

# **An Analysis of the Strengths and Weaknesses of Applying James' (2014) Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations**

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The concept of positioning 'something' (be that a person, product, or a social construct) has been shown to be a significant facet of contemporary public relations practice. Nonetheless, how positioning is actually undertaken remains a vague concept that is rarely explicated, with public relations practitioners mostly referring to positioning from a marketing perspective. In this article, I present an evaluation of James' Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations (James, 2014) as a model for examining and explaining public relations positioning. James' Framework is based on Positioning Theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), a social constructionist approach to understanding why people say and do certain things in their interactions with others. I show that James' (2014) conceptualisation of Positioning Theory potentially provides answers in terms of answering a key problematic of public relations scholarship; that is, how is strategic intent conceptualised in public relations theory and what role does power play in such practices? But while James' (2014) Framework has obvious merit in terms of increasing understanding of strategic positioning in public relations, particularly in relation to issues of power and legitimacy, there were some identified

shortcomings with the Framework as it stands. Principally, this is that the Framework is failing to fully capture the dynamism of positioning as it has been more traditionally conceptualised. Given this, I argue that more research is needed to determine how, or if, James' (2014) Framework requires further adaptation. This article will be of interest to positioning theorists and public relations scholars alike - contributing to both wider discussions of positioning in public relations as well as scholarship within Positioning Theory.

**KEYWORDS:** positioning theory, public relations; strategic positioning

## **INTRODUCTION**

The term 'position' has been widely referred to in social and psychological writing (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 1) and is especially prevalent in the marketing literature (James, 2010, 2014). From a marketing perspective, positioning is primarily concerned with the '4 P's' of product, place, price and promotion, and whereby positioning something (be it a product, service or business) refers to the "act of designing a company's offerings and image so they occupy a meaningful and distinctive competitive position in the customer's mind" (Kotler, 1995, p. 295). Several studies have also demonstrated that positioning is a significant aspect of public relations practice (see for example, Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler & Meckel 2009; James 2009; Motion, 1997; Motion & Doolin, 2007), and positioning is frequently referred to in the public relations academic literature (see for example, Berger, 1999; Beurer-Zuellig, Fieseler & Meckel 2009; Fitch, James & Motion, 2015; Hallahan, 1999; Heath, Motion & Leitch, 2009; James 2009, 2010, 2014; Leitch & Motion, 2010; Moffitt, 1992; Motion 1997, 2000, 2005; Motion & Doolin, 2007; Motion & Leitch, 1996, 2007; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Roper 2005, 2012; Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009, 2011; Schoenberger-Orgad & McKie, 2005; Tsetsura, 2014; Wang, 2007; Wu, 2007; Zompetti & Moffitt, 2009). Yet, how positioning is actually undertaken in these contexts is rarely explicated (James, 2014), with many public

relations scholars drawing on marketing definitions and concepts of positioning.

At issue with marketing approaches is that while there is often an overlap between public relations and marketing, and marketing conceptions of positioning may at times be applicable to public relations, this is not always the case (James, 2014). Finding that the “concept of position had not been explored thoroughly outside of the marketing discipline” (James, 2014, p. 17), James (2014) proposed a more strategic conception of positioning in public relations contexts; one that facilitates understanding in terms of how organisations “wield and concede power” and provide “insights into the way elements of practice such as language use and stakeholder engagement come together” to shape meaning-making in society (p. 16). By this definition, instead of focusing on how to influence behaviour (as in marketing approaches), the focus is on how public relations practitioners work to discursively construct knowledge and belief systems (James, 2014).

James first presented a ‘provisional’ positioning framework for public relations in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* in 2011. This work was based on positioning theory as conceptualized by Rom Harré and colleagues (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003a; Harré & van Langenhove, 1991, 1999) and is referred to as a discursive positioning approach (Zerfass, 2008). Specifically, positioning theory is about ‘how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others’ (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010: p. 2), and is based on the central idea of a positioning triad of position, speech act/action, and storylines that are enacted within social episodes. The triad must maintain ‘dynamic stability’ in order for effective positioning to be achieved (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999, p. 10); a premise James (2014) argues likewise underpins the Positioning Triangle Domain within her Framework. Where James (2014) Framework differs is that in constructing a framework specifically applicable for public relations, James formed a domain around the positioning triad consisting of position, speech act/action and storylines, and then added three additional domains. These are: the Strategic Pre-positioning Domain; the Positioning Type Domain; and the Positioning Goal Domain.

