Diversity and inclusion in Australian public relations: Toward a multiple perspectives approach

Introduction

In November 2015, *the Guardian* featured a story on how the newly elected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed 15 men and 15 women of ethnically diverse backgrounds to his cabinet. He said he wanted to present Canada with ‘a cabinet that looks like Canada’ and when asked to explain his policy on gender parity, he quipped, ‘because it is 2015’.

Around the same time in Australia, social media were abuzz after a story on *Mumbrella* announced Leo Burnett’s appointment of five white males as senior creatives (see http://mumbrella.com.au/what-the-are-u-thinking-cindy-gallop-blasts-leo-burnett-sydneys-white-male-hires-330065). Long time British gender equality advocate Cindy Gallop did not mince her words on Twitter and criticised *Mumbrella* for featuring the story as a news item, and Leo Burnett for its appointment of white males.

In late October 2015, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) held its national conference in Hobart. With the theme ‘Huge Transformations’, its speaker list
featured prominent practitioners and scholars, who were all notably white Anglo-Saxon males and females.

These three events made me wonder why issues of gender and diversity continue to remain issues in multicultural Australia and elsewhere. I recalled a similar question posed by an undergraduate student in the late 1990s: ‘Marianne, why do we have to discuss gender and diversity in public relations when we went to school with students of different backgrounds?’ I replied, ‘Well, look around you and tell me what you see’. The class was predominantly Anglo-Saxon and female, with a handful of male students.

To contribute to rethinking public relations in Australia, I propose that we first examine our own identity – as educators and scholars – in the context of Australia’s struggles with its identity as a nation. How can public relations practitioners and educators, as producers of knowledge and public discourse comprising a fairly homogenous group, espouse diversity and inclusion? And, more broadly, how can we ensure the needs and views of multicultural Australia are adequately represented?

Postcolonial public relations scholars have examined the representation, or underrepresentation, of marginalised groups (Munshi and Kurian, 2005; Dutta and Pal, 2011) and issues of ‘race’ and ‘Whiteness’ (Munshi and Edwards, 2011). While
Pompper (2005) introduced critical race theory, the limited attention given to race issues in public relations scholarship urged Munshi and Edwards (2011) to suggest that PR privileges Whiteness in the way issues are framed. McKie and Munshi (2005) addressed the lack of diversity in the academy, agreeing with Lauf (2005) that most of the published scholars come from English-speaking countries, primarily the US. New Zealand-based scholars McKie and Munshi (2005) wondered whether mainstream public relations scholarship suffered from a review process that discriminated against international manuscripts. So when a Public Relations Review special issue on ‘global’ public relations that they edited attracted 30 submissions ‘from all over the world’, they lamented that none were from Asia. As such, the lack of diversity reveals public relations scholarship has suffered from limited cultural and theoretical perspectives.

Using a postcolonial feminist perspective, I present some experiences and memories from the past 26 years as a female migrant public relations academic in Australia. Postcolonial feminist theory argues that power relations, which can be manifested in representation, or lack thereof, need to be addressed and gendered colonial systems must be overthrown (Sison, 2014). Postcolonial feminist scholarship focuses on finding the voices of marginalised women or the ‘member of a subjugated group whose position has been hidden from history’ (Lewis and Mills, 2003: 10) to provide alternative and previously unheard viewpoints. Spivak’s (1988: 296)
‘unlearning project’ focused on articulating ‘that ideological formation by measuring silences’ – if necessary in the object of the investigation’. She proposed that scholars unlearn their privilege, learn from below, speak to rather than speak for the subalterns, and learn to critique postcolonial discourse. She worries that ‘if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow’ (1999: 274).

While I admittedly do not fit the character of a marginalised subaltern, being a privileged, well educated university academic, my reflections as an early migrant entering the Australian academy in the early 1990s will help us understand the trajectory of Australian public relations’ progress or lack thereof. Postcolonial self-reflexivity enables academics to question how we organise our teaching and research, and whether the way ‘we structure our conferences and decide who speaks (and doesn’t speak), about what, in the name of intellectual practices legitimize[s] the hegemony of Western power structures’ (Shome, 1996: 45).

