

Chapter #2

SOCIALIZATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AMONG PUBLIC RELATIONS STUDENTS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

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ABSTRACT

In the United Arab Emirates, economic and cultural forces are affecting the development of public relations. A high imbalance of expatriates to locals (Emiratis) in the population has left the field of public relations lacking in local representation. Without adequate representation across the major sectors of the society, Emirati can lose influence and control over their own homeland where they are a significant minority. A contributing factor to success in any field is the development of professional socialization and construction of a professional identity in the post-secondary environment. This is an exploratory study examining Emirati public relations students and their professional development. It is a qualitative study of semi-structured interviews of 10 Emirati public relations students, utilizing a grounded theory approach. Findings reveal that Emirati public relations students are developing in their professional identities at institutional and relational levels, but there is more that can be done by the students, themselves, to support the construction of their professional identities in their post-secondary environment. This would likely increase their chances for career placement and success in the area of public relations, and further greater representation of locals in the society.

Keywords: public relations, students, professional identity, socialization, UAE, education.

1. INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates formed in 1971. The country has experienced rapid, ongoing, and significant development since the discovery of vast oil reserves in the 1950s (Zahlan, 2016). This ongoing, rapid growth has precipitated a high demand for ex-patriates to support the economic expansion and infrastructure development that comes with burgeoning economic activity. This has led to an extreme imbalance in the population with expatriates now outnumbering locals by about 88% to 12%. Emiratis represent only about 1.1 million out of UAE's population of 9.5 million. (Global Media Insight, 2018).

The local Emirati culture is rooted in the Islamic tradition (predominantly Sunni Muslims) and in Sharia Law. There is, among many things, a particular dress code, prohibitions on alcohol use, and a family structure that values tribal kinship, traditional gender roles and patriarchy (Mostafa, 2005). However, the influx of expatriates has created cultural diversity. The largest groups are from India (27.5%), Pakistan (12.7%), Bangladesh (7.5%), Philippines (5.5%), Iran (4.7%), and Egypt (4.2%). (Global Media Insight, 2018). The largest Western representation is from Great Britain (Ministry of

Foreign Affairs, 2018). The government of UAE is a sovereign absolute monarchy of six royal Emirati families who work to support, preserve and develop the local culture in the midst of the diversity (Zahlan, 2016).

Because of this imbalance, Emiratis are under-represented across many sectors of society. If they are to retain influence over their own society, it is important that they be adequately represented across the different sectors of society, occupy influential positions, and have meaningful employment. Emiratization, a type of affirmative action program, was instituted by the UAE in 2000 to address the imbalance in employment, but a government policy, alone, is insufficient to address the issue and the effectiveness of the program has been questioned (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014). Many Emiratis (about 86%) tend toward public sector employment because there is a perception that salaries and working conditions are better than in the private sector, and because public sector work supports certain cultural norms (like separation of the genders). This is problematic because public sector work is not always plentiful and competition for such positions is high; many Emirati graduates seek such employment, and opportunities are shrinking (Harry, 2007; TANMIA, 2004; Simpson, 2012). Emiratis only encompass some 1% of the private sector, leaving the group particularly under-represented in this sector (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014; Croucher, 2014). Emiratis need to be as skilled and as prepared as possible for employment in all of their chosen professions. They must also be willing to work across both the public and the private sectors if they wish to combat rising unemployment among their numbers and retain control over their own economy as minorities in their own country (Al-Ali, 2008).

The field of public relations is an increasingly popular, and important, career choice for Emirati students. Public relations programs are offered in about seven institutions of higher education as a baccalaureate degree, and there are many professional programs in the industry. Public relations have been described as a “profession [that is] badly needed to meet the challenges of economic, political and cultural globalization,” such as is occurring in UAE, and while the field faces challenges, “there is nowhere in the globe that having it [public relations] . . . is more important than in the Middle East” (Kirat, 2006, p. 259). It is important for Emirati to be represented in the field of public relations and for these public relations students to be adequately prepared to occupy influential and meaning public relations roles within the society.

