

# **Communication Symmetry Elaborated: Lessons from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

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Published by the Institute for Public Relations  
Commission on Global Public Relations Research  
[www.instituteforpr.org](http://www.instituteforpr.org)

May 2010

## Introduction

This article examines the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a six-year national initiative intended to shed light on human rights abuses and bridge the deep divides caused by decades of Apartheid, as an example of symmetrical public relations. Although many scholars, professionals, and even more media representatives and the general public view the role of public relations as persuasion, of convincing someone what to think, believe, or do, many observers have been proposing and exploring a relationship-based, “symmetrical” type of public relations for more than 20 years (J. E. Grunig & T. Hunt, 1984; J. E. Grunig, 1992; Dozier, et al, 1995; L. A. Grunig, et al, 2002).

The debate about the purpose, role, and right practice of public relations has been identified by Botan and Hazelton as an important paradigm struggle, one crucial for the field to evolve and grow (2006, p. 11). They characterized the dominant paradigm as “co-creational,” which “sees publics as co-creators of meaning and communication as what makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations, and goals” (Botan & Hazelton, 2006, p. 13). They further said that, “Symmetrical/Excellence Theory remains the most researched of the co-creational approaches” (Botan & Hazelton, 2006, p. 13).

Symmetry will be defined in more detail later in this paper. Here briefly, we highlight one of the more general descriptions of symmetrical public relations, i.e., it “seeks to manage conflicts and promote mutual understanding” (Dozer, et al., 1995, p. 13). This description of the symmetrical model comes very close to the general purpose of the South African TRC, whose stated goals were to avoid civil war and create a level of respect among different ethnic groups – and for institutions – allowing co-existence without undue bloodshed and upheaval that could hinder social, political and economic development.

Although the Symmetric/Excellence concept has been viewed as a dominant theory of public relations (Botan & Hazelton, 2006; Sallot, et al., 2003) much of the research and writing on it have focused on where and to what degree it has been utilized in the “real world,” on the circumstances that seem to facilitate its use, and on whether it is, in fact, viable. Specific tactics for implementation have not been explored deeply.

One implementation or “cultivation strategy” involves incorporating the principles of authentic communication into the communication process (Bishop, 2006). The 10 principles of authentic communication dictate that the communication process be: *truthful* (factually accurate), *fundamental* (dealing with core information and issues), *comprehensive* (telling the whole story, including contexts), *consistent* (with other words and actions), *relevant* (addressing others’ concerns and interests), *clear* (presented with appropriate language and visuals), *timely* (providing information immediately and before related decisions are made), *accessible* (easy to find, with sources available), *seeking and being responsive to others’ views*, and *showing care and consideration for others* (Bishop, 2006). These attributes of communication are dialogic in nature and represent ways to develop relational and symmetric communication processes.

This paper provides a case study of the TRC as an example of one “co-creational” approach, based on Symmetrical/Excellence Theory. It gives an example of the theory in action, explores the real-world complexities of applying the theory in a critical and volatile national peace context, and adds some practical propositions to the theoretical concept of symmetry. It also briefly examines to what extent the TRC seems to have utilized a specific “cultivation strategy,” the principles of authentic communication, in its communication processes.

### The TRC: Its History and Context

In 1994, South Africa formed a new government of national unity that featured a one-person, one-vote democracy after at least 46 years of Apartheid or official racial separation. During Apartheid, about one million White people had oppressed some 40 million Black and

Colored (mixed-race) folks. Millions of non-Whites had been banned – forcefully moved to or forced to remain in – poor homelands or bantustans, and thousands of others had been ill-treated, tortured, or murdered. In addition, horrendous black-on-black violence had been fomented by the Apartheid regime to weaken anti-Apartheid resistance and prove that Blacks were barbaric (Daye, 2004, pp. 23-36).

Decades of racial violence and oppression spawned terrible hatred and enmity.

After the 1994 election in which Nelson Mandela was elected president and his political party, the African National Congress (ANC) which represented the Black and colored majority, ascended to power, the country was thought to be on the brink of civil war (Daye, 2004, p. 5). The two sides – the Apartheid regime and the African National Congress headed by Mandela – realized a military solution was impossible without unthinkable death and destruction. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in 1995 after extensive consultation with varied sectors of society. The intent was to facilitate compromise needed to avoid civil war, mitigate hatred, and help the country heal. At its very core, the TRC was designed as a two-way communication process in which victims and perpetrators were encouraged to engage in dialogue on politically motivated crimes against human rights and persons in the nation from 1960, when the ANC and other protest groups were banned, to 1994. Violations were defined as extreme acts of violence – murder, rape, beatings, kidnappings, etc.

The TRC, chaired by Archbishop Desmond M. Tutu and with members appointed by President Mandela, included three committees. The Human Rights Violations (HRV) Committee investigated human rights abuses, seeking through hearings and broad investigations, backed up by subpoena power, the identity of the victims, their fate, and the nature and extent of harm they suffered. An Amnesty Committee considered applications for amnesty by people judged to have carried out abuses in furtherance of Apartheid-era political objectives. And the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee proposed policies such as monetary reparations that might aid the healing process for victims.

The TRC was led by 17 commissioners chosen by Mandela from among about 300 people nominated by a selection panel drawn from government and civil society. The panel chose from those nominated a short list of 25 from which Mandela selected 15. The president then named two additional commissioners (Shea, 2000, p. 25).

The commission's enabling act specified that members would not have a "high political profile," and it sought to insure broad representation of the society as a whole. The commissioners included seven women and 10 men. Seven were Black, six were White, and two each were "Colored" (mixed-race) and Indian (Shea, 2000, p. 25).

The TRC was formed with an annual budget of \$18 million (U.S.) and scheduled for a life of two and one-half years. A staff of 300 was stationed at four large offices around the country (Hayner, 2002, p. 42). Functioning with budgetary limits and uncertainty, the commission was not formally dissolved until March 31, 2002. By that time, it had operated for almost six years. In the concluding several months, the Amnesty Committee alone kept working and took on many functions of the other two committees (<http://info.gov.za/otherdocs/2003/trc/>).

Archbishop Tutu spelled out two major goals which relate closely to symmetry (Tutu, 1999, pp. 54-55, 165).

