

An exploratory study of the experiences of 'BAME' PR practitioners in the UK industry Industry Report

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Introduction

This report contains the findings from an exploratory, qualitative research project into the experiences of BAME PR practitioners in the UK. The project was funded jointly by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, grant RES 000-22-3143) and a Promising Researcher Fellowship from Leeds Metropolitan University.

This report has been written specifically for a practitioner audience and should be of interest to consultancies, in-house staff and PR educators. The findings show that there is discrimination in the industry, rooted in the social context in which PR operates and the stereotypes about individuals from different ethnic groups that shape that context.

The focus in this report is primarily on ethnicity; other dimensions of identity also create a basis for discrimination, and the data showed that gender, class and religion all played a role in participants' experiences. However, because the primary lens for the analysis was a racial one, most of the discussion revolves around this dimension.

My thanks go to all the practitioners who took part in the research, who shared their experiences so frankly and whose talent and determination were an ongoing inspiration for the project. I hope that the study can help ensure that they and their successors are more equitably treated, more consistently, as their careers unfold.

All ESRC projects are subject to peer review, and readers should note that this process will take place in January 2011. Thus, at the time of writing, the data in this document are still subject to this confirmation by the Council.

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1: The research project

The research took place between January 2009 and January 2010. The aim was to find out more about the experiences of Black and other minority ethnic PR practitioners in the UK. In particular, the research was designed to discover how ‘difference’ was experienced by them in their professional lives, in what contexts, and how this affected their professional identity and development.

Practitioners were asked to take part via the Chartered Institute of Public Relations members’ e-newsletter, and were also sourced by searching through issues of PR Week from the previous year to find practitioners of colour or other non-White British ethnicities to contact directly with an invitation. Fifty people took part in the study, responding proactively either to the CIPR mailing or to the personal invitation. Demographically, the sample can be described as follows.

- 17 male, 33 female
- Aged 20 - 52
- 25 had up to ten years experience, 25 over ten years experience
- 11 were employed at a junior level, 13 at mid-level, 26 at a senior level
- The sample was split 50/50 between public and private sector, in-house and consultancy
- Participants described themselves in terms of over 20 ethnicities
- Most participants (43 out of 50) were based in London

Data was collected from participants about their experiences using three methods:

- 34 one-to-one interviews
- 7 focus groups, ranging from 2-6 people
- 8 participant diaries, with a maximum of ten entries over a period of 12 weeks.

The quotes in this document are taken from the interviews and focus groups. Readers should note that the quotes are verbatim quotes. Verbatim speech does not necessarily follow the formal structures of written language, and some quotes may seem grammatically strange as a result. To excessively ‘tidy up’ the speech, however, would modify the practitioners’ ‘voices’ that emerged through the discussions. Giving these practitioners a voice is an ethical obligation in this project, because it deals with an area that has a considerable effect on their professional lives, but where they are seldom asked about their opinion or experiences. Consequently, I have made edits only where necessary for the purposes of comprehension.

The context for these experiences was explored through analysis of a series of documents that described the profession and its professionals, and thus formed the normative (standard, public) understandings of the field. The documents included:

- Web pages from the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) web site that described the profession and its practitioners

- ‘The Frontline Guide to a Career in Public Relations’, produced by the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA)
- Web sites of the top 10 consultancies in the PR Week Top 150 2009: Hill & Knowlton, Weber Shandwick, Edelman, Freud Communications, Fishburn Hedges, Brunswick, Finsbury, Financial Dynamics, Citigate Dewe Rogerson, Chime Communications.
- 11 PR Week profiles (weekly double page profiles of successful practitioners), randomly selected from 2009.

Fundamental assumptions

The research was framed by the following assumptions:

- ‘Race’ and ‘difference’¹ are socially constructed phenomena (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001), in the sense that they are given particular meaning and importance through the interactions of individuals with other individuals and with their social contexts. These meanings change depending on the context they are in.
- ‘Race’ is a ‘primary social definer’ (Anthias, 2001), in the sense that it shapes peoples’ perceptions of us in a way that is immediate, often implicit, and over which we have limited control.
- While ‘race’ was the primary lens through which diversity was viewed in this research, it does not operate in isolation. People’s identities are ‘intersectional’ in the sense that they encompass race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion and other social categories. The experience of being ‘different’ is shaped by these intersections rather than simply by one single factor (Archer, 2004).
- The public relations profession, like other professions, is influenced by the social context and the assumptions about individuals and groups that shape wider social hierarchies. The types of people who are part of the elite in wider society (e.g. well-educated, middle or upper class) are also likely to be higher up the professional hierarchy of public relations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Correspondingly, those who occupy less prestigious positions in wider society (e.g. less well-educated, working-class) are likely to be found lower down the professional hierarchy, and find it harder to progress.
- Discourses – understood as the frames that shape the way we talk about things, including the PR profession and its professionals – are underpinned by fundamental assumptions about the way we view the world and our place within it (Fairclough, 2003). Analysing discourses of difference and diversity in the profession can therefore reveal the underlying assumptions about the profession itself, and the nature of ‘difference’ within it, that in turn shape the experiences of ‘different’ practitioners.

It is worth noting that the principle of intersectional identities, as noted above, means that many of the patterns of discrimination outlined in this report may well be recognised by practitioners who are ‘different’ from the norm in other ways, including women who may have experienced discrimination; practitioners with a disability; gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender practitioners; and practitioners who have a different class background to the professional norm. In this sense, the report may also be illustrative of more general patterns of discrimination against ‘different’

¹ The terms ‘race’ and ‘difference’ are marked in inverted commas to indicate that they are fluid and contested terms, and in practice, the meaning associated with them changes depending on the context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

people in PR, even though the detail is specific to the experiences people from a minoritised ethnic background.

