The public relations practitioner as cultural intermediary assignment

Sociology

Sir William L. Bragg said, " The important thing in science is not so much to obtain new facts as to discover new ways of thinking about them. ". Although this quotation is open to much discussion, it seems appropriate when debating the topic of non-Western public relations practice in which the practitioner is acting as a cultural intermediary.

This implicates that public relations as a science, and in practice, needs to re-examine its approach towards the publics (organizational and social) in which it functions. But why? Is it merely the foundation for another approach to research the practice of public relations, or does it perhaps hold the core essence of public relations practice in a post-modern ideology? The first and most obvious answer is globalization. The term globalization is simplified by Smith & Smith (2002: Online) as " a shorthand way of describing the spread and connectedness of production, communication and technologies across the world.

That spread has involved the interlacing of economic and cultural activity". This brings the student to the second aspect to answer the questions posed, namely culture. With organizations and society being able to communicate and trade across geographical borders almost instantaneously (via amongst others, satellite, the internet and email), the communicator are also almost instantaneously exposed to different cultures – some of whose customs might have been previously completely unknown to the communicator.

Hannerz (2001: 58) descriptively explains the marriage of globalization and culture: " It is this particular emphasis (culture), entailing a conception of the organization of cultural diversity as a global mosaic of bounded units, which

is most dubious in a world that is to a great extent characterized by mobility and mixture. " Hannerz' description of a " global mosaic of bounded units" is particularly applicable to contemporary South Africa.

Viewed micro-leveled to the international arena, it is the student's opinion that the internal cultural structures of South Africa can be perceived as a true representation of a multi-national entity representing a " global community" within its geographical borders. This opinion is based on the fact that South Africa acknowledges eleven official languages; representing eleven officially recognized cultural identities. The result is that, within one organizational structure, one can easily encounter all eleven different cultures in one day.

A situation which is partly due to migration as a result of socio-economic upliftment and development over the past fourteen years since the first democratic election, and which prompt the subsequent question: does contemporary South Africa, in principle, differ that much from the international arena? In this assignment, the student will discuss the question(s) posed by examining globalization and the post-modern society, focusing on the cultural aspects of communicating across cultures and how it impacts equally on the communication skills of the public relations manager to its publics.

This approach will be based on the contemporary South African milieu with reference where necessary to the international perspective. 2. Literature review The sources cited in this assignment, whether on-line or published, were sourced in relation to their authority regarding the subject. The student

attempted to consult as many South African researchers as possible since the topic of this assignment is embedded in contemporary public relations in South Africa.

Incorporated into this assignment are the international perceptions and opinions of researchers such as Hannerz, Lull, Samovar and Porter, and Friedman all of which is internationally regarded as authoritarians in the field of globalization and multi-cultural research. 3. Theoretical approach Gudykunst (1993: 35-37) argue that, with respect to human nature, communication is influenced by culture and group memberships, as well as structural, situational, and environmental factors.

However, " the process underlying communication between people from different groups (including cultures and ethnicities) is the same as the process underlying communication between members of the same group. " This statement indicates that when approaching cultural studies, the principle in which the studies are approached, could well be the same approach as to any of the human sciences such as psychological, sociological, anthropological, and most importantly, communication studies. 3. 1 Theoretical perspective

Papastefanou (2008: 5-10) list three major theoretical perspectives in the study of social reality, namely functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. In brief, these theories are depicted in table 1: Table 1: Functionalism, Conflict and Symbolic Interactionism Theories FunctionalismConflictSymbolic Interactionism Functionalism is built upon

twin emphases: application of the scientific method to the objective social world and use of an analogy between the individual organism and society.

The emphasis on scientific method leads to the assertion that one can study the social world in the same ways as one study the physical world. Functionalists see the social world as " objectively real," as observable with such techniques as social surveys and interviews. The conflict theory has its roots in the ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883. The Marxist, conflict approach emphasizes a materialist interpretation of history, a dialectical method of analysis, a critical stance toward existing social arrangements, and a political program of revolution or, at least, reform.

