Emma’s ‘busy client’. Unlike John, Emma does not explicitly refer to using empathy but nevertheless describes a process whereby she has to use the information she has about the client in order to imagine how busy he is while working on his press release:

So I just researched that, wrote the whole thing. I didn’t even speak to him ‘cause I know he’s *really* busy this week. And also being aware of what timings and things; getting a whole new computer system, so I didn’t want to disturb [him], you know, the MD. So I just wrote it all and sent it in. And he just sent it back and said “that’s fine, send it out”. So it’s kind of taking it away [...] and he can still see that I am working on it even though we are not having like, that constant communication. So he knows that he’s always, like, on our minds and always doing things, and er...making it easier for him.

In listing the reasons why she cannot speak to her client (or vice versa), Emma appears to be engaging in a deeper imaginary effort than John, and this may be driven by a level of anxiety about getting the job done. ‘I didn’t want to disturb [him]’ and ‘making it easier for him’ denotes a submissive

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relationship, rather than one between equals. In contrast to this, taking control of a client relationship sometimes involved the practitioner changing their personal attitude towards a client in order to feel comfortable with the relationship and able to achieve results for that client. Alison's account of dealing with a 'difficult' client demonstrates the emotional and imaginary effort involved in a particularly complex relational arrangement:

And so I went away and learnt a bit about what actually is it that she has to cover off in her job. And there are all these different areas, and it comes up all the time; every time I talk to her it comes up. She is always like: "Oh we had to deal with this big planning permission up here" and so she is always involved in these policy issues and stuff. Which is nothing to do with what we do. We are completely separate from that. And these things must be really time-consuming, and I know she is always really busy, she is always on the road. So now I've got a brilliant relationship with her. [...] I've invested quite a lot of time in making sure that for example, I don't blame her if we don't get information through.

Through researching her client's job, and imagining her situation, Alison had learned not to blame her client for being unhelpful. In doing so, she had succeeded in changing her initial negative attitude towards her client. Alison was subsequently congratulated by her bosses for the 'brilliant' relationship with the client, and for succeeding where others had failed: 'I've invested quite a lot of time in making sure that for example, I don't blame her if we don't get information through' suggests a complex and dynamic navigation around the client's own identity and status within her company, and the need to find ways to ensure that the work ultimately gets done and the client is happy without the client's direct help in the process.

### **Discussion: what kind of empathy is suggested in public relations discourse?**

Neoliberal discourses have been shown to permeate and shape all aspects of society, politics and business so that the logic of the market becomes normalised and difficult to question (Pedwell, 2012, Olson, 2013). Prevailing ontological assumptions that public relations is an organisational function (Edwards, 2012) means that it is subject to neoliberal 'regimes of truth' about the profession and business (Foucault, 1980). Therefore, the discourses of empathy are necessarily shaped, as well as constrained, by the demands and the logic of the market and what constitutes permitted behaviour within the range of discourses on offer. PR services operate as a sub-set of the UK's large service economy (CEBR, 2005) and the commercial focus of the PR agency environment permits the idea of

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employees commodifying their relational skills to improve business relationships. The concept of empathy as a skill not only appeals to agency owners and managers in relation to improving client/journalist relationships, and the possibility of seeing a better return on investment (ROI); it in turn appeals to employees as ‘neoliberal selves’ who can build emotional capital, a marketable commodity which can be transferred to their next employer (Illouz, 2007).

In the *PR Moment* blog the discourse of ‘forgetting your own ego’ (Table 1, discourse 2) suggests an other-orientated empathy, in which the practitioner imagines not just themselves in a given situation, but imagines the client, the journalist, or the ‘other’, in that situation, and from the other’s perspective (Scheler, 1958; Bennett, 1998; Coplan, 2011). Other-orientated empathy is considered to be true empathy (Coplan, 2011). Focusing on the client, as illustrated in the three practitioner narratives (John, Emma, Alison), could be described as other-orientated empathy. However, within a business context, this other-orientated empathy discourse will always be influenced, as Pedwell (2012) suggests, by instrumentalism. A ‘client-first’ attitude produces a level of anxiety about the practitioner-client relationship arising from frustrated attempts to get the job done on the client account. In all three narratives, the client is absent or elusive and not always helpful, but there is still the possibility that they will blame the PR practitioner for not achieving their objectives. This, in turn, prompts a desire for the practitioner to manage the client relationship better by engaging in a considerable amount of emotional labour, of which empathy is part (Hochschild, 1983).

The *PR Moment* discourse (see Table 1, discourse 4) warns that unless genuine empathy is practised, a practitioner’s career is likely to be shortlived: fake empathy will be recognised by the ‘key target recipient’. Practising impression management (Goffman, 1959), or ‘surface acting’ (Hochschild, 1983) to display the appropriate demeanour towards the other person as required by the given situation, may not be convincing enough. Advocates of true, other-centred empathy such as Coplan (2011) would argue that impression management is an example of pseudo-empathy which has an ego-centric bias. Asking questions of another person to ‘find out what makes them tick’ (see Table 1, discourse 2) would be an example of pseudo-empathy and is perhaps best illustrated by John’s account of his client’s ferry crossing. ‘Pseudo-empathy’ is hinted at by Culbertson (2009: 3) in his definition of the concept of role-taking as ‘psyching-out’. And yet, the notion of intentional empathetic ‘perspective shifting’ in order to share the psychological state of another person (i.e. genuine empathy and perhaps illustrated by Alison’s account), is regarded by some as morally questionable (Goldie, 2011). Thus, both self-

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orientated empathy and other-orientated empathy raise ethical problems and have to be considered within the context of the situation and the motives of the individual empathiser.