These additional domains can be seen to relate to strategic communication and public relations, especially drawing on James’ (2009) own work on strategic intent. James (2014, p. 6) explains that,

When someone, or an organization, takes a position on something it opens up possibilities for action. However, taking a position can also close down options for action. Positioning theory provides a way to tease all this out as it is concerned with the way the actions of participants in social interactions are constrained by an understood framework of rights, duties and obligations, a moral order (Tan and Moghaddam, 1999). It can serve to define the nature of constraints and possibilities for participants in public relations episodes and assist in both researching past practice and in future program design. It can provide a method for analysis as entities establish, maintain and even transform their relationships (Tan and Moghaddam, 1999). Applying positioning theory to public relations provides a new way to practice strategic public relations that aligns with the increasing complexity of the twenty-first century.

Notwithstanding these insights, Positioning Theory also has as its main purpose the examination of how rights and duties to a) say and do certain things, and b) to refrain from saying and doing certain things, are distributed among a group of people through discourse, moment by moment (Harré, 2012). Interestingly, James “provisional” (2011, p. 112) Framework did not address this key tenet in any detail, stating “it was beyond the scope” of her “initial” work. She did however highlight that how “parties to positioning efforts have rights and duties which are jointly constituted through engaging in discursive practices” offered “possibilities for an exploration of the ethical dimensions of positioning in public relations” and recommended this as an area that warranted future research. Moreover, despite James’ book (2014) devoting an entire chapter to issues of power, rights and duties in public relations positioning, her Framework as presented in her book failed to overtly incorporate such areas; areas which are foundational to both public relations and positioning theory.

In 2016, researchers Zerfass, Verčič and Wiesenberg published an academic article entitled “Managing CEO communication and positioning: A cross-national study among corporate communication leaders” in the *Journal of Communication Management*. In their

article, the authors stated that James (2014) had “combined positioning theory and strategic communication in a thought-provoking book” but proceeded to state that James had focused “on framing theory and how to position (i.e. frame) topics and situations in public discourses”. Although James (2014) stated that she saw her book as “a catalyst to beginning a wider discussion of intentional strategic positioning in public relations” and that it “was never intended to be a definitive treatise on the subject” (p. 206), the critique offered by these esteemed scholars cannot be disregarded. In this article, as part of such wider discussions of positioning in public relations, I report on a study that specifically examined the strengths and weaknesses of James’ Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations, as presented and subsequently explained and demonstrated in James’ 2014 book.

## **FRAMEWORKS: THEIR USE IN PR/STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION RESEARCH**

One way of making sense of an area’s complexity is to apply conceptual or meta-frameworks. Although the terms ‘model’, ‘theory’ and ‘framework’ are often used interchangeably, theories are usually “a denser, logically coherent set of constructs and relationships that have predictive capability and therefore may be translated into testable hypotheses to predict or explain a certain phenomenon” (Urquhart, Sergeant & Grunfeld, 2013, p. 49). Models differ by typically being narrower in scope and “normally depict specific situations” (Urquhart, et al, 2013, p. 49). Frameworks differ again by (sometimes) drawing on multiple theories, and by identifying “a set of factors and relationships among those factors” (Urquhart, et al, 2013, p. 49). These factors are then examined to gain an understanding and to help “explain a phenomenon” (Urquhart, et al, 2013, p. 49). When clearly articulated, conceptual frameworks have the potential to scaffold research and assist researchers “to make meaning of subsequent findings” (Smythe, 2004, p. 168) and this was the approach taken by James (2014).

In the public relations literature, such overarching or meta-frameworks can be broadly conceptualised as falling within either a functionalist, symbolic/interpretative or discursive framework. The distinctions between these frameworks are not hard-edged and there are theories that could be encapsulated within two or more frameworks. Various scholars have also applied different terms or demarcated frameworks applying different concepts or theoretical

underpinnings (see, for example Macnamara, 2016; Grunig, 2009). Functionalist frameworks typically focus on the consequences of communication rather than the communication process itself and are often conceptualised within a systems theory approach. From this perspective organisations are viewed metaphorically as organisms, made up of various subsystems, that must be ‘open’ and interact dynamically with their environments to survive. Legitimacy is thus a core concern, as an organisation must be perceived as possessing legitimacy if they are to successfully garner the resources upon which their survival depends. However, the evidence suggests that functionalist/systems theory approaches fail to address the dynamism of public relations, and efforts “to tightly control messages and meaning as a way of engineering defined outcomes for organisations no longer works, if it ever did” (James, 2014, p. 24).

