

**'Insiders' in Mexico:  
researching the occupational culture of public relations**

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## **Introduction**

Over the last decade in international public relations scholarship, there has been a significant growth in comparative research, offering illumination on the different practices, assumptions and expectations of those involved in public relations in both global and local contexts. The qualitative voice is increasingly heard because of its more nuanced insights on cultural difference. Yet there are significant challenges for researchers seeking to investigate public relations in cultures different from their own, one of the most prominent being how to explore and interpret in a culturally sensitive way the lived experiences of those under investigation. This is complicated by the intersection of the data with researchers' own culture. To date, detailed accounts of the process of undertaking cross-cultural public relations research from an emic perspective are rare. In this paper, we join a long tradition in sociological research (Bell & Newby 1977) whereby we present an in-depth discussion of the process of conducting ethnographically inspired research into the occupational culture of public relations in a Latin American city. The paper has a methodological focus, our aim being to consider the cultural influences that affected our decisions, methods and experiences in undertaking a study of public relations practitioners in Mexico City.

We begin by outlining the importance of a cultural approach to understanding both the occupation of public relations, and the beliefs and values of the society in which public relations is practised. We then identify some of the most important characteristics of Mexican culture, discussing these in relation to our choice of methodology, noting also how they influenced subsequent modifications to our research procedures.

## **Occupation as Culture**

To understand the occupation of public relations requires a theoretical lens that is able to take account of the situational, the particular and the mundane as well as the significant, because these are all aspects pertinent to how and why public relations is practised as it is. Such an approach must be capable of dealing with the dynamics of communicative relationships, human or mediated, at the intra- and inter-personal, institutional, and societal levels. In fields such as organisational and media studies a cultural approach is well established 'as both a heuristic principle for describing and classifying behaviours and as an analytic concept that begins to explain how people's choices result from the interpersonal influences and symbolic universe that circumscribe everyday life' (Mariampolski 2006, 130). The notion of occupations as cultures has been employed usefully elsewhere (eg Barley and Kunda 2004, Bloor and Dawson 1994), and therefore we draw on this approach to underpin our study.

In line with public relations authors who write from a cultural studies perspective (e.g. Banks 1995, Bardhan 2003, Curtin and Gaither 2007, Hodges 2006, Mickey 2003; Zaharna, 2001), we define public relations as a cultural practice that forms part of the communicative process by which society constructs its social reality. Through its often powerful and persuasive contribution to public discourse, public relations is influential in shaping the meanings and imperatives of society (Bardhan 2003; Curtin and Gaither, 2005; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2000; Taylor, 2000). At the same time, the

nature and practice of public relations is constituted by society's cultural beliefs and values, especially those concerning communication and relationships.

As an occupation, therefore, public relations is socially constructed, its practitioners acting as social actors or agents who, in relationship with other agents from the same occupation, are shaped by certain socio-cultural conditions and situations (Hodges, 2006; Serini, 1994; Pieczka, 2002). Research suggests, then that the term 'public relations' is culturally specific; occupational titles may be similar but their meanings and accompanying practices can vary in different countries (Curtin and Gaither 2005). Therefore, in order to understand the occupation of public relations, research needs to take account of the macro influences of the broader, societal cultural context on the practice of public relations, together with, at a micro level, perceptions about the occupation that are held by practitioners situated within particular national parameters. Such a research focus has the potential to highlight areas of potential difference that affect the way public relations is practised by occupational groupings around the world.

### **An ethnographic approach**

With a cultural approach underpinning our study, it was necessary for us to examine the occupation of public relations according to the meanings and worldview of those involved in the practice in Mexico. Previous studies which have sought to bring insight into public relations as practised within an international arena are notable for the way in which they draw on Western models or general typologies as a means of evaluating public relations practices in non-Western contexts. Some scholars contrast theoretical models of public relations against different cultural characteristics; for example, Sriramesh's body of work tests the validity of Grunig's Excellence theory in a variety of Asian contexts, such as his recent evaluation of the usefulness of situational theory in Singapore (Sriramesh et al, 2007). Others employ Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a heuristic for identifying the characteristics of cultures, and thus treat the concept of culture as a universal, definable in general terms rather than surfacing what is truly unique to each culture (e.g. Cooper-Chen and Tanaka's exploration of Japan's PR industry, 2008). While the findings of such studies offer interesting perspectives on how Eastern practices can be evaluated against constructs developed primarily in the West, such studies tend to uphold the notion that reality is reflected in the researcher's view of it.