I put myself in this context because I would like to express my voice as a migrant academic in a predominantly homogenous and elitist academy. I experiment on a form of narrative that is new to me but which I feel is important to demonstrate my argument: that Australian public relations education is a product of the country’s
struggles with its identity. Moving the public relations discipline forward requires more culturally diverse and aware faculty who can develop and champion a curriculum that embraces multiple and intercultural perspectives. If we expect diversity and inclusion in the industry, why can’t we expect the same in the academy?

This article is structured in the following manner. First I discuss autoethnography as a methodological approach, and then present some of the issues of identity in multicultural Australia. After a brief exposition on diversity in the Australian workplace and the public relations industry, I conclude with my thoughts on the future of public relations scholarship and practice in Australia.

Autoethnography: A voice from within

I heard about autoethnography from a colleague. I was intrigued because I wanted to tell my story, from my perspective as a migrant, as I think that is still missing in the public relations literature. But I was warned it is not just a personal narrative, it should be much more than that. I suggested the topic and approach to the editors without knowing really what is involved. They responded that it could be a ‘powerful’ contribution. I then hesitated because it was a totally new approach for me and given the imperative for academics to publish in high-ranking journals, I want to get the
paper accepted. From my previous ‘training’ in ‘conventional’ positivist social science approaches, which included a short stint with quantitative methods, I shifted to qualitative research. My move from quant to qual already horrified my former advisor! So I deliberated whether I should write a ‘safe’ piece or take the risk with a new approach. Because my argument is underpinned by a call for academics to get out of our comfort zones, I went for the latter. So I experiment with a new form of narrative, a blend of an autoethnographic account and a ‘third’ person account – the one I’m used to – that’s meant to be more ‘authoritative’ and I can’t yet let go.

Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno (the sociocultural connection), and -graphy (the application of the research process) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). As a ‘new’, perhaps ‘radical’, methodological approach, autoethnography is still contested. Debates exist between Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) ‘evocative autoethnography’ and Anderson’s (2006) ‘analytic autoethnography’. The former views the personal narrative and reflects a more literary approach. The latter reflects a scholar perhaps unwilling to let go of their positivist social science approach. As such, ‘analytical ethnography’ is a study where the researcher is: 1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in published texts, and (3) committed to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006: 373).
The use of memory as texts and in self-reflexive approaches is a form of cultural production that exposes the value of not only what is remembered but how it is remembered to ‘make sense of the present’ (Kuhn, 2000: 187). Although Kuhn’s work on cultural memory has been applied mostly in cinema and visual arts, she proposes that ‘personal memory operates in the cultural sphere’ as a means to inquire ‘how, and where [...] memories [are] produced and how people make use of memories in their daily lives’ (Kuhn, 2000: 283). She focuses on ‘memory text’ in her later work, which she defines as:

A montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, ‘snapshots’ and flashes that can generate a feeling of synchrony: remembered events seem to be outside any linear time frame or may refuse to be easily anchored to ‘historical’ time. In the memory text, events often appear to have been plucked at random from a paradigm of memories and assembled in a mode of narration in which causality is not, if apparent at all, a prominent feature. (Kuhn, 2010: 299)

While my narrative is neither visual nor cinematic, I use memory texts to highlight diversity and inclusion issues in public relations education in Australia.
Few public relations scholars have attempted this methodology. Pompper (2010) explored her concerns as a white person writing about women of colour; she combined a reflexive narrative with interviews about her identity as a white researcher. James (2012) employed autoethnography to exemplify the ‘messy’ and complex world of a public relations practitioner; her narrative of client work provided insights on how her positioning framework helped design a strategy but proved difficult when applied to organisational circumstances. Both works employ analytic autoethnography in such a way that one’s experience and story are used in lieu of the ‘case study’. These types of narratives challenge the normative and positivist approaches in public relations research and contribute to a richer understanding of the discipline. This present paper adds a postcolonial perspective to autoethnography, which has not been previously employed in public relations. By applying a postcolonial frame to autoethnography, ‘we create a space that allows for one to engage both the story and its story’ (Pathak, 2010: 7).