The first was *to address extreme asymmetries in power, voice and resources* created under the Apartheid regime. White South Africans had considerable wealth and monopolized power. Blacks and Colored folks were disenfranchised, lived in abject poverty, and often were forced to move to homelands. Even after the 1994 elections and formation of the new government, Whites retained the bulk of economic power and resources, a fact that hindered

even political symmetry in practice (Bundy, 2001, pp.11-2). Although symmetry was very difficult to achieve, it was an explicit goal of the TRC process.

Second, the commission gave primary emphasis to building relationships in accordance with the African notion of *ubuntu*. That concept holds that a person's humanity is bound up with the humanity of others. Thus the victim and perpetrator of a violent crime both lose humanity and need to regain it through renewed relationships and empathy with each other based on facing the truth (Tutu, 1999, pp. 28-31). Relationship building is a core concept of symmetry (J. E. Grunig, 1992), and the TRC was explicit about the importance of *truth* and *caring* in the communication process.

An important part of the TRC's work was creating opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and relationship building, and it supported these activities in several ways.

The HRV Committee worked to make its hearings *accessible* and held these in at least 59 locations about the country between 1996 and 1998. Hearing sites generally were close to where victims and their relatives lived, making it easy for them to appear and feel comfortable in doing so. The committee sought to include as many victims as possible, utilizing extensive media publicity to alert people to the opportunity to participate and tell their stories to the committee. Churches and other nongovernmental organizations helped the TRC staff identify and recruit victims as well as transport them to hearing sites. (<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans>).

About 21,000 victims of gross human rights abuses made submissions to the HRV committee. Largely because of time and resource limitations, only 1,200 victims testified in public hearings (Shea, 2000, p. 19). However, most others provided information about their suffering, the abuses they and their relatives endured, and related circumstances (illustrating *relevance* and communication on *fundamental* issues). Counselors helped victims express themselves and find the right words (seeking *clarity*), with the purpose of telling their experiences fully (*comprehensively*), and with kind gestures such as providing a glass of water during testimony (illustrating *caring*).

Also, support groups were formed to allow victims to share their personal stories and a sense that each person did not suffer alone. The largest such organization, the Khulumani Support Group, included about 33,000 victims in 70 chapters around the nation. Khulumani lobbied for reparations and victims' rights, spearheading efforts to sue transnational corporations that had supported the Apartheid regime (<http://africaction.org>).

The media covered the hearings extensively, contributing to national awareness of victims' plights and providing victims with the feeling they truly had a voice (Du Plessis, 2006). Most newspapers ran stories on the hearings regularly, while radio and television newscasts often led with commission coverage. Four hours of hearings were broadcast live over national radio each day. Also, a Truth Commission Special Report on Sunday-evening television became the most-watched news show in the country (Hayner, 2002, p. 42). This helped give people a feeling that they were truly heard, and it surely contributed to having a recognized voice in the public sphere (Du Plessis, 2006).

Seeing victims and perpetrators being *responsive to others' views* and *showing consideration and care for the other* obviously were important aspects of the hearings that were consistent with authenticity. The extent to which media coverage of the hearings really aided reconciliation is not clear, though survey data give some basis for optimism as discussed later. Certainly amazing instances of forgiveness and reconciliation were reported as victims faced and asked questions of their former torturers, showing concern for *relationship development* (Tutu, 1999, p. 86). The hearings themselves and the extensive media coverage helped create a shared experience. The nation, divided throughout its history, had lacked a sense of shared meaning and values (de Gruchy, 2001, pp. 168-9) which Culbertson and Knott (2004) and Culbertson and Chen (1997) viewed as essential to community.

## Consistent Action

In addition to the dialogic aspects of the TRC's work, the actions related to justice focused on *restorative* justice – healing and reconciliation – rather than *retributive* justice in which guilty people pay for the crimes. In this, the TRC's actions were *consistent* with its underlying philosophy, as meting out justice was framed and carried out so as to create a sense of shared meaning and community.

A primary focus on retribution might have led the government to adopt the Nuermeberg Trials model followed by the Allied powers in punishing Nazi war criminals after World War II. This approach was not viable for at least three reasons, according to Tutu:

1. South Africans of all racial and ethnic groups would need to live together after the trials ended. They could not simply pack up and go home as the judges and jurors did following Nuremberg.
2. Unlike in World War II, the South African conflict ended with a military stalemate and not with anyone having the power to force a solution on losers. In that situation, peace seemed quite fragile.
3. Convictions in a court of law often would have been very difficult or impossible. The Apartheid regime had proven its capability to lie and conceal. Furthermore, many witnesses to the crimes committed had been killed (Adam & Adam, 2001; Tutu, 1999, pp. 29-34).

Another approach might have been a *blanket amnesty*, immunizing all South Africans from future prosecution or punishment for gross Apartheid-related human-rights abuses. Leaders argued this would not have brought true, lasting healing. Unless South Africans learned the *truth* and “looked the beast in the eye,” according to Tutu, they would be destroyed by simmering hatred, repressed guilt, and other by-products of trauma (1999, p. 28).

The commission chose a middle ground with two major elements. The first was to give victims of gross human-rights abuse (maiming, murder, torture, rape, and so on) and their relatives dignity by providing them voice – a chance to testify in public about their hardship – and by offering *reparations*. The second was to grant amnesty for confessed *perpetrators* who came before an amnesty committee – an autonomous body within the commission – to testify publicly about what they had done (Shea, 2000, pp. 12-8).

The Amnesty Committee was in charge of amnesty applications, deliberations, and decisions. To qualify for amnesty, an applicant had to:

1. Give a *truthful, comprehensive* account of what he or she had done, admitting unconditionally to the act or acts.
2. Demonstrate that the act or acts had been carried out to help achieve genuine goals of some politically related party, government, or movement during the Apartheid era. That period was designated somewhat arbitrarily as running from 1960, when anti-Apartheid groups were banned formally, to the birth of the government of national unity in 1994. In an attempt to avoid judging the rightness or priority of certain political groups, amnesty was considered for a wide variety of activities ranging from propagandizing to sabotage, bombing, torture, and murder (Van de Vijver, 2001).
3. Convince the committee the act or acts were not disproportionate to the goal sought. For example, one could not gain amnesty for killing a person walking across the street who seemingly posed no apparent threat to the perpetrator's safety or goals. Also, one could not kill 1,000 people in order to get one “bad guy” if she or he could have identified the bad guy and taken out only that person (Van de Vijver, 2002, p. 129). In a controversial move, the Amnesty Committee operated largely independently of the commission as a whole. The committee continued to function

after the HRV and reparations committees completed their work in 1998. Much concern was expressed about balanced treatment of White and Black amnesty applications. Early in the process, White applicants seemed to be refused amnesty more often than Blacks, leading to pressures from the commission as a whole to change course within the Amnesty Committee (Shea, 2000, pp. 27-8).