This contrasts with the stance of interpretive researchers who, informed by constructivism, endeavour to surface the meanings and realities that are co-created and conceptualised by those under investigation (Daymon and Holloway 2002). In grounding their findings in the voices of research participants, interpretive researchers seek to identify significant, local issues in naturally occurring settings by using research tools that are relevant, comprehensible and pertinent to their specific cultural context (Tayeb 2001). A recent example of work in this interpretive vein is a visual and textual analysis conducted in Israel by Bloch and Lemish (2008) who deconstructed rhetorical strategies within magazine and TV advertisements, internet video segments, public petitions, billboards and bumper stickers. They showed how a negative cultural construct, which is embedded in Israeli identity and perpetuated by social and commercial discourse,

contributes to the maintenance of 'a set of values that are antisocial and dysfunctional' within Israeli society (p.252).

In conforming with the norms of the interpretive/constructivist school, we sought to address the particular rather than the general and to this end were involved in carrying out the type of fieldwork that Wolcott describes as 'intimate, long term acquaintance' (2001, 76). Because culture and public relations are mutually generative, as we have already argued, then the choice of research methods is driven by the need to capture the dynamism of this vitality. Snapshots provided by an investigator who has sporadically and temporarily entered the world of public relations long enough to enable the recording of interviews and the carrying out of short observations provide only a static (even if insightful) record of a cultural phenomenon in a particular moment of time and space, e.g. Sriramesh (1992). To study public relations in its role as a contributor to the dynamic process through which culture is shaped requires a researcher to commit to immersion 'in the field' over an extended period of time, drawing on an ethnographic approach which Rosen notes is 'a method of 'seeing' the components of social structure and the processes through which they interact' (1991, 12-13).

Ethnographic research techniques usually involve participant observation, as well as non-observational methods such as interviewing and visual and textual analysis. Thus, a researcher enters a cultural setting (i.e. the working world of public relations practitioners) and uses culture as a heuristic to account for observed patterns of human activity. The researcher's aim is to develop a relationship with those belonging to the culture, in effect, becoming 'an insider', being sensitive to how human beings behave, able to conceptualise the world through the lens of its participants, and, therefore, able to capture something of the interactive process through which public relations and culture are constituted. The classic workplace ethnography by Lupton highlights the potential contribution of ethnography to such understanding: 'by attempting to observe and explain events within the context in which they occurred, they generate an understanding of behaviour which [is] premised upon the cultural perspectives of the people being studied' (1963, 29). A strength of ethnographic techniques, therefore, is their ability to deal with the ambiguity and flux that occurs in social life which other methodologies are forced to conceal or ignore (Machin 2002). We describe more precisely how we did this in Mexico in a later section.

To date, judging by the scarcity of ethnographically oriented studies in the public relations literature, it would appear that few researchers have followed this route to public relations inquiry. Perhaps this is due to the prolonged period of time that a researcher needs to devote to conducting his or her investigation. Yet such research offers candid, revealing, critical insights (Pauly and Hutchison 2001) concerning, for example, suppressed, minority voices pointing to imbalances of power in society, as well as the values mirrored in public relations discourses and thus the ideology of the occupation itself. Other disciplines have been less hesitant in applying this approach which originated in social anthropology. In marketing, Moeran (2007) studied the day-to-day running of a Japanese advertising agency, drawing attention to the structures, strategies and work practices in one sector of the cultural industries. In management, Barley and

Kunda's (2004) observations in three staffing agencies revealed the dynamic of work relationships in a professional job market. In sociology, Taylor's (1993) account of the lives of women drug users illustrated social issues in this often rejected community. In media studies, Miller and Slater (2000) examined how the Internet was thought about and used in Trinidad culture, illustrating how it acted to strengthen the sense of involvement of globally dispersed Trinidadian families with their societal culture.

In choosing to follow this tradition, our research is informed by the cultural nuances of our focal culture, i.e. Mexico. In the next sections, we introduce what we know about Mexican culture and follow the ethnographic tradition of describing in detail the process of conducting our research, including articulating the cultural influences on selectivity, and offering a reflexive account of our own roles as researchers in this project.

### **Mexican Cultural Characteristics**

In this section we discuss some of the more widely recognised categories and perceptions of Mexican culture before going on to consider how this understanding informed our research approach.