Marxists believe that social theory and political practice are dialectically intertwined, with theory enhanced by political involvement and with political practice necessarily guided by theory. Interactionism focus on the subjective aspects of social life, rather than on objective, macro-structural aspects of social systems. One reason for this focus is that interactionists base their theoretical perspective on their image of humans, rather than on their image of society. Interactionists tend to study social interaction through participant observation, rather than surveys and interviews. http://web. grinnell. edu/courses/soc/s00/soc111-01/IntroTheories. html) In relation to multi-cultural research, the student proposes the conflict perspective as a feasible perspective. Conflict theorists find social conflict between any groups in which the potential for inequality exists: racial, gender, religious, political, and economic. The conflict perspective, which originated primarily out of Karl

Marx's writings on class struggles, presents society in a different light than do the functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspectives.

While these latter perspectives focus on the positive aspects of society that contribute to its stability, the conflict perspective focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society. Unlike functionalists who defend the status quo, avoid social change, and believe people cooperate to effect social order, conflict theorists challenge the status quo, encourage social change (even when this means social revolution), and believe rich and powerful people force social order on the poor and the weak. The conflict perspective expanded Marx's idea that the key conflict in society was strictly economic.

Conflict theorists take note of the fact that unequal groups usually have conflicting values and agendas, causing them to compete against one another. This constant competition between groups forms the basis for the ever-changing nature of society. Critics of the conflict perspective point to its overly negative view of society. The theory ultimately attributes humanitarian efforts, altruism, democracy, civil rights, and other positive aspects of society to capitalistic designs to control the masses, not to inherent interests in preserving society and social order. www. cliffsnotes. com). 3. 2 Research approach When researching multi-cultural communication, three approaches are dominant, namely the interpretive, critical and traditional approaches. Although the interpretive perspective are not the only approach advocated, Hall, as quoted by Papastefanou (2008: 8), stated that concepts of culture are mostly, with regards to culture,

interpretive in nature, because people are assumed to socially construct or interpret what is meaningful in their interactions with others.

It is the student's opinion that if a topic such as " the role of the public relations practitioner as cultural intermediary" is researched, the interpretive approach would be the most applicable. In such an approach, culture as an entity should be dually researched: firstly from the interpretation of the public relations practitioner's own culture, and secondly, from the ability of the public relations practitioner to interpret the culture of its publics, which in this instance would relate to a different culture than that of his or her own.

This is further illustrated by Leary and Miller (2000: 148): " Social norms also influence people's self presentations. When clear consensus exists about how one ought to behave in a particular situation, people typically try to ensure that their impressions are consistent with those norms". Within the South African context, some scholars might argue that the critical approach be more appropriate due to the historical injustices of apartheid which related to prevailing power struggles throughout the South African communities and cultures.

Ramphele (2008: 121) notes that there is a notion of " power as finite. Other people are seen as competitors for this scarce and limited resource. Such an understanding of power leads to intolerance of people with different views. This notion of power is predicated on the idea of ' power as a right to do what one wants' rather than ' power as a capacity to act'. Power as ' right' is an entitlement that excludes other. It is more about control of others than about enabling participatory decision-making. "

This however, also underlines the student's conviction that the interpretive approach remains a suitable approach to multi-cultural studies within the South African context, because by being able to interpret multi-cultures, their actions and motivations, the public relations practitioner will be able to communicate to his or her publics in a suitable and appropriate manner. Following, the student will briefly discuss the interpretive approach and hermeneutics as a metatheory when researching multi-cultural communication. 3. 2. 1 Interpretive approach

According to De Vos, Schulze and Patel (2005: 6), interpretive social science can be traced to the work of German sociologist, Max Webber (1854-1920) and German philosopher, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Dilthey defined two fundamentally different types of science: the natural sciences and the human sciences. Natural sciences are based on abstract explanations (Erklarung) and human sciences are based on empathic understanding (Verstehen). Babbie and Mouton (2001: 28) explains it as follows: " Not the human body, but the human mind or consciousness forms the basis for the presumed analogy between the study of man and the study of society".