Understanding identities as multi-faceted also means that patterns of discrimination differ at different times, depending on which aspects of one's identity are meaningful in any one context and at any one time (Archer, 2004). Thus, the participants did not describe continuous discrimination, but they did highlight regularities in the types of discrimination to which they had been subjected and the occasions when this took place. It is these consistent patterns of discrimination that this report aims to describe and address.

2. The professional context

Demographics

The PR profession in the UK can be characterised in broad terms as White, middle-class and gendered.

- 4% of practitioners are from minoritised ethnic groups (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009a). This compares to 12% in the adult working population of England and Wales, and 31% in London, the heart of the PR industry (Office for National Statistics, 2009).
- 76% have a degree, compared to 31% of the total eligible adult population (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009a).
- According to an exploratory survey carried out in 2007 with members of the CIPR, practitioners' patterns of taste, knowledge and activity in relation to cultural and social activities corresponded to patterns associated with relatively privileged social classes in the UK (Edwards, 2008).
- The profession has 65% female practitioners (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009a). However, its structures may be gendered: although no official statistics exist, anecdotal evidence suggests that men are overrepresented at senior levels. In the 'PR Power Book 2008' (PR Week, 2008), 69% of the 457 practitioners listed were male, a significant over-representation based on their overall participation rate.
- 3% of practitioners have a disability (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009a).

Professional jurisdiction

Generally, public relations is defined as a means of

- Protecting reputation
- Managing public / customer opinion
- Generating support for organisations and (less commonly) individuals

As a service profession, the PR industry is focused on the interests of the (potential) client. Because PR professionals are paid, directly or indirectly, by their clients and not by the public, their priorities have to be tied to client objectives, even if they nominally support the idea of two-way communication which suggests more of a balance between the interest of client and public. Because the client base for public relations is dominated by corporate and government bodies, their interests drive the majority of public relations work. Less common are specialties such as third sector or diversity communications (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009a), which generate less income and are therefore less prestigious, at least in the consulting environment. When minoritised² groups do become a focus for public relations activity, perhaps under the rubric of 'diversity' or 'multi-cultural communications', they are of interest because of their potential to consume, to vote, or the need to 'manage' a problem they present to clients. In other

² The term 'minoritised' is used throughout this report to recognise the fact that such groups are a minority in this particular context, but may be a majority in their local community, or in terms of the global population.

words, just as with other less specific audience groups, they are framed in terms of their relevance to (usually) business or political interests. The ways their lives are shaped by their own ethnicities are less important and their identities remain two-dimensional.

The PR profession, like other professions, is also focused on its own struggle for legitimacy (Abbott, 1988). PR's legitimacy is based on the value it can provide to organisations as a function that manages their reputation through effective communications (see, e.g. Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2009b). This is a competitive activity: PR must struggle against the claims of marketing departments, digital agencies and internal communications experts, among others, for the right to 'own' communications as well as for tangible resources to fund its work.

Notions of 'difference' and 'diversity' articulated by professional bodies are positioned in relation to these aspects of the professional 'project': the primacy of client interests and the need to constantly assert the right of the profession to exist and to claim expertise in a particular area.

Whiteness in public relations

PR is a profession that is characterised by 'whiteness'. Whiteness encompasses not only physical aspects of whiteness (e.g. skin colour, physical build, facial features), but also the categorisations normally associated with White and other ethnic groups. These categorisations position groups differently in society in terms of, for example, a particular class, a level of criminality, a level of intelligence, or a particular profession. The position of different ethnic groups in these categories is based on stereotypical assumptions about their intellectual capability, their 'natural' aptitude or tendency towards a particular behaviour (e.g. Black men are often assumed to be 'naturally' good at sport, or suited to IT professions), and their suitability for particular roles and professions (Hylton, 2009, Gillborn, 2008).

Importantly, where whiteness is the norm, as it is in the UK PR profession, it also acts as a benchmark (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Whiteness frames our perceptions of ourselves and others and permeates social institutions, systems and spaces such that white identities, interests, values and norms are central. Those of other groups do not 'fit' the norm and remain peripheral (Gillborn, 2008). The *PRWeek* practitioner profiles provided a useful illustration of the benchmark, consistently associating practitioners' success with elite networks, their financial success, their work ethic and their apparent creativity, and presenting these criteria as natural assets even though the ability to demonstrate them is determined in part by social status.

With his Blairite origins, some wonder if Allan will suffer. Others note Allan also has plenty of high-powered Tory friends – including Google's global comms chief Rachel Whetstone and her partner Steve Hilton, director of strategy for the Conservatives.

'Tim is one of the best people with whom I have ever worked – intelligent, witty and creative,' gushes Whetstone, a former colleague at Portland. Pascoe-Watson also notes Allan is 'well-connected with both Labour and the Tories.'

'Leaving Blair Behind', *PRWeek*, 15 May 2009, p. 16

The following quote, from a young participant who had had some difficulty obtaining a job in PR, demonstrates the degree to which whiteness can reflect a particular identity, upbringing and way of life, and generate a sense of exclusion in the process.

I'm glad I don't want to be in Public Affairs, because I don't think I would really stand much of a chance. I mean I remember researching agencies and you go on their website and you look at the team and after being knocked back so many times I did start to do that...and I started to go on their website, look at the team, look at the type of people, and sometimes they had profiles...and I'd read the type of people that were hired and, as I've just described, it was those type of people...really, you know, good degree, the traditional degree, um, you know, very white background.

