

*Relaciones Humanas*: The Potential for  
Public Relations Practitioners as Cultural  
Intermediaries in Mexico City

Caroline Elizabeth Mary Hodges

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For Lindy, an inspirational public relations person and a true friend.

*“It will call for the best efforts of all [persons] of good will to protect the human values as our [communities] move into their next stage of development” (Munro Fraser, 1960).*

## **Abstract**

Using Mexico City as a case study, this research proposes an alternative framework for research which, rather than add to the dominant narrative that public relations should become a formalised and recognised profession, seeks to understand the make-up of public relations as an occupational culture. It explores the values and experiences relevant to practitioners and emphasises the need to recognise the role of practitioners as intermediaries in the development of society. In contrast to the prevalence of quasi-experimental methodology often adopted in public relations research, this thesis advances a subjective, cultural approach to public relations research and practice.

This study is based on the premise that methodological approaches in public relations research need to be flexible enough so as not to suppress the new meaningful insights, which may emerge of practice in other parts of the world. The narrative advances an ‘in-awareness’ cultural approach to public relations research, applying a social constructionism-inspired perspective to the study of public relations as an occupational culture in Mexico City. In-depth interviews were carried out in Spanish with 32 practitioners working in public and private sector organisations. This data was supported by general observation and follow-up participant observation, in order to explore the potential for practitioners as cultural intermediaries in the development of a culture in transition. The study focuses on the practitioner lifeworlds (or public relations *practitioner* culture – PRP) and considers the impact that their habitus, occupational identities, social networks and experiences have on the ways in which they communicate. Influences from the occupational structure and the socio-cultural structure of Mexico were also explored.

The data was analysed by way of a ‘constant comparison’ method in order to identify patterns within the culture. The findings are presented in the form of five semi-biographical composite narratives that bring out the contrasting ways of seeing and acting: the ‘Young Public Relations Executive Experience’, the ‘Old School Experience’, the ‘Agency Director Experience’, the ‘In-house Practitioner Experience’ and the ‘Social Communicator experience’. The relationships between these patterns were then interpreted by way of analytic generalisation. Three core themes emerged: ‘Occupational Identity’, ‘Interpersonal Communication and Networks’, and ‘Ethics’, each of which were grounded in practitioners’ experiences of Mexican culture. The findings suggest that public relations in Mexico City might be regarded as an occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas*, a Spanish term to mean human-centred approach. This ethos would place value on human and trusted communication manifested in an authentic occupational ‘character’



and formal and informal interpersonal communicative practices. Amalgamating these findings with broader sociological and community relations theory and within the context of wider globalisation theory, a reconceptualisation of community relations was developed in order to explain the potential for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in Mexico City. This thesis suggests that this potential might be at a personal, grass-roots level. By communicating interpersonally, practitioners would be able to communicate trust and respect and encourage solidarity, and thus help to develop micro-level social capital, which is essential for a culture like Mexico with significant levels of suspicion and class division.

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## 1. Setting the Research Within Context

This study proposes an alternative framework for research which, rather than add to the dominant narrative that public relations should become a formalised and recognised profession, seeks to understand public relations as an occupational group. It explores the values and experiences relevant to practitioners and emphasises the need to recognise the role of practitioners as intermediaries in the development of society. This thesis advances a cultural approach to public relations research and practice. It links societal culture and the occupational culture of public relations to the communication activities of practitioners, with the aim of understanding the role of public relations within Mexican society. In this chapter I will explain and justify the rationale which underpins my thesis and outline my research purpose. I start by identifying what I consider to be some of the limitations of current thinking regarding the nature of public relations within a global context. The implications for the professionalisation debate within the industry will then be considered, before introducing the conceptual framework which underpins this study.

### 1.1 Trends within International Public Relations Research and Practice

*“It is largely American techniques that have been adapted to national and regional PR practices throughout the world, including many totalitarian nations. Today, although in some languages there is no term comparable to public relations, the practice has spread to most countries, especially those with industrial bases and large urban populations. This is primarily the result of worldwide technological, social economic, and political changes and the growing understanding that public relations is an essential component of advertising, marketing and diplomacy.”*

(Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron, 2000: 344).

Dennis Wilcox, Phillip Ault, Warren Agee and Glen Cameron (2000) agree that public relations is a US phenomenon, emerging as a result of industrialisation, and spreading to other parts of the world as a result of globalisation. As questionable as statements like these may sound to academics and practitioners of international public relations, similar views persist within the industry - as practitioners believe that what is known about public relations in one country, can be applied across all countries (Vasquez and Taylor, 2000; Vercic, van Ruler, Butschi, Flodin, 2001). Back in 1988, Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck suggested that definitions of public relations demonstrated the lack of overall precision in its practice and that practitioners were unable to provide an adequate and specific description of the public relations function (p82).

These authors raised some interesting questions: Does the history of public relations as it is commonly presented adequately or even accurately describe why public relations exists today? What is an appropriate definition of public relations, its role and function? Now, in the twenty-first century, Kruckeberg and Starck's observations still hold, and there is a continued need for the industry to address the questions these authors raised.

As Krishnamurthy Sriramesh and Dejan Vercic (2001) and Nilanjana Bardhan (2003: 226) argue, *"the majority of the models, principles and theories of public relations that are commonly tested (or assumed) worldwide were developed mostly within the socio-political and economic context of the western capitalist democratic world."* Studies of international public relations have typically compared practices in different countries using James Grunig's 'Four Models' of public relations (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang and Lyra, 1995; Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki, 1999; Huang, 1990). This approach constitutes one lens, among many, for exploring how public relations is conceptualised and practised in different countries. Over-emphasising Grunig's models of 'Excellent' public relations, (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2000), there is a tendency to perceive of any differences found as 'right' and 'wrong' practice (Zaharna, 2001). *"The standardisation of approaches to understanding, and a lack of awareness and appreciation of the culturally prescribed rules and norms of, communication behaviors particular to other cultures can cause public relations projects to fail, or worse, backfire"* (Zaharna, 2001: 135). Concurring with Zaharna, I suggest throughout this narrative that whilst basic concepts may remain constant, public relations activity will vary according to the historical and cultural context in which it is practised. North American education and theory will, of course, continue to play an important role in the development of the field around the world. However, *"indigenous influences, institutions, and practitioners are helping to develop public relations in unique ways within particular nations"* (Culbertson and Chen, 1996a: 11).

In this thesis, I propose a conceptual framework for exploring the complex relationship between public relations and culture. Whilst the empirical fieldwork will be specific to Mexico, my intention is that the agenda for research might be taken and adapted to other cultural contexts. Assuming a discovery-driven (Todres, 2002; 2000), interpretivist approach, I do not intend to cast judgement or to prescribe. Interpretive research which explores the nature of public relations practice around the world, I argue, should come first and form the foundation upon which theories and models of practice are developed and applied to future research.



## **1.2 Professionalisation Discourse within Public Relations**

In order to understand the rationale for undertaking this thesis, it is necessary to understand firstly the context from which it developed. As a practitioner, and also now researcher of public relations, I became very aware of the new 'thrust', to coin Nilanjana Bardhan's (2003: 244) phrase, within the industry towards 'professionalisation'. Bardhan suggests that this 'thrust' has emerged in the era of globalisation and is based on the supposition that the previous norms of practice are not professionally adequate for the new global context.

Public relations has so far concentrated its efforts on staking a professional claim to exclusive and expert knowledge. The dominant narrative within the professionalisation debate has been mostly concerned with the structural approach depicting professionalisation in terms of the establishment of professional bodies in the public relations industry. Normally, the use of professionalism is linked in our industry with the expression of the US public relations concern with the identity of the field (Vercic et al., 2001: 377) and a need to improve the standing of the occupation (Pieczka and L'Etang, 2001: 228). Approaches have been largely normative, assuming the traditional functionalist perspective from within in the sociology of professions, with industry experts asking themselves the traits which make-up a profession (Culbertson and Chen, 1996; Pieczka and L'Etang 2001). The professionalisation efforts have focused on defining the practice and developing prescribed education and training requirements as the public relations industry strives to see itself more directly likened to universally practised professions such as medicine and accounting, which share more similarities globally among their professional practitioners than differences (Kruckberg, 2000).

To date, the professionalisation of public relations has been considered largely from what might be regarded as an ethnocentric, American progressivist perspective (Pieczka and L'Etang, 2001), which has looked to provide standard solutions. By implication, those who subscribe to this perspective are exercising hegemony (Pavalko, 1988; Friedson, 1977; Trice, 1993; Laaksonen, 2003) in the creation of appropriate and 'excellent' practice. The belief has been that if public relations is to become a recognised 'profession', it will need to develop a global theory of practice and an international code of conduct and there has been little to challenge the legitimacy of this view (Heath, 2001, however, might be regarded as a significant turning point for the public relations discipline). I have considerable reservations regarding the notion of global 'theory building' and the construction of generalisation, particularly within the context of

professionalisation, in what is not only a complex occupation (Macmanus, 2003; Zaharna, 2001), but one which is ultimately concerned with human relationships and dialogue. Concurring with Derina Holtzhausen's (2000; 2002) postmodern critique of public relations and the consideration given by Patricia A Curtin and T. Kenn Gaither (2005) to the role of public relations within the circuit of culture, I would argue that every individual, or group of individuals, is different and that the relationships practitioners build, and the dialogues in which they engage, with them will be different, depending on the context. Furthermore, the values and assumptions that guide relationship building will be culturally constituted (Bardhan 2003: 246; Curtin and Gaither, 2005). There is, therefore, a need for more multiple perspectives and critical case studies with a focus on the major problematic of globalisation (L'Etang, 2005).

Talking simply of 'the profession' of public relations means that we will inevitably ignore several important problems. Firstly, there will undoubtedly be variances in how it is practised in different countries, and the way of conceptualising the occupation may differ entirely (Stevens, 1998: 29). There is a danger that professionalisation might lead to an inappropriate concentration of effort on the capitalist marketplace and the structure of the practice in the private sector (Stevens, 1998; Curtin and Gaither, 2005). It has long been the case for public relations theories to emphasise the importance of the practice as a management function, communication managers as members of the dominant coalition, and the significance of strategic planning in public relations focused on measurable outcomes, preferably in economic terms (Holtzhausen, 2002, 2000; Curtin and Gaither, 2005). Derina Holtzhausen (2002) questions whether these critical approaches or critiques add any value to the field of public relations. In the final instance, it is the focus on the practitioner, she suggests, who performs a formal communication function for an organisation that sets the field of public relations apart from other related disciplines. The content of the work carried out by public relations practitioners may be strikingly different in different parts of the world (Al-enad, 1990; Botan, 1992, Holtzhausen, 2000), and codes of ethics may play distinct roles in guiding practice and in constructing the identities of public relations practitioners and the profession (Curtin and Gaither, 2005: 104).

As research suggests, the term 'public relations' is not a simple label easily transferred from one area of practice to another. In seeking to standardise the industry, the professionalisation effort is set to ignore the internal stratification of practitioners within particular countries. Occupational titles may be similar, but what persons with same titles actually do can differ vastly (Stevens,

1998).<sup>1</sup> It is clear that, on an international level, professional standards in public relations have yet to have coalesced (Sallot, Cameron and Weaver and Lariscy, 1997, Gabrielsen 2004) and industry leaders “*need to recognise the diversity beyond the homogeneity implied by the labels of lawyer, doctor and public relations specialist*” (Pieczka and L’Etang 2001: 227).

The discourse which surrounds public relations quest for professional status looks set to continue. It is not enough, however, to build a profession on a set of rules (Gabrielsen, 2004, Brien, 1998). Firstly, practitioners will act as they do because of the values and dispositions that they possess and the experiences they have had (Banks, 1995). Secondly, practitioners would be more likely to be motivated in their work and to promote professional practice if they perceived of what they were doing as being relevant to their own particular cultural experiences and not just merely as a case of following a rule of an international order (Brien, 1998; Banks, 1995). Magda Pieczka and Jacquie L’Etang’s (2001) recommended approach to understanding the issue of professionalisation is more appropriate. They follow Friedson in suggesting that each case of public relations will be explained by a unique configuration of ‘national’ factors and will, therefore, be socially constructed (Pieczka and L’Etang, 2001; see also Stevens, 1998; Serini, 1994).

A complete paradigmatic basis for the development of public relations theory must account for the situational and the institutional, the particular and the significance of relationships. Researchers and practitioners of international public relations should instead concentrate on following Jongmin Park’s (2003: 252) lead and encourage “*the industry to carefully examine its assumptions to understand where it currently is, and more importantly from a global perspective, where it is going.*” We firstly need to learn more about the influences of national culture, politics and economics on the development of the practice beyond the United States and Europe and, more significantly, to consider the values, dispositions and experiences of practitioners in other nations and the ways in which the complex patterns of national culture and occupational values shape the development of a global occupation (Zaharna, 2001).

The most significant themes which, for me, emerged from my reading of the literature on professions is, firstly that a profession is an occupation which is directed at solving real human problems and secondly, which is meeting human needs; a profession, therefore, claims to serve

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<sup>1</sup> I deliberately use the term ‘persons’ rather than ‘individual’ throughout this thesis, as W H Auden once said, “ ‘individual’ is primarily a biological term to classify a tree, a horse, a man, a woman, while the term ‘person’ refers to the uniqueness of each



society (Brien, 1998: 396; Stevens, 1998; Fitzgerald and Teal, 2003, Bivins, 1993). Returning to Dean Kruckberg and Kenneth Starck's assertion (1988; 2003), public relations needs to define its position and function and consider how it is serving society. We now find ourselves living in times of increased multinationalisation, with popular cultures spreading across national borders (Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995; Huntington, 1998, amongst others) and public relations is at the fore in driving new trends. However, most changes in society happen first in the material aspects of culture (Al –Enad, 1990: 25). Whilst, as Hobbs and Blank wrote (Al-Enad, 1990: 25), *"the nonmaterial aspects of culture [eventually adapt] to accommodate themselves to the new material changes"*, this movement towards globalisation does not, I would argue, necessarily affect people's beliefs or values, nor does it their basic assumptions about human relations (Huntington, 2001; Christians and Traber, 1997). And these are the things which hold societies together, and these are the things upon which public relations should concentrate its thinking.

### 1.3 The Role of Public Relations in Culture

*"Culture shapes public relations, but public relations can help to change culture"* (Grunig and Grunig, 2003: 236).

Patricia. A. Curtin and T. Kenn. Gaither (2005) propose that considering the role of public relations within the circuit of culture is a basis for developing public relations theory that will inform the wide variety of public relations practices found globally. As Derina Holtzhausen (2000) has suggested, public relations is a diverse and influential discipline which can be used for propaganda and deception, to upset or confirm social consensus, to relieve or exacerbate social tensions or to promote solidarity or fragment a community. Drawing on Kevin Moloney's (2005) definition of public relations as *'civic and commercial diplomacy'*, one of my principal aims in this thesis is to explore the idea of public relations as a shaper of culture – an institution and a process that influences culture and yet is also sensitive to culture's reciprocal influence (Banks, 1995). Thomas Mickey (2003) suggests that public relations is essentially a cultural product and emphasises the social importance of the practice. Stephen Banks contends that public relations has increasingly become a tool in shaping public policy and in instigating public debate, thereby playing an active role in shaping society, and ultimately culture. Furthermore, Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck (1988: xi) suggest that public relations is better defined and practised as *"the active attempt to restore and maintain a sense of community."* Whilst the important role played

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*human being"* (Van Manen, 1990: 6).

by public relations in contemporary culture is widely recognised, I am interested in the ways in which public relations proposes to society ways of contextualising a part of the social world (Banks, 1995). It is in this sense that Stephen Banks argues that public relations is cultural due to the close relationship between the practice and existing predispositions held in any society about public communication.

As an increasing number of public relations professionals and scholars venture into the international arena, many are discovering the paramount role played by culture (Zaharna, 2001: 135) in shaping the practice. There are a growing number of researchers who consider culturally-defined expectations and assumptions about specific public relations activities (Zaharna, 2001). Nilanjana Bardhan's (2003: 225) study emerges as "*a critique of unquestioning global applications of public relations metanarratives in culturally diverse settings*," and there is a growing body of thought which encourages critical inquiries and non-traditional methodologies that aid our understanding of local and culturally specific styles of public relations (Pratt, 1985; Sriramesh, 1992; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2001; Zaharna, 2001; Bardhan, 2003). However, Carl Botan (Taylor, 2000: 4) and Dean Kruckberg and Kenneth Starck (1988: xii) noted that the 'exciting future' for international public relations lies in studying and redefining our understanding of the social role of public relations.

Public relations practitioners can unleash a powerful force for social change (Holtzhausen, 2000). Some studies have begun to look at the position of public relations in encouraging organisations to take more of an active role in social transformation (Peruzzo, 1993; Molleda, Athaydes and Hirsch, 2003; Molleda and Ferguson, 2004; Holtzhausen, 2000, 20002; Signitzer and Coombs, 1992). In addition, Maureen Taylor (2000a) considers public relations expertise in relationship building and, consequently, its influence in establishing democracy, whilst Kevin Moloney has written about the role that public relations can play in the development of civil society (see Moloney, 2000; 2001, see also Taylor, 2000b). This latter focus opens up new approaches and functions, "*public relations for nation building and national development has shown us that public relations and strategic communication are no longer practices employed merely within the domain of profit-making organisations. Instead, public relations can be effective for any group or organisation that wishes to build, alter, and maintain relationships with their key publics*" (Taylor, 2000a: 637).<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these studies have significantly enhanced our understanding

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<sup>2</sup> To contrast this perspective, it is also interesting to consider the ideas of Mohan J. Dutta-Bergman (2005). In taking a critical approach to the rhetoric of civil society, Dutta-Bergman suggests that civil society and public relations are concepts which, at present,

of how the practice of public relations might contribute to our national cultures, yet they place little emphasis on exploring the public relations practitioners themselves in their role as social and cultural agents.

#### 1.4 Cultural Intermediary Occupations

Whilst the important role played by public relations activity in contemporary culture is widely recognised, we need to deconstruct the practice and to consider the significance of public relations as an occupational group in the development of culture. Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke (2002) identify the new ‘cultural turn’ in which there is a renewed interest in the production of meaning at work (p.1). They argue, as Graham Salaman (1997) previously, that “*the ‘rationalist’, ‘mechanistic’ or ‘bureaucratic’ systems of organisation have systematically destroyed meanings and creativity in the workplace and that in order to compete effectively in the new globalised, knowledge-based economy, it is vital to reverse this process and to create new meaning for people at work, thus unleashing their creativity and enterprise*” (p1). As Garry Stevens (1998) suggests when writing about architecture as an occupation, what is important for the industry is not what it knows and how to apply this knowledge, so much as understanding what being a public relations practitioner means (an overview of Garry Steven’s book is provided in section 2.6.1, on page 25).

I would argue that there is a need for public relations to disengage from the constant attention that is currently given to the structure of the occupation and to instead look at *who* is doing what to *whom* and *how* (Stevens, 1998: 31). To explore this, the theoretical perspectives I draw on in this thesis originate from a European intellectual tradition that has long been concerned with the study of culture and society. Prime among these influences is the body of British work on cultural intermediation through Paul du Gay, Sean Nixon, Liz McFall and Angela Robbie (amongst others), who have drawn heavily on the ideas of the French Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) in his work, *Distinction*.

In 2002, a special issue of Cultural Studies 16 (4) was published which looked at the role of ‘*cultural intermediaries*’; a group of occupations that are widely understood to have increased both numerically and in the power and influence they command within European society (McFall,

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do not go hand-in-hand, and that “*civil society serves the goals of the transnational elite and actively participates in the marginalization of the Third World participant*” (p276).



2002). Cultural intermediaries are by definition advertising practitioners, management consultants, public relations practitioners and other occupational groups who belong to those intermediary occupations which involve information and knowledge intensive forms of work and that have come to be seen as increasingly central to economic and culture life. These groups are widely understood to have increased both numerically and in the power and influence they command within society in the second half of the twentieth century (McFall, 2002). From a Bourdieusian perspective, cultural intermediaries would be “...*predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living*” (1984: 366), they would be able to transmit the latest styles and attitudes to wider audiences, and themselves form part of the reception class for new goods and experiences (Featherstone, 1991: 109). Practitioners are characterised as occupying a position where “*jobs and careers have not yet acquired the rigidity of the older bureaucratic professions*” (Bourdieu, 1984: 151) and instead, entry into these occupations is usually via networks of connections, shared values and common life experiences (Negus, 2002: 511).

Turning to these occupational groups and the conceptual terminology that has developed around them, this body of researchers have sought to place cultural intermediary groups in the occupational division of labour and to understand the social roles they perform. The authors are concerned with opening up the links between culture and economy, production and consumption, by focusing on both the formal expertise of the broader intellectual and cultural formulation of the practitioners. The differentiated accounts they provide of the occupations they have studied, enable the reader to grasp the differences between these occupational groups as well as any ‘family resemblances’.

This group has, so far, paid little attention to public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation, however. The limited discussion there is of the practice considers public relations within the context of marketing and publicity; as a producer of consumer culture and a cultural vanguard for taste and lifestyle (Nixon and du Gay, 2002; Negus, 2002; Soar, 2002), or as a tool of manipulation (Negus, 2002). There is, therefore, a gap in the literature and a need to explore the concept of public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation within a broader context. There is a need to assume a wider perspective on public relations practice, taking their approaches and also applying the ideas of Juan-Carlos Molleda and Mary-Ann Ferguson (2004) who, focusing on Latin America, suggest that public relations professionals are emerging as ‘social intermediaries’ in the new economy. Molleda and Ferguson contend that public relations is taking



on more of a collaborative social role in the region, which is essential in societies with disproportionate rates of inequality.

### 1.5.1 Occupational Culture

When seeking to develop a thesis, I was interested to find public relations research which explored the role of public relations in modern cultures and, more significantly, those studies which assumed more systemic approaches (Tayeb, 1994: 429)<sup>3</sup>. Essentially, I sought studies which acknowledged that cultural values and attitudes are different in degree at least, if not in some cases in absolute terms, from one society to another. Secondly, studies which considered the idea that different cultural groups behave differently under similar circumstances because of the differences in their underlying values and attitudes. Finally, and most significantly, I looked for studies that not only looked at the important role that culture plays in shaping the nature of public relations practice, but that explored the role of public relations practice in shaping culture. At this point I wish to separate the meaning of the word ‘role’ that I will employ in this study from more commonly accepted definition. In keeping with the Anglo-American approaches to professionalisation, the concept of occupational role has traditionally been regarded as *“systematically enforced prescriptions for how organisational members should think and feel about themselves and their work”* (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1168-9). Recognising the close relationship between occupational role and occupational identity, I use the term ‘role’ in this study to mean a ‘function’ or ‘position’ considered from the point of view (or subjectivities) of the practitioners themselves.

### 1.5.2 Social constructionism approach to researching occupations

Heightened interest in the cultural intermediary occupations has brought with it a need to understand both the characteristics of the individuals who occupy such positions in the circulation of culture, and the ways in which their dispositions shape the nature of the practice in which they are involved (Nixon, 1997: 182, Giddens, 1987: 98). This means deconstructing the practice yet further to explore the culture of the occupation which forms the very foundations upon which the activities carried out by practitioners are based (Mickey, 2003). In order to do this, we need to

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<sup>3</sup> Systemic study is *“lacking of the cultural values and attitudes of people investigating both the historical development of their values and attitudes, and by carrying out an independent survey of the cultural traits of sample of ordinary people outside the [occupation] to be studied, and those of a sample of the [practitioners], in order to examine the coherence between cultural values and the [occupationally]-relevant attitude and values of the people involved”* (Tayeb 1994:437).

turn to the metatheoretical approach of social constructionism. Social constructionism is principally concerned with explaining the influences upon, and the processes by which, people come to describe, explain, and account for the world in which they live (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they are now, as they were in the past and as they might potentially develop in the future (Gergen and Gergen, 2003; Gergen and Gergen, 1997; Giddens, 1987). Social constructionist research, therefore, focuses on the multiple apprehensible realities and relationships between the past and future, the internal and external, and the 'I' and the 'we' (Critten, 2005). It is an appropriate means for considering an occupation's potential from a holistic framework, based on the premise that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work in them (Gergen and Gergen, 1994). When considered from an occupational perspective, social constructionist research is concerned with the workers' values, visions, achievements and perceptions of best practice. At the centre of social constructionist research is reconstructing stories around experiences (Gergen and Gergen, 1994).

### **1.5.3 Social constructionism approach to exploring cultural intermediary occupations**

Garry Stevens (1998: 30-31) suggests that in the quest for professionalisation, there is a tendency for occupations to "*gloss over its relationships with other elements of society*" and in doing so, to relegate the practitioners of such importance to the occupation, to marginal positions (see also Hofstede, Bram, Ohayv and Sanders, 1990). As a cultural intermediary occupation, public relations is responsible for the creation of discourse within culture and all cultural discourses centre on subjectivities (Laakonsen, 2003). As Nilanjana Bardhan (2004: 251) stresses, ground-up research or conceptual frameworks for studying the culturally consisted roles of the public relations person, are practically nonexistent. Moreover, Maureen Taylor (2001: 636) encourages research that examines predispositions underlying public relations theory and practice considering it "*an important step towards articulating useful theories of [the practice].*" The articles published in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* 12 (1) in 2000 began to address the ways in which our values as public relations theorists and practitioners shape what we do when we "do" public relations (Spicer, 2000: 116), but I would suggest that we need to look beyond merely the predispositions and values held by public relations practitioners, to explore their meanings, which will develop from their experiences. In using the term 'subjective experiences', I am interested in the open, situational and discursively sensitive nature of human subjectivity, rather than depth-psychological issues contingent upon early identifications.

The current body of research into the sociologies of cultural intermediary occupations draws out some of the general ways in which the social make-up of practitioners, the values and motivations of the people, and the wider workplace cultures they inhabit, can be seen to shape the cultural practices they perform. In this thesis, I propose to build on this work and to consider the multiple subjectivities (Laakonsen, 2003) of public relations practitioners in Mexico. By using the term ‘multiple’, I imply that public relations practices are not only interactive and situational, but also specific in terms of social and cultural conditions. As social actors, public relations practitioners are open to certain socio-cultural and globally influenced conditions and situations. Therefore, public relations as an occupational culture, I will argue, will be socially constructed and needs to be considered from an intercultural perspective (Zaharna, 2001). Public relations activity represents a higher level of complex patterns of several culturally-mediated behaviours (Zaharna, 2001: 142). The practitioners as agents will live in some sort of relationship to other agents and be shaped by societal and cultural influences. In this thesis I propose to follow an “in awareness” approach (Zaharna, 2001) to understanding public relations as an occupational culture, exploring the practice as defined by practitioners working within particular national parameters and refined by cultural nuances. Exploring public relations in this way would highlight areas of potential difference that will affect the way public relations is practised by occupational groupings around the world.

## **1.6 Why Research Public Relations in Mexico?**

The empirical research is set within the context of Mexico. Numerous researchers, including those works featured in Culbertson and Chen (1996), Sriramesh and Vercic (2004), and Tilson and Alozie (2004), have shown that countries throughout the world have made major advances in public relations research and practice. *“We now have in-depth information about public relations practice in Asia and the post-Communist world, and studies about public relations in the Middle East and Africa have shown that there are many opportunities and challenges for the development of the industry”* (Vasquez and Taylor, 2000: 433-434). However, there has been limited empirical research carried out in Latin America (Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003: xxviii), in particular in Mexico.

Public relations is an industry that is regarded as constantly changing, but in regions such as Latin America, these changes are much quicker in instance due to a series of socioeconomic factors (Molleda, Athaydes, Hirsch, 2003: 371). Latin America provides a complex and fascinating



environment in which to conduct empirical research exploring the reciprocal relationship between public relations and culture. As Maria Aparecida Ferrari (2003) suggests, public relations in Latin America has developed by shaping its own profile based on the political, economic and social conditions present in the area which, as a result, has given birth to local nuances in the practice.

Mexico is a country worthy of particular study in the area of public relations. Being the closest Latin American neighbour to the United States, it is the focus of much interest from the international business community and was an early expansions market for US-based multinationals (Sharlach, 1993). Mexico is a country experiencing rapid development and democratisation and the social actors which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s have contributed to the cultural transformation of the public domain (Kirschke, 2001). The development of public relations and, in particular, the role of practitioners as social actors in the social and economic development of Mexico, has not yet been fully researched and documented. Moreover, further research which concentrates on the circulation and appropriation of cultural capital in Latin America and its role in the reproduction and transformation of the social system, is encouraged (Garcia Canclini, 1993: 19).

At this point I should also relay my personal aspirations for conducting research in Mexico. My fascination and passion for the Spanish language and for Latin American culture has been my main motivating factor throughout. Having studied the language, history and politics of the region at undergraduate level and continuing with this interest in my spare time over more than a decade, I developed a foundation of knowledge and understanding about Latin American society. One thing was missing for me, however; I had yet to visit the continent that had been such an inspiration to me. I knew that I wanted to go, but not as a tourist; I wanted to get a real taste of the way of life, I wanted to work there. From my desk in a busy Bristol office, I began to research 'PR in Latin America.' For more than six months I spent every lunchtime, and stayed behind after work, 'surfing' the internet for any potential leads. It became clear that the industry was most developed in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, but that there was still very little known about the practice even in these countries. This motivated me to want to learn more and to carry-out research in the area for myself. I remembered learning about the complexities of Central America and Mexico at university, and had developed a keen interest in the natural environment and history of that part of the world. Looking to combine this personal interest with a strong empirical case study of established public relations practice, I chose to make Mexico the focus of my study.

## 1.7 Research Aims

Throughout this thesis I will assume a naturalistic approach – based on the in-depth study of participants’ understanding of the practice of public relations. This is in contrast to the prevalence of quasi-experimental methodology often adopted in public relations research. Most researchers in the field appear to have adopted an objective, rather than subjective, stance towards the design of their research. Returning to my previous arguments regarding the over-emphasis placed on professionalisation, I would suggest that such approaches are driven by the compulsion to justify the worth of public relations and a need to study the outcomes of the practice and to provide hard ‘objective’ facts. More qualitative, naturalistic approaches to public relations research might be regarded as meager and fragmented. Researchers who take a subjective approach are unlikely to look for ‘proof’ of public relations’ effectiveness but rather be interested in uncovering an in-depth understanding by collecting data in the setting in which it normally occurs. Throughout this thesis I advocate the need for a shift of focus in public relations towards subjective research methodologies which place practitioners in a central position and develop theories based on their points of view.

As I proposed in section 1.3, this thesis seeks to explore the idea of public relations as a shaper of culture – an institution and a process that influences culture and yet is also sensitive to culture’s reciprocal influence (Banks, 1995). The aims of the research can be separated into four distinct areas:

- To seek conceptual innovation coupled with empirical research, in order to contribute to the growing body of research which encourages critical inquiries and non-traditional methodologies that aid our understanding of local and culturally specific styles of public relations.
- To advance an ‘in-awareness’ cultural approach to public relations research and practice, linking societal culture and the occupational culture of public relations to the communication activities of practitioners with the aim of understanding the potential role(s) of public relations within Mexican society.
- To deconstruct the practice to explore the relationships and individual functioning behind the occupational culture and to explore unsuspected aspects of, and potentialities within, the occupation and the influences of the wider culture in which it operates.

- To explore the occupational culture of public relations in Mexico from the perspective of the occupational lifeworlds of the practitioners – the subjective meanings and experiences.

The narrative I present in this thesis will assume a sociological approach to exploring public relations as an occupational culture in Mexico. This study will use the idea of cultural intermediation to explore the relationship between public relations and culture. Culture will be used as a 'lens' through which to explore public relations as an occupation in Mexico City, determining firstly how it is understood and practised. An understanding of the occupational culture should give us a greater understanding of the potential role(s) for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries.

There have been calls for public relations research that spans micro- and macro-levels of analysis (Curtin and Gaither, 2005: 94). The divide tends to fall along paradigmatic lines with some favoring more macro-level critical-cultural approaches, whereas others identify a need for more micro-level postmodern approaches. Whilst this study will focus on the micro-level and might, therefore, be regarded as characteristic of a postmodernist approach to research, I have deliberately chosen not to bring postmodern rhetoric into the narrative I present. Postmodernism as research has traditionally focused on the role of language in social construction, resulting in different forms of domination, particularly through knowledge and power (Holtzhausen, 2000; 2002). It is not my intention here to look at public relations practitioners as agents of power in Mexican culture. I will, however, frequently make reference to 'Modernity'. In doing so, I do not recognise a distinction between 'Modernity' and 'Postmodernity', but rather employ the term to refer to the stages of social development which are based on industrialisation, urbanisation, technological advances and the capitalist world market (Featherstone, 1991: 6). Moreover, whilst focusing on the subjective experiences of practitioners, the research will also take into account the larger picture by exploring experiences at occupational group and societal level. The cultural identification of practitioners and the wider occupational culture in which they move will both provide resources for, and set certain limits to, the direction of the occupation. The subjective dispositions of key practitioners and the meanings, values and normative assumptions written into their occupational cultures, will be important in mediating the process of reaching out to, and connecting with, publics.



In review, in this thesis I seek to generate theory rather than to confirm existing theories (Gergen, 1994). I will, therefore, combine conceptual innovation (Giddens, 1987: 43) with empirical research in order to open up 'ways of seeing' that do not exist within the perspectives of lay practitioners or in other theoretical approaches to international public relations. I will explore unsuspected aspects of, and potentialities within, the occupation and the influences of the wider culture in which it operates. Whilst assuming a culturalist approach to the research (Coxon and Jones, 1978: 10), pursuing a country/society specific study as opposed to focusing on cross-national similarities of public relations occupational culture, this thesis will identify key areas which will contribute to future work on the role of public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries and the development of the occupation in different international contexts.

## 1.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I began by discussing what I regard as some of the current limitations within public relations discourse on an international level. The most significant area for concern, I argued, was the continuing 'thrust' towards global professionalisation. As Chie Nakane (1972) argued several decades ago in his study of Japanese culture and organisational practices, I suggested that concentrating on Anglo-American cases gives undue emphasis to the *market* aspect of professionalisation and that we should move away from trying to develop a general theory of public relations as a profession, and instead focus on the more important theme of the construction and cultural and social consequences of creating meaning and of building relationships, and the role of public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in this process.

In the final sections of this chapter, I set out the aims of this research. I proposed that in assuming an occupational culture approach to the study of public relations practice in Mexico will enable us to explore the ways in which practitioners' subjective values and experiences influence the nature of the occupational practices they perform. In the following chapter, I will draw on the key literature on occupational culture, cultural intermediary occupations and the practice of public relations in order to develop a conceptual framework for research into public relations occupational or *practitioner* (PRP) culture.

I have made my biases known here and have emphasised my interest in observing and interpreting, not judging or prescribing. Such an approach calls for reflexivity at every stage. This



thesis has become a part of me. It has shared by life for more than three years. It has taken me on adventures to a country unknown to me, where I knew no one. I have made some life-long friends and learned some valuable lessons along the way. Therefore, it is impossible for me to detach myself from what I write and I will continue to use first person narrative.

## 2. 'PRP Culture': The Relationship Between Culture and the Occupational Group

My intention in the following chapter is to develop a conceptual framework, and subsequent model, for researching public relations as an occupational culture. As Patricia A. Curtin and T. Kenn Gaither (2005: 106) argue, any research which explores public relations practice from a cultural perspective must take into account the situational, the institutional and the particular. Concurring with this position, I advocate the need to consider occupational culture from the position of the practitioners, whilst considering the wider structure of the occupation and the impact of societal influences, by way of rules and resources. The framework I propose will, therefore, enable us to explore how PRP culture is socially constructed.

### 2.1 Interpretations of Culture

Before going on to look at the concept of occupational culture, it is imperative to establish what we mean when we employ the word 'culture.' Academics across a range of social sciences (anthropology, psychology and sociology included) increasingly acknowledge the importance of culture and, as a result, there is a wide range of ways of understanding it and identifying its characteristics. Within the constraints of a study of this nature, it is not possible to provide a critical overview of these many and diverse approaches. Instead, I will present and justify my particular interpretation. In the previous chapter I encouraged a social constructionist approach to understanding public relations, based on my personal unease with attempts to generalise professionalisation and knowledge generation processes within the industry, and concern with any one group claiming rights to the ultimate authority of that knowledge (Gergen and Gergen, 2003). The conceptual framework I propose for understanding the culture of public relations will also be underpinned by social constructionist influence. As Steve Duck (1992: 6) suggests, "*the cultures we talk about the in abstract are actually composed of real people and the personal and social relationships that bind them and bring them together.*" Culture, when considered from the point of view of social constructionism, would be regarded as a duality between individuals and the group, persons and societal influences. In essence, culture is created in the experiences of individuals and the meanings that they draw from them (Geertz, 1973: 145; Bernd, 1999: 56). 'Meaning' is the term given to describe the significance, beliefs, definitions and the value which individuals and groups attach to their every-day experiences (Harpaz and Fu, 2002). Culture as meaning also refers to the ways in which these persons differentiate their sense making from other groups' ways of understanding (Banks, 2000: 9). In essence, culture tells the actor how the

scene is set and what it all means. It is, therefore, best perceived of as recipes for action. I use the term recipes rather than plans or mechanisms, as are often used, as the word recipe implies that the individual has some freedom to deviate from the set pattern of doing things in accordance with his or her own needs and wants. Viewing culture as recipes for action implies a constantly evolving link between 'mental practices' and action, and emphasises the assertion that culture is socially constructed (Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Triandis, 1972, Scheweder and Le Vine, 1984; Daymon, 2000).

The foundations of culture are found in the predispositions of individuals (Arrow and Burns, 2004: 171). The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1992), refers to these predispositions as '*Habitus*'. *Habitus*, Bourdieu advocates, is a feel for, or sense of, the 'social game'. Christine Daymon (2000: 175) explains this suggesting that the predispositions of individuals contribute to the ways in which members of a culture interpret the meaning of new situations, which in turn determines which solutions and understandings go on to become accepted as part of that culture. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952: 357) stress this interrelationship proposing that, "*culture systems may, on one hand, be considered as products of actions and on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action.*"

This suggests that culture exists in the form of mental schemata, or *ideational* elements. These elements comprise the senses, beliefs, values and attitudes that may, to a certain extent, be shared amongst members of a culture. A 'belief' can be defined as a prediction about how things are. To illustrate this, let us consider the example of Mexico – a country in the process of economic and political transition, and the case study for this research. A young Mexican man comments, "*life is hard for young people today, opportunities for employment are scarce.*" What he is commenting on is a state of affairs which he perceives (or believes) to be reality. This contrasts with the idea of values, which are statements of how things ought to be (Schein, 1991: 249). If we take the previous example, this same man might go on to comment that, "*this [the lack of opportunity] should not be the case in a country like ours, our economy is growing steadily and we need to support our young people before they take their knowledge and expertise overseas.*" This statement implies that the young man values the contribution that young people like him can make to the economy, and that society should support and encourage them. An attitude on the other hand, Harry Triandis (2002) suggests, is an idea charged with affect (emotion) and predisposing action. An attitude differs from a value in that an attitude refers to an organisation of several beliefs around a specific object or situation. Using the same example, in airing his views

about the lack of opportunity for young people, the young Mexican is also inadvertently expressing an attitude, that of frustration, towards the current political system.

Whilst the ideational elements of culture comprise a group of salient elements, I would argue that values are by far the most significant. A culture cannot be said to have meaning for those associated with it without the existence of a value system which serves as a form of reference for the group. Comparing conceptions of the desirable state of affairs (Triandis, 2002), it is a culture's value system which provides the foundation for action and, more particularly, for change. The concept of values is closely allied to the idea of worldview which Linda Smirchich (1983: 56) defines as "*[the] shared understanding of group identity, purpose and direction..*," but is concerned with how the thoughts shared by members of a culture impact on their behaviour. Milton Rokeach (1973: 24) presents the argument that, "*values are determinants of virtually all kinds of behaviour that could be called social behaviour – of social action, attitudes and ideology, evaluations, moral judgements and justification of self and others, comparison of self with others, presentations of self to others, and attempts to influence others.*" Values are thus the conscious and unconscious feelings which manifest themselves in virtually all human behaviour. Furthermore, a significant proportion of a culture's value-system comprises what are known as *espoused* values. These values focus on what people 'say' is the reason for their behaviour, what they ideally would like those reasons to be, and what are often their rationalisations for their behaviour.

Values differ by intensity and direction, Geert Hofstede explains this as, "*If we "hold" a value, this means that the issue involved has certain relevance for us (intensity) and that we identify certain outcomes as "good" and others as "bad" (direction).*" Hofstede proceeded to identify three levels of cultural values: universal, collective, and individual. Universal level values are the most basic and common to all, collective level values are shared by some, but not all, people; they are common to people belonging to a certain group or category and individual level values are the most unique and account for the diversity of behaviours within the same collective group. Culture, therefore, does not necessarily imply a uniformity of values, indeed quite different values may be displayed by people of the same culture. In such an instance, we might ask ourselves what it is that holds members of a culture together. Martha Feldman (1991: 154) suggests that we look to the existence of a common frame of reference - a shared recognition of relevant issues. "*There may not be agreement about whether these issues would be relevant or about whether they are positively or negatively valued... they may array themselves differently with respect to that issue,*



*but whether positively or negatively, they are all oriented to it.*” Martha Feldman is suggesting that regardless of whether or not a group of individuals is in agreement over an issue, in some way or another, they can all identify with it.

## 2.2 Culture as Patterns

The notion that not all beliefs, values and lifestyle traits will be relevant to every member of a culture leads to my argument that, when considered from a social constructionist perspective, occupational culture should be considered as patterns. Culture has traditionally emphasised conceptual sharing – the idea that there is something under the surface that new members learned that led to a high degree of similarity of outlook. At one pole of opinion are reductionists who assume an entity perspective to the understanding of culture, and whose basic premises are that culture implies homogeneity (Le Vine, 1984: 80). The ‘entity’ theory of culture sees it as a collective - an in-group with a relatively ‘fixed’ system of ‘customary beliefs, social forms and material traits’ (Heine and Lehman, 2004: 339; Adams and Markus, 2001: 286). One consequence of this entity conception of culture is a static, essentialising, stereotype-prone account of cultural differences. Reductionists typically treat patterns within a culture as inherent in-group categories rather than the product of circumstances associated with these categories. The *description* of modal patterns becomes the *definition* of group boundaries. It ‘fixes’ group membership around a particular way of being, makes group boundaries more concrete and categorical than they are in reality, and even reinforces or confers their sense of entity-ness (Adams and Markus, 2001: 286).

Although much of the anthropological work considers neatly bounded societies, ‘cultures’ or communities, these objects of study do not necessarily occur naturally. Instead, as numerous other critics have proposed (Krober and Kluckhohn, 1952; Heine and Lehman 2004; Schein, 1991 amongst others), cultural influence is not limited to a homogenous set of values, beliefs, or meanings of reality, but includes differences in reality itself. From this perspective, it is argued that there is no such thing as a general, cultural world; instead, people inhabit worlds that are culturally patterned.

In essence, the argument here is that if culture is taken to be that which comprises the habitus and experiences of a person, those involved in its development are not necessarily an homogenous whole, but instead are united by those elements of their habitus and experiences which are shared

with similar others. A conception of culture as patterns would explain reproduction, maintenance, and modification of cultural patterns. The phenomenon under consideration then becomes the redirection of cultural flow rather than outright creation of that flow (Heine and Lehman, 2004: 344).

### 2.3 Definition of Culture

Drawing on the ideas of the communication theorist F.E. Jandt (1998), the approaches to understanding culture addressed in the discussion so far can be summarised as:

- The totality of a group's thought, experiences, and patterns of behaviours and its concepts, values, and assumptions about life that guide behaviours and how these evolve with contact with others in all aspects of daily life.
- A process of social transmission of the thoughts and behaviours over the course of generations.
- Members who consciously identify themselves with that group (cultural identity), or the identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has a shared system of symbol and meanings.

Culture can, therefore, be referred to as a whole way of life – a combination of language, ways of perceiving, categorising and thinking about the world, forms of non-verbal communication and social interaction, rules and conventions about behaviour, moral values, technology and material culture, art, science, literature and history. As it develops from the influences of those individuals associated with it, culture will recede when individuals begin to abandon it as much as it will grow as more people come to identify with, and take an active part in, it. Assuming a social constructionist position, these 'individuals', however, are not acting in isolation. Whilst culture is founded upon their predispositions, something, or a combination of things, must have lead them to develop them. When conceptualising culture it is, therefore, imperative to consider that culture is built up over time through communication, interaction and shared history. The predispositions held by each person will be shaped by their unique experiences, contact with others and influences from wider structures of society. As Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway (2002: 5) suggest, "*shared meanings are something a group accomplishes together and this is what shapes their cultural reality.*" This is a narrative I will develop in the following section on occupational culture.

## 2.4 Approaches to Occupational Culture

Culture is seen to play a crucial role in structuring the way people think, feel and act at work (du Gay and Pryke, 2001: 1). In this next section I will argue that it is appropriate and, more significantly, *necessary* to study occupations through the lens of culture.

An occupation can be defined as:

*An activity that serves as one's regular source of livelihood; a vocation.*

(The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000), Fourth Edition)

*any activity that occupies an important portion of a person's attention*

([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org))

*...engagement in a regular basis in a part of the whole of a range of work tasks which are identified under a particular heading or title by both those carrying out these tasks and by a wider public*

(Watson, 2003: 134).

[Emphasis added]

As the narrative develops we will appreciate the close relationship between these three understandings of occupation and that of occupational culture.

Whilst the concept of culture is often discussed within the context of management practices and organisation, it has much less frequently been applied directly to occupations (Trice, 1993, Hofstede, 1983). Those studies that have considered the concept of occupational culture, have tended to look at the phenomena as it operates within the wider context of organisational culture (Filby and Willmott, 1988; Bloor and Dawson, 1994; Cameron, 2001 amongst others). The aim has been to produce the sort of meanings that can enable people to make a contribution to the success of the organisation or occupation for which they work. To this end, managers are encouraged to view the most effective or 'excellent' organisations or 'professions' as those with the 'right' culture – an ensemble of norms and codes of conduct that enables the goals and capacities of individuals to become aligned with those of their occupation.



When thinking conceptually about occupational culture, sociologists find themselves turning to studies of both organisational and national culture. Yet the significant difference between the concept of occupational culture and that of national, or societal, culture is, as Geert Hofstede (1994: 18) argues, that those involved in occupational culture usually had a certain influence in their decision to join it, and may one day leave it again. However, this does not have to imply that upon changing or leaving an occupation, a person necessarily relinquishes the relevant value system. Sociologists of occupations are also concerning themselves much more with the ideational nature of culture (Barley, 1991; Nixon, 2002; Nixon, 2003; Skov, 2002; Salaman, 1974, Van Maanen and Barley, 1984 amongst others). An ideational perspective emphasises the importance of understanding the ways in which people think and feel in the work environment. As we saw in section 2.1, culture tells the actor how the scene is set and what it all means. In particular reference to occupations, these meanings relate to the meaning of the occupation (how they define it), and what it means to be involved in it. Salient within this discourse is the idea that an occupational culture possesses its own relevant set of beliefs, values, attitudes, norms, procedures and artefacts that are characteristically associated with that occupation. Geert Hofstede (1983) suggests that on entering the occupational field, an individual acquires both values and practices *specific* to that occupation. Harrison Trice (1993) shares this view, arguing that members of an occupational culture share, “*collectively held beliefs or ideologies that impel [them] to act in certain ways.*” These *abstract beliefs* are expressed in the “*special language, training, dress codes and rituals that reflect what [these] people do and how they socialise within the workplace.*”

## 2.5 Occupational Culture from the Perspective of Social Constructionism

Returning to du Gay and Pryke’s (2001: 1) assertion that culture plays a crucial role in structuring the way people think, feel and act at work, a social constructionist approach would develop this and regard occupational culture as a social process. Individuals are constantly drawing on influences both from within the culture itself, and from outside, in order to make sense of the work they are involved in. Several research studies have already explored occupations from what might be regarded as a social constructionism-inspired perspective. John Van Maanen and Stephen R. Barley (1984) proposed that an occupational framework is an alternative to studies of organisational culture when one wants to look at a diversity of work experiences. Their approach focused on the meaning attached to work by persons most closely associated with task performance, in the context of interpersonal relationships *socially constructed* with others sharing

similar work experiences. Geoffrey Bloor and Patrick Dawson (1994) looked at professional culture in an organisational context and developed a conceptual framework which considered the main shapers of culture as being: societal influences, organisational environment and historical context (past markets, technology, structures etc.,). In addition, in her study of women in the information technology profession, M.K. Ahuja (2002) considered the effects of social and structural factors which might act as barriers to women working in the industry. Furthermore, by using a grid-group analysis which mapped the links that exist between culture and behaviour in his work on the occupational culture of chefs within a hotel chain, Derek Cameron (2001) was able to account for the influence of external resources.

## **2.6 Three Key Studies of Occupations**

Returning to the purpose of this thesis, which is to explore the role of public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in Mexico, I will explore ways in which public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation might be studied from the point of view of social constructionism – emphasising the predispositions and experiences of the individual practitioner, whilst setting them within the context of wider social influences. Before doing this, I will review three of the studies on occupations that have been key in developing this conceptual framework.

### **2.6.1 Garry Stevens (1998) “The Favored Circle”**

The inspiration for Garry Steven’s book was the distinct unease he felt with the ways in which architecture had been perceived, and studied, as a profession. Stevens suggests that accounts from the architectural literature on professionalisation stand firmly in the Anglo-American tradition of conceptualising one group of occupations (professions) as somehow quite different from others, as being in some sense ‘higher’, nobler, and more prestigious. “[P]eople consider that it is better for one’s occupation to be a profession than just a job: the name has symbolic force” (p23-24), he asserts. Stevens identified the differing levels of significance placed on professions and professionals in different parts of the world. In the Anglo-American tradition, he suggests, “professionals identify themselves by what they do, and their status and prestige flow from their membership in this corporately organised occupation.” In contrast, “non-Anglo-American individuals who we would label professionals often do not think of themselves as such.” In Japan, for example, individuals’ status and identity are dependent first on the company they work for, then the position in that company, *then* the sort of work they do. Drawing on Andrew Abbot’s

reformulation of the concept of professions, Stevens suggests that the study of the professions should be a study of how the occupation links to, and is anchored by, formal and informal social structure. As such, his book explores the 'field' of architecture, which structures the entire social universe of the architect. It is a social study of architecture from the point of view of exploring the individuals involved in the construction of artifacts, the immediate social structures with which these individuals are embedded and the discourses they participate in.

Whilst Stevens' study does not involve any empirical research on his part, he draws on existing studies and his own experiences to support his hypotheses. Adapting Pierre Bourdieu's ideas that *"the social world is not just an empirical given ready to be studied by neutral researchers, but is actively constituted by everyday practices and beliefs of people"* (p52), Garry Stevens uses Bourdieu's conceptual framework –

(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice,

to explore the field of architecture on two levels:

- To provide a detailed account of the field as it is any given point in time, describing the different concepts and their relationships.
- To analyse the dynamics of the field through time from the Renaissance to the present. Stevens discusses the system of architectural education, as well as everyday aspects such as competition for reputation.

Stevens refers to 'habitus' as *"a construct that is both psychological, since it is in people's heads, and social, since one may refer to a group or class as having a habitus"* (p57). He, therefore, defines it as *"a set of internalised dispositions that incline people to act and react in certain ways, and is the end product of what most people would call socialisation and enculturation."* He suggests that this identity is modified as we pass through the educational system and from the interactions we have with others throughout their lives. *"Nonetheless"*, he adds, *"the possibilities for change are circumscribed by our own history, the history of our class, and the expectations of the groups with which we identify."* This perspective suggests that our habitus enables us to practically master social situations and to know 'instinctively' what to do. Stevens refers to the term 'game' to emphasise certain aspects of the occupational practice. He writes that *"players are not free to play as they like, but do so according to their place in the structured set of positions, and according to how their habitus dictates"* (p76).



This study considers the aspects of autonomy, semi autonomy and conflict within the field. Stevens discusses the conflicting ways of perceiving of identity status within the industry. One of which is professional, or temporal, in which architects compete for material or economic success and professional power, whilst the second is intellectual status, in which architects compete to be recognised as great creators or thinkers. He suggests that the practice might actually be broader than the term 'architecture' perceives it to be (p85). It is also divided, as a result of the social requirements i.e. whether building designers concerned with mass market structures are architects.

Finally, Garry Stevens argues that there is a social basis for intellectual development. He critiques architectural education suggesting that the current system is failing in its function to produce knowledge and to reproduce professional architects. He proposes that many of the stresses in architectural education arise from the fact that its various elements were drawn from differently structured national fields and placed into the British and American fields out of context (p173). He concludes by suggesting that the world of architecture is enclosed and private. Throughout history, the most eminent architects have interrelated with each other via master-pupil and collegial relations. These networks, he suggests, still exist today and provide a mechanism for architectural influence and socialisation alongside that of the university-based schools.

### 2.6.2 Sean Nixon (2003) "Advertising cultures"

Sean Nixon's book *'Advertising Cultures'* aims to "*extend the analytical focus of cultural studies into the domain of economic life broadly conceived*" (p166). Nixon is concerned with "*the ideas about modernity of advertising practitioners and their proximity to the most contemporary signs of urban life and consumption not only in the work that they performed, but also their own lifestyles*" (p2). The book explores work-based cultures of advertising and the cultural resources that its practitioners draw on in living out particular social scripts within it. The empirical research focused on the work experiences and attributes of a group of 26 young male art directors and copywriters working for London-based advertising agencies, and a group of 6 of their female colleagues, in order to explore the influence of gender in the workplace. The narrative "*details the identities and motivations that animated and gave direction to [the] working lives [of these practitioners] and also set out to explore the informal cultures in which they worked*" (p2-3), which Nixon believes an indispensable part of an adequate account of the commercial practices performed by advertising agencies.



It was not Nixon's intention to reduce the commercial practices of advertising to the subjectivity of its key practitioners or the cultures of the agencies. "*The process of commercial production in which advertising agencies are engaged*", he argues, "*is highly structured and involves a range of practitioners deploying different kinds of formal knowledge and expertise, as well as the mobilisation of a set of economic and cultural resources, in order to generate promotional materials and associated services for clients*" (p5).

The key research questions underpinning Nixon's study were:

- What kind of values do these [advertising] practitioners hold?
- What subjective dispositions and attributes animate their working lives?
- What kind of occupational culture do they work in?
- What were the informal gender cultures in which these advertising men worked?
- What cultural resources did they draw on in living out particular gender identities at work?
- What scope did this field of commercial endeavor offer for living out distinctive forms of masculinity?
- How, in short, was gender written into the creative cultures of advertising and into the subjective identities of its creative cultures of advertising and into the subjective identities of its creative practitioners?

Advertising cultures is not only a book about gender; the issue of creativity is also significant. The practitioners in this book were implicated in this valorising of creativity in very particular ways, "*it was their expertise and skills, together with the peculiarities of their training, which was seen to lay behind the reputation acquired by London-based industry as a centre of 'creative excellence.'*" (p.8) Throughout the interviews Nixon conducted, some strikingly consistent understanding of what made a good creative emerged. "*The most significant related to an often-repeated concern that good creatives should have the capacity to be open and able to see things differently, to be unencumbered by convention and dogma*" (p104). Nixon suggests that creativity would be context-dependent and shaped by value judgement in which recognition is conferred upon (or denied to) certain degrees of novelty or difference. At the heart of Nixon's work are the narratives of those practitioners he interviewed. How these practitioners represented their work in the narratives they gave also said something about their broader occupational identifications – "*it shed light on how they handled the cultural standing of the form of commercial practice in which they were engaged*" (p82). What was significant in the responses of creatives was that, "*whilst the different responses revealed distinct occupational personas, they shared a common concern*

*to elevate the status of the work they performed*” (p84). Nixon’s primary concern throughout was to pay close attention to the language and metaphors participants used and the associated modes of expression that they deployed, as much as to document the directly factual content of their statements. In many instances, the practitioners said more than they intended to when talking about colleagues, working patterns, and the mundane routines of the job. These dimensions, Nixon contended, were especially important in offering ways into the kinds of masculinity lived by the men interviewed. It was how their gender identities showed themselves when they were talking about something else that interested Nixon (p11). He attempted to be attentive to those moments in their accounts where certain things were not said (could not be said), as much as what was said, and it was the absences in their testimonies that Nixon also read in terms of what this might have said about their gender and creative identities.

Some of the men interviewed revealed a simultaneous investment in the forms of work-based leisure associated with the job. In doing so, Nixon asserts, their testimonies tell the reader more about the kind of men they were. At the heart of this was their identification with hedonism and a consumption-based ethic of enjoyment that shaped both the appeal and performance of the job (p159). This led Nixon to conclude that the work-based identities of creative people were forged through social rituals and cultural practices that were not narrowly work-based, but spread into the domain of leisure and personal life (p167).

### **2.6.3 Graeme Salaman (1974) “Community and Occupation”**

The subject of this book is *“work, the meaning of work and the relationship between men’s work and non-work lives”* (p18). Graeme Salaman was concerned with the work experience in industrial societies and draws on themes, issues and problems inherent in processes of social change addressed by early sociologists in order to develop a conceptual framework for understanding occupational communities. He considers the idea of alienation, regarded by Karl Marx as, *“the separation or estrangement that follows from loss or lack of control and the consequent submission to an external person or system that exploits, and oppresses and is hostile”* (p2), Tonnies’ work on Gemeinschaft (organic, collective-oriented communities), and Gesellschaft (individualist-focused association), the latter of which he believes is on the increase in modern society, and Max Weber’s inter-related work on bureaucracy and rationality – emphasising the importance of rules and formal procedures high degrees of predictability, formality, impersonality and specialisation that had entered the workplace. Crucial for Graeme

Salaman's work was Emile Durkheim's interest in the relationship between the individual and society as the source of morality, a particular focus of influence was *anomie* – a condition of normlessness and lack of regulation, discipline, and restriction on aspirations (p11), and Everett Hughes' (1958) book, *"Men and Their Work."*

Some of the questions Hughes asks are basic to Salaman's enquiry (p18):

- To what extent do persons of a given occupation "live together" and develop a culture which has its subjective aspects in the personality?
- Do persons find an area for the satisfaction of their wishes in the association which they have with their colleagues, competitors, and fellow servants?
- What part does one's occupation play in giving him his "life organisation"?

