

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR THE PRACTICE OF PR

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is devoted to the theoretical perspectives of the practice of PR. In order to describe the practice of PR in Africa, a theoretical framework providing a foundation for the study is critical. This framework will guide the theoretical as well as the empirical aspects of this study. It will provide a scientific anchor for this study.

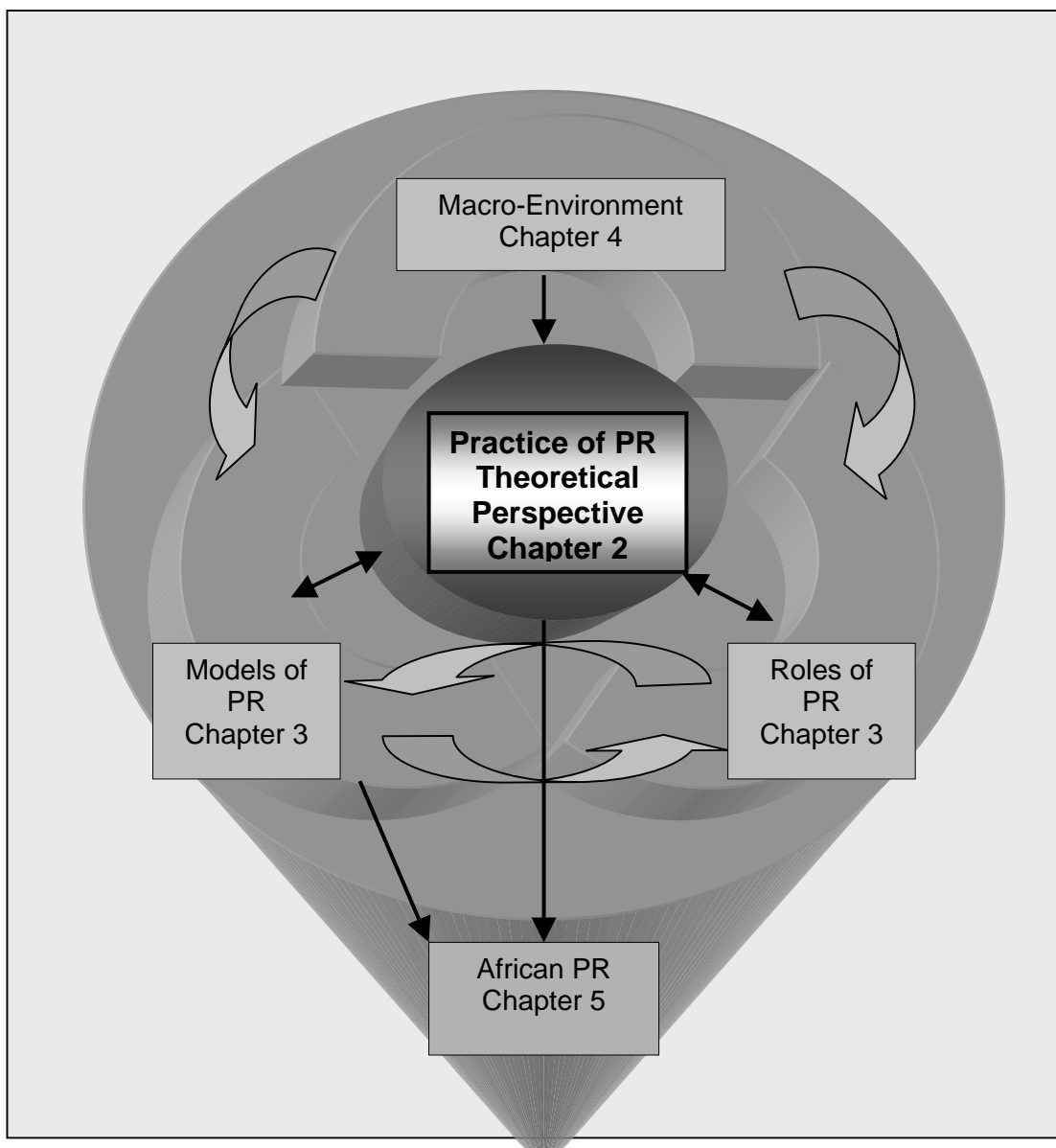
Chapter 1 discussed the definition of PR, which was selected for this study. The definition will again be briefly stated. The practice of PR in this study is defined as follows:

*"PR practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes which will serve both the organisation and the public interest" (Wilcox, et al 2000:4).*

PR can be viewed from various scientific research fields. The scientific research fields applicable in this study are social sciences and economic and management sciences. The first scientific research field is from the social sciences, specifically referring to sociology. This scientific research field is used in this study to anchor PR to the importance of the macro-environment. This field provides a foundation for the impact of the macro-environment on the practice of PR by referring to the macro-level of analysis. The most recent PR developments in this field refer to the reflective paradigm that was conceptualised in sociology. The second scientific research field that is used to anchor PR for this study is that of economic and management sciences. The research in this field refers to the organisational function of PR and the

activities performed by PR practitioners. This field provides a foundation for the importance of the organisational level (meso-level) as well as the practitioner levels (micro-level) of analysis. The chapter concludes with theoretical frameworks referring to the systems theory, the social systems theory and the excellence theory of PR, providing a foundation for this study. Figure 2.1 provides an overview of how this chapter fits into the total conceptual framework of this study.