Interview 4

For those people who do 'fit' the environment, whiteness is invisible because it is simply taken for granted; the assumptions that underpin whiteness map onto our own assumptions about the world and there is no mismatch. For those who do not 'fit' whiteness in some way, however, it is noticeable because it forms a barrier to those individuals truly 'belonging' to the group. Whiteness becomes obvious because it marks their difference and places them at the margins of the group (Ahmed, 2009). The following quote from a research participant illustrates this effect.

[At the] internship it was about, you know, even how to talk, just the mannerisms, how to talk, how to conduct ourselves in meetings and that, that's when it becomes a reality how different you are. And you're told that [...] you have to start consciously getting to that mannerism to get there and feel comfortable and fit in, otherwise you will always feel like an outsider.

Focus group 1

Whiteness was also linked to a heavy emphasis on the value attached to UK, rather than international, experience. Those practitioners who were trying to enter the profession from a different market often found themselves marked as outsiders not only because of their accent, or because they had different cultural knowledge, but also because the markets they came from were less valued and therefore their experience was assumed to be of a lower calibre than UK-based colleagues.

When I first sent out a few applications I spoke to some people and so on, and the first reaction was always, "Yeah, but you don't have any UK experience." So basically that was why I had to start from the very beginning. It doesn't matter completely what I did in [country], what I achieved there. Well, everyone said, "Oh that's great, but what's your UK experience?" Actually just this week I applied for a job in a crisis management team, and again they asked me, "So what's your experience in this?" and I told them of my experiences in [country] but in the UK I only did media relations, I don't really have any crisis experience, so 'Sorry, [no]'.

Interview 28

In summary, the prevalence of whiteness created a professional environment in PR that meant practitioners from non-white British backgrounds felt their lack of 'fit' on a number

of levels. Their embodiment of difference was one aspect, but cultural knowledge and overseas professional experience also played an important role in defining their identity as outsiders and limiting their career opportunities.

3. Professional representations of diversity and 'difference'

An important aspect of whiteness in PR is the way in which diversity and difference are represented in the profession. The research revealed that, in the vast majority of cases, ethnic diversity was simply invisible in the professional documents examined. Instead, diversity and difference were aligned with the need to demonstrate the value of PR to clients and their organisations. This is due in part to the nature of the documents: they are essentially marketing tools, designed to make the profession seem valuable and attractive to potential clients and new recruits. Moreover, the web sites are designed to make a particular organisation stand out from other consultancies; the types of service promoted and the presentation of staff therefore corresponds to this aim and should be understood in this light.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that the documents do constitute a 'shop window' onto the profession. The documents from the professional bodies inform the reader about what PR is, what it is designed to do, and what types of people might be successful practitioners. The *PRWeek* profiles also do this, albeit in a different context. The consultancy websites are developed and managed by some of the largest consultancies in the UK, which together generate 36% of the total income of the Top 150 agencies (PR Week, 2009), and therefore have significant influence on the profession and its development.

In the documents, diversity and notions of difference were alluded to most frequently in the context of service offering and communications environment.

Diversity in service offering relates to the range of work undertaken by the agencies (e.g. events, branding, media relations, crisis management, social media) or the range of sectors with which PR as a profession is involved (e.g. financial communications, corporate relations, consumer PR, health sector PR). Relatedly, geographic diversity is promoted by agencies that have a global presence, with offices or networks of associates in different countries around the world. In both cases, diversity is a marketable strength, a resource of experience and connections that may be integrated into campaign development.

Diversity in the communications environment relates to the range of audiences, the complexity of the business environment and the transparency of business operations. Media, audiences and stakeholders are more varied than ever before, and present a complex, even chaotic problem for organisations trying to manage their environment.

'The climate in which companies operate has shifted seismically and corporate reputation has never been so vulnerable. Business today is subject to ever increasing scrutiny from a complex set of stakeholders and influencers whose opinions can create more impact than ever before.'

www.edelman.com, 'Corporate Reputation', accessed 5 January 2010

Diversity in this context is also a marketing tool: PR professionals have the skills and knowledge to manage and control these difficult environments, reducing their unpredictability and ensuring opinions - and opinion leaders - are shaped in a way that supports the client.

When diversity is mentioned in relation to individual practitioners, it is either in relation to their professional experience (they have worked in a wide range of sectors or for a wide range of clients), or their professional background (e.g. finance, journalism, retail). This is also something that can be used to support the interests of the client: a wide range of experience suggests networks of influential connections and expertise that can be brought to bear on the client's account. It also suggests creativity that generates better client service from that particular individual and the team. However, importantly, diversity in this sense it is not solely positive: it also has to be managed. Invariably, claims about the different experiences and backgrounds of practitioners are immediately followed by evidence that they are 'united' or connected, still part of 'our people' who have a 'passion for communications'.

'Our people are an eclectic bunch, with diverse backgrounds including advertising, research, journalism, banking, politics, consultancy and in-house communications. All are united by a passion and flair for communications, as well as a sense of hard-work and fun.'

<http://www.fishburn-hedges.com/aboutus/people/>, retrieved 5 January 2010.

Thus, unity overrides difference and reveals the central importance of the client experience, which must be reliable and agreeable, regardless of the point of engagement with the organisation or the profession. Practitioner characteristics are only important if they enhance the profession's ability to deliver to the client, and the client relationship must remain paramount.

PR practitioners operate in a market where the clients hold all the cards – it's called a buyer's market. The ability to develop good client handling skills, from understanding the character of your clients as individuals, to establishing real chemistry and rapport is therefore crucial.

'The Frontline Guide to a Career in PR', 2009, p. 16

Because these texts are directed either at an audience of senior managers in the private and public sector, or at prospective new entrants (PRCA and CIPR documents), and because in all these groups people from minoritised backgrounds are under-represented, cultural and ethnic differences are largely irrelevant to the communications process. Indeed, highlighting them could make audiences feel less comfortable simply because representing greater diversity may make the consultancy or profession seem more 'different' to themselves. The exception is when diverse audiences become a target for PR, and occasionally specialist diversity or multicultural divisions are set up, as is the case in some of the larger agencies in the UK. However, even here cultural differences are somewhat two-dimensional and presented purely in terms of their importance to business strategies (if you don't understand cultural differences, you won't be able to communicate effectively with these important audiences).

