The Institutionalization and Professionalization of Public Relations in Nigeria: Applying the Activity Theory Framework

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ABSTRACT

Purpose - Public Relations continues to struggle for a voice in Nigeria as it still fails to be recognized as a respectable profession and practice. The overall aim of the doctoral project on which this paper is based is a study of the tensions arising from the contradicting Public Relations (PR) understanding and practices of organizations, Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and PR educators in Nigeria that are viewed as actors in this study. The findings of my pilot study indicate that these tensions relate to (1) organizations’ perceived practitioner incompetence, (2) predominant one way communication PR practices, (3) inter-profession jurisdictional battles, and (4) inconsistent PR education scope and curricula. More specifically, this paper will demonstrate how Engeström’s (2006) Activity Theory (AT) framework can be applied for studying the contradicting PR practices in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework – The Interdependences and interactions between the actors and their environment, and professionalization processes within organizational contexts necessitate a complex theoretical framework that draws from neo-institutional theory and the sociology of professions.

Research Design – Yin’s (2014) single case study with an embedded design is employed for the study, within which the AT framework is applied to critically analyze and discuss the interdependences, contradictions, tensions as well as their implications for each actor and the Nigerian PR environment they share.

Contribution/originality – The study contributes an empirical holistic study of PR practices in Nigeria that goes beyond anecdotal evidence or focus on single actors. The study also introduces and demonstrates how Activity Theory (AT) could be applied to studying PR practices within specific contexts.

Key words – Public Relations, Neo-institutional theory, Professions, Activity Theory

Introduction: Concerns for PR in Nigeria

Public Relations (PR) continues to struggle for a voice in Nigeria as it still fails to be recognized as a respectable profession and practice despite appearing to fulfil requirements that should guarantee its rightful place amongst other reputable professions. Nigerian PR boasts of milestones such as a practice dating back to the 1850s (Otubanjo & Amujo, 2013), a professional body since 1963 and chartered status in 1990 (NIPR, 2014), membership to the Global Alliance for Public Relations Institutes (Global Alliance, 2015) and availability of PR education at BA, MA and PhD levels. However, these milestones have done little to legitimate PR as a respectable profession that can contribute to and gain the respect of organizations and other professions. To understand this problem from a broader perspective, my pilot study indicate that PR in Nigeria may be affected by four interrelated concerns emerging from (1) organizations’ perceived practitioner incompetence, (2) predominant one-way communication PR practices, (3) persistent inter-profession jurisdictional battles, and (4) inconsistent PR education scope and curricula. These concerns influence PR practices of Nigerian organizations, Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and PR educators in
Nigeria respectively, which can be understood as actors. These actors exist in a network-like and interdependent manner whereby their actions have implications for one another and the PR environment they share. More so, Engeström (2000) notes that contradicting activities/practices of interdependent actors within an activity system or environment lead to tensions between them. In the case of Nigeria, these tensions are deterrent to PR effectiveness and the actors’ respective image.

These concerns raise questions about organizations’ PR assumptions and practices, the quality and rationale behind PR professionalization and PR education curricula in Nigeria. More so, the underlying factors responsible for these contextual concerns as well as the contributions of the respective actors to the situation are not entirely understood.

Hence, the purpose of this doctoral study is to explore the existing contradictions and tensions within Nigeria’s PR environment for understanding the often experienced but under-investigated concerns using the AT framework as an analysis tool. The study investigates (1) how and why the perspectives of organizations, NIPR and PR educators in Nigeria influence PR practices in Nigeria, and (2) how such practices cause and contribute to the contradictions and tensions within Nigeria’s PR environment. Culbertson and Jeffers (1992) International PR theory as well as Sriramesh and Vercic’s (2009) Global PR theory have extensively covered studies on PR practices within specific context/countries including Nigeria. However, studies about Nigeria appear to be mostly based on anecdotal evidence, while empirical studies appear scarce. In order to critically explore the practices of the actors, this study takes its point of departure from literatures in these theories, and then utilize neo-institutional theory and the sociology of professions as theoretical framework. Additionally the AT framework is applied as an analysis tool to rigorously analyze collected data towards understanding the institutionalization and professionalization of PR in Nigeria.