#### ***Simpatia* and interpersonal orientation**

Latin American cultures have traditionally been considered collectivist, emphasising goals, needs and views of the in-group over those of the individual (Albert, 1996). Mexico is described as having an *interdependent* culture (Markus and Kityama, 1999) where harmony and friendly relationships are emphasised, with the expression and experience of emotions and motives significantly shaped and governed by consideration of the reactions of others. In paying close attention to social interactions, Mexicans are motivated to find a way to fit with relevant others, to fulfil and create obligation (commonly through personal favours) and, in general, to become part of various networks of interpersonal relationships. *Simpatia* is highly valued and a person is deemed to have this characteristic when s/he is 'perceived to be open, warm, interested in others, exhibits positive behaviours towards others, is in tune with the wishes and feelings of others, and is enthusiastic' (Albert 1996, 333). Qualities such as 'understanding and helpfulness' predominate (Albert, 1996) underpinned by the moral obligation to take care of family and friends (Gandy, 1990). Mexican family relations are characterised as 'exceptionally affect laden, with a great emphasis on life, reflecting strong emotional interdependence' (Diaz-Guerrero and Sazalay, 1991).

For foreign researchers entering Latin America, their credentials hold less weight than interpersonal relationships built on trust. Nevertheless, European researchers are respected in Latin America for their rigorous training and greater access to resources. Qualitative methods and objectives are welcomed because 'understanding is generally more valued than counting' (Jones 2004, 446-7) and therefore there is a greater affinity with the humanities and critical studies orientation of European scholars.

#### ***Palanca* and Social Hierarchy**

Despite paying close heed to the needs, desires and goals of others, the attention of Mexicans is not indiscriminate but highly selective, with particular focus on relationships

with 'in-group' (particularly class) members (Marcus and Kityama, 1999). Whom one chooses as companions and associates reflects their standing in society and their quality as an individual. Mexicans often look to associate with people of higher status in order to improve on their station in life. *Palanca* is relied on, referring to power derived from extensive interpersonal connections and networks of relationships which expand into organisational, social and family life (Lindsley and Braithwaite, 2003). However, position in the social hierarchy does not in itself indicate what an individual can accomplish, rather what can be offered in an interdependent relationship (Jones 2004). Therefore, people manage relationships according to the resources available to them, such as information and knowledge, contacts and access to networks.

Foreign researchers start at middle-upper level on the hierarchy where 'good manners, courtesy, intelligence and affinity will be appreciated. What matters is not displays of wealth but displays of common courtesy and appreciation' (Jones 2004, 449).

### ***Confianza***

Central to beliefs of Mexicans is the importance of placing trust with great care. The country has experienced deep and longstanding sentiments of '*desconfianza*' (lack of trust) in the political system and institutions of contemporary capitalism (Pearce, 2004) and cultural tradition has taught Mexicans that one should not trust that promises will be fulfilled. As a consequence, Mexican culture is often considered to be fatalistic, regarding time as more interpersonally negotiable, as is discussed in the next section, and with relationships prioritised over tasks. Lindsley and Braithwaite (2003) have suggested that building stability through interpersonal linkages that connect people in their familial, social and organisational lives provides the 'social insurance' necessary against the uncertainty in economic and political structures. The view that relationships are more important than the completion of tasks is manifested in a variety of behaviours, including asking questions about colleagues' families, and discussing personal matters before business.

The core foundation of good relationships, therefore, is the notion of *confianza*, i.e. 'the feeling of trust, interpersonal closeness and a commitment to shared effects in the future, based on a similarity of worldview and derived from common experience' (Archer and Fitch, 1994, 86). Trust is built through communicative behaviours that adhere to cultural norms for face saving (Lindsley and Braithwaite, 2003) and the need to guard one's privacy (Barta, 1992; Albert, 1996). 'For the Mexican to place trust in another, particularly anyone who is not a blood relative, is very significant. Mexicans regard it as a great risk to have faith in another and trust is never granted lightly' (Roy, 2003: 231). This has implications for the foreign qualitative researcher seeking access to individuals and research sites such as work organisations and social centres. Unless a relationship has been built already, either directly or through an intermediary, it is unlikely that effective data collection will occur.