The exception to this is in the *PRWeek* profiles, where three of the eleven profiles analysed were of practitioners from minoritised groups. However, in two of these cases the practitioners'

ethnicity was not mentioned at all, again reinforcing its irrelevance to the profession and to their career in particular. The third profile focused on the head of an agency specialising in ethnic communications. Here, the business case for understanding audience diversity was central to the narrative: the practitioner in question was represented as a valued expert in this area, but was marginalised in other ways. Explicit contrasts were made between her own agency and the rest of the industry, in relation to her office location ('about as far from a typical London PR agency as you can get') and the conditions in which her staff worked ('cramped office space' compared to 'feng shui-aligned Covent Garden agencies'). Her expertise is represented relatively simplistically as understanding 'cultural nuances' while compared to other profiles published during the year, there are far fewer endorsements from named, prestigious contacts.

In summary, professional representations of diversity are abstract, not generally linked to individuals but instead to aspects of the business and its staff that will benefit clients. When ethnicity does appear, it is in this context. The marginalisation of the specialism, and the invisibility of ethnicity, is echoed in the trade press coverage of successful practitioners.

4. Experiencing ‘difference’ in UK public relations

It could be argued that the patterns of representation outlined in the previous section make sense from a business or professional perspective. It is, after all, important to emphasise what will appeal to clients or graduates in marketing texts, and trade media have no explicit brief to privilege the professional underdog. However, the reality is that the invisibility of ethnicity can be problematic in a number of ways for those who come from backgrounds that differ from the professional norm. First, it can mean that they have to put aside an important part of their identity during the majority of their working life. Second, it leaves them no recourse if / when they do experience implicit or explicit discrimination based on their different backgrounds. Because the profession does not acknowledge the relevance of social and cultural background to professional roles or career development, no space exists within which such issues can be discussed safely. There is, literally, no ‘room to talk’ about discrimination. This can lead to professionals feeling isolated, under pressure and under-recognised.

This section summarises the patterns that emerged from the experiences narrated in the interviews, focus groups and diaries. For the purposes of this report, the experiences of difference are categorised into two areas: professional structures and professional environments. The section should be read in light of the fact that minoritised PR professionals are astute practitioners. They recognise the importance of the profession’s legitimacy and that their most important professional role is to deliver to the client. Their work is focused on delivering to this requirement, but they can face barriers in terms of their *perceived* ability to do so in the eyes of others because of their apparent difference from the norm.

Being perceived to ‘fit’ the normalised notion of a ‘PR professional’ is crucial, therefore, to their career and they expend significant effort managing perceptions in order to counter stereotypical assumptions (rooted in whiteness) about their suitability and capability. In contrast to the more abstract professional notions of diversity, their own stories are grounded in the visceral, personal experience of being ‘different’ on multiple levels. Their physical difference (e.g. skin colour, dress, accent, hair and other aspects of the physical self) form grounds for others’ judgments, but equally important are judgments made on the basis of cultural and social differences including religion, education, social and professional networks, and leisure activities (e.g. whether one drinks alcohol, watches a particular TV programme, is religious), where to be different to the norm can put you on the margins of the profession.

Professional structures

A. Recruitment and progression

Processes of recruitment and progression were highlighted by participants as a key point at which they could face barriers to progression based on their difference. Their experiences included:

- **Poor recruitment and promotion processes** that were too subjective, based on interviews alone and did not adequately assess skill and capability in an objective manner. Such recruitment processes were often led by all-white interview panels and

were vulnerable to bias, in the sense that recruiters tended to hire in their own image. This bias was recognised when feedback from an application was vague or could not be substantiated.

There were a number of times where I had meetings with HR. I said, "I'm achieving my objectives, you've set me goals and I've achieved all of those yet I'm not seeing anything, I'm not moving forward." And they just didn't give me proper reasoning, and they said it would happen, it would happen, and I was there for... and, you know, I was working really hard, like I was putting in 110% and I just felt like there were people that had come in after me that maybe, you know, were fulfilling their role but not exceeding it and they were getting further than I was.

Interview 21

Such experiences led to a lack of trust in the overall recruitment process.

You know, people can say, "Oh well, somebody else had more experience." I mean they're not going to tell you the truth

Interview 19

- **Working harder and longer than their peers** to get promoted. This was related to the apparent lack of trust among managers in the practitioners' ability or potential to demonstrate the appropriate level of skill and responsibility. It contrasted with the situation that many practitioners had seen, where their peers had been awarded a promotion even when their skills were lacking, simply because their 'fit' generated a subjective belief that they would be able to reach the required level in time. Minoritised practitioners did not seem to enjoy the same leeway.

You weren't allowed to just be able to do 30%, 40%, 50%, 60% of the next level, you had to do 120%. And then they'd quite happily sign, yes this person's able to be promoted, whereas that wasn't the case, particularly for men, white men, because it would be, they might not have had a lot of experience, they'd done this job for like a year, but then yeah, we like them and they can be promotable. They could probably do about 40% of the job and that was fine.

Interview 15

- Relatedly, practitioners reported **different standards applied to their own work** as compared to those applied to the work of their peers. At times, the simple fact that they had a different background seemed to make their colleagues blind to the evidence of their actual ability and potential.