Identifying the duality between the elements comprising occupational communities and their relationship to wider social processes, Graeme Salaman suggests that "*occupational communities are centrally concerned with the work in which the group under study partakes, the conditions under which they ought to do it, the qualities and skills they ought to have and be free to use, the proper way in which they should carry out their work, and the sort of contribution they make to society and the general good*" (p104). Salaman suggests that an occupational community represents a particular relationship between men's work and the rest of their lives. Members of occupational communities, he suggests, are affected by their work in such a way that their non-work lives are permeated by their work relationships, interests and values. Members build their lives on their work; their work-friends are friends outside work, and their leisure interests and activities are work-based.

The key defining components of an occupational community proposed by Salaman suggest that members of an occupational community will:

- See themselves in terms of their occupational role: the self image is centred on their occupational role in such a way that they see themselves as a particular group of workers with specific qualities, interests and abilities (p16).
- Share a reference group composed of members of the occupational community.
- Associate with, and make friends of, other members of their occupation in preference to having friends who are outsiders, and they carry work activities and interests into their non-work lives (p21).



The determinants of occupational communities Salaman defines are (p27):

- Involvement in work tasks.
- Marginal status or stratification situation.
- The inclusiveness of the work or organisational situation.

Salaman suggests that members of occupational communities would be emotionally involved in their work skills and tasks and would value their work, not only for the extrinsic rewards it brings, but also for the satisfaction they derive from actually doing it, and for the opportunities it offered them to use their work skills (p27). Those who are closely involved in their work skills and tasks would be likely to see themselves in terms of their occupational role, for work would be an activity which they regarded as emotionally important and valuable, and the occupational role would, therefore, become a salient element in their self images.

Salaman draws together these determinants and components to form a systematic model of occupational communities. He explored this within the context of London railwaymen and Cambridge architects whom he interviewed in order to hypothesise about the nature of the relationships among these determinants and the relative causal importance of each. The purpose was not to discover two new occupational communities, but *“to consider their nature, and the character of the causal mechanisms that produced this sort of work/leisure link”* (p63). Both samples displayed a marked involvement in their work skills and tasks. The architects were particularly influenced by a professional culture which they picked up during their training period, whilst the railwaymen were affected, in their choice of friends and leisure activities, by the restrictive effects of shift work (p115).

Specifically, the data showed that the majority of both occupational samples saw themselves in terms of their occupational role, and that this self-image carried certain conceptions about the people involved in it: they were felt to be of a particular type, and on further questioning, participants revealed that they shared values and attitudes with other members of their occupation. Finally the data revealed that both samples had a remarkably high number of friends from their occupation and carried work-based interests and activities over to their leisure lives (p115).

The main argument of Salaman's work is that there were significant similarities between the two occupational communities which made it possible to consider them in terms of the three



component elements and three sorts of determinants he had proposed. He concludes by suggesting that it is only possible to understand the position, experiences and behaviour of members of the two occupation samples described by considering these things in a historical perspective.

## **2.7 The Culture of Public Relations as a Cultural Intermediary Occupation: A Search for a Definition.**

The purpose of this research study is to explore the phenomenon of occupational culture within the context of public relations in Mexico, in order to better understand the relationship between the practice and Mexican culture. In sections 1.4. and 1.5, I suggested that public relations should be regarded as a cultural intermediary profession, defining it as an occupation which mediates between organisations and groups within wider society, seeking to communicate meanings through influential communicative practice.

All three of the studies considered above sought to place their particular occupational groups of interest in the occupational division of labour, and to understand the social roles they perform. They explored the network connections, shared values and common life experiences of practitioners and the influence of occupational structure and socio-cultural factors on their work practices. Drawing on these ideas, I will develop a definition appropriate for researching the culture of public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation. As we have seen, cultural intermediary occupations are by definition those occupational groups which involve information and knowledge intensive forms of work. These groups would be “...*predisposed to play a vanguard role in the struggles over everything concerned with the art of living*” (1984: 366). They would be able to transmit the latest styles and attitudes to wider audiences, and themselves form part of the reception class for new goods and experiences (Featherstone, 1991: 109).

In section 2.1, I suggested that culture be understood from the point of view of ideational culture, as something which we as human beings are constantly involved in; as a way of life, and a group of individuals who consciously identify themselves with others associated with that group. Furthermore, I argued that culture has meaning for those involved in it. Occupational culture is, therefore, in the predispositions of the workers, their habitus. An occupational culture cannot be said to have meaning for those associated with it without the existence of a relevant occupational value system which serves as a frame of reference for the group. Tony Watson (1987: 161) argues

that an occupational value system is a set of ideas developed by an occupational group to help to legitimate the pursuit of the group members' and occupationally related interests (a view also supported by Trice, 1993). People working in any field need to feel that their work has value in order to carry it out to the best of their ability. Terms often referred to when thinking about occupational values in this sense are 'intrinsic' versus 'extrinsic'. These terms refer to what motivates people in a job, the work itself (intrinsically motivating jobs) or the conditions and material rewards provided (extrinsically motivating jobs). When considered from a social constructionist perspective, the occupational value system reflects not only the way that people see their work and its role in society, but the *potential* for the work. The occupational value system combines not only professional experience, but also *social experiences*. Thus, the value system develops from, not only occupational socialisation, but from being part of a national culture. As Graeme Salaman suggests, this set of values and perspectives will extend beyond work related matters and social relationships would merge realms of work and leisure.

Few studies have looked at public relations from the perspective of occupational culture. The majority of studies which have explored occupational values, in particular, have done so from a professionalisation perspective, seeking to establish the extent to which public relations can be said to 'fit' within the ideal model of a 'profession'. However, three studies which address aspects that may be more closely associated with an occupational culture approach are those of Ivan Filby and Hugh Willmott (1988), Shirley A. Serini (1994) and Magda Pieczka (2002). Filby and Willmott's ethnographic study of the ideologies and contradictions in a public relations department looked at the role of living myth in workplace culture from an organisational perspective. Whilst these authors accept that the study of meaning is central to the analysis of culture, they emphasise and sought to explore how these meanings are infused with forms of power. Shirley Serini explored power networks and surveillance within the context of public relations professionalism, using an interactionist approach to consider how public relations practitioners contribute to the social construction of reality of a community in a Midwestern city by way of their own socially constructed reality (p44). As a participant in the occupational culture, she observed the *process* of doing service both inside and outside of the organisation in order to explore the ways that practitioners shared their knowledge with, and evaluated, others who did similar work. Finally, Magda Pieczka's ethnographic study of a three-week public relations training course links occupational knowledge and professional practice by way of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' which she argues underpins the practice and constructs the objects of knowledge. "*Public relations expertise*", she contends, is "*a complex interactive*

*structure organised through past experience and current exigencies which modified itself through action” (p321).*

Drawing on these studies I suggest that public relations practitioners contribute to the social construction of culture and that they do so out of their own socially constructed culture (Serini, 1994: 55; L’Etang and Pieczka, 2001; Filby and Wilmott, 1988). Building on this idea, I propose that public relations practitioner (PRP) culture be defined as:

- The practitioner lifeworld – The totality of practitioners’ thought, concepts, values and assumptions about their occupation (referred to collectively as ‘habitus’) and their occupational experiences and identities that guide their behaviour. These will evolve with contact with other practitioners (occupational socialisation) and with wider social and cultural influences.
- A system of occupational practices involving actions which ‘make a difference’ to the world in some way.

This definition is similar to Graeme Salaman’s (1974) idea of occupational community – an integrated set of social relationships, a system which provides its members with a sense of common identity and a shared value system. It also draws on the concept of lifeworld, defined Greek phenomenologist Clarke Moustakas (1994) as “*the way a person lives, creates and relates to the world.*” From a social constructionist inspired perspective, seeing occupational culture as an occupational lifeworld illustrates the clear links between individuals and their experiences as members of an occupation and as members of society, and suggests that a worker’s identification would be more salient when elements of the occupational cycle were carried over to her life outside of work.

It is established that the jobs that people do consume a large portion of their daily lives, and it might be argued that it is the workplace to which individuals turn for a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to and extend beyond work-related matters. John Van Maanen and Stephen R. Barley (1984: 295, see also Coxon and Jones, 1978) suggest that occupational culture describes a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work and who identify (more or less positively) with their work and share with one another a set of values, norms and perspectives that apply to, but extend beyond, work-related matters and whose social relationships merge the realms of work and leisure. Furthermore, Graeme Salaman (1974: 37)



argued that *“when a group of (people) are all subject to [the same occupational conditions]... it is highly likely that they will, because of their values and attitudes which they have in common, make friends of, and associate with each other.”*

Exploring the lifeworlds of members of an occupation would tell us much about the pervasiveness of the occupational culture – in essence, those activities inside or outside of the occupation for which the occupation sets the norms. Reviewing these arguments and other relevant literature, there are three key areas from which we might assess the pervasiveness of an occupational culture:

The extent to which workers:

- Share work-based beliefs about the world (Salaman, 1974; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Sonnentuhl and Trice, 1991).
- Build their lives around work (Salaman, 1974; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984; Sonnenstuhl and Trice, 1991).
- Extend work relationships in to their non-work lives (Trice, 1993).

As the definition I propose suggests, research into understanding the nature of occupational culture should be concerned not only with the abstract beliefs and occupational values, but also, with exploring the occupational identity-giving process and, more particularly, its relationship to reference group affiliation, choice of friends and associates, and the leisure and social pursuits of workers. The idea of a ‘shared’ or ‘relevant’ lifestyle refers to the ways in which interests and social pursuits are used to draw the lines of social relationships amongst workers. Members of an occupational culture would typically associate with, and make friends of, other members of their occupational group in preference to having friends who are outsiders, would carry work activities and interests into their non-work lives, pursuing work-connected hobbies and belonging to work-related societies and clubs.

### **2.7.1 Occupational Culture and Occupational Identity**

Close links exist between culture and identity. In fact, occupational identity is central to the concept of occupational culture. The construction and validation of an occupational group’s definition of who they are (and are not) will be basic to the task of developing shared values and



goals, and group members will develop values as a result of processes of interaction and identification with the occupational culture. John Turner and Rina Onorato (1999: 21) suggest that social (or group) identity, like culture, is about values and motives. Where people share a common frame of reference, they see themselves less as differing individuals and more as a group with similar or shared characteristics. Persons will, therefore, define themselves in terms of shared social category memberships. This process transforms individual into collective behaviour and, as such, is the very foundation upon which culture develops (see also Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi and Cotting, 1999). These authors go on to argue that *“people do not merely form or join or find themselves joined to groups; they work actively to define themselves. To define what they have in common and what they reject”* (p27).

In her work on cultures in organisations and occupations, Joanne Martin (2002) recognised the close relationship between occupational identity and image. Martin considers identity as broadly referring to what members perceive, feel and think about their occupations and argues that it may be assumed to be a collectively, common shared understanding of the occupation's distinctive values and characteristics. Daniel Marschall (2002) whose ethnographic fieldwork explored the work practices of internet technologists as an occupational community and whether they identify closely with one another, argues that when an occupational culture is strong, members draw their identities and construct their self-images from the occupations and the social roles they inhabit in them. Members would tend to take pride in their identities, and present themselves to others in occupational terms. He also suggests that community members would construct distinctive identities in relation to their positions within the occupation. Jane Dutton, Janet M. Dukerich and Celia V. Harquail (1994: 242) would argue that defining [occupational] identification as a cognitive link between definitions of the occupation and the worker is consistent with attitudinal approaches to occupational commitment. As part of the commitment process, the level of occupational identification indicates the degree to which people come to see the occupation as part of themselves.

Workers may differ by the degree to which they identify with a culture. Some individuals will identify strongly with a particular group; others will combine practices from several groups (Samovar and Porter, 2001: 31). There may be some overlapping of practitioner habitus and behaviour which may be identified as meaningful for the wider occupational culture. In his study of chefs, Derek Cameron (2001) argues that cultural identity belongs principally to the occupation in terms of ‘concepts, judgements, ideas and norms’, which are shared by a group of people but

certain elements of which are interpreted by those individuals in different ways. As Graeme Salaman (1974: 128) explains, *“the concept of culture occurs when persons see themselves in terms of their membership of an occupation – as they define it - and see conditions under which this definition and identification come about.”*

When considering occupational culture from a social constructionist perspective, this is significant. The phenomenon of occupational identity is not just something which is prevalent amongst those directly involved in it, but is something which involves outside influences. As Eric Waddel (1990: 61, as cited in Rusciano et al., 1998: 64) notes, *“group identity does not exist in isolation, but rather is based on the notion of culture difference, and hence, organised around boundaries and interactions across boundaries... In such a dialectical context, group identity is both self-ascribed (by those within the group) and ascribed by those beyond the boundary (the other group).”* Any research which considers how members of an occupational group identify with the culture and their role within it, will also need to establish how the occupation is perceived by those outside of it and the affect this has on the occupational identification process. We would, therefore, look to explore the following questions: What *kind* of person is a member of this occupation? What image do we have of them? How do we imagine that they see themselves? Secondly, we would look to explore how the image of the occupation is taken up and lived out, how it is performed in such a way as to be distinctive from other occupations.

Graeme Salaman recommends that when seeking to understand occupational culture and identity from the individual's point of view, the researcher give consideration to how our occupations might soon become a way of living which eventually influences our whole lifestyle. Returning to his ideas, he suggests that occupational research explore the extent to which:

- Members see themselves in terms of their occupational role;
- Their self-image is centred on their occupational role;
- People share specific qualities, interests and abilities;
- People share a reference group composed of other members of the occupational culture;
- Occupational culture members associate with, and make friends of, other members of their occupation in preference to having friends who are outsiders;
- Carry work activities and interests into their non-work lives.

From the ideas discussed so far in this chapter, this study will seek to explore the following six main questions:

- What sorts of people practice public relations in Mexico? Do they have any common social and/or educational experiences?
- What meanings do these public relations practitioners assign to what they do?
- How do practitioners subjectively and socially construct the meanings inherent in the occupational culture they are involved in?
- How has the cultural climate in Mexico shaped the practitioners as agents and the occupational activities they carry out?
- What impact does the above have on the roles public relations practitioners play both inside and outside of work?
- How does the occupational culture relevant to public relations practitioners in Mexico influence their potential as intermediaries within Mexican culture?

## 2.8 PRP Culture as a Social Process

In the following section, I will develop a conceptual model for exploring public relations practitioner (PRP) culture as a social process. Public relations is responsible for the creation of discourse within culture and all cultural discourses centre of the subjectivities of the creators and receivers. The model of PRP culture, therefore, centres around the occupational lifeworlds (habitus, identity and experiences) of the practitioners themselves. As we saw in the section 2.7, 'lifeworld' research would involve exploring the multiple subjectivities of the individuals working in public relations in different cultural contexts. The term 'multiple' implies that public relations practices will not only be interactive and situational, but also, specific in terms of social and cultural condition.

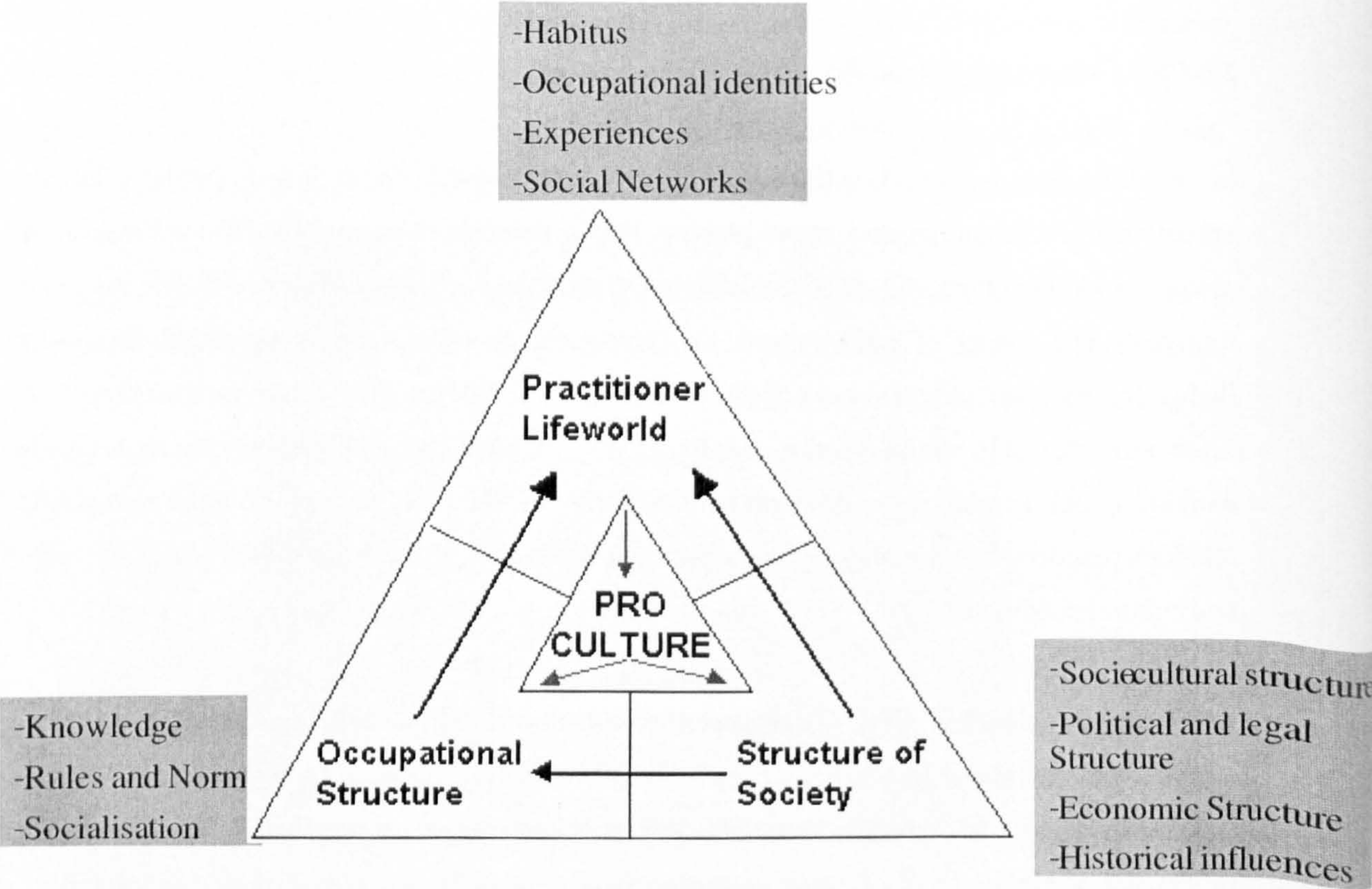
As Filby and Wilmott (1988: 347) suggest, the attributes of individual practitioners are a product of the totality of social relations. *"As social actors, public relations practitioners are open to certain socio-cultural and globally influenced conditions and situations. Public relations activity represents a higher level of complex patterns of severally culturally-mediated behaviours"* (Zaharna, 2001: 142). As cultural intermediaries, or 'agents', public relations practitioners in Mexico will live in some sort of relationship to other practitioners and will be shaped by societal



and cultural influences. The subjective dispositions of these practitioners and the patterns of meaning, values and behaviour written in to their occupational culture, will be important in mediating the process of reaching out to, and connecting with, publics. Exploring public relations in this way would tell us more about the pervasiveness of the occupational culture – in essence, those activities inside or outside of the occupation for which the occupation sets the norms. It would also highlight areas of potential difference that would affect the way public relations is practised. More significantly, from an understanding of the culture of the occupation, we will have a greater understanding of how public relations practitioners in Mexico can contribute to the development of their national culture.

Fig 1. illustrates how PRP culture might be socially constructed, as well as the circuit of cultural intermediation, i.e. the relationship between the work practices, or manifestations of the occupational culture, and wider processes.

**Fig. 1 The Circuit of Cultural Intermediation**





### 2.8.1 Practitioner Lifeworlds.

At the centre of the process of cultural intermediation, is the practitioner (PRP) culture -at the core of which are the practitioners and the lifeworlds they create around their work. 'Lifeworld' refers to the way in which practitioners live, create and relate to the world of public relations work. The practitioner lifeworld will be determined both by the structure of the occupation and wider society, and by the conditions and conditionings experienced as a result of the individual practitioner's position in the profession and in society. The practitioner lifeworld would comprise:

**Habitus:** Practitioner attitudes, beliefs and values, together with their occupational identity acquired by explicit or implicit learning, would comprise the core of PRP culture. To reach a deeper level of understanding of the foundations of this culture, to uncover any pattern, and to understand the relationships between lifestyles, attitudes and behaviour, any researcher would need to start by exploring the core value system. Adapting Graeme Salaman's (1974: 91) concept of value systems, referred to in section 2.6.3, to practitioner culture, the occupational value system should contain the following:

- A view of the occupation – How is public relations defined by practitioners? What areas of practice are perceived to comprise the field?
- Its role in society – How do practitioners see their role both within the organisation in which they work and society in general?
- The nature of the contribution that public relations makes to the general good – What, if anything, do practitioners believe is the potential for public relations as an industry and them as individuals to play an active role in the cultural transition of Mexico?
- The relationship between the occupation and other related lines of work – What are the attitudes of practitioners towards colleagues in similar fields such as journalism, marketing and human resources?
- The conditions necessary to ensure an adequate flow of 'suitable' recruits to the occupation – What are the attitudes of practitioners towards the 'professionalisation' of the practice via the provision of formal qualifications?

The extent to which a practitioner will take on the habitus and identity of the occupational group will depend on the extent to which (s)he is devoted to (involved with) the profession. In his work *'Distinction'*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 297) emphasises this in relation to the field of engineering. Bourdieu writes, "...within a category such as that of engineers (i.e. one where individuals come from different backgrounds), it is possible to distinguish ... sub-sets of individuals separated both with respect to cultural and educational [resources] and to seniority within the [occupation]. At one extreme is found the ...older engineers, originating from the middle or working classes and promoted from the ranks or trained in second-rank schools; at the other extreme, ... the young engineers who have recently graduated from the grandes écoles."

**Occupational identity:** In order for effective transmission of elements of occupational culture to those associated with it, these individuals would have to be able to identify with those elements to a significant extent. Cultural identity within the context of PRP culture focuses on the cognitive connection between the definition of the practice of public relations, and the definition a person applies to herself as practitioner. Unlike similar fields such as journalism, there is not a broad professional definition of good public relations that spans organisations (Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis, 1999). I have already suggested that individuals may differ by the degree to which they identify with a culture. There is little consensus among public relations practitioners about the nature of public relations work and their role within it. It is widely considered that public relations practitioners enter the field from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, and once working in the industry, find themselves in a variety of roles. Some practitioners might regard themselves as providing publicity or press relations for an organisation, whereas others would see their role as maintainers of long-term relationships with key publics (Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis, 1999; Filby and Wilmott, 1988). The result of this may be 'sub groups', or patterns, of identity developing within the culture indicating a disparity in the level of occupational identity amongst practitioners.

**Experiences:** A prerequisite for understanding how practitioners define their work, construct their occupational identity, and develop a relevant system of occupational habitus, is an appreciation for their diversity of experiences (Filby and Wilmott, 1988). Experience within the context of PRP culture would be expressed as narratives of direct participation or witness in events or activities which have an affect on the knowledge, judgment skills and/or emotions of the practitioner. The potential for cultural intermediation will be always changing because the occupational and social experiences to which public relations practitioners are constantly



subjected are many and varied. Practitioners work in a variety of contexts, some work in in-house departments in both private and public organisations, others in agencies, whilst some practitioners may even work independently as consultants. Finally, the nature of the practitioner lifeworld would change as the character of the public relations industry, and the rules and resources within it, changes. It will be affected by wider societal changes, which impact on both the structure of the occupation and the daily lives of the practitioners, and the relationships between, and within, them.

**Networks:** Also associated with the practitioner's experience of the occupational culture, would be the social networks they develop. A network consists of a series of direct and indirect ties from an individual to a collection of others (Tonge, 2003). As a cultural resource, we can define social networks as those situations which allow for the reciprocity of practices between people in situations of co-presence in the day-to-day enactment of social life. *"They are those formal and informal ties that the practitioners develop with others that might influence such things as how they find jobs, how much responsibility they have, who gets to control their affairs and with whom they tended to come into contact"* (Conrad, 1985: 167). Practitioner networks may be formal (in the case of professional associations) or informal – interpersonal relationships either with practitioners or other persons in the community. In public relations, it is generally agreed that contacts are highly important due to the nature of the work. Having 'contacts' refers to knowing people who occupy key positions. Looking at the influence of interpersonal communication on strategic public relations in Malta, Laura Misfud Bonnici (2003) suggests that in high-context societies, interpersonal communication is important and relationships tend to go beyond role specificity and recur over one's lifetime. Networks are seen expand into both organisational and social life. Using one Mid-West institution as a case study, Shirley A. Serini (1994) takes an interesting approach. Serini explored the ways in which public relations workers interacted with peers in the community in the name of service (within this category she included the Media, public relations and advertising personnel). The study observed how practitioners developed powerful social networks, and how they evaluated their work and the work of their professional peers in the process of doing service activities.

## 2.8.2 Occupational Structure

Occupational structure refers to the rules of public relations and the resources available to enable practitioners to function fully in their job. These rules and resources will be both enabling and constraining. In order to enact a particular working role, practitioners would draw on a set of rules; these rules *structure*, and give shape to, the practices they are involved in.

**Rules:** Rules within the context of occupations may be formal, such as government legislation and professional codes for ethical conduct, or informal norms. Those canvassing for public relations to become recognised as a 'profession' assert that the most significant barrier to this is the absence of credible sanctions and mechanisms to impose them. The extent to which there are formal rules to govern the practice varies between countries. In countries such as Brazil, which was the first to introduce the licensing of public relations back in 1967, it has been difficult to enforce, especially in times when the scope of public relations has been expanding and diversifying and other disciplines such as marketing, human resources and legal and business communication have claimed ownership of certain public relations practices (Molleda, Athaydes and Hirsch, 2003).

In the United Kingdom, for example, the Institute of Public Relations has recently received chartered status. The members of this professional body are now subject to a degree of regulation by the government. The key word here, however, is 'members,' public relations practitioners in the UK are not required to be members of the CIPR in order to practice. A letter to members from the Director General on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2005, included a quote from the President stating:

*"The charter formally recognises that it is in the public interest to have a professional body lead the industry, and the CIPR is that body. This endorsement strengthens our position in representing those who are professionally committed to the industry; those who are willing to be accountable and sign-up to a code of conduct"* [emphasis added]

(Chartered Status Achieved. The CIPR: Personal Information for Members, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2005).

In the case of the United Kingdom then, the code of conduct is more akin to a series of occupational norms. Norms, or ideas, about the behaviour expected of workers would typically comprise the informal rules within PRP culture. Norms are mostly informal and tacit, but are sometimes codified as Codes of Ethics or conduct. Kirsten Dellinger (2002) in her study of occupational and organisational culture in the publishing industry, considered norms as informal



rules exploring gender differences in dress and appearance norms of men and women who worked as editors and accountants. She found that informal, unwritten occupational and organisational norms of dress played a large part in workers' definitions of appropriate and inappropriate expressions of gender and sexuality at work. As will become clear in the following discussion on the transmission of knowledge and the nature of occupational socialisation within the Public Relations industry, the norms will be significantly context dependent.

**Knowledge:** Academics such as Clifford Geertz (1973), Roy D'Andrade (1984) Ronald Inghart (1997) and Lucian Pye (1997), in particular, have argued that culture is founded on shared information or knowledge. Knowledge is what an individual needs to understand in order to 'go on' with the routines of daily life (Giddens, 1979). This knowledge comes in the form of learning practices such as formal education or rituals but, more significantly, comprises mutual background knowledge in the sense that it is knowledge that is taken for granted. In his work on Internet technologists as an occupational community, Daniel Marschall (2002: 54) defines knowledge as that which, "*enables [workers] to converse over a wide range of subjects in terms incomprehensible to outsiders.*"

The first way in which knowledge is systematically transmitted to new members of an occupation is through formal education practices. With regard to the public relations industry, this would include the knowledge gained from the subject-related material taught in universities, from the university experience itself, as well as the knowledge gained from formalised professional development programmes. A review of the relevant literature on the influence of university education and developments in the public relations industry illustrates that on a country-particular level, there is an argument to be made that public relations education plays an important role in integrating practitioners' values regarding effective working practices and public relations organisation roles *specific* to that country. Within the context of Western culture, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) talks of the '*economic-political culture*' taught in the universities or business schools and the 'modernistic and social world view' which goes with it, and which [practitioners] help to produce in their conferences, commissions and seminars. Drawing on this reflection and Ali Mazrui's argument (in Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1997: 59) that, "*[the university] is the single most sophisticated instrument of cultural dependency cultivating a taste for Western academic values that devalue traditional culture,*" any study exploring the country-specific education process of public relations practitioners will need to consider the extent to which the most commonly cited

western theories and models are taught in the universities, and the likely impact of this on the development of a practitioner value system.

Public relations is still underdeveloped in terms of being a recognised and rigorous academic discipline and, as a consequence, much of the knowledge which could be said to be 'shared' by practitioners is the 'mutual background knowledge' acquired from observing and interpreting the actions of others. This 'mutual background knowledge' is that taken for granted, but which persons need to know in order to 'go on' with their daily working routines. Geoffrey Bloor and Patrick Dawson (1994: 277) suggest that there may be a tendency within occupations for past stories, myths and experiences to form part of the individual's store of cultural knowledge and to be used for determining action. "*These patterns of interaction,*" they argue, "*become recursively recreated over time and ultimately become shared knowledge.*" In her study of the role knowledge plays in the constitution of the public relations occupation and the links between knowledge and professional practice, Magda Piezcka (2002: 321) defines public relations expertise as a body of practical knowledge, "*public relations expertise is seen as constituted and transmitted through practice. It is a complex interactive structure organized through past experience and current exigencies which modifies itself through action i.e. professional work and training.*" Thus, shared knowledge is then used by members to make sense of past experiences and provides a framework for interpreting situations and deciding present and future actions.

**Socialisation:** A practitioner would learn the 'mutual background knowledge' from observing and interpreting the actions of others. The extent to which she develops this knowledge would depend on the effectiveness of the socialisation process. The process of socialisation within occupations is an interesting one. Tony Watson (1987: 293) defines socialisation as "*the process whereby individuals learn about the norms, values, customs and beliefs of an occupation.*" If PRP culture is something which lives in the minds of practitioners and is constantly be recreated in their daily working lives, every communication encounter will, to some extent, be cultural and thus contribute to the socialisation process. Public relations practitioners will be open to elements of the occupational culture in all areas of their working life – working as part of a team, membership of an occupation-related association, reading occupation-related literature and meeting with colleagues outside of the workplace. When encouraged to interact with other members of the occupation in this way, practitioners will be subjected to informal pressures to conform to group norms. Daniel Marschall (2002) suggests that, from this, an occupational



culture will develop a 'culture of achievement', in which members demonstrate their performance and mastery of the knowledge and skills of the occupation.

I have presented the argument already that when researching PRP culture, it is essential to assume a relativist approach, giving equal consideration to differences, as much as similarities, amongst public relations practitioners. This is no more salient than as regards the knowledge held by these practitioners. This is due to the multiple routes of entry into the field which ultimately involves fundamentally different socialisation processes (Pavalko, 1988: 117). For example, it may be argued that the process of socialisation for practitioners working as government communicators is quite different for those who are involved in a corporate communication role or agency position. Jongmin Park's study (2003), in particular, explored the extent of the discrepancy between professional standards of government and corporate public relations. Moreover, in their exploratory study of practitioner roles, education and professionalisation within public relations, Dan Berkowitz and Ilias Hristodoulakis (1999) compared the education and socialisation processes within the public relations industry to those of journalism. They argued that work socialisation in public relations seems to produce the opposite effect on public relations practitioners than it does on journalists. They suggested that work in a newsroom tended to provide an homogeneous viewpoint about core journalistic roles and values that could easily transfer to most other newsrooms with little difficulty. In most cases, these authors asserted, journalists have a common idea about the role of the press in society and the basic values that journalists should hold. Public relations practitioners on the other hand, *"lack consensus on the role that public relations performs in an organisation, at least partly because public relations work occurs within broadly contrasting settings (e.g. nonprofit, education, corporate and agency) that have vastly different purposes and vastly different relationships with their publics"* (p100). Dan Berkowitz and Ilias Hristodoulakis also suggested that differences in practitioners stemming from educational backgrounds in public relations further accentuates this lack of consensus. *"Work training"* they believe, *"has the potential to lead students astray from what they learn in the classroom."*

Closely linked to the transmission of occupational knowledge and the processes of socialisation, are professional associations. Successful transmission of PRP culture would depend on the opportunities that practitioners have to interact and to learn from others in the industry. Professional associations would usually provide an opportunity for practitioners to network with others, and produce industry-related literature and encourage on-going professional development.

By way of each of these 'channels', cultural content would flow in a variety of forms, such as, information, expressiveness and influence. As I emphasised in the context of occupational socialisation within the public relations industry, practitioners have diverse routes of entry into the field. Therefore, establishing strong connections with others via professional associations might be particularly significant.

### 2.8.3 Wider Societal Processes

Significant drivers of occupational cultural change also come from outside of the occupation, in the form of forces of human beings, such as technoeconomics - the advances in economic development and technological breakthroughs, emerging or developing patterns of trade, and economic or political dominance of a society (Hofstede, 2001: 34; Kaplan and Manners 1972, as cited in Sriramesh, Kim and Taksaki, 1999: 274).

In order to understand these forces in the context of PRP culture, we might group them together as follows:

**The socio-cultural structure:** The norms, beliefs, values, contemporary lifestyles and social expectations of members of society at large. *"It represents on the one hand, the daily activities which are pursued by [persons] as they seek to satisfy their needs. In other words, it is an expression of technological, organisational, and administrative beliefs. In addition, however, social structure expresses the deeper moral order of society, that is, beliefs about [a person's] relationship to [other persons]"* (Knowles, 1967: 61). Interpersonal trust and deference to authority might be two other dimensions (Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki, 1999: 275), and we might also add to these, contemporary lifestyles (Bloor and Dawson, 1994: 279). Some of these beliefs and lifestyle traits will be shared by all members of the society, whilst others by particular groups within it, and will merge with those idiosyncratic to individuals. This forms part of the store of cultural knowledge available to members of an occupation to use in organising their interactions with each other and with outsiders (Bloor & Dawson, 1994). When practitioners join the occupation, they will bring with them a system of values, attitudes and expectations from the wider culture(s) of which they are part. In their study on corporate social responsibility in India, for example, Prema Sagar and Aswani Singla (2004) found that trust and respect were well entrenched in Indian culture, and that these values were carried over to working practices. Moreover, they suggested that the importance accorded to respect for elder, relationships, and



family values, were pillars upholding the symbiotic relationship between community and businesses in the country (p289) and this transcended into the corporate world.

**Political and legal structure:** The political and legal structure would refer to the institutions that govern decision-making and power relationships and ways of regulating and enforcing behaviour among citizens and organisations (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2004; Tilson & Alozie, 2004).

**Economic structure:** The economic structure would refer to levels of economic stability and of private entrepreneurship, free market reforms and economic dependency on international powers (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2004; Tilson & Alozie, 2004).

**Historical context:** In addition to economic and political forces, we also need to consider the historical context of the society under study (its past markets, structures etc.,).

The socio-economic environment is also an important factor that influences a person's preferences and values (Inglehart, 1990). According to this assertion, individuals would attribute relatively high subjective value to those factors or elements that are relatively scarce, but highly valued, or needed, by them. Periods of economic hardship and high unemployment and inflation are often associated with a relative increase in materialistic values due to a decrease in wages and greater economic and employment uncertainty (Harpaz and Fu, 2002: 647). Garry Stevens (1998) suggests that the history of architecture as a profession is, in part, the history of its attempts to expand its environment, and the resources available in that environment, so as to be able to support more architects. This sector has no control over the economic forces that dominate it, Stevens argues, and, as a consequence, feels the full effects of the cycles of the national economy.

## 2.9 Cultural Heterogeneity

As I emphasised in section 2.2, doubts have been raised about specifically whether culture can be validly characterised as shared or consensual in the face of individual variation (Le Vine, 1984: 68). I concurred with Glenn Adams and Hazel Rose Markus (2001: 287) who suggested that culture should be framed "*not as membership in a more-or-less recognised group, but as engagement with patterns.*" Adapting the ideas of Martin Fougere (2002), I propose three reasons why we should not describe PRP culture as an homogenous whole:

- Each practitioner will have a different perspective on the occupation's culture. Culture comprises a series of subjective experiences and interpretations and thus not shared by all practitioners, although it might be strongly perceived as being shared by them.
- Any given practitioner may be in large measure unconscious of the predispositions of the culture i.e. of the beliefs and assumptions that are at the core of her occupational experience. This does not mean, however, that these beliefs and assumptions are bound to remain totally unconscious: certain situations would provide excellent opportunities to become aware of some deep cultural values and make sense of a practitioner's place within the occupation.
- The practitioner's interpretation of the occupational culture will be constructed and reconstructed over time, especially through interactions with others.

From this perspective, there would be no such thing as a general approach to public relations, but instead, there will be patterns of the practice (Le Vine, 1984; Adams and Markus, 2001). Collective practices would develop as *many* practitioners unite *parts* of their subjective experiences.

## 2.10 Chapter Overview

In this chapter I have emphasised that there are a variety of ways to approach the concept of culture and suggested it imperative to define one's own position from the start. Assuming a social constructionist approach, I defined PRP culture as, "*the totality of practitioners' thought, concepts, values and assumptions about their occupation (referred to collectively as 'habitus') and their occupational experiences and identities that guide their behaviour, which will evolve with contact with other practitioners (occupational socialisation) and with wider social and cultural influences,*" and suggested that this would be manifest as "*a system of occupational practices involving actions which 'make a difference' to the world in some way.*"

This definition places an emphasis on the experiences of, and the relationships and interactions between, practitioners as members of the occupational culture, and the meanings that they would infer from them. In order to draw meanings from their experiences, practitioners would draw on rules and resources from the environment around them. These rules will be both enabling and constraining and, rather than referring to formal rules such as societal laws, refer to those conscious, unwritten rules which, when brought together, comprise mutual knowledge.

The successful development and transmission of PRP culture, I have argued, will be primarily due to the influences of those practitioners associated with it. A culture will recede when persons begin to abandon it, as much as it grows as more come to identify with, and take an active part in, it. The ways in which rules and resources are brought together, would depend on the personality of the practitioner and the particular situation in which she finds herself. In other words, practitioner will sometimes 'try on' particular formulae to see if they fit their needs (Cassell, 1993: 10). Furthermore, exploring PRP culture from a social constructionist perspective suggests that the cultural influence of public relations would not be limited to a homogenous set of values, beliefs, or meanings or real truth, but will include differences in reality itself. From this perspective, there would be no such thing as a general approach to practice, but instead there would be patterns of the practice.



### **3. Developing Effective Approaches for Researching PRP Culture**

In this chapter, I propose an interpretative research methodology for exploring the phenomena of PRP culture. I discuss the empirical research undertaken, emphasising the cultural and societal influences on the nature of the fieldwork. I suggest that the methodology used to study PRP culture in any context be flexible enough to appreciate the dynamics of both the occupational, and the national, culture. To capture culture from different perspectives, I have advocated a social constructionist approach. As will become clear in the discussion, the fieldwork became more opportunistic and interpersonal in focus in order to capture not only the essence of life in Mexico City, a city where the pace of life is hectic, but also to adapt to the Mexican character. What follows is a critical discussion of the research process interwoven with 'reflections' -my reasons for working that way I did, and the intervening variables arising from the culture of Mexico which impacted on the development of the empirical research agenda.

#### **3.1 Researcher Perspective**

My interest was to explore public relations in Mexico City from a cultural perspective. A weakness of a significant number of cross-cultural researchers in the past has been that their training and educational background was anchored in Anglo-American tradition and perspective, and, as a result, they treated the concept of culture as something universal and, therefore, definable in universal terms (Tayib 1994; Laakonsen, 2003). All too often, the interpretations and comments an observer makes of the culture she is studying, are made through her own perceptual lens and some element of bias is, therefore, inevitable (Currall, Helland Hammer, Bagett and Dollinger, 1999: 32). However, Monir Tayeb (1994: 429) suggests that, in assuming a cultural perspective in all areas of the research study, this weakness can be overcome. As one would recognise (1) the fact that cultural values and attitudes are different in degree at least, if not absolute terms in some cases, from one society to another, (2) the fact that different cultural groups behave differently under similar circumstances because of the differences in their underlying values and attitudes, and (3) the important role that culture plays in shaping work organisations and other social institutions. As will become clear in this chapter, I was constantly aware of the fact that I was to conduct research in a completely different cultural context and that it would have a significant affect on the nature of my work (Crandall and Schallar, 2004). Assuming a reflexive approach, I hope to reduce the researcher effect and allow for the flavour of Mexico to come through.

### 3.2 An Interpretivist Approach

Throughout the research process my intention has been, to use Bourdieu's phrase, to understand 'the logic of the practice.' The practice tells us how and why the occupational group is the way it is, how it develops and why it survives. My research aim was to explore the Mexican public relations industry as a *modus vivendi*, an *occupational lifeworld*, seen from the point of view of the practitioners involved. From their experiences and knowledge, I hoped to develop a picture of the social makeup of these people and their values, behaviours and lifestyles, and the ways in which their cultural and occupational dispositions, and wider societal influences, shaped the nature of their work.

In order to generate *insights* into social processes, my research needed to ask six main questions (as identified on page 37):

- What sorts of people practice public relations in Mexico? Do they have any common social and/or educational experiences?
- What meanings do these public relations practitioners assign to what they do?
- How do practitioners subjectively and socially construct the meanings inherent in the occupational culture they are involved in?
- How has the cultural climate in Mexico shaped the practitioners as agents, and the occupational activities they carry out?
- What impact does the above have on the roles public relations practitioners play both inside and outside of work?
- How do the roles carried out by public relations practitioners in Mexico influence their potential as intermediaries within Mexican culture?

As I have argued in chapter 2, PRP culture will be socially constructed over time (Daymon and Holloway, 2002: 5) and will be largely invisible to the practitioners themselves. It will, therefore, be the researcher who is able to define what culture is, based on the practitioners' accounts. In order to do this effectively, it was essential to assume an emic perspective from the outset, an approach which, so far, few researchers of public relations have followed (some of the more significant who have and who, therefore, contributed to this thesis, are Filby and Wilmott, 1988, Piezcka, 2002 and Serini, 1994). An emic perspective is akin to Geertz's (1973) idea of 'translation' which, he emphasises, is *not* concerned with providing one single interpretation from



the researcher's perspective based on the interpretations of others, as Joanne Martin (2002) suggests, this is an approach in which things get lost. Instead, 'translation' would be about communicating the multiple 'voices' (or perspectives) of practitioners in a comprehensible way.

An interpretivist approach, one which challenges the notion that cultural reality comprises objective influence that negate behaviour and present the views of multiple voices, was therefore appropriate for this study. The interpretivist, or 'humanist' (van Manen, 1990; Gergen, 1997 (b); Davies and Fitchett, 2004: 274) worldview, usually associated with qualitative methods, emphasises meanings and the perspectives of those studied. Interpretivist research "*allows the researcher to get up close to the people they are studying and get involved with them*" (Daymon & Holloway, 2002: 5). This is in contrast to quantitative approaches where the emphasis is on the end product and on the perspective of the researcher. As I emphasised in the introductory chapter, I consciously sought to avoid researcher dominance. Therefore, for a research study of this nature and, in particular, one that was carried out in a culture such as Mexico, it was essential for there to be a significant element of interpersonal interaction between myself as researcher and my participants.

### 3.3 Grounded Theory Approach

The successful construction of sociological interpretations requires researchers to choose those techniques of enquiry most adequate to the nature of the task (Bertaux and Delcroix, 2000). As I emphasised in section 1.4, exploring public relations in Mexico from the perspective of potential for cultural intermediation, I wanted to investigate the way the phenomenon appears when pre-existing practice-based theories and constructs developed elsewhere in the world are put aside by the researcher.<sup>4</sup> I wanted to go on a journey of discovery, using the public relations practitioners as my guides and what I found out from my literature review as a map. This approach to thinking about culture draws on '*grounded theory*' proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967). Grounded theory as a methodology is relevant for research undertaken from a social constructionist perspective, as it is focused on both society and the individual (Goulding, 2005: 297).

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<sup>4</sup> Roche (1973) questions what existing sociological theories, hypotheses, classifications, generalisation, data and methods of data-collection presuppose about their own meaningfulness, viability, and validity and about actors' meanings, minds and purposes.



Grounded theory is an open and reflexive approach where fieldwork, literature review and analysis, and development of theoretical concepts take place in a cyclical process (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). However, the full grounded theory approach is a complex system and considering the time and financial constraints upon me when conducting research overseas, I adopted a grounded theory 'style' of approach (Daymon and Holloway, 2002: 128; Van Manen, 1990). Being both open and reflexive, grounded theory complements an interpretivist approach with the researcher serving as an 'interpreter' of the data, not just a reporter or describer of a situation (Daymon and Holloway, 2002: 119) as is typical of more ethnographic studies. This involves both induction – analysing the data to produce provisional working 'hypotheses' – and education, where these working hypotheses are checked against literature and further incoming data.

Given the complexities inherent in developing an agenda for research in a country where little indigenous research in the field had been carried out, I immediately began to gather secondary data - not only on public relations theory and practice, but on Mexican culture. The cycle was then ongoing. Each stage involved a critical analysis of literature on culture and public relations, and this was considered within the context of what I knew and had been reading about Mexican culture. Alan Bryman (2001: 389) describes this as a repetitive interplay between the collection and analysis of data, *'analysis starts after some of the data have been collected and the implication of that analysis than shape the next steps in the data collection process.'* Having begun to gather empirical data in Mexico, my approach became more systemic (Tayeb, 1994) involving close scrutiny of this data against the literature and against my observations. The most significant strength of this method was that, in my conceptualising about PRP culture in Mexico, I was able to benefit from leads to additional Mexico-specific data that I would not have had access to from the United Kingdom.

### 3.4 Case Study

The emphasis throughout this research has been on quality not quantity. I sought to explore the values and experiences of a relatively small number of practitioners so as to uncover patterns and trends in their perceptions. I chose to focus on one city in Mexico, Mexico City, as a case study offers the opportunity for a phenomenon to be explored in depth over a short time frame (Denscombe, 1998) and allows rich and detailed information to be found over a range of

methodological approaches, as well as the use of multiple sources of evidence (Daymon and Holloway, 2002).

Whilst this study was concerned with exploring the subjective habitus and experiences within the collective, in order to study the potential for public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation, my interest has not been concerned exclusively with the personal level. When reminded of the conceptual model I proposed on p40, this is an embedded case study (Yin, 2003: 42-43) of three levels – one is the individual practitioners, the other the occupational group, and the third is the Mexican culture. In essence, this research considers the PRP culture as a mezzo-entity made up of a myriad of micro-issues which together contribute to the macro-entity that is Mexican culture (Sveingsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1169).

Case study research has traditionally been regarded as primarily inductive and requiring a medium to high level of prior theory, and the process and content of case studies has tended to be (semi) structured and to follow standard procedures (Riege, 2003: 75). The approach to case study research that I assumed, however, takes an alternative view. The main objective of this research was to explore Mexico City as a case in order to provide data for conceptualisation and theory generation (Gummesson, 2005: 322). Assuming a systemic and holistic approach, I aimed to discover new relationships of perceived realities and build an understanding of the meanings and experiences of public relations practitioners which might come from creative discovery as much as research design (Riege, 2003: 80). As Andreas Riege (2003: 80) argues, structured design tests could *“suppress the discovery of new meaningful insights and as a result not maximise the quality of the research.”* As emphasised this research assumed an interpretive approach rather than seeking to verify predetermined hypotheses.

Critiques of the case study approach argue that generalisation is not always possible and question the value of a study of a single phenomena. However, I would reject these criticisms in this study on the grounds that generalisation was not my purpose and the variables investigated were complex, therefore, requiring in-depth research, which was not possible across a broad sample due to time constraints (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Whilst not aiming for generalisability, I was, however, aiming to provide transferability via the theoretical concepts I introduce throughout. This will become clear in the final sections of chapter 9 (sections 9.6 and 9.7) where I offer some concepts and research questions which have emerged as a result of this fieldwork and which could be transferred by other researchers into a different context.



### 3.4.1 Site of research

As will be discussed in chapter 5, The United States of Mexico is almost a continent in itself with vast differences between classes, social groupings and cultures. It would, therefore, have been beyond the scope of this research project to explore how public relations operates countrywide. As a result, I took the decision to focus on the capital, Mexico City. Furthermore, the majority of the practitioners whom I later met commented that what they as practitioners recognise as being public relations activities, are confined to large urban areas in Mexico. The key phrase being *that which is recognised by practitioners*, I needed to consider how and by what means the boundary might be drawn around these expert communicators.

There are undoubtedly individuals and groups operating in the rural areas (particularly in Oaxaca and Chiapas to the south of the country), who may be regarded as using techniques similar to what we in Europe have come to recognise as ‘public relations’ in order to reach their desired public(s).<sup>5</sup> However, the codes of communication they employ might be quite different to those employed in the cities and, furthermore, several of these groups may be regarded as ‘rebels’ and would, therefore, not be recognised as being part of the ‘profession’ of public relations. In not including these persons and groups in my research study, I did not seek to go against Al-Enad (1990), Carl Botan (1992), Derina Holtzhausen (2000) and Nilanjana Bardhan (2003), who argue that attempts to theoretically place meaning of public relations within a modernist capitalist paradigm limits the indigenous understanding of how public relations is culturally interpreted and acted in locales around the world (see Bardhan, 2003: 226). However, as my purpose was to explore the phenomena of PRP culture within Mexico from the subjective point of view, I needed to refer to the definition used by the practitioners and the boundaries that they drew around the occupation.

### 3.5 Piloting methods

*“The constructionist invitation is first to open the door to multiple traditions, each with their own particular view of knowledge and methodology”* (Gergen and Gergen, 2003: 60; see also Goulding, 2005). A choice of research method is also a choice about the way we will understand the world. To expand the vocabulary of research methods is thus to enrich the ways we have of

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<sup>5</sup> The Zapatista movement, for example, have made extensive use of the internet in order to raise awareness of their cause – fighting for the rights of indigenous peoples in Chiapas.



constructing the world and our actions in it (Gergen and Gergen 2003: 60; see also van Manen, 1990). Max Van Manen (1990: 162) strongly advocates a certain openness “*that allows for choosing direction and exploring techniques, procedures and discourse that are not always foreseeable at the outset of a research project.*” He goes on to suggest that “*context places certain limitations on the general applicability of methodological procedures. Practically speaking, the research needs to be creative in finding approaches and procedures uniquely suited to the particular project and the particular researcher*” (p163). Given the diversity of approaches to researching culture, the opportunities for empirical research within the social constructionist paradigm, and the complexities involved when conducting research overseas, it was important for me to find an approach that would be appropriate to studying PRP culture from the perspective of cultural intermediation in a culture such as Mexico.

Throughout the research process I sought data *production* rather than data *collection* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 29). I was concerned with ‘discovery-oriented research’ (Todres, 2003: 199). Therefore, the methods I employed would serve as enabling factors in understanding the essence of Mexican PRP culture. In order to select the most effective methodological tools, I undertook some exploratory research to pilot different techniques, both in the UK and in Mexico. In the early Autumn of 2003, I carried out some observational research at a public relations agency in the South of England. The intention was to observe the ‘culture’ of the agency in order to get an insight into elements of the ‘culture’ of the occupation. The main focus was to explore how the practitioners interacted with each other, with clients and with other persons, in order to gain a feel for the types of people that worked there. How did they present themselves? What did they talk about? What routine, if any, did they have? I also reviewed some of the cultural ‘artefacts’ or documents, such as press releases, past campaign pitches and other written materials. The agreement with the agency in question was that none of the work I produced as a result of this exploratory research, be used in this thesis.

Despite not being able to comment on these findings, the methodological findings from this study were significant. I realised that taking on a role of ‘outside observer’ meant that I was not as involved in the culture as I might have been, and feedback from the agency on the report that I produced for them suggested that, sometimes, I may have misinterpreted actions or events as a result of not being sufficiently involved. As Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2003) suggest, observation of a group of persons is questionable as a guide to descriptions of a wider group of persons. The rules for ‘what counts as what’ are inherently ambiguous, continuously evolving,

and free to vary according to those who use them. I reached the conclusion, due to the dynamic nature of observational research, that the process requires a longitudinal study design and methods that capture the process over time. Observational approaches have, to date, been little utilised in public relations research, and it is an area which holds much opportunity. Yet, the constraints of time and finances upon me when thinking about conducting research overseas prevented me from pursuing the option of carrying-out longitudinal research.

Secondly, I explored the appropriateness of administering an on-line questionnaire amongst public relations practitioners in Mexico. Questionnaires are an often-favoured approach amongst many researchers as they enable a large amount of data to be collected relatively quickly and economically from a wide sample of the population (Denscome, 1998). This factor was particularly appealing as regards this study considering the money and time constraints.

The questionnaire was developed from the original ideas of the Venezuelan academic, Juan-Carlos Molleda who has carried out research on public relations as an agent in social transition in Latin America. The questionnaire was intended to provide a way of exploring the structure of the occupation and 'professional' values relevant to public relations in Mexico. In short, it sought to offer:

An overview of the mezzo-field of study i.e. the structure of the occupation within Mexico.

A portrait of the microfield- by starting to explore general biographical data of, and attitudes and values held by, practitioners.

The breadth of data attainable might mean that a questionnaire would be more representative of the public relations industry in Mexico which would be important to see how the practitioners interviewed fit within the broader context of the occupation. This would then enable me to explore occupational influences on the practitioners, and the extent to which there was a shared frame of reference regarding occupational values. I intended to use this data as a point of comparison when analysing cultural patterns of subjective experience that would be gleaned from in-depth interviews.

Questionnaire research usually goes hand-in-hand with statistical, or random, sampling which involves distributing the questionnaire to a predetermined group of people in terms of size and structure. I had intended to do the same and to approach national professional associations within



Mexico that would endorse my work, but there are none in existence. I attempted to make contact with the local associations: La Academia de Relaciones Publicas (representing practitioners in Mexico City), RELAPO (Association of Public Relations Practitioners of the West Coast, which represents primarily those practitioners who work in Guadalajara and the state of Jalisco) and the Asociacion Mexicana de Comunicadores Organizacionales (a nationwide organisation but representing in-house organisational communicators<sup>6</sup>). Successful links were made with the first two associations from whom I received the contact details of members to be able to contact them via email. The associations also agreed to set some time aside in their meetings to introduce my research and to encourage members to take part.<sup>7</sup> As both associations have comparatively low membership levels and are somewhat 'elite' groups, in order to get a more representative sample, it was necessary to recruit additional respondents via word of mouth or '*snowball sampling*' (Bryman, 2001). This inevitably meant that it would be impossible to quantify the population and track response rates. The overall number of online questionnaires completed was fifty. Whilst online surveys, in particular, often result in inadequate levels of participation (Witmer, Colman and Katzman, 1999: 147) and more so in Latin America (Molleda and Hirsch, 2003: 369), I decided that the data was not robust enough, as many of the questionnaires were not completed in full, and it would not be an appropriate research tool to progress with in Mexico. Significantly Juan-Carlos Molleda and Maria Angeles Moreno (2005) also carried out research in Mexico City in the summer of 2004 basing their work on the research framework previously developed by Molleda. Their purpose was to explore the economic, political and media contexts for public relations practice in order to gain a deeper understanding of the way in which each directly influenced the development of public relations professionals and the industry in the country. It was interesting to note that their empirical fieldwork also adopted a slightly different approach making use of structured *in-depth interviewing* and *focus groups*.

A copy of the questionnaire and further analysis and discussion of the development and application process can be found in Appendix A.

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<sup>6</sup> AMCO includes under the umbrella 'organisational communication' those working in human resources.

<sup>7</sup> The structure of both groups is such that they are rather informal in terms of administration issues, with neither group having developed an association website or a regular news bulletin. Whether or not members were made aware of the survey depended on how many were present at the particular meeting, and how many of them may have passed the message on to colleagues by word-of-mouth.



### 3.6 The empirical investigation

Based on my findings and experiences when conducting pilot research, I decided to divide the empirical research into the following three stages:

- In-depth personal interviews.
- Ongoing non-participant observation and documentary analysis.
- Follow-up/explanatory observations.

### 3.7 In-depth Interviews

The in-depth interviews were carried out amongst 32 public relations practitioners in Mexico City between February and May 2004. An additional interview was carried out with a practitioner-academic. Whilst my original intention was to analyse this interview in conjunction with those of other practitioners, the conversation progressed significantly beyond that of the others, exploring, in particular, the rules and resources available to the occupation and the influence of Mexican society on the industry. This interview was therefore considered separately.<sup>8</sup>

Assuming a social constructionist approach, I sought to produce a natural narrative of the lifeworlds of practitioners and the influence of external factors on their motives and actions. In essence, the interviews provided the participants with the *“opportunities to explain themselves, that is, to construct their own point of view both on themselves and on the world”* (Nixon, 2003: 11). I considered the work of Tom Wengraf (2000, 2001) who adopted the ‘biographic-narrative interpretive method’, developed in the context of interactionist and phenomenological research traditions. By taking the individual narrative to understand the collective, I was able to identify in the accounts of individuals, elements characteristic of some form of common occupational or social influence (Rustin, 2000). Maxwell (2002: 54) identifies a weakness in accounts based on interviews. He argues that whilst they may be descriptively, interpretively, and theoretically valid as an account of the person’s actions and perspective in that interview, they may miss other aspects of the person’s perspectives not expressed, and can easily lead to false inferences about their actions outside the interview situation. I would argue that by employing methods of in-depth interviewing to understand the meanings associated with life as a public relations practitioner in

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<sup>8</sup> Topics covered in this interview included theoretical aspects of public relations practice and the ‘Latin American School’, the history of the occupation in Mexico and public relations education in the country.

