Diversity in Australian Public Relations: an exploration of practitioner perspectives

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Abstract

Public relations (PR) scholars have long emphasised the importance, as well as the prevailing lack of, cross cultural awareness and international PR skills. As political and economic powers are shifting from West to East, it becomes even more imperative that the public relations industry embraces diverse modes and styles of communication by moving beyond its traditional focus on Western inspired practice, as reflected in the popularity of US and UK based textbooks, and the prevailing focus of scholarly research on familiar (usually Western) cultural context. Recognised as a culturally diverse nation, this paper investigates if Australia’s multicultural fabric is reflected amongst its communication professionals and hence shapes the characteristics and communication styles of the local public relations industry. Given its geographic location, Australian communicators should theoretically be well positioned and equipped to play a prominent role across Oceania and the Asian continent.

Based on first hand insights from Australian communication professionals from diverse backgrounds, both in terms of ethnicity, as well as country of origin, this exploratory study provides an insight into the cultural fabric of the Australian public relations industry. Findings challenge the assumption that the nation’s multicultural make up has shaped its communication industry. Whilst participants emphasise the value of an international perspective and diverse cultural backgrounds, the Australian PR industry is still perceived as largely white, Anglo-Saxon, with a continuing dominance of female professionals. Based on practitioners’ first hand insights, the industry has failed to recognise diversity as part of its occupational identity.

Keywords: Australia, cross-cultural, internationalisation, diversity, multiculturalism
Introduction

As political and economic powers are shifting and new technologies are having a profound impact on both business and society at large; cultural awareness and literacy gain added importance. Corporations, not for profit organisations, government departments and even small businesses are operating in an increasingly globalised environment. This in turn demands the ability to communicate appropriately and professionally with diverse international stakeholders. Simultaneously, globalisation has resulted in gradually more diverse and multicultural publics, both locally and abroad.

As a nation, Australia arguably displays the characteristics required to meet and address these new challenges, i.e. to recruit communication teams that are socially, culturally, ethnically and gender diverse - or proportionate - and possess the skills needed to engage with international, as well as disparate local audiences. With more than a quarter (26%) of its population born overseas and a further one fifth (20%) of the population with at least one overseas-born parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013), diversity touches every segment of Australian society. Moreover, the latest national (2011) Census identified over 300 ancestries, which further illustrates the diverse fabric of contemporary Australia.

Drawing and maximising on these multicultural characteristics becomes particularly relevant as economic power is shifting from West to East, and Asian politics and culture are projected to dominate over the coming decades (KPMG, 2012). The emergence of what has been labelled the Asian Century (Henry et al., 2012) highlights more than ever the need for Australians to understand, value, engage with and learn from their immediate neighbours. Given their geographic location, Australian communication professionals are arguably well positioned to perform key roles within the Asia-Pacific region (and beyond). Their skills and expertise as cultural intermediaries (see Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Hodges, 2006) are required to advise management, clients and governments in terms of protocols, cultural differences, challenges and expectations. However, this level of involvement does not only require Australian communicators to be equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge, but also assumes a high level of recognition of the strategic capabilities and responsibilities of what is still a relatively young – and often misunderstood – profession.

Australian communication education and philosophy have traditionally looked to other English speaking nations - most prolifically the United Kingdom and United States of America – for guidance, expertise and best practice examples. This emphasis is equally reflected in the country’s limited linguistic diversity: 81% of Australians aged five years and over speak exclusively English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). However, since the first national Census in 1911, Australia’s cultural fabric has changed remarkably. Whilst historically the majority of migrants came from Europe, the leading birthplace for those who have arrived since 2006 is India (13.1 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Other dominant nations of origin now include China, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). This shift will arguably have an impact on the country’s linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge, as well as on its overall diversity and consequently communication practice.

