

Key Issues in Turkish Public Relations Practitioners' Perception of the Profession: Relational Paradigm, Dialogic Public Relations, Symmetrical Public Relations, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Corporate Sustainability

Hatun BOZTEPE TAŞKIRAN¹



¹Assoc. Prof. Dr., İstanbul University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Public Relations and Advertising, İstanbul, Turkey

Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author:

Hatun Boztepe Taşkıran,
İstanbul Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Bölümü, İstanbul, Türkiye
E-posta/E-mail: hatun.boztepe@istanbul.edu.tr

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ABSTRACT

From the critical approach public relations is evaluated as a whole series of strategies and practices that only benefits corporations and ignores mutual benefit and public welfare. In contrast, frequently used and investigated public relations concepts, such as symmetric public relations, dialogical public relations theory, relational paradigm, corporate social responsibility, and corporate sustainability, can answer the criticisms against the discipline. In light of this information, it can be said that there are two different perspectives in public relations literature towards outcomes of public relations. This study is designed to determine whether the argument that public relations is a management function that only benefits corporations is supported by Turkish public relations professionals. Also it is aimed to determine whether Turkish public relations professionals ignore public welfare. This study also presents how contemporary and ethical public relations strategies and practices that center on creating, maintaining, and reinforcing positive relationships between corporations and target audiences function in practice. Within the scope of this study, a research has been carried out with the participation of 107 Turkish public relations practitioners who are in charge of forming and practicing public relations strategies at public institutions, private enterprises, and non-governmental organizations or as freelance consultants. A questionnaire form has been designed and participants have been asked to answer questions which aim to determine the professional perceptions of public relations practitioners. The findings have demonstrated that Turkish public relations practitioners perceive their profession as a whole series of strategies and practices that serves the mutual benefit of corporations and target audiences.

Keywords: Corporate benefit, mutual benefit, relational paradigm, dialogic public relations, symmetrical public relations

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Public relations has received criticism throughout its history as a function that focuses on corporate benefits and ignores mutual benefit and public welfare. The discipline that has been critically billed as "a whole series of strategies and practices that only serve the profits and interests of corporations" is still thought to perform no function apart from answering the needs of corporations. According to this point of view, public relations is considered as a field that manipulates realities in line with a corporation's interests and profits and dictates the target audiences to behave in favor of corporations, ignoring public welfare or interests. On the other hand, frequently used and investigated public relations concepts and practices, such as symmetrical public relations, dialogical public relations theory, relational paradigm, corporate social responsibility, and corporate sustainability, can answer criticisms against the discipline. Mainstream public relations studies encompassing these notions and practices emphasize that public relations focuses not only on the profits of corporations but also works for the interests of society by underlining the principle of public welfare. However, studies criticizing public relations continue to claim that the function of public relations in serving the public welfare is improbable in practice while underlining that entire strategies and endeavors on public relations only work for corporate interests rather than the public good.

This study is designed to present how contemporary and ethical public relations strategies and practices center on creating, maintaining, and reinforcing positive relationships between corporations and target audiences function in practice. The study has also discussed whether the argument that public relations is a management function that only benefits corporations is supported by Turkish public relations professionals. It has aimed to determine whether Turkish public relations professionals ignore public welfare.

This article aims to contribute to the discipline empirically:

- (1) Dialogical public relations, symmetrical public relations, relational paradigm, corporate social responsibility, corporate sustainability, and similar significant practices and theories that echo public relations' purpose of serving for public good have been explored in a detailed manner.

- (2) The critical point of view, which suggests that public relations ignores target audiences and public welfare is implemented in practice, has been discussed.

This article is important in that it evaluates the concepts and approaches of contemporary public relations answering criticism towards the discipline such as symmetrical public relations, dialogical public relations, relational paradigm, corporate social responsibility, and corporate sustainability. Besides it reveals how these concepts and approaches are evaluated by public relations professionals in practice.

In light of this information, within the scope of the study, a research has been carried out with the participation of 107 Turkish public relations practitioners. A questionnaire form has been designed and participants have been asked to answer the questions which aim to determine professional perceptions of public relations practitioners. The data obtained during the study by quantitative research method has been saved online via a coding system and has been analyzed with Statistical Package for Social Sciences. Such information has been evaluated and interpreted with multiple perspectives to obtain concrete results and output in line with the aims of the study.