The amnesty process was designed to offer a carrot that would encourage perpetrators to come forward and confess in order to avoid possible later prosecution. This did not always work as some high-profile Apartheid-era officials were prosecuted but acquitted in court, implying others might avoid imprisonment without the effort and embarrassment of admitting guilt to the Amnesty Committee (Hayner, 2002, p. 43).

The committee rejected an application for blanket amnesty by 37 ANC leaders who, in effect, sought to take responsibility for the deeds of guerrilla fighters during the anti-Apartheid struggle. The intent of this application, apparently, was to encourage lower-level rebel leaders to cooperate with the commission as they might also gain amnesty.

The committee initially accepted the application, but the TRC challenged the decision in court on the grounds that the 37 leaders failed to disclose precisely what violent acts they had committed as spelled out in amnesty rules requiring *comprehensive* disclosure (Shea, 2000, p. 28). The commission won in court, establishing its credibility to a degree by taking on the ANC, the party in power which effectively created it (Shea, 2000, pp. 29-30).

Former Presidents F.W. de Klerk and P.T. Botha also refused to cooperate with the commission and were defeated in court, though a contempt citation against Botha for refusing to testify before the TRC eventually was overturned because of a technicality. Obviously South Africa's strong if somewhat flawed judicial system helped the commission gain needed credibility (Hayner, 2002, p. 44).

In a related vein, the commission was accused of failing to pursue vigorously crimes committed by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), representing the Zulu people, and its leader, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. During the Apartheid struggle, the ANC and its military wing, the Umkhonto We Sizwe, had engaged the IFP in many bloody incidents. Some critics contended the TRC caved in to political pressure stemming from fears that subpoenas to Buthelezi might have triggered civil war in his home province of Kwa-Zulu Natal (Hayner, 2002, p. 42). However, many South Africans apparently accepted this caving – and implied lack of *comprehensive* coverage – as an alternative to further bloodshed.

The Reparations and Rehabilitation Committee devoted a great deal of effort to defining just reparations for victims. Government officials and experts from around the world took part in 11 workshops during a 12-month period beginning in February 1997. Clearly, a person who was tortured for one day and released in good health suffered less than a person who was blind and disabled for life. However, the committee failed to come up with an acceptable formula reflecting degrees of suffering. Standard amounts per victim were proposed.

The TRC recommended payment of about \$10,000-\$13,000 to each certified victim (Wilson, 2001, p. 23). However, only a token amount of a few hundred dollars was provided to each of the 17,000 victims or relatives at the time of the hearings (<http://www.info.gov.za/otherdocs/2003/trc/>). In 2003, the government created a fund that provided about \$5,000 per victim, less than half of what the commission recommended. Surely such a small payment for the loss of limbs and eyesight, death of a loved one, and so on, was almost an insult! However, the commission itself could hardly be blamed for the miserliness, as its mission was only advisory with regard to overall reparations funding (Shea, 2000, pp. 33-7).

Such limited funding of reparations created something of a public relations disaster (Daye, 2004, pp. 118-9). Several high-profile leaders of the Apartheid regime received amnesty

and “walked” very quickly while victims waited years and years for only a pittance. And, in some cases, amnesty was granted to leaders despite what critics saw as a failure to really “come clean,” show remorse, and admit wrongdoing. In particular, former President F. W. de Klerk caused consternation when he claimed ignorance of bloody deeds committed on his watch (Daye, 2004, pp. 60-1).

Some criticized the fact that remorse was not a criterion for receiving amnesty. However, surely politicians tend to be good actors capable of faking remorse. And the legitimacy of the entire process would be called into question by a requirement which many would see as inviting inconsistency between words and true feelings.

### **Comparison with Other Truth Commissions**

The South African TRC focused more than most other truth commissions around the world on restorative justice, devoting many resources to establishing a sense of moral community and giving voice as well as dignity to oppressed, poor people. Among the most important features were these:

*Independence from the judicial and executive branches of government.* Several other truth commissions were formed by deposed dictators before they left office. These tyrants, including the infamous Gen. Augusto Pinochet of Chile, remained in positions of power after “retirement.” Pinochet severely restricted commission activities and findings in Chile (Hayner, 2002, pp. 35-8).

*Balanced attention to both perpetrators and a broad range of victims* – and relations between people in these groups. Other commissions tended to focus on reparations for a small group of victims – often primarily relatives of the dead or disappeared (Hayner, 2002, pp. 154-69).

*Naming of victims and perpetrators.* In the victim hearings, alleged perpetrators were named and given a chance to respond. And, in the amnesty process, successful applicants had to “go public” and give what the amnesty committee regarded as a full and complete description, as well as *relevant, fundamental contextual explanation*, of what happened.

*Openness.* The South African media paid widespread attention to the TRC hearings and reached a large, varied audience, helping to make the process *accessible* to all. This was seen as necessary to reduce doubts that all sides had committed horrible crimes during the Apartheid struggle (Krog, 2000, p. 38; Tutu, 1999, pp. 220-2; Valdez, 2001, p. 53). In contrast, several other commissions had held hearings in secret and had been prevented from identifying perpetrators.

*Contextual research and reporting combined with broad investigative and subpoena powers* As described earlier, witnesses were strongly encouraged to provide detailed testimony on history and context. Also, separate hearings were held to examine the role of political parties, the military, the medical community, women, religious bodies, and other sector of society (Shea, 2000, pp. 16-22). Other commissions tended to have a narrow prosecutorial focus.

*Strong, ethical leadership.* Mandela and Tutu were Nobel Peace Prize winners revered around the world as people with amazing dedication, strength of character, and restraint in leading their nation’s long struggle for freedom. In contrast, many other bodies were subordinated to corrupt leaders bent on saving their own—and their lieutenants’ – hides (Hayner, 2002, pp. 107-32).

*Support from a strong civil society.* Prior to 1994, South Africa had a functioning if flawed parliament and judiciary, along with active NGO’s that supported the move toward peace and reconciliation. Many other nations coming out of despotic pasts lacked these resources (Hayner, 2002, pp. 50-71).