Public relations scholars (e.g. Curtin & Gaither, 2005, 2007; Sriramesh, 2003; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003) have long emphasised the importance – as well as highlighted the lack of - cross cultural awareness and international PR skills. This paper investigates if Australia’s cultural diversity is reflected among its communication professionals and if the Australian industry may therefore provide useful insights for other cultural contexts in terms of embracing diversity and encouraging cross-cultural skills development.
Motivators for this study

Having grown up, studied and worked in Europe (Germany, Spain and the UK), the diversity of Australian classrooms is still notable to the author, even after over a decade in Australian higher education. The public relations student cohort may not be as culturally and ethnically diverse as those in other discipline areas, such as for example accounting or pharmacy, which may be largely due to a smaller intake of international students; however, the richness of cultural influences and backgrounds nevertheless becomes apparent during in class discussions. In the typical Australian public relations classroom it is frequently impossible to identify who is an international student and who is not, as expectations and preconceptions are challenged. The majority of students typically identify as “Australian” when originally asked to describe their ethnic background; however, once further interrogated and unpacked, different ideas and interpretations of Australianness start to emerge. Being born to parents of diverse ethnicities, relocating to Australia as a child, or growing up speaking a language other than English at home does not prevent these students from identifying themselves as “true blue” Australian. Consequently, the label Australian does not predict skin colour, looks or in some cases even the respondent’s accent. Instead, “Australianness” appears to have become synonymous with multiculturalism, hence implies a certain level of diversity.

However, simultaneously a rise in nationalism and xenophobia has to be acknowledged, characterised by tight border controls, internationally criticised offshore detention policies (Millar, 2015) and the success of right-wing populist parties, such as One Nation, in the 2016 Federal election (Patel, 2016), largely built on an anti-immigration – in particular anti Muslim immigration - platforms. Although domestic laws forbid racial and other forms of discrimination, indigenous Australians experience lower levels of education, employment and health outcomes and remain underrepresented in politics and across professional sectors (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2014), including communication.

Nevertheless, given the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures quoted above and Australia’s geographic location, both the composition of classrooms and the multilayered understanding of Australianness are arguably no surprise. However, given the historical understanding of public relations as a predominantly white (female) profession, the question emerges if the diversity observed in public relations classrooms translates into the professional context. Are Australian PR professionals better prepared for regional and international communication challenges than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts? Can Australia provide inspiration – or even a blueprint - for other countries? In order to put the importance of these questions into context, the following section provides a brief discussion of the relevant literature in relation to cross-cultural communication and the increasing emphasis on international communication within public relations practice.

Literature

Public relations has traditionally been understood as a Western phenomenon (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011), characterised by what Munshi and Edwards (2011) describe as a “pervasive nature of whiteness” (p.363), which is echoed in both theory and practice (Macnamara, 2004). This white, Anglo emphasis is reflected in the industry’s commercial history and hence the clients it services, which have historically reinforced the domination of corporate interests and largely white nations over coloured Asian, African and South American ones “by spreading the message of the superiority of the west” (Munshi & Edwards, 2011, p. 351). Equally, the public relations workforce has traditionally been characterised by a dominance of white, largely female practitioners, thereby reinforcing (industry) stereotypes and social agendas (Munshi & Edwards, 2011).

Concurrently, the focus of academic studies into the public relations industry and practices, as well as authors and countries of origin of these research projects, have largely
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relied on and further emphasised a prevailing white, Western lens – or what Macnamara (2004) refers to as “Western Myopia” (p. 325), thereby privileging the perspectives of the western cultural elite (Munshi, 1999). The influence of the United Kingdom and the United States of America in PR scholarship may be slowly weaning (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011), however, it nevertheless prevails and continues to shape the way in which public relations is understood, taught and practised. This limits insight into how public relations is practised and conceptualised in non-traditional, i.e. non-white, Western contexts. International public relations scholars, such as Krishnamurthy Sriramesh (e.g. 2001, 2003; 2004) have therefore long called for more diversity in public relations scholarship.

In order to understand and appropriately communicate with diverse audiences, public relations professionals should reflect the varied cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds of their stakeholders (Curtin & Gaither, 2007), as they otherwise lack the required in-depth understanding of the audiences they wish to reach and who they aim to build (lasting) relationships with (Macnamara, 2004). Hence, diversity is also something employers are looking for in their communication professionals. A comparative study between Singapore and Perth, Western Australia, by Fitch and Desai (2012) found that employers emphasise intercultural competencies specific to public relations practice. Arguably, cultural knowledge is particularly crucial within the Australian context given the country’s geographical location and the fact that Asian cultures remain markedly different to their Western counterparts (Macnamara, 2004). However, Sison’s (2013) study of Australian public relations programs highlighted a gap in the Australian public relations curriculum in relation to cultural competencies, concluding that curricula were slow to develop knowledge about Asia and furthermore lack representation of Asian public relations. Her findings highlighted that to date few Australian universities have been actively engaging with Asia and the wider region through the internationalisation of their curriculum. Hence, although the need for diverse and culturally attuned PR professionals is increasingly highlighted in industry publications and scholarship, the (higher) education sector appears to have failed to date to sufficiently address these identified gaps.