Findings have demonstrated that Turkish public relations practitioners perceive their profession as a whole series of strategies and practices that serve for the mutual benefit of corporations and target audiences. Turkish professionals disapprove public relations as a management function which only benefits corporations.

INTRODUCTION

It is known that public relations -a function responsible for the management of the relationships between corporations and a variety of target audiences including employees, shareholders, raw material suppliers, service providers, investors, media, financial organizations and society- has always received criticism. It is also emphasized that public relations strategies and practices focusing on the management of the relationships between corporations and their target audiences according to the principles of mutual trust, sympathy, tolerance, goodwill and dialogue are basically directed towards the interests or benefits of public. The emphasis on the interests of public in the mainstream public relations researches is dealt with a different perspective in critical public relations. Studies criticizing the discipline see public relations as a function that supports the interests and profits of corporations instead of serving for public welfare. In these studies, public relations practitioners are thought to be workers who disregard public welfare and try to manipulate target audiences and realities according to corporate interests or benefits.

Common criticisms in the literature review of public relations are centered around the ideas that public relations serves capitalism (Berger, 2005), focuses on corporate interests (Edwards, 2006), could neglect the interests of public (Ihlen & Van Ruler, 2007) and manipulates realities (Mickey, 1997).

In the mainstream public relations studies, on the other hand, the concepts of dialogic public relations, symmetrical public relations (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Grunig, 2001, 2006), relational paradigm (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000), corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability (Büchner, 2012; Herbohn, Walker, & Loo, 2014; Waddock, 2008) have gained importance in an answer to the related criticisms. Understanding how public relations is perceived and for which purposes it is used by public relations professionals is important in appreciating the repercussions of different perspectives in practice.

This study aims at investigating how Turkish public relations practitioners evaluate contemporary public relations strategies and practices in the mainstream studies. Whether public relations professionals in corporations and consultancy firms or independent public relations practitioners support the view that the discipline is a

management function that only serves for corporate profits and neglects the interests of target audiences will be investigated.

A group of Turkish public relations practitioners was invited to take part in a questionnaire -a quantitative research method – in the study to understand their notions about the field and its benefits.

Criticisms Against Public Relations

Criticisms against public relations suggest that the field does not serve for public welfare in practice but corporations' entire public relations strategies and efforts serve for their interests and benefits.

It is argued that public relations "is about giving 'voice' to organizations and groups holding different values, behaving differently, and promoting different interests as they seek to maximize advantage in their political economy and civil society" (Moloney, 2005, p. 551). This point of view, one of the most fundamental criticisms against the discipline, defines public relations as a function that contributes to corporate benefits and tires to maximize organizations' economic gain within the capitalist system.

"At the root of the public debate is the assumption that public relations wields unjustified social influence on behalf of already privileged organizational interests" (Edwards, 2006, p. 229). So, it could be deduced public relations professionals focus on corporate interests, create strategies in line with corporate benefits and make their strategies happen in real life. It follows that these people try to dominate and manipulate society for the sake of corporate benefits with their strategies and efforts. Therefore, their dominant and powerful position in a society only makes it possible for corporations to have power so as to maximize their profits.

It is also argued that "the task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organizational mission" (Motion & Weaver, 2005, p. 50). This idea reduces public relations to a function that helps organizations yield hegemony over society and serves for corporate interests.

Thus, it is accepted that corporations or groups that use public relations strategies and practices wish to hold hegemonic power and reinforce it, and thus attempt to gain public trust. The hegemonic power over society, acquired via public relations, also needs public consent.

Using negative words or expressions such as “social or political engineers, persuasive people, commentators, apple-polishers, and devil’s advocates” (Sayımer, 2007, p. 83) in defining public relations professionals is an outcome of the viewpoint arguing that these people focus on organizational benefits and use society as a tool on behalf of organizations to sustain hegemonic power. Some studies argue “communication professionals play a key role in discourse construction, seeking to further the advantages of their clients” (Roper, 2011, p. 83). This idea presupposes public relations practitioners who maintain the communication process between corporations and their target audiences use communication’s manipulative power, and thus shape facts. They are labeled as “experts” who encourage target audiences to behave in such a way that their attitudes will serve for corporate interests as communication is believed to have the power to manipulate their thoughts, feelings and actions.