### ***Flexibilidad frente al incertidumbre (Dealing with uncertainty: Flexibility)***

Linked to the notion of fatalism is the value that Mexicans put on flexibility, both in behaviour and use of time. What counts as being 'on time' can be mediated by unexpected events beyond one's control. Organisational tasks in the capital, Mexico City, for example, are often slowed by structural processes such as government bureaucracy or infrastructural constraints such as traffic congestion and public transport delays. On the day of a '*manifestacion*' (public protest), the city is thrown into gridlock and it is expected that anyone with an appointment will arrive late, if at all. Jones (2004) observes that Latin Americans 'do not internalise time pressure the way many northern Europeans and North Americans do [and therefore] these frustrations are perceived differently. They are rolled into the process rather than being confronted as hurdles that must be overcome' (p.451). As Roy (2003) argues, "Mexican nature seems more than merely accepting of the inevitable. Much of Mexican folk wisdom ...seem(s) to relish the challenge of finding happiness in the face of adversity" (p. 232). '*La fiesta*' (literally, 'the party') is a form of therapy for reducing the strains and stresses of everyday life.

As a consequence of the Mexican belief that much is out of their control, deadlines are considered arbitrary, and time is measured by the task rather than the clock. To some extent, this is also a reflection of Mexicans' respect for relationships over task. In work and social life, therefore, the generation and implementation of carefully planned work or personal strategies is not common, unlike in Europe or North America; however, creativity is prized. This has implications for foreign researchers used to carrying out investigations according to precise and rigorous research protocols.

In summary, an ethnographic approach is appropriate for our study because little is known about the occupation of public relations from the perspective of those working in it, especially in Mexico, and the emic approach of the ethnographic orientation enables an understanding of this cultural group on its own terms and using its own constructs (Earley and Singh, 1995). Furthermore, this qualitative approach is closely aligned with the characteristics of Mexican culture, that is, it is flexible, able to be adapted to suit changing circumstances, and it pursues a greater understanding of human relationships especially the interpersonal, because it allows researchers to get up close to the people they are studying and get involved with them" (Daymon and Holloway, 2002, 5). We move now to describe the process of undertaking this research which aimed to explore the occupation of public relations in Mexico City. We note how cultural influences informed each stage of the research.

#### **The Research Site**

In 2006, the newly re-formed Mexican Association of Public Relations Professionals (PRO RP) conducted the first annual study of the public relations industry in Mexico (PRO RP, 2007). This study suggested that there 98 agencies dedicated to offering Public Relations services throughout the country. 12% of these agencies were created in or before the 1980s and 42% created in the 1990s, mostly between 1995 and 2000. In 2006, the public relations industry in Mexico generated a total of 2,252 jobs divided into the varying levels of account executive, account director, supervisor, administrative support

and production. Out of this total, sixty per cent of practitioners were on permanent contracts whilst the remaining 40% were contracted on a project basis. 63% of practitioners are women whilst 37% are men. The areas of expertise most in demand in Mexico today are corporate public relations (reported to be offered by 72% of agencies in Mexico), social responsibility, media relations, issues and crisis management, integrated marketing communication, events, fashion public relations, and lobbying.

### **Developing familiarity with the field**

It was primarily through serendipity and indirect access to *palanca* that we were able to enter the field in which research took place. All primary research was carried out by the first author, a Spanish speaker, with the second author remaining in the UK, involved in providing methodological guidance and insights into interpretation of the data. Our first interactions with the cultural life of Mexico occurred when the first author attended an academic conference in Oaxaca, Mexico. Here the local conference organiser offered himself as a guide to the cultural sites of the city, thus sparking in us an enthusiasm for the people and artefacts of Mexico. We therefore decided to focus on Mexico for our research into the occupation of public relations. From the start, as well as throughout the investigation, interpersonal networks played a major role in providing us with access to our site of study. Indirect contacts led to the first author being offered both work and accommodation: a one year appointment as a communication advisor and coordinator in Mexico City, and accommodation, first, with a family in Mexico City, and later with other young practitioners also working within marketing, communications and international relations. Our involvement as ethnographers was therefore in both work and social contexts.