A small scale Masters project by Ravena (2005), based on interviews with 10 practitioners on the east coast of Australia, highlighted the benefits respondents from diverse backgrounds brought into the industry and concluded that some inroads had been made in actively embracing the concept of diversity and its value. Equally, the current report by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations’ (CIPR) Diversity Working Group (DWG) reported a slight increase of PR practitioners from non-white /BAME backgrounds (in the United Kingdom). However, despite the emphasis of global trends and the apparent “evolution from the monoculture of yesteryear to a new diverse reality” (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2015, p.3), representation of practitioners from BAME backgrounds remains at only 9%. Multiple initiatives and policies have been established by professional bodies to address diversity issues, such as the Public Relations Consultants Association (2016) and Chartered Institute of Public Relations’ (2016) campaigning work around diversity in the UK, the Public Relations Society of America’s (2016) efforts to increase diversity in the United States and the recent launch of the Institute of Public Relations’ (2016) diversity and inclusion policy in Australia.

Despite the diverse nature of the Australian population, a recent State of PR survey in Australia (Wolf & de Bussy – unpublished) found that 75% of respondents were born in Australia, followed by a further 7% in the UK. The sample included representation from German, Indian, Indonesian, South African and Swedish born PR professionals; however, these were notably limited. Reassuringly, the same study found that language skills represented a much higher level of diversity, with 15% of respondents reporting a basic working knowledge of French, 7% of German and over 4% declared some knowledge of the Italian language. However, the representation of regional (Asian) languages was notably more limited. Over a decade ago Dhir (2004) introduced the concept of language as a corporate asset, based on the increasingly globalised environment in which many organisations are operating. However, a decade on less than 2.5% of Australian
respondents disclosed some knowledge of Bahasa Indonesia and Malay. The reported (basic) knowledge of Arabic, Hindi, Mandarin and Cantonese was less than 2% respectively, which certainly does not reflect Australia's geographical location, the composition of its wider population and resulting language requirements, nor indicates an active role played in embracing its role in the wider region. This prevailing focus on the English language further restricts the diversity in communication practice, as well an in theory development, due to the continuing marginalisation of PR scholars whose first language is not English (McKie & Munshi, 2007).

A further limitation to diversity in public relations is the prevailing dominance of female practitioners, in particular at entry- and middle-management levels. Male communicators may continue to dominate top hierarchies, but studies have consistently highlighted that they are outnumbered at lower levels in neighbouring countries such as Indonesia (Simorangkir, 2011), in Australia (de Bussy & Wolf, 2009) itself, as well as in Europe (Pompper & Jung, 2013) and beyond. Although ‘gender’ is not a focus of this study, it was inevitably mentioned in terms of being a limiting factor in relation to diversity amongst the Australian public relations workforce.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study, based on 21 semi-structured interviews with PR professionals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, who are working in communication roles in Australia, across different sectors and at various levels of seniority. Interviews ranged from 40 to 105 minutes and were audiorecorded, transcribed and thematically analysed with the aid of NVivo 10. The aim of the study was to explore practitioners’ perception of the public relations industry and in particular their own role as communicators with an ethnically diverse background. Within this context ‘diverse’ was conceptualised as non-Australian cultural and/or ethnical influence from at least one parent. The sample included first and second generation migrants, i.e. participants who were born in one country and relocated to Australia at some point in their lives, as well as those who were born to first-generation immigrants in Australia. Participants were invited to reflect on how their cultural background had influenced both their personal and professional lives, before being encouraged to share their thoughts on Australia’s label as a culturally diverse country and how this – if at all – is reflected within the communication context.

Participants were initially recruited using purposive sampling, by drawing on the researcher’s existing contacts, including industry peers, colleagues and past graduates. Recruitment was then extended to snowball sampling, inviting existing participants to nominate other communicators with diverse backgrounds, who may be able to contribute to this study. However, the snowball sampling approach was surprisingly unsuccessful, arguably indicating participants’ lack of (conscious) awareness of diversity as a unique characteristic, as well as the homogenous nature of their work environment.

