



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review



Full Length Article

Communicating across, within and between, cultures: Toward inclusion and social change

Marianne D. Sison

RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Inclusion
Diversity
Public relations
Social change

ABSTRACT

In this article, I provide some reflections on the theme of this special issue and the recent World Public Relations Forum, “Communication across cultures”. In doing so, I was initially tempted to respond with a “how to”, but instead asked myself a fundamental question: “Who is communicating with whom, and why?” The reason I pose this question is because we need to take stock of our assumptions and the perspectives we take as communication scholars and practitioners. As we face the new opportunities and challenges of global, highly mobile, and increasingly diverse and digitally savvy publics, we also need to clarify some of our assumptions. To expound on this, I will touch on the global, mobile and multicultural context; then discuss how inclusion must be combined with a focus on diversity, and conclude with a call for practitioners communicating across, within and between cultures to advocate for social change.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

1. Global, mobile and multicultural

Working in multinational contexts is not new, but migration and mobility have increased around the world, and this is not just manifested in the mass migration of refugees into Europe. The United Nations reported 244 million international migrants living worldwide in 2015, up by 41 percent from 2000 ([UN International Migration Report, 2016](#)). Of this number, almost 20 million are refugees. The rest are people like myself, migrants who are persons living in a country other than where they were born.

International migrants are dispersed across the six continents with Europe and Asia hosting 76 million and 75 million migrants respectively. North America hosts 54 million, Africa 21 million, Latin America and the Caribbean 9 million, and Oceania 8 million ([UN International Migration Report, 2015: 6](#)). Of the 244 million migrants, 43 percent were born in Asia with India comprising the largest diaspora in the world. People born in Europe were the second largest group of migrants. Interestingly except for Latin Americans (70 percent) most of whom migrated to North America, most migrants often stayed closer to home in 2015. For example 66 percent Europeans moved within the region, 60 percent of Asians migrated to Asia, while 59 percent of those born in Oceania stayed in the region. Nevertheless the UN report highlighted that in Europe, North America and Oceania, international migrants accounted for at least 10 percent of their population. In Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, international migrants comprise less than two percent of their population.

These figures mean that migration and mobility have increased multicultural communities across the world, and thus communication across cultures do not necessarily mean communicating across nation states. For instance, we would previously assume that communicating across cultures would mean adapting a particular global campaign to suit the needs

E-mail address: marianne.sison@rmit.edu.au

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.015>
0363-8111/© 2016 Published by Elsevier Inc.

Please cite this article in press as: Sison, M.D. Communicating across, within and between, cultures: Toward inclusion and social change. *Public Relations Review* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.015>

of the local audiences, often through translation. But we have seen many cases where 'language' translation is not enough. Culture is much more than language. Understanding cultures include knowledge about histories, economics, politics, social mores, regional differences and indigenous traditions and the tensions within these cultures.

For practitioners working in multicultural societies, it is no longer a simple proposition of communicating to homogenous 'local' audiences, and that assumptions we have regarding particular 'cultural' groups and 'nationalities' may no longer be valid. Increasingly diverse populations require practitioners to gain deep knowledge regarding cultural values that often influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, and our existing audience segmentation frameworks are not enough (Sison, 2009). Although current algorithms used in social media are able to target specific information for specific individuals, there are still underlying assumptions being made based on limited media usage.

2. Diversity and inclusion

Within these culturally rich, diverse and complex environments, we therefore need to re-examine our own assumptions as they relate to our communication praxis. Several public relations scholars have examined issues of diversity in the context of gender, race and culture (Aldoory, 2005; Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Edwards, 2014; Pompper, 2005; Sha & Ford, 2007; Sison, 2016; Tindall, 2009; Vardeman-Winter, 2011). However very limited attention has been given to the notion of identity, or the multiple identities that we, or our publics, 'perform' (Golombisky, 2015).

Crenshaw (1991) argued that these multiple identities provided the basis of oppression and inequality and developed the theory of intersectionality. In her conceptualization, she suggests that constructions of identity are neither independent nor discrete and as such intersectionality posits that "race, class, gender and sexuality" interact with each other (Crenshaw, 1991). While public relations scholars have highlighted the importance of intersectionality as an important approach to global public relations practice (Vardeman-Winter & Tindall, 2010), the application of constructs have been limited. Gender diverse (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex–LGBTQI) and disability sectors have not been mentioned.

A focus on diversity while valuable is not sufficient. Some quarters have expressed a focus on diversity has in fact encouraged exclusion and generated conflict because of perceived bias (Nishii, 2013). Combining diversity with inclusion is critical and increases business performance by 80 percent (Deloitte, 2013). They argue that organizations need to refocus on inclusion to gain the full advantages of diversity. The study showed that most organizations have focused on diversity but not enough on inclusion partly because of the lack of clarity about inclusion, from academic and workplace experts.

Deloitte (2013: 12) defines inclusion as an "active process of change or integration, as well as an outcome, such as a feeling of belonging". Their research identified that inclusion is manifested through perceptions of 1) fairness and respect and 2) value and belonging. The study further posits that when these inclusive elements are combined with diversity, they result in higher employee engagement.