**Figure 2.1 Conceptual framework of the theoretical perspectives of the practice of PR**



## 2.2 ANCHORING PR FOR THIS STUDY

There is a need in the field of PR to define and determine the domain and dimensions of the field. PR is a relatively new field of scholarship and practice and a general agreement is necessary for this phenomenon to grow as a scholarly and professional endeavour. Hutton (1999:199-200) is of the opinion that the field has suffered from an identity crisis, largely of the field's own making:

*"In both theory and practice, PR has failed to arrive at a broadly accepted definition of itself in terms of its fundamental purpose, its dominant metaphor, its scope, or its underlying dimensions."*

PR practitioners have based their research on scientific theories drawn from various scientific fields. Although PR has mostly been defined as a management function, it can be explored from various other theoretical perspectives. PR has not yet developed further into scientific theories because only limited parts of PR have been examined. Although PR has been identified as a pre-theoretical activity, it is developing into a scientifically based profession. In order for PR to be studied as a scientifically based profession it needs to rise to a meta-level. This means that PR needs to rise over and above the fields of practice and studied from a theoretical, scientific level (Holmström, 1996:2).

### 2.2.1 Social sciences

During the 1960's, North American PR educators considered much of the communication research conducted as relevant to PR. This included research on mass media, public opinion, attitudes and persuasion, the effect of information campaigns, and interpersonal and organisational communication. The intellectual roots of these scholars were in social and political sciences - that is sociology, social psychology and political science (Vercic & Grunig, 1995:15).

The professional practice of PR developed in pluralistic democratic societies and should therefore be studied in connection with developments in society. Social sciences view PR as a new pattern of social action, involving the process of integration and disintegration (Holmström, 1996:3-4). The development of society is firstly identified by religion on the one hand and a capital-based private enterprise on the other. Furthermore, it is identified by the differentiation of society into the political system, private enterprise and science. These developments have an impact on the practice of PR. Therefore, in order to explore the practice of PR an analysis of the macro-environment is essential in order to understand the practice of PR (Holmström, 1997:25).

World and societal developments influence the way businesses function. There is a strong linkage between business and society and this should be explored in order to determine its impact on the practice of PR. In this study, PR is explored as a strategic management function and therefore emphasises the impact of the macro-environment on the practice of PR.

### **2.2.2 Economic and management sciences**

According to Mersham *et al* (1995:14 & 17), PR is searching for legitimacy in the South African context. These authors are of the opinion that PR lacks an understanding of the nature of the communication process owing to an inadequate and incomprehensive theoretical foundation. Furthermore, communication offers a 'philosophical' basis, which is essential for the field of PR. The field needs to ask the question why, as the sense of purpose lies beyond technical aspects. It is on this issue that the second scientific research field, namely the economic and management sciences, was identified.

James Grunig (1966) started the development of PR theory with a monograph on the role of information in micro-economic theory. Most definitions of PR refer to the integral part of management, but most scholars and practitioners

have failed to make theoretical connections to theories of economics and management. Grunig devoted his theorising to understanding the value of PR to an organisation (Grunig & White in Grunig, 1992:51). Grunig wanted to illustrate that communication is needed to plan more effective strategies. This can be illustrated by an excerpt on the centrality of decision making to economic theory:

*“The process of decision making is a central feature of most economic analyses. Assumptions about the way in which economic actors make basic decisions underlie theories of the firm, consumer demand, welfare economics, market structure, location and other basic economic theories”* (Vercic & Grunig, 1995:1).

The roots of PR can therefore be traced back to economics and strategic management. This was done through investigating the economic decision-making process of an individual. Therefore, according to Grunig & Vercic (1995), PR was anchored to concepts of neo-classical micro-economics, taking concepts such as the organisational, social and political factors into account when making a decision. This investigation provided background on where PR originated and emphasised the importance of practicing PR strategically.