This paper combines both forms proposed by Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Anderson (2006). To me this is a new form because I have yet to ‘undo’ years of training where I use the ‘third person, objective’ voice. To assist my transition, I attempt to demonstrate how a multiple perspectives approach is integral to enacting inclusion and diversity in the academy. It is my hope that in ‘rethinking public relations’, ‘methodological
experimentation’ is acceptable within the mainstream conventions of scholarship and publication.

The Australian context: Identity and belonging

I was sitting in a taxi on the way from a work function and it was late. The driver was an elderly, white gentleman with a kind voice. It must’ve been the early 1990s. He asked, ‘Where are you from?’ I replied, ‘Originally, from the Philippines’. He probed further, ‘How long have you been here?’ I said, ‘A couple of years’. He continued to ask about my work and if I ‘liked it here’. I remarked, ‘Yes I did. It’s much better than the US’. At that time, I felt Australia, and Melbourne in particular, was 15 years behind the US. But, for me, it was this ‘old world charm’ mixed with its modernity that made Melbourne the right compromise between living in the Philippines and the US. He then asked, ‘Love, you barrack for any team?’ Still familiarising myself with the accent and Australian slang, I asked, ‘I’m sorry, what did you mean?’ He chuckled and repeated it more clearly this time, ‘Which footy, I mean football, team do you barrack for, support?’ Then I realised, I just learned a new word, and I wondered how that word was spelt – barick? barack? With English as our medium of instruction from kindergarten to university in the Philippines through to my study and work in the US, I have not come across that word before. Anyway, I replied, ‘Football?’ The football I
was familiar with was American football, as I had watched and followed ‘my’ Florida Gators college football team as a graduate student there. He then patiently clarified, ‘Aussie Rules football’. To which I replied, ‘Sorry, but I don’t know much about that sport. My husband plays tennis. But most Filipinos follow basketball’. The kindly gentleman advised, ‘Love, if you want to assimilate here in Australia, in Melbourne, you have to follow the footy’.

True to the wisdom of this taxi driver, sport has shaped the construction of Australia’s national identity to some extent. As Bruce and Hallinan (2001: 258) pointed out in their essay on Cathy Freeman and the quest for Australian identity, her emergence as a national celebrity highlighted the country’s struggle with a ‘national identity that embraces both indigenous people and the many waves of immigrants while retaining white power’.

Fifteen years later, Australia’s identity struggle with its indigenous and multicultural population continues. In June 2014, 28% of Australia’s resident population were born overseas (ABS, 2014). In 2011, 34.3% of people had both parents born overseas and 200 languages were spoken in the country. While most migrants were born in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the next three source countries were
China, India, and the Philippines. Completing the top ten countries of birth were Vietnam, Italy, South Africa, Malaysia, and Germany.

Asian migrants accounted for 45.5% of academic staff in Australian universities (Hugo 2008). Around 21% of students in Australian universities are international students (Australia – Educating Globally, 2013). In 2014, international education contributed AUD$17 billion to the economy, making it the fourth largest export after iron ore, coal, and natural gas (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2015).

But, what do these statistics mean, aside from enabling Australia to claim itself as a multicultural nation that is attractive to international students and migrants from Asia? The Australia in the Asian Century White Paper (2012) highlighted that despite Australia’s location in the Asia-Pacific region and its multicultural population, there was still a need to develop deeper and broader relationships as well as our Asia-literate capabilities. Despite these efforts however, it seems Australia continues to resist fully engaging with Asia. A recent PricewaterhouseCoopers report (2014) indicated that 65% of Australian businesses do not intend to do business with Asia in the next two or three years. When asked about their reluctance to invest in Asia, respondents revealed a lack of knowledge about culture, language and traditions, and perceptions that there were too
many legal and trade barriers including corruption. This discomfort with the unfamiliar raises questions of one’s willingness to learn ‘other’ cultures and cross boundaries. But we need not go beyond our borders. We also struggle with our relationships with our indigenous peoples. While the business sector may represent only a part of Australian society, issues of identity, racism and being ‘un-Australian’ continue to hound our public sphere, especially in sport.