Mexico City, I was not looking at the interview data as a way of describing accurately the actions, but rather, at the ways in which practitioner 'agency' is socially constructed (Bellaby, 1991: 20).

All interviews were conducted in Spanish, recorded and lasted from thirty minutes to 2 hours, with the average duration being around forty-five minutes. The interviews were then transcribed within 36 hours to ensure that the elicited interpretations were preserved accurately and available for initial analysis and planning subsequent interviews (as in Barley 1991: 40). In addition, after each interview day, the fieldwork notes, taken supplementary to the recording, were checked to ensure their completeness and understandability, and any additional field notes and observations were written down. This was all then typed on computer files. The data files were named by interview date and number, and participant information was attached to these interview numbers.

Ethics as regards informed consent to take part was not an issue and participants were all informed of the confidential nature of the interviews and assurances were given that their real names would not be used in any report. Furthermore, all participants were contacted via email and offered the opportunity to read and to comment on my interpretations. Having successfully emailed twenty-two of the participants, only two took up the opportunity.

### 3.7.1 Sample

Whilst some public relations researchers (Moreno and Molleda, 2005; Bardhan, 2003) have argued that interviewing 'elites' within the profession offers the advantage that they have a more critical vision of the work and of the role of the researcher, I was conscious of the need to consider as wide a variety of experiences as possible. I sought to interview a selection of men and women from all levels - from managers to the 'old school', and from all areas of the field. As James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (1995: 26) argue, "*selecting people, as opposed to representatives of populations, suggests that individuals, in principle, are equally worthy despite individual differences and therefore have worthwhile stories to tell. Although this may complicate the description of culture and experience writ large, it enables and encourages representations of diverse and complex experience.*" Conscious that public relations is often regarded as a feminine and female-dominated profession (Lesly, 1991), I was also aware of the importance of balancing the number of men and women interviewed as much as possible. However, given the size and



complexities of life in Mexico City, the sample selection for recruiting interview *participants*<sup>9</sup> was based on the availability of practitioners and their willingness to participate in the research. Initial interviewees often played a crucial role as ‘gatekeepers’ in recruiting participants.<sup>10</sup> This is characteristic of both opportunistic sampling which involves following new leads and taking advantage of the unexpected (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Cresswell, 1998) and convenience sampling – those available to the researcher by virtue of their accessibility (Bryman, 2001: 96). Many of the interviews that took place were ‘informal’, as opportunities to gather data presented themselves that were too good to miss.

The sample comprised a total of thirty-two practitioners with a mixture of experiences of working, both agency-side, in-house and as independent consultants. A full composition of the sample is provided in Appendix B.

### 3.7.2 Interview structure

The central purpose of the interviews was to explore the dimensions of practitioner lifeworld at the centre of PRP culture. However, given my argument that a person’s life is rooted in the community, encouraging the participants to share elements of their working life histories with me revealed not only the details of that person’s life, but also the process revealed important parts of the culture (Spradley, 1979: 24).

Prior to entering the field, I developed an interview guide which I later adapted to suit the themes emerging from the data. In the earlier interviews I found myself adhering more strictly to the format of this guide. As I became more comfortable with both my own position as interviewer and that of the participants as interviewees, I made more use of non-directive questioning formats, allowing individuals to account for themselves in their own terms. As I did so, the interviews became more ‘active’ (Holsten and Gubrium, 1995: 8) and narrative in nature.

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<sup>9</sup> I consciously use the terms ‘participant’ and ‘informant’ rather than ‘respondent’, which implies that the researcher is offered greater importance, as the research process for me has been a mutual project between myself and the public relations practitioners.

<sup>10</sup> Mollada and Moreno (2005) also found the same in their fieldwork.



### 3.7.3 The interview guide

The interview guide provided a focus on the issues or topic areas to be covered and the lines of inquiry to be followed during the course of each interview - though the sequencing of questions was not the same for every participant as much depended on the process of each interview and the responses of each person. Due to the absence of qualitative academic research which explores the phenomenon of public relations within the context of Mexico, it was essential for me to explain my purpose and position as a credible researcher from the UK, and this meant that I needed to explain, though in brief terms, the interests and aims of my work. As Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway (2002: 170-171) contend *“researchers need to be very clear about the purpose and procedures of their research. If participants understand these goals and motives, they are likely to feel more secure in taking part and in interacting with the researcher.”*

The interview guide was developed in order to raise questions concerning the following topics, each in relation to the practitioner and the occupation as a whole:

- Values.
- Attitudes.
- Characteristics.
- Formal and informal roles e.g. practitioner involvement in social or community actions where the practitioner applies public relations skills.
- Behaviours.
- Relationships.
- Occupational Identity.

In order to explore these areas, my questions needed to consist of what Patton (1990) identifies as *experience, feeling and knowledge questions* (see Daymon and Holloway, 2002). In order to put participants' experience into context, I asked my research participants to share as much as possible with me about themselves and the history of their experiences (Bardhan, 2003). By exploring such questions as, *'Describe how you came to be a public relations professional?'* I was able to gain an understanding of their past experiences and motivations for joining the profession. The conversation then moved on to concentrate upon the concrete details of their present experience. Participants were able to reconstruct these details by answering questions which encouraged them to talk about what it was that they actually did as a public relations

practitioner. Themes included their working and professional relationships, what it was like for them to do what they did - by taking me through a typical day in their working life from when they get up to when they go to bed. In order to reflect on the meaning of the experience in light of what they had said about their work, we explored such ideas as what public relations means to them, the sort of people public relations practitioners were, whether or not it would be easy for them to identify another practitioner if they were not personally known to them, and finally how they would ideally like to work in the future.

See Appendix C for full copy of the interview guide.

As I was unsure which themes would emerge as most significant, the interview guide was quite long and detailed. I wanted to ensure that I did not ignore any area that may be significant. However, the more interviews I completed, the more I found myself adapting in order to focus on the most significant themes emerging from all data collection methods. As advocated by Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway (2002: 171), the purpose of the interviews was to gain the perspectives of my informants regarding their experiences as public relations practitioners, whilst using the interview guide to maintain some control over the interview in order to achieve the objectives of the study. In addition, I found that as I began to attempt to move away from the interviewer-interviewee mode of questioning and embrace a more two-way conversational approach, the participants began to deviate from the 'textbook-type' responses that they believed I wanted, and to offer their own perspectives (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). I also found that once I began to introduce some of the ideas from so-called 'universal' models of public relations and shared my interest that the unique elements of public relations practice within Mexico be highlighted and that the voice of the Mexican public relations practitioner be heard, my informants opened up and our relationship seemed to take on another perspective of reciprocal interest and mutual learning.

When rounding-off each interview, I offered informants the opportunity to add anything else which had not been covered but which they thought was important. By asking such questions as, *'Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?'* or *'Is there anything else that you think is important that I should know about?'* I found that several participants then began to explore completely new and exciting avenues. Perhaps more significantly, those who had come across as being a little uncomfortable with the more 'formal' approach of interviewing began to open up, as if feeling that the awkward experience was over and that they could now converse freely with me, talking



about areas of their work or their experiences that were of particular significance to them. Sometimes the interviews continued for up to half an hour, or in some cases more than an hour.

#### 3.7.4 Limitations

As I would be conducting the fieldwork in a different language, I was unable to pilot my techniques and questions before arriving in Mexico. With hindsight, as the interviews followed a developmental process (Daymon and Holloway, 2002) this was not a significant problem. Moreover, the obvious cultural differences, particularly as regards means of communication, would have meant that those techniques and phrasing of questions which may have worked in the UK, would have to have been adapted quite considerably to suit the Mexican 'character'.

Recruiting participants posed some difficulties. A larger sample would have undoubtedly given greater breadth to the sample being investigated. However, as I argued previously, my focus was on data quality rather than quantity and in a qualitative study of this nature it is not so much the number of people interviewed that is important, as the depth of the information that can be gained from their accounts. The fact that several of the initial interviewees played a crucial role as 'gatekeepers' in recruiting participants may be considered as affecting the reliability of my sample. However, their primary motive was to act in good faith rather than to manipulate the direction of my research and I do not view this as weakening the value of my interpretation. Furthermore, the fact that I met the majority of them as a result of interviews and conversations I had had with colleagues of theirs meant that it was easier to develop a mutual understanding from the outset.

Bauman (1986, as cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 28) suggests that "*framing the interview as an occasion for narrative productions suggests a vision of the respondents as a story teller of sorts. As with any story, however, the narrator is relating experience at a specific time and place, to a particular audience and with particular objectives in mind.*" It might be suggested that participants were simply 'putting on an act' or a 'face' for my benefit but, concurring with Holstein and Gubrium (1995: 28), I do not believe that the participants could possibly have 'made it up' as they went along, "*the improvisational narrative combines aspects of experience, emotion, opinion, and expectation, connecting disparate parts into a coherent, meaningful whole. The respondent does not just 'make things up' as much as he or she is 'true to life' – faithful to subjectively meaningful experience- even as it is creatively, spontaneously rendered.*"



### 3.7.5 Reflections

The way of life in Mexico City influenced the ways in which I conducted the empirical research significantly. As I became more comfortable with conducting interviews, they became much more like what Bingham and Moore (1959 as cited in Daymon and Holloway, 2002: 166, see also Holstein and Gubrium, 1995 and Van Manen, 1990) identified as a '*conversation with a purpose*' where my research participants and I became 'conversational partners'. This is similar to the humanist approaches to depth interviews in which interviewee and interviewer "*become 'peers' or even 'companions' ....[supporting] meaningful understanding of the person... and wholeness in human enquiry*" (Reason and Rowan, 1981 quoted in Silverman, 1993: 95).

There is an argument that asking the same questions of all participants in roughly the same order helps to minimise the effects of interviewer bias and achieves greater efficiency of information gathering. However, to fully understand the experiences and predispositions of the practitioner, it was more effective to tailor the interviews to suit their characters. It was clear early on that a couple of the participants were not comfortable with talking too deeply about themselves. In these instances, rather than push them on these questions, I used the interview as an opportunity to ask questions about the occupational structure of public relations and about Mexican society. Upon doing this, I found that some of the interviewees naturally brought their own experiences into the narrative and did not feel as though they were 'disclosing' bits of themselves.

Often interviews were carried out informally or 'creatively' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), as opportunities to gather data presented themselves that were too good to miss. As a result, interviews took place in the car (quite a valuable opportunity if, when travelling to an industry function with other practitioners, you find yourself in a queue of traffic for an hour having only moved half a mile down the road- a situation not uncommon in Mexico City), in restaurants and hotels, at home, and in the offices of my participants. Whilst it may be argued that the data gathered from such 'informal' settings would not be as reliable as that obtained from interviews undertaken in a more formal environment, I would argue that the interviews were not only revealing in terms of the talking that took place, but the ways in which the participants interacted with me (Nixon, 2003). The most fruitful data was obtained from those interviews which took place when my participants either invited me to take breakfast, lunch or coffee with them, or to their home. Away from the office environment, participants were more relaxed and felt able to

converse more freely and to dedicate more time to it. This was also a prime reflection of the extent to which interpersonal relationships are valued within both public relations practice in Latin America and Mexican culture.

### 3.8 Observations

Ongoing observation was an inherent part of the fieldwork process. All social research is some way or another founded upon participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 234-5). I could not begin to *systematically understand* PRP culture in Mexico without also observing the general contexts in which it operates and in which it is reported. Indeed, by understanding how the occupational group is perceived by Mexican society, I would have a better understanding of the position of practitioners as *intermediaries* in Mexican culture. That meant familiarising myself with the categories and perspectives of Mexican culture, how Mexicans view life, and how they behave (Szalay, 1985: 21). As Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway (2002: 203) suggest, such data provides the 'holistic perspective'.

Throughout my time in Mexico I kept a fieldwork journal to record my thoughts, emotions and reactions to the experience, as well as my interpretations and biases and any emerging themes. The observation process was initially progressive, similar to the 3 steps proposed by Spradley (1980). Not yet accustomed to the complex and vibrant culture that is Mexico, I started out recording almost everything I saw and was told. In order to understand the potential for public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation, I wanted, as much as possible, to understand the environment in which the practitioners operated. As time went on, I found that I became much more focused in my observations. As themes began to emerge from the interview data, I started to narrow-down what I was consciously looking for. Finally, as I began to identify those areas in which I wanted to focus my study, I carried out selective observation. For example, I noted the reactions of people to public relations activities, and their attitudes towards the occupation, together with the ways in which the industry was portrayed in the press and the media.

Observation was a useful method to understand the tensions between the formal and informal norm systems within a culture and to determine what practices informants considered to be the most important. Often, the everyday dimensions are overlooked in social science research. As was the case particularly in my follow-up participant observation, the informal conversations I had, in both the working and social environment, were rich in anecdotes which I have drawn on



in a multitude of ways throughout. These anecdotes, media and other textual observations, together with more general everyday observations from both socialising and interacting with public relations practitioners and experiences of, firstly, living with a Mexican family, and later young communications professionals, were insightful techniques for investigating and understanding the position of public relations within Mexican society. I was able to draw on my direct observations and experiences of living and working in Mexico City to substantiate and assess both the occupational and societal culture. Throughout the narrative I make use of the data obtained via observations to complement and illustrate my discussions on the themes related to practitioner lifeworlds, and occupational and societal resources and influences which emerged from the interview findings. Therefore, unlike the interview transcripts, the information recorded in the field diary was not content analysed.

### 3.9 Data Analysis

The purpose of the data analysis is *“to explicate how meanings, their linkages and horizons, are actively constructed within the interview environment. It is about ‘deconstructing’ the participants’ talk. Showing the reader the hows or the whats of the narrative frames of lived experience”* (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 79-80). In writing and presenting my findings I was interested in expressing the results of the study in a way that was thematic rather than final. As Les Todres (2002: 3) suggests, *“themes and structures, have more the quality of the possibilities around which unique variations can occur”* and allow is to account for cultural patterns. Rather than using the conceptual model for exploring PRP culture I developed on p40 as a way of analysing and presenting my findings, I have assumed an approach which draws on grounded theory.

Despite the open and flexible nature of the data that may be used in a study which follows a grounded theory approach, there is a set of specific principles for analysing and abstracting information – the *constant comparison method* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Following the very first interview, I began to provisionally analyse the data and when transcribing, I noted down any themes. On return to the UK, I analysed the texts more systematically, going through each line-by-line and noting emerging themes and comparing the themes from each transcript with those from other transcripts, in order to ensure consistency and also to identify any diversity in the cases. I then grouped these themes together to form categories which I initially recorded in a NUD\*IST Nvivo software programme (see Appendix D for an outline of these key categories).



Each category was given a conceptual label and can be traced back to specific phrases or sentences in the transcripts which can be used to illustrate it. In order to present these categories in a comprehensive, yet creative, way, I developed five semi-biographical composite narratives, the process and details of which I will discuss in section 5.1.

The next stage in the data analysis (as presented in chapter 6) was to search for links through identifying concepts that might go some way to offering an explanation of PRP culture in Mexico City, referred to by 'grounded theorists' as '*axial coding*'. Distinguishing relationships between several of the themes, or cultural patterns, I was able to identify core categories around which these themes might revolve. This process then formed the basis for the overall theory construction I present in chapters 6, 7 and 8 (Goulding, 2005: 297).

The final stage of the data analysis involved the construction of the *core category* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which is presented in chapter 7. This core category pulls together by way of analytical generalisation, defined by Andreas Riege (2003: 81) as the process whereby particular findings are generalised to some broader theory, all the concepts discussed in chapter 6 in order to offer an interpretation of the PRP culture. In the following chapter, 8, I go beyond the core category to offer a thesis for the potential role for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in Mexico City (Goulding, 2005: 297). I cannot expect to exhaust the topic, but the process of analysis I have followed enabled me to develop a particular interpretation from which the phenomena of PRP culture and cultural intermediation within the context of Mexico City might be seen more clearly (Todres, 2002).

### **3.10 Reflections on My Role as Researcher**

I recognise my own subjective experiences will have structured the sociological narrative I present because it provides the medium through which the raw data was gathered. In the introduction, I made clear my 'political' and 'ethical' stance and proposed that the most appropriate thing I could do was to be honest, or self-reflexive in presenting my narrative in order to account for my interpretations.

It might be argued that researchers from the same culture as the participants should undertake cultural research; otherwise there is a danger of the researcher's ethnocentric perspective influencing the data interpretation. As I have argued in section 3.7.5, I do not believe that this applied to my approach as a researcher. I am nevertheless aware that I am British and culturalised

into the British perspective on social norms and values and that I cannot hope to understand fully those of Mexico. However, by living with Mexicans, observing, and talking to people in the day-to-day, I was able to learn a lot about Mexican life and to begin to see things from different Mexican perspectives. Furthermore, I believe that being an outsider was actually beneficial to the research process. Being able to constantly compare what I was finding in Mexico City with what I had experienced as a researcher and practitioner in the United Kingdom, for example, enabled me to note things which perhaps an insider might overlook.

There are obvious benefits and advantages in sharing the language and culture of participants. One might argue that those interviews I conducted during my initial few weeks in the field served as pilots, as it was still very much a period of acclimatisation for me. I was having to get used to conducting research in a second language and living with a Mexican family whom I had never met. And this whilst physically fighting the effects of Mexico City – the much cited altitude sickness, affects of poor water quality, and adjusting to the effects of the pollution and the smog, for example. I could not afford to spend too long adjusting to the environment, however. By my third day in Mexico I had met up with my one key contact and was invited out to campaign launch, a breakfast seminar and cocktails with the Minister for the Environment, all within the first fortnight. All of these experiences were fundamental in introducing me to the field, serving as a fruitful background to the study, and placing the public relations occupation in its wider societal context. I was able to pick up on general attitudes towards the occupation (both within society generally and amongst practitioners themselves) together with colloquial expressions which were of particular use in later interviews.

From the outset, I was determined not to assume the traditional stereotypical role of interviewer, as one who avoids closeness to their subjects in order to gather objective data. I would not have felt comfortable in doing this, and I wanted my participants to take me as I am. Devereaux (1967, as cited in Hunt, 1989: 26) believes that objectivity creates anxiety and results in the gathering of data that is often far removed from the meaningful world of subjects. Furthermore, Harry Triandis and Dharm Bhawuk (1996: 29) speak of the need to pay special attention to the cultural norms of the country in which research is being conducted as this aids in establishing a rapport between the interviewer and research participant. This helps to avoid many of the problems prevalent in interview research, such as participants being over courteous in trying to give answers that will please the interviewer, or those who are reticent or playing games in order to fool the interviewer by telling the biggest lies they can get away with. Rosita Albert (1996: 333) identifies the



significance of the 'interpersonal dimension' as a norm in Latin American culture and, in particular the importance of 'simpatia' in establishing relationships, *"a person is seen as simpatico/a to the extent that he or she is perceived to be open, warm, interested in others, exhibits positive behaviours towards others, is in tune with the wishes and feelings of others, and is enthusiastic."*

The transference onto the researcher of cultural meanings (so vital to my understanding of PRP culture in Mexico City) is linked to the activities, behaviours, and roles the researcher demonstrates. These, in turn, structure the researcher's exposure to different dimensions of the subjects' world (Hunt, 1989: 21). My desire to establish strong conversational bonds with my research participants, in order for them to feel at ease in letting me into their personal experiences of their practitioner lifeworlds, sometimes meant that respondents went a little off track in their responses and I deviated from the interview guide in asking questions particular to the personal situations they were describing. For example, if a participant was keen to talk about his or her family and the impact of their working life on their life at home, I would make an effort to ask a few short questions about their children for example. Whilst it may be argued that this was adding to the amount of 'dross' I was collecting alongside the information which related directly to the themes that I wished to explore, I believed that this was worth it because it enabled my participants to feel more comfortable with me and with the unfamiliar experience of being interviewed. In addition, I also came from each interview with a feeling that I knew the participant more personally, which helped me when seeking to develop the composite narratives in chapter 5 (Hunt, 1989).

A further issue to be overcome, and one which added to the transference of meaning I sought, was the image I was presenting to my participants, i.e. *how* they viewed me. In my first few interviews, particularly with male practitioners, I felt that I was not perhaps being taken as seriously as I might have been as a PhD researcher. I put this down to firstly, the continuing relative scarcity of qualitative academic research being carried out within the field of public relations in Mexico, leading to a lack of appreciation of what it entails; and secondly, my status as a female academic. Whilst I would not profess to having experienced any direct prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of sex both when undertaking fieldwork or living in the community in Mexico City, Mexico is a country with a tradition of male dominance in the social, political and business spheres, and it is often hard to shake-off such implicitly ingrained attitudes.



There are obvious repercussions to assuming an interpersonal approach with interview participants. I became close friends with one practitioner in particular; I stayed with her family on subsequent visits to Mexico and was witness at her wedding. From an ethical point of view, I decided not to draw extensively on her interview transcript when compiling the composite narrative as I would have had my judgement clouded but what I knew of her as a person outside of the interview situation and I did not think it ethical to make reference to anything that she had told me outside of the interview. Instead, I made a mental note of anything I thought significant or interesting, and brought it to front of mind when I came across similar situations, either in another interview or in my observations. However, the regular email contact I had with her, meant that I could ask her questions regarding terminology that I did not understand and aspects of Mexican society and culture emerging from analysing the data.

In addition, I had come to find that a couple of weeks prior to my arrival there had been another student from Europe who had approached some of the same people for help with her Masters level dissertation. Having assisted her, many of my respondents initially assumed that I was undertaking a similar study and that, as they had done for her, a short interview of between fifteen and twenty minutes would be sufficient. I also had the feeling that some participants were holding back on some of what they wanted to say through fear that I would not have the necessary experience to understand very clearly. This often meant that I needed to 'drop into the conversation' little anecdotes about my own experiences as a public relations practitioner which also led me to sometimes express a personal opinion about a particular 'professional' issue. I found, however, that in doing so, my professional relationship with my participants improved; both of us respecting each other as fellow practitioners.

### **3.11 Study Authenticity**

As I have argued throughout, social science is not a wholly objective activity carried out by researchers who are detached from their field. It is a social activity and is concerned with exploring day-to-day life. As a result, it will always be shaped, to some extent, by the researcher's own motivations and values, and by external influences (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). I believe validity and reliability to be inappropriate as categories for assessing the effectiveness of qualitative research (Denzin, 1997), and, instead, draw on the ideas of Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) and Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway (2002) to argue the *trustworthiness* of

this study. The categories of trustworthiness are *credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability* and *authenticity*.

Before addressing each of these in turn, I should emphasise one weakness I identified when considering Lincoln and Guba's ideas in the context of this study. Guba and Lincoln advocate that the inquirer make every effort to become thoroughly acquainted the field sites in which the study is to take place. Indeed, William Corsaro (1980, in Guba and Lincoln, 1985: 251) strongly recommended 'prior ethnography': becoming a participant observer in a situation for a lengthy time before the study is actually undertaken. "*Such prior ethnography*", he argued, "*not only helps to diminish the obtrusiveness of the investigator but also provides a baseline of cultural accommodation and informational orientation that will be invaluable in increasing both the effectiveness and the efficiency of the formal work. It prepares the inquirer's mind for what will come later.*" I would argue that this is not essential. As an outsider, I was able to enter the field without many preconceived ideas. As I stated in section 1.6, I have had a long-standing passion for, and academic interest in, Latin America and for Mexico.

Also as an outsider combining interest with ambition, I think I was able to maintain my enthusiasm over three-and-a-half intensive years. I became emotionally involved with my work and found it impossible to detach myself from it. This, I would argue, has been a strength of my research. I have always been quite in-tune with my emotions and use them as a means to make decisions and to rationalise upon the past. The psychological involvement with my work meant that I was more able to empathise with the positions of my informants and with those I met day-to-day in Mexico City, I was able to get more of a perspective on their motivations for doing things and their ways of viewing the world.

### 3.11.1 Credibility

Credibility is a qualitative research term which most closely resembles 'internal validity' as a term employed in positivist research studies. A study is credible if it illustrates prolonged engagement of the researcher with the field. Guba and Lincoln (1985: 310) suggest that any researcher invest sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the 'culture', testing for misinformation introduced by distortions, whether of the self or of respondents, and building trust. As I explained in section 1.6, despite spending limited time in the field. Initially, I had a



long-standing appreciation of the culture. Furthermore, subsequent visits meant that I was able to build and sustain trust with my key informants.

Credibility can be strengthened through member validation and triangulation, researcher reflexivity and a transparent methodology (Bryman, 2001; Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Throughout, I attempted to be as transparent and reflexive as possible in my approach, accounting for how decisions have been affected by my own biases. Member validation was achieved through peer debriefing. Presenting papers at academic conferences, writing articles for peer review and publication (Hodges, 2006), discussing initial thoughts with a Mexican public relations practitioner-academic, presenting initial findings in a lecture to undergraduate students and follow-up informal interviews and 'focus groups' gave me an opportunity to test out my understanding of culture and later my interpretations of PRP culture in Mexico.

### 3.11.2 Transferability

Transferability can be most closely associated with the positivist research term, 'external validity.' Transferability refers to the degree to which findings can be generalised across social settings. Christine Daymon and Immy Holloway argue that "*whilst a case may be interesting in itself, few relevant insights are likely to emerge if the reader is unable to transfer these to another setting*" (2002: 113). The complexities inherent with any qualitative study which focuses on in-depth interviews and/or observations make it almost impossible to replicate the research process in another time or place. In providing a rich or 'thick' description' (Geertz, 1973) of the participants' contexts and perceptions, the reader can make informed judgements about the transferability of the research findings to a similar context. Martin Denscombe (1998: 212) advocates that researchers should return to the field as various explanations emerge to check their validity against 'reality'. Due to distance, it was not possible to make several visits every time a new theme emerged, however, returning to the field in August 2005 to work and participate in PRP culture in Mexico City for myself, enabled me to substantiate the transferability of my final thesis. By developing a unique conceptual framework looking at public relations from the perspective of occupational culture, this study can be generalised on the basis of theory (Riege, 2004). The theoretical concepts proposed can be transferred and recontextualised into a variety of settings.



### **3.11.3 Dependability**

Dependability refers to the reliability of qualitative research. Findings should, therefore, be consistent and accurate. Given the nature of the study and the particularities of Mexican culture, particular as regards establishing close working relationships with informants highlights issues of dependability, it is questionable whether another researcher would be able to enter the field and conduct the interviews in the same way. Indeed, given the diverging views about what constitutes public relations, would another researcher define the field of study in the same way, employing the same criteria?

A 'dependable' study suggests that readers will be able to evaluate the adequacy of the analysis through following decision-making processes. As Appendix E illustrates, I have attempted to provide a 'trail' of any decisions made and the factors influencing them. Furthermore, despite the low up-take, participants were offered the opportunity to review the composite narratives. The main reason for member checking here was to see whether I had presented the reality of the participants in a way that was credible to them (Daymon and Holloway, 2002: 96). Participants could suggest adaptation to the interpretation and their comments could clarify, trigger and extend ideas which were fed back into the narrative. I also asked a couple of practitioners and non-practitioners in the UK to read the composite narratives and to write a list of bullet points on their interpretations. This enabled me to check that I had been successful in communicating those themes I had hoped to communicate, and to see if they had different interpretations of the material that could feed in to my analysis and overall interpretation. On subsequent visits to Mexico City I was also able to catch up with a small number of interview participants, together with other public relations practitioners, and talk over progress of my study in an informal setting. I was able to share my thoughts and ideas with them and they could provide significant input without feeling the pressures of being interviewed. Initial participants also felt empowered that I had asked for further input from them.

### **3.11.4 Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings and conclusions achieve the aim of the study and are not the result of prior assumption and preconceptions. As emphasised in section 1.5.1, my overall research was systemic and grounded in the literature, data, and observations. Moreover, the decision trail required me to be reflective and to provide a self-critical account of

how the research was carried out. The composite narratives I present of multiple accounts was a means of cross validating the data and forming a larger picture than any one account makes possible (Bellaby, 1991: 39)

### **3.11.5 Authenticity**

Authenticity is consistent with the relativist view that research accounts do no more than represent a sophisticated but temporary consensus of views about what is to be considered true (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, 1994; Seale, 1999). By developing composite narratives and presenting my data from the subjective perspective of practitioners, I have been able to represent a range of different realities (provide fairness), to develop 'more sophisticated' understanding of the phenomenon being studied (provide 'ontological authenticity') and enable them, and practitioners elsewhere, to appreciate the viewpoints of other colleagues (provide 'educative authenticity').

### **3.12 Chapter Summary**

The fieldwork carried out in Mexico City was based on an intensive approach in terms of time and practicalities, which considered the subject matter from several angles in order to make it possible to provide an empirically rich and detailed as well as nuanced and varied account (Sveingsson and Alvesson, 2003). The literature reviewed in chapter 2 emphasised the idea that there is no one tried and tested method to the study of culture. The methods used will depend on the research problem, the knowledge of the researcher and the cultural acceptability of the various techniques, as well as the sophistication of the respondents. Having identified my particular understanding of culture, I went on to develop a conceptual framework for exploring PRP culture. Despite giving careful consideration to the research philosophies and methodological approaches relevant to this prior to entering the field, the research was conducted in such a way so as to allow the circumstances of Mexico City to set the direction of the practical fieldwork. Whilst I would not suggest that researchers of culture should underestimate the importance of employing a rigorous methodology to their work, this chapter emphasises the ways in which the fieldwork is negated by the particularities of any field. When this is borne in mind, research becomes even more emic and interpretative in focus. Indeed, the fact it became necessary to adapt some approaches more typically used in the study of culture to the particular setting in itself, tells us something about the specific culture under study, which has been influential for the interpretation and discussion in the following chapters.



## **4. An Introduction to Mexico**

A social constructionist approach implies that members of a culture will perceive of it differently according to their own experiences. True to this worldview, my purpose in this chapter is not to provide an objective account of Mexico in order to place my findings on PRP culture in context. Firstly I do not believe that a dry, descriptive, 'matter-of-fact' interpretation would contribute to the nature of the narrative I present elsewhere, and secondly, it is inevitable that I will have my own views, based on a combination of preexisting dispositions, my experiences in the country, and what I have learned from others.

Clearly, I have only ever been in contact with certain groups and moved in small circles in Mexico City and there will inevitably be people who would not concur with my account. I have had numerous aborted attempts at writing this chapter. On each occasion, it was criticised by Mexicans from whom I asked feedback, who did not agree with the significance of some of the points that had emerged from the literature or who had serious reservations about the veracity of the observations described in the quotes I had cited. Whilst a sociological 'truth' will always be located within the cultural context of the writer who will, consciously or unconsciously, be communicating her own biases, it has been my intention throughout to try to limit the extent to which preconceived bias and stereotypes have entered the narrative. Instead, what I present in the opening sections of this chapter is a thematic analysis of the cultural literature on Mexico. Although there is some danger in singling out certain factors and events in history as being of significance when in reality all types of factors influence cultural development, it is possible to distinguish a number of actions and influences that have shaped the development of Mexican culture. The final section will focus on Mexico City. Here, I will draw on my own observations and experiences in order to illustrate the way of life in the country's capital.

### **4.1 'Modern' Mexico**

Mexico has experienced dynamic social, political and economic changes, society is now becoming more pluralistic. Affluence has enhanced materialistic values and encouraged a growing movement away from collectivist towards individualist values. Concurrently, privatization, along with diminished government involvement in the economy, has enabled market forces to evolve, and the grave economic crisis which occurred in the early 1990s provided a change in the balance of power in the economy in favour of US interests.



Critics would argue that, in fact, two realities exist in Mexico: one is rural and underdeveloped; the other is modern, urban and industrial. The mosaic of cultures which make up Mexico would lead some to even suggest that there are more than two (Pieterse, 1995; Bartra, 1992). What is clear is that Mexico now finds herself in what might be regarded as an '*era of desmodernidad*' (Bartra, 1992) – a contradictory modernity, modern Mexican society stands in sharp contrast with its traditional cultures (Montenegro, 2004: 107; Martin-Barbero, 1993) and values.

## 4.2 Mexico's History

One needs to know not only that the attitudes and behaviours prevalent in Mexico are different today, but also why. To appreciate the 'emerging' Mexico, it is important to understand its unique history (Long, 2004; Bartra, 1992). Writing more than fifty years ago, the Mexican Noble Prize-winning author, Octavio Paz (1985: 169) suggested that a philosophy of Mexican history would simply be a consideration of the various ways in which Mexicans have reacted to the course of events dictated to them by world history. The Mexican people have survived centuries of war followed by periods of stifling authority. It is thought that the first inhabitants of Mexico arrived approximately twenty thousand years ago (press reports of a recent archeological find of a preserved footprint in an area just outside of Mexico City suggest that it could be even longer). Ancient civilizations included the Olmec, Zapotec, Mayan and Aztec empires. The Spanish arrived in 1519 and, after conquering the country, ruled for three hundred years. After their reign, the nineteenth century brought a war of independence culminating in 1821. Widespread instability followed with thirty-six changes in presidency within twenty-two years, and a war with the United States in 1846, in which Mexico lost half of its territory. The consequences of this war had a significant impact on the attitudes of Mexicans toward their North American neighbours, Richard. K. Long (2004: 44) cites Tim Weiner, a New York Times reporter as saying: "*People here [in Mexico City] do not forget invasion of the gringos [those from the United States], or their power and influence.*" This conflict was followed by revolution, which began in November 1910 and ended in 1917, a series of mostly military presidents, and then seventy-one years of one-party rule under the "Institutional Revolutionary Party" (PRI). In July 2000 a new party, this time the National Action Party (PAN), was elected under the Presidency of Vicente Fox. The next presidential election is due to take place on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006.

### 4.3 Economy and Industry

“Rich in natural resources, blessed with strong facilities and a hardworking populace, Mexico is ready to move from the ranks of developing nations into a new role, this time as a modern player on the world stage.”

(National Geographic 190 (2) August 1996, Emerging Mexico: A Special Issue p.7)

Mexico's fortunes improved with the oil boom of the early 1970s, but the subsequent crash in the 1982 resulted in the country's worst recession in decades when “*many small and relatively uncompetitive businesses failed to survive the transition from a protected economy to an open one*” (Philip, 2000: 219). The country's economic recovery has since been tied to the US (Long, 2004: 43; Levy and Bruhn, 2001; EIU, 1999). As a consequence, Mexico's relationship with the United States has been one of respect and animosity. There is a famous phrase in the country, “*Too far from God and too close to the United States.*” The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), created between Mexico, the US and Canada in January 1994, called for eliminating tariffs on most manufactured goods over a fourteen year period and for opening up all three markets to each country's products. Many US companies have relocated to, or opened production divisions in, Mexico as a result to take advantage of lower costs (Long, 2004: 45).

The country's economic development has traditionally not followed a long-range national plan, preferring instead to administer ‘selective incorporation’ (Robertson, 1995) - ‘importing’ models and techniques from more established economies. In financial and organisational terms, it remains fairly centralised - some regions have been favoured, while others have been almost completely neglected (Philip, 2000: 218). In the last ten to fifteen years, Mexico has continued to develop economically and is now not only a leading country within Latin America but is also making significant strides to become fully integrated into the world economy (Romero, 2004). Mexico is a country recognised as a producer of raw goods whilst the manufactured goods consumed by its people have always been imported from abroad (Gonzalez, 1999). In 1997 it surpassed Japan as the US' second largest trading partner behind Canada, and it is now the world's eighth largest economy (Long, 2004: 43). Overall, the key characteristic of the Mexican economy is free-enterprise capitalism (Philip, 2000: 219) and major industries are chemicals, iron and steel, oil, mining, motor vehicles (EIU, 1999) and, ever-more increasingly, tourism - which has increased by 6.2% in recent decades (UNRISD, 1996).



Compared with other economies of similar size and level of economic development, Mexico has very low urban unemployment rates. To interpret this as meaning that the labour market is healthy, however, is a mistake (Salas, 2003). Some critics argue that the average Mexican needs at least three minimum wages to be able to live (Haarlem, 2005: 33). As a result, grey and black economies generated by informal small businesses, street hawkers, day labourers and criminal activities are flourishing. The Mexican government estimates that just over eleven million Mexicans, about one-quarter of the workforce, are involved in the 'underground economy' (EU Commercial Counsellors, 2005). From 2000 to 2004, the informal economy was one of the few sources of employment growth in Mexico, and it is continuously increasing. In 2004 the Mexican Tax authorities (SAT) carried out a study, together with the Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon, which suggested that the unregistered informal economy generated 1,294 billion pesos nationwide, equivalent to 22.2% of Mexico's Gross Domestic Product (EU Commercial Counsellors, 2005). Job-creation in the formal sector has been slow in recent years, and has fallen significantly short of the one million positions a year needed in order to keep pace with population growth (EU Commercial Counsellors, 2005). Ironically, it has also been stated that the informal economy –along with migration and drug trafficking – to an extent serves as a safety valve, preventing social unrest (EU Commercial Counsellors, 2005).

#### 4.4 Political system

Mexican politics have a strong anticlerical tradition - dating back to the war between the revolutionary leader, Benito Juarez, and the Church. The 1917 constitution was modeled on the US and established the framework for a federal system of government which covers thirty-one states and the federal district, and provided for the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers (EIU, 1999). In the 1930s, one dominant political party emerged. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) took government of Mexico, electing a new president from within the party every six years without fail (Long, 2004: 44), yet between 1928 and 1988 there were no local elections (Tejera Gaona, 2003). As Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon (2004: 5) write in their recently published book, *Opening Mexico: The Making of a Democracy*, which discusses at length the processes leading to Mexico's transition to democracy, "[a]t the height of its powers, 'el sistema', as Mexicans called it, was remarkably effective at seducing, dividing, discrediting, intimidating, or simply annihilating any serious opposition." The party shaped the system to look like a democracy but the reality was far different, presidents were more concerned with fulfilling their own personal ambitions. The government became centralised and was committed to



*presidencialismo* (Preston and Dillon, 2004: 407) -the president's personal power was greater than that of congress and he had considerable influence over the judiciary (EIU, 1999). Freedoms of speech were also controlled by a combination of politics, corruption and fraud.

Under the PRI, power was in the hands of a 'bureaucratic professional class' (Gandy, 1990). As Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon (2004: 407) suggest, "[t]he PRI system was not totalitarian; it was never as rigid or intolerant as the Communist regimes in the Soviet Union or China. But it did have its dogma, and as its hegemony advanced, its ideas became part of the fabric of life." The PRI regime had considerable capacity to control and contain political conflict, to determine development policy, to shape events and outcomes, to mold social organisation, and to establish dominant social values (Levy and Bruhn, 2001), particularly nationalism. Mexico has one of the strongest senses of nationhood in Latin America and a relatively high national heritage and cultural homogeneity (Keillor and Hult, 1999: 79). Indeed, during the neoliberal period, nationalism has been valued by political elites intent on modernisation. New political discourse emerging in the early 1990s redefined the liberalising processes evident in Mexico as 'social liberalism', which accommodated the social discourse of nationalism and the individualising discourse of liberalism by appearing to draw on tradition that predated the social state (O'Toole, 2003). The concept might be regarded as one in which the group is stressed and the individual related to it. Although the PRI claimed to be democratic, democratic principles were never at the core of its policies or actions (Preston and Dillon, 2004: 407). The government did not promote free elections, competition among political parties, civil liberties, citizen activism or a free press.

Corruption has long been an everyday fact of life in Mexico, "...the 'system' was in place for at least a century and blossomed under seventy-one years of [PRI] rule... The sins range from small bribes, called 'mordidas' (the bite), to fixing traffic tickets, to widespread and megadollar graft at the highest levels of government" (Long, 2004: 59). Democratic transition in Mexico has sought to fight against "centuries of authoritarian rule, and the narcotics industry [which turned] police into kidnappers, politicians into cocaine brokers, and the courts into a marketplace where everything from documents to verdicts was up for sale" (Preston and Dillon, 2004: 347). The latest National Survey of Corruption and Good Governance (NSCGG), from October 2002 through October 2003, registered 101 million acts of corruption with an average cost of 7 percent of the income for the typical Mexican family (Meza, 2004a: 42). As noted by Guillermo Marin in his essay "*La Corrupcion en Mexico: una estrategia de resistencia cultural*", corruption "is a major detriment to society because it destroys, debilitates, disarticulates, splits and disintegrates



*any and all national, political and social projects*” (Meza, 2004a: 43). A recent Latinobarometro survey suggests “*a consistent level of mistrust toward Mexico’s democratic institutions*”(Meza, 2004b: 51). On a scale of 1 to 10, “family” topped the list with an 8.9, while police officials and federal deputies each earned a 5. Senators were lower still at 4.9.

It was public fatigue with such corruption that promoted a change in Mexico’s presidency in 2000 (Tilson, 2004). The government of the National Action Party (PAN) under its leader, Vicente Fox, is referred to by many as a legitimate democracy (Long, 2004; Levy and Bruhn, 2001), whilst others regard the changes as ‘a transition from authoritarianism’ rather than ‘a transition to democracy’ (Meza, 2004b: 35). Several of the people I met talked about the frustrations within certain groups in Mexican society that many of the democratic changes they expected from the government have not been realised. They feared, furthermore, that voters would become apathetic and that this would significantly affect the government’s chances of being voted in for a second term. Despite current attitudes, President Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive, has helped to lead Mexico into becoming a stronger player on the international scene due, in part, to his close affiliation (more particularly in his earlier years as President) with President George Bush Jr., The Mexican government had long restricted the flow of information to citizens, and it prevented organised opposition from forming and offering citizens real alternatives in leadership and policy. The focus of the ‘new’ government is now on creating stability via a much more open process of information, appeals, competitions, and choice (Levy and Bruhn, 2001: 147). The challenge for the future is to build democratic foundations based on a more autonomous, pluralist society. Kirschke (2001: 4) suggests that this will be a process of learning new values, identities and political strategies that might enable groups and individuals to create and sustain a new way of life and new institutions in order to organise society.

#### **4.5 Mexican Culture**

Mexican society has undergone the greatest change out of all Latin American countries from 1981 to 1990 (Romero, 2004; Martin-Barbero, 1993). Latin American cultures have generally been considered as collectivist, emphasising goals, needs, and views of the in-group over those of the individual: the social norms of the in-group, rather than individual pleasure; shared in-group beliefs, rather than unique beliefs; and a value on cooperation with other members of society, rather than maximising individual outcomes. That said, individuality, or the recognition of individual uniqueness, is also highly important (Albert, 1996: 338). Geert Hofstede (1983) in his

study, '*Cultures Consequences*', identified Mexico as a masculine, predominantly collectivist culture with high power distance and uncertainty avoidance. We should note, however, that Hofstede's study was carried out between 1967 and 1973. There have indeed been changes in aspects of national and regional culture within Mexico, as a result of interaction with more economically developed countries and multinational firms (Romero, 2004), yet differing with Hofstede's view of cultural dynamism, and as I emphasised in the opening chapters, in this thesis I argue that values are deep and persist. As Hofstede himself suggests in his later work (1994: 77), countries having achieved fast economic development have experienced shifts in cultural dynamics.

Renee de la Torre (2005) argues that Mexico is a society where culture and Catholicism go hand-in-hand; there is a permanent conflict between secularised culture and the Catholic faith (Torres, 2005). Mexico was one of the first countries to adopt a lay law and whose article prohibits the intervention of the Church in the political sphere, and the prohibition of religious education in public schools. In fact, the Constitution continues to be one of the most rigid in maintaining the separation between religious affairs and politics and public spaces (Torres, 2005). That said, the Catholic church continues to have significant influence over certain sectors of society, above all the business elite (Torres, 2005). Although the vast majority of Mexicans are Catholics and continue to practice their religion, this has not prevented them from taking on some of the values of any other modern city, particularly as regards sex. A knock on affect has been the rising number of campaigns from religious groups, which set out to cease what they regard as the secularisation of morality and the loss of traditions in Mexico. Above all, these groups, such as the *Alianza Fuerza Opinion Publica* which comprise thirteen civic organisations who work in defense of traditional societal values, are concerned with issues surrounding family values, marriage and virginity. They have focused their efforts, in particular, on the middle classes and those parents who are worried about the influence of the mass media on their children.

Mexican culture has been regarded as placing an emphasis on harmony and maintaining friendly relationships (Pelled, Xin and Weiss, 2001: 65); interpersonal connections, referred to as *palanca*, (though *palanca* itself can also have negative connotations, perceived by many as patronage or corruption by using personal influence) are relied upon (Albert, 1996: 333). Dignity, refinement, courtesy and reserve are also perceived of by many to be the cultural norms (Bartra, 1992; Albert, 1996). Life in Mexico is very personal, "[a] handshake is a deal as strong as a signature in blood. And a joint venture is not just lawyers and boardrooms; it is drives in the country, talk of



*brothers and children, an embrace at days end*” (National Geographic, 1990). Patriarchal relations are particularly strong “*Mexicans believe that it is right to take care of family and friends – right morally*” (Gandy, 1990: 12). Diaz-Guerrero and Sazalay (1991) characterised Mexican family relations as “*exceptionally affect laden, with a great emphasis on life, reflecting strong emotional interdependence*” and concluded that in the Mexican conception of self, social roles and qualities such as “*understanding and helpfulness*” predominate (Albert, 1996: 338). Within their study on relational democracy and conflict in a Mexican production facility, Lisa Pelled, Katherine. R. Xin, Allen. W. Weiss (2001: 65) argued that Mexican culture placed an emphasis on harmony and maintaining friendly relationships, and encouraged workers to pay close attention to their interactions with others.

A complex culture serving as a melting pot for different groups (Martin-Barbero, 1993), Mexico has experienced a long-standing struggle for identity. Within the country, this has been about struggles for collective identities that have continued from colonial times to the present period of modernisation (Martin-Barbero, 1993; Bartra, 1992; Sanchez and Pita, 1999), whilst externally, Mexico has been concerned with ridding itself of its Hollywood image of the land of lazy people (Finnegan, 1999: 313), living in a society with exorbitant crime rates (National Geographic, 1990). Not dissimilar to the findings which emerged from Cynthia-Lou Coleman’s (1997) study on American Indian discourse and emergent values, Mexico has a long history of “*altering alien cultural impositions*” (p.197) in ways which serve their own sense of cultural identity and continuity. Mexico wants to be recognised as a nation in her own right (Martin-Barbero, 1993), but the reality is still very complex. The Argentine-Mexican anthropologist, Nestor Garcia Canclini (1993: 1) suggested that Mexico is a country “*where traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived,*” there is a contrast between the emerging Euro-American-style culture, which reinforces individualism, and the more traditional values which encourage communitarian-inspired practice.

Globalisation and heightening international trade is fuelling a hunger amongst Mexicans for information, as well as products and services. As a result, there is a growing division between the expanding minority of upper class (approximately 5%) and middle class (approximately 20%) Mexicans who are ‘plugged into’ the new economy, and the majority who are not (Levy and Bruhn, 2001). Both national culture and social psychological mechanisms play a role in the effects of relational demography in Mexico. The popular press and academic research have documented the class-consciousness of Mexicans (Pelled, Xin and Weiss, 2001: 65). Rosita

Daskal Albert (1996: 335) observed that, in Latin American cultures, “*greater distinctions are made on the basis of status, class, being a member of the in-group.*” However, compensating for the further disintegration produced by neoliberalism, there is a growing “*demand for social integration*” and a “*desire for community*” (Garcia Canclini, 2000: 42-43). A theme which runs through much academic discourse in Latin America is that communally oriented traditions should be valued and that a prosperous future for the region depends on linking these traditions to modern development. Yet the reality in Mexico is that civil society has traditionally been weak, due in part to the lack of resources for participation, as well as to common cultural attitudes that orient society more inward (towards families) than outward (to larger political communities). Moreover, those who have tried to form independent organisation in Mexico have tended to run into low official tolerance for association outside state control (Levy and Bruhn, 2001). Nestor Garcia Canclini (2000: 43) suggests that in twenty-first century Mexico, a confluence of forces will converge upon the region that will continue to change and further entrench certain aspects of Mexican society and culture. The development of free market economies, the proliferation of mass media outlets, and an increase in promotional activity will continue to commercialise society, whilst the majority of those excluded from this development will fall back on the family and a culture of anomie.

#### 4.6 Mexico City

Patricia A. Curtin and T. Kenn Gaither (2005: 105) advised that “*care must be taken not to let cultural indexes serve as procedural shorthand.*” This, they believe, results in cultural stereotyping. Both authors suggest that cultural indicators provide helpful guidelines, but that they are not predetermining factors. Indeed from my own experiences - predominantly of Mexico City, but also elsewhere in the country, I have developed particular perceptions, some of which concur with existing accounts, others of which do not. My purpose in this section is to draw on my experiences and observations, in order to explore whether there are possibly 'missed-out', or alternative, perceptual cultural dimensions prevalent in Mexico City.

Raymond Williams (1976) defined a city as a distinctive order implying a whole different way of life and large-scale modern urban living. In recent decades Mexico City has experienced changes that have made it almost unrecognisable from the more traditional communities, particularly those of the rural south of the country. Mexico City is now home to more than twenty-one million people ([www.infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com)), one quarter of the country's population, and demographers



suggest that this is set to grow to some fifty million people during the first few decades of the twenty-first century (Preston and Dillon, 2004: 479). Society in the capital is more pluralistic, allowing for the emergence of a new set of modern values alongside traditional ones. Affluence has enhanced materialist values and growing movements away from 'collectivist' towards 'individualistic' values. Fierce personal competition and reduced work opportunities also appear to have emerged as a result. Yet, as the author Octavio Paz (1985: 388), suggested, "*side-by-side with this, stands a people united by bonds of a personal nature.*"

Despite the city's serious social and environmental issues – the affects of pollution and traffic congestion and the negative press that surrounds the muggings and kidnappings, the madness and energy of the city is somehow exciting. Mexico City remains simultaneously traditional and modern, and is very divided. On secure urbanisations, and behind gates, live the overtly rich with their housekeepers and gardeners, whilst at the other extreme of the city, people live in make-shift housing, without access to running water and basic sanitation. I remember once noticing that a family had plugged their Christmas lights into the electricity pylons in the street, presumably because they did not have a supply to their own house. I also noticed distinctions within the more privileged classes. In his article '*In the Pink*' about Mexico City 'making its own future', Joel Silver (2005) wrote about those who have reclaimed the southern-central districts of Roma and Condesa, for example, who have not only restored these neighbourhoods and created new 'communities', but who embrace a new 'Mexican chic', with values that are in opposition to those of their parents. As Julia Preston and Samuel Dillon (2004: 479) write, "*[i]n Mexico City... urban squalor blend[s] with stylish professional enclaves. New university graduates managed architectural firms, Internet access companies, automobile dealerships, video-rental clubs, and medical centers. Many young Mexicans had traveled abroad...They had not grown up regarding the United States as Mexico's eternal enemy...*"

Samuel Huntington (1998: 46) contends that Latin America has a distinct identity which differentiates it from the West, "*[a]lthough offspring of a European civilization, Latin America has evolved along a very different path from Europe and North America... Subjectively, Latin Americans themselves are divided in their self-identifications. Some say, 'Yes, we are part of the West', others claim, 'No, we have our own unique culture' and a large literature by Latin- and North- Americans elaborates their cultural differences.*" My own initial perceptions were that Mexico City may not be unlike any other 'mega-city' in the world. Yet, I soon realised that Mexico's cultural heritage continues to influence the lives of the people in lots of different ways.

Symbols of 'Mexican Catholicism' adorned the walls of many of the houses I visited, even if perhaps now more for cultural significance rather than religious. The numbers of Mexicans who now actively practise Catholicism has gone down as religion has become more privatised and personal. Yet, Catholicism has been the most significant influence in shaping societal values and these values remain at a significant level.

The family is still of great significance, and many families continue to function as closely-knit entities which are initially hard to penetrate. '*El Dia de la Madre*' (Mothers Day) is widely celebrated, and is much more symbolic in a country where the Mother has traditionally been regarded as the focus of the family. Research on human behaviour and cultural values in Mexican culture and organisations has also shown that the Mexican family is traditionally a tight group with strong emotional bonds. From my observations, the notion of family can extend beyond ties of blood. Mexicans often referred to close friends as 'brother', 'sister' or 'cousin', and '*compadre*' (literally translated as 'Godfather') is also used by men when referring to particular 'best friends' as 'brothers'. Moreover, the country seems to come together, in particular, to stake its own nationalism and solidarity in the wake of dominant international influences - all be they cultural, economic, political or on the sports field. 'Family' also continues to be a part of political rhetoric – I often saw campaign references to '*Mexico, somos una Familia*' – 'Mexico, we are a family'.

My first impressions were that Mexico City was a male-dominated society - in law, business and custom the man rules and women have long been thought of as inferior. Yet, the motherly element is, in fact, interwoven into the cultural and social system. The predominance of such elements is clear in the religious structure of Mexican Roman Catholicism. Whilst its theology is no different from the 'traditional' roots of Catholicism, the emphasis is heavily placed on the matriarchal side - the religious beliefs, for example, centre around the Virgin of Guadalupe. Indeed, Erich Fromm and Michael Maccoby (1970: 112-113) recognised this in their earlier work on the '*Social Character in a Mexican Village*.' When discussing Mexico's national culture, they referred to a 'Mother centred system' - different from the concepts of matriarchy and patriarchy, which presume social and political domination. The maternal principle expressed in this system, they suggested, was "*unconditional love, mercy, the natural equality of children, the prevalence of natural law over manmade law, and of natural groups like the family or the tribe over manmade groups like the state.*"



The societal culture as it exists in Mexico today is largely a product of the country's Iberian roots. Whilst the indigenous Aztec cultures managed their domains by hegemonic means of what could be considered very flat organisation - valuing, albeit unequal, cooperation and collaboration and the contribution of individuals for the creation of social wellbeing (Alvarado, Vazquez and Estrada Garcia, 2003) - the Spanish colonisers preferred the feudal system. The sociopsychological elements of this feudal system still characterise the sociopolitical structure in the country i.e. power is from the top down. In his article about the obstacles to Mexico City's democratic transition, Hector Tejera Gaona (2003: 104) talks about the relationships of the citizens with each political party and the affect of cultural dynamics that underline Mexican democracy. He writes, "*[i]n general terms, the citizens who live in the poorest neighbourhoods of the city tried to establish links of a personal character with the candidates.*" Some candidates were invited to dinner and other celebrations as citizens saw "*the opportunity to shorten the distance from the government by building links of reciprocity and moral commitment, which they found more useful than going to the ballot box.*" Tejera Gaona asserts that the attitudes of the citizens in the poorest areas of the city illustrate that "*they perceive the relationship between themselves and government representatives (...) as vertical and symmetric.... Personal power is, by its nature, authoritarian. Insofar as citizens consider that personal relations are a means to satisfy their demands, authoritarianism as the basis of political relationships will continue to dominate.*" In contrast, those belonging to the middle and higher strata of society, Tejera Gaona contends, did not show much interest in establishing personal loyalties, "*[t]heir political relationships tended, in general, to be more pragmatic.*"

Nevertheless, and irrespective of the political arena, there still appears to be respect on a personal level between the classes. For a long time it was the expectation that those above had favours to give (patronage), and one of the main efforts on the part of those of the more inferior classes was to win the favours of those above them. I was struck by the fact that such phrases as '*a sus ordenes*' – 'at your orders', and '*para servirle*' – 'here to serve you', were still inherent in everyday dialogue. The traditional hierarchical structure and emphasis on family rather than community issues has limited the role of non-profit social service organisation in the society. Yet the earthquake in 1985, which claimed the lives of ten thousand people, seemed to provide a turning point in Mexican society. In the aftermath of the disaster, Mexicans began to establish neighbourhood associations and environmental and human rights groups, and these appear to have gathered more strength as those Mexicans from the majority class (lower middle) increasingly voice their frustrations. '*Manifestaciones*' (political and social protests) were not



uncommon during my time in Mexico City and when they did occur, the centre of the city seemed to be in deadlock. It was expected that anyone with an appointment anywhere on the day of '*una manifestacion*' would arrive late, whilst some people preferred not to venture out at all.

From my observations, I would agree with Yoonhyeung Choi and Glen Cameron (2005: 176) who suggested that there have been a growing number of criticisms toward the definition and description of collectivism developed in Western culture. Mexico cannot be effectively described as either a collectivist or an individualist culture, it is perhaps best regarded as an *interdependent* culture (Markus and Kityama, 1999). Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kityama (1999: 341) assert that, for members of an interdependent culture, both the expression and the experience of emotions and motives may be significantly shaped and governed by the consideration of the reactions of others. People are motivated to find a way to fit with relevant others, to fulfil and create obligation and, in general, to become part of various interpersonal relationships. Whilst maintaining a connection to others will mean being constantly aware of others and focusing on their needs, desires and goals, interdependent selves do not attend to the needs, desires and goals of all others, "[a]ttention to others is not indiscriminate; it is highly selective and will be most characteristic of relationships with 'in-group' [particularly class] members" (Marcus and Kityama, 1999: 344).

One aspect of Mexican culture which particularly struck me, was that the Mexican people seemed to take great pleasure in emotions, particularly in their social lives. Partying ('*la fiesta*'/'*la marcha*') until the early hours took on something of an important social function – Mexicans seemed to enjoy themselves unguardedly, and everyone appeared to partake. One weekend returning from an evening out, I even found myself caught in a traffic jam at four o'clock in the morning. '*La fiesta*' was almost like a form of therapy for reducing the strains and stresses of life in the city. I found it hard to understand at first, I look at it now with a sense of admiration. Furthermore, the Mexicans I interacted with, and observed, in Mexico City had an inclination towards philosophy and the Arts – music, reading and painting, in particular. People I talked with often knew more about British and United States history and politics than I did, and taxi drivers would show interest in the British monarchy and Tony Blair whilst sharing with me their knowledge of Mexican culture in return.