Much of the discussion of empathy has so far concentrated on interpersonal relationships in PR agencies. The discussion of empathy in public relations literature, however, is focused at the more abstract level of organisation-publics relationships. Here, the suggestion is that the public relations practitioner, on behalf of their organisation, should use empathy to enter into dialogue with stakeholders and publics (Kent and Taylor, 2002; Bruning, Dials and Shirka, 2008), as well as demonstrate empathy with those affected in crisis situations (Martinelli and Briggs, 1998; Seeger, 2006). As already noted, Windahl and Signitzer (1992: 21) identified the problems of empathising with audiences that are both 'distant and heterogeneous'. Without the benefit of first-hand knowledge of the audience, they argue, the communication planner must resort to likely unreliable proxies, such as colleagues or relatives, on which to test their message. Prinz (2011) warns of the subjective bias inherent in empathising with social groups that are dissimilar from ourselves, and that our images of the 'other' are likely to be influenced by media representations at best. Without the benefit of research data, or first-hand experience, the practitioner has only their preconceptions, prejudices and biases, largely shaped by media sources, on which to draw. And yet the discourse of dialogue within the literature (e.g. Kent and Taylor, 2002; Bruning, Dials and Shirka, 2008) suggests that organisations and practitioners have a duty to build trust through empathy or understanding of the 'other': the target publics of organisational communication. Setting aside the questions concerning the practical implications of corporations engaging in dialogue with publics (Theunissen and Noordin, 2011), perhaps what is really being discussed within the context of dialogue discourse is sympathy (Bennett, 1998) pseudo-empathy (Coplan, 2011), or instrumental empathy (Pedwell, 2012), exhibited through a public demonstration of concern for the other, including efforts to consult on matters of mutual interest and concern, and corporate apologies following a crisis. But given that organisational interests are likely to prevail over publics' interests within the context of power relations and the need to further self-interested corporate agendas, true empathy, as described in an interpersonal sense, is likely to be elusive, even though the demand for it is great. Kent and Taylor's (2011) intercultural, co-constructionist approach to dialogue and empathy enacted by PR practitioners operating within a global context is perhaps the most convincing and worthwhile avenue for further exploration, and comes close to Calloway-Thomas' (2010) intercultural definition of genuine, other-centred empathy. However Kent

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and Taylor (2011) do suggest that first-hand experience of other cultures would benefit communication professionals, alongside frameworks and theories that contribute to what they term a ‘third culture’ orientation.

As already noted, while true empathy with the ‘other’ may have transformative potential for the individual as empathiser with disadvantaged, marginalised or oppressed groups in achieving social justice goals, it is not in the interests of organisations to embrace this level of public-identification in casting the role of the practitioner as organisational activist (Holtzhausen, 2012); unless, of course, the organisation is itself part of civil society or has explicit values and policies (e.g. CSR) which are consistent with empathetic concern for the other.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have sought to address the question: ‘what kind of empathy is suggested in public relations discourse?’ This question resulted from the burgeoning interest in emotion and empathy in both the academy and in popular discourse. This paper challenges taken-for-granted notions of empathy in public relations practice and in the public relations literature. Through an analysis of texts including an online blog and practitioner accounts of their handling of professional relationships, notions of empathy in PR practice were examined in relation to literature in which ‘imaginary effort’ as a socio-cultural conceptualisation of empathy was identified. A socio-cultural lens enables analysis of contexts in which empathy discourse takes place: in this case, public relations agency practice. My analysis revealed that while empathy in PR is discursively framed as a desirable skill for practitioners, reinforcing neo-liberal notions of the self-enterprising individual and emotional competence/capital, the type of empathy suggested within a business context is inevitably instrumental and codified in its pursuit of business goals. The empathy suggested in three practitioner accounts involved complex imaginary effort on the part of the practitioner in order to understand the perspective of the other, and was dependent upon the situation or problem at hand. However I question the desirability for practitioners to engage in other-centred emotional empathy using intercultural communication conceptualisations and call for a re-framing of empathy, for example, as ‘role-taking’ or ‘social perspective taking’ to emphasise cognitive definitions of other-orientated practice. These concepts do not exclude the possibility of emotional empathy and feelings of genuine human concern in

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professional relationships, but neither do they connote the commodification of feeling, with which the concept of empathy is inexorably loaded within a commercial context.

The empirical evidence presented is limited to the analysis of one online blog and the analysis of three illustrative accounts drawn from an empirical study that involved a process of in-depth interviews with six regional PR agency practitioners in the UK. A richer data set and analysis may have produced different outcomes. Nevertheless, the illustrations presented in this article, together with the literature reviewed, potentially open up further lines of inquiry on emotion and empathy in public relations which has hitherto received very little conceptual attention and empirical analysis. While in this paper I have argued for socio-cultural perspectives of emotion and empathy in public relations, inspiration for further work (as indicated in methodologies such as Clark's) could well emerge from the arts and humanities. Such work could more meaningfully embrace the emotional 'turn' and the paradox of empathy.



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