Despite conscious attempts to recruit a balanced sample, both in terms of cultural diversity and gender, only three participants were male. Equally, despite multiple efforts, no indigenous Australian practitioners could be recruited for this study. Ethnic backgrounds of study participants included Malaysian, Malaysian-Chinese, (Anglo) Indian, Italian, Vietnamese(-Chinese), Swedish, South African, North American, Thai, Singaporean, Spanish, Macedonian, Burmese, Arabic and Swedish.

Findings

Participants consistently labelled Australia as a diverse country, fuelled by immigration, but also based on the number of practitioners who had gained work experience overseas. First generation migrants in particular commented on how surprised they were about the level of diversity they encountered when their first arrived in Australia:
That, for me, came as a bit of a shock. ... everyone had experience in a lot of different countries and everyone could bring so much input into work. And obviously when you get people from all over the place and experience in different countries, well, you get a lot of different personalities and different opinions.

As observed based on the author’s classroom experience, it is becoming increasingly complex to define what ‘Australianness’ signifies, based on traditional cultural characteristics, names and physical appearances. With one exception (a permanent resident), all participants in this study confidently referred to themselves as Australian, despite their different backgrounds, experiences and circumstances. Being Australian does not require relinquishing other cultural values, customs and language, as one participant explained:

How important are culture specific traditions and celebrations to me? Very important, because it defines who I am. I don’t feel like because I’m Australian I have to be a Western person, because I’m really proud of my background and heritage.

This notion of a cultural melting pot appears to be continuously increasing, with “the younger crowd being [perceived as] more diverse than the older crowd”, especially when compared to (experiences gained in) other countries:

I think everyone here is just included in the community. In the UK it was a bit more black and white, I must admit. It was a bit more, you’re Indian, you’re Chinese, you’re this and you’re that, and here it’s like you’re welcome, whoever you are. Because there are so many people from all other places.

Participants described Australia as increasingly accepting of different cultures, their influences and contributions. A clear difference in perspective emerged between first and second generation Australians, the latter of which could recall (childhood) experiences in a country that had traditionally been less embracing of diversity. Participants with an Asian background in particular commented on a major shift within Australian society, away from its White Australia mentality and roots. Whereas numerous participants recalled being “the only Asian” in their primary school class, they pointed to a much broader, taken for granted level of diversity in the modern Australian classroom, which is the norm for their younger relatives. This change towards a more diverse and accepting society has been illustrated via the availability of cooking ingredients and a growing appreciation for varied cuisines – something which would not have been the norm in the 1980s and 90s, as the following quote illustrates:

I think it has changed over time. We are more accepting of other cultures, we are more willing to experience more food, more cultures. I think growing up, like, even Harmony Week when I was younger, say primary school, you really didn’t want to bring any foreign food in because no one had really heard about it. But these days it is so accepted that you want to be the person that brings in foreign food because you don’t want to be the social outcast that doesn’t have anything exciting or exotic to show or share.

Another much referred to example indicating an increasingly diverse society was language. The majority of those participants growing up in Australia prior to the 1990s emphasised how their parents deliberately avoided speaking their native language at home, both in order to foster and strengthen English language skills, but also to ensure “societal fit”, based on a desire to belong and blend in, as explained in the following quote:

Mum and dad made the decision for us not to be taught Burmese...I've never talked to them about it, but I think there was inherent racism when they came across that they experienced and they just wanted us to get along at school. I personally
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haven’t experienced racism in an overt way, but I know my brother has…I remember speaking Burmese up to the age of six and then when I went to primary school …they did stop speaking to me in Burmese. It was just all English.

In contrast, more recent immigrants appear to make a conscious effort to preserve language skills and cultural knowledge, perceiving it as a benefit, rather than a hindrance for their children. Today, diversity is not necessarily celebrated or singled out. Instead, it is perceived as simply a part of the Australian make up:

I think here we’re pretty open minded to mixed backgrounds because we tend to be a society here where there’s mixed marriages all over the place, so I don’t think that’s an issue at all in terms of people’s backgrounds.

This becomes particularly obvious when compared to experience gained overseas, as reported by a number of participants:

So it hasn’t really been an issue in WA at all, but going overseas, that’s where I experienced more racism towards colour, definitely colour, because as soon as I voiced that I was Australian then that barrier just dissolved immediately (when going into employment agencies).

And:

I’d never actually experienced any form of racism that was memorable in my whole life growing up, nor was it an issue being here in Perth in any types of part-time jobs, student, nothing. It had never, ever been an issue. So to actually be on the other side of the world it was a little bit startling to actually think wow, colour does make a difference here.