Thus, understanding and not explaining people/culture. Hall in Papastefanou (2007: 21) explains that the goal of those working from the interpretive perspective is to be able to explain what sense certain acts make and how people are able to create shared meaning and coordinate their actions. Knowledge and understanding are sufficient goals in, and of themselves. According to Henning in Papastefanou (2007: 21), the interpretive paradigm states knowledge as constructed not only by observable phenomena, but

also by descriptions of people's intentions, beliefs, values and reason, meaning making and self-understanding.

Interpretivist knowledge is dispersed and distributed – a researcher has to look at different places and at different things in order to understand a phenomenon. That is why interpretivist research is a communal process, informed by participating practitioners and scrutinised and/or endorsed by others. " Observable phenomena" transcribe to the students topic as multi-cultures. The dynamics of these cultures manifests in " people's intentions, beliefs, values and reason, meaning making and self-understanding". Thus, the way in which multi-cultures is observed and interpreted.

The researcher proposes that during the process of observation and subsequent interpretation, culture acts as a major interpretive agent. There are several related metatheories to interpretivism such as hermeneutics , symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology. Babbie and Mouton (2001: 33) conclude that regardless of the related metatheory, the primary aim of interpretivism stays directed towards understanding: " understanding of individuals in terms of their own interpretations of reality and understanding of society in terms of the meanings which people ascribe to the social practices in that society".

Following will be a discussion of hermeneutics as a related metatheory to interpretivism. 3. 2. 1. 1 Hermeneutics as a metatheory The term " hermeneutics" is defined as " the science and methodology of interpreting texts" by the Encarta Dictionary (S. a.). De Vos, Schultze and Patel (2005: 6) states only hermeneutics as a related metatheory to interpretive social

science, but Babbie and Mouton (2001: 30) lists several related metatheories such as hermeneutics, symbolic interactionism, and ethnomethodology.

In the process of understanding the nature of human inquiry, Dilthey used the term " hermeneutics" increasingly. " In the same way that we understand the meaning of texts through interpretation, we should aim to interpret the ideas, purposes and other mental states expressed in the world of human action" (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 31). De Vos, Schultze and Patel (2005: 7) agree that " true meaning is rarely simple or obvious on the surface; one reaches it only through a detailed study of the text, contemplating its many messages and seeking the connections among its parts".

Babbie and Mouton (2001: 33) further states that in an idealist epistemology, data collection should not be confined to observable behaviour, but should also include descriptions of people's intentions, meanings, and reasons. Culture in this instance will substitute " people" in Babbie and Mouton's definition. The emphasis thus is on interpretive understanding of the culture. Concluded from the information stated above, an interpretive approach would be most suitable to research the role of the public relations manager as cultural intermediary. . Postmodernism, globalization and culture in communication: a brief discussion 4. 1 Postmodern communication At approximately the same time that South Africa proceeded to become a democracy, a new movement, postmodernism, emerged. Postmodernism embodies a complicated term, which has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980's and is a general, wide-ranging term

which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, cultural and literary criticism, and communication.

Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific (objective) efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly sceptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person.

Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal. According to Steyn (2002: 25), the postmodernism approach to society (and the individual's place in it) comprises many different elements of which the most prominent aspect is the fragmented nature of society. Postmodernism is, to a large extent, a rejection of modernism. Whilst modernism is optimistic about the future and embraces progress and humanist value, postmodernism take a cynical approach towards these " values".

In addition, De Vos, Schultze and Patel (2005: 8) emphasize that modernism has confidence in technology and science whilst postmodernism attacks this faith in science " by questioning its capacity to generate truth, in part because, like all human communications, it is dependent on language, which is socially constructed, and, as such, distorts reality". Considering the above and the questions posed in the introduction of this assignment, it could be

argued that the disarray in the contemporary corporate society is largely due to the postmodern reflection on society and not as such due to any hierarchal incompetence.