It will be interesting to see how the country, and its capital in particular, will develop in the future. As Joel Silver wrote (2005), "[n]o one – not the historians, the journalists, the technocrats



*or the fortune tellers – can predict what will happen in a metropolis this complex. But everyone agrees this is a fascinating era in one of the world's great cities. Mexico City's future is being decided.*" At the beginning of their term in office, the new government generated feelings of hope for big solutions to the country's economic and social problems. Yet, now almost at the end, there is a strong sense of disillusionment. The UNDP report that social capital in Mexico dropped by 50%, to little under 20%, between 1998 and 2002 alone (UNDP 2004: 82). The people with whom I interacted showed a positive attitude towards Mexico's future development, but they seemed to concur that the 'new' process would need to consider both the strategic and identity dimensions of social actions and orientations in the country – above all, the strong desire to keep things 'Mexican'. As Octavio Paz (1985: 85) contended, *"any contact with the Mexican people, however brief, reveals that the ancient beliefs and customs are still in existence beneath western forms."* Samuel Huntington (1998: 150-151) asked the question, *"Will further democratisation in Mexico necessitate a different focus?"* We might ask whether this 'new focus' might also be more compatible with the country's cultural traditions and values.

#### **4.7 Chapter summary**

An interdependent culture which emphasises strong interpersonal connections, Mexico has been shaped by its unique history and the influence of international powers. Multinationalisation has provided significant benefits in economic terms; however, it is the minority who are improving their lifestyle as a result. The weakening of local traditions and the increasing social divide are among some of the most severe consequences. Mexico has a history of close ties with the United States and this is set to continue for the foreseeable future. Yet, as a result of their experiences of economic and colonial imperialism, Mexicans have long-struggled to forge their own identity. Being a melting pot of cultures, Mexico has been able to change more readily than most, at the same time creating social ambiguity and frustration.

Mexico is a country of stark contrasts, Mexico City has developed at a pace far in excess of regions to the south, and life for the more privileged is not unlike life in many other developed cities in the world, sharing many of the same social problems. As Mexico City has become more democratic, there has been a deep transformation of social attitudes. Yet, this transformation has not been broad. This is partly because of the country's stagnant economy that has severely limited the expansion of the middle class.

## 5. Telling the Story: Composite Narratives of Practitioner Experiences

I have chosen to open my discussion of PRP culture in Mexico City with as 'natural' an account as possible of the practitioner lifeworlds. As introduced in chapter 2, the practitioner lifeworld is that part of the occupational culture which describes the relationship between practitioners' predispositions to act in a certain way and the role(s) they might assume. It refers to their habitus, experiences, identities and relationships. As the personalities of many of the practitioners I met were so strong, I did not feel that I would be doing justice to them, or to their accounts, by merely extracting and presenting quotes amongst academic discourse. I have, therefore, chosen to present the data in the form of five semi-biographical practitioner narratives: the 'Young Public Relations Executive Experience', the 'Old School Experience', the 'Agency Director Experience', the 'In-house Practitioner Experience' and the 'Social Communicator Experience'. It was initially difficult to categorise the participants given that each individual has his or her own unique experiences and perceptions. However, upon analysing the data, there were several themes which were, more particularly, relevant to particular groups – young practitioners, or those working in social communication, for example.

### 5.1 Reasons for Composite Narratives

Kenneth and Mary Gergen (2003: 60) challenge social constructionist theorists to be creative and to initiate new ways of producing knowledge that are tied to our particular values or ideas. Fundamentally, the approach I have chosen for presenting the research findings reflects my personality as a researcher, and as a human being, and my approach to learning. For as long as I can remember I have been fascinated by how much can be learned from listening to the life stories of other people, and their feelings, thoughts and motives for doing things. I have always found myself more able to comprehend, to *understand*, a situation (or phenomena) as a result of listening to, or reading about, (a) person(s)' experience(s) of it. Narrative constructions, in whatever form, have been crucial to my understanding of human experience in a meaningful way.

For me, when seeking to explore the potential for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in Mexico City, the construction of these narratives was a process which sought to preserve the *"plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that can be considered retrospectively, but can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought"*



(Weick, 1995: 60-61, as cited in Czarniawska, 1998: 15). In developing these narratives, I seek to represent a range of different realities (provide fairness), develop 'more sophisticated understanding of PRP culture in Mexico (ontological authenticity) and to enable those practitioners who took part in the research, as well as practitioners elsewhere, to appreciate the viewpoints of other colleagues (educative authenticity).

When constructing the narratives, I found myself once more absorbed in the culture albeit separated by geographical distance. Not only did the development of the narratives help me to think about the key characteristics of the occupational culture, but also to identify the links between the occupation and societal influences, which was so essential when thinking about the potential for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in the proceeding chapters. In essence, the practitioners serve as a 'window' on to the wider phenomena of PRP culture in Mexico City and, consequently, reveal elements of the structure of the occupation and the ways in which Mexican society might influence their experiences. Each narrative presented in this chapter is a composite picture, or synthesis, of practitioner voices, which represents the core qualities, meanings and experiences that enhance the occupational character of the public relations practitioner in Mexico City. From these narratives, it was easier to arrive at the final stage of the theory development process; identifying relationships between the themes and delineating those core categories around which the other concepts revolved. As Barbara Czarniawska (1998) suggests, narratives serve as a process of association, of building the "and, and, and" connections. The composite narratives are, in essence, a form of 'collective discovery' – I hope that they might contribute to practitioners' abilities to learn more about themselves as a community, to characterise themselves collectively, and to discover the possibilities that are before them.

Whilst all of the narratives might refer to a particular 'type' of practitioner, I have deliberately used the word 'experience' to describe each. I have done this so as not to suggest that the lifeworlds of practitioners can be generalised. Whilst the experiences I describe refer to those of 'Agency Director', for example, a couple of practitioners have been included in more than one section, as they have worked in a variety of positions, and thus had diverse experiences of the occupational culture. As will become clear, in providing five narratives, I hope, to an extent, to be able to illustrate the level of diversity and commonality of themes, both within and across the narratives, and to highlight some of the cultural patterns emerging.

## 5.2 Process of Development and Explanation of Composite Narratives

As Les Todres and Immy Holloway argue in their article on flexibility of method (2003), in expressing general themes as possibilities, a researcher is not denying the unique variations of the experience, but rather, using the terms as ways of organising meanings that have a shared and communicative value. Drawing on the idea of the reflective practitioner, the composite narratives provide alternatives to that of a narrowly defined public relations practitioner in Mexico City, and illustrate the diversity of the practice. The purpose of each narrative is to comprehensively draw together the key themes which emerged from the earlier stages of data analysis in order to illustrate the general patterns in the habitus and experiences of the public relations practitioner in Mexico City. While, as will become clear in chapters 7 and 8, some themes were more important than others, it is necessary to understand the variety of patterns of values and experiences, as they are all reflective of an underlying process of symbolic meaning which binds culture (Rusciano, 1998: 91). To remind ourselves, the practitioner habitus would consist of beliefs, values, and attitudes. A 'belief' can be defined as a prediction about how things are, whilst an attitude is an idea charged with emotion and predisposing action. A value-system on the other hand, is about how things ought to be, and predetermines action. It would include statements, evaluations, moral judgements, attitudes and all kinds of social behaviour.

The narratives were developed from the key themes that I identified during the data analysis phase. When several participants mentioned a similar subject during the interviews, I believed that I was hearing a common 'theme'. The number of times a 'theme' was mentioned in different interviews or the emphasis placed upon it, pointed to its significance as a major theme in participants' understanding of public relations (see Appendix D). The second stage of analysis was to organise the data so that those themes could be traced back to their source in the transcripts. I wanted to produce a list of 'themes', grouped together according to similarities, which I called categories. Each category has a conceptual label, a definition, and can be traced back to specific phrases, sentences or dialogue in the transcripts, which can be used to illustrate it.

The third stage of the analysis follows a more social constructionist approach to produce a set of results from the research. I wanted to present the data placing an emphasis on the first-hand experience of the participants. To achieve this I first wrote a summary of the experiences to use as a base from which to develop the narratives. The points I identified for each of the narrative summaries refer to both the practitioners' perceptions of the PRP experience with regard to the



particular group of practitioners with whom they share a common frame of reference, within the wider context of the public relations industry in Mexico, and to how they perceive of the occupation in general. I have chosen to include the summaries at the end of each narrative to emphasise the key themes upon which each of the narratives is based. By employing such 'thematising', I was not looking to locate my informants in any 'fixed' way, but rather offer an imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994) as a composite with possibilities for interpretation. What is significant to emphasise at this point is that I started the data analysis process using NUD\*IST NVIVO software as a means of identifying and recording key themes, believing that it was an approach that every 'credible' qualitative researcher would take. However, as I continued the process of narrative development, I felt increasingly uncomfortable with this approach and began to rely less and less on the software, instead using it as a means to identify key quotes which would be essential in to my analysis. In order to make the characters really come alive, I found that I needed to go back to the original interview transcripts and immerse myself yet again in the experiences and assume the perspectives of my informants. In doing so, I was able to select additional sections of commentary, to get a sense for their style of speech and communication in order to personalise the accounts, and, more importantly, I was able to present these commentaries within the original context of the stories (or experiences) as the practitioners themselves had related them to me, and to share them with the reader. By returning again and again to the data, and communicating actual narratives and experiences, I was able to obtain a more valid depiction of the experience being investigated and repeated verification that my way of explaining the phenomenon, and the creative synthesis of the essences and meanings, effectively portrayed in Mexican practitioner culture.

I have chosen to present the narratives in the first person, as if the participants had spoken them. As Donnison (1999) suggests, this is a practice that presents the lifeworlds of the practitioners taken directly from the transcripts which were edited and compiled by the researcher. Whilst the stories are told in the voice of the participants, I did not intend for this approach to add to the validity of them, though the words of participants are lifted and used directly as much as possible. As you read the narratives you will notice that each of the characters has a name. This is not because the narratives refer to the experiences of one particular person, but because, again, I wanted to emphasise the fact that, as much as possible, it is the informants who are doing the talking, not me. In the narratives I am presenting the research findings as if it were a naturally occurring narrative as opposed to interview responses presented directly by the researcher. As Philip Donnison (2002) suggests, the emphasis I place within these narratives on communicating

participants' experiences and perceptions, could be described as the middle ground between an 'emic' and an 'etic' approach to data presentation. What I have done, effectively, is to communicate data from the perspective of the practitioners (the insiders) the stories of the participants themselves, whilst organising them in such a way as to emphasise the key themes emerging from their stories (from the perspectives of the researcher).

The names given to each practitioner narrative are purely fictional and do not refer to the practitioners who contributed to them. In addition, nothing should be taken from the fact that some of the practitioners are female whilst others are male, the gender of each of the characters does not reflect the gender of those whose story is being told. In fact, in each case the narratives comprise accounts from both male and female practitioners. By personalising the narratives as much as possible, I hope that you will come away with a sense that you too have had the opportunity to get to know some of the people I had the privilege to meet.

At first, the narratives did not feel like the findings from an extensive piece of field research. However, participants' descriptive accounts of their experiences are a result, which is an end in itself (Donnison, 2002). They add the balance necessary so that a thesis of this nature, which focuses on the subjectivities of public relations practitioners in Mexico, does not become over mechanistic. I have deliberately chosen to use these narratives to open my discussion of the research findings, as I do not want you to approach them with any pre-established perceptions of what the occupational culture is like. Instead, I hope that you will first form your own interpretations from what the practitioners have to say. In the following chapter I will identify the most significant points that *I* have drawn from these narratives, and will pull together data from interviews and my field observations. All of these strands of data have enhanced *my* understanding of the potential role of public relations practitioners in Mexican culture. This is similar to what Clark Moustakas (1994) identifies as the heuristics approach within phenomenology which culminates in a creative synthesis, accompanied by a general structural description.

### **5.3 The Public Relations Executive Experience (Martín)**

“So, How did I come to work in public relations in Mexico City? And, What do I do? My God, I don't know whether you have seen that everyone, well, that the area of public relations has, like, something of an identity crisis? I think people have made a whore out of the word PR., because it



is used for various things that really don't have anything to do with it. The problem is that there isn't, like, one serious definition of what PR is, it can't be put into one box; public relations activities go on everywhere. And I think everyone agrees that, well, in Mexico in particular, the public relations business is perhaps a little misunderstood in the sense that it can be anything from organising parties and playing the hostess, and, whilst there is nothing wrong with that, it is only one branch of a much broader activity. We have got to get rid of this narrow perception. It's more than that... For example, there's this one PR practitioner, there's this one girl who is famous in Mexico City for putting on, like, the best parties and all that, and you will always find her in all the restaurants, anywhere where one *should* be, having been at like 5 parties on one day...as a guest I mean, not always as the hostess! ... This sort of thing makes me, like, super sad. It's not just those outside the industry who don't understand what it's all about, but so-called practitioners themselves who say that they are doing public relations, when in reality they are doing something else. Anyone working in the industry should know that you don't have to be the most beautiful woman in the country or know personally all the country's rich set, to work in PR, as long as you are carrying out your work professionally ...

Actually, before explaining what it is that *I* do exactly, I guess I'd just like to say a bit more about this idea of an identity crisis and, well, try to illustrate in a way just who I think the PR practitioner is, what we are all about. I guess you could say that PR people are 'shiny', you know, we attract attention. I think we all have a picture in our minds of the PR practitioner as someone who is fashionably, but stylishly, dressed. Yeah? But in a way we are just talking about clichés and stereotypes here...There's all this stuff with the 'It-girls', You know what I mean? 'Posh', like the girl I mentioned before and those who dedicate themselves to doing PR for 'Tiffany' or 'Louis Vuitton' or 'Chanel' or something like that. Their work revolves around how you're dressed, '*Oooh* I do the PR for Chanel', and all that. There's no real interest in the job, it's all about how you look. Even my own friends don't really understand what it is that I do. Take the other day, an old friend from uni was telling me about an interview he had been to for a job which, unknown to him, turned out to be in PR. He was like, 'They asked me ... 'Take this mobile... you have to launch this mobile, but the phone company doesn't have much money to spend on PR, What do you do?' Well...' he said to me, '...I don't have a clue about PR, just that it is about cocktail parties and all that stuff, so I just talked about holding a party in one of the big hotels in town!' Sure we go to parties but that is only part of our work.

In general, we public relations practitioners are very open people, put us in a room full of people and we'll know most of them - and those we don't know, well, we'll soon find conversation! Obviously, there will be exceptions to the rule, I'm not saying that we are all exactly the same, or that you have to be a 'natural' with people to work in PR, you just have to be good at getting your message across. But I do think that public relations is something that you practice all day, everyday. I mean, when you want to get something, you already have, like, PR serves as an extra tool to help you. Above all, when you want to convince someone of something. I mean, you know, 'Dad, um, lend me the money because I'm going to Europe but I assure you that you will benefit from it.' You know? Well, it's the same with friends and everything. I mean, getting your point across, its like things are much easier, you know what your key messages are, you see who your audiences are, Yes? You know things like this without really realising it. The truth is that it's just something that you always do, without even realising it.

One other thing this career teaches you is to be more tolerant as much on a personal, as well as, professional level. We are people who, well as someone once said, 'we are people whom it is very difficult to make angry'. You know? I mean we may well explode in private and, of course, we all have our moods, but generally, when we are in meetings we are very friendly people, we are quite on a level and hardly ever fly off the handle. Of course, you get tired sometimes, tired of always having to put on a smiley face. But the relationships you build at work have to be just as good as those you have outside of work. It would be kind of strange if I left my 'communication skills' in the office at the end of each day and forgot all about them once I was out in the real world. You can't work as a PR practitioner, yet as soon as you leave the office change character completely, like Dr. Jeckyl and Mr Hyde, you just can't.

Like I said, working in public relations helps you to be more open and to understand others. Above all, it is important to be genuine because at the end of the day if anything is artificial, it shows. As we work all the time with different people, it is so important to be sure of, and be comfortable with, yourself - to have good self-esteem. You have got to treat everyone in the same way, you need to feel as comfortable around people like, well, like the Queen of England, as with those people you have known for years. You know? Everyone deserves the same respect. This understanding and dialogue with people is what I love about this job, this is what enriches our knowledge as practitioners and makes us non-judgemental.



So.... on to me. Well, I started out, really I started out doing something else. I studied 'Communication' here in Mexico City. As you can appreciate, it's quite a broad degree. Anyway, to start with I really wanted to get into journalism or the Media, but as time went on, well, circumstances just led me in this direction. I guess PR is like the other side of journalism. In reality, I find it quite easy because I'm quite a chatterbox. I'm a very sociable person and I really like to work as part of a team and, above all, I don't find it at all difficult to socialise in groups. As I say, I am a very sociable person and, besides, writing is a huge passion of mine.

And well, I entered here...Really a friend of mine was working here in the area of government relations, '*cabildeo*' (lobbying) and all that sort of thing, and she was going to get married so they needed someone to come in temporarily to cover for her whilst she went on honeymoon, for a month or so. Anyway, I was without work at the time, so I came in kind of super, super temporarily. But well... In Mexico a lot moves around '*palanca*' and that is, in the main, a bad thing really. It's like, in the whole communication industry, if you don't know anyone who works in the media, it is very difficult to get a job and a decent salary. I mean, if you don't know anyone, you just start at the rock bottom. I think a lot of this stems from, my God, our history here in Mexico and actually working in this industry today some elements still hold true. If you have friends in radio and TV, for example, it is so much easier to ensure that your message reaches the right person; it really makes a difference.

Anyway, that's how I started out in PR. I worked firstly in marketing, what's known as 'consumer PR'. That area can be very diverse, the needs of the client are much more flexible, it's more, to sum it up in one word, 'fun', I guess. There were so many events to go to and to organise. Above all, it went in seasons like, for example, from the end of March to the beginning of May, and from more or less September until November. That was when everyone was, well, there were launches, shop openings, etcetera, etcetera. I used to be out at parties two or three nights a week and they finished around two in the morning. It really wasn't all that heavy going though because many of my friends were also there so it was kind of like work and play rolled into one. At the end of the day, as a PR practitioner, my work and my social life overlap.

It got to the point where I wanted a change. It's like, now with this PR 'Boom' everyone is a public relations practitioner and everyone wants PR. As a result, there are, like, brands of mouthwash, that hold parties. Take shampoo, for example, brands hold 'mega' launch parties for the sake of it. The people there are getting drunk and whatever, but at no point are they actually in

contact with the product. The shampoo features little more than on one or two posters. They might be enormous posters, but the truth is that nobody turned up for the shampoo, but for the party! In this sector, the way in which you reach the people is through parties, meetings, sponsorship and that kind of thing. So there I was going out five nights a week, and I began to find that the work no longer seemed as cool as it did at first.

However, now, working in the health sector, my clients are obviously global players in the pharmaceutical industry. Whilst I could honestly say that before, I used to consciously refrain from getting involved in this sector, now I find that what I do leaves me with another kind of satisfaction. It might not be fun like marketing can be, but it leaves you with another type of satisfaction, on a personal level and on an intellectual level. You have to really immerse yourself in what these industries do, what it's all about, understand the laws that govern the sector, all the different types of illness, their consequences and the ways to combat them, all the statistics, everything. The two sectors are very different, but equally satisfying.

And well, regardless of what area you are in, working in PR, you are always busy. I'd like to make it clear that public relations becomes a way of life. By that I mean that you don't arrive at work and put on the 'PR hat'. From the point at which you get up in the morning you are doing public relations. I get up at around 8 o'clock, I'm one of the few here who live locally but I still find it hard to get out of bed. I immediately turn on the radio to listen to the news; the business news and what refers to my sector in general, it's practically the way I start every day. Before you even leave the house you're doing public relations, it might be communicating with your partner, or with the girl who helps you in cleaning the house. Personally, I have two little dogs so I also have to work my public relations magic on them. One way or another you end up negotiating, persuading... On the way to work in the car you continue listening to the news, flicking through 4 stations at once! Then arriving at work, which is usually around nine, nine-fifteen, I like to go and speak with all of my colleagues personally just to see how they are, I like to feel what type of mood they are in, how they are feeling. Then when I get to my desk, one of the first things I do is review the press for that day, what each of the papers is reporting on and I look out for any mentions of my clients in particular. I then prepare a press clipping report, this has to be done straight away in the morning because if not, well, the news is no longer news.

The work is never typical, it's a real mixture. Sure I arrive with an idea of what I am going to do that day, some things are planned, but there is inevitably a lot more work which we have not



planned for - either the client has an emergency, or something has happened and you have to take action, or they want this and that done for tomorrow. So I would say that my work is much more un-planned than it is planned. Though, in general, I would say that in the mornings you are in contact with your clients, responding to things that need immediate action. We mustn't forget that our other clients are also the journalists and the Media, so I am constantly calling them, firming up meetings or appointments etc., By the afternoon, well, you dedicate this time to working on documents – writing progress reports on day-to-day activities and, well, preparing proposals left, right and centre. Proposals for the Media saying, 'Hey, I have this subject that could interest you,' proposals to clients saying, 'Hey this is happening out in the market place which could be interesting.' The rest of the time is spent going over what you have to finish and tying up any loose ends before the next day. I am not going to say that I leave the office very early, because it all depends. Again, it depends on the demands of the client, and whether or not there is an event on, but I like to leave the office at around six or seven. I am, perhaps, more fortunate than many of my colleagues in that, like I say, I live relatively near to the office. In this city that is a *real* advantage - several colleagues spend two hours in the evening battling with the traffic in this city! At least I have the chance, thank God, to do something in the evening. So, when I can, I like to catch up with friends, go to the cinema, out to dinner...When I get home, of course, I watch the news because it's like, well, you become an addict!

In reality, this industry takes up a lot of your time; you have to invest too much sometimes. It starts to eat in to your personal life and you feel like you spend more time with your work colleagues than you do your own family - in fact, they begin to feel like part of your family! I do, however, think that you should always leave a little space in the day for reading. For me, it's a basic necessity. A PR practitioner has to like culture, reading, museums that sort of thing. We have to be very well informed of what is going on in the world. I admire those people who know about the history of Mexico, the world, about journalism, they are involved in what is happening in our country. I don't know, I couldn't say to you that I read X number of books a year, but reading would have to be, my God, one of the most important things for me. I think it is one of the best ways to enrich your vocabulary, and it is a habit that has stayed with me since university. It's not easy, but I do set some time aside everyday for a minimum, a minimum of 4 pages of a book... If only to keep me sane!

So yes, my job keeps me busy, but that's what I love most about this profession, the fact that as an agency executive, I have the potential to be involved in so many different sectors. I have

colleagues who suddenly go from a meeting with a client from the financial services industry to another with one from tourism, and then to another meeting, sometimes the same day, with a client from consumer products. This is a mental 'switch', it's often very complicated but very interesting because it allows you to get involved in various things at the same time and have a range, a 'scope' for what is going on out there in the outside world, perhaps broader than that of your own client, and certainly other professionals. Yeah, this is an aspect I like a lot. So for us the work may be really dynamic.

Sure, there are many frustrations to being in this industry. In Mexico it's like, a type of 'limbo', a grey area that we're working in. You can become a real expert in something, much more of an expert than your client in fact, but it is never *you* who gives an interview, a conference, or anything, without being authorised to do so. You know? For example, all of the prizes we have won as an agency aren't even.... well...*we* haven't won *anything*. I mean it is the client who ends up winning the prize for the strategy that *you* carried through from beginning to end. *You* spoke to journalists, all the audiences etc., yet they don't give *you* the prizes for public relations, but your client's marketing department. However, like the majority of practitioners I think, I love my work. I think that in special ways my work has taught me a lot, it has taught me to apply my own knowledge, but more than anything it has taught me to learn from others and that is something which enriches you as a person everyday, every hour of every day.

As for the future, I would love to be in a company where, apart from its daily activities, I could do some good for the community or be involved in activities that are much more of social benefit. That is something that I would really like, because PR isn't just the sales side of things, the advertising and promotion of products or services, it is so much more. It is much more oriented towards, 'What are we going to leave them?' You know? 'Who is all of this work for?' 'Who is it aimed at?' 'Who is it going to benefit in the long term?' I would always want to do PR somewhere that ethically corresponded to my values. Actually, what I didn't say was that my first big account here was for a company working in the GM foods industry, which is something that I don't believe in. I didn't believe in the subject, and, for me, it's kind of important to work, above all, in something that is, well, that is about trying to convince the people that what you are doing is good, something that you believe in. You know? But I guess that ethics go with age. At the moment I don't have a family to take responsibility for, I don't have to pay rent or anything like that, so I think that at the moment, I'm in a position where if I didn't believe in the work, or if I thought it 'shady' in any way, I wouldn't do it. You know? 'I'm not going to do it and if you



don't like it then fire me.' But that's, like, right now. When I have a family and a house to pay for and everything...I mean, I couldn't tell you right now how I would react. I would love to be able to say hand-on-heart that my ethics are such that I would say 'I don't like the sound of that, I resign', but circumstances change. But really, I think that in this profession you have to be as professional as a doctor, I mean, you have to have certain security in what you are doing because you are working with people.

I would love to see this industry have more credibility, that people really have it clear in their minds what public relations is, and that it isn't seen as being nothing more than parties and meeting people, and that anyone can do it. PR needs to be seen as a profession to which you have to be dedicated. Of course, there are many CEOs who know that PR is a good investment, but there are others who don't believe in it. Then on the other hand, there are those who, although they believe in it, don't have the money, they don't have the budget to invest in it. I think that it is a real problem, and for that reason, I think that PR is much more developed in other countries like the United States and Europe where they do have the necessary power to be able to buy in to this type of services, and this is how I see PR in Mexico in the future. But, well, I think that whilst the economic situation doesn't improve and there isn't the investment, the ability of companies to invest in it, well the industry is going to grow very slowly. Like I say, there are still those who don't understand what it is that we do, and this is part of our work, I mean, to make people understand and to explain just what it is that we do. It is like a building, if we build the rooms and don't put the foundations in place, well, it is easily going to fall down. So, I really think that it is in our hands, we are the spokespeople, every one of us, for public relations and what it can do, and we can take it wherever we want to go. Then, as they say, the sky is the limit!"

### **5.3.1 Narrative Interpretation**

As a graduate in 'Communication' and now a public relations executive working within an agency environment, Martín offers the younger person's perspective on working in public relations. He shares his frustrations with how public relations work is perceived not only by those outside of the industry but also those working within it. Many people, he argues, have made a 'whore' out of the term public relations using it to refer to parties and 'It girls'. As a result, he suggests, public relations is experiencing something of an identity crisis. When discussing his initial role in consumer PR, Martín explains how he regarded it as one of the 'cool' and 'fun' areas to work in as it meant hosting and attending lots of social events. However, having now

moved across to a less glamorous sector, 'health', he finds the work equally as rewarding but in different ways. Now, he has more of a 'scope' for understanding what is going on in the outside world. Whilst recognising that his career has taught him a lot, Martín also suggests that skills in communication is something which comes 'naturally' to a public relations practitioner and that public relations is something that you practice all day every day. Public relations practitioners, he suggests, are open people and he believes that it is important to be 'genuine' and comfortable in yourself. For the young executive, public relations is about respecting all people equally, irrespective of their position in society. In fact, he believes that public relations is a way of life. His work merges into his home life, but when he is not socialising at events, he enjoys reading. He also thinks that as a result of this work, he has become addicted to following the news. Much of what Martín does on a day-to-day basis is carrying out technical roles such as liaising with the Media and writing progress reports. Martín draws several satisfactions from his work, the most significant being the personal enrichment that he gets and the variety and the mental 'switch' often required. However, he does discuss some of the frustrations of working in the industry. He relates the way in which he was able to get in to the industry to the old Mexican cultural tradition of '*palanca*', the old social network system, which he sees as still operating to certain extent within media industries, and identifies the state of 'limbo' in which he believes he is working, where the work of agency practitioners often goes without praise. Despite longing to see the industry have more credibility, Martín has a bright outlook on the future and suggests that public relations can grow much more as long as people understand its potential. He would like to have the opportunity to contribute more to society through his work, and has companies in mind that he would not work for on ethical grounds, though he does suggest that this might change as his family responsibilities change.

#### 5.4 The Old School Experience (Arturo)

"Tell you about my experiences of working in public relations in Mexico City? Do you know how long I have now been in this business! And I should start by saying that I don't agree with the fact that, over the years, public relations has taken on some frivolous connotations. I would love to find another name for it, for the industry I mean, but as public relations is an internationally recognised term, it would be really difficult to change it now. I think the problem is that in many companies they say, 'No. Here public relations taken care of by the director general', or, 'No, no, no. My secretary is responsible for public relations.' But, a secretary can't be a public relations *professional*. The fact that perhaps she organises the annual sales meeting



doesn't mean that she is working in public relations. We must be very careful. So what *does* a PR practitioner do?

Personally, I think *I* came into this by accident. You see, I have always loved people. As a little one on the bus coming home from school, I had great fun people watching: "What's he doing?" I thought to myself, 'Why is that woman so happy?' 'Why is he sad?' 'This woman looks worried.' I have *always* been interested in people, I like people, I like to know what they like, what they don't like. Then, I studied 'Communication Sciences' at university. This degree offers various areas of speciality; one was TV, whilst others were advertising, public relations and that sort of thing. To be honest, I chose to specialise in television and I went to work for a station at a time when they were preparing for an international television event that was going to be held in Mexico. Well, one way or another, I got involved in that and some of the little details that seemed, well, almost impossible, or difficult, let's say. I was lucky, or capable, enough to be able sort out. And at that moment, my boss said to me 'You know what? You are an ideal person for public relations.' I denied it saying, 'No, I'm so shy, I'm very timid, no, no I am not a party animal and I'm not the person who tells the best jokes, I'm not, I'm not charming...' 'But no,' he said to me, 'what public relations.... Public relations is about having the information, knowing all the little details...like where to find a restaurant open on a Sunday evening...' Anyway, these were the types of things that I was involved with. And, well, I continued doing this until a couple of years later they gave me my first actual contract to work in the area of public relations. My first job was as a 'can' or 'host'; I greeted people and showed them around the TV studios, I offered tours of the studios. I taught myself the history of television, people arrived here looking for 'Snr Lopez' thinking that he was this wise old man who knew all the history of television and I was, well, a young chap! But to have all the information to hand, you have to study and I had to impose some discipline on my team; I began to educate the people, all the people in my department on how to be good hosts. You know what hostesses are? Those girls that help out in events and all that, 90% of whom are gorgeous girls who stand up to pass you the microphone, and that's all that they know how to do. Anyway, I had a team within the TV company, and we provided tours of the facilities and whenever we had a visit I would give all those who had come an exam, or rather, I used to say, 'Did you learn anything?' 'Did you find out anything?' Because really hosts are, well, more often than not, it's a man or woman who might not say to you any more than, 'Well, this is a picture and this is another picture...' And so this way, there was a bit of interaction.

I also used to cut pictures out of magazines and newspapers, photos of everyone. We would stick the photo of 'Snr X' on a sheet of paper, 'Senor John Smith', 'Senor X', the 'President of the Delegation', the 'Secretary of whatever', the 'Ambassador of England', the 'Spanish Ambassador', we put all the photos up. Why? So that all my team would, one way or another, memorise them and when there was an event on, well, it was 'Senor X please...', we were really able to give a bit of personal attention. Anyway, that's how I started out in the area of public relations, and everything I have ended up doing in my career has been to do with public relations, but there we go. Like I say, it had something to do with my character.

I repeat, I don't like the generic term 'public relations' because in many places it refers to the girl who is in an office in a hotel dealing with complaints. For me, at the end of the day, if we are talking about hotels, for example, the concierge in the European hotels is the true PR practitioner, the type of person who sorts everything out. And that's what we are, we see to everything, if you need a lemonade, a new shirt. I mean, we are very much facilitators, go-betweens, it's really the essence, you might say, of personality. Everyone is individual, of course, but that's the *typical* personality of the public relations practitioner. There are many bad definitions, many of which I am sure you have been told. We have been the butt of many jokes, like we often hear ourselves referred to as '*el ejecutivo de la mano fria*', you know 'the executive with the cold hand', as they believe that we always have a drink in our hand. It's not about being the person who tells the best jokes either! But it does take a special character to do this work.

I think it requires a profile, well, with certain characteristics. "*Un relacionista nace no se hace*" - public relations is something you are born to do, you can't make someone into a public relations practitioner. You would recognise a good PR practitioner by the way they behave, at a social event, for example, they would be the person out there moving from group to group ...*mingling*. There are those who are natural for public relations, I know one person, in particular, who is a very special type in that sense. The first Christmas card that I receive is from him, he has impeccable manners, he is correct in everything. Frederico Sanchez Fogarty, the Father of PR in Mexico, was again very different. He had these qualities, those of the greatest PRs and, well, he left you saying, 'How did he know? At what point did he realise...? What point?' Furthermore, he was the type of chap to whom you would show a brochure and he would open it at the very page with the only error. Out of the entire brochure, he opens this very page! That's how he was, that *type*, and apart from that, he had a very good memory, he liked to talk a lot, he was a great one for studying, very rounded in that sense, *a man made for public relations*. And in some ways, that is



how I learned, or rather, learned these extra things, things that they don't teach you at school. That's to say, I have the qualifications, I have a Masters in Communication, but, well, there are two parts to professional development. And this part, the little details rather, are things that you learn and you drop into everyday life and you say, uhm, 'look, this little detail had some thought behind it' You know? These characteristics can't be confused with professional qualities though; they can be learned or destroyed. There are people who are charming by nature, people who are naturally nice, but these days you have to *study* public relations, you have to prepare yourself to be a PR practitioner. You have to know where you are going, where you want to go, where you want to reach, and if you don't have the preparation, the training to do it, you are going to drown.

So, public relations is an attitude, a character, and it's a level of education. Being a public relations practitioner requires some very special traits and I'll tell you the most important, not the most estimable. Firstly, the most important has to be a facility with communication. He who doesn't carry out PR with his family, when is he going to learn PR? For me, within public relations, like in all careers, in all professions, you have to start out as though you are building a house. If you don't have foundations, the house is going to wobble and it's going to fall down. So, if you don't know for whom you are working and if you don't know the people, and don't understand the people, how are you going to be able to communicate? I think that if we knew how to communicate better, and adapt ourselves to understanding others, everything would be different, because I think we can impose our own desires on others without thinking about the other person and what the other person wants. A public relations practitioner is someone who knows how to communicate, a person who wants to know how to communicate and to accept other people, other needs. And these skills in public relations serve you extraordinarily well outside of the workplace, even up to the point of securing work for your children or helping the neighbourhood committee, helping the 'neighbours'. When the community needs light let's say, you know how to get to work on it and help, so you put your PR skills to work at home as well, always. Secondly, creativity; you have to learn to adapt. There's perhaps 60% of public relations that can be applied wherever, but there is perhaps another 30 or 40% that you have to adapt to where you are, to your situation. You need to know how to adapt to the circumstances, that's to say, a client could call me today and say, 'Hey, I've got this problem, how can we sort it out?' I may have never done anything like this before but I am going to do the best I can for the benefit of my client. There are many things that we in public relations can do, but it depends on the circumstances. I think that the interesting bit about all this is that you never have anything pre-prepared. That is, if a client comes along and says to me, 'Hey, I've got this problem', I'm not



going to open a drawer and pull something out and say, 'Here you are, take this', you just can't do that. When faced with a problem, you have to create a solution, you have to implement it' and then we will see results. And thirdly, honesty; the most valuable attribute for me is honesty. No public relations campaign is going to work if you don't speak honestly. Above all, we are the ones who sell companies, sell people, or sell an institution, let's say. In reality, if we don't see absolute honesty, no campaign is ever going to work. I worked with a company once that was going through an awful period, one of our plants exploded and three weeks later a warehouse exploded. There was some important PR work to be done, first and foremost because there were fatalities. So we co-ordinated everything - I co-ordinated everything there and then. In the case of the second accident, the second explosion, the majority of the staff were involved in a convention and we had to come back early. I left the convention set-up and all ready and returned to attend to this business. In reality, the company came out of it well. On both occasions the company came out of it well, because we managed to stop all of the bad press that could have been generated. For example, in the case of the accident, we didn't communicate anything against the company other than the first news about the accident. And by the second day, we had stopped everything, they didn't print anything more. The first thing we did was that I arrived at the plant about an hour after the accident had happened. Obviously, the press were there and they said to me, 'Well, listen, what happened?' 'Well, I don't know, I have only just arrived, let me go in and see'... An hour, hour and a half later, I came out and told them all what had happened. Once we had been inside with one of the technical people to see what had happened, and once we had reached a conclusion from a technical point of view on what had occurred, I took the expert out with me and I said to the press, 'Look here's the expert and you can ask him about it' In other words, we told the truth. We didn't try to hide anything, we knew what it was, that there was X number of fatalities and X number missing. And that is public relations. The next day we held a press conference and we told them that the company was doing this, gave them all the figures and whatever and that was it, it was a success. In other words, we were always open in our actions, and we didn't try to hide anything.

For me, the most important part of all this is ethics. Or rather, at least for me personally, my ethics are my greatest strength. I think it has been rather like my calling card throughout my life, both professionally and how I behave with with family and friends. Yet somehow in Mexico it is very difficult to keep this up because it is a country of sudden changes. Today you are here, tomorrow you are there, or today there's work, tomorrow there isn't - you have to work a lot in the spur of the moment. I recall this one instance when I was working in television...The public,



in general, think that if you work for a television station, you know all the artists. The general idea is that because you are there, you are everyone's best friend. They don't understand that as an in-house PR practitioner, those you know the least are perhaps those also working *in* the organisation. Most of my work was with people on the outside, not on the inside. Anyway, when important people arrived at the TV station they would say to me, 'Oh introduce me to so-and-so', and I would say, 'Hang on. No. Listen to me, I am not going to introduce you to any such artist.' It's fair to say that during my time there, there were instances which worried me a bit. One such occasion kept me awake all night. They had asked me to organise a sort of '*party*'... You know? Well, I was left stunned, I was tossing and turning all night and the following morning at work I said to them 'You know what? I don't do that sort of thing, that's not my job. I am not a hooker...I am not the sort of person who lowers themselves to do that sort of thing. You know? I don't get involved in that sort of thing, it's not part of my job description. If you want to sack me, sack me, but I'm not going to do it.' 'Oh...' they said to me, '...but you see it's someone...and listen he wants a...' 'What do you want me to do?' I said, 'Do you want me to introduce him to my daughter or what?' I said, 'I don't feel comfortable doing these things. It's not my job, just tell me if you want me to go and look for another because I don't work here for this.'

And this happened quite frequently, and that disappointed me, because, well, Did they think that because I was automatically there I had a drawer from which I could magically pull out girls? And apart from that instance, outside of the office people say things like, 'You must have a good time.' Why do they think that I have a good time? Because they think there are cocktail parties and pretty girls? Well, sure there are pretty girls around me but, look, I have been married to the same woman for nearly thirty years and I have two children. You know? So the ethical element is something that you have to understand to clean up the image of public relations, because the term lends itself to comments like 'Ah, public relations, I imagine what you do' or there are people who say 'Ah, you don't do anything.' Don't offend me, please! And others say 'Well, *what do you do*, eh?' and I say to them 'Well, I don't know what it is I do but I have been working in this industry for more than 30 years and they pay me, and they pay me well, so either I have been taking the mickey out of them by not doing anything for the last 30 years, and I have done it well and they haven't realised... and well, if that is the case, public relations is fantastic, if it means not doing anything for 30 years!'

Seriously though, what is it that I do? You know what a routine is I suppose? Well, I tell you that my routine is change; it's the only thing that I can be sure of. There is no typical day, if only there

were typical days! No, the advantage of this profession is that no two days are ever the same. But, in general, well, I get up and do a bit of exercise. Before that, I should say, I watch the news whilst I get ready... Oh, and I read two or three newspapers a day, I like to hear different things to know what is happening because being a communicator, it's something very 'of my profession'. If I don't have a breakfast meeting that day, I normally go straight to the office. The first thing I do each day is a list of telephone calls. That's to say, my secretary doesn't do it, I do it myself. I like to talk to people directly, I am not one of those people who demand, 'get me so-and-so on the line'. If I want to arrange to meet up with someone, normally, well 90% of the time, I make the call and I think it is common courtesy. If I am interested in seeing you, I am going to talk to you, I don't have time for people who call you up and then leave you there on the line waiting, 'Ay, excuse me I have another call', that type of thing. What is more, that goes against what public relations is about. So, first thing, including whilst I am still at home, I am busy making calls. Now that mobiles exist, well, its fantastic because when you are in the car for 40 minutes to an hour, well, you can make some progress. I learned from one of my old bosses that wherever possible in life, I wouldn't drive. For example, I had a chauffeur and the time that I was en route in the car was very useful to catch up on reading or, in this case, for making phone calls and all that. And when I don't do that, because I haven't always had a chauffeur, well, I put on my 'hands free' and can make the most of the journey time. I arrive at work between eight and eight-thirty and I arrive already having advanced a few things.

So, I arrive at work, look over a few newspapers, check the Internet to see what's what, and the routine ends there. From then on, everything can come as a surprise, and that's what makes this business so interesting. It might be a trip to Miami and they say, 'Hey, we have this or that problem', it may be that something urgent has come up and we all meet up for whatever thing, it may simply be that I go out and see a supplier and so on. In other words, the routine, I think that the routine is nothing more than keeping yourself informed and it stops there. In the afternoon, it's pretty much the same. That's to say there could be a meeting or a business lunch. However, in Mexico, conventionally speaking, it's much more breakfast meetings than lunches. In Mexico, lunch is too long. If it is a business lunch, well, that lasts up to three hours with all the after lunch table talk! So it makes the day that much shorter. In contrast, if in Mexico we say, 'We're going to a breakfast', if it is at 8 in the morning say, it's all over by 10 and you can dedicate the rest of the day to work. In contrast, if you go out to lunch, it will be very difficult to go back to work, you return having had a bit to drink and you are in a different mood. You know?



A typical day for me ends at nine o'clock in the evening. As time goes on, I accept less invitations at night if they're not work-related because with the years, well, the tiredness sets in. I mean, in my personal life I prefer not to go out at night. It has been a routine that has gone on for many years and, well, it has its disadvantages for the family. You have little time for the family, you have to look for the spaces in the diary to be with them. And what is more, if there are conventions or events, well, Saturdays and Sundays don't exist. So now, I prefer to go home and I normally watch the news, and once that has finished, I watch a film and read a few pages of a book until I feel tired. I have a couple of books by my bed: one is a novel, the other is a technical book something to do with management. That's a little of my routine. When I do have a weekend, of course, I normally spend it with the family, but for me there is no bigger treat than sitting down to read. I spend, well I don't know, maybe ten or twelve hours reading. Because during the week I can't read very much, and I really love reading, I developed this habit from my parents. Sometimes I could... well, actually I behave myself now, but in the past I could take a book and read until dawn because I couldn't put it down! Another thing I love is travelling, because it's a way of meeting other people, other countries, and you understand what is going on around you much more. You see different scenery.

I think that public relations, the *badly named* public relations, is a vitally important means by which you enjoy life much more, no matter where you are. I have had the opportunity to be with a lot of people and that way have learned from lots of people. Every interview, every little thing touches you, every person is different, and no matter how mad they may seem, you learn from everyone. Public relations has to be everywhere, I mean, it requires you to be. And I think that what we as practitioners can offer, we can say, 'Listen. If there is a problem in the community, I will help you, or I will collaborate with you, or I will do whatever I can, or I will support whatever you have to do.' A classic example is the earthquake of 1985, which practically destroyed the centre of the city. Well, I put a PR office out there on the pavement to deal with all relatives who feared that their loved ones had fallen victim. We put up a tent and put out some sandwiches, drinks and chairs, because people were beginning to get desperate with how slow the rescue situation was. They were saying to me, 'I am sure that my son, or my brother, or my wife is there because they were working there at that time.' For me, it was very satisfying that we are able to find people when we didn't really know at all where they were, people came to us who had been trapped under all sorts of things. Other people whom we thought were missing, had been taken to hospital and so their son, wife or husband came to tell us what had happened. For me, this was very satisfying. When I saw the after effects, dear me, you don't know the

satisfaction this work gave me. These are the ways in which we can support the community! Helping the community doesn't always have to involve a cost. What doesn't present me, or the organisation I work for, with an immediate cost, is time. For example, I might be part of an association or a society, where I manage their communication free of charge for them. And this is a way in which I can support the community.

The future? Well, if I wasn't doing this, I'd like to write a book. Nothing technical, I have written a few articles and things like that, but I would like to write a novel. Like I say, reading is my passion, I'm a person who, when he gets on the plane, the first thing that he does is take out a book and then doesn't stop reading for the duration of the flight. And when I get to Acapulco I sit on the beach, on a sun lounger under an umbrella, and I stay there reading all day until it is time to come in for dinner! Jestings aside, with the little time that I have left in the industry now, I would like to dedicate more of my time to making people aware of public relations, because we haven't done public relations for our own profession. Once we adorn the badge 'I am a PR practitioner', we set about managing our own crowns, our own kingdoms, and we carry out very little public relations for the profession as a whole. And I think it is a true profession, yet whilst a PR practitioner in the United States is recognised, is respected, is listened to, a PR practitioner in Latin America isn't listened to, isn't recognised and is often not respected.

What I would like most, more than anything would be to see public relations recognised in Mexico. At the moment public relations becomes confused with communication and communication confused with advertising, marketing and lobbying and so on. People don't know that lobbying is one of the *tools* of public relations. Unlike other professions, for example, take a lawyer, a lawyer might be a litigation lawyer, might specialise in employment, or he might be a corporate lawyer. He can be many things, yet he is still a lawyer. This is because he is defined by his degree in the rudiments of Law. The same applies in the case of an architect or an engineer and, well, a doctor. This isn't the same in public relations, public relations requires, in one form or another, a knowledge of many things and this knowledge has to be supported, with technical things from every area of the discipline. The architect, well, he has to be constantly planning, designing, building, whilst for us it's different. As public relations practitioners, we have times when we build, times when we design, times when we plan and times when we implement.

Unfortunately, as I see things at the moment, we as public relations practitioners are never going to be united because it's always a case of 'My agency is best', 'I do events better than you and



you', 'I bring in the best business'. We haven't realised that if we really join forces it would be, well, that we would achieve so much more. I do really miss the old days; I think we have lost so much since then. I was in the 'Asociacion Mexicana de Relacionistas Publicas' [Mexican Association for Public Relations Practitioners – the AMRP]. It was successful; at that time we had a magazine dedicated to the public relations industry and everything. And, well, those of us in it learnt so much from the 'old' practitioners, the 'old' public relations practitioners of this country, all of whom have now passed away. They studied a lot, they learnt a lot. As a result, they have taught us a lot and they went on achieving, ensuring that those of us who worked in public relations were recognised. The funny thing is that, yes, today we are recognised, but we are recognised amongst ourselves. The AMRP, like all associations, had some very capable people, brilliant people in fact, but the association and the people grew old and there it stayed, it disappeared. It had problems and internal politics, those types of things, and politics will always kill an association, whatever association it is. If there isn't some reorganisation of people, renewed growth, it's logical that an association will die sooner or later.

It is true that we now have the 'Academy of Public Relations'. Well, really it got to be called an 'Academy' by accident, it wasn't intentional; we never pretended to be. We never intended to create an academy, but rather, an association. And, well, I think that the 'Academy' has an important role to play in the professionalisation of the industry. In fact, I have a little figure that they gave me and it is one of the most valuable things I have. It's an award, it's called the 'Frederico Sanchez Fogarty Award' and they gave it to me for 30 years service to the public relations industry. Not just anyone can be a member of the 'Academy', the regulations are very clear; you have to have been in the profession for more than five years. We don't have student members, we don't accept anyone who has just come out of school - I mean, we don't accept students. The 'Academy' has already published four books about public relations based on a foundation of broad experience. This is something which no other association has done. One of our clear objectives is to create local literature which has never existed in Mexico.

The Academy is doing what it set out to do, but the problem is that there should be more than five hundred members, because here in Mexico City there are more than five hundred heads of public relations, yet we can never get more than 20 or 25 even at our breakfast seminars -40 if we're lucky. It's always the same people; we are the same people going around the block. We have been working in this industry for a long time now, we are getting old, we are retiring. Many of us are from the past generation, the past career. I find it sad that people don't want to get involved,

and fail to understand that together we can do so much more. I would like you to take one message away from this -If we, the PR practitioners, don't join forces, if those of us in public relations don't create a plan from which to approach the industries so that they can tell us what they want from PR and create a plan in collaboration with them for our PR schools, we are always going to remain like this. I would like to bring the PR schools and industry closer together so that we, as PR practitioners, can reach our true potential here in Mexico. It still isn't a 'great' profession, but it's an excellent, *excellent*, medium in which to work and, by far the greatest satisfaction *I have* is that I have been able to work in it for so long."

#### 5.4.1 Narrative interpretation

Throughout his career, Arturo has placed significant importance on the 'human' side of public relations, such as establishing and maintaining personal working relationships, and being actively involved with people and work-related groups. In fact, he has always had an interest in people and cites this as his main motivation for working in public relations. Yet, he does not see himself as an outgoing person. Arturo perceives of public relations as being service-oriented, and when talking about his experiences of working for a television company, emphasises the notion of the practitioner as a host, as someone who 'sorts everything out' and offers personal attention. He is frustrated by other people's perceptions of what he does and by some people who have tried to take advantage of his position over the years and asking him to go beyond the call of duty. Arturo believes that people are born to be in public relations, that the work requires a certain 'type' of person; they need to have an impeccable eye for detail, be creative, have a facility for communication in any situation and, above all, be honest. He also recognises that to succeed in the industry today, a public relations practitioner needs preparation. Being ethical has been Arturo's calling card throughout his career and he argues that no public relations campaign will work without honesty. For Arturo, one of the advantages of working in public relations is that no two days are the same. However, the greatest satisfaction that he draws from his work is being able to meet a lot of, and learn a lot from, people. Outside of work, his eagerness to learn from people continues, he likes to travel as a way of meeting new people and he also likes to read, his ambition is to one day write a book. Arturo considers public relations to be a means by which one can get more from life. He considers it a true profession, yet admits that the industry has suffered set backs in recent times. He is nostalgic towards the 'good old days' and his involvement in the 'Mexican Association for Public Relations Practitioners'. He cites the lack of camaraderie and



increasing personal competition amongst public relations practitioners in Mexico today, as the biggest barrier to progression for the industry.

### 5.5 The Agency Director Experience (Maria)

“It is interesting that we are thinking about the activities of public relations practitioners in Mexico City and of my experiences of working in the area. I have worked all over the place but came back to Mexico City to open my agency because Mexico is a country where the information is very centralised. The most important newspapers, and the large part of the magazines, are produced in the capital. So, from the point of view of media relations, it is important that we are based here. Anyway, it is interesting that you should ask me what it is *I do* as a PR practitioner; it has always concerned me that public relations practitioners themselves are afraid to say that that is what they are. I work in public relations and *I think that* it is something honourable, I believe that public relations is an activity that is as dignified, as scientific, and as intellectual as the best of them. It’s a one hundred per cent intellectual activity. Public relations is definitely an activity that is finding new ground in the country, doors are opening. Perhaps this is as a result of globalisation processes.

So, how did I get into it? Well, I think it’s the result of three factors really: Firstly, my personal characteristics. I have an ability to communicate with people and I’m not shy; I am a very sociable person. I was even more so in the past, I was always off seeing people. I suppose you could say that communication is something that has come easily to me all my life, it comes a bit from within. Secondly, it was parental influence, or rather, *inspiration*. My father was a journalist in Mexico at a time when there were few daily newspapers, few news bulletins on the radio and only one or two on television, I am talking about practically fifty years ago. Anyway, my father formed part of a young generation of reporters, he became very well-known in the country because he wrote in very important daily newspapers, he was the first to have a political column published in the national press. Later, he turned his hand to public relations. My father was a true PR man, everywhere he went people would sit and listen to him. So, I grew up in this house surrounded by politicians, intellectuals and artists and it was a case of, ‘I want to be like my Dad’, I wanted to be a journalist. Actually it is interesting, all of my brothers and sisters have ended up working in some area of communication. In some way, all of us are following the guide that our father gave us a little bit. And thirdly, I am in public relations because this is what I studied at

university; I studied 'Social Communication' at one of the private universities. Public relations as a career in this country, a degree in public relations does exist, but it isn't very well recognised. That's to say, it's not the same as being a graduate in 'Communication', which is something that is recognised and where you have many options for study. Within 'Social Communication', there was a specialisation in public relations. In my particular case, I chose two specialisations, journalism and public relations. In my day we were more, more open, and worked constantly with the philosophy of philanthropy and social welfare, whereas today it is more technically-minded. Anyway, I chose to specialise in journalism and public relations together, so you could say that I am a communicologist with a specialisation in public relations, though I make my living out of public relations, not journalism. So, if people ask me, I am a communicologist but I carry out a function of PR, and so I could consider myself a public relations practitioner. However, I believe that all human beings are public relations practitioners, every one. As long as we have had language there has been public relations.

I started working quite young. I studied at the same time as working and that meant that I progressed quite a bit faster through the ranks. My first job was, well, I joined a political party as a reporter as I liked the idea of serving as a reporter for a public organisation. Having an interest in politics, I wanted to see how it all functioned from the inside. I then got very involved in municipal government and, as a result of my experiences, they asked me to take charge of public relations for the wife of the municipal president, so I worked there for a while. Then I saw the opportunity to work in an agency. *They called me*, in fact, because I had begun to write pieces in the media and they said that they needed someone who wrote well to produce press releases and to put presentations together for clients. So, they took me on to do nothing more than that at first and, little by little, I got involved in more and more. Then, I met a North American agency that had just arrived in Mexico and joined them. From there, I began to develop my agency career in a more professional way because before then, for me, public relations had been something, well, working without clear strategic objectives and that is, I think, what makes the difference. You know? Because everyone does public relations, but the difference in an agency like that one was that there was a plan, behind which there was a strategy, to reach the publics.

...I then got married and began to work 'freelance', and when I reached the stage where I had various accounts, I saw the need to establish an agency -because it was no longer something that I could manage all by myself, and anyway I wanted something a little more 'formal'. At that time, which was the early nineties, all eyes were focussed on Mexico. There was political and



economic stability after the huge problems that we had, and the many tragedies that we had lived through as Mexicans. The transnational companies were looking to reinvest in our country and we saw this as an opportunity for PR. It was then that I said, 'I have found my calling.' It was a time of political transition, there was sooner or later going to be an alternative to the PRI government, it could no longer remain in power, there was going to be change and one which would involve a new condition of dialogue between civil society groups and the government. So we did our research and set about building up the business. Today, as an office, we have around eight regular accounts, which for a small office that hasn't been taken over by a multinational, like so many have in order to make mega powerful organisations, this is really good.

So, like I say, there are increasing opportunities for public relations here in Mexico. Yet, as an industry, especially in this country, public relations is something that is very misunderstood. Today, PR agencies in Mexico continue to have this image of 'I'll charge you, you pay me and I'll get the interview for you,' or the practitioner is regarded as 'el ejecutivo con la mano fria' as a result of going to so many parties and carrying a glass all night. There are a lot of connotations. Regrettably, people associate public relations with cocktail parties, with presentations, with tastings, with receptions in the best hotels; it's really all about *perception*, whether positive or negative. The true essence of public relations involves much planning, much visualisation. We are consultants and we help our clients to make decisions. We are the people who offer them four or five dreams and who say, 'If you are going for this you may fall here, so perhaps choose this which will be your better alternative.' But it's funny how easily a professional activity such as ours is seen as something so free.

Public relations has this other disadvantage that it can be considered as elitist work, that only the very rich can afford to pay for it, and that only those who are very powerful can benefit from it. In Mexico, for example, the vast majority of companies are small and medium-sized, yet, interestingly, the PR agency 'greats' of this country, those regarded as 'professionals', and there are five or six, are those that are not interested in business worth less than 850 thousand or a million dollars a year! Whilst we are on the subject of these 'great' agencies, more often than not they are from the US. Now, one thing that attracted my attention in the US agency I worked for, the people who work in their offices throughout the world are so similar. The *profile* is so similar. This is something that I think is happening in agencies here as well. The people are normally young, and there is a sort of willingness, a goodwill, an ease, the people are 'light' to begin with.

Furthermore, a factor which is distinguishable to public relations practitioners, is their personal ability to make contacts, this is not an activity for the shy.

The people that I have most admired as public relations practitioners over the years have been my bosses; both men and women. They struck me as intelligent, really intelligent, very strategic, and with an obvious capacity to relate to people, a capacity of analysis and abstraction - that's to say, the ability to see a headline, the ability to be in a meeting and understand the problem much faster than the majority of people and to see how communication can resolve it. They are people with aggressive personalities, in the English sense of the word, because in Spanish, it has a different connotation; people who know how to get on with others but never too intimately. By that I mean 'emotional intelligence'. We are not just strategists, we are creators. People think that advertising agencies are where the creatives are, but public relations has to be creative; you have to think-up, to design new strategies because your client's competitors are also thinking-up strategies.

And public relations practitioners definitely have to be socially and culturally aware. Whilst in this country we have a broad and beautiful culture, the people today aren't as interested in general issues, they are interested in very specific issues. In Mexico, like many countries, we are very regionalist; those living in the north of the country, for example, won't accept a trend that comes from the south. Yet the vast majority of PR agencies in this country, and I am not talking ill of them, have a problem with this. Our agency is one of the one hundred percent Mexican agencies for a one hundred percent Mexican public. We are gaining lots of ground because we know the needs of the public. For instance, I know of a company that staged a press conference in Torreon, which is a city in the north of the republic, on a day when the heat was unbearable. On the invitation they put that the reporters had to wear suits, this was one of the conditions of entry to the conference. And who went to the press conference? Nobody. Because in Torreon, nobody uses a suit and tie. In contrast, when we put on a press conference in Torreon, instead of it being in the most elegant room in the hotel, I staged it in the garden. Instead of offering coffee and biscuits, I gave the people beer and appetisers – not with the purpose of getting them drunk, but because beer is thirst quenching. Our press conference was a success; everyone came. These things really are more about 'feeling'.