**Literature review: PR within specific contexts**

The field of PR has witnessed a lot of developments over the past decades from the purely functionalist to the relational, feminist, critical, rhetorical and co-creational approaches to PR. While these developments were taking place, another dimension to PR research that Molleda and Laskin (2005) classified as local, regional/national, comparative, international and global PR that articulates the cultural, political, social and economic factors influencing PR practices within specific context(s). For this study, two similar and relevant contextual PR theories belonging to the past are considered.

The older one is the International PR theory that dates back to the 1990s which attempts to describe and define PR across nations/contexts based on the views and practices of people in those nations regarding their culture, political and economic development i.e. the Social-Political-Economic: SPE context (Culbertson & Chen, 1996). They focused on issues management and propose proactive approaches that necessitate environmental scanning by organizations to identify emerging problems/issues and attend to them before they become full blown crises. Cultural and subcultural beliefs are equally argued to be crucial for understanding context based on expectations and values that can help avoid misbehaviour or problems arising from communicating across cultures (Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, & Terrell, 1993). In addition, they noted the blurry and often confusing distinction between “gift-giving” and bribery that has varying ethical stance across regions and countries. The SPE and their implications are argued to make PR practices to be sensitive to the context or country.

The global PR theory is the newer one that was developed in the 2000s (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, 2009) which is an extension of the Excellence PR theory that proposed the generic principles that should be applied for effective PR practices across different countries. In addition they proposed specific applications that must be adapted to various countries based on an evaluation of the infrastructural ingredients that include: (1) country infrastructure which encompasses political system (democracy, monarchies, authoritarian etc.), economic development (developed, developing or underdeveloped economies), activism (level and nature of activism, unionism, social movements etc.) and legal system (legal structure, social/religious codes), (2) Societal and corporate cultures that are evaluated based on Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions, and (3) the media environment i.e. media control, diffusion, and access respectively. They argued that these interrelated factors influence PR practices
in various countries and as such must be understood and considered for PR to be effectively practiced in such context.

Molleda and Laskin (2005) notes that contextualized studies pay most attention to culture and socio-economic variables while ignoring legal and activism related variables. Even at that, Weaver (2011, p. 257), maintains that scholars using Hofstede's cultural dimensions to explain PR practices do not account for the diversity in many complex contexts. Beck (2002) also noted the limited usefulness of culture for navigating and understanding complex environments. This correlates to Nigeria’s PR environment where the underlying causes of the tensions cannot be understood from knowing Nigeria’s complex culture(s). However, Rittenhofer and Valentini (2015) argued that culture should be abandoned within Global PR research and be replaced with the practice theory that has been developed for understanding complex problems as it concentrates on localized human actions (Callagher, 2012 as cited by Rittenhofer & Valentini, 2015). This appears to be a much more appropriate approach for this study as it explores what the actors do and why they do it, instead of the culture (Rittenhofer & Valentini, 2015). Hence, this study focuses on practices from a social constructionist view that explores the reality of the respective actor’s in relation to their practices.

**Theoretical framework**

This study explores organizations' PR practices, practitioners’ educations and ordeal in the workplace that altogether impact the professionalization of PR in Nigeria. Hence, the complex nature of the study necessitates a complex theoretical framework comprising neo-institutional theory that talks about the interdependences between the actors and their environment as well as their responses to it. The sociology of professions, including the institutional approach focus on the professionalization processes in general as well as those taking place within organizational contexts.