Although it is clear that PR can be explored from any of the two scientific frameworks, criticism was developed around each of these frameworks. Grunig (1992:51) argues that PR has devoted ample time to understanding the role of PR within society instead of understanding the value of PR to an organisation. Holmström (1996:3) argues that if PR research were studied solely based on communications science, a scientific environment in which to examine the actual social function would not be possible. Furthermore, PR should be studied in the fundamental scientific research and theoretical framework of business economics. However, the context will be weakened, as this phenomenon will mainly be seen in relation to an overall economic goal.

For the purposes of this study, PR is investigated from two theoretical frameworks, namely an economic and management perspective that addresses

the value of PR, as well as a sociological perspective, addressing the issue of societal legitimacy and social order. This decision was based on the following two aspects. Firstly, it is via social sciences theories that economic and management theory can gain practical relevance for everyday application (Vercic & Grunig, 1995:2). Many would argue that economics is a social science but in this study the focus in this perspective was on the economic value that PR can contribute to an organisation. Secondly, in an increasingly differentiated society, social responsibility is being institutionalised in order to ensure social order (Holmström, 2000).

**Table 2.1 Meta-theoretical framework for this study**

<b>META-THEORY</b>	Social sciences Economic and management sciences	
<b>DOMAIN</b>	PR	Sociology
<b>PARADIGM</b>	Strategic PR	
<b>THEORIES</b>	Models theory Roles theory	Sociological theory of PR Reflective PR
<b>MAJOR CONCEPT</b>	Practice of PR	
	<b>CONCEPT 1</b>	<b>CONCEPT 2</b>
	Models	Roles
	<b>CONSTRUCTS (1)</b>	<b>CONSTRUCTS (2)</b>
	Press agency	Technician
	Public information	Manager
	Two-way asymmetrical	Strategist
	Two-way symmetrical	
	Reflective paradigm	

### 2.3 WORLDVIEWS AND PARADIGMS

The most popular use of the word in the context of a ‘thought pattern’ was by Thomas Kuhn (1962) in the book titled ‘*The structure of scientific revolutions*’ where this term is used to describe a set of practices in science. According to Grunig in Botan & Hazleton (1989:24), a paradigm can also be referred to as a scientific world-view. A scientific world-view can be defined as “a set of shared basic beliefs about how researchers view that which they study” (Du Plooy, 2001:19). It is important to note that this concept refers to a central idea,

shared by a number of theoretical approaches, providing a scientific framework for research (Jansen & Steinberg, 1991:7). Grunig (1992:34) refers to world-views as theories that can be used in order to understand and evaluate the different world-views that influence PR. Grunig continues by describing a world-view as a “*gestalt or mind-set that focuses the attention of a scientist primarily upon theories or observations that fall within that mind-set*”. This author therefore uses the term world-view as a synonym to paradigm. The importance of these explanations relates to the science of a particular field of study.

Hallahan (1993:200) identified seven paradigms that can be used to study the practice of PR. A short explanation of each follows:

- Process paradigm - PR should be assessed as a continuous set of routinised activities irrespective of the time frame.
- Plan or programme paradigm focuses PR practice on the part it plays in programmes and/or campaigns. These activities are self-contained and focus on the output efforts where the objectives, tactics and strategies are emphasised.
- Communication/ practice style paradigm provides a framework of consistency with accepted communications principles and PR is evaluated through the efforts and not the results.
- Organisational/ managerial effectiveness paradigm emphasises PR as a function aligning with the organisation's expectations. Furthermore, PR focuses on the development of effective working relationships with the organisation.
- Behavioural paradigm focuses PR practice on persuading target audiences to buy, invest, donate, work or vote in the way the organisation would like them to act.
- Social problems paradigm emphasises PR practice by evaluating how practitioners deal with power relationships in society in the attempt to influence the organisation and institutions on how to behave.

- Systems paradigm focuses on PR practice by referring to the inputs and outputs designed to reduce conflict and build agreement between the organisation and its stakeholders.

These paradigms provide a framework for researchers to study the practice of PR. An explanation of the paradigms used in this study is necessary in order to scientifically direct this study. The following section will explain what the author understands under the term paradigm. This will provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for this study.

Grunig & Hunt (1984) identified and described a set of values and a broad pattern of behaviour taken by PR practitioners in the four models classification of PR practice. Initially two variables, namely direction and purpose, were identified underlying these models of PR (Grunig, 1992:289). Steyn (2003:74) is of the opinion that although these models of PR practice are referred to as world-views it can also be regarded as scientific world-views or paradigms since research traditions have been applied to each of them and they have directed and guided numerous research studies.

The practitioner roles can be explained as abstractions of everyday activities or behaviour patterns of individuals in an organisation. Research conducted on the roles of PR practitioners provided an important understanding in terms of the function of the practice of PR. The roles are the link to all the concepts affecting the success of the practitioners, focusing on the functions, organisational structures, processes and the relationship of the organisation with the environment (Dozier in Grunig, 1992:327). Steyn (2003) again mentions that although these roles are referred to as world-views they can also be regarded as scientific world-views or paradigms, since research traditions have been applied to each of them and they have directed and guided numerous research studies.



