

**HUMANISING PUBLIC RELATIONS RESEARCH**  
**Christine Daymon**

**Presented to the Radical Roundtable Conference, University of Stirling**  
**30 June – 2 July 2008-06-28**

Contact: Dr Christine Daymon  
School of Marketing, Curtin Business School, Curtin University of Technology, Perth,  
Australia,  
And  
The Media School, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK  
c.daymon@curtin.edu.au

In this discursive paper, I want to argue that, as public relations researchers, we should be paying more attention to the human dimension of public relations in our research, taking account of multiple interests as well as introducing the diverse voices into our research accounts. There are five points related to this focus which I want to make in this paper. The first concerns the value of taking an interpretive, constructive stance to research. The second and third points relate to the need for qualitative methods to be employed, together with reflexivity. Fourthly, I argue for the use of a cultural lens for understanding public relations, and fifthly I suggest that there is merit in delving into the organisational culture literature in order to inform our understandings of culture and human involvement in public relations.

To date, public relations research has not defined itself in such a way that interpretive, qualitative work - especially that underpinned by a cultural framework - is central to its self-image, research focus or characteristic research practices. Yet public relations scholarship would benefit from more researchers employing an interpretive stance to their investigations because, in understanding communication as a co-construction of meaning, interpretive inquiry enables research to be humanised, i.e. giving priority in exploration and presentation to the voices and concerns of research participants rather than those of a distanced, 'value-free' research agenda. Such a concern is not limited to those acting as sources of data. The interpretive imagination extends also to the researcher herself, demanding a commitment to reflection upon and articulation of her self-identity and subjectivities especially as they relate to issues of selectivity, and to the representation of a multiplicity of (often suppressed) voices in research.

**The Subjective Nature of Meaning Making**

In fields other than public relations, an interpretive epistemology usually leads researchers to undertake their investigations in the qualitative tradition, underpinning this with a constructivist ontology which seeks to surface the social realities created by individuals and groups. The development of such context-specific understandings is the aim of interpretive, constructivist research. In the field of public relations, where qualitative methods are used these are often employed in the pursuit of functionalist concerns. With a positivist underpinning, research of this nature is more interested in developing either 'objective', generalisable theory or relatively straightforward solutions

to practitioner problems. Interpretive inquiry, on the other hand, seeks to better understand the more intimate, complex, subjective and tacit aspects of human involvement in public relations.

Therefore, despite the recent increase in qualitative studies published in the leading public relations journals, what continues to remain opaque is the subjective nature of the experience of public relations. Even researchers driven by emancipatory concerns continue to overlook the individual, the emotional and the cultural, in favour of mechanistic or less humanistic approaches. When human interactions are overlooked, public relations strategies and effects appear to be self-fabricating, inevitable and value-free. Reports that do not speak to the processes or influences involved in the production and consumption of public relations, obscure the beliefs, values, emotions, motivations, and subsequent struggles or pleasures which suffuse the doing, perceiving and constructing of the meaning-making involved in public relations.

Therefore, my second point is that not only should we as public relations scholars be grounding our research in an interpretive, constructivist framework, but we should also be using qualitative methods because these enable researchers to surface the human subjectivities involved in producing and consuming public relations.

### **Subjective Nature of Doing Research**

The notion of humanising public relations extends to the process of undertaking research. It is not uncommon for a researcher to write herself out of a research report, on the positivistic assumption that research 'should be' value neutral and untainted by a researcher's personal value or interest preferences. This ignores how the researcher's presence and cultural position inform the social shape and character of the data collected. For example, feminist scholars have shown how the genders of researchers and cultural members affect what is experienced and how that experience is interpreted (Martin 2002, 224). When researchers erase themselves from their research reports, in effect, they enhance their authority as a researcher because their text is presented as representing reality directly and objectively without bias. There are few published discussions which problematise researchers' assumptions, interpretations and subjectivities involved in conducting research into public relations. Yet, in other fields such as anthropology, scholars provide explicit, detailed accounts about their relationships with research participants and sites, thus alerting readers to the effect of the researcher on the data collection and analysis.

For example, Martin (2002, 225) quotes an extract from Kondo's (1990) ethnographic of a family-owned small business in Japan. 'Her openness about herself as a Japanese American female of a certain age and class background enriches the reader's understanding of the cultures she is describing:

At first, then, as a Japanese-American I made sense to those around me as a non-too-felicitous combination of racial categories. As fieldwork progressed, however, and my linguistic and cultural skills improved, my

informants seemed best able to understand me by placing me in meaningful cultural roles: daughter, guest, young woman, student, prodigal Japanese who had finally seen the light and come home. Most people preferred to treat me as a Japanese – sometimes an incomplete and unconventional Japanese, but a Japanese nonetheless ... that I, too, came to participate enthusiastically in this recasting of the self is a testimonial to their success in acting upon me. (pp13-14)'

In making no attempt to hide the potential for bias and subjectivity in relation to doing research, such self-reflexivity reinforces the author's claim to have presented an honest (and therefore authentic) representation of culture.