According to Mickey (1997), public relations practitioners can be called symbol makers if one considers their work is largely word and image and they can manipulate symbols. Even their chances of manipulating symbols leads to the conclusion that public relations is a body of strategies and practices far from reality and aimed at gaining organizational benefits. Several arguments point out public relations eliminates the situations preventing corporations to achieve their goals, does not unveil realities or shapes them according to corporate interests, and tries to create false images for corporations. The discipline is said to shape target audiences’ ideas and behaviors in the way they desire them to be. Public relations is billed as a conscience management technique that prepares and encourages target audiences to display a certain set of behavior patterns (Erdoğan, 2005, p. 357). Such a manipulative public relations is said to be carried out by public relations professionals within corporations, public relations consultancy firms or independent public relations professionals.

The discussions above have shown that the main concern of the criticisms against public relations is to define public relations as a function that does not consider

public welfare and serves for corporate interests. Some say that the field deviates from its original purposes and attaches public welfare a secondary significance (Becerikli, 2008, p. 21). In their studies Motion and Leitch (1996) and Weaver (2001) also indicated “there is little doubt that public relations has effectively served capitalism and powerful economic producers for many years but whether it has served or can serve stakeholders and society as well from inside or outside the dominant coalition is a contested issue” (Berger, 2005, p. 6).

As could be seen from the literature reviews shared and discussed above, public relations strategies and practices are claimed not to have gone beyond supporting corporate interests and benefits. Besides, it is asserted that public relations is a discipline that manipulates realities according to corporate interests, dismissing public welfare, and sees target audiences as tools to achieve corporate purposes and convinces them to exhibit behaviors contributing to corporate interests.

Concepts in Mainstream Public Relations Studies Responding to Criticisms Against Field

Mainstream public relations studies emphasize the significance of mutual benefits and public welfare in a response to the criticisms arguing that public relations uses target audiences as tools to achieve corporate interests, and neglects public welfare. The concepts of symmetrical public relations, dialogic public relations, corporate social responsibility, relational paradigm and corporate sustainability have not only carved themselves a place in mainstream public relations studies but also draw attention to public relations’ interest in the benefits of target audiences and social welfare.

That “public relations is often studied from a managerial ... perspective ... [but it also] needs to be studied as a social phenomenon” (Ihlen & Van Ruler, 2007, p. 243) is the reason why the concepts mentioned above appear in mainstream public relations studies. Thus, studying public relations in a social context, which is far from a managerial perspective, leads to the discussion of its aspects focusing on public welfare and benefits of target audiences since public relations is a discipline which goes beyond providing corporations with benefits and includes strategies and practices that will affect society.

It is necessary that “public relations should be freed from its narrow definition as organizational communication management” (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 95), and it should be studied and understood within social, cultural and political contexts. Therefore, it is important to explore the concepts of symmetrical public relations, relational paradigm, dialogical public relations theory, corporate sustainability and corporate social responsibility that help investigate public relations in a social context, and thus evaluate the capacity of public relations in contributing to society.

Symmetrical public relations concept is structured upon the two-way symmetric communication model, which is among the four public relations models developed by Grunig and Hunt in 1984. Of the four models of public relations - press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric, two-way symmetric – symmetrical public relations is presented as the most ideal model that needs to be included in public relations strategies and practices. The purpose of symmetrical public relations “is that organizations and publics adjust and adapt to each other for mutual benefit, rather than an organization using one-way persuasive communication merely to empower the organization and foist its goals onto its stakeholders” (Searson & Johnson, 2010, p. 121).

As a response to the criticisms against the field, it is important for public relations academics and practitioners to study public relations as a discipline that supports the principle of shared-power in order to serve for society, and to adopt symmetrical public relations method. Power relations is conceptualized as hegemony and relations based on power with the purpose of yielding hegemony over the others in the two-way asymmetrical public relations model. On the other hand, “... the two-way symmetrical ... public relations [model] emphasizes [the concept of] shared power ... achieved through dialogue, negotiation, collaboration, and substantive relationship building” (Berger, 2005, pp. 15–16). In symmetrical public relations, neither of the two parties, organizations and target audiences, yields power-based hegemony over the other side but both parties participate in the public relations process with their individual interests and benefits.