The vast majority of respondents reported that they had never experienced racism themselves. In fact, none of the participants could recall an example in which their personal background would have represented a barrier or obstacle in a professional context. However, most nevertheless pointed (unprompted) to a relative, close friend or colleague, who had gained a very different experience at some point in the past. Despite reassurances that Australian society has changed, characterised by a commitment to embrace its diverse influences, traces of racism have evidently remained. These may be largely invisible on a daily basis, but appear to have become somewhat accepted and tolerated by those who find themselves at the receiving end, as the following quote illustrates:

I’ve met many people from all over the world who live here and they love it here, and that's a good thing. I like how everyone embraces all the different cultures. Obviously every now and then, I still get abused, discriminated, people who are racist, but that’s very normal. I’ve learned from the uni days not to take it personally and just look at them as being ignorant. But yeah, overall, Australia is a very multicultural and diverse country.

Comments like this indicate a certain level of acceptance and resignation to the fact racism may be covert, but nevertheless a deeply engrained element of Australian society. Discrimination in a professional context appears to be largely based on stereotypes and assumptions associated with names and – in some cases – accents. Participants somewhat justified this attitude based on the need for excellent (English) language skills within the communication industry. In contrast to – for example, Europe – other, non-English language capabilities no not appear to be sought after; neither in spoken nor in written communication, hence limiting Australian PR practitioners’ level of engagement in the wider region.
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A small number of participants remained sceptical and somewhat cynical about Australia’s growing diversity, pointing to clusters of different cultural backgrounds that have emerged based on geographical, as well as professional preferences. At a macro level Australia may appear to be culturally diverse; however, on closer inspection it becomes apparent that cultural and ethnic influences are not equally distributed.

Arguably, public relations has emerged as one of those clusters, which remains not only largely female, but also predominantly white, Anglo Saxon. Regardless of growing levels of acceptance and increased commitment to celebrate the country’s diverse culture, the public relations industry itself does not reflect national statistics, as will be discussed as part of this findings section.

Commonalities

The scope of this paper does not allow an in depth analysis of the commonalities and strengths contributed by communicators with diverse backgrounds that have emerged as a result of this study. The primary focus of this paper is to investigate if Australia’s public relations industry is as diverse as its national statistics may suggest, as opposed to a thorough analysis of what practitioners from diverse backgrounds contribute to the industry. However, a broad summary of emergent key themes is provided in this section, as it provides context, as well as highlights key themes that are worth further in-depth exploration.

Participant in this study came from a wide variety of backgrounds, in terms of professional experience and areas of expertise, levels of seniority and of course cultural contexts. Despite capturing immigrants on humanitarian grounds, as well as skilled migrants, a number of commonalities emerged that provide a useful insight into the contribution culturally diverse practitioners make to Australian society.

First of all, no matter their background or motivation to settle in Australia, not a single participant considered returning to their former home country. All interviewees had consciously adopted and embraced Australia as their new home. Another commonality that emerged was the value placed on education – both in a traditional sense, as well as in terms of continuous professional development. The emphasis on structured education was particularly highlighted by participants from an Asian background (or rather their parents), but the importance of learning, training and ongoing development was raised in every single interview. Participants were largely critical of the perceived lack of emphasis on education in (traditional) Australian society, as the following quotes illustrate further:

I suppose, especially coming from a third world country, [my parents] see education as a privilege not a right.

However, in this context education refers to more than formal education. Instead, participants mentioned a deeply engrained respect for and commitment to lifelong learning, as well as the ability to overcome challenges:

When my father brought the family out it was to embrace what Australia had to offer. They mainly came out for educational opportunities for their kids……. When I use the term education I don’t say that we all have degrees, but we’ve always been encouraged to extend ourselves, so education may not just be through the schooling systems. We’ve been encouraged to always venture into different hobbies and interests, I would say about personal development, not straight school systems

This deeply engrained commitment to professional development, in a traditional and informal sense, is arguably particularly relevant within the context of public relations, a profession that requires continuous upskilling, especially given the emergence of new
communication channels and technologies over the past decade, and the need for continuous environmental monitoring.