Social scientists have agreed that research in PR is important in order to describe (looking at processes, situations or phenomenon's), explain (why something happens and what the causes and effects are) and predict (what will happen if we do or do not do something) PR. Each of these types of research will increase the understanding of people, society and the world (Pavlik, 1987:15). As PR is an applied social science, the question might be asked if the term paradigm can legitimately be used in this context. Kuhn expressed his doubt as to whether any social science can actually be inherently paradigmatic (Hallahan, 1993:199). According to Steyn (2003:73) the models and roles of PR regarded as world-views can be regarded as pre-paradigms since

*“certain research traditions are relevant and commonly applied to each of them”.*

In this study, PR will be explored and empirically tested from three levels, focusing on the strategic contribution of PR. From a macro-level, the question: *“what role does PR play in society”*, will be posed, focusing on social systems, social responsibilities and society as a whole (Grunig, 1992:51; Hallahan, 1993:198). This question can also be cast on a meso-level, focusing on the purpose of a PR department within an organisation, and lastly, on the micro-level focusing on the function or the role of the PR practitioner. All these various levels are interrelated and influences the way in which PR is practiced but also directly impacts on the appropriateness of the research paradigms (Hallahan, 1993:198). For the purposes of this study, the researcher views the models and roles of PR as PR paradigms.

#### **2.4 PR: MACRO-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE**

The most complex social system, society, consists of clusters of functional systems. As society becomes more complex and differentiated, social trust becomes more important for interactions and relationships. Systems learn to understand themselves through reflection. This is done through the system observing its environment and developing boundaries, which coordinate

mechanisms to assist in the decision-making process. The process of reciprocal reflection is therefore used to create self-understanding, which is necessary to build trust. The motive is thus to secure the system's own autonomy and interact with other systems, thus ensuring independence as well as interdependence (Holmström, 1997:33).

When PR is therefore analysed from a reflective perspective, it is primarily seen as a strategic process, viewing an organisation from a societal or "outside" view. The "public" perspective of organisations is concerned with organisational behaviour (reflectivity) and societal legitimacy (Olasky in Van Ruler & Vercic, 2003:12). Communication within the public domain therefore influences the legitimacy of an organisation. This type of communication takes place through the use of the public communication system. This system refers to the mass media, which links social systems to one another and therefore develops relationships. These relationships, however, are focused on the meanings, codes and logics of the social system and are not necessarily focused on the institutions. Therefore, the particular type of stakeholder that PR serves and the relationship it has with them does not define the PR activities. It is really focused on the meaning, code and logic it conveys. Consequently, the interaction amongst various social systems, through the public communication system, builds relationships, which are constituted by the symbolic medium of social responsibility. The regulation of social order has therefore changed from the law to that of social responsibility. For this reason, owing to the great concern PR has for social responsibility, PR has an important role to play in increasing the trust of the interaction amongst social systems (Holmström, 1996:96; Holmström, 1997:31).

## **2.5 PR WORLDVIEWS: MESO-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE**

A world-view focuses the thoughts of the researcher only on theories and hypotheses that make sense to him/her within his/her particular world-view,

which introduces subjectivity into the explanation of science (Grunig, 1992:35). World-views can be defined as

*“attitudes, beliefs, values or views of social reality characteristics of particular social groups”* (Du Plooy, 2001:26).

The way people think and the way they act are very closely related. World-views result in certain behaviours because people's actions are explained by their ideas (Kearney, 1984 & Morgan, 1986 in Grunig, 1992:37). A world-view cannot be tested directly but the theories and hypotheses within the world-view can be tested. Competing world-views can be compared by neutral direct observations or through indirect observations based on non-controversial background information or theories (Suppe, 1977 & Shapere, 1984 in Grunig, 1992:37).

Grunig (1976) started investigating PR as a dependent variable to be explained instead of an independent variable to be described, where he identified two patterns of PR practice. These two patterns were described as synchronic and diachronic PR using Thayer's (1968) types of communication. In 1984, Grunig replaced these two terms, as it did not accurately describe the purpose conceptualised by the author. The terms were replaced with asymmetrical and symmetrical. These terms described the purpose of PR striving for balanced rather than unbalanced communication effect. The presuppositions underlying asymmetrical and symmetrical communication were manifested in the four models of PR practice. These models were used to describe the historical development of PR in the United States as well as a set of ideal types that described ways in which PR can be practiced (Grunig & Grunig, 1992:287; Grunig, Past, present and future:1-3).