For the past three decades, postmodernism dominated the cultural and intellectual scene in many fields throughout the world. The postmodern assault produced new social and political theories, as well as theoretical attempts to define the multifaceted aspects of the postmodern phenomenon itself, which in turn, seems aptly applicable to the current multi-cultural experience in South Africa. 4. 2 Globalization and communication Globalization refers to " the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole" (www. sociology. emory. du). In thought and action, it makes the world a single place. What it means to live in this place, and how it must be ordered, become universal questions. These questions receive different answers from individuals and societies that define their position in relation to both a system of societies and the shared properties of humankind from very different perspectives. Globalization broadly refers to the expansion of global linkages, the organization of social life on a global scale, and the growth of a global consciousness, hence to the consolidation of a world society.

In concept, globalization is, contrary to contemporary belief, not a new one. The modern world-system originated around 1500. In parts of Western Europe, a long-term crisis of feudalism gave way to technological innovation and the rise of market institutions. Advances in production and incentives for long-distance trade stimulated Europeans to reach other parts of the globe.

Superior military strength and means of transportation enabled them to establish economic ties with other regions that favoured the accumulation of wealth in the European core.

While the Europeans started with only small advantages, they exploited these to reshape the world in their capitalist image. The world as a whole is now devoted to endless accumulation and profit seeking on the basis of exchange in a market that treats goods and labour alike as commodities. (www. sociology. emory. edu). The magnitude and the impact of globalization on world trade is illustrated by Friedman (2005: 181-182) who developed and interesting perspective that, due to globalization, the world has become " flat". In the last decade of the twentieth century, several parts of the world were making the transition from a closed economy to a free market system, such as China, India, Russia, and Eastern Europe. By 2000, the " global economic world," the amount of the world's population participating in global trade, reached six billion people, compared to 2. 5 billion in 1985. As it happened, this coincided with the digital revolution that was " flattening" the world, thus not only leveling the playing field, but also bringing that field directly to these new players".

Philosophers such as Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) predicted, if not recognized, globalization in the way society is experiencing it today, as early as the 1960's. It was during this time period when McLuhan both announced the existence of a " global village", and predicted the intensification of the world community to its present expression. " If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic

ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness? (McLuhan, as quoted by Kappelman, www. leaderu. com). All of this was supposed at a time when television was still in its infancy, and the personal computer was almost twenty years into the future. Globalization in its current status is largely due to interconnectedness via satellite and cable connection. The majority of mass- and interpersonal communication today is transmitted through the effective use of information technology. The result, according to Hannerz (2001: 62) is that a great many kinds of actors now operate, if not literally globally, then at least transnational.

There are more " ethnic diasporas" than ever before, dispersed membership groups, multinational business corporations and transnational occupational communities, each one engaged in " its own particular way in the management of some part of contemporary culture". Hannerz' view underlines the importance of a public relations practitioner acting as a cultural intermediary within a globalized society. 4. 3 Multi-cultural communication Ramphele (2008: 112-113) states that " all South Africans are newcomers to democracy. We (South Africans) must acknowledge our authoritarian political heritage.

It will not simply go away in the face of a democratic national constitution. Building a participatory, inclusive democratic culture is a long term process of cultural change. Schools, homes, communities and the workplace have distinctive and mutually supportive roles to play in this". Ramphele's

statement addresses the topic of this assignment in more than one aspect. Not only is South Africa as a democratic union in its infancy in comparison to global democratic practices, but is the way in which we approach, and are approached by the international community, a new-fangled experience.

South Africans as a whole have to deal with its own internal multi-cultural aspects, as well as the exposure to international cultures simultaneously, which is more apparent as to why a public relations manager should be able to act as a cultural intermediary. George (2003: Online) highlight this aspect, stating that by " understanding the cultural uniqueness of a country enables a public relations practitioner to identify the most effective message, format, channel of communication, and spokesperson to deliver that message. It is noticeable from the above that, in order to communicate effectively to its publics, the public relations practitioner must be able to understand and interpret multicultural identities. 4. 3. 1 Culture and cultural identities Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2007: 123-125) argues that cultural identity is a focal element in intercultural communication. An individual's culture shapes his or her understanding and expectations as to which is the correct communication practices for various social settings – some which may be appropriate to one culture, may be inappropriate in another. Issues of identity can be expected to remain – and perhaps become more – complex as multiculturalism increasingly characterizes contemporary society. It is clear, however, that the old understanding of a fixed cultural identity or ethnicity is outdated, and identity is rapidly becoming more of and " articulated negotiation between what you call yourself and what other people are willing to call you". But regardless of what form they may take or