**Neo-institutional theory: passive versus strategic response to taken-for-granted practices**

Katz and Kahn (1966) introduced open-systems approach to organizations that emphasize organizations’ interactions and interrelationships with their internal and external environments, which inspired the neo institutional theory. The theory focuses on how environments in the shape of institutions with taken-for-granted practices are sources of legitimacy in that environment (Scott, 2008). Hereafter, organizations adopt such practices to gain legitimacy or appear rational even when such practices do not guarantee efficiencies (e.g. DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). For Selznick (1957: 16–17), to institutionalize is to ‘infuse with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand’.

Scott (2008: 48) used his three pillars to define institutions as “comprising regulative, normative and cultural cognitive elements that provide stability and meaning to social life” (see also Institutional isomorphism, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Adoption of these pillars is argued to lead to relatively durable structures of practice (Lounsbury, 2003, p. 211). Meyer and Rowan (1977) rejected organizations’ rational-choice decision but emphasized the adoption of myths, albeit in ceremonial or decoupled forms. These early neo-institutionalists were more concerned about homogeneity, isomorphism, stability and passive adoption of predominant or successful practices within their institutional context. In contrast, more recent neo-institutionalists (such as Oliver, 1991; Boxenbaum and Strandgaard-Pedersen, 2009; Schneiberg & Clemens, 2006 etc.) acknowledge organizations’ strategic and heterogeneous responses to institutional pressures that contributes to organizations’ social validity and efficiency (see also institutional entrepreneurship DiMaggio, 1988, institutional work, Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Oliver (1991) proposed a typology of 5 strategic responses comprising both active and passive responses that include; conform, compromise/bargain, avoid, dismiss/challenge or even manipulate institutionalized values and social approval (see full description in Oliver 1991: 151-159).

Nevertheless, Thornton and Ocasio (2008) define institutional logics as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to
their social reality”. Greenwood et al. (2011:317) talks about institutional complexities emanating from “incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics” that organization must respond to. Friedland and Alford (1991), view society as comprising inter-institutional system where every institution has its own institutional logic, which raises the potential for contradictory institutional logics as individual institutions act based on their social reality that may differ from that of other institutions.

Nigeria’s PR environment is argued to be characterized by contradicting institutional logics and consequently contradicting practices of the actors, and as such a complex institutional context. Therefore this study focuses on the complexities with the environment by exploring the contradicting institutional logics and their resultant implications for individual actors and their entire environment. Frandsen & Johansen (2013) noted how neo-institutionalism offers a theoretical framework for studying how PR has been institutionalized in organizations and their respective fields. Hence, institutional theory helps this study to understand the current state of PR in Nigeria with regards to the dominant practices and responses of the actors. Neo-institutional theory equally facilitates (1) the formulation of relevant questions towards unearthing how PR is organized by the actors (2) understanding the “values” that have been infused into PR by each actor, and (3) their influence on their practices and contributions to the contradictions.

Institutional approach to the sociology of professions

The institutional theory has been applied to understanding professions as an alternative to the traits and power approaches developed within the sociology of professions. The traits approach involved developing lists of characteristics that separated professions from occupations (Etzioni, 1969; Millerson, 1964; Freidson, 1986; Caplow, 1954; Wiliensky, 1964; Johnson, 1972), which was criticized for being an oversimplified differentiation of professions from occupations (Hoyle and John 1995). It was replaced by the power approach that emphasized occupational dominance by professions. Through expertise, superior political and organizational resources, experts are argued to retain professional power and autonomy to self-regulate, gain financial rewards and determine who qualifies to practice their profession (Freidson, 1970; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2007; Abbott, 1988; Larson’s (1977). These functioned as a means to retain jurisdiction (see Abbott, 1988). However, the power approach ignores the larger and complex organizational and institutional context where professions utilize their skills, powers and claim over their jurisdiction (Suddaby, Gendron, & Lam, 2009; Hinings, 2005; Leicht and Fennell, 1997).