The most influential part of PR literature, defined in terms of organisational behaviour, has been Grunig's definition of the two-way symmetric model for PR. This literature implies that proper PR performance cannot occur until this symbiotic model of performance has been achieved. The symmetrical model of PR leads to understanding and not persuasion or manipulation. The

identification of ethical PR presuppositions leads to the ability to identify the achievement of PR not as performance but as social behaviour. This is what this paradigm broadly suggests (Sharpe, 2000:348). Initially, Grunig & Hunt (1984) identified two variables underlying the four models of PR, namely direction, referring to the extent to which a model is one-way or two-way, and purpose, referring to whether the model is asymmetrical or symmetrical (Grunig, 1992:289).

## **2.6 PR ROLES: MICRO-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE**

Roles refer to the everyday activities of PR practitioners. The function of PR, according to Broom (1986:2), is

*“gathering, assimilating, interpreting and disseminating intelligence about the environment”.*

It is the link to a network of concepts influencing practitioners, the structure and processes of the function of PR within an organisation, as well as linking the organisational capacities, to interact with the environments. There is thus a strong empirical linkage as well as a theoretical expectation that the role and the purpose (models) of PR go hand in hand, even though the practitioners' role refers to the micro (practitioner) level of analysis and, as mentioned before, the models refer to the meso (organisational) level as well as on a macro-level of analysis (Dozier in Grunig, 1992:327-345). This study will attempt to empirically prove that there is a correlation between the purpose (models) and the roles (activities) of PR.

Newsom, Turk & Kruckeberg (1996:4) describe the function and/or role of PR practice by using the following ten principles:

- PR deals with reality, not false fronts. Conscientiously planned programmes that put the public interest in the forefront are the basis of sound PR policy.

- PR is a service-orientated profession in which public interest, not personal reward, should be the primary consideration.
- PR practitioners must go to the public to seek support for programmes and policies, public interest is the central criterion by which programmes and policies should be selected.
- PR practitioners reach many publics through the mass media, which are the public channels of communication; the integrity of these channels must be preserved.
- PR practitioners act as the intermediaries between organisations and their publics and they must be effective communicators - conveying information back and forth until understanding is reached.
- PR practitioners expedite two-way communication and are responsible for the extensive use of scientific public opinion research.
- To understand what their publics are saying and to reach them effectively, PR practitioners must employ the social sciences - psychology, sociology, social psychology, public opinion, communications study and semantics.
- PR practitioners must adapt the work of other, related disciplines, including learning theory and other psychology theories, sociology, political science, economics and history. Thus the PR field requires multidisciplinary applications.
- PR practitioners are obligated to explain issues to the public before these problems become crises.
- PR practitioners should be measured by only one standard: ethical performance.

Newsom *et al* (1996:4) are of the opinion that the PR practitioner can be viewed as an intermediary between the organisation being represented and all the publics of that particular organisation. The responsibilities of this individual include both that of the organisation and those of the various publics. The complexity of the role of the PR practitioner prompted the PR Society of America (PRSA) to define 14 activities generally associated with PR. These are publicity, communication, public affairs, issues management, government relations, financial PR, community relations, industry relations, minority relations, advertising, press agency, promotion, media relations and propaganda (Newsom *et al*, 1996:4).

## **2.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY**

This section is devoted to the explanation of the various theoretical frameworks used in this study, to support the study's aim. The theoretical framework is essential as this is the foundation for the study in terms of the way in which PR will be described.

### **2.7.1 Systems theory**

Ludwig von Bertalanffy who established the field of study known as the general systems theory as it is known today best codified this theory (Littlejohn, 1999:41). According to Angelopulo in Lubbe & Puth (1994:41), the systems theory is a scientific approach and not a theory, which originated between the two World Wars. This theory was found to be applicable to many different disciplines. The eclectic nature of the theory led to a disparity in the constructs attributed to this theory because these theories originated in applied science; the theories emphasised the importance of equilibrium, balance and interdependence that construct society. Society is usually regarded as an integral whole, and the various subsystems work together to keep the whole in balance. The system's primary function is to maintain itself, therefore the interactions of the system (mechanical, organic and social) and the environment, ultimately defines the system (Mersham *et al*, 1995:47).

There are three main systems perspectives that usually apply in a business context – mechanistic (closed), organic and adaptive (open systems). All three provide PR with valuable insights (Mersham *et al*, 1995:47; Gregory, 1999:267).

### **2.7.1.1 Open and closed systems**

One of the first distinctions made by systems theorists was between open and closed systems. Open systems exchange energy, material and information with systems in their environments. Closed systems seal their boundaries and do not exchange energy with their environment (Spicer, 1997:57; Gregory, 1999:267).