In symmetrical public relations, based on the idea of shared-power, both corporations and target audiences have gains and interactions focusing on their agreements. Target audiences are not regarded as tools to serve for corporate interests and not manipulated to exhibit particular set of behaviors. Instead,

corporate strategies, decisions and policies are shaped according to the expectations and demands of target audiences. Strategies and efforts do not concentrate on corporate interests but attach importance to the benefits of target audiences and social welfare. That corporations make changes on their strategies, practices and policies according to the expectations and interests of target audiences promotes the concepts of shared power and mutual give-and-take process.

Dialogic public relations could also be investigated in connection with symmetrical public relations in answering the criticisms against the discipline. Dialogic public relations is based on the idea that relationships between organizations and target audiences should be managed according to the principle of dialogue and mutual interests and benefits of the two parties. Besides, it argues that corporations have responsibilities for target audiences and aim at eliminating the concerns about dialogue in public relations (Pieczka, 2011, pp. 108–109).

In the monologic approach to public relations, however, there is an imbalance of power between organizations and target audiences, favoring the interests of organizations. Thus, organizations are after practices that support corporate interests and benefits while they yield power over target audiences and neglect public welfare. Mutual understanding does not exist and the interests of target audiences are not considered but gaining control over them is the main concern. In dialogic public relations, in contrast, corporations make efforts to find a common ground with target audiences instead of forcing them to become the compromising side. Both parties are involved in a relationship based on the exchange of information and dialogue, which “represents efforts by parties in a relationship to engage in an honest, open, and ethically based give and take” (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009, p. 317). Moreover, target audiences’ interests, expectations, ideas and suggestions are determined so as to shape corporate decisions, strategies and practices, and therefore, the interests of target audiences and public welfare are observed.

In addition to symmetrical and dialogic public relations, relational paradigm promotes target audiences’ benefits and underlines the vital aspect of the strategies and practices for public welfare. Relational paradigm, which sees public relations as a discipline that manages the relationships between corporations and their target audiences, has recently been used in countering the criticisms against the field. “The emergence of relationship management as a new paradigm for public relations

scholarship and practice redefines the essence of public relations—what it is and what it does or should do as well as its function and value within the organizational structure and the society” (Jo, 2006, p. 227). This point of view argues public relations manages the relationships between corporations and target audiences in line with the principles of mutual trust, understanding, dialogue and goodwill, and helps maintain and pursue long-term and positive relationships between the two parties. In order to achieve such a relationship, there is a need for public relations strategies and practices that focus on the benefits of target audiences and public welfare.

In relational paradigm, relationships between organizations and target audiences are based on the principle of interaction and mutual benefits should be observed to maintain sustainable relationships (Solis & Breakendridge, 2009, p. 79). According to relational paradigm, it is not possible to maintain long-term and positive relationships between corporations and their target audiences if public relations focuses only on corporate interests. There is a need for the strategies and practices that take the interests and benefits of target audiences into consideration and that will result in public welfare and target audience satisfaction.

Moreover, it is significant for organizations “to be open with community members, that ... organization[s] support/sponsor events that are of interest to community members, that ... organization[s] engage in activities that can be used to improve social and economic aspects of the community, and that ... organization[s] take an active role in community development” (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999, p. 165) in relational paradigm. This point of view, which deals with the relationships between corporations and target audiences as part of social relations, stresses corporations should come up with practices that value the interests of target audiences, and events that will invest on social relationships and public welfare. The relationship types between organizations and target audience as developed by Hon and Grunig (1999) are similar to Bruning and Ledingham’s ideas in that they argue that corporations need social relationships based on the interests of target audiences with no thought of corporate benefit. Relational paradigm includes strategies and practices that are shaped according to the principle of mutual benefit without highlighting corporate interests.

Corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability are the other ideas used in response to the criticisms arguing that public relations focuses only on

corporate benefits. These two ideas, investigated as part of the mainstream public relations studies, underline the need for the public relations efforts that attach importance to the benefits of target audiences and social welfare. Corporate social responsibility efforts are about social issues, do not have financial outcomes, and are expected from corporations by public (Cornelissen, 2004, p. 186). Corporate social responsibility, “as an activity, is the corporate attempt to negotiate ... [organizations’] relationship[s] to stakeholders and the public at large” (Ihlen et al., 2011, p. 8). Corporate social responsibility includes the determination and evaluation of the two parties’ demands, and improving and practicing organizational policies and actions to meet the determined demands. It is based on the voluntary act of working for target audiences’ interests and social welfare. In addition, corporate social responsibility “argues that organizations should have a positive net effect on society and consider not only their financial impact but also their environmental and social impacts on the world (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 884) since corporations, as features of the social system, have an important impact on society with their decisions, policies and actions, and thus corporations have responsibilities for society.

“In today’s global world, corporate social responsibility ... increases public demand of firms’ transparency regarding disclosure of information to meet stakeholders’ expectations” and organizations “that engage in business with a large public-interest component commit themselves to promoting business activities that bring economic, social, and environmental benefits to the society” (Wang et al., 2015, p. 2232). Therefore, corporate social responsibility practices are aimed at meeting the expectations of target audiences and become the main indicators of organizations’ social welfare-based structures.

Corporate sustainability argues that public relations focuses on social welfare. In defining the concept, Herbohn and others (2014, p. 422) make a reference to the World Business Council For Sustainable Development (WBCSD) in 2004, arguing “the concept encompasses the commitment of a business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life.” It is understood that corporations should shoulder responsibilities and contribute to the development of society, meeting the expectations about these issues as part of corporate sustainability. Corporate sustainability practices support the arguments of mainstream public relations as they give priority to social welfare rather than corporate benefits.

Findings of the literature review discussed up until now have shown that there are various opinions on the purposes and the benefits of public relations. Critical studies have pointed out to the fundamental aspect of corporate interests or benefits whereas mainstream public relations studies see the discipline as a strategic function that is responsible for the management of the relationships based on the principles of shared-power and mutual communication. So, public relations' concern is beyond maximizing corporate benefits since it is a part of both corporations and social structure and has responsibilities for them and other members of the society.

AIM AND METHODOLOGY

Public relations studies have proposed a variety of opinions on the benefits of the discipline in a series of conceptual discussions; however, if public relations professionals support these notions and to what extent they have been used in professional life have not yet been sufficiently understood, and the results of such researches have not yet been used to support the conceptual discussions. This study has been designed with the purpose of filling this gap. Both conceptual analyses will be done, and how public relations is perceived by Turkish public relations practitioners and what their tendencies about the issue are will be investigated as part of it.

Aim

Previous studies dealing with the purposes and benefits of public relations see the discipline as the sum of strategies that only focus on corporate interests and disregard the gains of target audiences and public welfare, and use target audiences as tools to yield hegemony and power over society. On the other hand, mainstream public relations studies are centered around the concepts of dialogic public relations theory, symmetric public relations, corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability, claiming that the field supports the benefits of target audiences and public welfare. However, how public relations practitioners or professionals, who are the key agents in making the efforts and strategies of the discipline visible, interpret these aspects of the field has not yet been discussed in detail in the related studies. In this study, how the arguments of the critical and mainstream public relations studies shape the perceptions of public relations professionals or practitioners will be evaluated and whether their arguments are supported by them will be found out.

The questions aimed to be answered as part of the study are:

- How do Turkish public relations practitioners evaluate their profession in terms of public relations' purposes and benefits?
- How do Turkish public relations practitioners evaluate the criticisms asserting that public relations only attaches importance to corporate interests and benefits?
- Do Turkish public relations practitioners support the idea that the discipline serves for the interests and benefits of target audiences?

Method

Research Model

“Research model” is defined as the organization of necessary conditions for researchers to collect and analyze data suitable for their purposes while “scanning model” tries to describe and introduce both previous and current situations as they are without altering and affecting the other issues included in the study (Karasar, 1984). In this study, scanning model is thought to be the most appropriate option as the researcher is able to collect, process and evaluate the data according to his/her field of interest.