how they are achieved, your identities will remain a consequence of culture. Cultural differences appear in many ways and in many forms along a set of key dimensions. Nolan (1999: 5-6) list six variables on which cultural differences can be distinguished: Perceptions: People from different cultures do not necessarily see the same things, even when everyone is looking in the same direction. Interpretations: People do not select, interpret, or remember what they see in the same way, even when they see the same thing. Facts: Because people from different cultures have different definitions of the situation, they use different pieces of information in their thinking.

Goals: People from different cultures may have quite different purposes or destinations in mind. Methods: Even when destinations are the same, people may have different ways of getting there. Values: People from different cultures apply very different standards in their evaluations of individuals, situations, behaviors and outcomes. Although Nolan's variables appear to be overtly simplified, these variables could be a good starting point when approaching multi-cultural studies. However, the most popular advance to cultural studies stems from the work of anthropologist, Edward T.

Hall who did pioneering work in multi-cultural research such as proxemics, a study of perception and the use of space between gender and culture. For example: there are important cultural rules and boundaries between the sexes, which mean we cannot move about as we would wish to think we can. Different cultures have differing norms and attitudes towards personal space and how closely people stand to each other when communicating. More intimate communications have different norms.

If someone breaks the norm in any given situation it might be interpreted as threatening or unfriendly. Hall also found that different cultures have different norms to do with time, friendship, business, written and oral agreements. Spatial zones are different for women and men. Women initially approach more closely, prefer side-by-side conversations, allow other women to be closer than men, whilst men have more face-to-face conversations, and tend to stand closer to women than women feel comfortable with. (http://www. onepine. info/mcult2. tm) More appropriate to this assignment though, is Hall's conceptualization of high and low context cultural factors. In essence, in a high-context culture, there are many contextual elements that help people to understand the rules. As a result, much is taken for granted. This can be very confusing for a person who does not understand the ' unwritten rules' of the specific culture. In a low-context culture, very little is taken for granted. Whilst this means that more explanation is needed, it also means there is less chance of misunderstanding, particularly when visitors are present.

The application of Hall's high- and low-context cultures is explained in table 2: Table 2: Hall's high and low context culture Factor High-context culture Low-context culture Overtness of messagesMany covert and implicit messages, with use of metaphor and reading between the linesMany overt and explicit messages that is simple and clear Locus of control and attribution for failureInner locus of control and personal acceptance for failure Outer locus of control and blame of others for failure Use of non-verbal ommunicationMuch nonverbal communicationMore focus on verbal communication than body language Expression of reactionReserved, inward

reactionsVisible, external, outward reaction Cohesion and separation of groupsStrong distinction between in-group and out-group Strong sense of familyFlexible and open grouping patterns, changing as needed People bonds Strong people bonds with affiliation to family and communityFragile bonds between people with little sense of loyalty Level of commitment to relationshipsHigh commitment to long-term relationships Relationship more important than taskLow commitment to relationship Task more important than relationships Flexibility of time Time is open and flexible Process is more important than productTime is highly organized Product is more important than process (http://changingminds. org/explanations/culture/hall_culture. htm) Applying the preceding two concepts as is to South Africa's multi-cultural community would be rather complicated. The diverse compilation of cultures in South Africa simply does not allow for a " yes or no" answer.