As educators, we have a responsibility to advocate for cultural diversity and multiculturalism in the academy, but it is difficult to achieve that without also addressing indigenous issues in public relations curricula as in practice. Unfortunately, very few Australian public relations scholars engage with indigenous issues in our research and teaching (Synnott, 2012). Considering that the White Australia policy was only officially dismantled in 1975, there is much work to be done in integrating indigenous people in government, industry and in universities. While schemes exist to encourage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders enrolments in Australian universities, questions remain on how multiculturalism and other diversity policies are enacted in the public relations academy.

**Gender and diversity issues in the Australian workplace**
Arriving in Melbourne in late 1989, I set out to look for work either as a public relations practitioner or as an academic. I taught part-time in the Philippines, worked in a PR consultancy in Manila and Los Angeles, and had a master’s degree from the University of Florida. With these reasonably good credentials, I thought finding public relations work would be a breeze. Boy, was I wrong! Like any new migrant who has endured numerous job applications and interviews, I was asked for my ‘local experience’. Now how could someone who just arrived from overseas have local experience? Through the friend of a friend, I got a job with a community organisation that offered media workshops for young people. Then I got pregnant with my first son and I had to resign because community organisations don’t have maternity leave provisions. I called up Prof Jan Quarles again to see if there was anything at RMIT. She said, ‘Call back after you have your baby. We always need tutors’.

Because I was keen to get a teaching job while caring for a six-month old baby, I accepted the one-hour tutorial a week assignment. I had to pay for three hours of babysitting to include my travel to and from university. But the ‘investment’ paid off. In semester 2 of that year, I was given two one-hour tutes. Then having fulfilled my ‘local experience’ requirements, I was appointed into a full-time lecturer’s position in 1993 with an office! I was ecstatic, we were able to get a mortgage for a house to bring up
our family. Baby, tick; job, tick; house, tick – now we were settled. This was 1993, a year after the internet was born and RMIT became a university.

In the late 1900s, I observed that the university language shifted to more family-friendly language. University leaders introduced themselves in public as a father and a husband, or a wife and mother of two children. ‘Wow, they were just like me’, I thought. ‘They were parents who understood how we need to balance our family and work commitments. Robin, our dean, showed pictures of his wife and young daughter. I suppose it is okay now to talk about my family at work. Just like in the Philippines.’ Then I thought again, ‘They’re not like me. They were white, tall and spoke with British accents; they are also professors.’ At that point, I realized that every one I’d met so far in public relations, teachers and practitioners alike, was white, tall and usually dressed in a suit. And, here I was, a mum who spoke English with a different accent, teaching young, mostly white Australians, theories of communication and public relations.

I then became conscious of my own background and ethnicity within the Australian public relations academy and industry. I recalled Jan saying to me, in 1993, ‘Do you know that you’re only one of four people in Australia teaching public relations with a master’s degree in communication?’ Surprised, I retorted, ‘Really? How can that be? In the US, and in the Philippines…. ’ as my voice trailed off. ‘Most who teach public
relations here are former or current journalists’, Jan explained. ‘And the same goes with our practitioners. Those with an undergraduate degree will have studied either politics or economics or social science.’

We as educational practitioners and knowledge producers have the ability to shape and influence the worldviews of future practitioners. While using mostly American texts, most of our teaching content was drawn from our experience as journalists or public relations practitioners. Not all Australian universities adopted ‘local’ public relations texts written by Australian practitioners (Tymson and Sherman, 1987) and academics (Johnston and Zawawi, 2000; Chia and Synnott, 2009), instead opting for texts by British authors Tench and Yeomans (2006). Could this decision to prefer British texts over Australian texts reflect a lack of confidence in local scholars, a form of colonial deference, or an avoidance to be seen a parochial? Does it reflect the country’s struggles with its own identity?

As a migrant, I observed this but I was not sure. So, I consulted a British academic who worked in an Australian university. I asked, ‘Jennifer (not her real name), is it just me who thinks that Australians are not quite ready to let go of their British colonial roots?’ She gave out a laugh, ‘Oh, Marianne, you are so right. I observed the same thing. In fact, I think Australians think and act more British than we
Brits do!’