*Case-by-case amnesty procedures which ought to hold perpetrators accountable.* In some other instances, blanket amnesty decreed by national leaders made commissions little more than debating societies.

We now turn to an assessment of whether the commission was successful.

### **Evaluation of the TRC**

Among the commission's stated or implied goals were to enhance government legitimacy so as to avoid civil war, promote willingness to tolerate people of other racial or ethnic groups, and develop a sense of moral community (Daye, 2004, p. 20). The methods employed to accomplish these goals can be considered honest disclosure of wrong-doing and suffering, emphasis on restorative justice, and providing reparations. The extent to which the TRC achieved its goals has been debated for many years. Certainly civil war was averted. However, gauging of tolerance and moral community is very difficult. The measurement of "soft" benefits such as these has been an ongoing challenge in public relations.

The TRC has been widely praised, and also widely criticized. Somewhat surprisingly, it commanded much attention and respect abroad but was pilloried quite widely in South Africa. It may be that the amnesty and reparation processes, as noted above, were not carried out as effectively as the hearings; thus the actions that needed to accompany the dialogue process surely were seen as deficient. Certainly the amnesty process was not carried out *consistently*, and reparations have been far less than promised. Thus there seems to have been a mismatch between words and actions (lack of *consistency*).

Nevertheless, in comparison with other truth commissions, the TRC has gained-world-wide fame as a leader in helping nations move from oppressive regimes and brutal civil conflict to democracy (Hayner, 2002, pp. 33, 40-5)

Did the TRC really advance reconciliation, peace, and fruitful interaction within society? Opinion is divided on that question. Tutu (1999, p. 86) and others report amazing instances of forgiveness by victims. These observers also emphasize that reconciliation is a long process in which TRC deliberations could only serve as an initial phase.

At this writing, the authors could find only one comprehensive national study that attempted to assess the TRC's impact. Gibson (2004) conducted a survey of 3,700 South Africans in 2000 and 2001, using some 1996 data as a partial benchmark for assessing progress. Space precludes a detailed discussion of findings here. Key results are these:

1. The TRC apparently contributed to widespread knowledge and acceptance of the basic thesis that all sides in the Apartheid struggle had contributed to horrific human-rights abuses (Gibson, 2004, p. 84).
2. In general, correlations were positive between acceptance of and attention to the TRC on the one hand and acceptance of a "human rights culture" on the other. This culture included, in part, respect for a rule of law, tolerance for groups very different from one's own, opposition to oppressive or discriminatory institutions, and commitment to democracy. However, acceptance of these tenets overall remained fairly low in the nation (Gibson, 2004, pp. 180-210). Also, of course, correlation does not prove causation. Belief in human rights may have stemmed from commission efforts, but the reverse may also hold.
3. Loyalty to political institutions – encompassing, in part, a willingness to accept their actions even when a respondent disagrees with them – remained fairly low in South Africa (Gibson, 2004, pp. 300-4).
4. Blacks felt much better about the TRC than Whites did. About two-thirds of Blacks, but only 18% of Whites, expressed a great deal of confidence in the commission



(Gibson, 2004, pp. 91-3). Apparently a fair number of Whites saw the overall project as a witch hunt directed at them.

5. Overall, the commission did appear to moderate views of any one racial or ethnic group about others. Thus, while groups remained suspicious of each other, the hearings seemed to reduce polarization somewhat (Gibson, 2004, p. 161).
6. The commission hearings, focusing on brutal human-rights abuses, did not convince very many South Africans that Apartheid was rotten to the core. A substantial number of Whites, and an amazing one-third of Blacks, felt that, despite abuses, Apartheid ideas were good (Gibson, 2004, pp. 80-1).

While surprising at first glance, such fairly widespread Black acceptance of Apartheid concepts may make sense in light of several factors. Black separatism was advocated by the Black Consciousness movement, the Azanian People's Organization, and the Pan-Africanist Congress as well as by Whites. Also, within the Black community, the Inkatha Freedom Party had collaborated with the Apartheid regime and opposed the ANC. IFP autonomy seems consistent, in spirit, with separatism. And finally, TRC hearings had focused on individual crimes, not institutional or group misdeeds. This in turn, seems consistent with the idea that Apartheid implementation, not its underlying definition, was horrible.

The TRC experience has significance for public relations because it illustrates and supports three propositions relating to the concept of symmetry. We now turn to a discussion of that notion.

### **Communication Symmetry An Overview of Symmetry**

In 1984, James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt (chapter 2) proposed the two-way symmetric model of communication as an ideal for public relations practice. Later, the widely discussed International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Excellence Study provided theoretical (J. Grunig, 1992) and empirical (Dozier, et al, 1995; L. Grunig, et al., 2002) evidence that effective organizational communication tends to follow this model.

Others have questioned that interpretation, focusing on at least three points. First, symmetry requires approximate equality of power and resources among actors. And that equality seldom exists, in fact, in the real world (McKie, 2001). Second, symmetrical communication may be unworkable and/or undesirable within cultures that emphasize hierarchy and have high power-distance – an assumption that large disparities in power and status among social groups are natural and inevitable (Sriramesh, et al., 1999; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003; Taylor 2000). And third, in any society, contending groups often have inherently competing interests creating win-lose situations that preclude shared interpretations (Deutsch, 1960).

Based on this literature, contrasting elements of the two basic types of communication – symmetric and asymmetric -- appear to be:

First, in symmetrical communication, there is an underlying view that the organization and its publics are *partners* in an ongoing process. In contrast, asymmetric communicators see their publics largely as *objects to be persuaded and manipulated*.

Second, both place strong emphasis on listening as well as speaking to audiences and value formal and informal research needed to implement it. However, symmetrical communication places its focus on *publics' needs, wants, and contexts* so the sponsoring organization can serve these publics. In contrast, two-way asymmetric communicators collect data primarily to figure out *what persuasive appeals work*.

Third, symmetry has as its basic goal building and maintaining *mutually beneficial relationships*. Asymmetry implies a focus on *persuasion* – attitude, belief and behavior change or change resistance as sought by the communicator and his or her client.

Fourth, the symmetric communicator seeks to *accommodate* audience interests, changing clients' as well as publics' beliefs and behaviors to insure a mutually beneficial fit between the two. On the other hand, asymmetric communication focuses almost solely on *advocacy* – persuading publics in behalf of a client.