If we thinking of other traits, a public relations practitioner also needs to be well-read, well-informed. One needs to know, at very minimum, what the market is about; the business standard, the financial standard, one has to know a little about politics, and understand the situation of the



client. The public relations practitioner is the *link*, is a link. But they need a team; a PR practitioner cannot work alone. I tell you this as someone who saw their father working alone in public relations. These days, this doesn't exist in Mexico. These days you need a team of people with skills in marketing, strategic planning, in social issues, in 'public first,' and someone who understands the internal operations of your client as a generator of employment, a generator of production, a generator of wealth, or a producer of service. The public relations practitioner isn't someone who works alone and does it just for the money, someone who works with his or her name before that of the client. But, I have seen that sort of thing and I think it should be the other way around. I feel honoured when my client calls me and involves me in their project and says, 'My image is in your hands.' At this moment I become part of the client. I take off my agency hat and I put myself in... I become part of X company, whatever its name may be, and I support the organisation.

I firmly believe that your abilities in communication go with your love of the work. If you go to a meeting and see architects, lawyers, people dedicated to business, the public relations practitioner is the first person who attracts your attention... I think that he or she has an angel on their shoulder. A public relations practitioner should be someone who is charismatic, charismatic enough to be able to represent an organisation, but not over the top. When I am recruiting, it doesn't worry me whether or not the person has much practical experience, public relations is about common sense. Obviously techniques need to be learned, but rarely do I stipulate that they have experience except for the higher-level posts. If they are going to have people under them then, yes, experience is important because they need to be able to direct a team. But, for those 'infantry', shall we say, the executives that we take on, I just need them basically to be very responsible, someone who isn't reporting in sick every five minutes, someone who sees the accounts they take on as their own, they put on the shirt. They need to take responsibility because anyone who enters here could be boss of this company in the future. And I have seen it, there are girls here who have entered as my secretaries and now one is account director of a team and the other is supervisor of another.

A practitioner who works here is someone with integrity, who is honest and ethical. Ethics form the foundation of any image, the natural foundation. The effective foundation of any image management campaign is the truth. And so, in some way, as public relations practitioners, we should be objective consultants. Just because the client is paying us for a service, it doesn't mean that we are going to say what they want to hear. Some companies have approached us and said,

'Guess what? I have this product and suddenly now my competition is copying me with a cheaper version. I want to launch a product war saying that his product is bad.' Our response is, 'You know what? No. Thank you very much for your kindness, your confidence in us, but No. We prefer to say the good things about you. I don't know if there is anyone who will do that, but we don't.' PR practitioners have got to be ethical.

One other area in which we are working a lot with our clients is social responsibility. More than anything, it is about helping them to understand what social responsibility is because they confuse it with 'philanthropy', with 'charity,' and social responsibility is much more than that. In Mexico, people are only just starting to implement and to understand the concept. The reason why we as an agency started to focus more and more on social responsibility programmes was because, having worked in international companies, I could see that the concept of social responsibility was beginning to emerge - but in a very 'low key' way. But really my personal reason for wanting to get involved in this area of the practice is that, over the years, I think that your personal values pass over to your business outlook. I reached a point where having been Vice President of the 'National Association of Advertisers', Secretary of the 'Mexican Academy of Public Relations' and an advisor to the 'Mexican Association of Promotion Agencies', participating on several committees, I am no longer on any of them - apart from the 'Mexican Academy of Public Relations'. That is for another objective of social responsibility; Mexico is in need of help in terms of issues of security. I found in my case that... I left all of that to be in the 'Mexican Institute for Justice', I am a member of the council. I am fighting for Mexico to become a more secure country, to change the laws, for a change of security, more transparency. You'll see that in Mexico, the same as in all Latin America, the level of insecurity is an embarrassment. The 'Institute' has a focus, I want to leave Mexico better than it is now for my children, and this is social responsibility. Public relations is all about transmitting your own values as an individual... For me, on a personal level, it's like looking after your own family. I think that work is part of your life and your love, and my agency and my clients are like a family to me. Here in the agency we live as a family, and your family will always be your first responsibility. By this, I mean that my staff have a life outside of work, and I respect that. And when you look after your own, your client, whoever it may be, will know that you are going to look after them. This all goes back to what I was saying about ethics, we as an agency never give the Media money, nothing with money. I don't do it with my family, and neither am I going to do it with my clients. So I think we, as an agency, have reached the point where we say, 'You know what? My agency may be good or bad, I don't know. What I do know, however, is that here we are all... we all try



to learn the values.' Within our characteristics as PR practitioners, we have to be very human, very sensitive.

So yes, my values play an important part of my daily life, both inside and outside of my work. One gets to know people through work and, on occasion, I have worked together with work associates to combine our skills in benefit of society, for social causes. For example, I knew people who worked for the 'Fundacion Mexicano para el Desarrollo Rural' [The Mexican Foundation for Rural Development] which is an institution that was founded by a group of businessmen who dedicate their spare time to helping those in rural communities. They share a philosophy of, 'I'll give this to you so that you can develop your potential.' They don't give things away, but they open doors so that at the end of the day these communities can do things for themselves. Anyway, I was fortunate enough to be able to work with them in different ways. I was vice president of the area of communication for a while, communicating the image of the institution. This was very enriching for me, both professionally and in humanitarian terms, and I was left feeling really satisfied to have been able to collaborate in this type of work. For eight or nine years now, the agency has been involved in the work of an NGO founded to provide relief and shelter for children affected by AIDS. We manage the organisation's public relations...Everything from organising parties and charity fundraisers, to raising awareness of the organisation by way of press releases, interviews on radio and in the press. We also take the children to my ranch once a year to spend the day there. They arrive very early at the office and we hire a bus to take them out to the ranch and there we give them breakfast, show them the horses, we watch films, play games, eat lunch and then in the evening we come back.

In public relations, our work responsibilities and our leisure time often overlaps. In fact, we say here that we spend practically more time together than with our own families! Our timetable is from nine until six, but everyone works until very late. I don't tell them that they have to, but they do so because they want to. When you work in an agency, you can't say that your work is from nine to six. You have to keep things quite flexible and many of us work Saturdays and Sundays. In public relations we should remember that, first and foremost, we are a service provider. A client may ask us for something, and sometimes they ask for it at the last minute, and it's something very, very particular that they want, and they need it there and then, and you have to provide it. People ask me what I do on a typical day and I always say; 'Would that be Monday or Friday?' They are very different, very, very different. But in general, I am one of those people who gets up very early at about six, six-thirty and I put on my jogging suit and I go walking. I

walk some two or three km, it's not a lot but I am quite obsessive, I do it very often. Then I come back to get ready for work and I put the radio on. I have a radio in the shower and I listen to the news. I am a constant zapper although I do have one or two stations that I normally listen to. I usually have a breakfast meeting with a journalist, a client, or a prospective client or a contact. I prefer breakfast meetings to lunch because I think that it breaks the day up if I have to go and eat, and then there's the '*sobre mesa*' [table talk] and all that goes with that and it takes up a lot of my time. Several times a week I have a breakfast, and if it's not a day when I have a breakfast, I come straight to the office. Ah, and whilst eating breakfast at home I read the newspaper. We have a media monitoring department here at the agency but they don't read in English. In Mexico there is a newspaper in English, so I get this delivered at home so that I can read it early before coming to work.

On days when I come straight to the office, I generally arrive before the rest of the staff. I am a very punctual person, what we call here an, 'early-bird'. The first thing I do is check my emails. This takes me two or three hours a day, responding to messages regarding new business or problems. I then have meetings with my different executives. On Monday mornings, for example, we have a meeting very early with all the staff because there are things that everyone has to hear. Then, anyone who isn't involved in 'Operations' leaves and we go over each of the client accounts. I ask what they have done, what they are going to do, what has happened with this and that. Then I start my work. I look over the press releases, for example. I like to see them, I have my style and, well, as I have worked as a journalist over the years, I have my style and there are things that I like done my way. So this takes up quite a bit of my time. They know me now and they do them quite well, but every now and again there is a paragraph that I take out and move elsewhere or something like that. I also go about assigning any new work that has come in. The staff really see to their own accounts all day, and the majority of the accounts have big events with the media and you have to prepare interviews, conferences and so on. I go out to lunch and often have appointments in the afternoon, either here or at my clients' offices, but that also varies day on day. Sadly in Mexico City, due to the size of the city and the traffic, you can't make many appointments, so that limits you. We are very fortunate that today we have the internet and mobile phones, because that helps in communicating with clients and they can always get hold of us, whatever time, above all when there is a crisis situation. I am usually here until eight in the evening and I arrive home between eight and nine and spend a bit of time with my children. They take it turns because almost always one or other of them is on the computer. We talk a bit as a family, and then I will usually have some things to read over. I always have one or two books on



the go which I combine with work-related reading; reading is a pastime of mine. Then I watch the evening news and there my day ends.

As you can see, every day is very varied, and I think that this is what keeps us in agencies, the variety of things that appear and the taste for learning. Every client is a challenge, a new challenge - you can't put the same campaign together for every client, every client is different. Every company has a new problem and is in a different industry. You know? Yet the difficulty is that the successes that we have in this industry aren't as visible as they are in say, marketing or events. Sometimes, not even my colleagues know what I am working on; sometimes you are doing work that only you and the client are aware of. Whilst this is a frustration, there are a great many more satisfactions that come with working in public relations in an agency environment. I like the social part, the social element of the work is important. I think that one of the great benefits of this profession is that you meet lots of people - people from different fields, different environments, different professional levels and different professional knowledge, and this enriches you personally. Also, thanks to the agency, and as a result of my relationships with top-level journalists, the people I work with here, those who are in the government and in other forums, I have been able to get to know Mexico better. It has given me the opportunity to have a more 'accurate' vision of what this country is about, and also a vision, and mine is still not great, but a vision of what is going on internationally. And it's about participating in life, and I think that this is the great part about working in an agency. You can take part in life, you are in the middle of it, and you have a front row view of what is going on.

A lot of my work is convincing my team that we should do this and that. It's always been a great business for us, there's the good creative element and yet we do very well with bills, we see a profit. However, the greatest rewards of all are the psychological rewards. I like the permanent clients, no matter whether they are big or small, I see myself grow with them, we are part of them. I say to my clients that I want them to see me as an 'advisor', and not as an outside 'agent'. I am not an outside agent, I am *part* of them. I suffer when the plant closes down, I am delighted when a new product comes out, when they are successful, and whatever. One can only reap successes by being part of the companies and investing effort in them over the long term. This is what I like personally, to have my clients satisfied. I am also content with the fact that we have the internal affairs of our company in order, the directors and executives, senior and junior, go on learning. In one way or another, I can say that our agency has a certain image of being an agency, a school, that offers opportunities to learn. I hope that we maintain this image in the years to

come. In the future, I see a lot of growth, both for the industry and for us as an agency. We have seen an impulse with the most recent clients that we have been able to capture in the last few years. We have also seen an opening in the economy. A motive of mine in life is to lay the foundations for heightened recognition of our profession. I want to educate the people so that they understand that our work isn't 'airy fairy', that it's not about those women who are divorced, widowed or from politics, who now find themselves out of work and who open a public relations office believing that it is easy. All of these services that I have been talking about here come from an experience of many years.

I aspire that in the future there is a serious association, a formal one which represents all of us, that helps the profession gain the respect that it deserves. I think that in Mexico, the same as with architects or engineers, public relations as a trade has to fight in order to be valued. As I said earlier, fortunately in Mexico the image of someone in public relations is no longer about being the 'hostess' and cocktail parties, now people think a little more in terms of formal plans and strategies, and a little more about the theory. I think that public relations has taken on a much more serious position in companies and I know that public relations is considered in their business plans, they consider the opinions of communicators in the decision-making process. This is something that, well, is a great step forward, it is very important and the area is becoming more strategic and is attracting more qualified people. I have mentioned already that I have noticed that public relations is now about young people, very young people and I love that; they are very committed and very capable.

Public relations is growing a lot in Mexico, but it is growing through the agencies. It has taken us a lot of work to be recognised as agencies, and I think that here in Mexico City there are now some very good ones. There are many very good ones, and I respect much of my competition, or colleagues, as we prefer to call them. Those of us PR agencies in Mexico don't squabble, it is quite disciplined. In the Academy of Public Relations, for example, many of the agencies work side-by-side and there's no problem. In Mexico, we are all friends, we all know each other, we are members of trade associations, we support each other.... We dedicate ourselves to the professionalisation of our activity because, above everything else, the fact that we are united is because we want public relations to be seen by the outside world as something as valid, as professional, as dignified, as respectable as the Law, medicine or engineering.



My ambitions for the agency would be to have a core team, and to contract out specialists in certain sectors, like government relations, for example. On the other hand, I would like to have the 'research' part more to hand, much more to hand, here in the agency. I mean, we are a small agency at the moment, but I would like to see more understanding of the inclinations of the consumer and know what motivates them. My ideal would be to have some sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists. I would love to, if only we could do it. Afterall, how am I going to communicate if I don't understand the person who is there in front of me and how history has impacted on them? And for me personally... Much of my work in the past has, in some way, been involved with political communication, administrative communication or governmental relations. I believe that in this country, 80% of the work out there is still in some way of political origin. I want to develop this. In some way lobbying has become my 'modus espiritual', for want of a better word - my passion, my ambition. All of us in the agency are quite young; at 41 I am the oldest. Of course, we haven't gained the reputation of the more established practitioners who everyone knows, but we have carved out our own domain and established a solid base. This is important because in Mexico you see offices specialising in PR sprouting up like mushrooms but they don't last for long. I think that our success is as a result of the passion that we have for the activity, and for the business that lies behind it, for the contacts, etcetera. Now we are looking to dedicate ourselves to growing our activities and to educating the world through communication."

### **5.5.1 Narrative interpretation**

As someone brought up in a media and communications family, Maria knew from an early age that she wanted to work in journalism. She studied 'Communication Sciences' at one the private universities and started work young. She started out as a reporter, yet over the years has become increasingly involved in public relations. She is proud to say that she works in public relations, although at times she refers to herself as a communicologist rather than a public relations practitioner, and considers it to be an activity what is one hundred percent intellectual and strategic. Maria has always had an interest in politics and sees public relations as an industry closely allied to political transition, and felt it her 'calling' to establish her own agency during the early nineties. She is proud to have a one hundred percent Mexican agency in the face of so much specialist international competition. Maria cites the negative perceptions held by many people as being based around the idea of PR and parties. Yet, for her, the ideal public relations practitioner would be strategically and emotionally intelligent. She regards herself as an external advisor to her clients, and is at pains to emphasise her emotional involvement in her work for her clients. A

frustration she cites is that many of her successes are not visible and that, therefore, people often are not aware of the work that she is doing. However, Maria believes that the satisfactions more than compensate for that. The greatest satisfaction for her has been seeing herself grow with her clients and sharing in the good and bad times. Through her work, Maria has also been able to meet a variety of different people and to learn a lot more about her country. Public relations, for her, is about participating in life. This sentiment is echoed in both her personal involvement, and that of her agency, in community projects. She believes that, by participating, she is helping to create a 'better' Mexico for her children. Maria brings this sense of community into her own workplace and perceives of her colleagues in the agency as family, and she feels responsible for their welfare. Maria sees her agency as an extension of herself, believing that over the years her personal values have passed over to her outlook on business. Whilst individuals in the agency are responsible for their own accounts, Maria still likes to ensure that things are done 'her way', for example, she insists on checking all press releases before they are sent out. However, most of Maria's time is taken up as the agency figurehead, bringing in business and co-ordinating this work. When recruiting new staff, Maria does not look for someone to have public relations training or experience, believing that they can be trained in the practical side. However, she looks for leadership, responsibility and, above all, honesty. Maria also believes that public relations practitioners have to be socially and culturally aware, in order to serve as the 'link' between an organisation and society. Maria sees increasing opportunities for the industry, and her ambition for the future is to see the profession come to be regarded on the same level as other 'professions', and she sees the way to do this as being through the establishment of a serious professional association. On a personal level, she would like to see her agency continue to grow and to have the resources to out-source areas of specialist sociological and psychological research, which she considers significant.

## **5.6 The In-house Practitioner Experience (Cristina)**

"Well, I am fortunate, I draw a lot of satisfaction from my job. But, working in public relations even in a city the size of Mexico City, is not without its frustrations. I don't think that this activity is well-positioned, even in the larger cities in this country. There is still a lot of ground to cover. For me, public relations has always meant working for large organisations. So, how did I get into it? Well, I think it was a bit...a little a product of circumstance, as with many things in life. Actually, I think that a high percentage of us public relations practitioners are here by chance. I'm not saying that it's a case of, 'Hey, what a charming person you are' or, 'Here you



go, set yourself down here and do public relations,' but I think that, well, 80% must be in public relations by chance. In my case, firstly, I didn't study 'Communication'; I studied for a degree in 'History of Art'. It was a beautiful degree to study, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I always wanted to study 'Communication'.

Like I say, I didn't study the subject at university and, yet, in one way or another, I have always worked in public relations. I have learned on the job, I learnt as I went along. I began my career in the hotel industry. There I had the opportunity to spend two years 'in training', for two consecutive years I worked in all of the areas. The hotel was very focused on banquets; I was working in banquets for some time, and I also spent a lot of time in the area of general management as an assistant to the director. And, well, the day came when the director started to get me involved in public relations. I had been assistant to the previous manager and had been very much involved in the state events at the hotel, attending to VIPs, but it wasn't a 'formal' position. But this new director involved me in public relations and, well, he opened the door to the office for me one day and said, 'Well, here you are, this is your office, you already know how to work.' It was a very interesting experience; nobody trained me. However, I knew the hotel industry well and I set about producing reports on everything that was going on in the hotel. In those days the hotel was state-owned, it was a company for the government. I was in charge of all those silly little things that we had to see to, and, well, within the hotel I had an excellent teacher in the general manager who was very much a PR-man, very PR. I began to work very closely with him and he supported me right from the beginning. He believed a lot in me.

I began to get involved in groups, public relations groups. Like I say, I hadn't really studied a degree in public relations. Yet, as I started to look after media relations, well, it came quite easily to me, I mean, it wasn't difficult. As I am quite an open person and, well, one way or another I was able to do it. I had all the PR manuals in the office and they guided me to an extent, but really it was when I began to get involved in groups, to get involved in the 'PR scene', and the 'Asociacion Mexicana de las Relaciones Publicas' [Mexican Public Relations Association] in particular, as well as the 'La Asociacion Femenil de Ejecutiva Turisticas' [The Association of Female Tourist Executives]... Becoming involved in these groups reinforced my knowledge and PR skills – media management, government relations and also events. Being in the public relations association, I had, and still have, the opportunity to be with some 'great' men. For me they are 'great' men. I mean, they are not of my generation, but the truth is that in having the

opportunity to mix with them, I could learn so much, they were my teachers. Really, they were people with whom I had to associate if I wanted to be successful in the hotel.

From there, I went to work for an organisation specialising in insurance and there they said to me, 'Hey, we would like it if you would start to work on this project,' and it was precisely press relations, raising awareness of the organisation. I was fortunate that this organisation realised that, by way of a good public relations programme, they would be able to sort out a lot of their issues, so they sent me to take some courses. It was then that I started to realise the true nature of public relations. To be honest, I was a little shocked, I found that it wasn't just about banquets and dealing with the press as it had been in the earlier part of my career. It isn't just about the 'nice side': the cocktail parties, little presents sent out of courtesy, the little birthday card...I mean, in hotels, in general, they are quite short-sighted; the voice of public relations isn't all that important.

Anyway, now that I was working in insurance, I would say that I went on to be more a part of 'Operations'. Through my various PR-related jobs, I had established good connections and the company realised that this is what attracts business. Or rather, everyone thinks that public relations is cocktails and lunches and so on. I mean, that's not true. Yes that exists, that's to say, it goes on, but anyone who works in public relations for a company is the person who brings business to the business. For a long time here in Mexico, the function was seen as something more, well, as an ability someone has to connect with people, a facility one has with expression, and a facility with communication, an ability to make friends, and using this in order to achieve things in favour of companies. So the fundamental characteristic of a public relations practitioner was to be a good interpersonal communicator, and someone with what we call in Spanish, '*Don de gente*', this is the ability to get along with people. And this still exists. This is what public relations is about, developing contacts. When I speak of contacts, I don't just limit this to the Media community. For example, the hotel needed to develop a strong relationship with 'Luz y Fuerza', the key energy provider, because we needed to know that we could call on them whenever we needed it. And it was my responsibility to develop these contacts, to make the contacts with people, to open doors. Opening doors was a big part of what I did there.

Just to tell you a bit more about my career history, whilst I was working for the insurance organisation, I was approached by an international cosmetics company. And when I left my job to go there, the insurance organisation said to me, 'Please help us to find a replacement'. They



presented me with the candidates, and one of them was my brother. I said to them, 'He's the one I recommend!' and he is now in the job. So, off I went to work for the cosmetics company, really because I loved what they were doing. I should emphasise at this point, however, that in my case, which is perhaps very particular - though there may be others who agree with me, I feel that the reason you dedicate yourself to public relations is that... I think it's a social job. By that I mean that we have a social role to play. And in my case, like I said, this is something that I had always looked for; I had always looked for ways to reach other people, to do something with contact with other people, Uhm... to be a *bridge*. And this is what I liked about the cosmetics company, I saw that I would have the opportunity to be a bridge. They were very women-orientated and had various specific campaigns. One of which was fighting against cancer, this was at a national level and another of which was an award in recognition of the Mexican woman; this was also national and was about recognising the work of the Mexican woman in many different aspects. This project fell within the remit of public relations, because it raised awareness of the company as one that was really oriented towards the Mexican woman. Furthermore, the prize was a cheque that the winner had to spend on a project, so you were benefiting a community, a locality, there was public recognition, an incentive. I really enjoyed working on that project, but now they have got rid of it.

If we are thinking about the traits of an ideal practitioner, really they would be an efficient communicator, someone who can express themselves equally proficiently verbally and in writing, someone who is charismatic. When I talk about the need for charisma, I am not just talking about charisma when building relationships externally, but also internally. If you stay in the office all the time and you are sending out press releases and all that and nobody sees you around the office, well, obviously they aren't going to know who you are. I always make the point of walking around the office and being present at all the events. That way the staff get to know me and begin to value the work that I do. Working in hotels taught me the importance of integrating, being part of the whole business. I have to be well-integrated in the organisation because, if not, I wouldn't be doing anything of what is *true* public relations; integration it is essential. Yet, actually, whilst I said that PR practitioners have to be charismatic, I don't think that I mean that you have to be the life and soul of the party. I know some PR people who make you ask yourself, 'How come he never laughs, and isn't an extrovert?' What happens in this case is that these practitioners manage a business approach to building and managing relationships. They are dignified. For them, public relations is about business. But, really I think that they can only be found in the larger companies.

A successful practitioner is also someone with leadership, who is capable of defending ideas effectively, who is capable of influencing people, who has the ability to...who doesn't overlook urgent issues. One of the areas of public relations is communication management in critical situations; if a public relations practitioner doesn't have the necessary, well, aplomb, the circumstances are going to overtake them. So a practitioner needs to have aplomb, and, furthermore, to be someone who is strategic, capable of seeing the details but not losing themselves in them, capable of seeing things as a whole, having a global vision and to be capable of seeing what makes things a success, and recognise the possible repercussions. Furthermore, someone who wants to be an effective communicator has to win confidence. If someone isn't trustworthy, their message isn't trust-worthy. So, the person who is in charge of public relations has to, above everything else, be an ethical person, someone who sets an example. I think that every area, every activity which involves a public relations programme, has to have ethics at the fore - because public relations, when well-understood, is based on the identification of, and the respect for, legitimate interests. This is ethics. As public relations practitioners, we carry a huge responsibility because, whatever you do is going to reflect back on you. If you are indiscreet, it's the worst thing that you can be if you are in public relations, and, believe me, there are many who are indiscreet. That's to say, you have to draw a boundary around what is your work, what is your life, and what your responsibilities towards the company are. So, if it's a serious area, an area in which you have to show tolerance, you have to learn to look after people, treat them as if 'the customer is always right', even though they might not be. This is the industry in which you can't afford to fall out with anyone. If you strike up a friendship with someone, get close to people, you might say to them, 'You know what? I don't like the headline like that, do you think that...?' but you shouldn't fall out with them, nor can you do the opposite, as we say here in Mexico '*picate el ombligo*', don't get too close. I've got life-long friends in the press that introduced me to my husband, came to my wedding, were there at the birth of my children, we have a very good friendship, but there has always been great respect between us. That, for me, is the crucial word within this industry, *Respect*. Respect for what you do and for what they do.

This goes with what I was saying earlier. I think that you need back-up, support in this industry, and I think that you have to know your journalists. I have this one friend who is a very good journalist and she has a daily finance programme on the radio. She is very well connected. And, well, she has helped me a lot. By this I mean, we became friends when I was working for the insurance organisation and we are still friends. So she may call me and say 'so-and-so wants to do



this and needs something, you could... you know how to do this and you could do it very easily.' And, of course, I say 'Yes' and I approach them.

I also think that I used the term persuade earlier on, what I wanted to say about this within the context of communicating internally, was that if you're not capable of persuading your own boss...If I am not able to persuade my boss that a campaign has to be in this way, I will not be successful in persuading anyone. Because, above all, our PR campaigns have to persuade those immediately around us because, if not, we are not going to be able to persuade anyone. To work effectively, I have to know what it is that my boss wants, what the company needs, and to do that I have to be close to the company president and to all of the vice presidents. This is something I insist on. I think that these are, in general, the characteristics that an ideal public relations practitioner should have. I am talking primarily about in-house practitioners, but if we compare this to agencies I think that, from a professional point of view, he who works in an agency has to be more, well, they have to have more resources to hand to be able to resolve a series of different problems that the client could present them with. That's to say, they must have flexibility. Yet, in my case, as someone 'in house', I don't need to have as much flexibility, but the job requires me to have a much deeper knowledge of the company and its policies, its products, and about the organisation's environment to identify opportunities. Well, the agency practitioner has to know their clients' products, they have to know the political side of things, but we mustn't forget that the vast majority of the actions that somebody external is going to take, depends on the decision of the client. That's to say, they aren't going to take action under their own initiative. In contrast, I can act under my own initiative a bit more.

And, of course, now my job is much more strategic. The, um... 'empowerment', I suppose you could say, that I have is without limits. And this, this is the real difference between my experiences of working in hotels and what I do now for large commercial organisations. I mean, being able to make decisions, to vary your work daily, I have this freedom. I am part of the management, part of the board. And this is important; because without this 'empowerment', you are limited and restricted by very established company policies, with little or no movement towards change. So one important step that I have had to take here is to use my creativity to look for things, to suggest possible change. I also have to be creative, I have to think up things that will achieve success. To be able to make the most of an event and to make a real impact, you need to break from the norm.

On reflection, I think that I have been very fortunate in that the organisations in which I have worked have indeed had a positive attitude towards public relations, and what it could do for them as a business. But there continue to be companies who don't take an interest in public relations; for them, public relations is the person who puts on the cocktail parties. Like I said, this is an image of public relations which is completely false; of course you have cocktail parties, but you soon get fed up with them. I tell you, there were days when I didn't want to know anything about events, I stayed at home - because it's one after the other and the truth is, this isn't what it's all about, you have a much greater responsibility and you have to work hard. One example, going back to hotels because this is an area where many of the 'bad' images developed', I remember the time when they sent me some journalism students on work experience... These girls were very sweet and everything, and I started interviewing them all, and, strangely enough, they all, without exception, wanted to be in public relations. So I asked them, 'Why is it that you want to be in public relations?' and they answered, 'Well, I know people.' I tell you, I almost killed them. They had this idea that they would meet their 'Prince Charming', they had a very false impression of what public relations was about. You are the image of the company you are representing and if you represent a bad image of yourself, you are presenting an even worse one of your company. And by image, I don't mean simply how you dress, but that you come across well, you act appropriately. Part of my job in the hotel was to make up all of the presents for the VIPs. I did them by hand, it's funny when I think about it; I made up little plates with biscuits, little plates with pieces of chocolate. Phew, it was endless. But it was tremendous,. I mean, doing these ridiculous things was an important part of the learning experience. And it was a laugh because those work experience girls that I mentioned, well, they didn't want to break their nails! I mean, they just weren't made for public relations; they didn't have the right image for it. All they wanted to do was pick up a man, meet their 'prince charming' and get married!

I think that one thing my experience has taught me is that, regardless of which company you work for, public relations is attention to the public. But the confusion lies in just how you attend to the public. Every area of the profession is going to be applied to, and carried out by, organisations, according to their own contexts and their own needs. There are some aspects of public relations that we all know and handle, but that we hardly ever put into action. There are times when we don't implement certain concepts for years because the need doesn't arise. Even when organisations do effectively implement a range of public relations skills, they do so in different ways, depending on the volume of activities, or things that they have to manage.



Well, perhaps I should say something about my routine? I am usually here in the office by half past eight. This is the time when I receive the media monitoring report, and if anything should come up before this time, they contact me via mobile phone - if there is immediate action that needs to be taken. If not, I arrive here at the office and I read over the synthesis of the day's press and also receive a call from my agency with whom I analyse the context of the day's media reports. This is the moment in which, based on what we see is happening in the industry and in the country, we make decisions. If there is an opportunity that we identify in the environment, or if there is a threat for the company, well, you have to react immediately... that's the first thing. Then afterwards, I look over my emails and respond to them, and then with my assistant I go over all those things still outstanding and advance them. There are also calls that you have to make, getting in touch with different people. Then I meet with each and every one of my executives; I have one executive dedicated to internal communication, and the other is responsible for public relations with external publics: promotions, sponsorship, charity support, and so on, to see what there is that has to be done. If there is anything related to the public that they want to notify the general management about, well, we ring him and we give him this input. I am the president of the editorial committee for our company magazines, both those external and internal, so, well, another activity of mine is to see how the production of these publications is going with those here, in-house, who are responsible for the internal publication, and our external suppliers who look after the external magazines. Normally, there is a business lunch that we organise to draw journalists together from, well, it's as much those who write on issues directly related to our industry, as those from the financial press and media. In the afternoon, I return to the office and carry on with the day-to-day business; I may have a meeting with some media people, for example. Of course, sometimes in the afternoon and evening there are industry-related events. I usually finish my day at eight or nine at night, which is when I return home and carry-on reading the papers. Here we receive all the papers, so I look through them to see if there's anything else or any opportunities and, well, broadly speaking this is a day-in-the life of me.

In the hotel it was more a case of a regular routine, a special routine, and the days were very similar, where I am now it is more varied. But that's not to say that working in the hotel didn't have its excitement too. When I look back, I can draw many satisfactions from my work there. One thing in particular which will always stay with me, was my first VIP guest, as part of my job I had the opportunity to look after some really interesting people. My first VIP guest was a famous business tycoon from the States, and when they told me who it was who was coming, I honestly was taken aback. It was a challenge for me because he was my first VIP guest that I had

to look after as PR. But the truth is that it all went marvellously because, well, it was very pressured work because it was everything from welcoming him to co-ordinating his programme. I remember that on his last day, he asked me to make a reservation at the French restaurant near the hotel, so I made the reservation for three people as he asked. Then at seven-thirty, eight o'clock, in the evening I said to him, 'Well, good evening Sir, I will see you tomorrow. I'll be here at nine o'clock in the morning to see you off', 'Yes, thanks, thanks a lot,' he replied and he presented me with a signed book. Well, about half-an-hour after I had arrived home, the telephone rang and it was his personal secretary. 'Hello' he said, 'What's the problem?' I said. 'Oh nothing...it's just that I want to know your address, in about five minutes or so we will come and pick you up and you are going to come and for dinner,' 'Excuse me? Wow', I thought. Anyway, we went for dinner, the reservation was for three, him, his secretary, and me. And, as I say, I was overwhelmed. But it was a great experience, it's the sort of experience that you won't repeat but, of course, it leaves an impression on you. In that way, I got to meet some great personalities, people from overseas, royalty, people who leave an impression on you.

Another situation which left me feeling very satisfied about a good job done but in a different way, was again whilst I was working in the hotel. In '85 we sadly had an earthquake here, I was in the hotel at this time. It was a terrifying experience. Nothing happened to us, but our sister hotels collapsed. So, we had to co-ordinate the effort, to adapt our dining rooms and turn them into bedrooms. We gathered together mattresses, cushions and whatever, and took people in from the 'Hotel del Prado' that had collapsed. I was there listening to the horrendous experiences of the guests and looking after people who came in with 'shock'. I had to link my telephone line up with what used to be TeleAzteca, which is now Channel 13, to be able to give out the names of the people that we had with us in the hotel from other hotels. It really was a moving experience because people were calling and saying, 'Please look on the list and see if my dear son or my husband is there.' We didn't sleep. The director and I stayed in the hotel for three or four days. But that's another side and an important side of public relations, it's all part of the duties of the job - coming together and offering support in such difficult situations. Experiences like that are dramatic but they are also important experiences for your development in public relations because it isn't all rosy. This sort of experience was very sad, but it was as though it brings you out of yourself, and being able to work together with others was, well, this also highlights the fact that public relations has to look after all sides, you can't work in isolation from anyone.



You have to establish and maintain contact with people when you are in public relations, both for the benefit of your work and for your professional development. I have drawn satisfaction from taking an active part in the industry. But, it's also now a frustration for me. So many other people in the industry don't see things the same way. Take the 'Academy', for example, we always seem to be lacking the support we need. It's the same for any association, you have no trouble in getting people together to appear in the photo but when you really ask them 'What are you doing?' or you say to them, 'Hey you have to do this'. They say 'No, no, no, I can't, I can't. You know what? I have to go and do this...' And those of us who are more involved end up having to do it all ourselves. I think we have to make more of an effort to round people up, to get them involved and then to say to them, 'You are going to commit to this and if not, you know what? If not, tell me.' We have to start doing this or else we are never going to develop the profession. Furthermore, I would like to see us involving young people more; I think that in this respect we are failing, we are not responding to the needs of the young people.

I think our future success lies in integrating, integrating more professionals so that they unite in this cause and that through their experiences, public relations continues to professionalise. In the future, I see myself going on to help build the discipline. It is a new discipline that we are building and I want to see it become as solid as the Law, as medicine or as engineering. If we don't do this, the organisations are not going to buy in to the activity. Until recently, when there was a crisis in a company, the first thing they cut was public relations. It's incredible. It's incredible that they should cut it because, who is going to manage a crisis situation? Public relations. Who is going to manage the crisis situation with the media? Who knows the media the most? And generally, when there is a crisis situation the media are the first who are in front of you to see what they can get out of you. I found it totally amazing that when I was working in the insurance organisation, for example, that they had a plan in place, a budget, for when there was a crack in the stock market, so, they were able to get rid of people, people disappeared. Then when things improved, well, they recontracted people.

The success of the industry depends on us. I say to many people that a lot of public relations is about what you yourself want to give. We can come together and we can develop the industry for the better, but people need to make the effort. That would be my one aspiration for the future, that we develop and professionalise our industry. We can do this via associations like the 'Academy'. But, people need to support it. Because, if we don't change things, it will just become just another group of friends, a club of friends who meet up for a social get-together."



### 5.6.1 Narrative interpretation

Having worked as an in-house practitioner throughout her career, Cristina has diverse experience of public relations across a variety of organisations. Getting in to the industry was a product of circumstance; Cristina has learned everything she knows on the job. Having been fortunate to have worked with people who valued public relations and supported her, she has worked her way up. She does not perceive a lack of formal education in public relations as a problem, and believes that it is more important for an in-house practitioner to have informed knowledge of the operations of the organisation than an in-depth understanding of the rudiments of public relations. She believes that how public relations is practised, depends on what the organisation one works for wants it to be; in the hotel industry the focus was on banquets, events and hosting VIPs, whereas she explains that she has now come to realise that public relations is more strategic and varied, and that it is not always so rosy. Cristina also finds the erroneous attitudes towards public relations frustrating. Above all, Cristina believes that she found herself working in public relations as a result of her long-standing interest in communication and her desire to play a social role. She believes that public relations is about establishing and maintaining contacts with people - anyone who works in-house in public relations is the person who brings the business in, and who establishes the necessary contacts to enhance organisational operations. The public relations person, therefore, serves as a 'bridge' between the organisation and its publics. Cristina argues that to be able to build successful relationships and to network, a public relations practitioner needs to have charisma and the common sense to know what the boundaries are. She believes that they also need to be effective at persuasion; an effective in-house practitioner needs to be able to persuade their boss first and foremost. Furthermore, she argues that a public relations practitioner needs to be strategic, particularly those in-house. She believes that a practitioner has to be genuinely trustworthy and set an example. Cristina has a management role acting as editor for company publications and overseeing the activities of her executives. She also has a lot of contact with the media. A practitioner working within an organisation, Cristina argues, has the potential to have 'empowerment' and this is one of the significant differences she identifies between in-house and agency practitioners. Cristina believes that the success of an in-house practitioner depends on their position within the organisation and the relationship they are able to build with others. Having the opportunity to get involved in industry-related groups is important to Cristina, she found this invaluable on the early part of her career. Alongside the opportunity to meet VIPs when working in the hotel, Cristina cites having the opportunity to get involved in groups as one of the most satisfying aspects of her career. However, one of her greatest frustrations is that there



is not an association in existence today of the same calibre as there was in the past. Cristina blames a lot of this on lack of commitment on the part of practitioners and this is her aspiration for the future.

### 5.7 The Social Communicator Experience (Hector)

“Tell you a bit about what it is like to be a public relations practitioner within the Mexican government? Well, to start with, I don’t know if I am a public relations practitioner as such, what I am is a communications professional. I have been working in communication now for twenty years and I think what is interesting about the industry, well ‘public relations’ if that is what we are talking about, is that you have it around you all of the time, all day. Public relations makes up the social part of the social communication, of human communication. Yes, social communication, social communication is perhaps the better phrase to describe what it is I do here within the government. *Social*, something more, well, what in theory public relations should be all about: the mutual benefit for both parties.

Like I say, I am a communications professional. I studied ‘Communication Sciences’ at university and have been working for more than twenty years in what is image management, press relations and communication strategy. I think that this type of work is much more of a vocation that one has to work with people and through people. I have always felt it a vocation to help others in some way. It was something to do with my family connections too. My father set an example to me, he was manager of a cement factory, and so I got to see what working with people was all about. Every Sunday we had to go with him to the factory, we accompanied him. I saw the way he treated people, what he gave to people and the importance of image both internally and externally. As for my interest in the Media, my older brother is a journalist and ever since I was young I went with him on trips, on the jobs that he had. Then I tried it out at being a journalist as well and it was for that reason I went to university to study ‘Communication Science’. But, since then, life has brought me this way.

Over the years, I have worked as a reporter in communication offices, for private and public organisations, private banks; I even worked in a private PR agency for a while in the early days. However, the job that led me here was the one I had working for a very important construction company. This job gave me the opportunity to get to know lots of people, in particular, it gave me

the opportunity to carry out public relations with the man who is today the President of Mexico, Vicente Fox. At the time, President Fox was Governor of Guanajuato, and working as I was for this construction company and as part of my work I was told to 'go and see the Governor.' So I developed a working relationship with him. From there, I was also asked to become part of the 'National Rubber Industry Chamber' and to work on a new image campaign for them, along with ten other people. I remember that the presidents of Goodyear and Michelin said to me, 'We are looking to be able to bring high government officials to the plants' and one of those was again Vicente Fox. And it transpired that within two years, when President Fox was elected for government, he invited those of us working for the 'Chamber' to go and have a chat with him, and he asked me whether I would like to work with him. I expressed an interest in coming to work here. I had never worked in government, and whenever I had previously had the opportunity, and I had various invites, my wife had always discouraged me. But this time, she didn't have anything against the idea, in fact she was the one who started to insist, 'Why don't you go and work with the President? Why don't you help the President?'

So, that is how I ended up working for the government. And working as I do now within social communication, I have come to realise that some people see social communication and public relations as two separate things. Often the expert in social communication is...well, they are journalists by profession, and they have often been journalists for many years. They are regarded as very good journalists, but not public relations practitioners. Yet, having worked as I have, on both sides, in private and public organisations, I think that as communicators of any type, we are cut from different cloth from those working in other occupations. Someone who works in public relations in general has, as you might say, 'that feeling', has the contacts, has the personality to meet people, to identify who would be a good contact, to identify business opportunities, to identify the *right moment*. Somebody who works in public relations in general is very diplomatic, very cordial. Somebody who works in public relations, or who has the ability for public relations, in a conversation, in a circle, is the person who is always going to look at everyone when he or she talks - it's not just about talking to one person, but groups of people. Like I say, it is knowing how to meet people and to make contacts. In other words, public relations practitioners have all the diplomatic tools, the protocols, the social management. Perhaps it is that they are born naturals. Perhaps as a PR practitioner one has an ability, a specific 'social skill'. Public relations practitioners have to have very good manners and at the same time have a lot of '*Don de gente*', by that I mean somebody who gets on well with anyone, and knows how best to approach the media. You need to be able to identify with the product that you are selling, you have to wear the



shirt of the institution that you are representing, and to keep the media at a manageable distance. I see myself as a window or a door between the organisation I am representing, and the media.

I studied 'Communication Science' at university, as I say, but I don't believe that a PR practitioner has to have studied Communication. Communication is a skill which should come naturally and, anyway, it is easy to acquire knowledge of how to write a press release and things like that. What is important, however, is having full knowledge of the country you live in, of the laws, the social issues, the economic issues and the wider world.

In my opinion, public relations is about how you position the institution your represent within the media and also social groups, that's to say that it isn't exclusively about the press. You have to be able to talk to, and to reach, these people in different ways, not just via press releases. I should explain that within the government, PR is really carried out by two areas: one that focuses its attention on society, building more direct relations with NGOs and with other government sectors, and then there's us and we are social communication. We dedicate our efforts, more than anything, to the area of the press. Our work is exclusively concerned with press relations. In the 'new government' the focus is on access to communication. 'What is access to information?' You might ask. Knowing our rights as Mexicans, is the answer. It is in the Mexican Constitution but it was never implemented correctly before. In this department, it is our job to make this right public in a country where people are not very politically aware. This, I think, is the second step towards democratisation. For seventy years, government control of the press was a forgone conclusion. Now that we are in the process of transition, the media is more critical than they have ever been. Without a doubt, the relationship between public relations and the media has a lot to do with our national development.

My position here is to try and understand the media, to try and see how we can influence them, and this includes explaining to my staff that they have to understand what it is that they are reading when there are unfavourable reports. The key is to empathise with what is going on, although it is bad, and understand that it is all part of an evolution. Things in the country are different now, and you need to understand this to be able to be a good official spokesman. Back at the beginning of the presidential term, I was talking to a colleague closely involved with President Fox and he said to me very angrily one day, 'The problem with this change, with this transition, is that the media haven't understood what it means.' It was as if he was putting the blame on the media. And I said to him, 'Well, you've got problems then, because this is your job.'

If they don't understand, it is because you are not doing your job properly.' Everything has to evolve. In this sense, working in Social Communication you are contributing to the democratic process, to transparency, to the balance of power in this country.

Today, if the media speaks well of you, it is a result of what you are doing. We must emphasise everything the new President has been doing, and the achievements that this 'change' government has had, and there are a lot. So, the first thing is for the government to act, and the second, is for us to inform the people - to let them know that the government they voted for is working. The government is working, and is providing results. Because, if not, then people are going to question what it is that we do. These days the government can't 'support' the Media as they did during the previous 70 years when government officials paid all the publications to speak well of them. Today, we don't pay them anything. Today we are ethical in our practice.

I think that ethics in whatever job, whatever responsibility you have, is tremendously important. It's vital. Out of all of my personal values, ethics come out top. It is something that I learned as a youngster, throughout my career, and particularly now in the government with President Fox. I think that ethics are about change, behaviour, honesty, and it is this *change* that is being brought in after 70 years of corruption. Someone who works for the government, I think, works first and foremost for the good of the people. In fact, I work all the time with the community because we work for society. We work with society all the time, we are a company, or an institution I should say, that has to respond to the anxieties and the needs of society. So, in the work that I do, my clients are, my client is, society. Unlike in the private sector, where your work is seen in how much the sales increase, or in the number of new clients you bring in, both of which allows your organisation to make a profit, in the government there's no money involved. *Here*, it is about finding ways to advance the right of access to information, how to improve, how, in a country which is making certain steps in the direction of democracy, to carry it on to the second stage - which is accountability. Much of what we are here to do is about creating an image of the institution, of the federal government's programmes, and I spend, well, I think the vast majority of the day presenting the institution to the outside public. I have been working with the media now for many years; today I work a lot with them. Much of what we do is about developing relationships, it is very one-to-one with the editors, with the journalists, with the mass media because we don't have the money ourselves to pay for campaigns. Much is concerned with building up personal relationships.



The work is intense. We are involved in many very interesting activities. First and foremost, there is a lot of reading, advising -not only the secretaries, but advising on the institution's communication strategy in general- revising press releases that are going to be published the following day, revising the logistics of an event which will take place soon etc., We work in the day-to-day, and often the work on a particular day will depend on what the press is carrying when you look at it at seven in the morning. But, the great advantage that I think we have here is that no two days are ever the same. I get up normally at around six, six-thirty, in the morning and the first thing I do is look over the synthesis of the day's press which arrives at my house - the communications team here put it together. My chauffeur comes for me at seven-thirty, and on the way in the car with the chauffeur, I read the paper -normally two or three newspapers a day, in order to have different points of view. I go through everything and pick out anything which may be of significance to the Secretary. Then I call him on the phone, and in 10 or 15 minutes maximum, I offer him my take on the media that day, what the most important headlines are for the sector. From there, we talk over a few ideas I may have for what we should or should not do. Normally, well, almost everyday, I have a breakfast with some member of the press, some columnist or other, or some director/sub director of communication. I arrive at the office at around nine, nine-thirty, and the amount of work from then on is infinite – personnel management, managing resources, managing the communication strategy, responding to the media, advertising strategies... campaigns. I look over with my PA, everything that came in the day before. I normally go to eat at three or four in the afternoon, but there are days like today when I don't get the chance. When I don't have a dinner or an event on, I normally leave the office at around nine in the evening.

So, you are kept busy all day. For the first two years that I worked here, I worked Saturdays and Sundays, all day. And here they don't give you much of an opportunity to take holiday so I take perhaps three or four days, and then another three or four days, when I can, because the demands on me are so great. Even now I take work home with me almost everyday, and I work on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, just to get all the paperwork done. If not, I would be drowning in it! But you have got to make sure that when things aren't going quite so well, that you don't take your problems from work home with you too. My children, who are all grown up and married now, complain that I dedicate too much time to my work, but I am passionate about what I do, totally. I think you have to enjoy what you do, because there is nothing worse than thinking in the morning, 'Here we go again' or whatever. I have had jobs where I couldn't stand the boss, or I couldn't stand the work, but here it is a very gratifying job. And I spend so much time here,

well, I have all my toys here around me. Cars are my passion, as are horses. So, as I don't get to ride during the week, I keep a lot of toys in the office to remind me of life outside of work.

As there are such great demands on you, you are kept busy all day. I am out of the office a lot, depending on how many meetings there are. There are days when I go out with the Secretary on tour. We go out on tour a couple of days a week, to different states and it's a series of things all sewn together. We visit the State Governor, the local facilities, we hold press conferences in whichever state we happen to be in. We have meetings with businessmen, and so on. Yet, even when we are out touring, my daily routine of monitoring the media continues. In the hotel, I wake up and look over the local press before going to see my boss.

Communication is an exciting activity in whatever field you are in. Communication is exciting regardless of where you work, and you have to, well, love it and support it a lot. The fact that I have to keep myself so informed about everything that is going on means that when I go to a party, or enter into conversation with whomever, I have a subject of conversation, with whatever type of person. I know a little about everything, the Government, the economy, politics, and very diverse topics - because I have to keep myself informed about everything a little. Working in communications means that I can talk in public and so on. It allows you to very easily become involved in your children's' school, for example, in different forms of friendships... But if you were to ask me why it is that I'm here, and I earn much less now than I did before I hasten to add, I am here basically for one thing, I want my children, my grandchildren, to one day say, 'My Dad was working in President Fox's government to bring about positive change.' I want to see a better Mexico for them. So here, well, I get a lot of satisfaction from working here, I find that the satisfaction the job gives me far outweighs what I am able to give to it myself. It is a great opportunity, a privilege, that life has given me the opportunity to participate, and be involved in, my country and to do something for other people. I always had this pledge to do something for others, but in a company you can only do a limited amount because there are a thousand, or two or three thousand, workers in the best of situations, but here we are talking about millions of people whose lives we can impact.

In the future, I would like to bring government affairs even closer to the people, try to break with the tradition which exists in Mexico in politics and try to make things more 'user-friendly', more inclusive, more accessible. I would love it if public relations within the government, was not quite so set in stone. In general, we continue to work within certain guidelines regarding the activities



we carry out and the media we target. These are not written-down necessarily, but they are there. It would be nice to see people have a broader vision of how to do things. Public relations within the government is very much divided up. That is to say, there is not one central body dedicated specifically to everything involving public relations; instead, everyone does their own little bit. I look after the press side, others look after NGOS, others universities etc., There is not anything that amalgamates all areas. And as regards the industry in general, I think that what is important is to create an awareness of public relations, not only as the relationship between the media and the product or service, but as something that goes much further than that; towards creating a social conscience, towards building social and human relationships. This vision is lacking in Mexico, that is to say, public relations is always seen as the product, the client and that is it. It is a continuous battle, a continuous battle. Fortunately, as I say, more and more in Mexico, people are coming to appreciate the value of this work, and for this reason, so many communication consultancies have emerged; because the large companies are thinking more and more about contracting this type of work. I have been fortunate in that the majority of places in which I have worked during my professional career regarded public relations as something important. But I have had times when I have felt that I was swimming against the tide to convince the people that this work is much more than publishing things in the press or paying for news. You know? And even now, even here in the government, when I see things about this institution in the press, they say to me, 'Hey, how much did it cost you?' And I say to them, 'Nothing'. 'What do you mean nothing?' they say. Well, paid-for publicity is one thing, communicating information is another and this is our work in the day-to-day and it's perhaps not noticed much. It is information generated via telephone calls, from lunches, breakfasts, visits, tours, interviews, and so on. I have frequently come up against this type of problem and I think that I will continue to. It's a daily fight of persuasion.

So, as an industry, we have to do something ourselves, and that is public relations for public relations. We have to make an effort to get people to realise that our work is not nothing more than going from cocktail party to cocktail party with a glass in the hand saying 'Hello. How are you? Cheers'. It is much more than that. This would start with education, I would love to see specialisations in universities, no longer 'Communication Sciences', which encompasses everything. I would like to see more professionalisation of communicators, of public relations practitioners, and a professional association which unites the industry. That is another thing that is lacking in Mexico. In Mexico we share much camaraderie amongst our immediate circles, but it is rare that you hear anyone talk well of someone else, everyone is me, me, me. So this I would

also like to see, I would love to see an association... I mean there are associations, but in name only. They are more like groups, groups which at the end of the day are more concerned with the social side of things, 'Hey, we are going to get together to raise a glass...' You know? There is not a concept of a guild, nothing like that. And, well, on a personal level, I would love to be able to have the time to visit other countries to see how my colleagues work. So I suppose that in an ideal situation, the future would be about education; that in my work here I am able to educate the public on what their rights are and what the government can do for them; that there is more education as regards the profession of public relations. By this I refer as much to developing university-level education in the subject as educating the public - so that they change their negative perceptions of the activity. Finally, on a personal level, that I might become more educated, that I might have the opportunity to learn more about the activity. And, well, this I suppose is a little bit of the world we live in as social communicators."

### **5.7.1 Narrative interpretation**

Working in the government, Hector is not sure whether he regards himself as a public relations practitioner, but rather, as a communications professional. He recognises a difference between public relations and his role in social communication, which equates more with journalism and media relations. He started out as a reporter, but felt a vocation to help others in some way. Hector has worked in a variety of private and public organisations, and came to work for the government as a result of establishing a previous business relationship with the now President of the Republic. Hector believes that practitioners of any type are cut from the same cloth, and that communication is a skill which should come naturally. Somebody who works in public relations, he argues, is diplomatic, empathic and has a certain social skill. A qualification in communication is not essential, but a practitioner working in government should have sound knowledge of the country and its social and economic issues. The majority of Hector's work is dedicated to media relations, raising awareness of government activities through state visits, and acting as personal advisor to the Secretary on media issues. He admits that this is not easy, as the media are very critical of government activity. In advancing the right of access to information, Hector says that his principal client is society. Hector believes that he is contributing to the democratic process, and this is his principal motivation – to work to provide his children with a better Mexico. Hector perceives of his work as being intense, he often doesn't leave the office until late, and finds it hard to take holiday. As a result, he keeps many of his 'toys' in the office to remind him of his life outside of work. Despite these minor frustrations, Hector finds communication an exciting



activity to be involved in and the satisfaction that he gets from working in the government, far outweighs what he feels he is, personally, able to give to it. For Hector, it is a 'privilege' to be doing what he is doing. In the future, he would like to see more education opportunities for the industry, but also to see public relations become recognised as something which goes towards creating a social conscience and building social and human relationships.

## 6. An Interpretation of PRP Culture in Mexico City

To cite the words of Polyani, (1958: 352) which appeared in Peter Critten's (2005) paper on 'appreciative inquiry' in organisations, "*the words I have spoken, am yet to speak, mean nothing: it is only I who mean something by them. And, as a rule, I do not focally know what I mean and though I would explore my enabling up to a point, I believe that my words... must mean more than I shall ever know if they are to mean anything at all.*" My purpose in this chapter is to 'make sense' of and provide *an* interpretation (amongst several possible interpretations) of PRP culture in Mexico City from the meanings communicated by the practitioners in their narratives of their occupational lifeworlds and the observational data I collected. As I introduced on page 70, this chapter is about searching for links through discussing the key concepts that might go some way to offering an explanation of PRP culture in Mexico. Throughout my analysis, I have sought analytic generalisation - whereby particular findings are discussed within the context of broader theories in order to understand public relations as an occupational culture. I will start by considering some of the key elements of the Latin American 'School' of public relations and discuss the extent to which these elements are reflected in the empirical data from Mexico. I will then move on to identify the key patterns emerging within PRP culture in Mexico City and to discuss these within the context of broader sociological theories.

### 6.1 The Latin American School of Public Relations

Before considering the themes central to the experiences of the public relations practitioners in Mexico City, it is important to consider how their occupational practices might fit within the 'Latin American School of Public Relations'.

The CONFIARP Code of Ethics (1986, as cited in Molleda 2000: 519) states that: *Public relations activity should...be substantiated with freedom, justice, accord, equality and respect for human dignity; [these are] components of any society that wants to...propitiate progress and the well-being of its people, by reassuring solidarity, protection of human rights, and satisfaction of the people's essential needs.*"

As the Mexican public relations practitioner-academic, Carlos Bonilla suggests (personal interview), the Latin American '*Corriente*' (current) or 'School' of public relations has a more humanist focus, and is based on acceptable social behaviour and harmony. It is about integrating



the organisation in its environment and, therefore, contributing to the development of the community and the organisation. Bonilla believes that the philosophy underpinning the Latin American approach to public relations is grounded in the Mexican Statement approved by the World Assembly of Public Relations and endorsed by 34 national public relations associations meeting in Mexico City in August 1978. Whilst this statement provides an 'agreed' definition of public relations, Latin Americans strongly believe that when translated into English, the meaning has been significantly misinterpreted.

The English version reads: *"Public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest."*

This is in contrast to the Spanish version which intended to emphasise the possible community role of public relations in promoting human interaction and integration (Lavalle, 1997: 20). This version might be translated as (author's translation): *"The professional practice of public relations requires systematic research and planned participative action between legitimate interests, in order to promote the development of both the organisation, those social groups associated with it, and the community of which it is part."*

The Latin American School has at least seven distinctive elements, as identified by Juan Carlos Molleda and Mary Ferguson (2004: 2):

- It is embedded in the ideas of freedom, justice, harmony, equality and respect for human dignity.
- It aims to contribute to the well-being of the human, urban and social environments where organisations operate.
- It responds to the historical and socioeconomic reality of the region.
- It focuses on the community's interest.
- It establishes confidence without manipulation and uses communication to reach accords, consensus, and integrated attitudes between an organization and its internal and external publics.
- It sees public relations practitioners as agents of social transformation or as change agents.
- It views public relations as fundamentally essential for integration and consensus.

At the XXVIII InterAmerican Congress of Public Relations held in Caracas, Venezuela in 1987, the InterAmerican Federation of Public Relations (CONFIARP), emphasised its belief that public relations should be regarded as a necessary support in the moralisation of business (Perez-Senac, 1990: 16); the public relations practitioner, they contended, should be regarded as a 'developer of development' (p.19). The professional values are recognised in Latin America are those of self-esteem, acceptance of others, solidarity, transparency, symmetry, strategic vision and social responsibility. Several of these values are 'ideal' and the socioeconomic and cultural situations the public relations practitioner might find herself in would dictate the extent to which she is able to emulate them in her daily working practices. However, at the core of the 'integration' theme, which is a key element of the conception of public relations in Latin America (Molleda, 2000), is valuing fellow human beings. As the following interpretation will suggest, this is something which is valued by practitioners in Mexico City. It is something which they seemed to act out in all areas of their occupational lifeworlds and carry over into their social lives. These core values, or system of reference, will form the basis of the critical assertion on the potential for cultural intermediation presented in chapter 8.

Mexico City is characteristic of all seven distinctive elements of the Latin American School of Public Relations, yet empirical findings suggest that Mexican practice takes this model one step further, placing particular emphasis on the 'integration' theme in developing relationships in which persons are valued. Identifying how patterns have developed within the Mexican PRP culture provides us with a deeper understanding of the underlying premises of that culture (Albert, 1996). As I suggested in chapter 2, cultures are dynamic. Some of the patterns communicated both in the narratives and described here may already be adapting and developing. However, there are three themes central to each narrative within which the cultural patterns emerge. These are identity, interpersonal communication, and ethics. I will discuss each of these themes in turn drawing on quotes from interviews, observational data, and narrative anecdotes for illustration. In the character of a socially constructed account, whilst the emphasis will be placed on the experiences and perspectives of the practitioners, we will also need to consider how these themes fit within the broader patterns of Mexican culture.