It may be the distance to their extended family, or even the relative isolation of Australia geographically, but the notion of family emerged as another strong theme. Despite some participants arriving with – or joining a number of existing relatives - all interviewees talked about deeply engrained family values and respect. According to the Dutch social psychologist and arguably one of the most widely quoted scholars on cultural attributes, Geert Hofstede, Australia is characterised as a masculine, individualistic, hence loosely-knit and competitive society (Hofstede, n.d.). Hofstede's dimensions undoubtedly have their limitations. His understanding of national culture as static has been increasingly criticised and discredited (see e.g. Courtright, Wolfe, & Baldwin, 2011). However, his ideas nevertheless highlight what immigrants from largely collectivist societies (in particular Asia and the Arabic region) contribute to Australian society in general, and the public relations industry specifically. Respect for others, and in particular elders and more senior members of society, equally reflects a level of tolerance for others’ opinions and listening skills, as well as the ability to communicate across different stakeholder groups respectfully.

Respect and tolerance are equally linked to the next key theme. Participants referred to the diversity amongst their immediate friends and acquaintances. They reported that their exposure to (a) different culture(s) – by living in a different country, through travel or via insights gained from their own relatives, who initially relocated to Australia – had equipped them with a certain level of openness to new and different ideas and perspectives, as well as the capacity to “tune into people”:

I definitely find I have more empathy because I actually relate it to my own relatives. And I have actually, you know, witnessed occasions where other people haven’t been so tolerant or haven’t had the patience and I’ve hated it. It’s made me so angry because I always think that could have been my Nonna that someone was talking down to like that. So it’s just given me, I guess, patience and understanding.

Participants widely agreed that travel contributes to the personality traits discussed above, such as openness and a genuine interest in other cultures and people. As a result, practitioners from diverse backgrounds arguably display heightened levels of flexibility, tolerance and adaptability, equipping them for a role as what authors such as Curtin and Gaither (2005); and Hodges (2006) refer to as cultural intermediaries. In drawing on observed and experienced cultural values of diverse audiences they transcend geographic and cultural boundaries, hence are able to advise management, clients and governments in terms of protocols, cultural differences, challenges and expectations.

Cultural traditions appear to be predominantly maintained for the benefit of existing and future generations. The arrival of children reportedly instils an appreciation of diversity and sense of pride in one’s ethnic background and language. However, cultural customs are not adopted uncritically. Instead, certain elements are selected and adapted to the Australian context, whilst those that are not personally relevant are cast aside and discontinued. This results in a pick and mix approach, where the perceived ‘best’ elements of different cultures are merged into a unique interpretation of one’s own identity.

Public Relations as a career choice

Entry into the public relations industry had been largely accidental for most participants in this study. Career advisors emerged as key influencers, as well as a self-declared “lack of interest in math”. Parental endorsement – and in some cases active support – were equally important. Hence the consideration for a small number of participants to enrol in a business and/or commerce degree, which was perceived to be better recognised and have a greater status than the actual public relations major they were studying towards. Traditionally, public relations degrees are based within Arts or Humanities. However, a small number of
programs are based within Schools of Business. The emerging reference to commerce
degrees arguably indicates a potential bias in the study sample. The business label
appeared to be a particularly important factor for participants with an Asian background,
who felt a business degree was a more acceptable career choice within their cultural and
family context, where traditional professions such as law, medicine and engineering (as
“fallback option”) are typically desired career choices:

They don’t think it is socially accepted in their culture, you know, an Arts Degree, -
that is kind of like a flouncy nothing degree. Whereas a Business Degree, at least
it is, they think, it is interchangeable and you can use it more to your advantage
and grow more.

Participants furthermore reflected on the difficulties they had in explaining what
exactly a career in public relations would entail:

If you’re a lawyer, you’re in a court or you’re writing contracts or whatever and if
you’re in medicine you’re saving lives. PR’s not tangible, especially to Asian
parents.

And:

For a very long time my dad didn’t understand what PR was, so for the three years
that I was PR manager at the Insurance Commission, he told everyone I was a
lawyer. He’s like “Oh this is really too hard to explain what you do so I’m just going
to keep telling everyone you’re a lawyer.” I’m like “I’ve never been a lawyer. I don’t
really plan on being a lawyer and I’m actually enjoying what I’m doing” and he’s
like “Oh. Okay. I’m just going to keep telling everyone you’re a lawyer because I
can’t explain.”

However, difficulties in defining what exactly public relations entails are not limited
to the Asian context, reflecting both its status as a relatively new profession, as well as
different cultural interpretations, as the following quote illustrates:

In Spain people don’t see PR as a very recognised profession, I think it’s because
they don’t understand what it means. [...] people used to think that we would just
be like handing out flyers for a dance. I mean she’s [mum] always been supportive.
Don’t get me wrong. But she will still drop a comment here and there like, “Why
don’t you study something else a bit more productive?”