I applied for some agencies to work as an intern and my mates that were also interns were all freshers from the university without work experience. I was coming with work experience. I have worked... I have worked at a very senior level, I've put pitches together, winning pitches, I have worked in London [...] at a senior level as well, but in that agency I realised that they were very reluctant in putting me forward. I think that was where I first of all got the hint. They just saw me like, even though it was clear in my

C.V. that my capabilities were much broader than the things they were giving me, they were reluctant at giving me bigger challenges to do.

Interview 27

- This differential assessment of skill was reinforced by the fact that some practitioners had experience of simply **being left out of the possible pool of applicants** when promotional opportunities arose.

Bias and blindness towards individual practitioners and their work were often acknowledged as unintentional dynamics produced by the whiteness of the PR environment. Nonetheless, they had tangible and problematic effects on practitioners' lives. One of the reasons mooted for this was that the social and cultural milieu of the typical white, middle class practitioner often includes relatively few people from different ethnic groups. Consequently, they have little experience of minority individuals or other cultural environments and tend to use social stereotypes as the basis of their judgments.

I found my religion and trying to bring that side of it into the job quite my hardest thing, and trying to get people around to change their views. [...] I think it's partly because of the way you were brought up [and] educated, they didn't have any Asian friends maybe or other than white friends, so I'm not sure. But I found that the hardest thing.

Interview 26

This disadvantages the minoritised practitioner, because it does not support their efforts to 'fit' in; on the contrary, social stereotypes of non-white ethnic groups are defined in terms of their *difference* from whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 2000) . This can lead to the defining characteristic of minority practitioners being their difference, rather than their skills and abilities, which ultimately works against them in recruitment and promotion contexts.

B. The talent pipeline

- Participants were critical of the **approach to graduate recruitment** that the industry seemed to draw on. They noted a bias towards a particular class background and particular types of university, that potentially excluded graduates from minority groups and perpetuated the whiteness of the profession.
- This tendency was compounded by the fact that the **profession is poorly understood** and poorly promoted in schools, colleges and universities. Here, participants were keen to emphasise the important role of industry bodies in promoting the profession more widely and improving its reputation, working with careers services if necessary and conducting more outreach activities.

I think the industry has woken up that if it wanted to professionalise, if it wanted to get these amazing candidates it needed to go out there and sell PR and I think what it's done is it's gone after the low hanging fruit, so it's gone to the top ten universities, and that's who they focus on and they don't necessarily send somebody up to Sheffield but yeah they'll go to Nottingham or Bristol and spend time doing that. [...] If [...] you're taking on ten or fifteen graduates then you do have the clout and the resources to be able to do

that - and should the CIPR be part of this process and the PRCA? Should they not have a stand and be talking about PR as a career and why it's good and maybe they should be targeting the places which are less likely to be targeted by the big agencies. So I think yes the PR industry has to go out and sell PR as a career

Interview 18

- Participants lamented the **lack of senior practitioners from ethnic backgrounds** who might serve as role models for new practitioners from minoritised backgrounds, and emphasised the need for mentors to help such practitioners navigate the profession once they were in.

I think lack of role models within this field's always challenging because when you start, like I said, I didn't know what the route was, there wasn't anyone within the family or with... within the culture that could help me in my immediate family and friends, because they tend to follow paths where, where there are clear roads that guide them towards their profession. So if they want to be a barrister, you know exactly what you have to do and what exams to get. And I didn't even know about the CIPR Diploma.

Interview 2

It's about getting the right mentors, getting someone to champion you, it's all those things you need to do as well as being good at your job but you do need those mentors because I think that the people who succeed, I've seen it myself are the ones who've got, you know, somebody bigging them up when they're outside the room.

Focus group 6

C. Tokenistic diversity

- While pigeonholing did not emerge as a major issue, participants were critical about the **tendency to pay lip-service or be tokenistic about diversity initiatives**. Employing people simply because of their ethnicity was not seen as acceptable and there needed to be a more genuine engagement with people as skilled individual professionals rather than as representatives of a particular social group.

I want someone to look at me and look at what I can do. And what skills I can bring as opposed to, "Oh, yeah, he's good at his job, oh and a bonus is he's Asian. We can tick that box".

Interview 8

Articulating this critique was difficult, though, because of the glib use of diversity as a standardised, but poorly-considered, theme in business.

We now live in a very different world where diversity is taken for granted, even those that are responsible for, if you like, excluding people [from] those positions of power. They still speak a language of diversity, they understand the importance of doing things the right way and I guess it then makes it harder for us to sort of say, "This is what our achievement is, there it is, it's very tangible, it's black and white, boom there you go."

Interview 22

Professional environments

Practitioners' stories were replete with instances where their presence in professional spaces was misinterpreted, generated surprise and uncertainty, or was simply not welcomed. These reactions were driven by a combination of the simple fact that the profession *is* very white, and therefore people of colour are relatively unusual, as well as by assumptions about the appropriate – or, at the very least, 'normal' - role for people from different ethnic groups.

A. Meetings and formal interactions

- Many practitioners told of times in meetings when they had been **mistaken for either a more junior practitioner, or an administrator** such as a secretary, or one of the catering staff. Some also talked about being looked 'past' or looked 'over', a kind of invisibility based on an apparent and probably unconscious disregard for their input.

...we would all have experienced quite difficult situations where you go to meetings and people assume that you're there to serve the tea and coffee. And that still was happening and you have to say, "Well no actually, I'm the person you need to speak to if you want some money out of me." Which I think both internally and externally that was still quite a surprise for people.

Interview 15

Such misconceptions were always corrected but undermined their authority and were based on their difference from the norm. These events therefore produced a heightened awareness of 'difference' both in themselves and among their white colleagues.