Symbolic or interpretative frameworks are those that view the role of public relations as being “designed to build relationships with stakeholders” (Grunig, 2009, p. 9). This attitude towards publics is what most differentiates functionalist from co-creational perspectives, and whereby rather than focusing on the organisation’s mission, adopting a co-creational stance prioritises and “values the relationship between an organization and its publics” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 653). Nevertheless, implementing this approach within organisations is not straightforward. Davidson (2016) argues that dialogic approaches not only have “vastly different starting points and epistemological assumptions” (p. 145), but management often fails to see the economic merits of this approach. The upshot is that public relations practitioners often find they are confined in terms of their ability to implement dialogic and co-creational approaches in practice, with relationship building through dialogue largely remaining an ideal rather than something that is routinely practiced.

Criticisms of both dialogic and functionalist frameworks have led to other frameworks being considered. Discursive frameworks differ by encouraging an examination of power “and the ongoing work by public relations practitioners to legitimate truth claims within discourse contexts” (Leitch & Motion, 2010, p. 103). Encompassing a range of approaches, including rhetorical, critical and post-structural perspectives, the shared concern within discursive frameworks is with persuasive discourses that privilege particular meanings over others, and whereby public relations is conceptualised as a “discourse practice with power effects” (Motion & Leitch, 2007, p. 263). According to this view public relations is held as being a significant

social force, shaping (and some might argue manipulating) how people understand situations to be. That being so, as Hallahan (1999) argues, “none of these approaches represents a comprehensive foundation for fully understanding the processes or consequences of public relations” (p. 205). This, then, is where James’ (2010, 2011, 2014) conceptualisation of Positioning Theory potentially provides answers in terms of answering a key problematic of public relations scholarship; that is, how is strategic intent conceptualised in public relations theory and what role does power play in such practices?

## **POSITIONING THEORY OVERVIEW**

The relevance of a Positioning Theory approach for public relations and strategic communication opens up many more possibilities than current limited approaches to positioning, and it has been suggested that it could be used as a basic theory for communication management and marketing communication (Zerfass, 2008). A position itself is seen in the broadest terms as being a ‘cluster of rights and duties that limits the repertoire of possible social acts available to a person or person-like entity (such as a corporation) as so positioned’ (Moghaddam, Harré & Lee, 2008, p. 294). According to Harré and Moghaddam (2003), positioning constitutes the actions taken to achieve a position; a point from which the possibilities for action are established, or in some cases denied. This idea resonates with public relations practice in that not all organisations are able to position themselves or others in particular ways, or at particular times; thus, a position defines what is ‘socially possible without incurring reprobation or punishment’ (Louis, 2008, p. 22). James (2014, p. 207) drew on such definitions and stated that a public relations position is:

A point of intentional representation discursively constructed for the purposes of achieving an intended outcome, and from where possibilities for action are established, or in some cases denied, in terms of the local moral order/s wherein the public relations activity is taking place. Positioning is comprised of those actions taken to achieve the position.

Notable in this definition is James’ focus on the notion of “from where possibilities for action are established, or in some cases denied, in terms of the local moral order/s wherein the

public relations activity is taking place” (2014, p. 207) as this concept places the positioning theory concept of rights and duties to act at the epicentre of the positioning episode.

This, then, is the key point of differentiation from other ways in which positioning in public relations has been defined, for example as defined by Zerfass, Verčič and Wiesenberg (2016) wherein,

In communication science, positioning is “an essential concept in communication management, public relations and marketing communication. The process of positioning includes identifying, defining and managing the perception relevant audiences have of a particular organization, product, person or idea” (Zerfass, 2008, p. 3822).

A further strength of Positioning Theory is that it accounts for “social flux” (Boxer, 2003, p. 260) and this has relevance for public relations when developing positioning strategies, because it facilitates an examination of the social dynamics in which positioning takes place. From a public relations perspective, an understanding of these factors can be seen to provide insights into how ideology might frame assumptions and perceptions. Such an understanding would also necessarily incorporate consideration of the strategy underpinning such positioning efforts. Positioning theorists Moghaddam, Harré and Lee (2008) propose that positioning can be considered strategic when rights and duties are attributed “to the advantage of the person” performing the positioning acts (p. 294). That being said, many Positioning Theory analyses don't specifically discuss positioning in terms of having a pre-determined strategy, and this is where James' (2010, 2011, 2014) and Wise and James (2013) work has perhaps been most perceptive. James has shown how positioning strategies are deployed to discursively construct points “of intentional representation” (James, 2014, p. 89) and whereby failure to adhere to the local moral order may result in entities not being attributed the rights to take particular positions, leading ultimately to a lack of legitimacy for the entities involved (Wise & James, 2013).



## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

What follows is a description of the findings with supporting details, categorised according to each of the four domains of James' (2014) Framework for Positioning in Public Relations, those being:

1. the Positioning Triangle Domain consisting of position, speech act/action and storylines;
2. the Strategic Pre-positioning Domain;
3. the Positioning Type Domain; and,
4. the Positioning Goal Domain.

In keeping with this integrated approach, I have collapsed the findings to answer if James' Framework could be improved upon and, if so, how this might be undertaken. In addition, I have drawn heavily on the other chapters in James' (2014) book that examines the application of Positioning Theory to public relations in detail.

### **1. Positioning Triangle Domain**

#### ***1.1 Positioning Triangle Domain: Storyline Vertex***

One of the strengths of applying James' (2014) Framework as an analytical heuristic was found to be with applying the storyline vertex of the positioning triangle domain. From a public relations perspective storytelling is a legitimisation strategy yet currently, "the benefits of corporate storytelling as a calculated and deliberate stakeholder engagement strategy" are "under-theorised" in public relations scholarship (Gill, 2015, p. 664). James' development of Positioning Theory, and in particular her work on storytelling in public relations contexts, is valuable in this regard as it permits an analysis of storytelling as a legitimisation strategy, and it does so by also considering the context in which discourses are articulated, an area of public relations scholarship that is often overlooked (Leitch & Motion, 2010).

It also became evident as my analysis progressed that a weakness of James' (2014) Framework is that it is not self-evident how to analyse the storyline, positions and acts as they are

Papers on Social Representations, 28 (1), 8.1-8.27 (2019) [<http://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/index>] 8.9

narrated within a text (for example as in a speech transcript prepared by a public relations practitioner) as well as the storylines, acts and positions that are enacted “in real time through the act of telling” these narratives (Bartlett, 2008, p. 176 (for example as when a political leader reads the same speech transcript to an audience). Bartlett (2008) discusses the problem of addressing multiple contexts across different timescales arguing that,

In essence, a speaker is not free to take up any position they wish with regard to the evolving storyline; rather, each speaker can only adopt those positions to which they are entitled through their symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) as recognised by those present according to the subject matter and the setting. Moreover, this positioning will only be successful if the speaker is able to realise their social status through the appropriate linguistic means. To put it simply, speakers must use a style of language that makes clear their social standing, and this standing must carry currency with the audience in context, as must the various acts they perform. This brings in deeply-rooted structural constraints that are not apparent in the basic positioning triangle (pp. 169-170).

Given that each act of positioning occurs in a unique context, positioning over different timescales implies differences of contextual constraints and affordances, and things become complex and messy. This is especially the case when one considers that social actors may be operating over different timescales, and hence operating according to the strictures of different positioning triangles, simultaneously (Bartlett, 2008, p. 171). This suggests that without a way of coherently analysing positioning across time, as well as within contextually bound social episodes, the analysis overlooks the storylines that were enacted in the act of saying and doing, for example, in delivering a speech. This then overlooks the role of public relations in strategically arranging such events for the purposes of communicating key messages to targeted audiences. That said there is no “silver bullet” that “can provide a complete and coherent description and understanding of the complexities of contextualised social action” (Bartlett, 2008, p. 171) and this was understood within the context of evaluating James (2014) Framework.

Equally important is the question of whether framing can be conflated with positioning and vice versa. In public relations contexts, framing can be approached from a rhetorical perspective where the concern is with how messages are created using “key words, metaphors

and concepts in the text that encourages audiences to develop certain understandings of events or issues” (Howard-Williams, 2009, p. 30). According to Entman (1993), framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In addition to this rhetorical approach, framing can also be understood as “conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgments, and to draw inferences about the world around them” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 206). As a social constructionist approach to communication, it also draws on social interactionism and the idea that human behaviour results from our interaction with symbols to create meaning (Hallahan, 1999). It thus shares some similarities with Positioning Theory concepts of framing.

This relationship is evident, James (2014) argues, when people sometimes confuse the analysis of storylines with the analysis of frames. To distinguish between the two, and drawing on Hallahan (1999), James (2014) argues that in public relations, a frame is a process of inclusion, exclusion and “adding emphasis to certain elements” (p. 150) and that framing occurs within the context of storylines. Storylines “constitute the collection of narratives - what storylines are being used to frame the episode in certain ways” (James, 2014, p. 160). However, it is also feasible that narratives are, in turn, ‘framed’ whereby some aspects of a discourse are accentuated while others are downplayed or excluded altogether. There is also a complex relationship between framing as defined by Goffman (1968), and traditional approaches to Positioning Theory. This relationship is acknowledged by Davies and Harré (1990), and Harré and van Langenhove (1999), who agree there are connections between Goffman’s (1974) framing theory and the associated concept of a footing, with their concept of positioning.