Oppenheimer (1972) noted that organizational contexts are characterized by managerial pressures and professions’ proletarianization in which powers, status and activities of professionals are conditioned by opportunities and control allowed by organizations (Leicht & Fennell, 1997; Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013) through positions assigned to them by management (Brint & Karabel, 1989). The proletarianization thesis highlights organizations’ use of bureaucracies, controls, routines and division of labour to influence and reconfigure work (Oppenheimer, 1973) which eradicates professional autonomy (see also deprofessionalization Haug, 1973). Ramirez (2013) noted how organizations interfere in professional associations by influencing their norms or redefining legitimacy and reconfiguring professional fields, which disrupts professions’ jurisdictions (Malsch & Gendron 2013; Kipping & Kirkpatrick 2013). These makes professions and their respective professional bodies to have to struggle with other professions to retain their jurisdiction or encroach on other professions’ jurisdictions due to the dictates of organizations that appear to mediate the institutionalization of professions and tasks within their jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988; Muzio, Brock, & Suddaby, 2013). Nevertheless, Wallace’s (1995) adaptive thesis emphasizes how certain professions are still able to use their expertise to gain legitimate discretion and autonomy over the structure and performance of their work within organizations. In the end, the institutionalization approach to professions offer a more realistic outlook of what professions can encounter in the work place. Therefore, it is most applicable for this study that concentrates on activities of organizations, professions, professional body and the organizational context.
**Research Design**

Yin’s (2014) single case study with embedded design is applied for this study in which the activities of organizations, NIPR and PR educators in Nigeria are the multiple units of analysis for which data would be collected. As AT studies practices of actors in their real-life context (Kuutti, 1991) semi-structured interviews would be conducted with (1) organizations c-suite members, (2) NIPR leadership and committees responsible for membership, training and development as well as certification, and (3) PR educators that includes Head of Departments of corporate communications, Mass Communications respectively and PR education planners in Nigerian Universities. Collected interview data would be combined with data from document studies of reports and articles in the media, commentaries from PR experts, corporate websites and other relevant studies. The data would then be analyzed using Attride-Stirling’s (2001) thematic analysis for systematically deriving themes and enumerating thematic networks. Lastly, the AT framework would be used to operationalize the themes for identifying and the ASs components for further analysis and discussion of identified practices that eschew disturbances and contradictions within and between the ASs.

The AT framework

AT works with a systemic view and concentrates on the context, situation and everyday practices (Naardi, 1996) related to a phenomenon. In this sense, AT is appropriate for studying interactions between organization and its environment, while also highlighting and analyzing the contradiction between them. As Engeström (1999) noted, AT dates back to Hegelian philosophy, Marxian historical materialism, L. Vygotsky and A.N. Leont’ev, and later expanded to its current form by Y. Engeström, that is also known as the Scandinavian AT. His framework provides a lens for studying the activities that make up the practices of interdependent actors coexisting in a network-like relationship within the environment they share where contradictions exist, and are manifested as disturbances or tensions (Engeström, 2000). More so, the actors’ activities cannot be understood in the exclusion of their environment (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999).

The unit of analysis for AT is the Activity System (AS) that contains the distinct components representing the collective elements within ASs. Analyzing the interactions between these components are key to understanding the practices of individual actors and their implications for other ASs within their environment (Engeström, 2001; Daniels 2004: 123). The components include: individual(s) or subgroup(s) whose point of view is chosen as the perspective of analysis (Subject); the problem or issue the subject acts upon (Object), which is then turned into (outcomes) using existing tools (instruments/artefacts). Also included are individuals and subgroups that share the same general object (Community), the horizontal division of tasks and vertical division of power and status for the activity (Division of labor) as well as guidelines (Rules) i.e. norms and standards permitting or constraining particular actions within ASs (Engeström, 2000; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). More recently, Kain and waddle (2005) adapted motives to the framework as the link between objects and outcome which represents the purposeful interactions with other activity systems within the environment towards reaching collaboratively constructed understanding that leads to shared outcomes for ASs within an environment (see figure 1).