My third point, therefore, is that research needs to be reflexive and to incorporate this quality into research reports.

### **Culture as a dynamic process of meaning making**

My fourth point relates to the heuristic value of employing a cultural lens for understanding public relations because this allows emotions, beliefs, values, discourses and communicative behaviours to be interrogated in research, aspects that are intrinsic to how public relations as a communicative activity is socially constructed by those involved in producing and consuming public relations. Such an approach enables the researcher to take account of multiple and shifting cultural identities in contemporary society where, for example, new media technologies enable individuals - as creators and negotiators of new meanings - to coalesce into often fluid, fleeting, activist communities. It also enables the researcher to take a processual view on the interweaving of cultural values, behaviours and artefacts with the activities involved in producing and consuming public relations.

While some scholars have drawn attention previously to the value of a cultural approach for understanding public relations, much of this work seeks to employ the notion of culture as a variable characterised by commonalities and stability that affects public relations practices (e.g. Sriramesh's body of research). Research of this nature is often characterised by a functionalist approach, certainly by a pro-managerial orientation which is concerned to manipulate and control both communication and its interpretation in order to achieve organisational effectiveness. Employee commitment to work, customer loyalty, community goodwill, and social cohesion are seen as positive outcomes. Culture, from this perspective, is treated as an unproblematic object of analysis - something that is "out there" in a form that anyone could recognize (Martin 2002). Public relations, from this perspective, is concerned with cultural control.

An alternative use of the cultural approach, such as that employed by Curtin and Gaither (2007, Gaither and Curtin 2008), points to the dynamic, constitutive nature of culture and public relations, suggesting that individuals in different cultural contexts may interact with public relations practices in ways that are less capable of manipulation and prediction because *inter alia* they interpret public relations messages differently from that of the message source. Pompper's article (2005) indicates that public relations' publics

have multiple, shifting cultural identities and, if this is so, their reception, rejection or resistance of public relations messages will be situational.

I want to draw attention to the more nuanced cultural perspective that is offered in the field of organisational studies and organisational communication, and to consider what insights might be found there for helping us to understand public relations (e.g. Daymon 2000, 2003; Martin 2002; Parker 2000; Ybema, Daymon, Veenswijk 2005). To date, the public relations literature has been relatively impervious to the literature in this field yet it holds great potential for the exploration of public relations. This is my fifth point.

### **Organisational culture**

What do we mean by organisational culture and how can this be operationalised in relation to public relations research? Studies in the functionalist vein often refer to 'corporate culture' where culture consists of the shared beliefs, values, artefacts (such as physical spaces and architecture) and behaviours, including the symbolic. Corporate culture is seen to be something monolithic, stable and consistent across an organisation. However, more contemporary researchers, sensitive to the complexities, ambiguities and conflicts in organisations, tend to use the term 'organisational cultures' in the plural on the premise that, at any one time, an organisation comprises not only what is shared, but also (a) differences, expressed in the cultural understandings held by a variety of subcultures or (c) ambiguity and flux, emerging from the meaning making activities of organisational members. In a public relations consultancy, the meanings held by certain account teams about how best to achieve client goals will lead to how they function as a team and the choices they make about the most effective PR techniques to use; these, however, may clash with the attitudes and behaviours of other account teams within the same consultancy, and even with those of senior management. Differences and conflict, therefore, may be an intrinsic aspect of life in such an organisation, yet overlooked in research which follows a pro-managerial orientation. Further, because of new experiences and learning continually taking place, the ongoing process of making sense of them can lead to multiplicities of interpretation, uncertainties, contradictions and inconsistencies within and across subcultural boundaries. In traditional culture research, cultural conflicts and ambiguities are usually overlooked, yet they are intrinsic aspects of the cultures of organisations. When culture is viewed in this way (as consisting of unified, divided and also confused or contradictory subjective interpretations all existing simultaneously) then, rather than being something coherent, capable of being clearly defined, and frozen in time, it becomes instead a precarious cluster of nested, overlapping and interpenetrating meanings.

How does one operationalise this notion of culture in research, and where is the link to public relations? If public relations is understood to be both a manifestation and a source of culture, then it is both influenced by cultural understandings and it also contributes to them.