A ‘frame’, as defined by Goffman (1974) refers to the principles of organisation (concepts and themes) that govern social events “and our subjective involvement in them” (p. 11). Definitions about the situation are then described and analysed in accordance with these principles (Goffman, 1974, p. 11). But while conceding that Goffman’s work “provides a powerful and mature sociology for the analysis of episodes” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 5), Harré and van Langenhove (1999) also argue that his analysis of interactions fails to focus “on

the idiosyncratic aspects of that interaction” (p. 5). What they are asserting is that what people do is understandable not only in terms of their particular roles in the episode, but also in terms of their shared history of interactions. A further criticism of Goffman’s (1974) framing theory is that it is overly static (Gordon, 2015, p. 336) and that Positioning Theory potentially offers more in terms of analysing framing in public relations contexts than other theories might offer. This is particularly relevant when the definition of a position, rather than as James (2014) has defined it as “a point of intentional representation” (p. 19), instead is conceptualised as being centred on a person or person-like entity. In these circumstances, entities are “assigned or refused a cluster of rights and duties to perform certain kinds of acts, thus constraining what someone, so positioned, can rightly do and say” (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 10). The fact that this definition, unlike James’ (2014) definition, relies on an entity with the agency to position themselves and others is more fully addressed in the discussion of the Positioning Triangle Domain: Position Vertex (1.1.2).

A further aspect of the Storyline Vertex that could be further clarified relates to differences between storylines and narratives. In public relations contexts, the terms ‘storyline’ and ‘narrative’ are often used interchangeably and “are synonymous concepts” (Kent, 2015, p. 482). Consequently, there is often some confusion between the two (Kent, 2015). In this study, similarly, there was a degree of confusion between how narratives and storylines are conceptualised by James (2014), as well as with how storylines are conceptualised from a more traditional Positioning Theory perspective (for example, as conceptualised by Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). This lack of clarity around storylines and narratives becomes even more muddled when key messages are added to the mix. Key messaging is an important aspect of public relations (see Hallahan, 1999; James, 2011, 2014; Mahoney, 2008; Pfau & Parrott, 1993) with James (2014) arguing that this a primary method of conveying an organisation’s story. According to Courtwright and Smudde (2010), key messages comprise two basic things: “a theme, thesis or slogan that is the single idea around which all communications revolve” and “copy points that serve as the basic proof or substance for detailed arguments that support the theme/thesis/slogan” (p. 66). Drawing on Courtwright and Smudde (2010) James (2014) proposes that ‘things’ (themes or slogans et cetera) are encapsulated in the positioning triangle domain (i.e. the speechact/action, storylines, position triad), and copy or proof points are the

‘things’ that ensue from narratives “told as result of invoking a specific storyline” (p. 134). However, in accepting this premise, allows for copy or proof points to be conceptualised as the various narratives that support key slogans, and this then raises further questions in terms of how a position, as currently defined by James (2014), is understood. This finding is also discussed in more detail in the discussion of the Positioning Triangle Domain: Position Vertex (1.1.2).

### ***1.2 Positioning Triangle Domain: Position Vertex***

The position vertex in James’ (2014) Framework incorporates the concept of local moral orders and this distinguishes this vertex from the Goal Domain of the framework. Local moral orders can be conceived as the rules imposed by society and its particular communication systems. However, despite the inclusion of this core Positioning Theory concept, applying the Position Vertex of the Positioning Triangle Domain, as defined by James (2014), remains complex when undertaking a positioning analysis. ‘Positions’ from a more traditional Positioning Theory perspective are dynamic discursive constructions that are in a constant state of flux as people, or people-like entities, adopt positions relative to one another within social episodes. As it stands, James’ (2014) concept of a position fails to fully account for this moment-to-moment dynamism, and the Position Vertex is less successful in terms of fully capturing the nuances of Positioning Theory as it is more traditionally understood.