So, how can we as educators assist the country’s struggles with its identity when we ourselves are struggling with ours? By recognising that our curriculum is a form of discourse that does not simply represent the world but signifies ‘the world in meaning’ (Fairclough, 1992), we can reflect on how it ‘represents and promotes selected positions of truth and power’ (Motion and Weaver, 2005: 52). I would argue that, as public relations educators and scholars who produce and share knowledge through our curricula and research, we have an opportunity and a responsibility to shape the broader societal discourse and enable socio-cultural transformation.

The educator’s role is critical in the production of knowledge, especially within the context of global and international education. Several scholars have identified the ethnocentricity of public relations curricula (Bardhan, 2003; Sriramesh, 2002), the Americanisation of public relations education (Toth and Sison, 2011), and, with transnational public relations education, the risk of being purveyors of cultural imperialism (Fitch and Desai, 2012; Fitch, 2013). Even my own writing then was generic, devoid of any cultural references so I could be accepted and be assimilated in the world of western-dominated publishing and public relations practice.
Australian public relations industry

It was 1998, in the Gold Coast. The PRIA had its national convention and it was the first time I had left my sons, who were now seven and three. I thought it would be okay to stay a few nights away, as it was my first break as a ‘working mum’. I felt guilty, but I was running the PR program and felt obliged to represent RMIT in the national industry conference. I was presenting my first ‘paper’ at the academic forum and my academic colleagues from Australia and New Zealand were very nice. They welcomed me. Almost immediately I felt I belonged to this small and friendly group. After our academic forum, we joined the industry people at the opening reception. Of course, cocktails meant drinking alcohol and standing up. While I was having a friendly conversation, one very tall man bumped into me on his way to talk to someone. I looked up, to wait for his apology. He didn’t even see me nor notice me … perhaps because my head was just below his armpit! How rude, I thought, and annoying! Then the ceremony started, and the hall went quiet. I stood close to the front as I often do so I can see better. As the speaker welcomed everyone, I scanned the room looking for a familiar face, see who I might know. And there it dawned on me … the room was full of white faces.
The challenge of diversity in public relations is not exclusive to Australia. Diversity in public relations was, and continues to be, an issue in both the public relations industry and academy in the US. Scholars have discussed cultural and ethnic diversity in response to the growing number of African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic-American students, scholars and practitioners in public relations (Brown, White and Waymer, 2011; Ford, 2006; Len-Rios, 1999; Pompper, 2005; Sha and Ford, 2007; Tindall, 2009; Vardeman-Winter, 2011). However, despite the increased scholarship, diversity and inclusion remain a concern in the public relations industry including the UK. As mentioned in *The Guardian*, ‘the PR industry is broadly white and middle class’ (Stimson, 2013), with 8% of public relations practitioners identifying as non-white.

The US-based Commission on Public Relations Education’s *Professional Bond* (2006) identified diversity as one of the five major themes that reflect public relations’ development since its 1999 Port of Entry report. It called for diversity among the student, faculty and practitioner populations to better reflect the society in which they live, as well as embedding diversity issues in the public relations curriculum. However, in 2013, the PRSA Foundation highlighted very little has been done about diversity. Its president, Lou Capozzi, lamented that ‘national public relations associations and academic public relations programs in the United States have not significantly moved
the needle’ (Gallo, 2013). Questions regarding diversity, fit, and representation continue to hound the US industry (Tindall, 2016).

This raises further questions concerning whether espousals of diversity and inclusion, and multiculturalism, are enacted by middle- to senior-level practitioners in Australia, who were probably our former students. Perhaps it is useful to examine ourselves as education practitioners and our trajectory of public relations scholarship.