B. Informal events and networking

- **Networking within the profession was recognised by the research participants as a pervasive and socially constructed barrier to progression**, with access to networks shaped by gender, religion, 'race' and class. Practitioners criticised certain practices, such as social events or networking that involved drinking or regular evening commitments, as exclusionary. Often, these practices were understood to be a result of ignorance rather than intentional discrimination, because of the young average age of practitioners and because of most PR practitioners' limited contact with other cultures. However, challenging the norm was difficult because of the isolation that many minoritised practitioners felt. Challenging norms necessarily means standing out, explicitly demonstrating one's lack of 'fit', and potentially becoming a 'problem' – a risky strategy for practitioners who may have felt vulnerable already. As the following quote suggests, sometimes practitioners may opt to fit in rather than remain different.

After, say, an awards event I'd probably be the one, not the first to leave but you know I'd leave after the awards have finished whereas everyone else would go until four in the morning and drink, so [...] which I'm happy to stay on and do, you know, as much as I can to network. And I have got friends who are journalists also in the industry and people I work with will understand and appreciate my values, but it's quite hard to get them across to somebody who you don't know. And then first impressions do count you know,

and 'don't judge a book by its cover' but people do, especially in this industry, and then I just sometimes think "oh you know 'cos I'm not drinking so I'm not fitting in to how maybe people would like me to" because -- it can be awkward you know. [...] I think that just distances myself from them just a little bit. But it's not just drinking, because I only eat halal meat and if we go to a restaurant I order just vegetarian stuff you know, [...] and then people have said to me "oh there's nobody else in the industry that you know..." or "there's one or two Muslim journalists who actually do drink so they're like-- are they" - I get questioned - "are they just doing that to fit in" and I'm like, "ask them, don't ask me"- and, yeah, it could be that they are.

Focus group 3

C. Social spaces and work spaces

- All practitioners noted the fact that **they were the only people from a different ethnic background, or at best one of very few, in their organisations and at professional networking events.** This meant that they had few people in whom they could confide if problems arose, who would readily understand situations of implicit or explicit discrimination. It also meant they felt relatively isolated in their experiences and sometimes disheartened at the need to prove themselves, their abilities and their skills again and again, in order to eventually progress.

I have to say actually like where I have been to client meetings or to like a conference and stuff, when they have like, you know, when everybody's in a room just networking or chatting, I do feel quite awkward and I think maybe people... because you're not used to seeing too many ethnic minorities at these sorts of events, so when we are there it's kind of like, how people approach you or do they feel comfortable approaching you?

Interview 21

The thing is as a minority you've got two layers of challenges; first I'm black. You don't have a lot of black people in PR, right? One. Then secondly I'm African, with an African accent, with my substantial part of my career life coming from Africa and Africa is not seen as a very advanced market in PR. So...the agency would be reluctant to put me in front of a client and say, "This guy is going to be in charge of your account" because the client might feel, "Okay well you're not resourcing my account with the right people". I understood that, but it was a setback for me because if you are not in account management, you don't get to really understand what's going on in the market and I think that's a challenge, any other PR practitioner that is of a minority group and coming here to practice, that's one of the things they'll face because, for instance, in every agency I've worked in I've been the only black person. Then the only black African. The only African. So I'm just like a single person standing there, it's not a very good experience, but I've managed to scale through.

Interview 27

4. Strategies of resistance

As noted in the introduction, participants were astute practitioners and recognised processes of marginalisation as they occurred. They had a range of different strategies that they used to counter these processes and mitigate their effects. All these strategies were underpinned by a refusal to give up the career they had chosen, as well as a determination not to let other people define who they were and what they were able to do.

You know, you've got to be confident enough to get out there and network and you've got to really... you can't let anything... you can't have a chip on your shoulder basically about anything...and so therefore you've just got to get on and, and do the best as, you know, as much as you can.

Interview 3

I didn't want to have that experience that I had last time; I knew that I had a lot to prove, so I think that made me stronger because, you know, it just made me think, "This is what I want to do and I'm not going to change it because somebody decided that I'm not capable of doing it or, you know, they don't want to acknowledge my contribution."

Focus Group 2

The most important element of participants' strategies was managing their identities in a number of ways in order to counter the tendency for their ethnicity to be used as a basis for judging their ability. This often meant highlighting and using aspects of their identity so that other, potentially disadvantageous attributes like their ethnicity, were less important.

Using other assets

For some practitioners, their ethnicity was almost irrelevant to their work lives. These practitioners possessed assets that meant their ethnicity became far less important because they 'fitted' the professional environment in other ways. Such assets included an education at a highly-regarded university; family connections; and access to elite social and political networks.

And so [my parents] had an interest in politics, so [...] to get involved locally and understand the local decision-making...the political Labour Party was easy in that that door was open effectively. [...] [T]hen at university political society becomes very accessible anyway. And when it came to getting the job in Parliament, I guess, which was my first career in, in communication, the wider communication industry and the party political industry, I think it helped, the fact that I'd run for Parliament.

Interview 3

Practitioners also demonstrated confidence in themselves that helped them ignore or actively reject any discrimination that they might encounter. It gave them the resource to cope with the long-term struggle for recognition and to challenge discrimination by finding new ways to demonstrate their ability.

I put confidence as my number one asset. I think it's hugely important, because if you can win people over, you know, whether it's in an interview or a boardroom setting you have to dazzle by your confidence so it overcomes anything they may be thinking subconsciously, you know, it just pushes it away. Experience, I think that, again, that's something that they can't fight really, it overcomes whatever they see sitting in front of them and all the assumptions they might make about that, it has to be clouded and muddled by your wealth of experience.

Focus Group 2

In addition, senior practitioners no longer had to deal with the barriers to career progression, although some noted that their presence still caused confusion and uncertainty among white colleagues who did not expect to encounter a minoritised practitioner in a senior role.