This study can provide information, regarding not only the development and future success of Emirati public relations students in UAE, but it can also be a means by which to examine the potential success of any student in any program of higher education in any country. It can be useful where student success is particularly vital, such as in this case of the UAE.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Construction of a professional identity and socialization – Foundational to career development

This research is examined through the lens of socialization and the construction of professional identity, which has been associated with positive professional outcomes (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Professional identity can be defined as a set of beliefs, values, and experiences characterizing a group of individuals practicing the same profession (Ibarra, 1999; Tuluas & Gokturk, 2017). It encompasses the development of both a collective and personal identity through professional experiences, interactions and the generation of

meaning (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). The construction of a professional identity allows individuals to adhere to a particular community with whom they share “a common approach to a particular type of work” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984, p. 5). Public relations students are developing professional identities as they assimilate into their profession, have experiences, network with other professionals, and generate meaning about the field.

Professional socialization, a closely related concept, is “the key period within which individuals begin to form identification with their profession” as learners adopt various norms, skills, and values associated with a particular profession (Caza & Creary, 2016, p. 15). This happens through interpersonal interactions and reflective knowledge as individuals begin to internalize the values, skills and knowledge of a profession. Public relations students begin to develop in professional socialization as they learn new public relations skills, internalize professional practices such as media relations, and adopt the values and norms associated with their chosen profession, such as the role of relationship building in successful practice and the application of industry ethics.

2.2. Professional socialization and education

A key objective of any academic program is to prepare future professionals to “learn and adopt the values, attitudes, and practice behaviors of a profession” (Hammer, 2006, p. 3). However, this training cannot be codified in any single program or individual curricula, as it needs to combine a variety of practices that range from classroom education and examination to extracurricular activities and interactions between educators, mentors and students (Tanzer & Dintzer, 2017). The socialization process relies on inputs from various sources including the following: discipline-based theories and concepts; practical skills and knowledge; and reflective knowledge involving intuitive and analytical thinking about experiences and beliefs (Sutherland & Markasuskaite, 2012).

A considerable body of research has highlighted various strategies that public relations educators in the field can adopt to foster professional socialization among learners (Aldoory & Wrigley, 2000; Ahles, 2004; Berger, Reber, & Heymann, 2007; Pinkham, 2004). Many of these studies have stressed the need to move away from traditional and formal classroom training to one that recognizes the importance of creativity, self-motivation and self-management as essential qualities in public relations graduates (Berger, Reber, & Heymann, 2007).

To analyse the level and process of professional socialization and professional identity construction, this study examines three sources of possible inputs into a student’s academic training: a) the programmatic processes offered by the educational institution such as coursework; b) relationships with peers, faculty, and other academic professionals; and c) personal learning. These sources have been used to examine the professional socialization of chemistry, history, and public affairs doctoral students (Gardner, 2008; Smith & Hatmaker, 2014). In their research about what constitutes the professional identity of a doctoral researcher, Smith and Hatmaker (2014), building upon Gardner (2008), developed these categories. In their study, they concluded that

- a) at the organizational level, doctoral students received inputs from departments and programs through classroom training, advisors, and research assistantships, which helped them to develop research skills, and facilitated faculty relationships.
- b) the relational level was most central to professional identity development, both instrumentally and psychosocially. Students experienced faculty mentoring, deeper faculty relationships, and on-the-job-training, bolstering their professional identities, and increasing professional visibility.

- c) at the individual level, students reported that their proactive behaviours contributed to their professional identity construction.

From this, Smith and Hatmaker (2014) identified the vital components of a research professional identity: research skills, methods expertise, area and domain knowledge, enhanced reputation, independence, self-confidence, and development of research ethics.

2.3. Public relations and public relations education in the Middle East and UAE

The context of the public relations profession in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) countries, and UAE in particular, provides a great challenge for promoting professional identity and socialization in the field of public relations. Although public relations has been practiced in the region for more than four decades and the need for it has developed tremendously in response to economic growth and the impacts of globalization. It is a profession that suffers, overall, from a negative reputation for a variety of reasons: professional standards and ethics are rarely maintained; public relations is often misunderstood in the society and, therefore, its use is limited; public relations is taken more as a synonym to publicity and press relations; and it can be reduced to small, executive office tasks (Badran & Ayish, 1996; Kirat, 2005, 2006, 2016). Other limitations include “poor qualifications and experience of PR practitioners,” “confusion of tasks and prerogatives,” “lack of research, studies and opinion polls,” and lack of understanding of the PR function by top managers, among others (Kirat, 2006, p. 258; Al Khaja, 2009).