Prior to arriving in Mexico, we sent out emails requesting information, meetings and interviews but these were mainly ignored, perhaps indicative of *desconfianza* because relationships had not yet been built. Unlike many qualitative researchers, therefore, we were unable to develop and pilot an interview guide in advance. However, in order to develop expertise in conducting research as an 'insider', and to gain sensitivity in surfacing the assumptions underlying occupational practices, the first author spent a week as a participant-observer in a British public relations consultancy, where a research diary was kept and informal interviews were carried out. With hindsight, this strategy could have been considered inappropriate as studies indicate that there are differences between Western and Latin American public relations practices (Sharpe & Simoes, 1996; Sharlach, 1993; Molleda, 2001; Aparecida Ferrari, 2004; Molleda & Moreno, 2006). In Latin America, historically access to information has been restricted and as a consequence Mexico has developed a culture in which people are not comfortable with sharing information. This has led to an asymmetrical worldview with regard to communication and, subsequently, the personal influence model of public relations has flourished (Sriramesh, Kim & Takasaki, 1999). Given this contrast with the British environment where access to information is easier, it could be argued that this pilot observation in the UK offered little to inform the larger study in Mexico. However, this short period of involvement with practitioners illustrated some of the challenges of informal observation, especially the difficulty of probing ambiguities and gaining greater clarification with practitioners who were often too busy to converse because of tight client deadlines.



Therefore, it was decided that formal interviews would need to form a major element of the methodology because these can be officially scheduled in advance into practitioners' diaries and thus create a discrete space for exploration.

Prior to arriving in Mexico, we had established that the research design would involve two primary stages consisting of interviewing and observing. However, once in the field, opportunity together with the need to be adaptable to both research demands and Mexican cultural characteristics led to our research taking on the form of three interactive stages consisting of ongoing 'dislocated' participant observation, ongoing in-depth interviews, and follow-up, explanatory observations coupled with document analysis. These stages are described next.

### **Communicating with *Simpatia* and *Confianza***

**Observations.** Living and working with locals provided the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of Mexican life, and to investigate public relations by taking on the role of a 'dislocated participant observer' (Banerjee and Linstead 2004). It is from such a position that creative insights often emerge in research (Lofland 1971). Being 'familiar' with the research area (because of the first author's previous experience as a public relations practitioner herself) enabled her to share an insider's interpretations of particular patterns of experience, principally those relating to the practice and occupation of public relations. At the same time, she was also a 'stranger' (from another country) which enabled her to gain enough distance from the phenomena to be able to interpret the rules and norms that are socially constructed in Mexico in a way that, hopefully, is comprehensible to culturally different others, i.e. the readers of this paper.

The purpose of the observation technique was to appreciate the wider and more general contexts in which public relations operates, including the lifeworlds of practitioners. This meant familiarising ourselves with the Mexican culture, how Mexicans view life, and how they behave at work and socially. To this end, observations were carried out within the first author's workplace (the British Embassy in Mexico City), and at a range of both large and intimate social events. Further shorter observations were undertaken within two consultancies and two in-house departments. A period of intensive observation also took place at a 4-day conference of public relations professionals organised in Guadalajara by the RELAPO (The Association of Public Relations Practitioners of the West Coast).

Work at the British Embassy in Mexico City was conducted primarily in English; nevertheless, public relations activities, primarily media relations, were carried out by local Mexicans, mostly working in Spanish. The first author had first-hand experience of coordinating embassy receptions, meetings and visits which required tailoring quintessentially 'British' events to the cultural expectations of the Mexican guests. She also prepared briefings, observed one-to-one media interviews and acted as representative for the Embassy at some regional press events. Due to the obvious British influence in the day to day working environment of the Embassy, observations here did not form a core part of the research but were useful for comparisons with how work was conducted at the other sites of observation, i.e. consultancies and in-house departments. Furthermore,

as a locally engaged employee, the first author was regarded by the majority of Mexican colleagues as ‘one of them’ and this led to friendships, invitations and access to professional networks. Informal conversations that took place in both the working and social environment were rich in personal narratives. For example, nearing the end of writing up our research, a Mexican friend and practitioner who had participated in earlier research, hosted an informal dinner party at her house for a group of her public relations colleagues. The purpose of this ‘get-together’ was to provide an opportunity to informally discuss the key findings that had emerged from our study within the context of their particular day-to-day experiences. These anecdotes, together with our daily readings of the Mexican press and other textual and everyday observations, offered further insights into both occupational and societal cultures.