The exchange of inputs and outputs through boundaries, allowing energy and/or information to pass through, is an explanation of open system. It adjusts and adapts to counteract or accommodate environmental variations. A closed system, however, does not allow any energy or information through to its environment. It therefore does not adapt to external change and eventually disintegrates. This type of system is concerned with the internal work of an organisation. The ultimate goal of the system is to survive and therefore interaction with the environment is necessary to maintain balance (Gregory, 1999:67; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000:234).

An organisation can be viewed from a systems perspective. An organisation as a whole is composed of interrelated subparts and therefore any single change in a subsystem will affect the entire system. Organisations exist in dynamic environments where it needs to modify its internal processes and restructure itself in response to the changing environment. Open systems adapt to accommodate environmental changes and therefore usually affect other units of the organisation as well as the whole system, which is responsive to changes in the environment. The key elements of open systems, according to Katz & Khan in Gregory (1999:267), are input, throughput, output,

interdependence, transactional relationship with the environment and boundaries (Cutlip *et al*, 2000:234).

Systems receive inputs from the environment that affect its equilibrium and ultimately have an effect on the system's goal. These environmental inputs are often a reaction to a system's outputs. This provides feedback within the system in order to adjust the structure and process of the system so as to reach equilibrium (Cutlip *et al*, 2000:234).

The focus of systems thinking is on the interaction between the parts. An open system develops an inner dynamic by means of an exchange process with its environment. This system can change its state when its environment changes. This can be done without having to completely change the system's structure. Systems therefore control their inner state by their own inner dynamics. An important principle and prerequisite for the closure of the self-creation system is therefore its openness (Holmström, 1996:53).

### **2.7.1.2 The value of systems thinking to PR**

Applying these concepts to PR, Grunig & Hunt (1984) are of the opinion that the press agency or publicity PR models operate as if they were in a closed system. Cutlip *et al* (2000:238) contends that closed systems react to outside events and therefore refer to reactive PR programmes. Buckley in Gregory (1999:268) is of the opinion that closed systems force a PR practitioner towards a technical role, implementing the decisions made by the dominant coalition. The two-way symmetrical model focuses on shared meaning, which will have behavioural and organisational consequences. In order for PR practitioners to apply the open systems approach, environmental scanning is essential so as to anticipate changes in the environment. These changes will influence the organisations and the relationships with the stakeholder groups. Cutlip *et al* (2000:239) contends that open systems use information gathered in order to make adjustments and refer to this as proactive PR programmes. Bell & Bell in



Gregory (1999:269) conclude that open systems enable PR practitioners to fulfil a management role, participating in decision making.

According to Spicer (1997:57), the systems theory is important for PR based on three reasons:

- Organisations were previously very concerned with studying an organisation by largely focusing on the internal workings of the organisation. The systems theory moved this locus to a focus on the interdependence of an organisation and its environment.
- The systems theory guides research and theorising in scientific communities. This theory is very prominent in the PR definitions and the understanding of PR is encapsulated by an emerging organisational view of the field through the general systems theory (Grunig, 1992:71; Pavlik, 1987 in Spicer (1997:58). PR concepts such as boundary-spanning activities and adaptation to the environment reflect a general systems theory approach to PR.
- The systems theory serves as a useful heuristic tool in assisting the PR function to conceptualise the complex nature of organisational interdependencies. It also provides a framework for thinking about aspects of importance in understanding organisational PR decision making and effectiveness. This type of thinking provides individuals with an understanding of the world as an interconnected whole.

Buckley in Gregory (1999:273) embraced the adaptive model where organisations are invited to engage with stakeholders, to create a process of shared meaning, which will change the organisation's current form. The organisation is part of a whole system which is interdependent and where the relationships between the organisation and its environment are subject to change.

According to Dozier in Grunig (1992:352) the definitions based on the systems theory address various roles that the PR function needs to fulfil. The systems theory provides an understanding of the importance of adapting to the increasingly unstable and threatening environments organisations function in. In the conceptualisation of the strategic role of the PR manager, Steyn (2001:24) concludes that the systems theory provides an ideal approach for the development of the strategist role. The author supports this statement by explaining that the various elements of the open systems mechanism emphasises the process input, throughput, output and feedback through binding the external and the internal environment with the organisation.

### **2.7.1.3 The relevance of systems thinking to this study**

When referring to the macro-level, the globe is viewed as a system influenced by its interaction with the different parts as well as its environment. Africa, being a part of the globe, therefore influences the equilibrium of the greater system, the globe. From an organisational perspective the function of PR and the level at which it is performing will influence the bigger system, namely the organisation, but also the continent of Africa. This will ultimately also have effects on the globe. The level at which the practitioners perform their activities will influence the success of the PR department. This will influence the organisation that in turn will influence the continent and ultimately the globe as a whole. It is clear that the interdependency of the different levels at which PR operates influences the bigger system, the globe. Systems thinking has influenced the study in terms of a conceptual, theoretical as well as empirical framework.