The key issue seems to stem from an underpinning argument of James’ (2014) approach to Positioning Theory whereby ‘things’ - for example products, services or government policies - can be positioned in much the same way as persons or person-like entities. James (2014) argues that in adapting Positioning Theory to public relations, she drew on data and reports by public relations practitioners in which they reported how their work consisted of intentionally shifting their “client/organisation (or its service, idea, product, project etc.)” from the position it/they currently “occupied”, to one they wanted to “occupy, or assign to another” (p. 4). The merging of the positioning of things with people or people-like entities is also suggested in statements such as, “any organisation can decide it would like to position itself or one of its products, personnel or services anyway it likes” (James, 2014, p. 85). James (2014) further argues that “determining a

position for an organisation or one of its services, programs or products ... e.g. positioning the immunisation of babies as a positive thing to do” should be a relatively easy sell to parents in a “fairly straightforward environment” (p. 83). This proposition of things (services, programs or products et cetera) draws on the work of Ries and Trout (1981) who suggested that all ‘things’ were products that could be positioned in people’s minds (James, 2014, p. 20). Ries and Trout (1981) argued that positioning starts with products, and here they include “merchandise, a service, a company, an institution, or even a person” (p. 2). For Ries and Trout (1981), then, positioning is not what is done to a product but rather it is “what you do to the mind of a prospect. That is, you position the product in the mind of the prospect” (p. 2). In this sense, positioning something is more than a cosmetic ‘fix’ done to a product (for example new packaging or pricing to make it more enticing or appealing), but rather it is the act of making a product more marketable by connecting it with the pre-existing beliefs and cognitions of prospects. The only reality is what exists in people’s minds, and the aim of positioning in a marketing scenario is not to “create something new and different, but to manipulate what’s already up there in the mind, to retie the connections that already exist” (Ries & Trout, 1981, p. 5). However, whether this is the same as discursive positioning, as it is more traditionally understood from a Positioning Theory perspective, is less well-defined.

For example, while the immunisation campaign (above) could be viewed as an example of public relations positioning consisting of the execution of discourse devices to support key messaging and manipulating “what’s already up there in the mind, to retie the connections that already exist” (Ries & Trout, 2001, p. 5), this differs from how a ‘position’ is typically understood in Positioning Theory. From this perspective, a position consists of ways of speaking, thinking and acting (Slocum-Bradley, 2010a) and these ways are bound by rights and duties specific to social episodes. If one applies this premise it suggests that whether or not parents ‘buy into’ a immunisation campaign to immunise their children rests with the rights and duties of the organisation to make such claims and not, as James (2014) seems to be suggesting, because their ‘position’ (as a point of intentional representation) is that immunising babies is “a positive thing to do” (p. 83). And, while this ‘positioning’ would most likely tie into the pre-existing cognitions and beliefs of parents about immunisation, it could also be argued that James’ (2014) definition of a position has attempted to align more with the marketing approach of Ries and Trout (1981),

rather than with how a position has been more traditionally conceptualised by some positioning theorists including Baert (2015) and Slocum-Bradley (2010a). As stated by Baert, “positioning only takes effect because of the agents operating within a particular context” (2015, p. 206). James’ approach appears to have lost sight of the focus that a position is concerned with the rights and duties of social actors, with the agency to do so, to position themselves and others.

This critique is given additional weight if one also considers that James (2014) argues that “the things that public relations episodes are about, that is, organisations, programs, products, services, people, ideologies, ideas and so on are actors in a narrative that provides a context within which public relations positioning occurs” (p.84). However, the claim that a thing (a non-person) is an actor, is questionable. Positioning theorists Slocum and van Langenhove (2004) argue that “states and regions can be attributed ‘actorness’ in much the same way that persons are” (p. 234), however these are “actorness properties” (p. 236) that confer:

a certain degree of autonomy and ... powers to engage in some sort of purposive action (p. 236). Actorness ultimately depends upon the power (that is, the rights) of the actor to act at various levels, in various realms (issues), toward various ends (goals). These are the actor’s positions (Slocum & van Langenhove, 2004, p. 237).

Thus, it would be nonsensical to argue that a public relations campaign can be attributed actorness properties or that it has autonomy or power to engage in purposive action. On the contrary, it is an ontological fact that all discourse is uttered by persons and whereby “neither ‘States’, nor institutions, nor groups of people (‘collectives’) can actually say or do things” (Slocum-Bradley, 2010a, p. 92). Clearly this is another aspect of James’ (2014) Framework that requires further clarification and needs to be addressed in any future iterations.

### ***1.3 Positioning Triangle Domain: Speech Act/Action Vertex***

The problems encountered while applying the Position Vertex within the Positioning Triangle Domain also negatively impacted on the analysis of speech acts. First, the analysis raised the possibility that there were multiple positioning acts being undertaken. Second, this then raised questions regarding whether positioning, as defined by James (2014), is about positioning

‘things’ or, as suggested by positioning theorists such as Slocum-Bradley (2010a), is it about persons or person-like entities, or (third) is it about both?