**Fieldwork diary.** Throughout the investigation in Mexico, the first author kept a fieldwork journal to record her thoughts, emotions and reactions to the experience, as well as to note any emerging themes, interpretations and consciousness of her biases. An emergent theme recorded in diary notes was ‘*Relaciones humanas*’, which referred to the human dimension of practice and the significance of social, or interpersonal, intelligence. We observed this phenomenon in a variety of contexts including during interviews, and in work and social settings, whereby practitioners placed great value on developing trust and reciprocity in all their dealings. For them, the ideal public relations practitioner was defined as an individual with cultural and social awareness, adaptability, honesty, and the ability to act as a bridge between organisations and their publics. A further theme related to how public relations practitioners are perceived in Mexican society, that is, as ‘*el ejecutivo con la mano fria*’: someone whose hand has frozen into the shape of holding a glass as a result of attending so many parties.

The following extract reveals how one event was recorded in the fieldwork diary.

**Figure 1: Diary extract from formal practitioner observation**

**XXV CONFIARP Conference ‘Relaciones Públicas, Punto de Reencuentro de América Latina’, 17, 18, 19 and 20th November 2004.**

Hosted by RELAPO (Association of Public Relations Practitioners of the West Coast), Hotel Plaza Diana, Guadalajara, Jalisco, México.

Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2004 09:00 hrs. Sesión Inaugural  
Flags representing all nations of Latin America were evident on the stage. Members of the organising committee had paraded in from the back of the auditorium and key members were now sat as a panel on the stage in front of big screen displaying “XXV CONFIARP Conference “Relaciones Públicas, Punto de Reencuentro de América Latina””.

I chose a seat towards the end of the row on the right about half-way back. Main auditorium about 3/4s full. I sat with a (female) PR Mexican practitioner I had met the day before and 3 practitioners (2 female, 1 male) who were visiting from Nicaragua.

Inaugural speech delivered by Carlos Brambilla Navarro (President, RELAPO) stood at the podium on the main stage to the left...

Summary of speech:

One of the tasks identified was “to dignify a profession” whose roots could be traced back to the earliest stages of humanity. In spite of the increasing levels of technology in society today, were still needed.

Remembered great “respect” that ancient Mexicans had for tradition. RELAPO uses the term ‘*Huehuetlatolli*’ to describe their approach to public relations.

“*Huehuetlatolli*’ has its roots in the Aztec language, ‘*Nahutal*’: ‘*Huehuetl*’ meaning ‘ancient’ or ‘old’ and ‘*Tlatolli*’ meaning ‘word’.

The term refers to the figure in Aztec society whose responsibility it was to pass on ethical values and wisdom to the public...

***Interviews and sampling.*** We have already noted that in Mexico there is a greater affinity with qualitative research than quantitative, and interviewing in particular seems to align well with Mexican cultural characteristics. Semi-structured interviews, as ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Bingham and Moore 1959), enable conversational partnerships to be developed, correlating with the Mexican desire to build closer proximity with relevant others. We selected this method also because of its ability to enable us to probe and clarify, and to allow interviewees to articulate the topics and experiences of interest to them rather than those we would have prioritised from our own European lens. Such collaborative qualities of the interview method align with the Mexican cultural characteristics of *simpatia* and flexibility, thus aiding the building of trust on which close interpersonal relationships are founded.

Through primarily convenience sampling (Bryman 2008), whereby introductions from one practitioner led to our approaching another, we interviewed a total of 33 public relations practitioners, all native Mexicans. *Confianza*, trust, is a key factor in business relationships in Latin America, and therefore access to personal networks usually occurs through introductions or an intermediary with appropriate *palanca*, power based on interpersonal networks. Drawing on the cultural norm of *palanca* to our advantage, we used some interviewees to play a crucial role as ‘gatekeepers’ in recruiting further participants (Lindsey and Braithwaite, 1996). Because we met the majority of participants as a result of conversations shared earlier with their colleagues and acquaintances, it was easier to develop a mutual understanding with participants from the beginning.

Our list of interviewees stemmed originally from the contacts of the head of the Mexican Academy of Public Relations, and then extended onwards to their contacts. It could be argued, therefore, that our research offers only a partial view of public relations in

Mexico, i.e. from the perspective of an elite group. However, some public relations researchers (Moreno and Molleda, 2006; Bardhan, 2003) claim that interviewing ‘elites’ within the profession offers the advantage that they have a more critical vision of the work and of the role of the researcher, have more experience and mobility within an organisation and are more willing to assist with the goals of the research. In this study, however, because it was important to consider as wide a variety of experiences as possible, we ensured that our sample included a variety of ages, expertise in consultancies or in-house, different sectors of public relations, both men and women, and a range of levels of role (i.e. from young executives to more experienced managers) (See Table One). We chose individuals based on the opportunity that emerged to carry out the interview in the first place (Miles and Huberman 1994) as well as participants who were willing to be involved in the project.