In spite of the difficulties, the public relations agency industry in the UAE is one of the most vibrant and developed in the Middle East; there are about 100 public relations agencies in Dubai, many of which are branches of major worldwide firms like Hill and Knowlton (MEPRA, 2017). Because many UAE public relations agencies are branches owned by Western or European firms, or run by ex-patriates, they are “virtually identical to their counterpart firms in the United States in their organizational structure as well as in their technological resources” (Ayish & Kruckeberg, 2004, p. 41). Many commentators have focused on the role of education and training in enhancing professionalism in the field (Kirat, 2016; Prasad, 2011).

In summary, in this unusual context of high growth and rapid development in the UAE, the public relations function is very much present and operating, but struggling toward attaining and maintaining a consistent, advanced level of expression (Rizk, 2005).

2.4. Canadian University Dubai

Canadian University Dubai was established in 2006 as a private institution. Its education is based on Canadian curriculum and it has about ten partnerships with colleges and universities in Canada including Mount Saint Vincent University, University of New Brunswick, McGill University, Concordia University, and Royal Roads University, advertising itself as a “portal to Canadian higher education” (Canadian University Dubai, 2017). The public relations program is housed within the School of Communication and Media Studies (SCMS) and is the most popular program in the School compared to its counterparts, journalism and advertising. Students may study in either Arabic or English streams, with Arabic being more popular.

The program enrolls an average of about 300 public relations students each Fall semester. The majority of students in the public relations program are Emiratis, at about 59%. CUD has enrolled about 895 Emirati public relations students across the Fall semesters, 2012 – 2106.

Figure 1.
Numbers of Emirati vs Non-Emirati Students Enrolled in PR Program, CUD, 2012 – 2016.
Source: Enrolment Services, CUD.

Date	Total # of PR students	# of Emirati	# of Non-Emirati	Percentage of Emirati
Fall 2012	174	106	68	60.9%
Fall 2013	327	215	112	65.7%
Fall 2014	347	220	127	63.4%
Fall 2015	369	208	161	56.4%
Fall 2016	311	146	165	46.9%
	1,528	895	633	58.6%

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: In the face of Emiratis being a significant minority in their own country, and with increased unemployment and decreasing numbers of jobs available in the popular public sector, how are Emirati public relations students faring in professional socialization and construction of their professional identities as a means to predicting possible future success?

In addition, the research questions follow the model proposed by Smith and Hatmaker (2014) and Gardner (2008), which proposes that professional identity construction emanates from the three sources of organizational, relational and personal/individual inputs and sources:

*RQ2: How is the **institution/university** contributing to the development of the Emirati public relations student?*

*RQ3: How are **PR faculty** contributing to the development of the Emirati public relations student?*

*RQ4: How are Emirati public relations **students**, themselves, contributing to their own professional socialization and development?*

4. METHODS

In-depth interviews were conducted of a purposive, convenience sample of 10 Emirati students at Canadian University Dubai to obtain in depth information on perceptions related to the socialization and professional identity construction inputs by the university, faculty, and students, themselves (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Berger & Luckman, 1966; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). While there has been much debate about the proper number of subjects for qualitative study, six has been considered an acceptable number (Miles & Huberman, 1994; also see Morse, 1989; Williams, Wallis, & Williams, 2013).

Participants were recruited by snowball technique (Broom & Dozier, 1990) and were offered to be interviewed by any of the four researchers of their choice, whether in English or Arabic, or by male or female interviewer. There was one first year student, three second-year students, three third-year students, and three fourth-year students. Five were

female, and five were male. Ages ranged from 19 – 43. Six were in the 19 – 30 group and four were over 30 years of age. All were self-identified as Emiratis and confirmed through enrollment information. Students were offered confidentiality.

A review of the literature provided the basis for interview questions and an interview guide was created (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gardner, 2008; Smith & Hatmaker, 2014). See Appendix A for the interview guide. Interviews lasted from 30 – 45 minutes. Some interviews were audio-recorded, with student permission. Recordings and notes that were conducted in Arabic were transcribed. Arabic transcripts and notes were translated into English. Information was then analyzed qualitatively through open coding for themes, using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Some students experience barriers to their public relations education

Half of the students, mostly females, expressed that they experienced barriers to getting their public relations education. There were transportation, babysitting, relationship, and work issues. One indicated that she relied on the family car and driving schedule. “Sometimes the car is available, but the driver is not,” she said. Another indicated some conflict with a boyfriend who was not supportive of her studies. Two students, one male and one female, indicated that working posed a problem as it presented constraints on their ability to attend classes, to do coursework, and take opportunities provided by the university, such as networking events. It was suggested that a selection of night classes would be helpful as an option to support students who work.