Recent writing has focused heavily on point 4 above. The data seem to suggest two-way communication is needed but should combine both accommodation and advocacy (L. Grunig, et al., 2002, pp. 55-89). Cameron and his colleagues have shown that varied factors influence where a practitioner falls on a continuum from advocacy to accommodation at any one time (Shin & Cameron, 2005; Shin et al., 2006). Similarly, L. A. Grunig, et al., (2002, pp. 334, 337) suggested that organizations need to use the symmetrical approach when under activist pressure or when faced with a crisis.

These conditions certainly existed in South Africa in 1995 when the TRC was formed. The commission seemed to be utilizing the symmetrical model in that it did not view its citizens as objects to be persuaded, but rather as partners in the healing process. It did not seek primarily to persuade, but rather to build relationships and community.

The TRC process did depart from symmetry to a degree. Consultation with varied sectors of society helped shape the commission. However, in the final analysis, the government imposed the process on a society in which some people disapproved of certain elements of the commission's make-up and mode of operation. In particular, as noted earlier, some objectors called for a focus on retributive rather than restorative justice.

We now discuss three propositions about the meaning and application of symmetry which the experience of and scholarship about the TRC seem to support.

### **Some Basic Propositions about Symmetry**

*Proposition 1 – Gross or extreme asymmetry between two partners in a relationship seldom leads to mutually satisfying relationships. Such asymmetry tends to create upheaval. Also, elimination of it takes time and extraordinary effort.*

Some public relations scholars suggest asymmetry often is inevitable given the cultural phenomenon of high power distance (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003). In societies with such beliefs, a large gap in power between leaders and led is regarded as natural and inevitable (Chen & Culbertson, 2003, pp. 25-6; Hofstede, 2001, pp. 97-8, 430-1).

Certainly nations such as India have existed for some time with vast gaps in power, wealth, voice and perceived dignity between the upper and lower classes. However, suffering and human right abuses seem common in these cases (Friere, 1997).

In South Africa, many Blacks live in extreme poverty, even today. Under Apartheid their movements were restricted by the infamous pass laws. Millions were forced to move into desolate, poor homelands. As Daye explains, Whites excluded Blacks and Colored people from their “*moral community*.” Within such a community, each person treats other members with dignity and recognizes that all have the same basic rights and responsibilities with regard to each other (Daye, pp. 75-6).

Apologies in the TRC process were carried out partly to establish moral community. Apologizers affirmed that they recognized the dignity and rights of those apologized to. And such affirmation may have helped integrate people into the community (Daye, p. 75).

TRC procedures articulated for all to see the suffering that human-rights victims had endured – and their right to a hearing. Counselors helped victims express themselves with coaching in finding the right words, with comfort, and with gestures such as providing a glass of

water during testimony. Non-governmental organizations, including churches, helped recruit witnesses and provided education prior to and during the hearings.

Also, support groups allowed victims to share their stories and a sense that each person did not suffer alone. The largest such organization, the Khulumani Support Group, included about 33,000 victims in 70 chapters throughout the nation. Khulumani lobbied for reparations and victims' rights, spearheading efforts to sue transnational corporations that had supported the Apartheid regime (<http://www.africaaction.org>.)

Extensive media coverage also contributed to awareness of victims' plights. This helped give people a feeling that they were truly heard. And it surely contributed to having a recognized voice in the public sphere (Du Plessis, 2006). The extent to which this really aided reconciliation is not clear, though survey data give some basis for optimism as discussed earlier. Certainly amazing instances of forgiveness and reconciliation were reported as victims faced and asked questions of their former torturers (Tutu, 1999, p. 86).

*Proposition 2 – Equal treatment of broad groups of people does not insure true symmetry in a way that contributes to relationship building and maintenance. Actions and words must be viewed as consistent. Also, treatment must be seen as equitable and fair – as providing each group or individual with what it and others regard as deserved treatment.*

Recent research has linked perceived fairness and justice to relationships between communication symmetry and relational quality. Fair and just actions must accompany words promising them. As noted above, in the case of the TRC, it may be that the payment of reparations was not perceived as equitable and fair action.

Relational quality has been defined in light of a large research stream on relationship management initiated by Ledingham and Bruning (2000).

Kim (2007) studied employees at 31 South Korean companies, focusing on symmetry as a predictor of relational quality as tapped by dimensions stemming from the Ledingham-Bruning tradition. The focus was on employee perceptions of their relationships with their firms. Adherence to *symmetrical philosophy* did correlate with *communal relationships* (perception that the company was concerned about its employees), employee *trust* in the organization, and *control mutuality* (perception that the company listens to an employee and considers what she/he has to say when making decisions).

The research drew on a concept of *justice* that involved at least two components – *organizational* (using fair guidelines and procedures) and *interactional* (keeping employees informed and treating them with fairness) (Bies, 2001; Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003; Kim, 2007; Leventhal, 1980; Rupp & Cropanzano, 2002).

*The correlations between symmetrical communication on the one hand and control mutuality, as well as trust, on the other, held only when justice was seen as prevailing* This supports proposition 2 above, which suggests that treatment of communication partners as equals aids relational quality only when accompanied by perceived fairness and equity.

The TRC sought to achieve justice, but the effort encountered at least three problems with regard to legitimacy and perceived fairness.

First was the doctrine of *evenhandedness*. Atrocities were viewed as equally heinous whether they were committed by the African National Congress and its military operatives, by the opposing Inkhata Freedom Party, by the white Apartheid regime, by the Pan-Africanist Congress, or by others (Shea, 1999, pp. 74-5).

Fear and paranoia led some whites to justify violence. They had been told they faced a “total onslaught” – a fight to the death – by communist-inspired rebels and powers (Boynton, 1997, pp. 235-6).

The notion of evenhandedness bothered Black South Africans even more. They were fighting a war of liberation. How could they be placed on the same moral level as their oppressors (Villa-Vicencio, 2001)?

The ANC consistently, if imperfectly, followed a policy of not targeting innocent civilians. However, it had to fight fire with fire to a degree as it dealt with enemy infiltrators whom it could not always identify perfectly. Guerrilla warfare is, of necessity, dirty business. And ANC forces, with many top leaders killed, exiled or imprisoned, had less experience and command-and-control discipline than did the enemy.

In light of all this, the notion of evenhandedness led to substantial resentment and protest on the political left.