It would be required to analyze each of the eleven cultures in the country, including the free inflow of neighboring nationalities, in order to devise a suitable paradigm from which an applicable variable could be devised. This seems a rather daunting challenge. How then, to proceed to an acceptable, predictable, and definable course? Hannerz (2001: 58) suggest that " we need a counter-image to that of the cultural mosaic, one that does not take for granted the boundedness of cultures and their simple relationship to populations and territories, but allows as a point of departure a more open, interconnected world. " To achieve that, and to move above the constraints of a multi-cultural collective, the student consulted Lull's concept of a " superculture" (see fig. 1).

According to Lull (2001: 132-163), contemporary cultural conditions " appear to only exacerbate the confusion, isolation, and existential despair. The historically unparalleled development of communications technology and the sweep of globalization that surrounds us today are changing the very nature and meaning of culture. A superculture refers to a cultural mode that is above other modes, has a higher rank, quality and abundance than is reflected in other conceptions of culture. " It certainly exceeds the norms which typify and limit traditional ways of thinking about culture. Supercultures are composed in part of symbolic content that is made available by super media.

The question immediately rises as to how cultural identities, for instance those officially recognized within South Africa's geographical borders, fit into the concept of a superculture? The answer can be derived to from Lull's explanation: " The super culture is the cultural matrix that individuals create for themselves in a world where access to ' distant' cultural resources has expanded enormously. At the same time, however, the superculture embodies traditional or ' close' cultural resources too – the values and social practices characteristic of ' local' cultures as they are learned and reproduced by individuals and group. The essence of the supercultures resides in the dynamic interfaces that link and mediates the available cultural spheres. " (Lull, 2001: 132)

Figure 1: Major components of Lull's superculture (Lull, 2001: 139-157) To conclude the section on culture: in order to appropriately apply communication between multi-cultural identities, which in this instance

signify the public relation practitioner and his or her publics, the student propose the implementation of Grunig's two-way symmetrical model which " use communication to negotiate with publics, resolve conflict, and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its public(s). " (http://iml. jou. ufl. edu). 5. Conclusion Friedman (2005: 324-325) noted that " to reduce a country's economic performance to culture alone is ridiculous, but to analyze a country's economic performance without reference to culture, is equally ridiculous.

As the world goes flat (globalize) , and more and more of the tools of collaboration get distributed and commoditized, the gap between cultures that have the will, the way and the focus to quickly adopt these new tools and apply them, and those that do not, will matter more. The differences between the two will become more amplified. Cultures that is open and willing to change, have huge advantage in this world. " Not only is Friedman's statement applicable to a global economy, but is it also applicable to the global interaction of public relations practitioners. In addition, Jansoozi and Koper (2006: 219-225) states that " public relations communication techniques have been forced to change as a result of globalization. The biggest challenge for public relations practitioners will be crossing language and cultural barriers. Often the subtleties of cultural difference are overlooked in the multinational's own home country. Business organizations are realizing the importance of intercultural communication, even within the same national boundaries. Immigration and guest workers have altered the homogeneity of many countries and cultures. " It is within this framework (and with the support of quotations from authoritive source

quoted in this assignment) that the student concludes: a purely western form of public relations practices no longer exists. As a result of globalization and the multi-national exposure that accompanies globalization, the public relations practitioner has inevitably become, amongst other, a cultural intermediary.

The contemporary public relations practitioner's communication is no longer restrained to the geographical, economic and cultural boundaries of his or her own country. Not only is the public relations practitioner able to communicate instantaneously on a global magnitude, but it is required of the practitioner to understand and interpret the culture of the publics which he or she communicates with. Global interaction demands that the public relations practitioner be aware of and implement trans-national customs and practices in the communication process. 6. Recommendation Exploring a topic such as culture and the effects it has on the process of communication globally, opens to a vast field of research. There are several factors that need to be explored in such a research project.

For instance, the dynamics of a post-modern society, a globalized economic structure and the multi-cultural identities that accompanies such an economic structure, which all cannot possibly come to its fulfilment in a ten-page assignment. As Ihator (2000: 44) clearly states: " The recognition of the cultural patterns of the world may be one positive stem in the understanding of the global publics. It behooves, therefore, international PR practitioners and researchers to use knowledge gained from various academic disciplines to adequately and effectively communicate with global constituencies".

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