The current literature on inclusion is indeed nascent particularly within the communication and public relations field. Although diversity management scholars have examined inclusion for less than two decades (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Roberson, 2006), there is much to be explored particularly when applied across cultures and across nation states (Tang et al., 2015).

While organizational, education and disability scholars may have examined inclusion, the increasing inequalities in society have magnified the need to embed inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals.

According to the World Bank, these inequalities—in terms of poverty, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, place of residence, disability, HIV/AIDS status, sexual orientation—often confer disadvantage that exclude people from societal processes and opportunities.

The World Bank defines social inclusion as the 'process of improving the terms for individuals and group to take part in society' (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/socialdevelopment/brief/social-inclusion>).

Social inclusion aims to empower poor and marginalized people to take advantage of burgeoning global opportunities. It ensures that people have a voice in decisions which affect their lives and that they enjoy equal access to markets, services and political, social and physical spaces.

As the various scholars and practitioners have mentioned, fairness, participation, recognition and a decision-making role are critical to engendering inclusion. To do so requires communication practitioners and scholars advocating for social justice and empowerment even within our neoliberal workplaces.

3. Communication and social change

Sophisticated, sensible, sensitive and socially responsible communication practitioners are needed to help us navigate our complex and fast-changing environment. Advocating for diversity and inclusion in our work practices is a small step to enabling meaningful, participatory communication across, between and within cultures.

Addressing social inequalities are major opportunities for communication practitioners and scholars to effect and contribute to social and meaningful change. When we communicate with our colleagues in other cultural and geographical contexts, we need to examine how we communicate from within our own communities, especially our indigenous communities, and with ourselves.

Communication practitioners and scholars are privileged to possess skills, knowledge, access and influence. We need to invite, include, listen to, work with and empower those whose voices have been previously absent—even if doing so is

uncomfortable and not too expedient. We need to open ourselves to different approaches, radical, non-traditional and perhaps outside the usual conventions in our scholarship and practice. We have to move outside our comfort zone, experiment, and have the courage to accept mistakes.

Exercising self-reflexivity is a good start. Cross-cultural communication practice starts from a position of learning and cultural curiosity that acknowledges our limited knowledge rather than our assumptions of expertise. By learning about the experience of 'the other', we can communicate across, between and within cultures to promote human empowerment and sustainable social change.

References

- Aldoory, L. (2005). A (Re) Conceived Feminist Paradigm for Public Relations: A Case for Substantial Improvement. *Journal of Communication*, 668–684.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics: And violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Deloitte. (2013). *Waiter, is that inclusion in my soup? A new recipe to improve business performance*. Retrieved from Sydney: <http://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/human-capital/deloitte-au-hc-diversity-inclusion-soup-0513.pdf>
- Edwards, L., & Hodges, C. E. M. (Eds.). (2011). *Public relations, society and culture: theoretical and empirical explorations*. In London: Routledge.
- Edwards, L. (2014). *Power, diversity and public relations*. London: Routledge.
- Golombisky, K. (2015). Renewing the commitments of feminist public relations theory from velvet ghetto to social justice. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 27(5), 389–415.
- Mor Barak, M. E., & Cherin, D. A. (1998). A tool to expand organizational understanding of workforce diversity: Exploring a measure of inclusion-exclusion. *Administration in Social Work*, 22(1), 47–63.
- Nishii, L. H. (2013). The benefits of climate for inclusion for gender-diverse groups. *Academy of Management Journal*, 56(6), 1754–1774.
- Pelled, L. H., Eisenhardt, K. M., & Xin, K. R. (1999). Exploring the black box: An analysis of work group diversity, conflict, and performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, 1–28.
- Pompper, D. (2005). Difference in public relations research: A case for introducing Critical Race Theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17, 139–169.
- Roberson, Q. M. (2006). Disentangling the meanings of diversity and inclusion in organizations. *Group and Organization Management*, 31, 212–236.
- Sha, B. L., & Ford, R. (2007). Redefining 'requisite variety': The challenge of multiple diversities for the future of public relations excellence. In E. L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: Challenges for the next generation* (pp. 381–398). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Sison, M. D. (2009). Whose cultural values? Exploring public relations' approaches to understanding audiences. *PRISM Online Journal*, 6(2), 1–13.
- Sison, M. D. (2016). Diversity and inclusion in Australian public relations: Towards a multiple perspectives approach. *Media International Australia*, 160(1), 32–42. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16651140>
- Tang, N., Jiang, Y., Chen, C., Zhou, Z., Chen, C. C., & Yu, Z. (2015). Inclusion and inclusion management in the Chinese context: An exploratory study. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 26(6), 856–874.
- Tindall, N. T. J. (2009). In search of career satisfaction: African-American public relations practitioners, pigeonholing, and the workplace. *Public Relations Review*, 35(4), 443–445.
- International Migration Report (2015). Highlights (ST/ESA/SER.A/375).
- United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2016).
- Vardeman-Winter, J., & Tindall, N. T. J. (2010). Toward an intersectional theory of public relations. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 223–235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Vardeman-Winter, J. (2011). Confronting whiteness in public relations campaigns and research with women. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 23(4), 412–441.