It does change when you get more senior because people are then completely stunned and shocked and really, you know, they don't know how to deal with it at all. They can't quite believe that you are the boss. There were lots of times I turned up for meetings with other members of staff and people would find it really difficult. They would keep talking to, you know, my member of staff or whatever, and they found it really hard to kind of accept that actually I was the decision-maker and I was going to be, you know, giving them the money or whatever it is.

Interview 14

Networking

Because of the importance of networking to the profession, practitioners focused in particular in building up contacts and making their work visible among people who were potentially valuable to their careers.

You have to just try and network ruthlessly and try and work harder and get known for, you know, for doing a good job in projects.

Interview 2

Finding a mentor

Mentors were recognised as crucial for career development, as well as being a way to find routes to enter important business and social networks. Practitioners regularly mentioned mentors that had helped them in the early stages of their careers, and with whom they maintained contact.

In my last organisation I sought a mentor who was a white male [...] because the chief executive looked on him quite highly and he was, he was around the board table and I was around the board table as well. [...] I mean, take PR Week, every week they have the interview and the interviewer always asks, you know, "Who is your mentor? Who was the person who helped you there?" It's extremely important whatever colour you are in any, in any career, but much more so in an area where you don't see anyone like yourself, and you [...] want to make sure you're not out of the loop because you might be excluded in some way. So you need that, someone who's got good inside information, good experience and can give you good direction and advice.

Demonstrating merit

While having to work twice as hard as other practitioners was a consequence of implicit discrimination, participants also recognised that ensuring their efforts were *visible* was an important source of reputation that could stand them in good stead as a way of demonstrating merit, developing networks and thereby building reputation.

So I thought the other way for me to prove myself is to make sure if somebody's on a call or talking I quickly try and pick up their phone and then try and react myself and, you know, answer the query and then follow up as well "Is there anything else you need, a case study or..." you know, just try and really build my name and make sure they're aware that I'm there, I'm not in the background of the press office.

Interview 26

I was very enthusiastic and I used to work extra hard and all the rest of it, and so bosses always like that and they forget your colour after a while because they just think, "Well, if you want it done, ask [name] and she'll do it," and that's what worked for me in the end.

Interview 14

Similar strategies were used to explicitly demonstrate skill in interview contexts and maximise the chances of success.

Getting into PR itself, I think yeah, they saw that extra mile that I would go because by then I was so like downtrodden I guess, that I was... "now I know I've got to do that extra bit more than the next person". So when I did go to that interview, I actually already prepared a press release...I prepared a press release that was based around the company and from the information that I'd got through my research, and [...] I just made up something, a new initiative and I wrote around that.

Interview 4

Taking additional courses to enhance their understanding of PR was also a means of some participants both demonstrating that they had advanced skills to do the job, as well as improving their own confidence levels, which could suffer from the ongoing need to prove oneself.

I did some PR qualifications alongside [the job]. Because part of it, all the years I'd been doing this, part of it was my own kind of confidence issues and 'I don't think I can make that leap into a fully fledged communications role' because I thought maybe I'm not qualified in the right way. Or maybe I don't have the right experience and all that sort of thing.

Interview 6

Rejecting discrimination

Some practitioners fought strongly against the notion that they may have been discriminated against because of their 'race', suggesting that it may be an excuse for other personal failings that needed to be recognised and dealt with. Others felt that raising the issue of discrimination would create undue focus on 'race' and disadvantage them because then they would be labeled as 'ethnic' first and a skilled practitioner second.

By the time I'd made the decision to freelance for a year I was like "Okay I don't want to get involved in this. I don't want to mess my head up thinking, you know, is it because of race" or whatever it was. I didn't want that. I was really adamant that I didn't want to, you know, bring out the race card because very often it's just not that. You might not have the right skills, you know, you might not have the right attitude even.

Interview 16

5. The contrast: Good practice

While the majority of practitioners' narratives were related to the difficulties of being different in the PR profession, they also discussed occasions when they *had* felt a good 'fit' with their surroundings. There were clear patterns of best practice, as well as practitioner characteristics that increased their sense of belonging.

Recruitment and promotion practices

Good recruitment practices were described as those that did not depend solely on interviews but incorporated some kind of test that would assess skills more objectively. The public sector was singled out here as an example of where recruitment and promotion processes generated more confidence among practitioners.

I was interviewed by a panel when I got the job at [government department] and I think the reason I found the selection criteria more fair was because it was test-based, so it was competency-based.

Focus Group 2

Mentors

Practitioners noted the importance of mentors, particularly those who had helped them navigate the political environment in their workplace and advised them on strategies for development and progression. Mentors also provided a support in that they could prompt practitioners to take up opportunities for development or promotion.

In terms of how I got where I am now, I think it's to do with meeting the right people, I think, having the right mentors.

Focus Group 2

Good Managers

As well as mentors, practitioners mentioned supportive managers and intermediaries, who supported their development and spoke up for them as key to their career development.

My two bosses are men and I have none of the same problems. They're really open and they really, sometimes they, they uphold me more than I'm comfortable with and they basically push me to be in a really senior role here, whereas I just kind of wanted to do the work and gain my footing but they just, they put me out there, which is brilliant, which is really a refreshing experience that I'd never had at any other agency.

Interview 16

Welcoming and inclusive workplaces

Workplaces that were inclusive and actively encouraged practitioners to participate generated greater loyalty and confidence. Recognition of practitioners' skills and development needs and potential was part of this.

Since I've joined here I've found that I've moved forward a lot quicker, you know, I've been involved in everything. It's just generally as a company I've felt that there's been no kind of... I haven't been marginalised for who I am or my background, you know.