To find answers I turned once more to traditional approaches to Positioning Theory wherein speech acts are conceived as being enacted “in the context of a particular storyline being enacted by actors with particular identities and a particular distribution of rights and duties” (Slocum-Bradley, 2010b, pp. 57-58). In these more traditional approaches the term ‘position’ has been used to account for “the kinds of acts that a person in that position can be ‘seen’ or ‘heard’ to perform” (speech acts) within a social episode (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003b, p. 8). Positioned actors, the types of acts they can perform, and the storylines they enact share a mutually influential relationship. According to Slocum & van Langenhove (2004, p. 227), storylines are constituted by patterns of acts that are recognised as such by the members of a culture and simultaneously “provide the context within which an action is interpreted as an act”. They state further, “it is through acts (which have a social force), within the contexts of storylines, that the players are positioned” while, at the same time, “the positions of the actors influence how an action is interpreted as an act” (Slocum & van Langenhove, 2004, pp. 227-228). This approach clearly places actors, identities and persons at the centre of positioning episodes, and it could be argued that without taking this approach the very rationale for including a speech act/action vertex is undermined because the social force of speech acts cannot be examined. Instead what results is essentially a reportage of speech acts that adds little in terms of “make(ing) sense” (Slocum-Bradley, 2010b, p. 58) of how positioning is undertaken in public relations contexts. This suggests that a future iteration of James’ Framework may need to accommodate the measurement of the success of speech acts in terms of to what degree and to what effect audiences took up the meaning potentials offered.

## **2 Strategic Pre-Positioning Domain**

A strength of James’ (2014) Framework as it stands is the inclusion of the Strategic Pre-positioning Domain. The inclusion of this domain aligns with contemporary Positioning Theory scholarship wherein authors such as Moghaddam and Harré (2010) have advocated that strategic pre-positioning is an essential factor in positioning. Specifically, phase 1 or pre-positioning refers



to “the attribution of qualities of character, intellect, or temperament, sometimes supported by biographical reports on the past behaviour of the person in question” (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 9). As Moghaddam and Harré (2010) also argue, and this research has confirmed,

This distinction between positioning phases is useful in that, oftentimes, phase 1 is the ground of phase 2. Or to put this more discursively, the discursive procedure by which a person is positioned as having (or not having) certain rights and duties is initiated and grounded or justified by an act of positioning as in phase 1 - that is, as competent/incompetent, trustworthy, untrustworthy, and so on with respect to performing the type of act in question (p. 10).

Nevertheless, these findings could only be arrived at by applying a more traditional approach to the concept of a position. Indeed, applying the strategic pre-positioning domain was instrumental in further clarifying one of the ongoing problems of applying James’ (2014) Framework; namely that attributing qualities to a thing (a product or service et cetera) is problematic. Applying this domain suggested that without accepting that a position is only something that can be taken up by a person or a person-like entity with “actorness” (Slocum & van Langenhove, 2004, p. 234), applying the strategic pre-positioning domain using James’ (2014) Framework as an analytical heuristic is not without inherent difficulties.

### **3. Positioning Type Domain**

Based on the work of Searle (1969), James’ (2014) Framework has five broad speech-act categories: assertives, commissives, declarations, directives, and expressives. But while these categories may be useful when devising a public relations campaign, they appear less successful when attempting to capture the range of possible illocutionary acts. Searle (1969) suggested that in the English language there are more than 1000 possible illocutionary acts and here he includes “state, describe, assert, warn, remark, comment, command, order, request...” (p. 23) and so forth. Public relations is a globalised profession wherein building relationships with key publics must necessarily consider a diversity of cultures and beliefs. This aspect of practice has been

accentuated by the growth of digital and social media, whereby there are potentially multiple global audiences that public relations communications may be targeting or reaching. Any application of speech act theory to public relations, therefore, must necessarily consider that different cultures will potentially have different speech act categories that may be applicable.

A further problem again centred on James' (2014) definition of a public relation position as a point of intentional representation. It is clear that every speech act can be seen to be an example of (deliberate) self-positioning, and the (deliberate) positioning of others. Whether or not a speech act is 'forced' is, however, debatable given it implies a lack of agency on the part of those being so positioned. Applying this understanding not only opens the door to arguing that all manner of 'things' can be forcibly positioned, it suggests that a 'thing', so conceptualised, can not only adopt a position, but that it can position others. Moreover, applying a separate 'type' domain effectively removes the context provided by the storyline/speech acts/actions, and the positions (the positioning triangle domain) from the analysis. This, then is, a potential area for further research, particularly in terms of the restricted range of available speech acts.