A second problem was *the focus on only limited groups of perpetrators, beneficiaries, and victims of apartheid, coupled with narrow definition of wrongs committed.*

The nation's one million or so white people could be divided into at least three categories:

1. Those who profited from Apartheid but claimed to have no awareness of its abuses. Some commentators said this must have required some sort of social blindness. Perhaps, but most observers seem to admit that blindness did exist.
2. Those who profited from Apartheid and had some awareness but did nothing to protest or change the abuses.
3. A few thousand who beat, raped, killed, and tortured victims.
4. The TRC proceedings focused primarily on the latter group. Some critics contended that, by doing this, it paved the way for those in groups 1 and 2 to deny blame and avoid facing their responsibility to compensate Apartheid victims.

Turning to victims, non-Whites fell into several groups:

1. About 20-30 million who were not killed or tortured, but who suffered from poverty, broken relationships, fear, poor education, and other deprivations to which Apartheid contributed.
2. At least 3-4 million who endured the horrors of forced removal from their homes to homelands or bantustans. This process was designed to subjugate non-Whites and enforce racial segregation.
3. Some 110,000 victims of gross human-right abuses which the Khulumani Support Group claims to have identified (<http://www.opendemocracy.org.za>).
4. About 22,000 victims who actually made submissions to the TRC Human Rights Violations Committee.
5. Roughly 1,200 victims who testified in public hearings conducted by this committee throughout the nation. Others were excluded because of limited time and resources.

In the eyes of critics, the focus on groups 4 and 5 – particularly on 5 – may have paved the way for powerful South Africans to forget about the extensive needs and suffering of those in groups 1 and 2. Furthermore, those in group 3 – sufferers of gross abuse who did not find their way to commission hearings – surely felt left out and ignored. As a result, it was suggested, needed remedial measures must have been narrowly defined and neglected (Wilson, 2001, pp. 34-5).

A third problem was *reparations*. Here much was promised but little has been provided. The TRC recommended payment of about \$10,000-\$13,200 U.S. to each certified victim (Wilson, 2001, p. 23). However, only a token payment of a few hundred dollars was made at the time of

the hearings. In 2003, the government created a fund providing about \$5,000 per victim – less than one-half of what the commission recommended. Surely such small payment for the loss of limbs and eyesight, the death of loved ones, and so on, was almost an insult!

We now turn to a third basic proposition.

*Proposition 3 – Communication symmetry focuses on process formulation and maintenance as its primary goal. Asymmetry, on the other hand, emphasizes end results such as specific attitudes, mental states and behaviors.*

This distinction seems to be neglected in scholarly writing about the symmetric and asymmetric perspectives.

The TRC recognized the importance of results. Some victims clearly would have preferred a results-oriented approach to justice. However, the focus was on initiating a long reconciliation process.

Tutu and his colleagues who designed the commission provided two important elaborations. The first – a matter of procedure and structure – was a focus on *restorative rather than retributive justice*. And the second – an issue of content in testimony – was emphasis on providing *context* so victims and perpetrators could understand each other as fully as possible.

Mandela and Tutu recognized the need for reconciliation in a war-torn, battered, hate-filled society. In light of this, they sought above all else to carefully design a forum for personal communication, for sharing stories, and for bringing perpetrators and victims face-to-face to elicit forgiveness, mutual understanding, and peace. In hearings of the violations committee, victims and their relatives named tormentors where possible. The accused were informed and were given an opportunity to respond. However, victims were not cross-examined as is standard procedure in western criminal trials. It follows that alleged perpetrators did not have perfect “due process” rights (Daye, 2004, pp. 188-94).

Wilson notes that retributive justice serves a useful function. It has deep roots in African culture (2001, pp. 115-6). And it may promote accountability as well as deter violence. In fact, the absence of accepted mechanisms for providing retributive justice in certain areas such as Sharpeville, scene of a well known 1960 massacre, apparently contributed to a “wild-west” atmosphere with widespread revenge killings (Wilson, 2001, pp. 188-95).

Wilson and philosopher Robert Nozick (1981, pp. 366-8) introduce an important further procedural distinction. *Retribution is not synonymous with revenge*. Some observers tend to downplay retributive justice by assuming equality here. Nozick makes five important distinctions:

1. Retribution is carried out to address a real wrong, while revenge is often sought to compensate for a mere slight, real or perceived.
2. Retribution seeks to insure that the severity of punishment is proportional to the wrong. It does not impose the death penalty for a parking violation! Revenge, in contrast, tends to ignore proportionality.
3. Agents of retribution need have no personal tie to the villain. In some African traditional courts, for example, no one person administers all lashes on a defendant to show that “things are not personal.” Revenge, on the other hand, occurs when a victim takes out his or her anger on a perpetrator.
4. In retribution, unlike in revenge, the agent of punishment need not derive emotional gratification from imposing that punishment.
5. Retribution is done to support a general principle of accountability, not simply to make an individual person suffer. Such suffering is the primary goal of revenge (Wilson, 2001, pp. 161-2).

Critics of the TRC have focused on the fact that those granted amnesty for crimes could not be prosecuted in a court of law and held accountable. Naturally, this has bothered some victims. Relatives of martyred Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko challenged the constitutionality of amnesty procedures (Daye, 2004, p. 73).

However, Archbishop Tutu and others contend this criticism is overstated. Only a small minority of all applicants was granted amnesty, and the rest were left open to prosecution. Moreover, many applicants had already served considerable time in prison. And the South African Defense Force, along with other officials, had killed many witnesses and destroyed a great deal of evidence. This suggests that, even if they'd been prosecuted, many perpetrators might have walked.

A second important area of process was a focus on context *as perceived by witnesses* testifying before the TRC. Testimony was rather unstructured – with people telling what had happened, and why, in their own words. The purpose here was to let all parties understand where both perpetrators and victims were “coming from.” That, in turn, might help pave the way for understanding and forgiveness.

Whites, non-Whites and Inkatha Freedom Party collaborators with the Apartheid regime all explained the horror and insecurity of their lives prior to 1994. Also, victims and their relatives told what it was like to live with diminished earning capacity and without loved ones.

Confessed white perpetrators discussed in detail several factors such as a long-standing, deeply ingrained sense of *white superiority* over other races (O'Meara, 1996, p. 17; Tutu, 1999, p. 70), *support for Apartheid in the Dutch Reformed Church* (Arendse, 2001; Botman, 2001; Tutu, 1999, p. 18), *fear of communism* (Tutu, 1999, p. 217), and *paranoia* that naturally stems from being outnumbered in a foreign land by people seen as militant foes (Boynton, 1997, p. 274).