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Public relations remains to be understood as a largely “female dominated – male run”
profession. When asked if the historical framing of PR as a “white female” profession still
applied, participants immediately focused on the gender, as opposed to the ethnic
dimension of the statement. Despite some participants noting a slight shift due to an
increasing number of females moving into more senior positions, they felt that females
were still lacking the so-called “seat at the table”:

Relationship building is definitely a female thing. But how decisions are made and
whether to involve a PR person within a context of decision making, is still a male
sphere I think.

Simultaneously, the lack of male practitioners at an entry level was noted, despite
apparent increasing numbers of male work experience students. One explanation given
were role and sector dependent preferences, both in terms of gender, as well as ethnic
background attracted. Respondents reported a culturally diverse workforce in a number of
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work contexts, however, once prompted about the composition of the actual communication department, they conceded an exception to the overall company profile and a largely Anglo Saxon focus.

Despite not necessarily being aware of it prior to this study, participants realised that their cultural background represents an exception in what is largely a white, Western work environment. One interviewee felt inclined to run a snap poll:

Just a quick poll I did around the office, I was like: “Anyone who is an ethnic raise your hand.” And there isn’t anybody.

Arguably, this lack of prior awareness is more noteworthy than the actual absence of diversity in the communication workplace. Ethnically and culturally diverse practitioners appear to be deeply embedded in their respective workplaces, to the extent that they fully blend in. However, this also indicates that their unique skill sets, knowledge and expertise are not being recognised, nor utilised to their full potential. For example, respondents reported speaking a minimum of two, often four, five or more languages and major dialects. However, this knowledge is not being applied in a public relations context. As one interviewee explains:

I still think a lot of workplaces still see PR as being [purely] communication based, whereas in reality, when you’re dealing with, say, Asian cultures, it’s culturally based. So you might not be so au fait in how to write something, but if you know the correct way to look at hierarchy and the respect levels, or you know the appropriateness in terms of dress, things that we can’t really teach, then I think in some of these relationships it’s actually more about those aspects of business that override the grammar and expression and punctuation in something that’s written.

Another participant referred to those communicators who possess the skills to combine communication skills and cultural knowledge within their work context as “shining stars”, but consequently struggled to name any examples who had not moved overseas for career reasons.

Discussion

Over the past decades, Australia has undergone major shifts, which have seen its population embrace – and arguably even celebrate – its multicultural characteristics, which is reflected in the diversity of foods available, the popularity of multicultural festivals and the diversity of backgrounds observed in the classroom setting. Today’s ‘new’ Australians hence reportedly no longer feel the pressure to ‘blend in’, but are instead embracing elements of their traditional culture, as well as new influences and customs. However, although Australia has become more accepting of its multicultural characteristics, an element of racism reportedly remains deeply embedded as part of its cultural fabric.

Based on insights and observations provided by communicators from diverse backgrounds, the concept of ‘whiteness’ has become increasingly meaningless within the Australian context. Many respondents struggled to make sense of the notion of whiteness, requesting further clarification and definition. Based on participants’ first-hand insights, the concept of ‘race’ has become increasingly irrelevant within the Australian context, as the legacy of the White Australia policy is slowly fading. Whilst in other cultural contexts, like the United Kingdom and the United States of America, race may continue to illustrate the unequal representation of practitioners from diverse backgrounds in the industry, as well as associated (professional) challenges (see e.g. Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2015; L. Edwards, 2010), the concept of human categorisation based on distinct physical characteristics does not necessarily apply within the Australian context, where multiple shades and cultural backgrounds are frequently represented within a single family unit. There may be some (geographical and professional) clusters in which certain ethnic
backgrounds are more represented than others, however, on the whole, participants perceived Australia as a melting pot of multiple backgrounds and influences. However, the absence of a distinct understanding of white vs. black does not signify an absence of racism and discrimination. Indeed, Edwards (2014) may argue that race is so unremarked and unremarkable precisely because it is so deeply embedded in Australian society.