### **2.7.2 Social systems theory based on Luhmann's work**

One of the most prominent representatives of the systems-theoretic view of society is Luhmann. In his thesis on autopoiesis (Greek word for self-creation), systems theory was developed into a theory on systems as networks of

*“self-organising, self-thematizing, self-legitimizing, self-reference communication”.*

Luhmann views society as an *“increasingly complex and differentiated cybernetic construction of self-creation”*, where social systems are grouped around their own meaning within a particular functional system. He further explains this functional character by means of systems boundary setting, *“how do systems maintain their boundaries”*, which is the objective of the social systems-theoretic theory (Holmström, 1996:7-9).

The systems theory, within the social sciences, has primarily been applied to social systems. According to Luhmann in Holmström (1996:56), when two or more individuals' actions are connected, a social system that separates itself from its environment is formed. Initially, these social systems are merely interaction systems but later can become more formalised into an organisational system. The most comprehensive social system is that of society.

Social systems isolate themselves from other systems and take on their own life, establishing a difference between the system and its environment. Systems therefore function simultaneously as open and closed systems. They change and adapt into closed self-referential processes requiring an amount of openness. This distinction is achieved through meaning, and meaning is created through communication. Communication is coordinated by means of codes. Within these codes meaning are found and the social systems in society are grouped around differentiated functional areas. The differentiation of functions, tasks and services into different systems is an effective division of labour, which is the foundation for the development and growth of modern societies (Holmström, 1996:53-57).

Systems therefore observe and evaluate their environment from their own logic and create an image of the world from their own perspective. The system thus reflects itself in relations to other systems and its environment in order to

produce self-understanding in relation to its environment. An identity is found in the specific function of the system as well as being an environment for other systems. Therefore, the maintenance of social systems' boundaries is central to this theory. Social systems are thus clustered in functional systems with their respective symbolic communication mediums (Holmström, 1996:57, 1997:33 & 2001:46).

### **2.7.2.1 The value of social systems thinking to PR**

The ultimate objective of reflection is to generate social trust. As society becomes more complex and differentiated, social trust is a prerequisite for interaction between social systems, which is cognitive and anchored in the logic of the system. The role that PR practitioners need to fulfil in strengthening this trust between the systems is to encode and decode images that can be used in the reciprocal reflection in the social system. This is done via the public communication system and is coordinated through the medium of social responsibility. Reflective PR emphasises the importance of public trust and legitimacy for organisations. As social responsibility becomes the regulating mechanism for social order, PR practitioners influence the coordination of social actions (Holmström, 1996:52).

### **2.7.2.2 The relevance of social systems thinking to this study**

African societies are becoming more complex as they are simultaneously confronted with global developments and cultural fundamentals of the African people. Africa is currently in a state of transformation and therefore it is important to continually reflect on the environment as well as the behaviour in order to understand and to build trust. Most African countries have celebrated their fortieth year of independence. The decolonisation of African countries has been a great challenge to these countries, as they had to define what their values are and how this can be integrated in order to look after the well being of the people. Therefore the political, economic and social issues have been

shaping factors in terms of not only looking after the people but also effectively functioning and contributing to the continent. Many multinationals have entered the borders of the African continent, and this has also provided these countries with further paradoxes. The nature of these organisations has been that of a post-modern way of thinking, again posing problems to the African people. Africa had to adapt very quickly and it is assumed that the countries had to skip a few phases in the development of societies. Therefore, in this study the social systems theory is relevant as the assumption is made that the African people have had to reflect on their own behaviour in amongst all these macro-developments. The social systems theory provides a framework for the conceptual, theoretical and empirical analysis of the practice of PR.

### **2.7.3 Excellence theory of PR**

The first general theory of PR is a result of a project named the Excellence Study, also referred to as the Excellence Theory, conducted by James Grunig. In the Excellence Study the researchers attempted to answer three critical questions, namely "*how, why and to what extent does communication affect the achievement of organisational objectives*". These questions not only are of great importance in terms of theoretical interest but also for the practice of PR. The study was conducted in two stages, namely a literature or theoretical stage and an empirical stage. The result of this theory is an integration of the many theories in the literature of various fields such as communication, PR, management, organisational psychology and sociology, social and cognitive psychology, feminist studies, political science, decision making and culture focused on measuring the ideal of communication excellence (Grunig, 1992:1-2).