Although our sample size for interviews is small, formal interviews were supplemented with informal conversations which took place at professional social events; therefore, we interacted informally with a much larger number of public relations practitioners.

**Table 1. The Sample of Interviewees**

	<b>In-house</b>	<b>Consultancy</b>	<b>Freelance</b>
<b>Number of interviewees</b>	2 Males 1 Female	3 Males	1 Male 2 Females
<b>Age</b>	20, 40, 60	20, 30, 50	40, 50, 60
<b>Role</b>	2 Directors 1 Executive	2 Directors 1 Executive	3 Freelance consultants
<b>Specialism</b>	* Corporate PR  * Industrial Relations/Social Comm.  * International Relations/Education	* Marketing PR  * Corporate Comms.  * Crisis Comms.	* Marketing PR  * Corporate Comms.  * Events  * Media Relations
<b>Education</b>	3 Undergrad. degree	3 Undergrad. degree	2 Undergrad degree 1 No qualification
<b>Work abroad</b>	2 worked in UK	2 in Multinationals 1 in USA	1 in USA 1 in Europe and UK 1 no experience

The central purpose of the interviews was to explore the dimensions and facets of practitioner lifeworld at the centre of the occupational culture. A person’s life is rooted in the wider community, however, and encouraging participants to share elements of their working life histories revealed not only the details of each practitioner’s life, but also important aspects of occupational and national culture (Spradley, 1979; Nixon, 2003). The interview guide featured questions concerning the following topics, each in relation to the practitioner and the occupation as a whole.

- Values.

- Attitudes.
- Characteristics.
- Formal and informal roles e.g. practitioner involvement in social or community actions where the practitioner applies public relations skills.
- Behaviours, including a typical work day
- Relationships: working, professional and social
- Occupational identity.

Prior to arriving in Mexico, we had developed interview questions based on our readings about Mexico as a society, public relations as a practice, and occupational culture as a generic concept. However, in line with the principles of qualitative research, we adapted our questions to encompass the themes emerging from our observations and early interviews. For example, the research was carried out during the term of the newly elected government after more than 70 years of one party rule. Several of the participants, therefore, were keen to situate their professional experiences within the wider socio-political context, noting the contribution of their profession to the emerging democracy. They saw the role of the authentic practitioner as one involved in promoting dialogue and more equitable relationships in all aspects of their occupational lifeworld. Our interviews, therefore, pursued themes such as the perceived relationship between the transition to democracy and the role of public relations in promoting transparency, access to information and a sense of trust in political institutions and those of contemporary capitalism. The interviews thus became '*active*' (Holsten and Gubrium, 1995) and narrative in nature as research progressed.

The interviews were sometimes carried out informally or '*creatively*' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995; Riege, 2003), as opportunities to gather data presented themselves that were too good to miss. The most fruitful data was obtained from interviews which took place over breakfast, lunch or coffee or in participants' homes. Such interviews were revealing not only in terms of the conversational data, but also of the ways in which participants interacted with the researcher (Nixon, 2003). For example, following an interview with the director of public relations at one of the public universities, we were taken to view an art exhibition of work by a member of his family. Such experiences and ad hoc conversations were invaluable in shaping our interpretation of the occupational culture of public relations in Mexico. Yet it was not straight forward to 'record' all of this information in situ. Instead, it required full and constant concentration and mental processing of what was being said and then scribbling down everything it was possible to remember at the earliest opportunity afterwards.

Mastery of the language spoken in the field of study not only provides a crucial means of building rapport and trust with participants but also influences the ways in which researchers collect data, address issues and interpret phenomena (Marschan-Piekkari and Reis 2004, Usunier 1998). That the first author speaks fluent Spanish enabled her to capture various concepts and associations that, as social constructions, are particular to Spanish-speaking contexts. However, her familiarity with '*castellano*', the Spanish spoken in Spain, did not always extend to many of the '*dichos*', the colloquial expressions used on a daily basis in Mexico City. These are specific to Mexican culture,

in some cases specific to particular regions of the country, extending back into early European and pre-Colombian Native American civilizations (Roy 2003). To gain clarification and ensure accuracy, the first author asked questions about expressions and emerging themes to participants, especially those with whom she had formed friendship bonds. Each interview was transcribed in Spanish and the data was also analysed from the original Spanish, with English translation not occurring until a later stage of writing up. Following the first diary entry and practitioner interview, transcription and data analysis began, continuing in a cyclical fashion with ongoing interviewing, observing and reading of the literature.