**Australian public relations scholarship: Reframing our discipline**

*It was 1999, I just completed a one-year stint as acting program coordinator for the undergraduate public relations program. After a good run with program management, and my second son turned four, it was time to start my PhD. It was, after all, my investment into my future as an academic. But, what do I study? Everyone says you should write about what you know, and what you can keep working on over several years. What could I possibly write about? How family friendly is public relations? About this time, Sydney radio ‘shock jock’ John Laws was being investigated for his cash for comment involvement and the public relations industry was implicated. I recall PRIA National President Lelde Ramma delivered a statement on behalf of the industry, indicating that the association has a code of ethics and that it was incumbent upon*
members to uphold the code in their professional practice. As an educator, I felt it was my duty to help shape an ethical and professional industry. While there were practitioners with integrity who refused particular clients or projects on moral grounds, there were still too many questionable PR practitioners (Potter, 2010).

I also faced a personal dilemma. My American-oriented communication studies background did not align with Australia’s British cultural studies approach. And, yet, American scholars, especially from the University of Maryland, dominated public relations literature. Two years earlier, New Zealand scholars Leitch and Neilson (1997) critiqued Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) four models. As I read more critiques from L’Etang and Pieczka (1996), especially those around notions of power, I discovered critical theory. Then, in 2002, Derina Holtzhausen, a US-based South African academic, introduced postmodernist theory into public relations scholarship and developed the notion of public relations practitioners as organisational activists. During my PhD studies, I reflected on my own identity as a living example of American colonialist knowledge production and realised I needed to further explore critical and postmodern perspectives. I could not just give up my past, but I would also like to integrate the present and the future of public relations. Fortunately, I found Trujillo and Toth’s (1987) earlier work on multiple perspectives, which I adapted for my dissertation (Dayrit-Sison, 2006).
When I asked for advice regarding a rejected article, a senior academic commented, ‘Marianne, you are too polite. Unlike us Americans, we are direct and very critical so you need to be more pointed in your writing so your papers will be accepted’. But, I said to myself, ‘That’s not me. That is not how I was brought up. Why do I have to change my ways?’ I know this is a predicament many Asian scholars and postgraduate students have because I repeat this line to my Asian PhD students. And, yes, we have to play the ‘academic game’.

In his overview of public relations development in ‘Australasia’, Macnamara (2012) concluded that despite indications of a ‘socio-cultural turn’ in public relations scholarship, the field still operates under the ‘shadow of functionalism’ and the Excellence Theory—which is a normative theory that identified factors where ‘excellent’ public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness (Grunig, 1992). Few scholars in Australia have employed critical, feminist and postcolonial perspectives in their work (those that have include Daymon and Demetrious, 2014; Fitch, James and Motion, 2015; Motion and Leitch, 2009; Sison, 2014). While the increased Australian scholarship is welcome, the perspective has been predominantly white and Anglo-Saxon. I myself am guilty because like most migrant early scholars, I often suppressed my own ‘cultural’ identity in my writing to gain acceptance in the academy. As such,
Australian public relations scholarship has suffered from the absence of work from indigenous or migrant lenses.

For Australian public relations to progress in the future, our scholarship and practice need to be more inclusive, more culturally diverse, and more open to multiple perspectives. But, we need to start with our academic selves. Do struggles with identity constrain our criticality? We need to tread unfamiliar paths and explore new ways of looking at the world, either through leveraging the cultural diversity within our midst or in partnership with our regional neighbours (Sison, 2015). If, like our business colleagues, we lack interest in engaging with Asia, or engage with a sense of colonial imperialist superiority, then it might take a long time before we see innovative thinking in public relations.

To be truly multicultural and inter-cultural, we must commit to inclusion and diversity, not just in our words but also in our practice as educators. To do so, we need to: 1) develop an understanding and deep knowledge about our identity and culture; 2) accept cultural differences; 3) identify and acknowledge our similarities; and, 4) commit and enact inclusion and diversity principles in our teaching practice and scholarship.
It is time for the Australian public relations academy and industry to embrace indigenous and multicultural citizens so that we may develop a strong and distinct identity that is progressive and innovative. Otherwise, public relations will remain an elitist, privileged and homogenous domain where we merely pay lip service to the oft-espoused values of inclusion and diversity. Unless we actively commit to these values, we will be complicit in perpetuating an Australian identity that is stuck in its colonial past.

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