The excellence theory is a normative theory aimed at providing an idealistic framework of how PR practice should be practiced in order to serve public interest. The excellence in PR describes the ideal state in which knowledgeable communicators seek symmetrical relations through the

management of communication with key stakeholders (Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995). On a philosophical level, symmetrical PR is more ethical and socially responsible as practitioners manage conflict. On a pragmatic level, literature shows that symmetrical PR programmes contribute to organisational effectiveness (Grunig, 1992:6-7).

The foundation of the excellence theory in PR is summarised in the two effectiveness questions:

*“when and why are efforts of communication practitioners effective?”* and  
*“how do organisations benefit from PR?”*.

Autonomy, interdependence and relationships reveal the contribution PR makes to organisational effectiveness. These three concepts are all interlinked, as PR practitioners need to manage the communication of various external and internal stakeholders that the organisation has relationships with. Relationships limit autonomy but in order for organisations to be effective, they must adapt, cooperate and interact with groups that might limit their autonomy. Organisations with good relationships are more effective as they have more freedom and more autonomy. Consequently, building relationships and managing the interdependence is the substance of PR (Grunig, Grunig, Ehling in Grunig, 1992:66-69).

### **2.7.3.1 The value of excellence theory to PR**

The contribution that PR makes to organisational effectiveness is the management of the organisations' independence by building and maintaining quality relationships with key stakeholders. This can only take place if PR functions at a management level and partakes in the decision making, by providing information about the environment of the organisation, the organisation itself and the relationships between the organisation and its environment (Grunig, 1992:11-12).

The empirical part of the excellence theory posed the excellent question:

*“how must PR be practiced and the communication function be organized for it to contribute the most to organizational effectiveness?”*

In order to answer this question, the focus falls on the “programme” level and how PR should be managed. Furthermore, the focus falls on the “departmental” level, explaining the characteristics of a department that manages communication in a particular way. At “organisational” level, organisations and their environments were researched in order to determine the conditions associated with excellent PR departments (Grunig, 1992:3).

According to Dozier, Grunig & Grunig (1995:4), the excellence study empirically found that PR excellence is universal across countries and types of organisations. The reason provided was that PR excellence involves knowledge that surpasses any public, organisational unit, industry, organisational type or national setting. Further findings referred to knowledge as being the base of a PR department, followed by a set of shared expectations between the PR manager and top management and lastly the organisational culture.

### **2.7.3.2 The relevance of the excellence theory to this study**

The excellence study provided this study with a foundation for studying PR from a strategic perspective focusing on the programme, departmental, organisational and economic level. This foundation gave this study direction to study Africa in context with all macro-environmental issues as well as referring to the changing nature of businesses in societies. It is, however, essential to understand African business and therefore a discussion on the African organisation is essential. Owing to the fact that so little is known about the African PR practitioner, the excellence study’s theoretical framework provided this study with the foundation. The findings of the excellence study guided this study from a theoretical as well as an empirical perspective. In order to better

understand African PR, the knowledge base as well as the importance of the effect of world-views on PR is essential in this study.

## **2.8 CONCLUSION**

The description of African PR will be based on the theoretical explanation of the practice of PR discussed in this chapter. These are the models and roles of PR practice. The chapter commenced with a brief description of PR on a macro-level, focusing on society, thereafter referring to the meso (organisational) and micro (practitioner) level. All three these levels will be utilised in the theoretical and empirical part of the study in order to describe the practice of PR in Africa.

The theoretical framework of the systems theory provides a foundation, supporting the analysis of a continent functioning in a very dynamic environment. This frame of reference provides the continent with an understanding that in order to fulfil the ultimate role of a system, which is to survive, constant change and adaptation are needed within the system. The systems theory was also applied to the social sciences, specifically the social systems theory, which focuses on the complexity of society as the unit of analysis. The emphasis here is focused on social trust as a prerequisite for interaction between social systems. The reflective task of PR is to reflect and express images that can be used in the reciprocal reflection in the social system, in order to create self-understanding.

The excellence theory of PR focuses on communication effectiveness providing a normative model of how excellent PR should be practiced. In order to contribute to the overall effectiveness of an organisation it is necessary to practice excellent PR, which is summarised in the symmetrical approach to communication. PR contribution to effectiveness is the building, maintaining and managing of quality relationships with stakeholders. This is only possible if PR functions at a management level. A few aspects contribute to the excellence of PR practice, namely knowledge as a base of the department,



shared expectations between the practitioner and top management, and lastly organisational culture.

In Africa, one cannot speak about business and economic factors and ignore the impact on a societal level. For this reason, it is critical to refer to the macro-environmental issues as these issues influence life in general. This discussion will continue in Chapter 4.

The next chapter will however focus on the main concept of this study, namely the practice of PR. This chapter will define the practice of PR through the models and roles of the practice of PR. These concepts will be theoretically explored in the attempt to assess the current most advanced level of development for the practice of PR.