Ironically, public relations appears to be one of these exceptions, or professional clusters, failing to reflect the level of diversity reportedly observed as part of mainstream Australian society. The absence of indigenous communicators further emphasises this point. Contrary to observations in the higher education context, Australia’s public relations industry does not mirror the level of ethnic and cultural diversity reflected in national population statistics. As such, it appears to be an anomaly to many other professions and areas of employment, which have embraced a greater level of variety in terms of ethnic backgrounds, cultural knowledge and interpretations of ‘Australianness’. Whilst Australia as a whole has become increasingly diverse, public relations continues to be framed and understood as a largely white, female, Anglo-Saxon influence dominated profession, hence confirming its exclusionary occupational identity as observed by Edwards (2014) in her work in the UK. This apparent lack of diversity has arguably implications in terms of communication effectiveness, given that the public relations workforce is not reflecting the cultural make up of their actual stakeholder groups and target audiences, both within Australia and certainly not within the wider region.

Based on first-hand accounts, PR practitioners with diverse backgrounds do not appear to stand out. Instead, they blend into the wider communications workforce. Most of the participants in this study were not aware of their unique background, skill sets and perspectives until prompted as part of this project. This was clearly illustrated in participants’ difficulties to name other communicators with ethnically or culturally diverse backgrounds, who may be able to contribute further to this study. On one hand, this is arguably a positive sign, illustrating that PR practitioners are hired based on merit, rather than skin colour. However, this lack of cultural awareness also raises a number of questions in regards to how public relations is practised, positioned and understood. Participants emphasised the focus on and need for excellent written communication skills, which may explain the preference for native English speakers as part of employment decisions. However, this emphasis on English language skills, and the consequent assumption of English as a lingua franca, even within the wider regional context, illustrate a failure to recognise language as corporate asset in its own right, as suggested by Dhir (2004, 2005) more than a decade ago. Whilst it is commendable that practitioners from diverse backgrounds are deeply embedded as part of the industry and do not stand out, their invisibility simultaneously indicates that their unique skill sets, cultural knowledge and perspectives are not being recognised. Beyond language skills, these communicators are able to provide first hand insights into and deep understanding of different cultures, at levels which are often impossible to acquire as ‘non-natives’. They are natural cultural intermediaries, who efficiently navigate across different subsets of (Australian) society. The failure to recognise these unique skill sets and abilities arguably illustrates the (lack of) maturity of the Australian public relations industry, which remains to be largely inwards facing and focused on written communication, i.e. media relations skills. The industry appears to have remained largely focused on tactical skills, as opposed to embracing strategic opportunities provided by its geographical location, as well as the knowledge and skill sets among its diverse workforce.
Conclusion

Illustrated by the rising popularity of nationalist parties in Europe, the election of Donald Trump in the US and the success of the Brexit campaign in the UK, nationalism and xenophobia may be on the rise across the Western world; however, this study highlighted that despite the rise of protectionist politics, Australianness has become increasingly synonymous with multiculturalism. This does not indicate an absence of racism and discrimination, but simply signifies that in the Australian context culture and ethnicity are not defined in ‘black and white’ terms. Nevertheless, despite its geographic location and high level of diversity reflected in national population statistics, the Australian public relations industry continues to rely on a largely white, female workforce, which reflects the country’s historical Anglo-Saxon influence, but not its actual cultural fabric. Practitioners from diverse backgrounds are deeply embedded; hence, they may not stand out or face unique challenges related to acceptability or career progression, as reportedly experienced in other cultural contexts. However, this lack of visibility may equally indicate unconscious efforts to avoid standing out based on their cultural skills, knowledge and ethnic background. Ultimately, their unique skill sets, knowledge and perspectives are not recognised or drawn upon. Whilst the notion of whiteness and traditional (Western) categorisations of race may have become meaningless within the broader Australian context, the public relations industry has failed to embrace the capabilities offered by its increasingly diverse (potential) workforce. Hence, despite the potential, as cultural intermediaries Australian communicators are notably ill equipped. In the industry’s current state, Australian public relations professionals are not prepared to perform a more visible role within the region, due to a reliance on English as a lingua franca and the failure to recognise the value of first-hand cultural knowledge and deep understanding of different ethnic contexts. In fact, Australia’s professional communicators are equally ill equipped to act as cultural intermediaries in rural and remote parts of the country, given the industry’s focus on large urban centres and lack of representation by indigenous professionals. A greater level of cross-cultural education is required within a (higher and professional) education context to enable Australian PR practitioners to perform in more strategic roles beyond Australian borders and to elevate the role of public relations from a largely tactical to a recognised, strategic function that contributes in a meaningful way to engagement and decision making in the wider region.
References