Interview 21

6. Looking Forward: Solutions

Participants were asked for specific ideas about how the industry might improve diversity and its management of diverse professionals. Their responses can be summarised in the following points.

Leadership from industry bodies and government

Participants felt that the industry needed to promote the profession among a wider range of students in schools and universities. The fact that PR is not widely known or understood among minoritised communities was perceived to be a real issue that prevented young people and families from these groups from recognising PR as a viable and attractive career. This was something that practitioners felt industry bodies needed to take more seriously and where they could initiate strategies for change. In addition, government, as one of the biggest clients for PR services, had a responsibility to insist on genuine diversity among its suppliers, because their purchasing power had the potential to significantly affect practice.

Be stringent in the application of merit

Participants were agreed that merit was the best foundation for recruitment and progression, and indeed wanted to be judged on the basis of their professional achievements rather than in light of their ethnicity. But the use of merit needed to be more carefully applied so that bias was eliminated from the process. Changing recruitment and promotion practices was essential.

[T]he way to change the industry is to have proper recruitment practices, because that's the way to change all industries. The [Government Communication Network] – when I first started, [was] totally white, I was the only black person. How did it change? They changed the recruitment practices and, as soon as they did that, they got complete diversity.

Interview 14

Promote the business case

Participants were keen that industry bodies and PR organisations themselves understood the business case for diversity. The main points to this case were:

- Including people from different backgrounds would introduce different perspectives into the business
- This would help organisations and clients to understand the importance of a wider perspective
- Having people from diverse backgrounds at a senior level in business was possible and effective.
- More diversity among staff leads to greater creativity and therefore better campaigns
- More diversity means agencies are better placed to speak to diverse audiences because they are more credible and understand their audience better

- The global nature of the industry and its clients means that diversity is increasingly essential for many international agencies and for companies with a global footprint, if their communications are to be effective internationally.

I think that's where diversity is important because you need people who think in different ways, who do have different backgrounds and people who have lived abroad and look at society in a different way. That's really important.

Interview 18

Increase the number and visibility of senior practitioners from minoritised groups

While quotas were not necessarily acceptable among the participants, they did generally agree that greater visibility of minoritised practitioners, particularly at a senior level, would encourage greater numbers of people from minoritised groups to consider taking up PR as a career.

I think the more you see people like you in what you aspire to do, the more you'll think that's okay for me to do. It's really simple. So okay positive, discrimination, positive action isn't necessarily the answer but it does help. More black policemen on the street means it's okay for you to be a policeman even though traditionally there's no way you'd be a policeman. The same with a lawyer, the same with a doctor, the same with an accountant - it's okay because they're okay and they're successful so therefore it's okay for me to be like that as well.

Interview 5

Widen the pool of applicants

Practitioners felt strongly that industry bodies and, to a lesser extent, large agencies, should reach out to a wider pool of universities for recruitment, which would in turn increase the diversity of the graduate intake.

7. Conclusions

The research clearly indicated that discrimination is prevalent in the PR industry, and happens on all sorts of levels and in all sorts of environments: client engagements, networking events, in PR consultancies and in organisations where in-house practitioners work. The PR profession is not immune to the social context from which it emerged and in which it operates; on the contrary, the difficulties that participants faced were linked to the social stereotypes associated with their ethnic group more widely. Similarly, participants that could claim assets more generally associated with higher status groups, benefited in that other, potentially problematic aspects of their identity become less important.

Participants who did face implicit or explicit discrimination were creative in managing these barriers, and used various tools and techniques to manage perceptions and reinforce their right to be part of the profession. However, this can come at a cost: some participants used words such as ‘upset’, ‘scarred’, ‘shocked’, ‘painful’, ‘angry’ and ‘hurt’ to describe their reactions to the experiences they had had. The risk is that talented practitioners leave the industry as a result of these experiences: the participants in this study had all decided to stay in PR and overcome any difficulties they had encountered, but there will be others that the research did not reach, who made the opposite choice.

One of the fundamental issues that must be dealt with going forward is the disconnect between the formal professional presentation of diversity as an abstract, business-related characteristic that has to be managed, and the very personal lived experience of being different that emerges through the participants’ narratives. Clearly, while the profession aims to ensure that merit is the only criteria for entry and progression, it is unable to do this while assumptions about the capabilities and suitability of people from different groups continue to colour industry processes, attitudes and values. While these assumptions go unacknowledged, there is little scope for them to be addressed and mitigated in practice. This makes the position of a practitioner who is experiencing discrimination very difficult, since there are few support mechanisms they can call on to address the problem.

The primacy of the client means that often, a business case relating to the client is perceived to be necessary for improving diversity. However, this is difficult to construct. Some participants articulated a business case that focused in particular on ‘diversity’ as a business asset, but the case is not watertight; in practice, employers and recruiters do not always behave rationally and the perceived risk associated with hiring someone from an unfamiliar background may outweigh the potential benefits of diversity. Other practitioners simply emphasised the fact that they had the skills and experience to ‘deliver’; it was other peoples’ perceptions of those skills that created the problem. Viewed from this perspective, improving diversity is about examining professional assumptions about minoritised individuals and their skills, making their talent more visible, and recognising it fairly, rather than constructing a ‘case’ for particular practitioners to be more included. Such an approach makes good business sense in any industry, for any client

relationship, and would break down the current stereotypes that have the potential to limit minoritised practitioners' careers.

The solutions that participants mentioned are not simple, quick or easy and require the profession to reflect on its values and norms, its understandings of 'difference' and 'diversity', its links to social hierarchies, and its structures, all of which can limit possibilities for 'different' individuals joining or progressing through the PR hierarchy. Nonetheless, as a benchmark exercise and the first of its kind in the industry, the research, and the participants whose voices we hear in this report, have detailed a position from which the profession may move forward.

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