### **Developments and Identity of the Practice**

The 'Public Relations Executive' narrative suggests that public relations is suffering something of an identity crisis in Mexico City. This is a theme that was communicated to varying degrees by



the practitioners I met. We might, therefore, assume that it was a common frame of reference for them. Indeed, the Mexican practitioner-author of public relations, Carlos Navarette (1998: 114), suggested that public relations was suffering from the 'original identity crisis'. The practitioners' opinions as to the origins of public relations in Mexico highlighted some interesting patterns. The majority of them believed that 'professional' practice was '[en] una etapa naciente', still in its growth phase. Public relations did not develop in the country until after the Second World War, when it emerged as a result of subsequent national development programs. The industry later went in to decline as a result of the state's nationalisation of industry (Participant 14). There were, however, clusters of practitioners who equated public relations with natural forms of communication. As we saw in the 'agency director' story, some practitioners believed that public relations was practised by all human beings, and that it had been in existence ever since the development of verbal communication between humans (Participant 30 and Participant 32).

In 1977, before the US model of public relations really took a grip on Mexican practice, the Mexican practitioner, Jorge Rios Szalay wrote in his book 'Relaciones Publicas: Su administracion en las organizaciones' (Public Relations: Its Administration in Organisations):

*"...in Mexico we find good examples of the origin of public relations. The Aztec governments had already realised the importance of listening to public opinion and projecting a favorable image to the public... there were various people with the title 'Tecuhitli' (dignitary or Sir), whose function was, amongst other things, to listen to the complaints or opinions from the people. Above anything 'el Tecuhitli' is the people's representative before the authorities" (p.13).*

The significance of Mexico's national history for the practice of public relations in the country was something that I noted in particular from attending the XXV CONFIARP Conference in November 2004, hosted by RELAPO (Association of Public Relations Practitioners of the West Coast). One of the tasks identified by the President of this association, Carlos Brambilla Navarro, was to dignify a profession whose roots, they believed, could be traced back to the earliest stages of humanity and which, in spite of the increasing levels of technology now in society, were still needed. Remembering the great respect that the ancient Mexicans had for tradition, RELAPO uses the term 'Huehuetlatolli' to describe their approach to public relations. 'Huehuetlatolli' has its roots in the Aztec language, 'Nahutal': 'Huehuetl' meaning 'ancient' or 'old' and 'Tlatolli' meaning 'word'. The term refers to the figure in Aztec society whose responsibility it was to pass on ethical values and wisdom to the public. Members of RELAPO understand the importance of

the function of the Huehuetlatolli as not only someone who transmitted verbally the vast and rich traditions, but also as someone with a huge responsibility. He was the patron of community interaction (or mediator), and used a model of communication which they believed could be imitated today to enable Mexicans to live in order and peace, whilst at the same time encouraging prosperity and cultural growth. This is a significant theme as, if established, it might question the assertion that public relations is more often regarded as a twentieth century phenomenon (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 3).

There was confusion amongst the practitioners I interviewed as to how the boundaries were drawn around what could be defined as 'professional' public relations and those groups in Mexican society regarded as employing public relations 'techniques' in order to communicate their messages. As one practitioner told me, Mexicans usually associate public relations with influential groups such as journalists and politicians, yet there are other small influential groups operating in regional towns who employ public relations techniques (Participant 32). It could be parents with their children, a religious movement, or small populations of people working in corn or garlic farming who are almost like small communities in themselves. There is very little written and recorded about these 'other types of PR', they are not typically professionally trained as public relations practitioners, and they have a low profile on a national level. They are carrying out what some practitioners referred to as '*relaciones humanas*', rather than '*relaciones publicas*' (the theme of Chapter 7).

In his work in India and other Asian countries, Krishnamurthy Sriramesh developed an interpersonal (or personal influence) model of public relations which illustrates how practitioners develop personal influence with key individuals, particularly in the media, the government, and among activists. Such practitioners used hospitality relations (giving gifts, hosting dinners and cocktails) and media junkets to humour relevant publics from whom they could later claim favours (Sriramesh, Kim, Takasaki, 1999: 278). In Mexico City, whilst interpersonal relationships with key individuals are highly valued, the concept of interpersonal communication goes much further. Public relations in Mexico has traditionally involved developing influential personal relationships between business leaders and politicians. In addition to this, and as we saw in 'The Old School' practitioner account, emphasis was also placed on public relations as a 'can' or host, a 'Senor/Senora Fix it' and media relations traditionally involved paying journalists or offering them favours. Whilst all practitioners hoped that the days of this corrupt practice was over, as we shall see as the discussion progresses, some elements of the traditional approaches practice



remain. RELAPO now encourages that public relations in Mexico be regarded as “*building bridges, making links and overcoming obstacles: making things happen*” (CONFIARP 2004: 90), and this was also reflected in several of the interviews.

There was almost overall agreement amongst the practitioners that I spoke to that the activity as it is recognised today developed firstly within larger international companies - primarily those of US origin, and that the ‘professional’ practice was reborn as a result of free trade agreements – particularly the NAFTA agreement which came into force in 1994. The *new* industry took on an American ‘look’ (Participant 14) and the attitude of many of the practitioners was that colleagues working for the larger US organisations were of the same mindset as the North Americans. As Maria Aparecida Ferrari (2003: 383) suggests is the case in Chile, the absence of indigenous research and the ensuing lack of dissertations in public relations has meant that Mexico has become dependent on foreign concepts and theories that often bear little or no relationship to Mexican culture and identity. The practitioner academic, Carlos Bonilla said in a personal interview “...*my paradigm [of public relations] is not the same as that of the US, it’s a long way off and I don’t think that they are going in the direction they should be going in. I believe that the role of public relations is much more social than marketing. They [the North Americans] don’t consider it to have role in development, a social role, it’s a tool of support for marketing and that’s it, and I think that it should be, it could make an invaluable contribution to the development of our towns and villages...*”

Despite the differing patterns of thought regarding the ‘true’ origins of professional public relations practice, the vast majority of practitioners emphasised that the industry was still evolving in Mexico, “*It’s changing, thankfully. It’s changing in me, it’s changing in the people who work with me, and its changing in the marketplace*” (Participant 8). Practitioners regarded the industry as evolving from being merely a function for putting on social events or hosting important people, taking on more significance in Mexican society. The impact of globalisation, and US influences in particular, in Mexico has been considerable. Practitioners thought that in order for the country to progress, it had to have a global vision, it had to ‘participate’ in global affairs (Interview 8). As a consequence, Mexican public relations agencies also needed to be global in their practice. The extent to which the practitioners were happy to embrace these influences varied. Many agreed that they did not consider it a problem and that they were keen to have the opportunity to learn from colleagues elsewhere. However, there was also a sense of unease with attempts from some international agencies to apply models which in reality did not

have anything to do with the Mexican culture, *"...there's a lot of US influence, above all in the Mexican market, with the American influence, but Mexico is Mexico, it has its own characteristics and it is very different... Here, I think that [the solution] should be to find other ways to, to arrive at the same result. It isn't the same [here], the people behave differently"* (Participant 15). Another practitioner added, *"the newspapers are different, the journalists are different, the environment is different, it's another story, another culture, another language"* (Participant 22).

The attitude of practitioners towards the merging of US practice with Mexican ideas, was that it was something positive, *"...fortunately, I have seen Mexican firms that try and take the best from the US ways of doing things but then apply them to the Mexican reality and that is really pleasing to see"* (Participant 22). *" But yes, you have to understand that...you work in Mexico, you have to have the Mexican way of thinking, and this is going to help you.... In the case of public relations... if you don't know the mentality of the government, if you don't know the mentality of the press, you don't know the market,... I know, I have seen various agencies who have come and it hasn't worked out in Mexico"* (Participant 8).

Steps are being made to carve an identity for public relations *'a la Mexicana'*. Carlos Bonilla in his book, *'Relaciones Publicas: Factor de Competitividad para empresas e Instituciones'* (Public Relations: Competitive Factor for Firms and Institutions) remarks that the fight for the public relations market in Mexico has become something of a war between elephants and ducks and that, for the moment, the latter have won the first battle. This tendency indicates that the large public relations companies are losing clients - due principally, Bonilla contends, to their high prices and lack of personalised attention.

### **6.2.1 The Nature of the Practice and the 'Character' of the Public Relations Practitioner**

There seemed to be some confusion amongst the practitioners I talked to as to what should, and should not, be defined as public relations. The general attitude was that public relations was a diverse activity which operated in a variety of areas within Mexican society. It was, therefore, difficult to define: *"everyone has a different definition... of public relations and for this reason it should be understood as, as a combination of elements from different areas and fields,"* (Participant 5). Essentially, practitioners believed the public relations activities would be carried out either according to the demands of the particular organisation (Participant 6), or the medium



in which the practitioner is working (Participant 23). A Mexican phrase which might best describe the activity of public relations, and the role of the practitioner, is *'un chile de todos los moles'* – a bit of everything.

Many regarded themselves as *'publirrelacionistas'* (public relations practitioners), whilst others, particularly those working in social communication within the government or public institutions, referred to themselves as *'comunicologos'* (communicologists). *"...They are two completely different things. For me, an expert in social communication is different. They are two totally separate things"* (Participant 26). Those who regarded themselves as *'communicologists'* were typically practitioners who had entered public relations from a journalism background – either professional or academic- and the public relations activities they carried out focused on press/media relations. Filby and Wilmott (1988: 341) noted a similar antipathy in their study of ideologies and contradictions in a US public relations department. They identified contrasting *'informational'* and *'promotional'* ideologies of public relations. They argued that the relationship between those holding to the promotional and informational ideologies of public relations was characterised by *"a mutual discrediting of the others' ideology as each was labeled as peripheral to the 'real work' of public relations."* Carlos Bonilla (personal interview – April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004) believes that this difference in attitude in Mexico City is little more than a question of semantics: *"How is it possible that a communicator in the public sector says to you, 'No. I don't do public relations... I am in a press office'?... I think that it is more of a problem of semantics... the majority of those working in public relations don't identify with public relations, the term is very over used and, therefore, people are ashamed to say that they work in PR or there are others who are working in what, from our perspective, is PR, without even realising it..."* He goes on to say, *"I think that public relations is quite a difficult concept to define because the general public identify it as being parties and cocktails."*

The biggest frustration for practitioners in Mexico City was how the profession was perceived by the general public. Often even those seeking employment in public relations did not have a clear idea of what it is all about. Most people associated public relations practitioners with the typical stereotype of the charmer who is always at parties and knows everyone, the typical *'socialite'*. As we saw in all five narratives, practitioners found such erroneous attitudes exasperating. I went to do a follow-up interview with one young practitioner (Participant 20), following the publication of an article about five of *'the best public relations practitioners in Mexico'* in one of the most widely-read social magazines. *"What they wrote"* he said, *"made me super sad. I mean, because*

*none of the five....what they do is put on the best parties in Mexico...those of us here in the office laughed loads at this article...*" (Emphasis added). Despite this, even some of the practitioners themselves, particularly the younger ones, agreed that public relations practitioners were regarded as people who are 'in the know' and 'up with the latest fashions'. They always dress to the latest style and know the best places to go to eat or drink.

The lack of consensus over what does, and does not, fall within the remit of public relations practice in Mexico City, has provoked confusion as regards the 'profile' of the public relations practitioner (Bonilla, 2002: 138). The practitioners themselves suggested that a successful practitioner is someone known as a '*Don de gente*', a Mexican phrase which describes a person who combines a natural flair for communication with an interest in people. They would also have a strategic vision, a knowledge and appreciation of culture, and an interest in learning. One practitioner told me that, in her opinion, to be successful and to be able to justify their place in the global marketplace, a Mexican public relations practitioner would need more skills than they do in the United States or Europe. Not only would they have to understand their own field, they would have to have a degree, to be able to speak English almost perfectly (and possibly more languages), and to understand their own and other cultures and how to adapt to their needs (Participant 32).

Interestingly, there was a lack of general agreement on whether it was necessary for a public relations practitioner to be outgoing, with a flair for socialising. Whilst the majority believed that the nature of the person went hand-in-hand with the job, there were others who thought that those who were shy and timid could be just as successful in communicating important messages, in a few cases practitioners believed that, where necessary, people could learn to adapt their character to the nature of the job. One of the practitioners I met expressed his belief that he had succeeded in public relations as a result of having a 'character' that suited the job, yet emphasised the fact that he was certainly not a party-animal or the person who told all the best jokes, nor had he ever been - he regarded himself as shy (Participant 11). Significantly, one of the 'younger' practitioners I spoke with (Participant 9) suggested that as public relations comprises several sub-specialisations, there would be different types of people that would be suited to different aspects of the job. Events organisation, for example, would require a certain 'type' of person – someone who relishes in sorting out the little details.



Despite different patterns of thought regarding what was, and was not, public relations and the profile and skills of public relations practitioners, all of those whom I met seemed to communicate a particular sense of 'character'. A 'character' can be defined as the sum of acquired tendencies, including sentiments and habits, that are built up to some extent consciously under the direction of experience, intelligence and will (Tredgold, 1965). This definition suggests that, as much as a practitioner's occupational character will have developed as a result of occupational socialisation processes, a significant element will also comprise natural tendencies and sentiments. When they moved away from the somewhat textbook, 'professional' discourse and talked about their own experiences, the practitioners offered a flavour of the ways in which they thought they and their colleagues related to the world around them, both inside and outside of work (this is something that will be discussed in greater detail in section 6.3). As the narratives illustrate, the general feeling amongst practitioners was that public relations was not a hat that you took off at the end of the working day, but rather something that you practised all of the time. One practitioner I interviewed who worked in social communication (Participant 5) suggested that, for him, working in public relations had something to do with the nature of his character because *"there are people who say...Don't you tire of being with people here, with people there?"* "Yes", he agreed *"...you do have to have a special character."* Moreover, one agency director in particular (Participant 30) regarded it an obligation for every human being to practice public relations naturally every day.

Many participants drew satisfaction from their work, their job enabled them not only to apply their skills in communication but also to draw on their natural personalities and, more importantly, to continue learning. The practitioners seemed to relish the opportunity to learn more about their own culture and history, as well as those of other countries. More particularly, however, they emphasised the importance of learning about, and from, the people that they met in the day-to-day. Regardless of whether or not they identified with the 'profession' of public relations, the practitioners I interviewed did identify with the art and philosophy of human communication - recognising the needs of the individual and building long-lasting relationships. Having considered the complexities surrounding the 'identity' of public relations as an occupation and, more significantly, the 'character' of those working within it, in the following discussion I will consider two of the most salient themes which appear to 'identify' the public relations practitioner in Mexico City and, consequently, the nature of the practice they perform.

### **6.3 Interpersonal Communication and Networking**

As we saw in the discussion of the 'identity' of public relations and the 'character' of the public relations practitioner, some key themes emerged which might enable us to further understand the nature of the practitioner character in Mexico City. The two most significant themes were a keen interest in, and respect for, people and the desire to be ethical, responsible and humanitarian in action. In this section, the discussion turns to that of 'interpersonal communication'. Interpersonal communication is an ambiguous term that must be defined for this section to be clear. To cite W. Timothy Coombs (2001: 106), 'Much like public relations, *interpersonal communication* has myriad definitions'. The idea of interpersonal communication is difficult to separate from the idea of relationship. In fact, many definitions of interpersonal communication are actually definitions of relationship. Steve Duck (1992: 5) regards interpersonal communication as the long-term and short-term relationships that we have with other people, which influence our thoughts and behaviour so strongly.

The general opinion of the participants in this study was that, in general, people read very little in Mexico. There is a significant class divide when it comes to the readership of the national daily newspapers, and even then the higher classes are thought to associate more with American or European publications such as Wall Paper and Time (Participant 20). The television, however, is one means of communication that is important throughout the country. This might be because Mexico is often regarded as a high context culture with high uncertainty avoidance, where people need to have proper communication and obtain necessary information in order to reduce their uncertainty (Yamaguchi, 2005). In such cultures the person is, typically, more important than the message (Samovar and Porter, 2003). People, therefore, would look to feel that they had an association with a personality. As the Mexican practitioner, Alejandro Gonzalez Munoz (2001: 70) observes, "*Mexico is a society captivated by audiovisual stimuli, so the effectiveness of the message depends on how it is transmitted.*" As a result, public relations practice in Mexico would tend to use the person to pass on the information, relying on opinion formers and personal influencers as important tools to communicate messages face-to-face or via television. Moreover, image management is also an important part of public relations activity (Participant 27 and Participant 30).

As each of the narratives illustrate, as an occupational culture, public relations in Mexico City is high on social capital. The overwhelming majority of practitioners whom I met and talked to were passionate about people and this interest was reflected in their occupational lifeworlds. Not only did they regard the ability to relate to people as being a professional obligation, but also it was in



their nature, *"We are people who know how to talk a lot, we know how to form groups and we don't find it at all difficult to talk to people we don't know"* (Participant 16). *"I can say that for me, public relations is relations with people"* (Participant 25).

Some of the elements of 'The Old School' practitioner story, in particular, reflect the comments made by one practitioner who is now retired, yet was still actively involved in the 'professionalisation' of the industry in Mexico (Participant 1). Having had the opportunity to be in her company on several occasions, I began to realise that she was a very well-known character and was respected and cherished by everyone in the industry who knew her. Public relations was her life; she was born with a love of people, an interest in what was going on around her. She commented that, for her, business was all about relationships with people and that the most important thing in public relations was to try and put yourself in the shoes of the other person. She genuinely believed that if everyone knew how to adapt to understand others, everything would be different. Because people, she thought, have a tendency to impose their ideals on others without thinking about the other person and what they want. We were sitting in a café having coffee one day when she commented about our surroundings. There we were, she said, in a typical little Mexican café, it was a comfortable place and was communicating a certain message. She then compared it to a restaurant overflowing with people, *that*, she believed, would be communicating something quite different. She considered this to be like the personality of every person, and that this was something I had to learn. This practitioner talked about the obvious class divide in Mexico City, and her frustration with people who would not move beyond certain areas of the city. There were people she had met who would not go into the centre, for example, almost through fear and would say 'What's for me there?' In contrast, she believed in people who would be comfortable in going to Santa Fe, one of the richest districts in the city, and to Tepito, one of the poorest. The attitude of this practitioner, in particular, is perhaps illustrative of Philip Lee's (2005) recommendation that people cannot communicate with other people if they consider them 'inferior' in any sense. Communication in a 'free society', as Lee suggests, presupposes the recognition that all human beings are of equal worth.

This interest, tolerance, and respect for people was not just communicated in the narrative experiences of the older generation. I also met a younger practitioner, in her early thirties, (Participant 3) who commented that she liked everyday to personally say 'good morning' to each of her colleagues in order to feel how they were, whether they were up or down in mood, and whether they were feeling well. This, she believed, was important in order to begin a productive



working day. She suggested that working in public relations was a way of life, and that her work had taught her how to be tolerant and to recognise the strengths in everyone. She believed that all of the people around her enriched her in some way - her colleagues, clients, even people she met crossing the street. When I asked her about her ethics as a practitioner and whether or not she had any companies in mind with whom she could not work, she answered that she could not work with anyone who would try to manipulate the way of thinking of the people and their ways of behaving. She could not work for anyone who would invade someone's personal space, their own personal identity - whether it be within an organisation, a group of friends or a community. *"If they wanted to do that,"* she said, *"then we would stop being Patricia, or Susana or Juana and we would become a computer."* *"Computers,"* she commented, *"are very intelligent...but they don't feel, they don't cry."* Sometimes, she believed, public relations agencies might not be completely up-to-date with the idea of technology but that they wanted to continue to attend to the needs of, and listen to, people in order to know how they feel and what they thought. The narratives of both of these practitioners seem to support the assertion expressed in Clifford Christian and Michael Traber's (1997) book on communication ethics and universal values that *"[a] philosophical analysis of Latin American societies sees in the insistence on cultural identity, an affirmation of the unique worth of human beings"* (pxi-xii)

Furthermore, it was not just female practitioners who shared this human-focused outlook on life. An agency director whom I interviewed (Participant 8) told me that he thought that his agency had a certain profile: personal involvement in clients' problems, which he regarded as vitally important. He said that he suffered when any of his clients experienced a crisis. A public relations practitioner, for him, would have to be very 'human'. He assumed a paternalistic approach to his work. I use the term 'paternalistic' here in the context in which Arlie Hochschild defined it when talking about paternalistic companies. Hochschild regarded such companies as being those which typically try to *"fuse a sense of personal satisfaction with a sense of company well-being and identity"* (Hochschild, 1983: 132). Moreover, this practitioner regarded his agency as an extension of his family and commented that the young practitioners who entered would indeed have to have an ability to 'analyse', but they also needed to be able to listen. When applied to a work context, the family culture approach promotes trust (Watson, 2003: 185). As Clifford G. Christians (1997: 7) suggests, a sense of 'parental accountability' is an archetype of natural accountability - that which is grounded ontologically and serves as a human responsibility (or obligation) that contributes to a moral philosophy. This practitioner believed that personal involvement and a familiar approach would increase the level of trust that the client had in his



agency. In addition, another participant working in social communication (Participant 12) thought that the key to successful public relations was being able to put yourself in the shoes of others, and to understand what was going on. He believed that it was very important to work with people who were of the same outlook, who had the same attitudes, and who behaved in the same way. To maintain successful communication, he contended, there had be respect for each other's points of view.

As Archer and Fitch (1994: 83) suggest, Latin American societies are very particularistic. People are thought of in terms of in-groups and out-groups, and social relationships are more predetermined by in-group membership than personal affinity, *"[t]echnical skills are not sufficient; to be successful requires being connected. Being plugged into the group can lead to more successful organisational life...work and personal life are not separated. Getting jobs more consistently relies on whom you know than what you know."* To a certain extent, the experiences related in the previous narratives reflect this observation. The character of the people working in public relations in Mexico City enabled them to build effective interpersonal networks both inside and outside of their immediate workplace. One of the agency directors I spoke to (Participant 14 – view supported by Participant 7) said that she believed that one of the greatest benefits of being in this profession was that she got to know lots of people from different fields, different environments and different professional levels, as well as and people with different professional knowledge, and this, she believed, enriched her a lot personally.

Practitioners used interpersonal strategies to get their work done – they developed a rapport with a network of key people. As Daniel Goleman (1996: 162) suggests, things go smoothly for [those who] put time into cultivating good relationships with people whose services might be needed in a crunch as part of an instant ad hoc team to solve a problem or handle a crisis. Several practitioners thought that part of the work of the public relations practitioner was to go out and make 'liaisons' (Participant 7) and to open doors (Participant 28). The responsibility of public relations was to bring in business. One in-house practitioner commented that the reason why she joined so many professional associations was because, by being well integrated in to the 'PR scene', she had the opportunity to network and to be introduced to other 'contacts' in the media industry and business in general.

As the young practitioner referred to above (Participant 3) illustrates, the majority of the practitioners believed it vital to work as part of a team - be it in a public relations agency, or a

large organisation. One of the in-house practitioners I interviewed who worked for one of the largest hotels in the city (Participant 28) commented, *"if you are walking around the hotel, walking around at the events...they [colleagues in the hotel] come to value what you are doing there[...]. If I don't have this, then my things don't go well."* A young practitioner (Participant 16) added that public relations cannot work in isolation *"... we don't work on our own, but we create teams. So the ability to work together is also, I think, the ideal...."* Another young public relations executive (Participant 19) valued the open nature of his colleagues in the agency in which he worked, *"...they are very open people, very sociable, people who talk to you and try to transmit knowledge, to encourage you...They are people who, above all, really look after their team and are conscious of the fact that the best way to success is that everyone feels comfortable..."*

Despite the general consensus amongst the practitioners that to be successful in public relations you had to be able to collaborate with colleagues, it was interesting that the subject of membership of professional associations produced varying responses. The public relations practitioners I met belonged to the upper-middle class within society. General sociological observations suggest that this class would typically operate in academic or professional organisations, decentralised public agencies, NGOs, political parties or civil associations. The majority of practitioners who were members of a professional association were members of the Mexican Academy of Public Relations, which is based solely in Mexico City. I attended a couple of their breakfast seminars and, from my observations together with the interviews, I sensed that the feeling amongst this group of practitioners was that they believed it important to meet with other colleagues in the industry and to learn from the experiences of others, *"I think that it is about integrating, integrating with more professionals, that they unite and that through their experiences, they continue to professionalise public relations. This is what a group like the Academy of Public Relations is doing, and is trying to do, and will continue to do..."* (Participant 6). *"...you make friends with people in the industry, and this allows you to share experiences. And I think that that enriches you a lot because you can't just stay in your office and hope to work developing external relations"* (Participant 25).

Moreover, in accordance with models of cultures with traits of collectivism (see Hofstede, 1991), we might assert that a professional association would be more people-oriented with a lot of group support and an emphasis on providing individual learning. Feelings of affiliation and belonging might be favoured. Yet, there was an attitude of much frustration amongst those practitioners who



were involved in professional associations that there were not more people doing the same “...we are the same people...It's the same going around the block” (Participant 26). This appears characteristic of Mexican culture. In a study reported by the Federal Institute for Access to Public Information, 56% of Mexicans considered it difficult to organise themselves together with other citizens to work towards common causes (Reyes Heróles, 2004: 20). Some of the practitioners I spoke with thought that the entry criteria for being accepted as a member of this association, being no less than five years of experience, was too high, given that there was not a ‘sibling’ association to represent young practitioners and students of communication: “...academies are elitist groups, they are, um, collegiate groups of high selectivity and, well, it is good to make them selective and that nobody else participates because, as they say in French, they are the ‘crème de la crème’ No? But this has to exist in the context of there being a professional association below it that involves students, that involves professionals who are just starting out in the industry to create a forum for discussion about the activity and then for there to be a higher body which is more selective where there are all the people of note...” (Carlos Bonilla, Personal Interview).

In the past there was a very strong professional association in Mexico which was created in 1955 and reached a peak in the 1970s. Mexico was the pioneer in the creation of professional associations in the whole of Latin America (Carlos Bonilla, personal interview). The FIARP (Latin American Federation of Public Relations) was created under the initiative of a practitioner working in Mexico, Frederico Sanchez Fogarty, at a time when there was a boom in public relations. ‘The Mexican Magazine of Public Relations’ (*La Revista Mexicana de Relaciones Publicas*) was also published for a good while in this era. But the association folded and went under. In their work on public relations in Colombia, Juan Carlos Molleda and Maria-Angeles Suarez (2005) argue that the commercial and political dynamics of the location may have an impact on the extent to which the professional community is organised. As we have already seen, the new ‘open’ economy in Mexico has brought with it increased personal competition and individualist values. Melvin Sharpe and Roberto Simoes (1996: 292) add: “...the visiting American Speaker to South America is frequently confronted with professional organizations that compete and downgrade each other's abilities and performance to the detriment of the public relations profession's advancement. This appears to be a carryover from Spain where there is a real effort to control competition by keeping competitors out of professional organization where membership carries status. Faced with such exclusion, practitioners create new competing public relations organisations.” A similar observation was also made by the former President of CONFIARP, Horacio Gegunde, in his introduction to the recent book published online by the



professional association (CONFIARP, 2004). Gegunde considers personalism, which he refers to as advancing one's own personal interests over and above those of the group, to be the reason why so many of the public relations associations have failed in Latin America. When talking about the nature of professional associations in general within the context of Japan, a culture in which the family is also highly regarded, Chie Nakane (1972: 45) suggested that the 'in the family' feature of group organisation in Japanese society is the very reason why the union movement in Japan, while exhibiting feverishly passionate energy, remains sporadic and cannot develop into a force that rocks society as a whole.

Those involved with the Mexican Academy of Public Relations thought that the public relations industry in Mexico City was united "*..this is something which perhaps you are seeing in Mexico. We are all friends, we all know each other, we are members of professional groups, we support each other...we are dedicated to the professionalisation of our activity*" (Participant 30, a view also supported by Participant 8). Whilst, as reflected in 'The Old School' practitioner narrative, those practitioners involved in the successes of the Mexican Association of Public Relations remembered fondly the 'good old days' and believed that the association failed because of bickering and competition amongst its members. This is something which some of the practitioners I spoke to thought had remained in the occupational 'community', "*...We are very individual, very...very egotistical, uhm...it is rare that you hear anyone talk well of anyone else...*" (Participant 22). As 'The Old School' practitioner story illustrates, some practitioners believed that the public relations industry in Mexico City had become quite individualist, with every one out for their own. The Academy was recognised by some as an insular group whilst others, particularly the younger practitioners I spoke to, were not even aware of a professional association for public relations.

Regardless of whether or not practitioners were members of a professional association, the majority seemed to emphasise the importance of having friends also working in communication. "*...I get together with colleagues. I mean, if I see anything in the media about someone then I send it to them, I send it to my colleagues, because it is important to have this 'feedback'... I have colleagues with whom we are very, very, very interlinked...Yes it is very important to have people around you and in some way or another to be integrated*" (Participant 6). One younger practitioner also talked about the fact that having friends in the media industries made it easier to get things covered in the press (Participant 29 – a view also supported in Participant 25), but considered this to be a reciprocal process because she was there to help her friends out whenever



they needed information on a particular story. Both this practitioner and another younger practitioner (Participant 29), talked about the influence of '*palanca*', interpersonal bonds that exist with other persons (Archer and Fitch, 1994: 86), on getting jobs in the industry. Whilst, in general, they regarded '*palanca*' to be a bad thing, they admitted that it was part of their cultural history and that they were not against people with a public relations degree who had 'millions of friends' to give them work, as long as they could conserve this and demonstrated that they could do the job well in the long term (Participant 29).

Work-related and social networks played an important part in the occupational lifeworlds of public relations practitioners in Mexico City. These relationships tended to go beyond role specificity and recur over one's lifetime. The networks, therefore, expanded into both organisational and social life. Networks, in this context, referred to the day-to-day relationships of practitioners. Illustrative of the definition of networks in section 2.8.1, they were those formal and informal ties that the practitioners had with others that influenced such things as how and where they found jobs, how much responsibility they had, and with whom they tended to come into contact. Within these networks, content would flow in a variety of forms: information, goods, expressiveness, and power or influence. The attitudes of practitioners in Mexico City regarding the significance of networks was not unlike the findings Shirley Serini (1994: 51) presented in her study of public relations practitioners in a US community. Serini suggested that the people with whom the practitioners she studied interacted read like a 'Who's Who', "*[t]hey were involved on the boards and committees with other practitioners who used this as an opportunity to augment their professional networks and sharpen their surveillance of the environment beyond the mere ability to provide feedback.*"

Work was regarded by practitioners in Mexico City as a source of social integration that facilitated community participation – as the narratives illustrate, several of the practitioners with more experience of working in the industry were members of voluntary groups, community associations and neighbourhood collectives. In their book on the role of public relations in the community, Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck (1988: 46-47) suggest that, "*the urban dweller often tend[s] to become a joiner of voluntary associations to compensate for the community that had been lost.*" "According to Wirth", they suggest, "*it was largely through the activities of voluntary organisations that the urbanite could express and develop a personality, acquire status, and be able to carry on the round of activities that constitutes a life's career.*" The narratives communicated by those practitioners I met did not seem to suggest that they became involved in



community associations merely to acquire status for themselves (though a couple commented that community involvement helped to raise the profile of their organisations), but rather that they drew personal satisfaction from having the opportunity to contribute to the development of their community and to learn from other people.

The interpersonal orientation appears to be the preeminent metaorientation of Latin America (Albert, 1996: 333). This dimension values respect, dignity, loyalty and *simpatia*. It is manifested in behavioural patterns which concentrate on cooperation rather than competition, the avoidance of critics and of negative behaviours, the reliance on '*palanca*' and personalistic attention (Albert, 1996: 332). However, as the 'internal politics' within the public relations industry alone suggest, these attitudes show potential to change in Mexico City. As suggested by Carlos Bonilla, (personal interview) the true effectiveness of public relations in Mexico City is established in the possibility of developing interpersonal means of communicating messages. Whilst the formal working practices of the vast majority of the practitioners I met revolved around media relations, everyone emphasised the importance of personal communication in their work. As one agency director said (Participant 31) "*[when] the company where I buy my products is [...] having a direct relationship with me as their public, we are talking about public relations.*" Several practitioners talked about the community as being the key benefactor of their work "*... this is a part that you have to consider in almost any branch of communication, what are you going to do with the community, how are you going to relate with the community*" (Participant 8). This was particularly the case for those working in social communications, "*In fact I work...all the time with the community because we work for society*" (Participant 26). One practitioner working in social communications for a government-run department concerned with the welfare of the elderly told me of how he always tried to go out to visit the "*little old people*" staying in the government maintained 'hostels'. He said laughing "*...and if I leave it fifteen days without going they say to me 'hey its been a month since you last came' and they joke with you and ...they pick on you...*" This same practitioner told me about one of his previous jobs in the era when they were building the World Trade Center in Mexico City "*...my responsibility*", he said, "*was neighbour relations....I had to have a constant presence with the neighbours. I used to walk up and down the road every day, having to avoid the trucks and the earth and everything...*"

Interpersonal relationships were not only apparent in the way that practitioners communicated their messages to external publics, but it was what they believed defined good service for their colleagues and clients. Carlos Bonilla (2001: 68) suggests that the focus of internal public



relations should be on considering human beings in their human dimensions, not seeing them as a means of production, but personalities who feel, reason, have ambitions, and want to be respected and treated like people. From an agency perspective, having worked with a client once, one young practitioner believed (Participant 16), you will have opened the door to a much more personal relationship and this relationship would not end the day that you closed the door and said 'Bye'. Instead, this person would feel that they could call on you as many times as they considered necessary and she believed that you had to be there for them. For her, it was not about public relations in the short term, but the long term. One of the more experienced practitioners whom I spoke to (Participant 23) emphasised the importance of the client-executive relationship, *"I can't go and see a new client and win this client and then the next day, now that I have the account, ...arrive and say 'Look let me introduce so-and-so who is the person who is going to be in charge of your account' This, I don't believe you can do... If I promise to work with the client, I am going to work with my client... the most that I can offer my client in this instance is sincerity...it depends on the chemistry that there is between the client and the service. If the client and the agency understand each other, if there's chemistry between them, there won't be a problem. The problem is when I put forward an executive who doesn't have this ethic."*

#### 6.4. Ethics

Georgette Wang (1997: 230-231) suggests that *"[a]s in all decision making, four groups of factors are essential in setting priorities in communication ethics, regardless of whether one is in the media profession or not."* *"They not only set the background for moral reasoning",* she suggests, *"but are present in every stage of the process."* These four factors are:

- Sociocultural: the nature of the political, economic, and social infrastructure, along with the dominant values and beliefs.
- Organisational: the tradition, goals, power structure, work ethics, and peer pressures of the organisation in which individuals work.
- Individual: a person's values, beliefs, personality, education and professional training, and past experiences.
- Situational: given similar organisational or sociocultural factors, individuals may still behave differently because of the particular circumstances, which they have to make the decision.

Referring, in particular, to point (1) – ‘sociocultural factors’- I would also emphasise the importance of the general cultural *psyche*, or collective (not universal – see page 19) *habitus*, which I would define as, *‘the underlying sentiments that are relevant to members of a culture and which develop as a result of the group’s experiences through history’*. From my observations of Mexico City, this factor is perhaps the most significant in influencing the ethics and, consequently, the behaviour of Mexicans.

As Wang (p231) suggests, it is obviously difficult to determine what factor is most important in making decisions about communication ethics in particular; in each case, the weight that these factors carry may be different. *“They are interrelated and dialectic, for each contains elements that may work for and against the preservation of ethical norms. Together, they interact to exert impact on the decision.”* We cannot deny the extent to which clients or host organisations influence the direction of formal public relations activities. After all, strategic communications activity serves to enable the organisation to achieve its set of particular objectives and, therefore, develop or enforce a positive image within society. However, it is significant from this research that the three key areas identified when analysing the data on practitioner ethics were: ‘social’, ‘professional’ and ‘work’, or ‘job’, specific. Given the extent to which the ethics of Mexican organisations have been, and continue to be, questioned, it is interesting that few practitioners talked about the ethics of the organisations they represented.

#### **6.4.1 Social Ethics**

Armando Ramirez (2004), in his article on the ethics and profesionalisation of journalism in Mexico, suggests that there is an established link between the social structure and the moral codes in Mexico, which confirms that ethical norms respond to the socioeconomic circumstances of the country. The socioeconomic system which characterises Mexico, Ramirez believes, is that of capitalism, which he defines as being directed by the laws of greed and obtaining the maximum possible benefit for the minimum possible cost. This is generating egotistical and individualistic social morals. In their conversations with me, some practitioners also seemed to imply that these changes in attitudes were prevalent. Furthermore, several of the younger practitioners suggested that whilst they, personally, may have liberal ethics now, they could not be sure that they would not change once they found themselves having to take responsibility for a home and a family (Interview 20). One more experienced practitioner also commented that it was



difficult to always maintain your own ethics in a country, which suffered so many brisk changes (Interview 5) and that it often called for improvisation.

As Pedro Gilberto Gomes (1997: 215) suggests, *“each situation claims to have its own morality and an assured conscience.”* He quotes Enrique Dussel (1986: 43) asserting that *“[w]herever the established system of morality is in power, its practices and codes are considered to be good.”* The established system of morality, therefore, determines whatever is good or bad. Hand-in-hand with the capitalist-inspired stronghold on the country, is the move towards democracy. Democracy is central to an understanding of Mexico’s present and future (Levy and Bruhn, 2001). The democratic imperative is thematic to Mexican development, and discourse and deficiencies in democracy are often blamed for much of the country’s past and persisting problems. Many people believe that with a strong democracy, economic and social gains will be possible, and the future will be brighter (Levy and Bruhn, 2001). As we saw in chapter 4, Mexico has undergone significant political changes in the last five to ten years, as the system has moved away from a seventy year one-party rule by the PRI, to the government of a more ‘democratically inspired’ PAN party. Yet, there is a sense of frustration in Mexican society with the state of current political affairs and disillusionment that the PAN party has not fulfilled all of its promises during their six-year term. Mexico’s purpose now is to clean up its image, both internally and on the world stage. All of the narratives illustrate the implications of this process of transition, both on society in general, and on the occupational lifeworlds of the public relations practitioners in Mexico City. In these times of change, a new condition of dialogue has emerged between organised civil groups and the government. The public relations practitioners’ conception of democracy is similar to that of Alvarez et al., (1998: 2 as cited in Kirschke, 2001: 25) *“encompassing redefinition not only of the ‘political system’ but also of economic, social and cultural practices that might engender a democratic ordering for society as a whole.”* Such a conception calls attention, these authors argue, to a wide array of possible public spheres wherein citizenship might be exercised, and social interests not only represented, but fundamentally reshaped.

One way of helping to reshape society, practitioners believed, was through transparency of practice and access to information. They regarded public relations as an ‘attitude of information’, or a public service, which enabled the public to learn. Practitioners strongly believed that people deserved to have information. This attitude is particularly reflected in the ‘Social Communicator Experience’. The ethics of all of the practitioners whom I spoke with were based around ‘trust’.

*'Confianza'*, which is defined as *"the feeling of trust, interpersonal closeness and a commitment to shared effects in the future, based on a similarity of worldview and derived from common experience"* (Archer and Fitch, 1994: 86), is significant in a society which is seeking to overcome deep and longstanding sentiments of *'desconfianza'* (a lack of trust) in the system. A practitioner working for one of the government institutions said, *"...ethics I think is change...conduct, honesty, it's the change we are seeing after sixty years of corruption"* (Participant 26). For practitioners like him, and particularly for those working in social communications, it considered their responsibility in helping to encourage these positive changes in behaviour *"...the public [civil] servants...one way or another, we are a visible figure... There are lots of people who know you and who watch how you act so...for me, throughout my life I have tried to set an example..."*. There was also a strong feeling amongst some that ethics is something which come from within, *"For me, the most important thing is ethics...I think it has been my calling card...throughout my life...[both] professionally and with family and friends"* (Participant 5). To act ethically, one practitioner believed, *"you have to know yourself and to know what it is that you want"* (Participant 1).

#### 6.4.2 Professional Ethics

In section 6.3, I began to outline the 'professional' ethics of practitioners and suggested that they focused on the nature of the 'service' they believed that they could offer their client, coupled with the idea of treating clients and colleagues as individuals. This theme, or pattern, of respecting and treating people as individuals was expressed in a number of ways by all of the practitioners I met. Treating clients as individuals was significant for those practitioners who worked in agencies; it was part of the service. Despite the fact that it was a theme that was discussed by practitioners of both indigenously Mexican and international agencies, some practitioners working in the former believed that their attention to clients was what set them apart from their international competitors. Furthermore, one young practitioner (Participant 20) commented that he knew that it was time to move to another section within the agency once he realised that he was no longer able to take a fresh perspective each time and, instead, found himself developing a generic campaign first and then tweaking it to the needs of whichever client decided to go with it.

There were also differences of opinion concerning whether or not executives or agencies should specialise in certain areas. One practitioner who had worked agency-side, client-side and as an independent consultant (Participant 6) believed that a lot of professional ethics were required as



regards organisations operating in the same market, *"I am not saying that agencies don't have them, I know that there are big agencies who have similar companies, but they are managed by different areas. You can't... have the same account executive because ...there might be robbing of ideas...that type of thing."*

Social responsibility was a further theme which emerged in the discussion. The majority of agency practitioners talked about the importance of encouraging their organisations to be socially responsible. Traditionally, Latin American nations do not have a philanthropic culture and a proactive stance on issues of concern to its citizens. The majority of the Mexican people I spoke to believed that social responsibility was a new concept in the country, and that it was something which arrived with the influx of international companies. Mexican people have traditionally put family before the community and there has been marginal interest in, or encouragement to become involved with volunteer or community issues. As one social communications practitioner commented (Participant 21): *"I don't think that we're really a socially responsible society, there has to be a conscience. And it's changing, every day it's changing...I don't know anyone who has said 'I give to this...' or anything like that, I don't think that we have that conscience. But that doesn't mean that it isn't going to emerge."*

Several of the practitioners I spoke to believed that the earthquake in 1985 was the crucial turning point when people began to take more of a community focus in Mexico City. As some of the experiences communicated in the narratives reflect, the public relations practitioners were, in their own small way, fundamental in the relief effort. Yet, there was a tendency amongst practitioners who did not work for the government, in particular, to think that socially responsible changes should come from the government first and foremost. Some practitioners talked of either themselves, or of Mexican people in general, as having questioned the motives of the international organisations in implementing socially responsible programmes. They agreed, however, that it was a global trend for companies to jump on the 'responsible' bandwagon and, furthermore, believed that the government was only just beginning to get involved and even then it was merely focusing its effort in particular areas such as environmental issues. Considering that, in their view, the government was not fulfilling its responsibility, the practitioners encouraged activities on the part of organisations which had a positive impact on their country.

Whilst I was in Mexico in March 2004, much of the national news focused on a political controversy surrounding one of the city Mayor's top aides who had been caught on video accepting money as a bribe. Several practitioners made reference to this in their conversations

with me *"...in Mexico...there are many businessmen who are renowned for their tricks...or with an awful reputation. I don't think there is a politician in Mexico who doesn't have a blackened reputation."* They talked about the importance of projecting an honest image, not just of themselves, but also of their clients, *"...it's a huge responsibility because what you do is going to reflect back on you. If you are indiscreet, it's the worst thing you could be in public relations...because...you are communicating both externally and internally what your company is about...So, yes it is an serious area"* (Participant 6). Several practitioners also talked about the problems associated with the image of public relations and the influence that this has on ethical behaviour. The fact that they built relationships with people on the outside, one practitioner commented (Participant 16), was often regarded as the equivalent of doing favours. Whilst, the concept of *'palanca'* as it might operate within the public relations industry was accepted as a cultural norm by many of the practitioners, there were others who regarded it as a breach of ethics, *"you have to be very ethical...not just economically, but personally. If you are a friend [of the journalist], then perhaps they will publish your story, but this doesn't interest me in the slightest."*

#### **6.4.3 Work Ethics**

As well as their attitudes toward ethical behaviour both within the profession and Mexican society in general, the practitioners also talked about their personal values and motivations in their work. Tony Watson (2003: 175) defines work ethic as a set of values which stress the importance of work to the identity and sense of worth of the individual, and which encourages an attitude of diligence, duty and a striving for success in the mind of the worker. He suggests that with the growth of modern industrial capitalism, the work ethic is spreading further and wider; with work becoming the essential prerequisite of personal and social advancement, of prestige, of virtue and of self-fulfillment. The modern pattern of working life in which 'jobs' and 'careers' are central to people's identities, as well as sources of income, is supported as the work ethic encourages people to seek and sustain involvement in this institutional pattern. A new pattern of work meanings was observed among the more educated and trained which contains elements of the traditional work ethic combined with a concern with self-fulfillment, the obtaining of 'just treatment', and the developing of 'more humanly rational economic organisation and technology'. This also involves an anti-authoritarianism in which people are systematically suspicious of those giving orders (Watson, 2003: 175).



There was a close relationship between practitioners' social and work ethics. In his book, Carlos Bonilla (2002: 46-47) suggests that sociologists have traditionally believed that Mexican workers work to live. In other words, Mexicans believed that life was for living, even at work. Their motivations to work were more to do with the satisfaction of personal necessities and the company was important only because it was a means for subsistence and an opportunity to meet people with whom they could have a good time. Whilst Berger (1964: 217-218 as cited in Heelas, 2002: 84) asserts that the influence of Modernity means that work is losing its value as a source of significance because Modernity has developed two spheres, the 'private' and the 'public' - with the values and assumptions of the former eroding the significance of the latter. As a result, life at work tends to involve the playing out of roles. In contrast to both of these observations, public relations practitioners in Mexico City found their work intrinsically motivating and it seemed to occupy most of their energies and had a decisive influence on their character (Schumacher, 1979). At the same time their 'character' influenced their work.

Similar to Steven Tipton's (1984: 282-3 as cited in Heelas, 2000: 79) '*expressive styles of work ethic*', the public relations practitioners with whom I talked were oriented toward the quality of personal feelings and of situations, and acted in terms of finding the most fitting response to the situation, and the most appropriate or honest expression of themselves. Practitioners valued their work for its variety, for being interesting and, in some cases, for enabling them to have a certain level of autonomy. Work provided them with 'intrinsic satisfaction' (Watson, 2003: 179). They also valued having the opportunity to learn. The role of being a public relations practitioner involved self-expression and the acting out of their lives. They wanted to work for expression and development of personal life (Heelas, 2000: 93) "...*they did not just want to work, but to grow.*" Public relations practitioners in Mexico City, it could be argued, are characterised by the self-work ethic (Heelas, 2000: 80), which regards the self at work as something much 'deeper', more natural and authentic than the self involved with the superficialities of the 'mere' materialism-cum-consumerism. These practitioners were looking for work which included all those practices which promised to 'bring life back into work'. Several were passionate about their work and regarded public relations as a vocation, or a calling. Paul Heelas (2000: 92) suggests that this phenomena is more apparent in situations when the institutional order fails to provide sound sources of identity, purpose, or value-in-life. People have little faith in what lies beyond themselves, he suggests, and what matters thus becomes a matter of what lies inside one's psychology, one's personal ethicality; the quality of one's emotions and the importance of being authentic. Practitioners believed that their job enriched them personally and enabled them to get

more out of life. Gubman (2004: 43) suggests that passion goes deeper than engagement: into who you are, as well as where you work and what you do. He defines passionate employees as those who (Gubman, 2004: 45):

- Have a variety of interpersonal styles, although most appear to know when to compete and when to cooperate to achieve mutually satisfactory solutions. They are not too overbearing or too weak.
- Handle change well: they are pretty calm in the face of change and experience few difficulties in coping with shifting circumstances.
- Like the new and different in their work: many have a variety of interests and enjoy pursuing the leading edge.

This picture of passionate employees describes the practitioners I met, who might be regarded as *“lively, likeable, and adaptive people, able to communicate enthusiasm and navigate changing situations and different types of people as they keep their eyes on their goals”* (Gubman, 2004: 46). The values and attitudes of the public relations practitioner in Mexico City were similar to what E.F. Schumacher (1979: 50) referred to as a longing for freedom which he recognised among the more or less rebellious young living in urban megalopolis in an era of technological progress in the 1970s. He believed their negations would be such as these:

- I want to do my own thing
- I want to live (relatively) simply
- *I want to deal with people, not masks*
- *People matter. Nature matters. Beauty matters*
- *Wholeness matters*
- I want to be able to care.

(Emphasis added).

Adapting the work of Gerald Pepper (1995: 147), the ethics of public relations practitioners in Mexico might be understood, therefore, as being:



- *Ontological.* An ontological perspective measures communication against the criteria that it should enhance, that which makes us uniquely human. Communication in this sense is concerned with generating truthfulness.
- *Dialogical.* A dialogical perspective focuses on the attitudes that communicative participants have toward each other. These attitudes exist as a measure and a level of ethical commitment. Critical attitudes include genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard.
- *Situational.* A situational perspective focuses on the specific elements of the situation in order to determine what is, and is not, ethical. Thus, no predetermined criteria are allowed to apply across the board. As several of the practitioners agreed, each situation must be evaluated according to its unique circumstances.

Practitioner ethics reflect what might be termed ‘narrative ethics’ (Pepper, 1995: 161), which suggests that ethics are culturally mediated visions of right and wrong; that the ethical environment is a combination of internal morality, group cohesion (storytelling) and professional and societal influence. The findings suggest that interactions with other humans play a greater role in shaping practitioner behaviour than do interactions with institutions or agencies, such as the Church.

In highlighting the themes of occupational identity, interpersonal relationships and ethics, and the patterns within them, it is possible to begin to understand the extent of the relationship between values, norms and behaviours in Mexican culture and, more particularly, the occupational culture of public relations in Mexico City. We have a sense for how PRP culture is socially constructed. From the interpretation I present here, we have a sense of the extent of social capital within PRP culture in Mexico City. The perspective of social capital I am assuming is that aspect proposed by advisor to the UK Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, David Halpern (2005: 18), which is directed towards a more micro-level and grounded approach. Social capital refers to resources stored in human relationships, whether casual or close and is not the same as civic engagement (Briggs, 1997). Halpern (p.10) suggests that social capital is composed of: a *network* (in this case the interpersonal relationships that practitioners develop with persons in their lifeworld); a cluster of *norms, values* and *expectancies* that are shared by group members (in this case grounded in respect, sincerity, understanding and trust); and *sanctions* – punishments and rewards – that help to maintain the norms and networks (whilst there are no strict sanctions for punishing practitioners, those helping to create the occupation’s social capital gain personal reward from

their work and consider it to be an extension of their character). When considered at a micro-level, these elements are manifest in the social interactions which encourage the informal and comforting social norms of everyday life that form the foundations of a civic community (Halpern, 2005: 10; Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, 1997; Taylor and Botan, 2005). From the Latin American perspective, civic community would emphasise participation and a personal commitment to justice (Kirschke, 2001: 3) and be “*the public space for the development and articulation of opinion through associational life about the values and priorities that should underpin a given society*” (Pearce, 2004: 501).

From such an understanding, we can begin to appreciate the potential for the role of the public relations practitioner as a cultural intermediary in Mexico City. This will be the subject of chapter 8.

## 6.5 Chapter Summary

The Mexican experience is characteristic of all seven of the steps identified by Molleda and Ferguson (2004) as comprising the Latin American school of public relations. However, the discussion has emphasised significant elements of public relations practice in Mexico City which are particularly grounded in Mexican culture and society. False perceptions and stereotypes of public relations in Mexican society can threaten any sense of coherence and meaningfulness in work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). However, the significance of interpersonal communication was clear from both the narratives of the practitioners and from my observations, suggesting a coherence of core values centred around *relaciones humanas* (which will be defined in the following chapter) and manifested in different ways due to different circumstances.

Public relations practitioners in Mexico City are highly involved workers maintaining work centrality. It is not that their work is central to their lives, but rather that they regard their work as part of them and an extension of their character. As the narratives and subsequent interpretation suggest, practitioners in Mexico City take an emotional perspective on their work - a perspective which might be regarded as a new ‘ethos’, helping to bring about social change (Perez-Senac, 1990: 8). Roman Perez Senac (1990: 8) suggests that such an approach implies developing a social consensus grounded in such values as respect, sincerity, understanding and trust. The potential for public relations practitioners in Mexico City to serve as cultural intermediaries in the transformation of culture, is reflected in the human values of *relaciones humanas* communicated



by the practitioners. In the following chapter I will draw on relevant sociological theories, and apply them to the themes identified in this interpretation, in order to propose a theory of the ethos of *relaciones humanas* relevant to the practice of public relations in Mexico City.

## **7. The Ethos of *Relaciones Humanas* – The potential for Public Relations Practitioners as Cultural Intermediaries in Mexico City.**

In the discussion which follows in both chapters 7 and 8, the data analysis involves the construction of a core category – that being the occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas* relevant to public relations practitioners in Mexico. This core category pulls together by way of analytic generalisation, defined by Andreas Riege (2003: 81) as the process whereby the findings are generalised to some broader theory, all of the concepts discussed in chapter 6 in order to offer an interpretation of PRP culture. I will argue that public relations practitioners have the potential to play a significant role as cultural intermediaries, or to coin the phrase of the Latin American public relations critic, Roman Perez Senac (1990: 19), as “*developers of development*” in a ‘modern’ Mexico. As I emphasised in the opening chapter, in the spirit of social constructionism, I use the word ‘potential’ deliberately, as a culture as a group comprising individual persons is better understood in terms of becoming, rather than being (Sveningson and Alvesson, 2003).

I will argue that it is not what the practitioners in Mexico City produce (in terms of communications strategies, cultural artifacts and events), but the ways in which they go about their work and relate to their occupational lifeworlds, that can make the most significant contribution to Mexican culture. I will suggest that the PRP culture is grounded in the ethos of *relaciones humanas*, which might encourage social capital by way of formal and informal interpersonal communication and respect for other persons. The phrase *relaciones humanas* was inspired not only by those practitioners who explicitly used the term or implied it in their narratives but also by the literature from the Latin American ‘school’ of public relations. I will suggest that those practitioners embracing this ethos might have the potential to foster trust, community feeling, and participation.

### **7.1 Context of discussion**

The interpretation of the findings I presented in the previous chapter suggested that PRP culture in Mexico City is grounded in an ethos of *relaciones humanas*. When translated into English as ‘human relations’ or ‘human relationships’, *relaciones humanas* can be interpreted in many different ways. My main reason for choosing not to use the Anglo-equivalent term here was the connotations that it brings about regarding the *Human Relations School* within organisation studies - which was strong in the US in the 1930s and which has, subsequently, received heavy



criticism. In order to explain the Mexican concept of '*relaciones humanas*', another literature is required. As in the previous chapter, I have sought analytical generalisation, considering the significant themes to have emerged from my interpretation of the empirical data in chapter 6 within the context of broader sociological theories. The theories I draw on in this chapter are those of 'therapeutic culture' (Richards and Brown, 2002); 'soft capitalism' (Heelas 2000); human relationships and interpersonal communication (Duck, 1992; Auhagen and von Salisch, 1996; Fisher and Adams, 1994; Argyle, 1994); 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983; Smith 1992); 'social' and 'emotional intelligence' (Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer, 2001; Bar-On and Parker, 2000; Goleman 1996; Singh, 2003) and '*relaciones humanas*' as developed within the Latin American 'school' of public relations (Solorzano Hernandez, 2000; Martino Ruiz, 2002; Fajardo Ortiz, 1976, amongst others). I do not attempt to offer a critique of these theories. However, this does not mean that I uncritically accept what has been written. Instead, my aim is to facilitate the development and understanding of the Mexican ethos of *relaciones humanas* and, as such, I will be critically evaluating the explanatory power of these theories in order to achieve this end (Salaman, 1974).

Amalgamating plausibly the ideas that surround me (Rose, 1978: 118), and applying them within the wider context of globalisation theory, I propose a speculative prescriptive theory for explaining public relations in Mexico City as the ethos of *relaciones humanas*, and a framework for exploring the interpersonal competence of the practitioners. From these, I will go on to explain the potential role for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries. At this point, I emphasise that these are not intended to serve as substantive 'models' of public relations in Mexico City, since developing definitive models would require further research. Instead, I hope that the theories I present might inspire and be adapted for future research projects in Mexico.

## **7.2 Interpretation of PRP Culture - Reviewed**

The nature of the 'professional' practice of public relations in Mexico City is immersed in capitalism, competition and globalisation, but a socially constructed approach allows us to go beyond these surface impressions. The narratives and interpretation presented in the previous chapters illustrate the diversity of occupational practices. The general belief amongst those practitioners I spoke to, was that public relations was a wide-ranging activity which operated in a variety of areas within Mexican society and was difficult to define. Their narratives reflected the complexities surrounding attempts to develop a 'professional' identity. The disparity in identity

and practice might lead us to assume that the public relations industry in Mexico City lacks an occupational 'community' or a sense of meaning and that, therefore, it may not be perceived as having a significant, or at the most be regarded as a segmented and differentiated, occupational culture (Filby and Wilmott, 1988).

However, the significance of interpersonal approaches to communication was clear in both the narratives of the practitioners and my observations of the culture. This suggests a coherence of core values, or common frame of reference, centred around trust, consensus, civility and a human approach to communication, which would be manifest in different ways due to different circumstances. Therefore, whilst the practitioners saw no quick fixes to the issues of identity and lack of respect for their profession, a culture relevant to public relations as an occupation in Mexico City has developed around practitioner habitus and behaviours towards collaborative communication and attempts to *humanise* the business, political and social spheres in which they move.