![Figure 1: Activity System: Adapted from Engeström (1987)](image-url)
**AT principles**

Engeström’s (2001) AT is applied based on five central principles that include: (1) AT comprises a prime unit of analysis that consists a collective, artefact mediated, object oriented, goal directed ASs existing in networked relations with other ASs that can only be understood when interpreted against the entire ASs, (2) AS emphasizes the multiple points of view, traditions and interests that are based on multiple layers and participants’ diverse histories engraved in their artefacts, rules and conventions. These are multiplied in networks of interacting ASs that are sources of contradictions, (3) ASs are shaped over a long period of time and as such, their problems and potentials are understood by studying their history of activities and objects as well as the theoretical ideals and tools that have shaped them overtime, (4) Contradictions are accumulated overtime within and between ASs which generates disturbances and are viewed as opportunities for innovative change and development that are beneficial to all ASs involved and (5) change would be achieved through expansive transformations through deliberate collective change efforts by questioning and deviating from established norms, reconceptualizing the object and motive of the activities with a much broader mindset for collaboratively developing shared objects. Engeström (2001) depicts these with the first, second and third order objects. First order objects make up the individual objects of each AS (Object 1). The second order object is known by comparing the objects of all actors which highlight the contradicting aspects between the various actors’ objects (i.e. object 2). The third order object (Object 3) contains shared objects that have been collaboratively developed by all ASs which is depicted in the overlapping region of the diagram and labelled Object 3 (see figure 2).

![Figure 2: Two Interacting Activity Systems depicting First order (Object 1), Second order (Object 2) and third order objects (Object 3) (Engeström, 2001)](image)

**The Issue of Contradictions**

According to Virkkunen and Kuutti (2000: 302), *Contradictions are fundamental tensions and misalignments in the structure that typically manifest themselves as problems, ruptures, and breakdowns in the functioning of the activity system*. Engeström (2008: 382) further noted that contradictions are long term and systemic formations that occur within collective systems in four levels (Engeström, 1987). Primary contradictions occur within components of an AS, while a secondary one occurs between components of an activity system. Tertiary contradiction occurs between the objects of ASs coexisting in environments with two or more ASs. Lastly, a quaternary contradiction occurs between the components of an AS and that of its coexisting ASs.

Clarifying the various levels of contradiction would guide the analysis of the collected data towards understanding Nigeria’s PR environment. This would also help in developing and operationalizing the respective ASs’ components that would be analyzed towards extracting existing levels of contradictions. Due to the complex nature of this study with regards to the number of actors, the contradicting objects and the scope of the study, my focus is mostly on tertiary contradictions through identified first and second order objects of the respective ASs. Nevertheless, the researcher believes that identified contradicting objects would provide the networked ASs with enough talking
points on issues that can be collaboratively worked upon for improving their respective practices in Nigeria.