Its contribution may not be through coherent, controlled messages that, for example, shape public opinion in manageable ways. Instead, cultural understandings may be shaped in a fragmented way because of the way in which audiences may resist, reject,

ignore or reinterpret those PR messages. This has implications for research because it inspires the rethinking of conventional, dominating ideas, highlighting asymmetrical power relationships and partisan interests. For example, it allows issues to be raised concerning the consequences for those such as minority groups of being the target of cultural control (eg in an extreme case, the responses of Iraqi communities to the political propaganda of Western military forces, or, alternatively, the responses of a suppressed workforce to managerial dictates). Such a cultural perspective draws attention to the key role of stakeholders in co-constructing meaning. The perspectives and concerns of those traditionally seen to be at the receiving end of public relations become of greater importance, notably their role in interacting communicatively within an organisation's sphere, whether that be intra-organisational, or at regional, societal or global levels.

In terms of how culture – in its guise as complex, emergent and indeterminate – may influence the practice of public relations, how practitioners do public relations as well as how audiences interact and interpret the outcomes of public relations activities depends on their sensemaking which is informed by their cultural beliefs and values (organisational, occupational, societal, for example). Public relations practices are manifestations of what is held to be true within an organisation, or within the PR profession within a particular country, and both are influenced by societal culture, although increasingly global influences are interpenetrating each of these.

### **Practical implications for research**

I want to call for more qualitative research from an interpretive standpoint, shifting public relations research from its dominant functionalist, positivist assumptions to incorporate subjectivity and constructivism in order to understand the everyday realities of those involved in public relations: producers, consumers and researchers. Such a stance enables us to take note of the important role of public relations as both constituting and constitutive of societal culture. I argue that public relations researchers need to train both their research gaze and the articulation of their findings upon the following:

1. The experiences of individuals and groups who are involved in constructing and negotiating meaning through the production of public relations processes, i.e. concentrating on public relations practitioners and their experiences (a) in organisations, (b) within the occupation of public relations, (c) in different societal cultures. This means undertaking ethnographic or phenomenological research.
2. The experiences of individuals and groups as stakeholders or publics in the production and negotiation of meaning, i.e. concentrating on individuals as publics, both external to organisations as well as publics within organisations (as employees or temporary workers, for example).
3. Finally, public relations scholars need to introduce reflexivity into their writing about research (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2000, Daymon and Holloway 2002). This involves self-identification as well as discussion of the way in which their own philosophical and cultural perspectives affect selectivity, interpretation and interaction with their research participants, sites and material.

With regard to selectivity, issues revolve around the research focus and whose interests are being served by the research. This has implications for what theories are seen as relevant, which informants, sites and material are selected to study and how the data is interpreted. To study culture requires researchers to investigate the point of view of people involved in doing, consuming or actively resisting/ignoring public relations. It means tracing the beliefs, values, behaviours and interpretations that are seen to be relevant to cultural 'insiders'. It requires researchers to interpret the data so as to offer an authentic representation of the interests of those being researched, and to introduce quotations into their research reports in order to highlight the voices of cultural participants. And it requires researchers to be self-critical about how their own interest preferences may have affected their investigations.

- Alvesson, M. and Skoldberg, K. 2000. *Reflexive Methodology. New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London, Sage
- Curtin, P.A. and Gaither, T.K. 2007. *International Public Relations. Negotiating Culture, Identity, and Power*. Thousand Oaks, Sage
- Daymon, C. 2000. Culture Formation in a New Television Station: A Multiperspective Analysis. *British Journal of Management*, 11(2)
- Daymon, C. 2003. Making Money, Making Meaning: A Longitudinal Case Study Investigation into the Construction of Culture from its Beginnings". In Schoor, A., Campbell, W., Schenk, M. *Communication Research in Europe and Abroad: Challenges of the First Decade*. Berlin, De Gruyter
- Daymon, C. and Holloway, I. 2002. *Qualitative Research Methods in Public Relations and Marketing Communications*. London, Routledge
- Gaither, T.K. and Curtin, P.A. 2008. Examining the Heuristic Value of Models of International Public Relations Practice: A Case Study of the Arla Foods Crisis. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 20, 115-137
- Leitch, S. and Neilson, D. 2001. Bringing Publics Into Public Relations. New Theoretical Frameworks for Practice. In R. Heath (ed.) 2001. *Handbook of Public Relations*. Thousand Oaks, Sage, 127-138
- Martin, J. 2002. *Organizational Culture. Mapping the Terrain*. Thousand Oaks, Sage
- Parker, M. 2000. *Organizational Culture and Identity*. London, Sage
- Pompper, D. 2005. 'Difference' in Public Relations Research: A Case for Introducing Critical Race Theory. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17/2, 139-169
- Ybema, S., Daymon, C. and Veenswijk, M. 2005. Competing Cultural Orientations: Identity negotiation within a Dutch daily newspaper and a British television station. *Journal of Intervention Research*, Vol. 1(2)