### **7.3 The significance of *Relaciones Humanas* within Latin American Public Relations Practice**

Drawing on the arguments and observations made by the Peruvian public relations academic Emilio Solorzano Hernandez (2000) in his article entitled '*La Relacion Humana, Legitimidad y Accion Comunicacional: Propuestas teoricas y metodologicas de las Relaciones Publicas*', (literally translated as 'Human Relations(hips), Legitimacy and Communicational Action: Theoretical and Methodical proposals of Public Relations'), the general belief within the Latin American School of Public Relations is that every public relations campaign should be grounded in *relaciones humanas*. For Solorzano Hernandez, public relations is a cultural discipline which emphasises those *human* relationships between individuals, groups and social organisations that are mediated by communication, information and dialogue. He draws on his experiences of declining social solidarity and community ties and increased social confusion that have resulted in Latin America from increased industrialisation, to suggest that *relaciones humanas* should be concerned with applying humanist principles in order to build a culture of consensus via the transmission of social values. Central to these social values would be truth – transparency, credibility and confidence.



Solorzano Hernandez offers what might be regarded as a narrow perspective, differentiating between the corporate values and human values inherent within public communication practice by distinguishing public relations from organisational communication. The difference, he suggests, is that public relations concentrates on building the human relationships between an organisation and an individual and/or public, which form the foundation of, and legitimise, the organisation's communications activity – namely media relations. The article asserts that, as humans, we do not live simply in a world of occasional contact, but rather that we live a world organised of relationships and communication where both elements converge. Independent of the media, Solorzano Hernandez suggests that real human communication is about '*relaciones humanas*'. Public relations would use communication as its principal tool, yet the public relations practitioner would be more than a communicator, she would be involved in designing policies and organisational strategies that involve *interaction* (emphasis added), both internally and externally.

Latin American scholars and practitioners assert that *relaciones humanas* can be a significant means of communicating social and professional ethics and creating a culture of trust. Virgilio Martino Ruiz (2002) defines *relaciones humanas* as being oriented towards breaking down communication barriers and developing the positive aspects of human nature, which is believed to be vital for legitimising any form of communication in the wake of rising confusion in society as a result of rapid technological advancement (Solorzano Hernandez, 2000). Offering a Cuban perspective on Latin American public relations practice, Rebeca Galan Caballero (2002: 227) contends that a solid public relations professional would develop from having strong human relationships. *Relaciones humanas* from this perspective would mean that the public relations practitioner would consider persons, their behaviours and motivations, in whatever relationships she were involved in daily life, and would respect the values of dignity (Fajardo Ortiz, 1976: 15).

A social constructionist approach supposes that the values and assumptions that guide relationship building will be culturally constituted. Therefore, within Latin America there are likely to be variances in the conceptualisation of public relations as *relaciones humanas*, in response to those experiences particular to each culture. The following discussion will propose a means of conceptualising *relaciones humanas* that is relevant to the Mexican experience.

#### 7.4 Public Relations in Mexico City: An Ethos of *Relaciones Humanas*.

Public relations as *relaciones humanas* – an ethos of human and democratic communication, manifested in an authentic occupational ‘character’ and formal and informal interpersonal communicative practices, which places an emphasis on building trusted relationships and valuing persons.

The Mexican practitioner, Juan Lavalle (1997) writes, “*trying to find the origins of public relations in our country is a difficult task.*” Yet, he suggests that the foundation of public relations practice in Mexico is *relaciones humanas*, which he believes dates back a long way to the days when societies possessed a social spirit that practitioners in Mexico consider vital for effective public relations practice today. As we saw in the previous chapter, the true effectiveness of public relations in Mexico City is seen in the possibility of developing authentic interpersonal means of communication (Bonilla, 2000; 2002). I suggested that interpersonal behaviour be regarded as “the long-term and short-term relationships which we have with other people and which so strongly influence our thoughts and behaviour” (Duck, 1992: 5). Whilst in Steve Duck’s definition, interpersonal communication can be used to establish long- or short-term relationships, practitioners in Mexico City suggested that relationships would go beyond role specificity and recur over their lifetime. Their networks would, therefore, expand into both their organisational and their social lives. Practitioners found meaning in their work, and, to varying degrees, shared a human sense of values. They communicated a tradition-informed work ethicality (Heelas, 2000: 88) brought out through particular integrations of work, family and a sense of Mexican identity. They practised a people- over and above a task- oriented approach, where communication and encounter were central to their work relationships (Smith, 1992), and the PRP culture reflected a duty to work and being dutiful in work. In essence, *relaciones humanas* within the context of Mexico City would be an ethos<sup>11</sup> that is manifested in an authentic occupational ‘character’ and distinctive (though not unique) forms of interaction and social behaviour which place an emphasis on practitioners building meaningful relationships, fostering trust and valuing the

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<sup>11</sup> Ethos has traditionally been referred to as a ‘moral competence’, expertise and knowledge. Two definitions significant for this discussion are:

Ethos: “*The dispositions, character or fundamental values particular to a specific person, people, culture or movement*” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition).

Ethos: “*The character, sentiment or dispositions of a community of people, considered as a natural endowment; the spirit which actuates manners and customs; also, the characteristic tone or genius of an institution of social organisation*” – The Collaborative International Dictionary of English v.0.48.



person in all areas of their occupational lifeworld. This ethos would encourage the communication of messages that are moral rather than political.

The morality offered by the practitioners might appear to draw on the 'secularisation' of traditional Catholic beliefs (Torre, 2005) that has taken place in the country during the last century and the 'social liberalist' ethic which was encouraged in the political rhetoric used by the Salinas presidency in the early 1990s (O'Toole, 2003). This rhetoric, though considered by some to have been used by the government, perhaps, as a means to distract attention from their malign cruel and coldly calculating authoritarian actions (Ibarra, 2005), accommodated the social discourse of nationalism and the individualising discourse of liberalism by appearing to draw upon tradition that predated the social state – identifying the individual in society as the building block of the nation. In essence, the practitioner morality would reflect a 'social compulsion', a term which Chie Nakane (1972: 83-84) implies is 'public thought', and which, he suggests, would vary in accordance with the conditions in which the society is placed. In Mexico City this 'social compulsion' would reflect this growing public ethic towards 'solidarity' and the traditional cultural values of interpersonal bonds and trust. Stephen Banks (2000: 98) suggests that "trust is created when speakers design communication with recipients' experience in mind, fashioning interaction that affirms audience members' identities, honours their interests, reckons with their cultural orientations." 'Trust', as I refer to it here, draws on Banks' assertion and, more particularly, the Latin American concept of 'confianza' which, as we saw, Archer and Fitch (1994: 86) translate as "the feeling of trust, interpersonal closeness and a commitment to shared effects in the future, based on similarity of worldview and derived from common experience."

Practitioner morality would also be therapeutic (Richards and Brown, 2002). Therapeutic communication as a form of human interaction has been largely misunderstood, "whilst it suggests something clinical, in reality it is an important frequently used form of interaction that occurs in all manner of human relationships" (Kreps, 1986: 190). Relaciones humanas as a therapeutic ethos, would have potential as a resource for the building of more civilised and compassionate institutions and social practices that would respect and encourage individualised dimensions within collective processes (Richards and Brown, 2002; Jones and Gaveta, 2002). Inherent in relaciones humanas communication would be the ideal of what Harry Triandis (1995: 76-77) refers to as collectivist communication, which he suggests emphasises concern for the feelings of the other and avoids the devaluation of in-group others. Communication efforts would

recognise the rights and needs of individual persons - whether they be clients, colleagues, publics or those persons the practitioner interacts with outside of the immediate work environment.

As the empirical findings have suggested, PRP culture in Mexico City would involve narratives and practices similar to those of soft capitalism, in which practitioners would be concerned with enhancing commitment and motivation to the occupation, occupational identity (what it is to become/be a good public relations practitioner); team work; exercising responsibility or initiative; engaging in emotion work and believing in it (Heelas, 2000: 81-82). Public relations as an occupation in Mexico City is illustrative of what Paul Heelas (2000: 91) regards as “[those] ... groups who provide caring and support for those who participate in it, who are oriented towards ‘life’: and bringing about change, but a change concerned with daily life, emotions, and understanding of one’s identity.” Practitioners used many communicative signs which reflected an emotional approach to work, and which suggest that public relations as practised in Mexico City is a form of emotional labour, involving face-to-face contact with people, and seeking to produce an emotional state in another (Hochschild, 1983). Practitioners not only laboured emotionally for their clients, but also for each other and for Mexican society. The occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas* would, therefore, suggest that practitioners put people first and organised their work in an emotionally-explicit way to make others feel respected and secure (Smith, 1992) -fostering relationships based on trust. It would imply almost a ‘professionalisation’ of offerings of civility, trust and empathy (Hochschild, 1983: 153), where practitioners are regarded as ‘therapeutic [persons]’ who want to make something better in a more pragmatic and focussed way (Richards and Brown 2002: 110).

The sociologist, Arlie Hochschild (1983), suggests that characteristics of emotional labour would have explicit monetary value both for the individuals employed, and the organisations they work for. For her, emotional labour is guided by what she calls ‘feeling rules’, others and social conventions. Emotional work would intervene to shape our actions when there is a gap between what we actually feel, and what we think we should feel. In order to express feelings in ‘culturally constructed ways’, Hochschild suggests that there are two kinds of emotion work: surface and deep acting. In surface acting a worker would consciously change her outer expression to comply with the situation and would mask how she really feels – creating a ‘false smile’. Deep acting, in contrast, would require her to commit to this emotional behaviour by changing her inner feelings and attitudes over time so that she is going beyond the smile that is ‘just painted on’ (Hochschild, 1983: 33). As a consequence, for Hochschild (1983: 86), a



worker's private emotional system would become subordinate to commercial logic, emotion would essentially become managed and mass-produced. As a result, the job would likely pose problems of personal and professional identity. 'Emotional labourers' often find themselves asking, 'What is my work role and what is me?' and questions arise for them concerning authenticity and 'natural' feeling. The empirical findings from this study suggest that public relations practitioners in Mexico City would not find themselves faced with the dilemma of real identity and authenticity. The idea suggested by some that public relations was a vocation requiring social skill and a certain character, epitomises the assertion that they might bring not only natural skills to their chosen occupation, but also an interest in developing Mexico in a positive and equitable manner (Smith, 1992). Hence, the practitioners would not become subordinated to commercial logic in their occupational lifeworlds, but rather cultural logic.

As we saw on page 155, a practitioner 'character' might be defined as the sum of acquired tendencies, including sentiments and habits, that are built up, to some extent consciously, under the directive of experience, intelligence and will. The character inherent in the ethos of relaciones humanas would not merely belong to the practitioner as a person, but to the occupation as a group. Feelings are appropriate and required to effectively perform public relations in Mexico City, just as are goals and formal activities, and they might, therefore, be said to belong to the occupation. The expression of an 'occupational character' would be an authentic aspect of practitioner behaviour and part of the process of constructing the occupation.

## **7.5 The Significance of 'Emotional' and 'Interpersonal' Intelligence for Effective Public Relations in Mexico City**

As I suggested in section 2.7.1, occupational identity or 'character' is central to the occupational culture, as the construction and validation of practitioners' definition of who they are (and are not) are basic to the task of developing a system of relevant values, goals and competencies. Finding a comfortable fit between a person and an occupation is easier when aspects of occupational practice link to a group of competencies (Singh, 2003). Practitioners believed that to succeed in public relations in Mexico City, it was important to have a certain character that was suited to the job – a public relations practitioner would be genuinely interested in people and in their national culture, and those of other countries. Practitioners measured their own positions in terms of their relations with others, their actions in terms of their own relationships with others, and their social, professional and work ethics in terms of their own experiences, and suggested

that they used these to guide their thinking and practice. The group of competencies relevant to the ethos of relaciones humanas are, therefore, 'social', 'emotional' and 'interpersonal' awareness. When these competencies operate together in an integrated fashion, a meaningful pattern of dispositions and abilities develops that facilitates successful occupational practice (Singh, 2003: 56).

Social awareness, or intelligence, provides a way of understanding an occupational character and behaviour in which people are presumed to be knowledgeable about themselves as practitioners and the social world in which they live (Zirkel, 2000: 20; Hedland and Sternberg, 2000). It is a set of abilities that guide adaptive and purposive actions (Bar-On and Parker, 2000: xii). E.L. Thorndike (1920, in Singh 2003) identified social intelligence as the ability to understand and manage persons and to act wisely in human relations, and suggested that social intelligence included three elements:

- The person's attitudes towards society such as politics, economics, science and values such as honesty.
- Social knowledge such as being well-versed in contemporary issues and general knowledge about society.
- The individual's capacity for social adjustment such as interpersonal relations and family bonding.

Later definitions of social intelligence have also included the ability to deal with other people, interpersonal knowledge, insights into the states and traits of others, the ability to judge correctly the feelings, moods and motivations of others, effective social functioning, skill at decoding nonverbal cues and empathy (Hedlund and Sternberg, 2000: 136). Collectively, these ideas were later adapted by Daniel Goleman who popularised the concept of 'emotional intelligence' (EQ) in his contentious work published in the 1990s. Goleman defined 'emotional intelligence' as: emotional awareness, accurate self-assessment, self confidence, self control, trustworthiness, conscientiousness, adaptability, innovation, achievement drive, commitment, initiative, optimism, understanding others, influence, communication, cooperation and so on (Hedland and Sternberg, 2000: 146). Significantly, the Mexican practitioner-academic, Carlos Bonilla (2000: 147) draws on Goleman's work and contends that emotional intelligence is vital to succeed in public relations in Mexico. He believes that, amongst other things, it is "a conscience, self-control, motivation, empathy and the capacity for team work." This would appear to reflect traits of the Mexican



character – empatia and interconnectedness and interdependency. If we think back to the practitioner narratives in chapter 5, teamwork was a value that was communicated strongly, particularly amongst the younger executives and agency directors. Certainly, as Dalip Singh (2003: 217-218) suggests, “according to the proponents of EQ, [a practitioner would] try to find happiness in [her] work, find a company that [was] compatible with [her] vision, mission and values, and actually put them into practice.” Those practitioners participating in this study communicated a strong sense of contentment in their work. More than finding a company, they suggested that they had found an occupation which was compatible with their natural character and enabled them to put their vision and values in to practice in different areas of their occupational lifeworlds.

### **7.5.1 The Interpersonal Competence Relevant to PRP Culture in Mexico City**

The decision to call this group of traits social, emotional, interpersonal, or even, practical intelligence seems to depend on one’s perspective (Hedland, Sternberh, 2000; Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer, 2000). For the purposes of this study, I will refer them collectively as interpersonal competence and discuss this within the context of relaciones humanas - patterns of interpersonal communication. Daniel Goleman (1996) refers to interpersonal intelligence as a skill at social analysis, an ability to resolve conflict, and the employment of interpersonal strategies in order to achieve objectives – typically illustrated by developing rapport with a network of key people. For Goleman, interpersonal intelligence is a fundamental ‘people skill’ (p43). According to Goleman’s perspective, public relations practitioners in Mexico City with high levels of interpersonal intelligence would be empathic and more attuned to subtle social signs that indicted what others needed and wanted.

Drawing on Topping, Bremner and Holmes’ (2000: 32) work on social competence, I define interpersonal competence relevant to the ethos of relaciones humanas as, “the potential possession and use of the appropriate ability(ies) to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour to achieve formal and informal communication valued in the host context and culture.” I define interpersonal competence in its nonsummative sense, as a social unit rather than the judgement or evaluation of a particular person (Aubrey Fisher and Adams, 1994: 227), and use the word ‘appropriate’ to avoid the value issues in relation to practice. Whilst this framework draws on various models and statements pertaining to social, emotional and interpersonal intelligence, these are grounded in the cultural experiences of the participants and the cultural patterns which

emerge from them. Combining both factors, I will develop a system of the relevant abilities<sup>12</sup> and qualities<sup>13</sup> in the occupational character. In light of the narratives presented in chapter 5, we would have reason to believe that practitioners would have the potential to demonstrate these abilities, and they would be carried out with certain fluency (Zirkel, 2000) i.e. carried out frequently. It is apparent that different manifestations of the occupational ethos of relaciones humanas in Mexico City may require different types, and degrees, of interpersonal competence. Interpersonal competence will itself be socially constructed and can be developed and improved upon throughout a practitioner's life. In the normal course of a lifetime, interpersonal competence would tend to increase as practitioners come to be more aware of their own experiences and to empathise and become more adept at understanding their relationships with others (Singh, 2003). Empathy and understanding is significant to the effectiveness of communication. As Phillip Lee (2005) suggests, communicating is not just about talking, but also, listening. An indispensable element of genuine communication, Lee suggests, is dialogue - which is not only exchanging different points of view, but listening to (hearing) another person's opinions or beliefs, and taking them seriously. From this perspective, dialogue is, in essence, about entering into, and understanding, the worldview of another person, a means of immersing oneself in their way of thinking and their feelings, and, as some practitioners suggested, 'becoming' that person (or, in the case of several of the interview participants, that organisation).

Interpersonal competence within the context of this study would be defined in terms of an array of social and interpersonal knowledge and abilities that influence the practitioners' overall ability to effectively cope with environmental demands (Singh, 2003: 110). Mexico has seen a tremendous rate of change in recent years in terms of political development and shift from a controlled to a free economy. Radical changes have been taking place in Mexico City, sometimes every day. In such situations, experience is not as critical as adaptability (Singh, 2003: 59). In an ideal situation, a successful public relations practitioner in Mexico City would possess a deep insight into what is going on in the community around her, an ability to recognise the process of change as essentially constructive, and would feel a responsibility for finding communication solutions that would allow competing interests to be reconciled with a framework of order (Munro Fraser, 1960). Developing strong interpersonal relationships with those they interact with in their occupational lifeworlds, public relations practitioners in Mexico City would be able to

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<sup>12</sup> Ability: "*an individual's capacity to produce and reproduce skills, necessary for the accomplishment of relational goals*" (Aubrey Fisher and Adams, 1994: 220).

<sup>13</sup> Quality: "*an inference of judgement made about the individual and the appropriateness of her actions based on a number of standards for determining what is competent*" (Aubrey Fisher and Adams, 1994: 220).



understand what is going on and to communicate accordingly. I would suggest that public relations as practised in Mexico City can be broken down into the following clusters in order to understand the general themes and illustrate the interpersonal competence communicated by the practitioners (adapted from an original framework in Singh, 2003: 53-56):

### **Social Awareness**

Practitioners would communicate varying degrees of:

- Empathy. A keen awareness of the emotions, concerns and needs of others, and an ability to act appropriately through, for example, affiliation or support.
- Service. The ability to identify a client's or customer's often unstated needs and concerns and then match them to communication services or strategies, and taking a long-term perspective in order to preserve relationships with clients, publics and other persons.
- Co-operativeness. Linked to empathy and service, practitioners would take into account the needs and wants of others (clients, colleagues or the community) as well as their own, or those of the organisation they represented (Argyle, 1994: 120).
- Cultural and organisational awareness. The ability to understand the currents of emotions and political realities of their culture and of the organisations they represent. This is an important competence for practitioners in order for them to network effectively and to exert any influence on persons and the cater for their needs and wants.
- Adaptability. The ability to communicate competently in a variety of situations throughout their occupational lifeworlds, recognising the appropriate behaviour required for each.

### **Relationship Management**

Practitioners would be successful at:

- Developing others. Public relations managers and agency directors, in particular, would be typically effective at developing others in their team, sensing their developmental needs and bolstering their abilities.
- Influence. Practitioners would be influential when they handled and managed emotions effectively in other people in order to communicate interpersonally. The most effective practitioners would sense others' reactions and fine-tune their own responses to move interpersonal interaction in the best direction.
- Communication. An atmosphere of openness with clear lines of communication is a key factor in the success of any public relations effort. As effective communicators and

‘bridges’ (or mediators) between individuals and/or group in society, practitioners would communicate interpersonally the importance of sharing information fully and fostering open communication.

- Visionary leadership. Those practitioners, particularly agency directors, adept at the visionary leadership competence would draw on a range of personal skills to inspire others, colleagues in particular, to work together towards common goals. They would articulate and arouse enthusiasm for a shared vision and mission, take initiative, guide the performance of others, and lead by example.
- Passion. Practitioners would be passionate professionals who are likeable and adaptive and who communicate enthusiasm and navigate changing situations well, whether on an organisational or societal level (Gubman, 2004: 46).
- Building bonds. Practitioners would be successful social networkers and develop strong and trusted interpersonal relationships with others in their occupational lifeworld. They would choose persons with particular expertise or resources to be part of their professional networks.
- Trustworthiness. Practitioners would communicate their values, principles and feelings, the foundations of which are honesty, respect, interpersonal communication and concern for the individual. They would act in ways that are consistent with them in all areas of their occupational lifeworlds.
- Authenticity (Hayes, 2002: 192). Authenticity is important in helping develop trust in relationships and would be expressed by practitioners communicating a natural and consistent character – being honest and sincere. They would be themselves, know what it is that they want, and be open, assertive and proactive. As a result of the variety of different interpersonal relationships they would have experienced, and from which they would have learned, practitioners would be well-rounded individuals (Aubrey Fisher and Adams, 1994: 235).

## **7.6 Relaciones Humanas: Manifest in Formal and Informal Communicative Practices**

The occupational value system relevant to PRP culture in Mexico City developed not only from occupational socialisation, but also from practitioners’ experiences as part of a national culture. As Graeme Salaman (1974) suggests, we would expect that this set of values and perspectives would extend beyond work-related matters, and that the social relationships would merge realms of work and leisure. If we consider public relations in Mexico City as an ethos manifested in a



system of interaction, the intimate relationship between formal aspects of communication (strategic communication activity via defined channels) and informal aspects of communication (those that are not part of a plan or strategy, but which rather form part of the daily interaction between practitioners and others in the community), is clear.

Practitioners built effective interpersonal networks both inside and outside of their immediate workplace. They strategically chose persons with particular expertise or resources to be part of their professional networks. Yet, the overwhelming majority tended to be passionate about people and reflected this interest in all areas of their occupational lifeworld. Not only did they regard the ability to relate to people as being a professional obligation, it was also in their nature. Informal communication is the result of the natural desire of people to communicate with each other and arises from the social interaction of persons (Huneryager and Heckmann, 1967: 513) and would result in personal relationships (Pepper, 1995: 173). Practitioners subscribing to the ethos of *relaciones humanas* would regard public relations as those personal or human relationships that are developed in any social environment, and day-to-day interpersonal communication may be just as important for them as the formal communication practices they deploy over the course of the relationships they develop with persons and publics (Hinde, 1996: 9; Taylor and Botan, 2005).

The philosopher John Dewy (cited in Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 60) talked about the need for face-to-face communication in giving reality to public opinion and creating community, “without the vitality of a close direct interaction, the formal transmission of information could not carry the burden of creating mutual sympathy.” Insights from informal relationships goes beyond the acknowledged ability of practitioners to collect feedback in the process of formal communication (Serini, 1994). The ethos of *relaciones humanas* would suggest that practitioners would be able to communicate more effectively formally (that is strategically for organisational purposes), if they communicated good social relations in all parts of their occupational lifeworlds. The design of persuasive messages has been studied mostly in connection with the mass media, but as Robert Argyle (1994: 137) contends, some of the principles apply in face-to-face situations. Argyle argues that people are more likely to be effective communicators if their actions reinforce the message (p119). Kruckeberg and Starck (1988: 68) suggest that practitioners should concern themselves in the communication efforts not just with ideas, but also with sentiments, attitudes and emotions - partly through the medium of conventional symbols, and partly through gesture and expressive behaviour, and that this behaviour can then be interpreted intuitively.

Both communication approaches are interconnected and essential in presenting an authentic and trusted message (Moore, 1967; Taylor and Botan, 2005; Arens, 1997), especially when seeking to communicate a therapeutic and democratic morality, and will be considered in further detail within the context of reconceptualising community relations in Mexico City in section 8.2.

### **7.7 Summary of the Ethos of Relaciones Humanas**

The interpretation I have offered of PRP culture in Mexico City suggests that whilst public relations might not be regarded as an occupational culture or community due to the ambiguous 'professional' identities of practitioners and diversity of practice, it can be regarded as a culture from the perspective of the practitioner lifeworlds which place an emphasis on relaciones humanas – an interest and respect for the individual within the collective, and communicating confidence and credibility to create a public ethic. Public relations in Mexico City is an emotional occupation that might be grounded in an occupational ethos of relaciones humanas. When manifest, this ethos will thus be a humane, 'democratic' and socially responsible practice based on a sound and pragmatic ethos and communicated by an authentic occupational 'character' via formal and informal communicative practices. This character would have a non-manipulative role and, if the ethos is practised as espoused here, it should result in a more humane and mutually supportive society (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 117).

Returning to the definition of culture I proposed in earlier sections, culture is concerned with meanings. As a cultural practice, public relations is concerned with the communication of meaning. Within the case of Mexico City, this meaning is reflected in the ethos of relaciones humanas, which communicates humanistic and democratic values. I emphasise, however, that PRP culture in Mexico City is grounded in subjective meaning and that practitioners, therefore, should not be regarded as an homogenous group. Meanings can be interpreted to varying degrees by members of a culture. Furthermore, in the spirit of social constructionism, we cannot assume a direct correlation between practitioner beliefs and action. Studies of the relationships between people's beliefs and their actions indicates that we often do not behave in ways that are consistent with our attitudes. Moreover, organisational context will reflect how the ethos of relaciones humanas is articulated and rendered into action. As a result of these influences, there will be practitioners who will embrace the ethos more emphatically than others. When considered from a social constructionist perspective, the ethos of relaciones humanas would reflect not only the way in which practitioners see their work and its role in society, but the potential for the work. The



next part of the discussion will consider Kruckeberg and Starck's thesis when applied to the Mexican ethos of relaciones humanas, in order to explore the potential for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in light of the loss of community in Mexico City.

## 8. A 'Human' Modernity That Might Hold in Mexico City

As I suggested on pages 69 and 190, a social constructionist approach requires the researcher to go beyond the discussion of the core category identified in the data analysis –in this case, the ethos of *relaciones humanas* – and to consider the potential for this ethos when applied to the everyday work of public relations practitioners in Mexico City. Social-constructionist inspired research encourages the researcher to explore approaches which are consistent with her own values. I have learned a lot from my own particular research journey – both from the interviews with practitioners, and from living as part of a Mexican family and sharing their experiences. My reflecting on the methodological and data analysis processes soon also became also a process of self reflection, encouraging me to recognise those values and behaviours which are also important for me as a person. The discussion I present in this chapter, therefore, seeks to combine the data which emerged from the field research, with my own attitudes and beliefs which developed as a result of this experience, to present a narrative which communicates 'potential' and 'possibilities' for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in Mexico City.

As Garry Stevens suggested, (potential) occupational practice might be defined by the following equation,  $\text{Habitus} + \text{Capital} = \text{Practice}$  (See p. 25 of thesis). In the previous chapter, I suggested that PRP culture in Mexico City is strong on micro-level social capital. I defined this as social interactions, which encourage the informal and comforting social norms of everyday life that form the foundations of a civic culture (Halpern, 2005: 10; Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, 1997, Taylor and Botan, 2005), and that the practitioner habitus is underpinned by a human-focused frame of reference. These two elements are brought together in an occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas* which, given the appropriate conditions, might encourage therapeutic-oriented communicative practices. In this chapter I will suggest the cultural intermediary potential of these practices.

An assertion is often regarded as something we communicate drawing on our own personal understandings, and those which may be a mix of personal experience and scholarship (Stake, 1995: 12). As David Halpern (2005: 28) contends, I believe that the micro-, meso- and macro-levels of social capital have some kind of empirical, causal relationship to one another. In the proceeding discussion, I will draw on both my observations of Mexico City and personal experiences, together with literature on 'community relations', 'globalisation', 'Modernity and



social change', and Mexican culture, in order to develop an assertion on the potential role for public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries in the development of Mexico City.

All societies create their own particular experiences of Modernity (Pieterse, 1995: 48). In his essay in Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson's (1995: 145) book "Global Modernities", Zygmunt Bauman suggests that "*it has been Modernity's organic inability to secure a system that works that has made Modernity the most restless of known forms of human life.*" Bauman argues that modern societies need to search for a centre that holds, a centre that confronts social issues, such as the modern identity crisis and increasing isolation, and provides a culture in which individualism and collectivism can cohabit peacefully (p148). In Mexico City, where in the last decade different approaches to representation and participation have been fostered without much success (Tejera Gaona, 2003: 104), this centre that holds might be a culture and a sense of citizenship - considered here as an ensemble of different forms of belonging stemming from a combination of social relations that will differ across the spaces in which peoples lives are played out (Jones and Galvata, 2005: 19; Gergen, 2001). Both would be founded upon an ethos of *relaciones humanas*: solidarity and '*confianza*' – trust, interpersonal closeness and commitment to shared causes.

Dean Kruckberg and Kenneth Starck (2003) suggest that in newly emerging democracies (as in the case of Mexico), public relations practitioners are in an advantageous position to be able to develop a framework for 'Modernity' that maintains the spirit of development capitalism and globalisation whilst redefining it in the process. Furthermore, Carole Pateman (1970) suggested when considering democracy as participation that the education for democracy takes place through participatory processes in non-governmental situations and that experiences in the workplace are carried over to encourage participation in the wider social sphere. In the following discussion I will suggest that the ethos of *relaciones humanas* might be manifest in a new conceptualisation of the practice of community relations and socially responsible behaviour, which focuses on the 'character' of the practitioner and the 'human' relationships she values. In order to explain this concept, I will draw on the ideas that Kruckeberg and Starck present in their reconstructed theory of '*Public Relations and Community*' (1988). Whilst some might question the value of a thesis which is nearly twenty years old for understanding society today, writing now in the twenty-first century, these authors reaffirm their belief in their original thesis (Kruckeberg and Starck, 2001: 58).

## 8.1 An Overview of Public Relations and Community

Community relations has traditionally been regarded as *“an organisation’s planned, active and continuing participation with and within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both the institution and the community to promote an organisation as a good corporate citizen and its purpose is to keep it on good terms with the community as a whole and with key individuals within it”* (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 24). Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck (1988) contend that if practised in this way, communication experts will not satisfactorily address how public relations can help resolve what is actually the more important problem in society today: the loss of community. In their thesis, Starck and Kruckeberg (1988) ground their ideas for a reconceptualisation of community relations in experiences of social upheaval in US society resulting from a loss of sense of community - a loss due, in large part, to new technology. By changing modes of communication and transportation, such technological advances, they believe, have changed human relationships. They argued that the widespread use of mass media, which is impersonal in nature, combined with easy and cheap long-distance communication among individuals, altered people’s relations to one another.

As a result, their book proposes an alternative approach to community relations as being one that directly stimulates and actively attempts to restore and maintain a sense of community which has been lost in contemporary society (p26). Drawing on the ideas of the ‘Chicago School’ of social thought who were concerned about the loss of community and sought to restore community primarily through the original culprit- communication, Starck and Kruckeberg developed their conceptualisation of community relations out of the belief that the old forms of social control represented by family, neighbourhood, and local community were undermined, and their influence was greatly diminished (p46). The urban lifestyle, they asserted, weakened bonds of kinships, family, and neighbourhood and undermined the traditional basis for social solidarity (p46). Fortuitous and casual relationships had come to replace more intimate and permanent associations, and social distances were maintained in spite of geographical proximity; relations among neighbours were more aptly described as symbiotic rather than social. In essence, they believed that people in cities lived together not because they were alike, but because they were useful to one another (p46).

Their thesis suggests that, whilst interpersonal relationships are as abundant today as in any other, it is apparent that for more and more people such relationships are morally empty and heighten



the sense of anomie (p48-49). With society becoming more and more dominated by large, complex organisations, Kruckberg and Starck advocate that it is important to recognise the unique worth of each human being, in Mead's terms – the 'generalised other' (p55). It is their belief that an individual is not, at least from a sociological point of view, a member of a community because she lives in it but rather because, and to the extent that, she participates in the common life of the community (p52). *"The community is where individuals maintain not only their existence as individuals, but also their lives as persons. The human community has its inception in the traits of human nature and human needs. Humans cannot live alone. Besides such basic needs as shelter and protection, they need the company of other humans"* (p 55).

These authors, therefore, propose an alternative approach to community relations as one that directly stimulates and attempts to restore and maintain a sense of community, and to develop some kind of moral community. Through a concern for art and a concern for community interaction, personal values, sentiment, and aesthetic experiences (p116), they believe that practitioners can help individuals in the community to overcome alienation in its several forms. They can help individuals accommodate themselves to the larger group of the community and can help members of the community to know one another. Public relations practitioners can help to develop person-to-person relationships, even foster personal friendships within the community, and help community members share personal experiences among one another in a true spirit of community. *"They can help individuals to root themselves in the community, to grow with it, gaining in depth, significance, flavour and absorbing the local tradition and spirit"* (p113).

Kruckeberg and Starck's overall thesis is that *"those who take public relations seriously, professionals as well as scholars, should not view public relations as a means of "us" - communications specialists – simply doing something to them – targeted publics. Instead, those responsible for public relations should approach communication as a complex, multiflow process having the potential to help create a sense of community"* (pxiii). From this, we can assert that they believe that practitioners have a cultural role to play in promoting and addressing social order and progress.

## **8.2 Public Relations and Community in Mexico City**

As I have argued throughout this thesis, rationalising globalisation processes have encouraged a competitive nature and exacerbated the politics and power relationships inherent in Latin

America. These processes have tended to favour individualism over collective values of solidarity, respect and tolerance (Solorzano Hernandez, 2000). Present-day Mexico City is home to more than twenty million people, many of whom have left their traditional family and community ties behind in the rural areas, arriving in the capital in search of work. In a city of such enormity, the individual can easily have little or no feeling of belonging to a community. This has, in turn, had a significant affect on the natural tendency to communicate interpersonally. As Octavio Paz (1985: 67) writes, "*capitalism deprives [man] of his human nature by reducing him... to an object... Because of his social condition he quickly loses any concrete and human relationship to the world.*"

The people I talked to recognised a pressing need to move towards greater solidarity and citizenship in their city and as this discussion develops, I will suggest that public relations practitioners have the potential to play a significant role in encouraging this change. When talking about Mexico's dynamic past - the imperialism, the revolutions, and the heroes, the divided and marginalised society that still exists in a country continuing the fight to find true and social justice and an authentic democracy, the Mexican practitioner, Juan Lavalle (1997: 13-14) suggests that today, development and transformation are clear words in public relations, as much as they are in society. Moreover, Carlos Bonilla (personal interview) contends that public relations has a role in development, it has a social role to play that "*could make an invaluable contribution to the development of our towns and villages...*"

Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck (1988: 28) pose the question: If restoration and maintenance of community are the goals of community (and public) relations, how should the problem be approached? The strategic practice of corporate social responsibility and community relations is a new concept in Mexico. Whilst the multinationals embrace it wholeheartedly, it has been hard to encourage Mexican organisations to do the same. Serini (1994: 47) argues, however, that considering the issues and concerns that are part of the daily life of public relations practitioners as people in the community can enable us to more easily conceive of public relations as a 'we situation'. Having considered public relations practice in Mexico from a social constructionist perspective, which emphasises the occupational lifeworlds of the practitioners and the relationships inherent in them, we can see that these practitioners are already practising community relations and promoting socially responsible behaviour by way of their occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas*.



On page 180, I defined this ethos as: *“an ethos of human and democratic communication, manifested in an authentic occupational ‘character’ and formal and informal interpersonal communicative practices, which places an emphasis on building trusted relationships and valuing persons.”* By way of this ethos, I further suggested that practitioners would be concerned with building social capital at the microlevel and communicating values that might encourage a sense of citizenship and civic community. As I proposed, from the Latin American perspective, such a community would emphasise participation and a personal commitment to justice (Kirschke, 2001: 3) and be *“the public space for the development and articulation of opinion through associational life about the values and priorities that should underpin a given society”* (Pearce, 2004: 501), and an environment of trust and authenticity (Taylor and Botan, 2005). These values cannot be taught, but rather are picked up or ‘caught’ (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 35). Believing that only through oral communication should the demands of democracy be met, Dewey (as cited in Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 57) noted, *“[d]emocracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighbourly community”* (see also Jones and Gavata, 2005: 22). Indeed, it might be argued that the force of culture is the face of social relations that transfer meanings and dispositions from one person to another and that creates the potential for persons to cohabit peacefully. As Steve Duck (1992) asserts, the cultures that we talk about in the abstract are actually composed of real people, bound together by personal and social relationships that have the potential to encourage people to act in certain ways. Public relations practitioners in Mexico City might successfully communicate their democratic values, developing informal personal communication practices alongside more formal approaches.

### 8.3 Personal Communication

We cannot deceive ourselves about the real power that the practice of public relations commands within organisations in Mexico, it remains those who lead from the top and who pay the bills who call the tune and who drive the nature of formal communication activity. As Kruckeberg and Starck (2001: 53) argue, *“it is unlikely that corporate constitutions and policies can be depended on to preserve and safeguard human and civil rights or to embrace democracy and democratic principles.”* Whilst there may be greater emphasis on corporate social responsibility and allocating part of the corporate resource to ‘good causes’, the core value system that sits at the heart of the international commercial world has yet undergo substantial change (Flower, 2005). Furthermore, at present, political parties in the region *“do not appear to offer meaningful and credible vehicles for articulation and representation of interests in the state and are often seen in*

*conflict with 'civil society'* (Pearce, 2004: 485). However, from the point of view of an ethos of *relaciones humanas*, public relations would be as much, if not more, of a personal concern for the practitioner in Mexico City, as it is organisational. Their values would be so strong that the practitioner and her work become inseparable.

I would suggest that the circles of influence in Mexican society are grounded in the individual person who is at the epicentre of each sphere (Tilson, 1999). Therefore, the public relations practitioner as a person would have the potential to make a positive contribution as a cultural intermediary in Mexico City. Michael Argyle argues that people are more likely to be effective communicators if their actions reinforce the message (1994: 119). Any attempt to communicate messages pertaining to civic morals and honesty will be ineffective unless the public relations practitioner, as communicator, is seen to be behaving in this way herself i.e. communicating an authentic message by way of an authentic character (Arens, 1997: 59). This would imply, for example, encouraging co-operation, showing concern for others, offering help and advice, being open and consistent in her actions, and communicating non-verbally with those she seeks to develop a relationship by way of smiles, etcetera. As the President of RELAPO, Carlos Brambilla Navarro suggests, the secret to effective public relations in Mexico is personal style – the personal stamp that the practitioner leaves upon the practice ([http://www.confirp.org/n\\_mex.04.htm](http://www.confirp.org/n_mex.04.htm) – accessed 04/06/05).

These behaviour signals can often have more impact than words, and sometimes symbolise aspects which cannot be easily displayed in the course of formal interaction (Argyle, 1994: 214). Whilst, as Kruckeberg and Starck (1988: 66) suggest, communicating messages via the mass media might contribute to a person's feelings of alienation in a world becoming increasingly impersonal, face-to-face communication and 'small talk' is a potential way of maintaining a sense of community or fellowship with other human beings, "*It helps us to create a bond of humanness*" (Knapp and Vangelisti, 1995: 184; see also Christian and Traber, 1997). It is, as Hayakawa calls it, "*the language of social cohesion.*" By valuing interpersonal communication and person-to-person relationships in all areas of their occupational lifeworlds, public relations practitioners in Mexico City might, in Kruckeberg and Starck's (1988: 67) words, help foster friendships. The Mexican practitioner, Ana Fusoni (2001: 88), suggests that one of the characteristics of public relations is precisely the ability to develop the personal contacts that we all look for in the social community in which we live. Through their professional networks and social liaisons, practitioners might enable information to flow between people who may not



otherwise communicate with one another. Such an approach to community relations contrasts with the strategic definition we saw on p189, which suggests that community relations is a strategically planned effort. Instead, the practice of community relations in Mexico City would be a natural inclination.

Communication is also an immediate enhancement of life, enjoyed for its own sake (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 59). In the opening chapter of his book on emotional intelligence, Daniel Goleman reminds us of the impact that a person's human-focused behaviour might have on our daily lives. Goleman relates personal experience of a hot and sweaty August afternoon on a bus in New York City. He tells us about how he was instantly taken aback by the warm welcome he received from the bus driver who offered each and every passenger a 'Hi, How are you?' and who set about providing a running lively commentary for the duration of the journey. *"By the time the people got off the bus,"* Goleman writes, *"each in turn had shaken off the sullen shell they had entered with and when the driver shouted out a "So long, have a great day!" each gave a smiling response"* (p.ix). Goleman goes on to say *"imagining a spreading virus of good feeling that must have rippled through the city, starting from passengers on his bus, I saw that this bus driver was an urban peacemaker of sorts, wizard like in his power to transmute the sullen irritability that seethed in his passengers, to soften their hearts a bit"* (p.ix-x). As this narrative suggests, due to the norm of reciprocity, practitioners employing the ethos of *relaciones humanas* in all areas of their occupational lifeworlds have the potential to encourage others to communicate and interact similarly, evoking a gradual spiraling or building effect in therapeutic communication (Kreps, 1986: 193; Pateman, 1970).

Personal communication such as that described in Goleman's account, plays a considerable part in our matter-of-course intimate experience of everyday association. In an increasingly globalised world, people need to belong, to feel part of something (Hall, 1976; Singh, 2003; Featherstone, Lash and Robertson, 1995; Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988). The interaction of 'neighbour upon neighbour' with members of one circle influencing others in their circle, and those in the adjoining circle, is significant (Tilson, 1999). Through informal relationships, people in Mexico City might gain rewards from being part of the city's culture, and through informal interpersonal communication they might express and share their satisfactions and dissatisfactions more comfortably. According to Mexican practitioner, Ana Fusoni (2001: 88), *"in the fast moving depersonalised world of the internet, the field of public relations will take on an ever-greater importance...Its importance will be found in encouraging people to touch base personally and*

*establish situations that create quality and sympathy. Its enormous challenge will be to convince the younger generations addicted to new technology that real human contact achieves much more concrete and effective results."*

Through informal ties, people would be able to maintain their own identities, gain a sense of self-respect, and exercise control over their lives. It is through informal ties that people gain rewards from their membership of a culture and have an incentive to be part of, and contribute to, it (Christians and Traber, 1997). By communicating informally with other members of their culture, practitioners might, therefore, obtain valuable information about the people in it and their experiences. Steve Duck (1992: 153) suggests, for example, that in everyday life *"power, credibility and trust are based on vibrant, familiar relationships. Not on the fripperies of the advertising image."* Due to the nature of informal communication, messages typically go through short chains. This might encourage people in Mexico City to temporarily ignore the status and power differences that are still inherent in the city.

When successfully and consistently used, informal interpersonal communication practices have the potential to make a positive contribution to increasing the level of civic trust in Mexican society (Richards and Brown, 2002: 104, Kirschke, 2001: 3). As William R. Potapchuk, Jarle P. Crocker, and William H. Schechter Jr., (1997) suggest, out of chats – that is real conversations that promote change- public relations practitioners in Mexico City might start to encourage authentic communities in which we might eventually see citizenship, political organisations operate effectively, and communities in which persons would want to live.

#### **8.4 Discussion overview**

Collaboration is the core value of a democratic society, especially one that is characterised more by societal corporatism than pluralism (Spicer, 2000: 117). Robert Putnam (1993) argued that democracy and economics work best in cultures that have a large stock of social capital - such as dense social networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (see also Azukaego Moemeka, 1997). Greg Leichty and Ede Wamer (2001: 73) contended that public relations practices that maintain or increase social capital should be identified and encouraged. Moreover, if the current economy is failing Mexico City as a community, one needs to be created that is based on a different form of exchange, accessible to everyone (Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, 1997). An approach which emphasises social capital, offers the opportunity



to break free from the traditional debates over the comparative effectiveness of the government and the market (Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, 1997). The task for public relations practitioners in Mexico City is to communicate their occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas* in order to promote transition - in particular, the 'moral economy' - described by Mexican commentator, Armando Bartra (in Wise, Salazar and Carlsen, 2004: 214) as, "*an economy of the subject and not the object, an economy that addresses human needs and potential, not only goods..*," and to humanise the effects of rapid cultural change without losing hold of Mexico's identity based on Mexican values and traditions. "[Aztec] societies possessed a great sense of community, independence, and competence as well as notable skills of government and science. The societies that developed after the arrival of the conquistadors forgot the emphasis on relationships, caring, and community that were a hallmark of the early writings of the Judeo-Christian tradition." Duhl (2002: 380) suggests that had these two traditions been meshed, "*the tumultuous history of Latin America would have been different. Community could have been the core value of society.*"

According to Eugene Halton (1995: 275), the time has come to find a new way of renewing reasons, in Mexico City this would involve opening the gates to the country's historical heritage and renewing values of family and interpersonal bonding, which might in the past be considered as exclusive, to create interpersonal bridging (or inclusive) practices (Halpern, 2005: 27; Putnam, 2000: 22) to encourage trust, reciprocity and citizenship through authentic and organic communication (Taylor and Botan, 2005; Gergen, 2001). Public relations practitioners would, therefore, be cultural *vanguards* – working in a field which is at the forefront of change in Mexican society, as well as *guardians* of elements of their pre-Colombian cultural traditions, in the process.

As we saw in section 7.3, Emilio Solorzano Hernandez (2000) suggested that human beings do not live simply in a world of occasional contact, but that they share in a world organised by relationships and communication. In terms of development, the ethos of *relaciones humanas* would be about taking a sociocultural outlook which is more harmonious and ethical. Valuing interpersonal relationships, listening, conversing and discovering values that might be shared by persons in their community, public relations practitioners can pass on the personal virtues and skills which many regard as necessary for democracy (Leichty and Warner, 2001). Hector Tejera Gaona (2003: 105) asserts that "[b]oth in Mexico City and in the nation at large there is the need for a profound change of character in the political relationships between citizens, political parties and government." I would suggest that this new 'character' should not just pertain to

political relationships, but to relationships within all areas of society. Public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries have the potential to aid in the development of a moral character necessary for their culture to grow in ways that encourage more civil and ethical relationships between persons (Gergen, 1994), thus enhancing Mexico's development and experiences of 'Modernity'.



## 9. Final Reflections

Before finally reflecting on the thesis, we should remind ourselves of the aims I identified in section 1.7. I proposed that the aims of the research could be separated into four distinct areas as follows:

- To seek conceptual innovation coupled with empirical research in order to contribute to the growing body of research which encourages critical inquiries and non-traditional methodologies that aid our understanding of local and culturally specific styles of public relations.
- To advance an ‘in-awareness’ cultural approach to public relations and practice, linking societal culture and the occupational culture of public relations to the communication activities of practitioners with the aim of understanding the potential role(s) of public relations within Mexican society.
- To deconstruct the practice to explore the relationships and individual functioning behind the occupational culture and to explore unsuspected aspects of, and potentialities within, the occupation and the influences of the wider culture in which it operates.
- To explore the occupational culture of public relations in Mexico from the perspective of the occupational lifeworlds of the practitioners – the subjective meanings and experiences.

My purpose in the closing sections is not to deal with each in turn, but rather to reflect thematically - whilst drawing on the aims within each of the subsections. We will first consider the ethos of *relaciones humanas* and what we might learn from the Mexican experience. Before going on to critique the research approach taken, and the unique contribution offered by, and potential limitations of, the study.

### 9.1 The Significance of the Ethos of Relaciones Humanas

Public relations in Mexico is still not recognised or ‘defined’. There has been a lot of baggage associated with ‘stereotypical’ perceptions of the industry. Practitioners in Mexico City are striving for public relations practice in their country to be seen as something other than parties and publicity, or another ‘*mere copy of the North American archetypical*’ (Paz, 1985: 286) influences which may be infiltrating other parts of society. They are striving for a model which

corresponds to their historical, psychic and cultural reality. PRP culture is characteristic of Raymond Williams (1981) conception of culture as a 'way of life' - the culture centres around meaning, and public relations as a cultural intermediary occupation is about *communicating* meanings. This thesis has identified that in the case of PRP culture in Mexico City, meaning does not always originate from formal spoken and written discourse but also through informal cultural symbols which may be verbal or non-verbal, practices. My argument has been, as Gergen (1994: ix) proposes, that what is meaningful in [Mexican] culture grows from interpersonal relationships and that this is where healthy transition might lie. Indeed, Hector Tejera Gaona (2003: 105) suggests that, for example, "*when relationships of trust, closeness and efficacy are cultivated between various agencies of government and the citizens, it will be possible to enlarge the foundation of a truly democratic participation in Mexico.*"

The findings in this thesis have not identified a model for best practice in Mexico City, but have instead identified an ethos relevant to the group of practitioners interviewed, an ethos manifest in ways by which public relations practitioners relate interpersonally to the world around them. I would not deny that there will be practitioners elsewhere in Mexico City whose concept of public relations would be quite different and they might advocate the continued use of propaganda, manipulation and influence, for example. However, the ethos I have identified through my research might suggest to the practitioner community in Mexico City possibilities for change and future development. When practitioners with this ethos effectively employ it in their occupational lifeworlds, they might have the potential to make a positive contribution to the development of Mexican culture (Pateman, 1970). Furthermore, in developing the ethos of *relaciones humanas*, practitioners have the potential to carve out a more appropriate and respected occupational identity, one that is more relevant to the cultural conditions of Mexico.

My intention in this chapter has not been to present a revolutionary mission to save the world through practising public relations with the ethos of *relaciones humanas*. Yet I do not deny that, for me, there appears to be an interrelationship between human problems such as anomie, unrest and disorganisation and advances in modern technology, industrial organisation and highly competitive materialistic-oriented economies. Practitioners "*will not sweep [class division in Mexico City] under the carpet thanks to the irresistible pull of this powerful idea of social capital.*" But they might "*armed with a more critical sense of the enterprise, envision stronger, more cross-cutting kinds of social capital that will make [citizenship and solidarity] work*" (Briggs, 1997). I believe that public relations practitioners in Mexico City have a potential role to



play in bringing about this positive cultural change, by communicating through words and actions, their 'therapeutic' values and desires to preserve what is Mexican. They might seek to connect people's lives – head, heart, and spirit – by communicating a sense of shared history and solidarity upon which the commonly held values of Mexicans are based (Briggs, 1997; Duhl, 2002). The impact of this occupational group might not be dramatic. Yet a difference might be made at grass roots level, and in a society such as Mexico where politics, big business and the media, even fellow citizens, continue to be treated with suspicion, it is at the grass roots, person to person(s), level where effective change begins.

Finally, I should emphasise that I am not suggesting that public relations practitioners are the only group in Mexican society who have the potential to influence Mexican culture in this way. Some postmodern theorists believe that city cultures have moved beyond individualism and are now concerned with generating a sense of communal feeling – a new 'aesthetic paradigm', where masses of people come together as emotional communities in which "*intense moments of empathy and affectual immediacy are experienced*" (Featherstone, 1991: 101). Donn Tilson (1999) proposes that a certain 'community of conscience' is required in Latin America to orient public and private life towards the fundamental dignity of all human beings. Practitioners suggested that the earthquake in 1985 in Mexico City was catalyst for a new citizenship approach, a renewed set of relationships, a renewed way of responding to neighbours, and a recognition that citizens have responsibility to their fellow Mexicans. The Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes (2000: 26 as cited in Molleda, 2000: 525) argued that his country's people are [now] actively embracing the concept of citizenship, "*[w]e are transferring our culture, our passion, our history, our lives... to civic society organisations, to environmental and human rights groups, to labour unions and agrarian co-operatives, to universities and the press, to entrepreneurial groups and community associations.*" Yet, these groups tend to focus on collective *action* rather than public *participation* (Pearce, 2004).

This exploratory analysis of the occupational lifeworlds of public relations practitioners in Mexico City suggests that, as an occupational culture, public relations practitioners share a set of real or espoused values which centre around an ethos of social citizenship and as a community of conscience. Public relations is in a unique position in that it offers considerable social capital - the opportunity for a variety of, and repeated contacts with people. Practitioners can have a variety and closeness in interpersonal relationships. Their actions can, therefore, enter more directly and penetrate more deeply into relational practices. The unique position of practitioners as 'bridges',

or intermediaries, between organisations and the Mexican people places public relations practitioners at an advantage in making a positive contribution to the change process, carrying forward the values and vision of the community in, and through, these relationships (Potapchuk, Crocker, Schechter, 1997).

Typical of most constructionist accounts (Gergen and Gergen, 2003), I have considered both stability and change in terms of the meanings created by the practitioners together. From this perspective I would argue that the practitioners in Mexico City have, themselves, the potential control over the future direction of their occupation; working together, they have the capacity to generate new meanings and, thus, new grounds for action. Simply to claim this ethos as their own would not be enough. Public relations practitioners in Mexico City would need to build on it, communicate it, and draw on it, to develop the formal practice of public relations in Mexico. Whilst I do not believe that an ethos can be taught, it can, and should, be nurtured. Practitioners would consciously have to make time for the persons that are central to their work. It was evident from several of the interviews that organisational demands were already taking over and affecting their ability to relate personally. Some participants had to cut interviews short and were distracted by emails during our conversations, whilst in other instances, I was kept waiting for considerable lengths of time - whilst conducting some interviews with practitioners, their colleagues were even rushing in and out of the office where we were.

As the narratives reflect, the overwhelming majority of those practitioners I talked with emphasised the affect that the worsening traffic congestion throughout the city had on their daily working lives. They increasingly relied on e-mail and mobile phones as a means of contact, as they found themselves unable to attend meetings outside of the office for the amount of time that this would take up. The typical Mexican '*comida*' (lunch), at one time the heart of Mexican daily life, is less significant now as professionals, increasingly, dislike the amount of time that it takes up in the working day. These trends reflect a dehumanising of the work experience of practitioners as persons in Mexico City and a depersonalisation of the service that they are able to give as professionals.

As I emphasised in chapter 4, the cultural transition occurring in Mexico has brought with it a growing attitude of increased competition. Some practitioners believed that this was already prevalent in the public relations industry, where some only sought to look after their own crowns. Whilst in the case of professional associations, a feeling still exists that those who are leading



them are following in the footsteps of those political and social authorities who have only sought to enhance their own personal power.

## 9.2 What Can We Learn from the Mexican Experience?

My intention in this thesis has been to add to the ever-growing body of research studies now being undertaken within the field of international public relations which seek to answer the one central question that Nilanjana Bardhan raised (2003: 226), “*Are there locales in the world where public relations is conceptualised and practised in ways that do not comfortably subscribe to pre-established dominant models and principles?*” At the same time, and within the context of Mexico City, I have sought to generate debate about the relationship between public relations and more general sociological theories that can bridge the gap between generalisation and the local understanding that is significant if public relations is to understand its potential as a cultural intermediary occupation.

My purpose has never been to produce generalisations from my findings in Mexico City to the public relations profession as a whole. As we saw with the case of the Mexican statement, much can be ‘lost in translation’ when making cultural perceptions generic. The successful development and potential manifestation of a public relations ethos of *relaciones humanas* would depend on the creation and maintenance of a particular kind of ‘climate’. This ethos would not be enough in and of itself. Interpersonal communication is a *pattern* of interaction that defines the relationship and binds individuals together. In this sense, the communication is not so much something a person does, but something persons participate in. “*No individual communicator can create interaction or define the interpersonal relationship. An individual communicator contributes to the interaction*” (Aubrey Fisher and Adams, 1994: xv). It would succeed in its aims only if formal and informal interpersonal communicative practices were employed in situations where the underlying values of the culture supported such approaches. The communication would then be interpreted as humane and honest, and people would respond favourably to it. In contrast, if the ethos were applied to defensive environments, these same actions might be interpreted as offensive attempts to manipulate individuals and publics.

In developing a theory to illustrate an occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas* in Mexico City and discussing the implications this approach might have to practitioners acting as intermediaries in Mexican culture, I am not suggesting that all public relations practitioners worldwide should,

or indeed could, aspire to this. The operative word is that competence implies multiple abilities, which are inescapably linked to the particular experiences of practitioners. Neither am I proposing that therapeutic values are appropriate for communication in all public relations activity. There will often be occasions where such an approach is not appropriate and may be regarded as 'false, regressive or degenerative' behaviour (Richards and Brown, 2002: 112), particularly as publics are becoming more and more critical of the media, marketing communication and politics. However, practitioners in Mexico City who possess therapeutic values as part of their natural character and who demonstrate them in different areas of the occupational lifeworlds, have the potential to actively participate in the humanising forces which help to make sense of daily life in this era of global confusion.

As Inman's observations (quoted in Albert, 1996: 344-345) of culture in Latin America suggests, the Mexican experience has something to contribute to international public relations discourse concerning the value of the individual, "*the place of friendship, the art of conversation, the place of differing and contemplation, and the importance of people over things and rules.*" This suggests that public relations practitioners might provide an alternative to those organisational views and practices that depersonalise the human order. The ethos of *relaciones humanas* may be an alternative to the pressure for practitioners in Mexico to become more specialised and 'efficient' and the pressure to think of public relations successes as organisational successes. It might encourage practitioners both in Mexico and elsewhere to, instead, think about the true nature of public relations – building *relationships* with *people*. In his article 'Ethics and PR', Thomas (2002: 308) argues that the public relations profession has lost credibility due to "*mechanical impersonal public relations programmes.*" He argues that in an environment of increasingly sophisticated publics, practitioners need to reassert their role as relationship builders and get to know the people they deal with. "*In the end*", Thomas concludes, "*image is what you [the practitioner] are*" (p310).

The emphasis placed on interpersonal competence when practising public relations effectively in Mexico City can make a significant contribution to the current debates surrounding the need to establish a theoretical and rigorous body of knowledge for public relations. It illustrates the fact that theoretical and practical knowledge is not enough and that practitioners also need social, cultural and human awareness. Furthermore, regarding public relations as an ethos rather than a fixed department or function within organisations, recognises that we cannot limit our



interpretation of the field determinately, rather that public relations is something which might be going on in various facets of Mexican society.