Another bit of context that played a part in amnesty hearings was whether an applicant committed the crime to which he confessed as ordered by superiors within the government or a political organization. Judges apparently did not regard such orders as essential for the success of an application. They recognized that, in guerrilla warfare, a person must often act very quickly based on his or her own judgment. However, the committee rejected some requests where a low-level applicant acted on her or his own but apparently had ample time and opportunity to consult with superiors.

A substantial number of amnesty applications were rejected because the context suggested confessed perpetrators were motivated by a desire for revenge or personal gain, not by organized political objectives (Daye, 2004, p. 97).

Such contextual ideas were emphasized not basically to excuse crimes, but to aid mutual understanding that might pave the way for reconciliation (Sachs, 2001, pp. 97-8). Of course, assessments of amnesty and the actuality of atrocities by the TRC were often controversial and subjective.

## Summary

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission confronted a huge challenge when it began functioning in 1995. The goal was to help avoid civil war and horrendous bloodshed among ethnic and racial groups that had come to hate each other with great passion over a long period of oppressive White rule.

President Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission's chair, hoped to gain acceptance of the premise that the nation's new ruling party, the African National Congress, would insure that all sectors have a place in society. These sectors included the National Party, which had ruled since 1948 and established the Apartheid state; ANC followers;

those associated with the Inkhata Freedom Party, bitter ANC rivals representing the Zulu tribe; black separatists connected with the Black Consciousness Movement and the Azanian People's Liberation Army; Colored people of mixed races; those of Indian descent; and even right-wing extremists devoted to violence against the new unity government.

The hope was to do far more than convince the various groups that the newly empowered ANC was credible. In addition, it was necessary to show that the government was created by a process that was *legitimate* – giving each sector of society a voice. Also, the process needed to be seen as providing *accountability* – as insuring that, if leaders or a group with evil or criminal intent were to gain control down the road, the machinery and will existed to remove them from power.

The TRC, as a creation of the government, surely could not achieve these goals without help from others, including credible executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

While such objectives surely were in the minds of Mandela, Tutu, and others when they formed the TRC, the commission's more basic goal was to create a feeling of trust, mutual understanding, and cooperation among previously warring ethnic groups.

Hazelton and Botan (2006) would characterize this as a “co-creational approach that focuses on publics as co-creators of meaning and emphasizes the building of relationships with and among publics” (p. 7). People needed to feel secure in redressing gross inequities in wealth and power which had contributed to exploitation and suffering of non-White South Africans. Blacks needed to recognize that White people still commanded most of the nation's resources and much knowledge needed for development. Thus their cooperation was essential to move forward economically and socially. Also, Blacks needed to understand that Whites might leave the country in droves if they felt their new rulers – and former threatening enemies – were bent on revenge and on driving them into the sea. And Whites needed to understand and tolerate Black impatience for progress toward economic and social justice.

These goals were pursued in a spirit of relationship and process enhancement, not to sell a particular product or end result. In that sense, the goals embodied notions spelled out in the two-way symmetric model as proposed by the IABC Excellence Team (J. Grunig, 1992; Dozier, et al., 1995; L. Grunig, et al., 2002).

In an effort to further “co-creation” or social responsibility, the commission adopted a model of restorative justice. This focused on helping each party in the long struggle understand why former adversaries had done what they did. Such understanding, it was hoped, might contribute to a level of forgiveness needed for future cooperation and co-existence.

All observers seemed to agree that the TRC could not, by itself, achieve these goals. Formed for a two-year stint that was later extended to six years, the body could only provide a beginning.

While sketchy, the available evidence suggests the commission achieved important things. It apparently showed beyond doubt that all sides in the Apartheid struggle had been guilty of human-rights abuses. Thus no one group could feel unduly self-righteous. It contributed slightly, at least, to such beliefs as respect for the rule of law and commitment to democracy. And it appeared to reduce polarization among ethnic groups somewhat (Gibson, 2004).

At the same time, the TRC drew much criticism in at least three areas.

First, many Whites viewed the commission as a witch hunt against them.

Second, emphasis on restorative justice appeared to compromise retributive justice to a degree. Naturally, victims bristled when their former oppressors gained amnesty and walked as

free people. However, only a few perpetrators got off scot-free. And many of these might not have been convicted in a traditional court of law designed to insure retributive justice.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, much was promised but little was delivered in reparations. Initial payments were small. Parliament eventually provided additional funding, but at a level much lower than the TRC recommended. TRC members obviously recognized this as a problem but did not, in the final analysis, control the purse strings.

Such lack of perceived *consistency* between thought and action violated an important principle of authentic communication listed earlier. And this apparently limited *perceived fairness and justice* – a necessary condition for communication symmetry to aid relational quality as specified in proposition 2 above.

On the plus side with regard to authentic communication, the commission and related non-governmental organizations got high marks for the principles of *accessibility*, *responsiveness*, and *care for others*. Much effort went into locating victims and perpetrators – and to insuring their *access* to commission proceedings. Also, staff members provided coaching and small gestures that showed *caring* for victims. To insure victim comfort, alleged perpetrators were not allowed to cross-examine them as would occur in a traditional court of law. At the same time, perpetrators were informed in advance of victim testimony so they could *respond* in due course. These features were consistent with proposition 1 above – addressing of asymmetries in dignity, resources, and perceived power.

In line with proposition 3, victims were asked to tell in their own words – not simply by answering officials' questions – what they had done, what had happened to them, and why. This practice was designed to tell “the whole story” in line with the authenticity principles of *truthfulness*, dealing with *fundamental* or core issues and information, *comprehensiveness*, *relevance*, and *clarity*.

*Timeliness* obviously was a challenge. It took some time to arrange and conduct hearings, and they generally occurred years after the alleged abuses under discussion. Also, victims naturally felt angry in a few cases they waited years for small reparations while their oppressors walked quickly as free people. It should be noted, however, that this was quite rare. In a large majority of cases, amnesty was denied to perpetrators. And, in some other instances, alleged torturers already had served fairly long prison terms.