Population and Sampling

The population used in the study consists of a selection of Turkish public relations practitioners. The public relations professionals taking part in the study are from state, private, non-governmental and independent organizations.

Since there is no list of the entire population of public relations professionals from Turkey, it is not possible to include all of them in the study and their number is high (Böke, 2009, p. 122), the non-probability sampling technique is used in the research. Snowball sampling– a non-probability sampling technique – is used at first to reach to the public relations professionals in Turkey. After the practitioners who will participate in the study have been determined and invited to take part in the study, they have helped find other public relations professionals who are thought to be suitable to take part in the research. Apart from snowball sampling,

convenience sampling is used in accordance with the data obtained from a preliminary survey so as to determine the (other) individuals who could contribute to the study.

Technique and Means to Obtain Data

A questionnaire has been prepared and used in the study as it is a part of quantitative research methods suitable for the purposes of the research. Apart from the basic and demographic questions on genders, ages and education levels of the participants, there are questions on their years of professional experience, professional positions and the sub-fields they are specialized in. The study features Likert scale which includes expressions that have helped the participants to be able to evaluate the purposes and benefits of public relations; and the participants have been asked to express their ideas about the expressions by using the scale.

The questionnaire has been digitalized and its link has been e-mailed to the participants. A total of 107 participants have answered the questionnaire with a regular series of intervals as part of the study conducted between the 17th of November in 2017 and the 20th of February in 2018, and the entire answers have been included in the results as no problem has occurred concerning them.

It is known that the more participants are included in the study, the more people will be represented and the more efficient the results will be. Not being able to do this is the basic limitation of the research.

Processing Data

In the evaluation process of the research, the questionnaires answered by the participants have been codified and made ready to be processed. Codified data has been digitized by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, and analyzed with frequency analyzes and average charts.

The level of reliability has found out to be high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.842$) when the public relations practitioners' answers about the expressions concerning the discipline's purposes and benefits have been analyzed.

FINDINGS

Demographic Pattern of Participants

Of the 107 public relations practitioners answering the questionnaire, 56 are female (52.3%) and 51 are male (47.7%). Of them, 22.4 percent are aged between 18 and 28 (24 individuals), 49.5 percent (53 individuals) are between 29 and 39, 21.5 percent (23 individuals) are between 40 and 50, and 6.5 percent (7 individuals) are between 51 and 61.

Of their education levels: Two (1.9%) are high school graduates, and six (5.6%) have associate's degree, 57 (53.3%) bachelor's degree and 42 (39.3%) master's degree. Of them, 42.1 percent (45 individuals) graduated from public relations departments while 57,9 percent (62 individuals) have degrees from other departments.

Of their educational backgrounds: Forty-five individuals (42.1%) studied public relations, 15 (14%) advertising, 20 (18.7%) journalism, seven (6.5%) radio, television and cinema, one (0.9%) communication design, two (1.9%) new media, three (2.8%) marketing, four (3.7%) business and ten (9.3%) other fields.

Of their professional experience: thirteen individuals (12.1%) have work experience up to one year, 14 (13.1%) between one to three years, 22 (20.6%) three to five years, 18 (16.8%) five to seven years, nine (8.4%) seven to ten years, and 31 (29%) more than ten years in the field of public relations.

Of their organizations: thirty-three (30.8%) work in private organizations, 23 (21.5%) in state organizations, eight (7.5%) in non-governmental organizations, and 30 (28%) in public relations consultation organizations while 13 of them (12.1%) work independently.

Of their professional positions: thirty-three (30.8%) are managers, 62 (57.9%) public relations experts or practitioners who work under the supervision of a manager, and 12 (11.2%) hold posts in other professional positions.

Of their areas of specialization in public relations: eighty-five (79.4%) are specialized in media relations, 15 (14%) in financial public relations, 31 (29%) issues

management, 59 (55.1%) crisis management, 62 (57.9%) reputation management, 45 (42.1%) in sponsorship, 41 (38.3%) in event management, 61 (57%) in corporate social responsibility, 40 (37.4%) leadership communications, 42 (39.3%) in social media management, 43 (40.2%) in internal communications, 11 (10.3%) in lobbying, and 18 (16.8%) in other areas. The questionnaire is designed to allow the participants to select from multiple domains of specialization in public relations as it is possible for some of them to specialize in more than one sub-field of the discipline.