**Applying AT to PR in Nigeria**

The AT framework has been successfully applied across various research areas including human computer interaction (Kuutti, 1996), work design (Engeström, 2000, 2001), interaction design (Engeström, 2006), technical communication (Spinuzzi, 2011), teaching (Kain & Wardle, 2005), learning environments (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999) etc. However, Engeström (1993) maintain that AT does not offer specific techniques and procedures for applying the framework. Nevertheless, Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999) noted that AT’s applications are beginning to lead to accepted practices. One of this is their six steps approach to applying AT, which is adapted for this study. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: Six Step process for Applying Activity (adapted from Jonassen and Rohrer-Murphy (1999))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1: Clarify the purpose of Activity system</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 i) understand relevant context(s) where activity takes place by identifying the actors carrying out specific activities/practices, the problems they face in the process from within their AS and from other ASs</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 ii) understand the subject(s), their motivations and interpretations of perceived contradictions in the system. Identify the subject-driven motives and goals that drive the activities of each AS? What is expected of those performing activities? Who determines expectations and contradictions emanating such expectations and activities?</td>
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<th>Step two: Analyze Activity systems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 i) Define the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify the participants for each ASs, their roles, beliefs, assumptions and the expected outcome of their activity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the rules guiding activities within AS</td>
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<tr>
<td>What challenges are encountered towards achieving desired outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is the relationship between goals-motives of the three ASs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do other ASs view activities? Do they value the goals of the activities?</td>
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<td>What is their perceived expected outcome of the activity?</td>
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<th>Step three: Analyze the Activity Structure</th>
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<tr>
<td>3 i) Define the activity itself</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify specific activities ASs, how they have been transformed over time and the nature of changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What forms of thought, &quot;rationality types,&quot; or theoretical foundations dominate activities and how have they changed and do the actors think about the changes?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the goals-motives of the activity and how are they related to other concurrent goals?</td>
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<td>What are the contradictions, as perceived from the standpoints of subjects driving the activity?</td>
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<td>3 ii) Decompose the activity into its component actions and operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>For each activity, identify and analyze the actions that are performed and by whom.</td>
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<th>Step four: Analyze tools and mediators</th>
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<tr>
<td>4 i) Tool mediators and mediation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify and analyze tools used to perform activities and the models/theories or standardized methods guiding activities?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How have the tools changed over time? And Is their flexible or strict adherence to available tools?</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 ii) Rule mediators and mediation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What formal or informal rules, laws, or assumptions guide the activities of respective actors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has the rules evolved? Are they task-specific? Are they understood by actors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 iii) Role mediators and mediation</td>
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</table>
Who traditionally has assumed the various roles?
How do these roles relate to the individuals’ position and competences?

Step 5: Analyze the context
5 i) Internal or subject driven contextual bounds
   What beliefs, assumptions, models are held by the actors about their activities?
   Which approaches and/or tools did they find effective and efficient for attending to their objects?
   What are their experiences in Nigeria’s PR environment?

5 ii) External driven contextual bounds
   What is the structure of the interactions between the ASs?
   What activities will be considered to be critical for attending to their goal?
   Which limitations emanate from the activities of other actors for attending to objects?

Step 6: Analyzing Activity Systems Dynamics
6 i) What are the interrelationships that exist within the components of the system?
   How could (inter)relationships be described and drives the relationships?
   How have those interrelationships changed over time?
   What factors kept the ASs good relations or drove them apart?
   Are there contradictions or inconsistencies between their objects?
   How does individual AS perceive their objects in relation to that of other ASs?

Concluding Remarks

In the quest of this study to explore and understand the interdependent and contradicting practices and tensions within Nigeria’s PR environment, Engeström’s AT framework is introduced to PR research as holistic empirical studies about Nigerian PR appear scarce. The AT framework is suitable for this study as it works with a systemic orientation and focuses on everyday practices of respective actors in their real-life context and how their actions affect or contradict one another in the environment they share. The framework helps this study to understand the actors both as individuals and as interdependent ASs with multiple perspectives, histories, ideals, tools/artefacts that informs their respective taken-for-granted practices. The potential for contradictions in such practices are emphasized by AT and their implications for the actors and the environment in general is the focus of this study. An understanding through the AT framework in combination with neo-institutional theory uneartns the values that have been infused into the interdependent PR practices, PR professionalization and PR education in Nigeria. This in turn forms the basis for holistic change and development through collaborative work between the actors, which is however not the goal of this study at this point. Nevertheless, such changes would deviate from the contradicting institutionalized norms and allow for transformations for the actors and Nigeria’s PR environment thereby contributing an original study into contextual PR research.


Ramirez, C. (2013). We are being pilloried for something we did not even know we had done wrong Quality control and orders of worth in the British audit profession. Journal of Management Studies, 50(5), 845-869.


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1 The chartered status signifies the highest level of professionalism that is globally recognized and signifies professional competence and professional status for professions. It is attained through rigorous assessment by professional bodies and eventually award to distinguished individuals that have gone through the accreditation process.