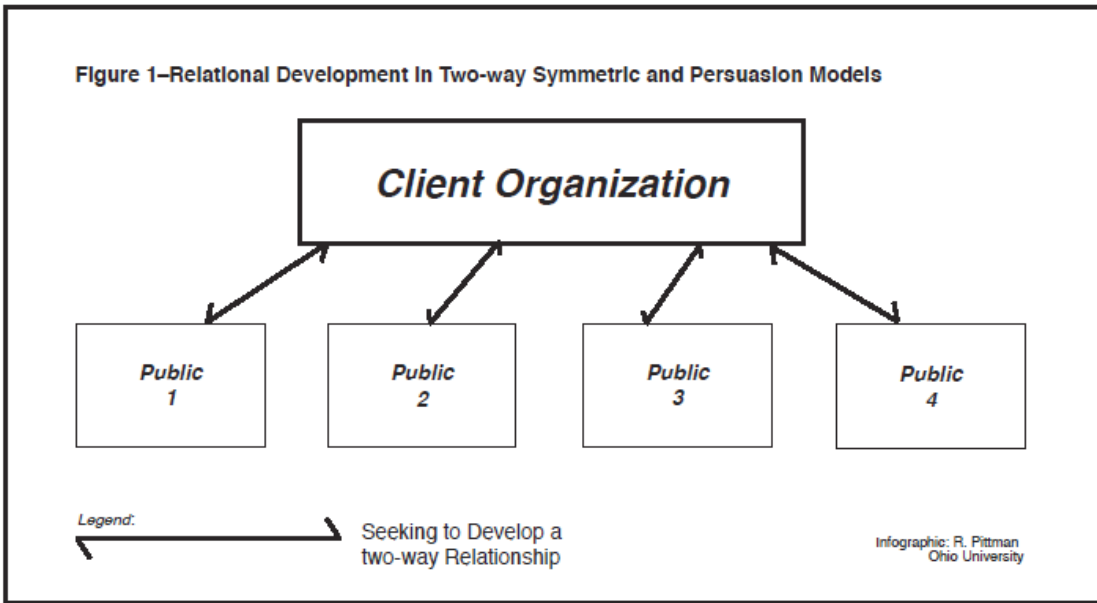
We conclude by noting that symmetry has a role – normative and practical, in public relations. The three propositions refine symmetry in practice. Gross asymmetries seldom work well. Equality does not lead to true symmetry in the absence of perceived fairness and justice. And attention must be given to process as well as end product.

### **Conclusion**

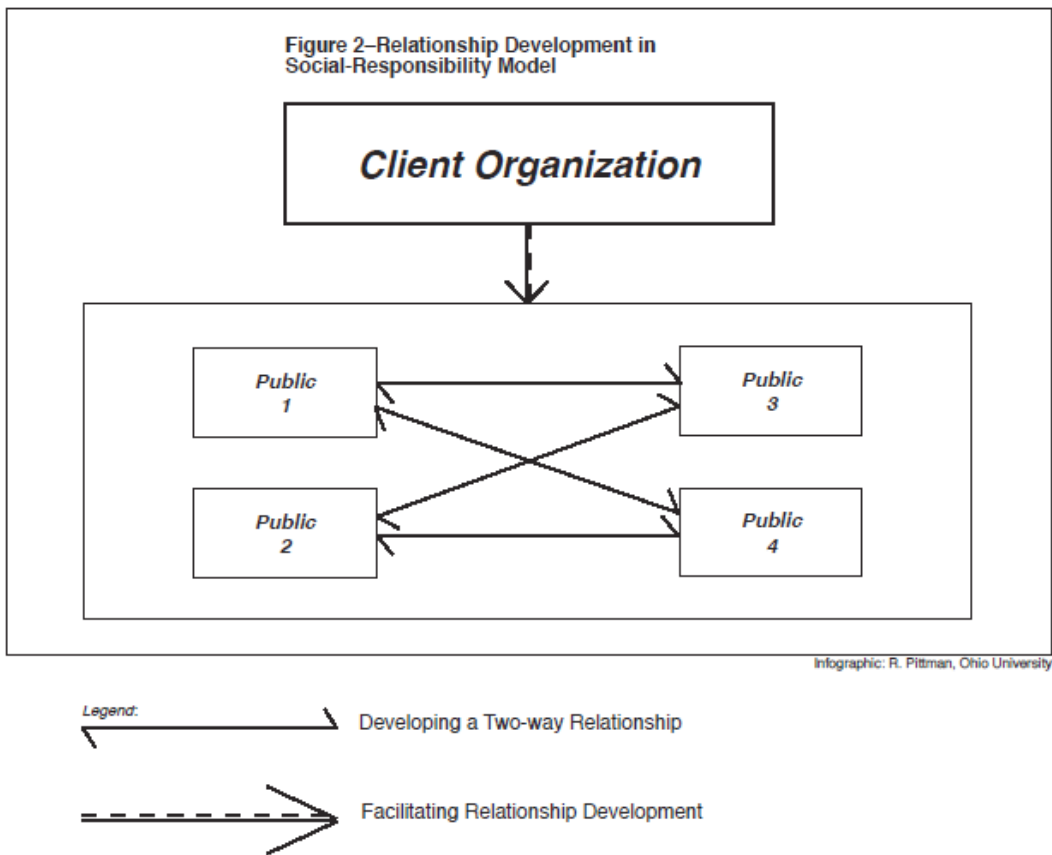
The TRC can be considered an example of symmetrical public relations, as we have argued, utilizing the principles of authentic communication as a cultivation strategy. However, given that the commission's role was primarily building relationships between the government and citizens, we propose that the African National Congress was primarily using a social-responsibility model of public relations in which the government created programs for the benefit of the communities where they operated.

The traditional two-way symmetric model is illustrated by Figure 1, which shows a primary focus on building relationships between a client organization and publics.





The Truth and Reconciliation Commission exemplifies the social-responsibility model. In this formulation, emphasis is on building relationships and activities among various publics, solving social ills, and working together to make a better world.



The sponsoring organization, in this case the ANC, must carry out programs so it will be respected and trusted as the government entity. The unity government established the TRC framework after consulting with varied groups and sectors in and outside of the society. Thus the commission operated basically with symmetric principles

This analysis refines our understanding of the role of symmetrical public relations in the context of socially responsible government relations. In particular, we emphasize the importance of making strategic decisions about trade-offs between questionable results (compromising of retributive justice to a degree) and broader social values (community and healing).

We close by calling for greater emphasis on symbolic-interactionist (Culbertson, 1989, 1991) and co-orientational (Chaffee and McLeod, 1968) approaches in analyzing relationships.

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