As Dean Kruckeberg and Kenneth Starck (1988: 11) suggested, “*symptomatic of the inadequacies of any understanding of the role and function of public relations today is the problem of its definition. What is public relations? What does it do? What is it supposed to do? Is it doing what it is supposed to do?*” This thesis has suggested an alternative ‘vision’ relevant to the practice in Mexico City, which suggests that public relations as an ethos, is something more than a strategic communication activity on behalf of organisations, instead it is something which has the potential to contribute to the community via the practitioners themselves. And we are likely to find many more ‘definitions’ emerging from elsewhere in the world in the future. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988: 4) suggest that “*conventional public relations literature takes great pains to argue that public relations is as old as civilisation.*” Yet, the dominant discourse is not that of roles or functions, as much as purpose and intent (Bivins, 1993). “*Critics emphasise the human societies are hardly conceivable without tolls of persuasion to enable groups to make decisions and resolve conflicts*” (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988: 4). The fact that the sense of community has become less strong in modern mass society creates a need that perhaps the public relations practitioner has to potential to help satisfy. But as Kruckeberg and Starck argue, “*such a role makes the job of public relations practitioner more difficult. It represents a public relations role different from one presently practised*” (p71).

An understanding of public relations in Mexico City as an ethos of *relaciones humanas* might enable practitioners to see where practitioner *agency* is possible and where it is not (Todres, 2002). This occupational ethos as a social ethic of communication “*is the very opposite of economic-industry rationality that is commonly applied to [the industry] – the pursuit of profit, technological efficiency and effectiveness, and competition in the economic marketplace*” (Traber, 1997: 332-333). The idea that public relations practitioners, above all, have to have all the strategic management skills to be able to know how businesses tick has become almost an obsession. In contrast, the ethos of *relaciones humanas* is based on a social reality or *raison d’etre* (Traber, 1997: 333). What the subjective perspectives of those practitioners who participated in this study can offer is an alternative perspective emphasising the importance of understanding of what makes society tick to success in public relations. This human knowledge is invaluable in today’s society. Practitioners in Mexico City have the potential to teach us of the need to develop actions that account for individual, collective, business and social needs within the various

cultural or social systems – whether it be families, communities, workplaces or societal level. Their actions would differ significantly according to the contexts and settings in which the practitioners found themselves and would change over time, whilst remaining grounded in the country's cultural values, those predispositions that comprise the foundation of the ethos of *relaciones humanas* should survive.

The, at times frustrating, complications inherent in developing an appropriate methodology for research in Mexico City actually enabled the ethos of *relaciones humanas* to come through from the empirical data. Most practitioners tacitly revealed the ethos not just through their overall responses and descriptive anecdotes, but also by the ways they acted with me in the interviews and social situations. It might be suggested that participants were simply 'putting on an act' or a 'face' for my benefit. As I emphasised on p155, I felt this to be the case when practitioners were talking about professionalisation, but as soon as the conversation changed to their own work and social experiences, their narratives seemed more natural. Moreover, to have such a pattern of themes emerge in interviews and informal interaction with practitioners in a variety of social settings must say something about the extent to which these practitioners were authentic.

Finally, the ethos of *relaciones humanas* implies that to succeed in public relations in Mexico City, practitioners would need to possess a number of natural qualities: empathy, authenticity, cooperation, and trustworthiness, amongst many others. These qualities - or 'competence' - if considered collectively, would be grounded as much in the cultural experiences of, and societal influences upon, the practitioners, as much as influences from the occupation itself. Might we, therefore, argue that practitioners elsewhere in the world would not, or could not, possess the same occupational character? The significance of interpersonal competence as seen in Mexico City would not lessen the need for education and a professional approach to practice, but it would imply that we need to take a new perspective. The industry will need to re-think, or at least refocus, its attempts to professionalise in order to recognise the important role that practitioners play in the community in different parts of the world (Kruckeberg and Starck, 1988).

### 9.3 Reflections on Methodology

Following on from my argument that what has been found to be relevant to the Mexican experience might not necessarily be applicable to other cultural contexts, it might also be misleading to use one research study as a model for application in another research environment.



Situations in which the studied phenomenon occurs may be very different (Van Manen, 1990: 166). However, public relations practitioners throughout the world need to take cultural and social changes into account and try to understand their implications and to conceptualise their role as cultural intermediaries accordingly. To do this they must have “*an expanded sense of history and an appreciation of contemporary needs*” (Kluckhohn and Starck, 1988: 41). Therefore, as emphasised on page 5, a complete paradigmatic basis for the development of public relations theory must account for the situational and the institutional, the particular and the significance of relationships. In this thesis I have advocated the importance of more research within public relations which considers macro, and more importantly, micro processes from a social constructionist perspective. A socially constructed approach which explores the occupational culture redefines public relations as a culturally relativist practice that might not privilege Western, corporate models over the rich varieties of practice that exist in other regions of the world (Curtin and Gaither, 2005) and draws out some of the ways in which the social make-up of practitioners can shape the cultural practices they perform.

Using a social constructionist approach in order to explore PRP culture has enabled us to:

- Identify diversity in the practice of public relations in Mexico City.
- Raise awareness amongst practitioners in Mexico City, and elsewhere, of each other's practice and communicate the stories told to enable them to envisage and co-create new futures for public relations practice.
- Bridge the occupational and social influences that make occupational meanings explicit.
- Bring the 'I' and 'we' together to create a space within which new patterns of meaning can emerge and to explore how, collectively, practitioners might develop the occupation in order to make a positive contribution to the development of Mexican culture.
- Help practitioners to pay attention to who they are *being* as they go about their everyday work, touching upon their relationships with different persons in their lives – 'relationships' with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours, beliefs, values, feelings, behaviours, country (Critten, 2005).

By viewing public relations through a constructivist lens, we are open to new vistas of practice. “*We begin to see the possibility for multiple realities and values, each legitimate and desirable within its own interpretive community. And, rather than seeking ways of determining which way is 'the right way' we are drawn into searching for forms of dialogue out of which meanings can be transformed*” (Gergen and Gergen, 2003: 161). More open and 'relativist' projects may not

make academic life easier for researchers of international public relations working in a field which has typically favoured large numbers and 'strict' research designs. As I have highlighted previously, there were times when writing up this research when I feared that, by assuming such a subjective approach – particularly as regards developing the composite narratives-, that I would be alienating myself from the academic community as it currently stands. I feared that I had not included 'numbers' in my analysis to support my narrative and decided to include narrative summaries that might, perhaps, make my work appear more 'objective' to the reader.

Criticism often made of academia is that it is focused too much on the notion of the Ivory Tower, that academics communicate their ideas effectively amongst themselves, but their work is, more often than not, inaccessible to practitioners. As Charles Moncur (2006): 98) wrote, *"... academics are part of a wider community which requires that they conform to strict academic standards in analysis and presentation: rigour must first be applied to the development of ideas and the use of language, and research findings must be set in the context of past and other contemporary work. This poses problems of access for practitioners, particularly if they come to the task reluctantly, and since they are likely to be interested only in the applied aspects of such work and not in the finer points of academic discourse. Therefore, the need for a growing body of literature in which academics present public relations theory and research in ways which make it accessible to a wider and less specialised audience."* I firmly believe that the subjective and reflective approach to research I have taken in this thesis will help to narrow the divide between researchers and practitioners whom Betteke van Ruler (2005) suggests are currently 'on different planets', and give practitioners and scholars alike a better feeling for the contexts, complexities and practices of public relations in different cultural contexts.

#### **9.4 Implications of the Findings - Public Relations as a Profession**

Given that this research developed out of my personal unease with movements within the industry worldwide to encourage a communal view of public relations professionalisation and knowledge and the rights of any one group to claim authority of that knowledge (Gergen and Gergen, 2003), it is important to consider how the findings of this thesis might contribute to this discourse. As I made clear in the opening chapter, the idea of public relations as a profession is employed almost as a discursive resource (Watson, 2003: 172) to demonstrate and protect a set of interests. A degree of discursive ingenuity has been used by some in the industry to encourage interests to centre around particular occupational purposes – such as the quest for public relations to sit at the



top table in organisations and to be seen as a function separate from marketing. As Juliana Raupp and Betteke Van Ruler (2006: 22) suggested in their work comparing the trends in public relations and communication management research in Germany and The Netherlands, *“the majority of the PhD theses are oriented towards practical questions, and not primarily towards the development of general knowledge... [the focus has instead been on] applied research in order to give recommendations for specific practical questions.”*

As Clifford Christians and Michael Traber (1997: ix) suggest in their introduction to *‘Communication Ethics and Universal Values’*, the current problems faced by communication occupations, *“cannot simply be resolved by new codes of conduct or legislation, but by in-depth and systematic reflection about the fundamental norms that form the bedrock of ethical reasoning and moral choices.”* Having suggested that public relations in Mexico City might be regarded as an ethos of *relaciones humanas*; it is interesting to consider whether public relations there might be defined as an occupation, let alone a profession. Tony Watson (2003: 134) suggests that *“membership of an occupation involves engagement on a regular basis in part or the whole of a range of work tasks which are identified under a particular heading or title by both those carrying out these tasks and by a wider public.”* As we have seen, public relations in Mexico City is suffering what can only be described as an ‘identity crisis’, with a lack of consensus amongst practitioners themselves as well as within the wider public. The second point of the occupational principle defined by Watson (2003: 134) states that an occupation can be said to exist *“where the tasks involved in certain kinds of work are such that assumed control over those carrying out those tasks can be sought by members of the occupation itself at the expense of control by an employer, government or clients.”* As I emphasised in section 8.3, public relations is practised in different ways according to the organisational context in which the practitioner works. Whilst the practitioners themselves might have control of their immediate work responsibilities, the nature of the communications programmes they develop will be directed by the management of those organisations they represent. Moreover, it is often the organisation itself which is rewarded for a job well done. Tony Watson suggests that it is when an occupational group is granted autonomy over their work tasks, that they can be considered to be a highly skilled ‘trade’ or, more especially, a ‘profession’.

Towards the end of writing up this thesis an article was published in *Public Relations Review* by Betteke van Ruler (2005) on the subject of professionalism and professionalisation within public relations. The article raises some interesting and significant issues concerning the incoherent

views on professionalism and the development of public relations practice amongst practitioners and scholars around the world. Van Ruler considers the development of this discourse drawing on four historical models of professionalism and professionalisation, from the 'knowledge' model to the present-day 'personality' model. She defines these as follows (p.3):

**Fig. 2 Four Historical models of Professionalism and Professionalisation**

- **Knowledge Model:** Professionalization is seen as the development of an organised group of experts who implement scientifically developed knowledge on a cluster of tasks defined by the professional group, in order to deliver a unique contribution to the well-being of the client and the progress of society.
- **Status model:** Professionalization is seen as the development of an organized elite who uses general and specific knowledge on a cluster of tasks defined by the professional group, in order to gain status, power and autonomy for its profession.
- **Competition Model:** Professionalization is seen as the development of experts who gain value for their clients by implementing those scientifically developed models that match the demands of the client and the determinants of the problem on a cluster of tasks negotiated with the client, and in permanent competition with other professionals.
- **Personality Model:** Professionalization is seen as the development of experts who gain value for their clients by their commitment and their personality, their creativity and their enthusiasm for a cluster of tasks negotiated with the client.

What is interesting for us when considering public relations in Mexico City, are the references made to the personality model in this article. In this model, emotional intelligence is given far more importance than rational knowledge and relevant skills. Emotional intelligence, for Van Ruler, is developed and shown in devotion, passion, empathy and enthusiasm. It is not what a practitioner *knows* but what she *thinks* that is significant (p.6). Van Ruler asserts that whilst scholars “*are clear about professionalisation: their perspective is a rational intelligence oriented one, and perhaps predominately, a knowledge model. Practitioners seem much more inclined to the emotional intelligence perspectives, and maybe even to a large extent, to the personality model*” (p.11), whilst she believes that professional associations seem to favour the status model. The article concludes by suggesting that public relations needs to combine elements of each of



these models in order to move forward productively. Could this be an indication that we might be set to see a major discursive turn in the professionalism debate in the future?

David Harper (2004) argues, in reference to clinical psychology training, that one effect of expert knowledge approaches to professional practice is that they often make a clear distinction between professionals and the people who use the services. He suggests that this can invite professionals to act in ways experienced by consumers as lacking in ordinary human qualities. For professionals too, Harper contends, this can be a strain, with many feeling a split between their professional person and their self outside of work. The situation in Mexico City appears to challenge this assertion. Public relations as an occupation appears to provide an affective link between the practitioner's character and personal lives and the practice to create a work-based lifeworld which reflects the nature of the being of the practitioners as a person. As a result, in this study I have suggested that public relations practitioners in Mexico City draw on many different kinds of support resources and personal qualities, not just those that might be regarded as expert knowledge.

Public relations in Mexico City stands for a human approach which is an ethos - more a way of being (or espoused being) than a code of conduct or of ethics. Recognising the contribution that public relations might make to the personalisation of culture and to maintaining those positive traits of Mexican culture, would illustrate the occupation's importance to society, which is the prerequisite of professionalism. I have suggested elsewhere that public relations is unlike the traditional professions in the sense that being concerned with developing relationships between persons, the practice cannot be easily defined and standardised unlike other professions such as the Law and medicine. Nevertheless, where medicine and public relations do have similarities, I believe, is in the attention to the person. Any of us who have ever spent time receiving medical care will probably agree that it is not the type of medicine that we received or the procedure by which we were treated that we remember, but rather the way in which we were treated as a person and the relationships we had with those responsible for our care. We would hope to be under the care of a medical doctor who was 'human' in her bedside manner. Likewise, I have presented my argument already that the communicative behaviours of a public relations practitioner in Mexico City might affect just one other person, or group of persons, but the positive impact they have on them may affect how these persons relate to others in the world around them in the future. Therefore, one practitioner alone can make a difference to her occupation and to the community in which she is working.

There is, undoubtedly, a need for in-depth and more open studies of the nature of professionalism, or rather the construction of professional practice, that emphasise the role of 'abilities and skills' in different nations, as well as a need for thick descriptions and for avoiding linking public relations professionalisation prematurely to standard categories, particularly, as we have seen, as regards knowledge and skill, but also as regards social ethics or an occupational ethos (Traber, 1997: 332-334). *"Social ethics are based on principles that concern being-in-community as essentially human, social ethics aims at the transformation of society"* (Traber, 1997: 334). As Gabriel Jaime Perez (1997: 168) suggests in his chapter on communication ethics in Latin America, the way forward must be an approach which generates basic questions relevant to the human experience in general, and places them in the concrete social and cultural contexts where communication processes take place. *"Such a vision [can transcend] the world of [public relations] practice and make a contribution to the public ethos, that is, to a more humane and more responsible code of values that society as a whole could and should adopt"* (Christians and Traber, 1997: ix).

As discussed on page 168, the ethics of those practitioners considered in this study reflect what might be termed 'narrative ethics' (Pepper, 1995: 161). The findings suggest that the ethics of public relations practitioners in Mexico City are culturally mediated visions of right and wrong; and are a combination of personal morality, the core values of the group, and professional and societal influences. 'Professional' ethics might, therefore, be regarded as socially constructed and grounded in practitioner experiences. This suggests that public relations cannot be considered as an exact science for the reason that the practice would have special characteristics in different cultures. As the Mexican practitioner Juan Lavalley (1997: 21) suggests, there will be characteristics that are generic to almost all cultural contexts such as honesty, ability of communication, organisation skills, and personality; but whilst the US might be more oriented toward technical and strategic aspects such as marketing and planning, the practitioner in Mexico would be surrounded by particular circumstances that affect their work such as inflation, recession and unemployment and the cultural and historical realities which would encourage developing human and organisational relations that operate effectively in a society based on scarce resources, inequality and conflict.

## 9.5 Unique Factors Emerging from the Study

Throughout this thesis I have sought to produce 'generative theory', proposed by Kenneth Gergen (1994: 60) *"to refer to theoretical views that are lodged against or contradict the commonly*



*accepted assumptions of the culture and open new vistas of intelligibility,”* in order to offer alternative perspectives of, and potential for, public relations practice which are grounded in the Mexican experience. The unique contribution that this thesis can make to the development of discourse within international public relations research would be:

Public relations research has never before looked at the occupational culture of public relations, assuming an actor-oriented approach, especially the lifeworlds of practitioners and the contribution they can make to the development of their national culture. As encouraged by Greg Leichty and Ede Warner (2001: 73), this thesis raises empirical questions about how public relations might affect the creation, maintenance, and destruction of social capital.

Research to date has applied variants of the idea of social constructionism to the practice of public relations (Moreno and Molleda, 2005; Bardhan, 2003; Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003; Serini, 1994; Filby and Wilmott 1988, amongst others). However, this research has not considered themselves, or explored the meaning and predispositions underpinning the occupational culture. To look at the meanings of PRP culture is to understand how practitioners understand themselves and how they act within culture. In this study I adopted an actor-oriented approach – looking at what the practitioners did and said about themselves – their relevant public actions and orientations, and the normative evaluations they made about their daily-life experiences. By focusing on the concept of the reflective practitioner it was possible to outline alternatives to that of a narrowly defined public relations practitioner as strategic and ‘expert’ communicator in Mexico City.

As a social constructionist view suggests, social and cultural context affects the effectiveness of interpersonal communication (Aubrey Fisher and Adams, 1994). The findings from this thesis support this view. The idea of applying interpersonal communication theory to public relations is neither new nor radical. A good source for discussion of the personal and interpersonal influence approach to practice is Elizabeth L. Toth (2000), whilst for exploring the relationship between interpersonal communication and Excellent PR practice see W. Timothy Coombs (2001). Ni Chen and Hugh M. Culbertson (1996: 280) found that, in China, achievement of many professional, personal and social goals rested on a concept of ‘*gao guanxi*’ which means “*establishing connections, creating obligation and favors amongst interactants, and enjoying privileges through relationships*” and further suggested that ‘*guest relations*’ – requiring interpersonal sensitivity as well as linguistic and relationship building skills – was an important

practice there. Whilst Sriramesh, Kim and Takasaki (1999: 285) in their study of three Asian cultures, found that '*hospitality relations*' – the rapport and friendships at the human [personal] level that practitioners developed with key publics, had a significant affect on the success of public relations as practised in that region. Mexico, provides a further perspective which suggests that interpersonal communication as practised in Mexico City, is carried out by practitioners at both a formal and informal level in order to communicate authenticity and to foster trust amongst all types of people they interact with in their daily lives.

This study contributes a new dimension to research that has looked at the moral role of the public relations practitioner (see Holsthausen, 2000; 2002) and the practice of community relations. Research to date has tended to focus on the roles of practitioners within organisations seeking to encourage ethical organisational behaviour. In the case of this study, I have applied such sociological theories as 'therapeutic culture', 'human relationships' and 'interpersonal competence' to public relations to reconceptualise the practice of community relations that might be relevant to the Mexican experience. Moreover, whilst many people talk about the skills needed by public relations practitioners, few have addressed the specific traits that should affect the practitioners ability to function effectively (Coombs, 2001: 113). Improved ability to handle *relaciones humanas* effectively will inevitably make itself manifest in a series of skills – skills in dealing with relationships between individuals and groups, skills in communicating ideas and intentions. Whilst I have suggested a prescriptive model which might reflect the interpersonal competence relevant to those practitioners I met in Mexico City, as I have suggested throughout, I do not propose to generalise this to the public relations occupation. This is, firstly, because we should seek to avoid cultural generalisation, and, secondly, and more significantly, because I do not believe that such skills can be generalised or learned out of a book. Instead, they are developed through experience. My intention was that such a discussion of social competence would help to awaken the public relations industry to its importance and to stimulate an awareness on which such skills can be based.

At the time when this research project was conceived, there had not been any significant studies carried out in English which looked at the practice of public relations in Mexico. Mexico is a country worthy of particular study in the area of public relations. The development of public relations and, in particular, the role of practitioners as social actors in the social and economic development of Mexico, has not yet been fully researched and documented, and this study contributes to this work.



## 9.6 Unresolved Issues Emerging from the Study

### **The impact of practitioners' religious and political biases on the occupational lifeworlds of public relations practitioners in Mexico City.**

We need to know more about the lifestyles of practitioners in Mexico City, their intellectual ideas and the religious and political principles that stimulate their relationship to the world of communicative practice in which they operate. Martin Albrow (1997), for example, asserts that the roots of many of the themes of modern organisational thinking such as alienation, vocation and hierarchy, are to be found in Christianity. Indeed, Mike Featherstone (1991: 121) suggests that *"Modernity with its processes of rationalisation, commodification, secularisation and disenchantment does not lead to the eclipse of religious sentiments, for while formal religions may decline, symbolic classifications which embody sacred/profane distinctions live on at the heart of secular social processes."* I suggested on page 176 that the morality communicated by practitioners might be a variant of the social compulsion that has been influenced by political rhetoric encouraging solidarity, yet I did not ask any direct questions concerning political or religious beliefs. However, the questions were suitably open-ended so as to enable participants to talk about any work or cultural experiences, values and/or issues that they wanted to. It was interesting that none of the practitioners touched on the subject of religion and, whilst they offered social perspectives on political issues, personal political biases were not brought in to the conversation. Future research might explore the extent to which public relations practitioners are politically active and the influence that their political beliefs have on their work. Research might draw on the initial work of Max Weber (1968) who explored the relationship between religious beliefs and power, or subsequent literature on feeling and spirituality in organisations (Albrow, 1997) and the link between social capital and political processes (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Halpern, 2004).

### **The extent to which class has a significant influence on the nature of PRP culture**

As Jacquie L'Etang (2005) points out, one particular gap in the sociology of public relations relates to that of class. I have touched upon the issue of class in places recognising in my observations that I was moving within particular circles in Mexico City, but research from this perspective could explore how public relations practitioners in Mexico some classes more than others and in what ways. As L'Etang suggests (p524), *"More introspectively, class could be*

*utilized as an organizing tool to explore the composition of public relations practice and the backgrounds of practitioners in determining the structure and role of the occupation in various societies and links it may have to 'international business class.'*”

### **The extent to which the public relations practitioner culture in Mexico City is illustrative of the PRP culture elsewhere in the country and in other cultural contexts**

The development of a general theory is not the purpose of social constructionist research and, furthermore, would involve taking the research into a variety of contexts, ensuring full theoretical sampling and the production of a theory that has applications to other settings and populations, which would involve a considerable amount of time and resources. I cannot expect to exhaust the topic in the narrative I have presented here, and those groups which are disposed to take these ideas seriously may be restricted to specific locations both geographically and socially (Featherstone, 1991: 120). A limitation of my research was that, whilst I perceived public relations to be a cultural phenomena, I regarded it as primarily urban rather than social, and as a phenomena that centred around the Mexican capital, Mexico City. Perceiving of public relations as an ethos of *relaciones humanas* may encourage transferability as researchers consider public relations within a wider context and to broaden the current perspective of the activity. An ethos suggests that a certain sense of ‘character’ should define practitioners, not whether or not they produce tangible results for commercial or political organisations. Moreover, I was only looking at a particular sample of practitioners and was moving within a very tightly knit class system in Mexico City, societal culture will likely have a different impact and practical relevance for different groups (Featherstone, 1991: 118). The challenge for future research will be deciding on where to draw the boundary around the population for study and the implications of urban-rural and class dynamics for the growth of the profession.

### **9.7 Future Research**

The ways in which new sets of ideas that are articulated by cultural intermediaries influence large numbers of people must be demonstrated and not assumed (Featherstone, 1991: 119). Having developed a provisional theory of an occupational ethos of *relaciones humanas* relevant to practitioners in Mexico City, and a framework for exploring the interpersonal intelligence of practitioners I emphasised the need for future research in order to investigate these concepts in an empirical setting. Furthermore, I have suggested that public relations is a cultural practice which



is inseparably linked to the vision of the practitioner as a person. Whilst in this research study I have been able to tentatively identify a practitioner character, individual personality is complex. As Seningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165) suggest, “*individuals constantly strive to shape their occupational identities and are reshaped by discursive forces. These identities are frequently in movement, there will be occupational and personal life situations which influence how they are constructed.*” Given the nature of the fieldwork I employed in this study, I cannot claim to have explored the *occupational identities* of the individual practitioners I interviewed. I did, however, get a flavour for the *identity of the practice* and the *character of the practitioner*. I would urge future research to explore the biographies of public relations practitioners in more detail assuming more traditional phenomenological approaches. I would encourage more open-minded efforts to explore the more vital aspects of how practitioners define and re-define their professional selves. The concepts of informal interpersonal communication and human relationships also throw up some interesting questions for future study. There is a particular need for more research carried out within a Latin American context, and which explores the seventh characteristic of the Latin American School of Public Relations as identified by Juan-Carlos Molleda and Mary-Ann Ferguson (2004) which views public relations as fundamentally essential for integration and consensus. Studies might also address the following questions, Would developing friendships with journalists have any implications for how the news gets defined in the media in Mexico? (Coombs, 2001) To what extent does *palanca* really operate within the public relations industry in Mexico City? What implications might this have for both professional and social perceptions of public relations and for the future development of the practice?

This study has considered the impact that the ethos of *relaciones humanas* might have on culture, but future research might also look at the contribution this approach can make to organisations. Indeed, one limitation of this research might be that little light was cast on the extent to which the organisation dictates the working practices of the public relations practitioner, and this might be an area for future research. Nevertheless, in her study of the role of public relations practitioners in a US community, Shirley Serini (1994: 47) suggested that considering the issues and concerns that are part of the daily lives of practitioners as people in the community, would enable us to more easily conceive of public relations as ‘we situations’ in which the organisation is a part of the community rather than an ‘us and them’ situation in which it is distanced. But, what can practitioners with this ethos bring to the communities or cultures *within* the organisations they represent? Furthermore, the links between the economic and the cultural in public relations practice where the core task of practitioners is to develop, manage and maintain strategic

relationships with an organisation's publics, is apparent. These relationships hold the key to economic success (du Gay and Pryke, 2000: 4). But what of the effect of practitioners' day-to-day interaction with publics? Might we have reason to believe that, whilst practitioners cannot force others to perceive of the organisations they represent in a certain light, their behaviour might help to foster a positive impression of both themselves and the work that they do, and consequently of the organisation?

## 9.8 Concluding Remarks

It is astonishing that within an occupation where the very word '*relations*' is used to identify the practice that the discourse of relatedness is not more developed. Given the heterogeneity of the cultures today, the crucial question for international public relations concerns the relational means by which public relations is practised and can be developed in order to make a positive contribution to the development of our cultures. "*One of the most important challenges for future theory and practice is renewing and recreating a relational orientation to understanding and action*" (Gergen 1994: xi).

A social constructionist approach suggests that the self is created and transformed in relationships with others and with culture. In this era of 'Late-Modernity', 'Post-Modernity' or 'Post-Industrialisation', whichever semantic term we use, the affects have been depersonalisation, increasing insecurity and crises of identity. Interpersonal communication and building relationships with others is, therefore, vital for individuals, groups, societies and cultures to develop their potential in times of change. Making time for collective reflection on the habitus and behaviours of the individuals that hold cultures together is essential for any culture to make the transition to change more 'comfortable'. As Bauman says in his discussion of the human consequences of globalisation, "*questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life is arguably the most urgent service we owe to our fellow humans and our selves*" (Bauman, 1998: 5).

This thesis will only reflect a particular moment in time; whilst I contend that dominant values of Mexican PRP culture and national culture will remain, other elements will, undoubtedly, be fluid and dynamic. Indeed, historical events and cultural changes are important in shaping occupational identity and motives and often reinforcing traditional values. Those who experience change show, as a result, dramatic changes in the nature and kind of motives they pursue (Zirkel, 2000: 13). The



public relations practitioners experiencing this 'new' transition phase in Mexico's development are, therefore, likely to have varying outlooks on the occupation from those who went before, or to future generations of practitioners. Yet, recent press reports suggest that Mexico's social problems, most particularly the '*manipulation for political ends by those in power*' (El Universal, 25/04/2005) are set to continue and to fail its transition to democracy. The necessity for groups like the public relations practitioners with an ethos similar to that of *relaciones humanas* might be as critical as ever.

As this thesis suggests, public relations has the potential to be a significant cultural force and it should be studied as such. Viewing public relations practitioners and their practice through another lens is imperative if researchers and practitioners want to keep it relevant, and seek to make a positive contribution, to today's society.

## **9.9 Personal Reflections and Acknowledgements**

### **9.9.1 Growing in Confidence as a Researcher**

Upon re-reading this thesis I realise that, whilst I was trying to open up new ways of seeing public relations and approaches to public relations research, I still found myself prey to the dominant discourses prevalent within the field and felt a need to be more objective in places so as to ensure that my work was more readily accepted by peers and colleagues, and indeed the Mexican's themselves. This lack of a consistent 'identity', or of confidence in openly expressing one's own character, ideas and interpretations, especially if they do not fit within the recognised norm, has been a reoccurring theme throughout this research – from my own reflections as a researcher, the ethos expressed by the practitioners and my observations of Mexican culture i.e. the juxtaposition between taking on the dominant discourses and practices of globalisation and modernisation, or carving out a Mexican version which maintains the unique elements of the Mexican history and culture. What is most interesting, and something which I am noticing ever increasingly now that I am working within PRP culture in Mexico City is that, whilst the ethos of public relations as *relaciones humanas* is so strong, there is a gap between this idealised mental picture, and the reality of how public relations (now thinking about it in the strictest sense of the term) is actually being practised. Practitioners talk about the importance of human communication in their work, but they are increasingly falling under the influence of dominant

organisational and professional discourses which emphasise more mechanical, inhuman approaches.

The possibility to explore and present potential actions, discourses and possibilities for change, is the most significant contribution to be made by social constructionist and interpretivist inspired approaches to research. Researchers are offered the opportunity, and are encouraged, to communicate their own values and to weave them in to the overall narrative the present. As I have developed as a researcher I have realised that all research is to some extent subjective, that there is no such thing as an objective interpretation – and nor should we try to search for one. What is important is that practitioners and academics alike have the confidence to express their own attitudes and ideas, and are given an equal platform upon which to do so. After all, we are involved in the field of public relations, a field which should encourage empathy, respect, authenticity and the recognition of different viewpoints – all of these essentially form the foundations of *human* communication.

All research is a learning process. For my own part, I have recognised the importance of having confidence in sharing my own particular beliefs, in making them transparent. Whilst recognising that we all, to some extent, fall under the influence of dominant discourses, what is important is that, as researchers, we strive for more innovative approaches. All researchers are, in the end, human and we should not try to write ourselves out of the narratives we present, or to arrive at the point at which we almost ‘apologise’ for the approaches we have taken. Creativity, reflection and subjectivity are what is needed in order for public relations research to be accessible to practitioners, and to be respected.

### 9.9.2 The Research Experience

Having carried out research work in a culture that was personally unfamiliar to me, I can appreciate the inherent difficulties in framing arguments and interpretations that are free from cultural bias (Giddens and Hutton, 2000). I found myself particularly frustrated during my first month and a half in Mexico City, as I thought that I was only seeing what seemed to me to be any megacity in the world. In the sector of society in which I was moving, people spent their leisure time at US-style shopping malls, going to the cinema or in European-style bars and nightclubs. Ashamedly, what I was feeling might be described as a weak form of ‘*ethnocentric disingenuousness*’ which Polly Toynbee (2000: 194) refers to, in hoping to find something



different and feeling disgusted by the ways in which Western culture had invaded the lives of others. I felt humbled when one day a friend told me a story of his frustration when a friend of his from Europe had been to Mexico City to visit him. Despite having spent time showing her the way of life in Mexico City, it was not until this friend asked to travel up to a village on the outskirts of the city to spend the night by herself, that she felt that she had seen the 'real Mexico'. Travelling to this village meant that she had to take a small, overcrowded and run-down bus – this bus depicted the image of what, for her, Mexico was all about.

After my initial period of adjustment, I soon realised the apparent diversity of the groups cohabiting in Mexico City. However, I also began to appreciate that many experiences might be relevant to people living in cities the world over, as globalisation and cultural change is shrinking the enormity of the world. The circles in which I was moving indeed had a lot in common with my own experiences of growing up in a British city. The young people faced the same issues as I faced at home, the day-to-day family routine was much the same as my family's, and yet there were obvious, and important differences. The cultural heritage of Mexico still affected the daily life of people in lots of ways. The younger generations, for example, appeared to be torn between their traditional Catholic values and the influences of increasing secularisation and modernisation of their culture. The family was still of great significance, however, and many of them continued to function as closely-knit entities which are sometimes hard to penetrate. 'El día de la Madre' (Mothers Day) is widely celebrated and much more symbolic in a country where the 'Mother' has traditionally been regarded as the focus of the family.

I now have the confidence to question many of the anecdotes I read about Mexican culture. One anecdote in particular being the extent to which Michael Argyle's (1994: 186) assertion that "*Mexicans regard openness as a form of weakness or treachery, and think one should not allow the outside world to know one's thoughts,*" is true. Certainly the breadth and depth of the narratives of those practitioners I interviewed and my personal experiences of the Mexican people question this assumption. Whilst I am openly critical of Argyle's observation, I am more than aware that some people will be openly critical of the interpretations I have presented in this thesis. I can only trust that, whilst they may not agree with my arguments, they will at least find them plausible.

Subjectivity in research can be described as ongoing 'identity work' not only of the research participants, but also of the researcher herself. On my research journey during the last three and a half years, I have certainly learned a lot about myself. This is not an uncommon claim to make as a researcher; increasingly more often you can pick up a qualitative (and often even quantitative) Ph.D. thesis and find at the end a section entitled '*Reflections*'. However, in my case it has been more than just learning about what my capabilities are, it has changed the way that I see myself and relate with others. Anyone who has known me for a long time is likely to say that I am not the same person now as I was when I started this project. I hope that the changes have been for the better! My experience of secondary school education and as a young adult in Britain lead me to believe that strong and successful people did not show their emotions, I thought that that was a sign of weakness. Having the opportunity to fulfill my ambitions, to travel, to experience and to learn from another culture, from other people, however, has taught me that it does not matter where in the world you are, people share the same basic need - the need to communicate, to share, and to support others, - as Dietmar Mieth (1997: 91) suggests, the need to form meaningful relationships. I remember an experience I had one day taking a taxi to the airport to catch my flight back to the UK. I was staying some forty-five minutes away from the airport and, following an initial period of quiet after first getting in to the taxi, the driver and I began talking. We chatted about my perceptions of Mexico City and his experiences of life there and in his home town on the coast, a place I longed to visit. By the time we approached our destination we were engrossed in conversation. As we were about to arrive, the driver said to me, "I enjoyed our conversation. So many people get in to my taxi and they are not interested in talking, you are different... One day I will think back and remember this and one day, you might visit my hometown and think of me." Whilst I am yet to visit his hometown, I still remember him. This sort of experience is illustrative of what I believe to be encouraging communication and cultural practice that will build social capital at the micro-level.

As Robert Argyle (1994: 309) suggests, relations with others are the most important part of human life. Talking to, sharing with, and learning from people is the most rewarding and valuable lesson that the Ph.D. experience has taught me. For that reason alone, I am eternally grateful to everyone whom I have met, worked with, and shared, albeit a short part of, my life with. I have learned and grown as a person from having had the opportunity to meet each and every 'character'. This I believe has been fundamental in enabling me to go some way as to empathise with those I met and to interpret their expressions. This empathy was a critical factor in enabling



me to interpret and begin to understand the experiences of public relations practitioners in Mexico City and to conceptualise their potential as cultural intermediaries.

Where this research will take me next I am not sure. Having had the opportunity to return to Mexico, I am as sure as ever that my ambition is to continue to learn about this fascinating culture and the people who shape it. Very little is known about the realities of how different people understand themselves as citizens, and the ways in which this impacts on the different dimensions of their lives (Jones and Gaventa, 2005: 28). I have touched upon some of the perspectives on the relationship between citizenship, trust and above all communication. There are inevitably tensions between these different perspectives. How these are applied out in practice, for different people, in different contexts, in different domains of their lives, requires learning from the people themselves. I regard this as a fascinating avenue for future research. Developing an understanding of citizenship and communication by identifying the experiences and knowledge of the communicators and of citizens themselves, is a central concern and points to the need for more methodologies which enable people to articulate their experiences and realities and propose strategies for potential change. The methodological approach I have used in this thesis, for example, provides the foundations for further research into the role of communicators in the developmental process.

The use of such approaches holds great potential for gaining a better understanding of the realities of communication and micro-social capital for different people in different contexts. *“Through opening spaces for citizens to express the possibilities and challenges which [communication and] citizenship present to them, such analysis might catalyse processes of reflection and action for change on the part of both persons and the organisations which affect their lives* (Jones and Gaventa, 2005: 28).

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## **9.10 Final Thought**

Global cultures are changing and people are beginning to acknowledge the interrelatedness of all things,

*“The principles and practices of public relations are integral to what will happen and how our society will reshape itself. But public relations people may not be integral to what happens – unless we recognise [our potential]...” (Lesly, 1991: 2).*



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## Appendix A

### Overview and Evaluation of Questionnaire Development and Implementation

The questionnaire served to provide:

- an overview of the field of study i.e. public relations as an occupation within Mexico
- a portrait of practitioners who work within it by starting to explore general biographical data of, and attitudes and values held by, practitioners
- a way of exploring perspectives practitioners may 'share' in regard to the structure of the occupation in Mexico<sup>14</sup>

### Survey development

The questionnaire was developed to include ethnographic questions which would provide an overview of the practitioner experience. I took the decision to host the questionnaire online due to the unreliability of the Mexican postal service. I also hoped to be able to attract more responses this way. Given that unsolicited emails are often seen as a breach of 'netiquette' (Witmer, Colman and Katzman. 1999) and the apparent unease with or dislike for email correspondence in Mexico, 'advertising' the web address via different channels, I believed, would encourage wider participation.

### Question development

The first draft of the questionnaire was based around questions derived from previous studies and on brainstorming my own ideas. As Triandis and Bhawuk (1996: 23) argue, "*It is now generally accepted that similarities between cultures must be established before their differences can be studied*". Whilst I emphasise not wanting to enter the field with any preconceived theoretical bias, I believed it important to strike a balance between interpretivism and ensuring that my research would build upon existing work.

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<sup>14</sup> a factor which Sherif and Sherif (cited in Salaman, 1974: 95) regard as '*an essential product of group formation*'.



The questionnaire comprised thirty-eight predominantly closed questions. This was particularly advantageous as the questions were less time consuming for the respondents to complete and it enabled me to identify the extent to which any perspectives were shared.

## **Beliefs and Values**

One section contained a total of fifteen questions related to respondent beliefs and values in connection with their individual experiences of public relations practitioners. The value types included (adapted from Watson, 1997):

- People-orientated values: Respondents were asked such questions as, ‘Which of the following conditions of work would be most important in encouraging you to work in PR?’ and ‘Which factors do you consider most important in your work?’;
- Pay and status values: Respondents were asked their attitudes towards economic rewards and lifestyle.
- Self-expression values: Respondents were asked about the least and most satisfying aspects of the work.

Respondents were asked a series of questions for each value type as comparing and contrasting these results would increase the internal consistency reliability of the survey and enforce the relative strength/weakness of the value (Procter, 1993: 119).

## **Structure of the profession**

Respondents were asked two questions, each comprising various sub-questions, about the structure of the profession and the role of the practitioner in general. They were presented with a series of statements or *beliefs* about public relations practice and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with them, and as a consequence ‘*identified with*’ the occupation.

## **Personal characteristics of the public relations practitioner**

The personal characteristics of the public relations practitioner in terms of *lifestyle* and leisure pursuits were also explored. The working definition used of leisure was that defined by Watson (1987: 118-119) as, “*those activities which people pursue for pleasure and which are not a*

*necessary part of their business, employment or domestic management obligations". Such questions asked included, 'Do you meet with other public relations practitioners casually – at lunchtime, evening, or just in the street?' and 'Consider your ten closest friends, how many of them share the same profession/ related occupation as you?'*

In addition, the opening section of the questionnaire contained fifteen questions seeking background information. This included standard questions on gender and age, the education of the respondent, past work experience and the nature of the organisation in which they currently practice to enable portraits to be drawn and comparisons to be made between practitioner role and their occupational values.

### **Pilot study**

The questionnaire themes were pre-established in English following which the questionnaire was designed in collaboration with a native Spanish speaker. Then two bilingual individuals performed reviews in order to refine the questionnaire design and agree on the final wording. I was particularly conscious that the initial questionnaire was over long. But given the diverse and ambiguous nature of any culture, it was necessary to include as many of the significant themes as possible. Therefore, the goal of the initial phase of questionnaire review was to maximise data collection where possible by shortening the questionnaire through formatting changes i.e. grouping questions together, rather than by reducing the number of stimulus items. This approach is supported by Witmer, Colman and Katzman's (1999) view that short versions of an online questionnaire do not produce a significantly higher response in comparison with longer versions.

Finally, the questionnaire was piloted amongst a restricted sample of native Latin American practitioners working in a variety of countries within the region in order to ensure successful translation of the questions and to identify any ambiguities or uncertainties in terminology. All the literature states that the pre-test sample should be as similar as possible to the final group. It is important that they have the same frame of reference as those under study as certain words may be interpreted in differing ways, depending on individual perspectives (Newell, 1993: 104). Whilst the pilot sample was taken from other countries within the Latin American region, all were practitioners working within the field of public relations. Significantly, the pilot study did not uncover any problems either with the length of the questionnaire or the phrasing of the questions, and all questionnaires were returned fully completed.



## Limitations

The total number of fully completed questionnaires was a significant disappointment. There may be many factors which contributed to this - the response rate may have also been affected by the cultural factors within Mexico pertaining to the use of internet communication, together with the fact that despite a relatively high figure of internet use - 3.5 million users were recorded in 2002 ([www.infoplease.com](http://www.infoplease.com)), finding an efficient and reliable internet service provider in Mexico is still a problem. A further weakness of the survey technique as it was employed was the scrolling approach. The entire survey was in one long HTML page and the respondent clicked "submit" after completing all items to transmit the data to the server. Practitioners did not have the opportunity to complete the questionnaire at their leisure, choosing to answer some sections and then return to it at a later, more convenient, time in order to complete it. This may account for the many gaps in the data – particularly as those questions with lower response rates tended to be those which required more thinking/consideration. Respondents seemed to prefer answering questions that referred to themselves and their experiences to those that were more specific of the occupation in general. In self-administered surveys you can expect to find unanswered questions.

The failure of respondents to answer questions was not only a result of the weaknesses with the questionnaire as an instrument of research, Triandis and Bhawik (1996: 27) identify the problems in respondent familiarity with the materials, their differential comprehension of instructions and the fact that some assume that they must only answer those questions they are absolutely sure of the answers to. In addition, respondents may not want to answer some kinds of questions, or they may simply miss some out (that is, not see them). Some verbal feedback I received concerning my questionnaire was that it was difficult to answer some of the more theoretical questions which related to the 'professional' activity of public relations. That in itself may shed light on why some had answered these questions whilst others had not. It tended to be agency directors and heads of department who had answered these. The initial questionnaire was piloted amongst practitioners within Latin America, the list of which was provided to me by an academic who had met most of the people at a conference. Therefore, it might be argued that this sample would be more inclined to understand the requirements of an academic research questionnaire and to complete it fully.

It may be further argued that with rating scales, as employed in the questions concerning attitudes towards the practice of public relations, there is the danger of response set, especially so-called 'yeasaying' which is the tendency for some respondents to agree to all kinds of statements

regardless of their content (Couch and Keniston, 1960 as cited in Hellevik, 1994: 293). Cultural factors may come in to play here. As Triandis and Bhawik (1996) propose, in some cultures, if you say “agree”, it sounds as if you are hiding something. You need to say “*I strongly agree*”. In other cultures, to say “*I strongly agree*” sounds arrogant. The former effect has been found to be largely prevalent in studies conducted with Latin American and Hispanic populations. Triandis and Hui (1989, as cited in Triandis and Bhawik 1996) found that Hispanics exhibit a stronger tendency for extreme checking (about half the time, on average). Furthermore, survey data may be subject to the social desirability effect where respondents exhibit a tendency towards replying in ways that are meant to be consistent with their perceptions of the desirability of certain kinds of answer.



## Appendix B

### Participant Profile

Participant Number	Participant
1	<p>Female practitioner. Now retired.</p> <p>Worked in in-house public relations and journalism. Studied History of Art. Founding member (voluntary) of 'Centros de Integracion Juvenil', an association dedicated to combating drug-dependency. Founding member of several professional associations for both public relations and journalism. President of professional association.</p>
2	<p>Male practitioner-academic (late 40s).</p> <p>Currently public relations director for large Mexican organisation with a stake in Mexican public relations agency. Has worked in in-house, agency and University instruction (Communication). Actively involved in professional associations both within Mexico and Latin America.</p>
3	<p>Female practitioner (early 30s).</p> <p>Executive position supervising a team. Previous experience working for a national television network.</p>
4	<p>Female practitioner (early 50s).</p> <p>Agency director (own agency). Trained as a translator. Previous experience in journalism, agency and public sector public relations and consultancy. Studied both in Mexico, the United States and Europe. Member of professional and social organisations.</p>
5	<p>Male practitioner (early 60s).</p> <p>Public relations director position, public institution. Studied Economics in Spain. Extensive experience of working in-house in publishing and public sector organisations. Founding member of professional association.</p>
6	<p>Female practitioner (early 40s).</p> <p>Independent consultant. In-house experience in private sector including tourism and multinational. Agency experience in Mexican public relations</p>

	agency. Did not study at university. Active member of professional associations.
7	Male practitioner (late-40s). Agency director (first Mexican agency established by his father in 1973). Studied Communication Sciences. Previous experience in advertising and working for national newspaper. Member of professional associations and business groups.
8	Male practitioner (late 50s). Agency director (own agency), specialising in marketing communications for private sector. Studied Communication at university. Member of professional association and advisory member of Mexican organisation for justice.
9	Male practitioner (mid-30s). Executive position in a Mexican agency responsible for a small team. Studied Communication Sciences and trained as a reporter and has worked in advertising. Experience of living and working overseas.
10	Female practitioner (late 20s). Public relations executive in family lobbying consultancy. Studied Communication. Previous experience in public relations for television and feature film companies. Not a member of a relevant professional association.
11	Male practitioner (early 60s). Public relations consultant for public organisation. Studied Information Science at undergraduate level and has a Masters in Communication Sciences. Previously worked for 25 years in public relations for national television station. Founding member of professional association.
12	Male practitioner (late 40s). In-house PR director role for a government institution. Previously worked as a journalist for 25 years.
13	Male practitioner (early 60s). Public relations consultant. Studied Law at university and started by practising Corporate Law. Extensive experience in-house in the private



	sector. Founder member of professional association.
14	Female practitioner (mid-40s). Agency director (international agency of US origin). Previous experience in international relations for United States Embassy.
15	Female practitioner (mid-30s). Public relations executive, international agency. Specialising in health. Previously trained and worked as a dentist. Also worked as interpreter for large national newspaper.
16	Female practitioner (late 20s), Venezuelan. Public relations executive, international agency. Specialising in Technology. Studied Journalism.
17	Female practitioner (early 20s). Public relations executive, agency. Studied Communication with a view to working in journalism.
18	Female practitioner (mid 20s). Public relations executive, new to the job having just completed an internship. Previously worked in internal communication. Studied Communication Sciences.
19	Male practitioner (mid 20s). Public relations executive with a North American agency. Studied Communication Sciences – specialising in advertising and public relations. Initial experience in marketing public relations for consumer products, now works in healthcare. Experience of working in Spain on secondment.
20	Male practitioner (mid 20s). Public relations executive (international agency) with experience in marketing public relations and corporate communication, specialising in wine and spirits. Studied International Relations, first job was with the exterior minister in the international cooperation section. Not a member of any relevant professional association.
21	Female practitioner (late 20s). Executive, large international public organisation. Previous experience in Mexican public relations agency and reception work. Studied

	<p>Communication Sciences at undergraduate level and is working towards a Masters qualification in Scriptwriting. Not a member of any relevant professional association.</p>
22	<p>Male practitioner (early 40s).</p> <p>Public relations director role for a government institution. Previous experience as reporter and in-house positions in large public and private institutions. Studied Communication Sciences at university.</p>
23	<p>Male practitioner (mid 60s).</p> <p>Consultant with 40 years of experience in advertising and public relations for private Mexican and international organisations and national public institutions. Studied Accountancy. Active member of professional association.</p>
24	<p>Female practitioner (mid-20s).</p> <p>Currently in her first job – a public relations executive/ information officer for a government institution. Studied for a degree in International Relations. Not a member of a relevant professional association.</p>
25	<p>Female practitioner (mid-50s).</p> <p>Independent consultant. Previous experience in a Mexican agency, in-house for a public institution and a multinational. Studied History of Art at university. Her brothers also work in public relations/communication. Actively involved in professional association.</p>
26	<p>Male practitioner (mid-late 60s).</p> <p>Works in social communication as director of a government institution. Extensive human resources and public relations experience in large Mexican and multinational organisations. Studied Industrial Relations at university and has brief experience of working in the UK. Founder member of professional association.</p>
27	<p>Male practitioner (early 30s).</p> <p>Consultant in public and corporate image and public relations executive for 'university' for public image.</p>
28	<p>Male practitioner (mid 40s).</p> <p>Public relations director for large international hotel. Previous work in restaurant and catering industry. Active member of professional body</p>



	associated with restaurant trade.
29	<p>Female practitioner (late 20s).</p> <p>Executive for large international public institution. Previous experience in radio and front-of-house for same international public organisation. Studied Communication Sciences at university. Not a member of any professional association.</p>
30	<p>Female practitioner (early 40s).</p> <p>Director of family-run agency. Studied Communication at university and worked previously in political journalism. Member of professional association and is involved in local politics, with a passion for lobbying.</p>
31	<p>Male practitioner (mid 30s).</p> <p>Director of family-run public relations agency. Started his career at a young age, studying Communication Sciences at university whilst working at the same time. Has previous agency experience in advertising and marketing communications and in-house public relations manager for a large multinational organisation, where he worked on a model for crisis communication.</p>
32	<p>Female Practitioner (mid 30s).</p> <p>Director of her own agency. Studied Communication and university after having already begun to work in marketing at an early age. Teaches some elements of public relations at a private university in the city. Member of professional association.</p>

## **Appendix C**

### **Discussion Guide**

The following questions were asked to shape the conversation with each of the participants. As each progressed, I asked additional questions tailored to narratives and experiences they offered.

- Explain how you came to be a public relations practitioner.
- Describe a typical working day from when you get up in the morning until you go to bed.
- Do you think that you could identify another public relations practitioner if you did not know them personally? For example, if you were at a party and somebody told you that someone else in the room was a public relations practitioner, but you don't know who?
- Which public relations practitioner, real or idealised, do you most admire and why?
- Describe a time(s) when your professional skills in communication have been particularly beneficial in your life outside of work.
- Until now, what aspect of your work has given you the greatest satisfaction and why?
- Describe a time when you think that you performed a work task particularly well and why. Include the reactions of colleagues, your boss and/or the client.
- What do you think you, as a public relations practitioner, can offer your client? The community?
- Do you have any particular situations or organisations in mind in which you could not work and why?
- Ideally, how would you like to work in the future?
- What elements would you incorporate into the education of public relations in Mexico and why?
- Is there anything else that you think it important that I know about your work or the public relations industry in general in Mexico?



## **Appendix D**

### **Key Themes Identified in Data Analysis**

The following coding categories were used in the initial stages to analyse the qualitative data.

#### **What is PR?**

- Society perceptions
  - General Public
  - Organisations
- Attitudes towards US models and practice
- Characteristic of Latin American 'School'
- Mexico specific practice
  - Industry profile
  - Human Relations
  - Interpersonal relations
  - Practitioner solidarity
  - Palanca
  - Psychological approach

#### **Role and Practice of public relations**

- General definitions
  - Social role
  - Generating business
  - Creating awareness
  - Crisis management
- Public Relations versus:
  - 'Communication'
  - Advertising
  - Events Management
  - Journalism
  - Lobbying
  - Marketing

- Organisational Communication
- Political Communication
- Social Communication
- Image Management
- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Role and Purpose of Public Relations
- Social Transition

### **Who is the public relations practitioner in Mexico City?**

- Behaviour
  - Characteristics
  - Sector differences
- Appearance
  - Characteristics
  - Sector differences
- Educational background and training
  - Characteristics
  - Sector differences
- Values
  - Ethics
  - Service
  - Sector Differences
- 'Ideal' Public Relations practitioner
- Work Motivations and satisfaction
  - General work
  - Campaign specific
- Motivations for Joining Occupation
- Career aspirations
- Society Perceptions

### **Practitioner profile**

- Work Routine
  - General Responsibilities



Industry differences  
In-house (for-profit corporation)  
Social communication  
Agency Director  
Executive  
Independent practitioner  
'Old School'  
Timetable  
Work/Life Balance  
Hobbies

- Social Role

Personality  
Volunteer work  
Crisis situations

### **Future of public relations in Mexico**

- Predicted growth areas
- Training and Education
- Role of professional association
- Growth sectors
- Development of practice
- Change of image
- Sector development

Appendix E

Audit trail to reflect the influence of Mexico itself when developing my research agenda and analysis

Year 1

Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.	Jul.	Aug.
PR's relationship with culture as cultural intermediary: Reading around culture, postmodernist approach? PR as change agent? PRs role in globalisation? Many accounts from western perspective. Things might be different in Latin America.  Studies on Advertising as cultural intermediary – focusing on outputs. How can I measure PR's output? Nothing tangible?	Reading around Mexican culture – complexities – modern v. rural, rich v. poor. How would PR operate in such an environment?	PR as cultural intermediary – went back to source of inspiration for the articles I had previously read on cultural intermediaries →Bourdieu, Distinction, Open University School. Read studies on advertising, design and music production as cultural intermediary occupations. Focus on agents and occupational culture. No studies on PR, therefore, gap to fill.	Decision made to look at occupational culture – allow me to explore what PR is and how it can contribute to development of Mexican society from the perspective of Mexicans.	Reading occupational culture:  What is it? Culture as implicit – values, attitudes etc., - Culture as an ingroup – Hofstede etc.,	How to explore it – Explored by way of Mixed Methodology (social Praxeology) any method that is practicably usable (Bourdieu).						
Enthusiastic	Frustration	Confusion	Relief	Excitement	Confidence						



# Year 2

Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May.	Jun.
Focus on Habitus and cultural and Social Capital (Bourdieu), growing interest in links between implicit culture and occupational identity.	Set occupation within Mexican context by comparing against existing values surveys – Hofstede, Inglehart.	Comprehension – first trip to Mexico for conference – Diversity of Oaxaca: Move from in-group focus to differences (visit to Mexico) – therefore, move from In-group to individual perspectives and patterns.  Questionnaires based on implicit elements – agency and occupational values  Concern – Questionnaires initially to be sent out before going to Mexico. Later changed my idea to administer questionnaires once in Mexico – difficulty of making contact before I went. 3 names from US supervisor - only responded two weeks before I left for Mexico. US supervisor sent email to 6 key contacts.	Equal weighting on questionnaires and interviews to emphasis on phenomenological perspective (Wengraf – bio-narrative perspective). Limited questionnaire responses, more interested in the person, more suited to my character and the character of Mexicans. Easier to get people to take part in interviews than to complete a questionnaire. Questionnaires distributed by email to Academia members 18 <sup>th</sup> February, word of mouth to RELAPO members, and snowball sample to other practitioners in Mexico and Guadalajara. 50 responses received.  Email sent to AMCO requesting support – 26 <sup>th</sup> March 2004. No response. No success with contact telephone number.	Mexico – diversity and complexities of culture and society in Mexico, my growing fascination with, and love for, the country, recognising weakness in Hofstede’s and Inglehart’s analysis of Mexican values → importance of observations, not only occupational but societal = social constructivist approach to recognise societal and occupational influences on the practitioners. Move away from Bourdieu’s concept of powers of agents to Giddens (1984) ideas of influences and resources.					
Comprehension			Concern			Challenged		Emotional, In awe	

# Year 3

Jul. Aug. Sept. Oct.	Nov. Dec.	Jan.	Feb. Mar. Apr.	May.	Jun. Jul.	Aug.
Analysis -N*VIVO for sorting and original coding of data but felt too detached from the people and from the country. Went back to original transcripts for composite analysis.	Back in Mexico, revisited friends and colleagues. Met informally with 4 participants. I wanted to do all participants justice. Focusing on patterns and individual perspectives wanted to do justice to the accounts of the people I had met. I had learned so much from them that I wanted to present their ideas as an illustration of their characters - How best to write it up? Back to phenomenology for composite biogs (Todres, Moustakas) Met 4 informally with participants.	New Year, New start: Having the developed composite narratives, I moved on to identify three core categories in data analysis. To make sense of the data. I linked data findings and narratives to wider sociological texts by way of analytic generalisation. Needed to think about not only how the practitioner perspectives and experiences linked with the practice of public relations, but factors relating to culture and society in Mexico, and Mexico City in particular.	Email sent to 22 participants (3 bounced back) 2 people took up opportunity (19 <sup>th</sup> Feb). Confusion over how my data fits within wider Mexican society. Read confusing sociological accounts of Mexico which seem to disagree with my observations. Decided to write chapter on Mexico and sent it to Mexican friend of mine who is an academic to read and check my interpretation.  April (Mid) -Difficulty identifying axial category from core categories. Difficulty in getting ideas in my head on to paper. Wrote overview of thesis which enabled me to clarify my ideas and move me forward in my writing with a clear narrative.	May -Making headway. Focusing on 'Relaciones Humanas'. Literal translation - Human Relations. Started reading around Human Relations literature, whilst there were similarities, the criticisms in the literature of much of the work from this school of organisational studies caused concern. Also read around literature on globalisation, social change and social capital and sociological literature on Mexico City. Develop my own definition of Relaciones Humanas - keep it in Spanish to avoid confusion.	June -. Complete first draft.  July - submit complete draft to supervisors for feedback. Prepare to leave for Mexico.	August - Start work at British Embassy as EU Presidency Coordinator. Begin participant and follow-up observations. Informal conversations with friends and new acquaintances, substantiate my initial observations of Mexican culture. Follow-up focus group (informal dinner party) with public relations practitioners supports humanas approach. Very frustrated with aspects of the culture i.e. laissez faire attitude of a lot of the people e.g. 4 people failed to show up without phoning to explain why. Difficulties trying to get back in contact with old contacts (don't return phone calls) etc.,
Lost and longing, later dejected			Tired, unmotivated, Overcome	Excited with renewed motivation	Relief	Suspense