**Document Analysis.** Analysis of media such as newspapers and magazines together with professional documents helped us to understand how the news was reported, and also the wider picture such as the intersection of politics, society, public relations and every day life in Mexico. It was also important to explore how public relations and related disciplines were portrayed in the media. The society pages of newspapers, for example, were significant. Publications produced by the professional associations were also reviewed.

In summary, our choice of research methods was informed by the societal culture of the research site, and arose from creative discovery as much as research design (Riege 2003), thus being relevant to the research focus as well as its locale (Tayeb 2001). Throughout our collection of the primary data, we sought to be *simpatica* and build *confianza* with all our research participants. That participants were often more concerned to spend time in building a communicative relationship with us than getting other tasks done worked to our advantage in collecting data; once in the middle of an interview, participants waived aside other tasks. On the other hand, the arbitrary nature of time in Mexico also disadvantaged us in that it was difficult to plan ahead and thus our original timetable for completion of research had to be extended. We used the *palanca* of others to aid our access but also employed that which we ourselves were perceived to hold as European scholars, in order to gain acceptance of the aims of our research project and therefore participation. We summarise below our research techniques and their benefits in relation to undertaking research in Mexico.

**Table 2: Methods of data collection**

	<b>Observation</b>	<b>Interviews</b>	<b>Fieldwork Diary</b>	<b>Document Analysis</b>
<b>Benefits to this study</b>	Allows researcher as ‘dislocated’ participant in the practitioner lifeworld to see first hand the behaviours and artifacts of occupational culture and way of life in Mexico City.	Provides a means for researcher to probe and encourage interviewees to articulate the topics and experiences of interest to them.	Allows researcher to record thoughts, emotions and reactions to the experience, to note emerging themes, interpretations and researcher bias, and to track commonalities/differences across data sources.	Offers a mediated view of Mexican current affairs and issues.

### **Seeking Transparency**

In this discussion, we have endeavoured to make transparent the process through which we conducted our inquiry, in line with an ethnographic orientation. However, this in itself is insufficient to allow the reader to make his or her own judgement about the trustworthiness and credibility of our methodology in relation to our research aims. A key concern for qualitative researchers is how to overcome the problem of the data collection, interpretation and research account being tainted by the qualities of the researcher, such as their cultural baggage and subjectivities (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Cunliffe, 2003). Although this is a problem for all types of inquiry because all knowledge is historically and culturally situated, a researcher who employs ethnographic techniques endeavours to offer a reflexive account that involves some self-scrutiny; this informs the reader of what it is that s/he brings to the research in terms of cultural biases, motivations and personal characteristics. To some extent, it also illuminates how the researcher's own pre-understanding has not only influenced - but also enabled - the development of the interpretations in conjunction with research participants. Pompper (2005), writing about the need to study difference in relation to *inter alia* culture in public relations research, states that public relations research is, on the whole, impoverished in that it is rare for researchers to self-disclose or to describe 'efforts to address difference in order to minimize potential bias [...] Consequently, authors may have unknowingly limited their findings' explanatory power by failing to discuss their own standpoint' (2005, 152).

Our opportunities for discovery and understanding have been strongly shaped by our professional backgrounds, and our previous exposure to different cultures and languages. The first author is British, a novice academic and former public relations practitioner. She employed the outlined ethnographic methods as part of her doctoral study, under the supervision of the second author, a British-New Zealander with experience as both a public relations manager and an academic. The first author was motivated initially to undertake this study because of her ability to speak Spanish and desire to investigate public relations in a Spanish-speaking, Latin American country. The second author, a speaker of English only, was involved particularly in guidance over the choice of location, cultural approach, methodology and interpretation of the data. As both authors have lived abroad (the first author in 3 countries, the second in five) and travelled extensively, their experiences have drawn them naturally towards a preference for a cultural approach to understanding how people make sense of their worlds. The goal of both authors is to develop greater cultural sensitivities, and to communicate this through their writing and teaching.

Our concern in this paper has been to illustrate how the culture of Mexico influenced our research process at the stages of research design and data collection. When our ideas are developed further following the Radical Roundtable, we wish to go on to draw attention to issues of selectivity and ethics in relation to carrying out research as cultural 'insiders'.

- THE END -

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