#### **4 Goal Domain**

There remains a degree of ambiguity between the Goal Domain and the Position Vertex of the Positioning Triangle Domain, and how they both might be interpreted and applied when using James' (2014) Framework to undertake a positioning analysis. Of concern, in terms of conceptual overlap in the framework, is that the definition of a position as being something that is "discursively constructed for the purposes of achieving an intended outcome" (James, 2014, p. 19) could be (mis)interpreted as being a goal. Equally, analysing a text to understand how entities sought to shape social constructions of reality (a goal) (James, 2014, p. 161), could also be understood as being entities seeking to discursively shape social constructions of reality in terms of a position, or indeed of storylines and narratives. Moreover, it is possible (and even likely) that there were multiple goals at play in different contexts. This suggests that while having a Goal Domain may be a strength when applying James' (2014) Framework to devise a public relations campaign, it is possibly less successful when applied to analyse the social consequences or 'effects' of positioning.

## CONCLUSION

The findings presented evidence of both the strengths and weaknesses of applying James' (2014) Framework Domains. One of the key strengths of developing a Framework for positioning in public relations contexts is that in Positioning Theory, "issues of legitimacy and entitlement are intertwined with the allocation of rights and duties" (Andreouli, 2010, p. 6). Apart from James' work (2014) and the work that cites her, this is not currently present in the public relations academic literature. Another strength was the high degree of "dynamic stability" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 10) between narratives/storylines, speech acts/actions, and the position and goals an entity determines that they want to hold or assume. In particular, applying the Storyline and Speech Act/Action Vertices showed how public relations works to strategically construct versions of social reality. Nevertheless, there also were several weaknesses identified with each of the Vertices within the Positioning Triangle Domain, as well as with the Strategic Pre-Positioning Domain. As such, while James' (2014) Framework undoubtedly has merit in terms of analysing strategy and assessing if there is coherence between each of the domains and vertices, and if these align with the goals being taken, the findings also suggested that in adapting positioning for public relations 'something' has been lost in its translation.

Primarily the research findings indicated that James' Positioning Triangle, that sits as part of her (2014) Framework, was in part unworkable. This was due to the way that a position is defined by James (2014) as a "point of intentional representation" (James, 2014, p. 19), and the Position Vertex referring only to the "desired position" that is being pursued (James, 2014, p. 65). Applying these definitions limited the findings in terms of analysing the available storylines and positions, and the strategic prepositioning domain could be applied at all. These findings also raised questions about where identity construction is accounted for, with any notion of an actor with the agency to perform certain kinds of acts missing from James' (2014) Framework as it currently stands.

It also became apparent as my analysis progressed that taking the approach of dividing the findings according to the four domains was not unproblematic. Chiefly this related to how, by

separating out these domains and/or the vertices of James' Positioning Triangle Domain, the mutually determining contribution that each makes to the actual positioning act becomes somewhat indistinct. This finding was particularly evident in the Positioning Triangle Domain, where the "dynamic stability" (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 10) of positioning is reliant on the mutuality and alignment of each of the vertices of the Triangle. Although this has always been a central plank of van Langenhove's and Harré's original positioning triangle (1999), James' placement of the triangle within its own domain in her Framework presents a central problem for the Framework when applied as an analytic heuristic.

In conclusion, my analysis indicates that James' (2014) Framework for Intentional Positioning in Public Relations is currently not fully capturing the dynamism of positioning as it has been more traditionally conceptualised. Indeed, applying a more traditional Positioning Theory approach was often found to be the only approach that "made sense" (Slocum-Bradley, 2010b, p. 58) both in terms of the data, and ontologically. A return to a more traditional understanding could potentially permit an analysis of legitimacy and power which has been found to be a significant concept in positioning theory, and which also underpins the success or not most public relations campaigns. Positioning Theory "conceptualises power dynamics and legitimacy in terms of entitlements for action and participation" (Andreouli, 2010, p. 6); a concept that is not overtly addressed in James' (2014) Framework. To be perceived as legitimate requires entities to act in ways that align with the local moral order, that is, the "cluster of collectively located beliefs about what it is right and good to do and say" (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 10). Through the detailed examination reported above it is evident that issues of legitimacy and power need to be considered at each vertex of the positioning triangle as it is defined by van Langenhove and Harré (1999), and suggesting that further research is needed to determine how James' (2014) Framework could be further adapted to accommodate the identified weaknesses.

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