Findings About Participants' Evaluations on Public Relations

The participants have also been asked to express their thoughts on the benefits of their profession, their roles as public relations practitioners and public relations strategies in Turkey by choosing options from Likert's 5 point-scale to express their agreements or disagreements about a series of expressions. (1: Strongly Disagree, 2: Disagree, 3: Neutral, 4: Agree, 5: Strongly Agree).

As shown in Table 1 where one can find the averages of the participants' responses to the questions about public relations, Turkish public relations practitioners do not think that public relations focuses on one-sided benefits or interests. They do not agree with the studies claiming that public relations include strategies and practices that attach importance to corporate benefits, disregarding public welfare or the benefits of target audiences or vice-versa. However, they think the strategies and efforts that give importance to the principle of mutual-benefits not only contribute to corporations but also their target audiences including groups such as their employees, media channels, investors or suppliers.

On the responses of the public relations practitioners to the questions about the purposes and benefits of the discipline, as also seen in Table 2 below, it could be said that they perceive public relations mostly as the sum of strategies and efforts that contribute to the improvement of society, are busy with practices that will be beneficial both for corporations and target audiences, and help the perspectives of target audiences to be represented at corporations.

The participants' answers have also shown that public relations has an important mission in improving life standards and society in Turkey with its benefits for the both parties -- organizations and target audiences -- as shown in Table 3 below.

Whether the averages of the participants' responses to the expressions in Table 1 have changed according to the organizations they work for has been analyzed with ANOVA statistical method. The result, $p < 0.05$, indicates that there is a considerable statistical change in the group averages of the participants' responses to the related expressions depending on the corporations they work for.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Public relations received and has still been receiving a great number of criticisms. In accordance with a contemporary point of view, mainstream studies say that public relations focuses on strategy and efforts that are beneficial for corporations, target audience and society in a broader context; in other words, it relies on the idea of providing the both parties with benefits (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Grunig, 2001, 2006) whereas the studies that criticize public relations argue that it offers one-sided benefits (Berger, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Ihlen & Van Ruler 2007; Mickey, 1997). The idea that public relations is about corporate benefits is in opposition with the concepts of relational paradigm, symmetric public relations, dialogic public relations theory, corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability, suggested in the mainstream public relations studies. However, both mainstream and critical public relations studies handle the topic in conceptual or abstract terms, failing to support their data with concrete results on how public relations practitioners evaluate the topic and what their tendencies about their profession are. To make up for this need, it is necessary to present empirical data on the area. Therefore, offering data on public relations practitioners' evaluation of their profession, and how they interpret the purposes and benefits of it is fundamental and necessary to explore the repercussions of the theoretical studies in practice.

Using this need as its starting point, this study aims at showing how public relations professionals from Turkey see the purposes and benefits of the area, and determining whether the concepts in the mainstream and critical public relations studies are supported or by them.

The results have shown that Turkish public relations practitioners see public relations as an entire set of strategies and practices that are beneficial for corporations, target audiences and public in general. Instead of accepting public relations as practices that only give priority to the interests of corporations or the benefits of

target audiences, they evaluate it as efforts with beneficial results both for corporations and target audiences, meaning that it yields mutual benefits.

Participants' answers have implied that they have the mission of offering consultancy services to corporations to make mutually beneficial practices happen, representing target audience perspectives in corporate strategies and meeting the demands of target audiences, indicating that they perceive public relations as a field that focuses on mutual benefits. In addition, their answers suggest the field contributes to society and serves for the improvement of it, and their professional mission is followed by the aim of contributing to the financial benefits of the corporations they work for.

The participants do not think that public relations' single concern is corporate benefits, and they favor the practices and strategies that are formed according to the concepts of relational paradigm, dialogic public relations, symmetrical public relations, corporate social responsibility and corporate sustainability.

The practitioners' responses have shown that they believe public relations is a discipline that tries to maintain long-term relationships between organizations and target audiences according to the principles of mutual understanding, trust, goodwill, tolerance and dialogue, and mutual benefits should be observed to construct sustainable relationships between the two parties. Besides, they support the idea that there are important contributions public relations could offer to target audiences and society, and corporate social responsibility practices stand for the public relations efforts for public welfare, and public relations has a role in the improvement of society and life standards. They all indicate that Turkish public relations practitioners do not agree with the suggestions of the critical public relations studies.

The participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the expressions stating that public relations does not have any function apart from offering corporate benefits and includes strategies and practices that support corporate interests and benefits, it manipulates realities for the sake of corporate benefits and has a corporation-based point of view. These all reinforce the impression that Turkish public relations practitioners see public relations as a unit of strategies and practices that result in the gains of both target audiences and corporations, and as a profession which focuses on the principle of providing the both parts with mutual benefits.

Further studies are necessary to obtain data on how decision and policy-makers in corporations evaluate the purposes and benefits of the public relations field. Thus, whether these people support the concepts suggested in the mainstream studies as a response to the criticisms against public relations will be understood.

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TABLES

Table 1: Results of the Responses to the Expressions on the Purposes and Benefits of Public Relations

	Average	Standard Deviation	N
Public relations consists of strategies and practices that only focus on corporate benefits	2.21	1.296	107
Public relations strategies and efforts will result in the mutual benefits of corporations and their target audiences including employees, media, investors and [raw material] suppliers	4.54	1.129	107
Public relations disregards corporate benefits and includes strategies and practices that only focus on the benefits of target audiences and public in general	2.00	1.136	107

Table 2: Results of the Responses to the Expressions on the Occupational Roles of Public Relations Practitioners

	Average	Standard Deviation	N
To offer advantages to society and actualize the practices that will improve social structure	4.07	1.253	107
To help the corporations they work for have financial gains	3.48	1.192	107
To align target audiences with corporate strategies for corporations to reach their goals	3.19	1.448	107
To actualize practices that will be beneficial both for corporations and target audiences	4.42	0.891	107
To help represent ideas of target audiences in corporate strategies, and provide corporations with consultancy on carrying out activities that will meet the demands of target audience	4.35	0.825	107

Table 3: Results of the Responses to the Expressions on the Public Relations Practices in Turkey

	Average	Standard Deviation	N
Public relations consists of strategies and practices that support only corporate interests and gains	2.20	1.342	107
Corporate social responsibility practices represent the public relations endeavors that will contribute to society	4.21	0.919	107
Public relations establishes long-term and positive relationships based on the principles of mutual understanding, trust, goodwill, tolerance and dialogue between corporations and target audiences	4.41	0.890	107
Public relations does not have any function apart from offering corporate benefits	1.93	1.155	107
Public relations is directed only towards corporate benefits	2.14	1.314	107
Public relations gives priority to social benefits	3.92	1.001	107
Corporate sustainability supports public relations' aim of offering benefits to society by supporting corporations to carry out their responsibilities for society	4.10	0.995	107
Public relations is dealt with an corporate perspective rather than a social perspective	2.54	1.215	107
Corporate social responsibility practices contribute to society and support corporate gains	3.96	0.857	107
Public relations practitioners manipulate target audiences according to corporate interests and benefits	2.86	1.356	107
There are important gains public relations could offer to society and target audiences	4.34	0.931	107
Public relations manipulates realities to get corporate benefits	2.31	1.277	107
Public relations results in the gains of the both parties, making it possible for the interactions that focus on negotiations to take place	4.20	0.936	107
Public relations could shape corporate strategies, practices and policies according to the expectations and interests of target audiences	4.21	0.847	107
Public relations yields power over society in favor of corporations by carrying out practices on corporate benefits	3.20	1.111	107
In public relations, target audiences are directed to develop attitudes that will support corporate benefits	3.06	1.180	107
The principle of mutual benefits is important for sustainable relationships between corporations and target audiences	4.34	0.879	107
Public relations is busy with practices that will improve society, and plays an active role in community development	4.07	1.110	107
Public relations is interested in practices that are about social issues and do not have financial concerns for corporations, and thus contributes to society	3.41	1.072	107
Public relations has an important role in social improvement and improving the quality of life	4.23	1.024	107