5.2. The institution contributes strongly to professional identity construction and socialization, particularly through its course offerings

Students indicated many positive aspects that the institution was contributing to their development. They named many different courses and modes of delivery across the curriculum as positive, including “graphic design,” “the public relations core courses,” “organizational communication,” “protocol,” “case studies,” “critical thinking,” “crisis communication,” “field trips,” and “research methodology.” Many specifically mentioned the internship as quite positive, including the final-year capstone graduation project. One specifically indicated a liking for “the mixture between PR courses and mass comm courses.” “It is like coffee and sugar – one adds sweetness to the other.” A few mentioned the group work as overwhelmingly positive, “although the group work can be irritating at times” and one “agonized over it” sometimes. Students noted that it can sometimes be uncomfortable to work in groups of mixed gender, but recognized that it was necessary. One mentioned a specific professor’s class as being particularly enjoyable “because most of our sessions and classes were on how to manage conferences and exhibitions ... skill-building.”

With regards to internships, there was suggestion that a) there could be more internships provided, b) the quality of the internships be better, and c) the university work harder to provide and guarantee internships, with one noting there was a “lack of public relations departments in UAE accepting internships.”

Many students felt that course offerings and delivery could be improved in a variety of ways:

- Eliminate “unhelpful” or “unnecessary” courses, such as basic computer classes.
- Offer more information that helps students translate public relations concepts, which are based in Western thought, into Arabic, “because there aren’t always good translations for concepts.”
- Review the curriculum for course content overlap.
- Keep building the activity-oriented components of coursework, such as field trips and skill-building training workshops, “either on-campus or off.”
- Offer night classes to support working students.
- Include more public speaking classes and/or opportunities to develop this skill.

In one interview, the topic of mentorship was discussed. The interviewer noted that this was something she was familiar with in other public relations programs, acknowledging that there was not a formal mentorship system at CUD, and asking the student if he felt that a mentorship program would be helpful. The student, a first-year, said he was not entirely familiar with the concept or the process of mentoring, nor how it would operate in the program. This likely indicated a lack of exposure to the concept or the term.

5.3. Faculty are contributing positively

Faculty input was indicated in an overwhelmingly positive way, with students saying such things as “each is different and gives you ideas,” “everyone is helpful” and “everyone is nice.” Students noted that faculty were also helpful in providing networking opportunities by bringing speakers to class, and by organizing field trips for students. All but two subjects indicated that professors provided good tips about public relations practice. The only improvement suggested here was for professors to provide more networking opportunities.

5.4. Students are falling short of investing in their own development

While two respondents indicated that they had been known to do an occasional free online course, and only one said she attended networking events regularly, most of the students admitted they were not investing significantly in their own professional development as individuals. One said that while she attended networking events, she “really didn’t do anything.” One said she wanted to improve her writing skills and felt that she should look for additional writing classes, but admitted she had not taken any action on that. One indicated she did some volunteer work, but that it was “in the past.” One said she “intended” to take more specialized training elsewhere, but had to do so. Another said she “tried” to develop more experience by getting work experience, but felt “too shy,” citing the need for more practical, skill-building opportunities.

Students tended to rely on the required internship experience and the provided class field trips for practical training and development. Inputs on the personal level outside of the required course work were quite limited, even though students recognized such inputs as potentially valuable.

Additionally, cultural patriarchy effects exist. When asked if she planned on working in the field of public relations after graduation, one female indicated that her future laid mostly in the hands of her father, who made the final decisions with respect to her major life decisions.

5.5. Students feel mostly prepared to enter the public relations workforce but may lack confidence

Most interviewees responded emphatically positively to the question of whether or not they felt that they had the skills to be successful in the public relations field, with such comments as, “I have learned so much,” “I came in with some skills I developed on my job but now I have more,” and a more mature student said, “I had practical experience for 24 years.” Some indicated a cautionary “yes,” saying such things as, “my skills remain to be tested,” “I am just getting started,” “I need more knowledge and patience,” “I need to improve,” “I need to develop confidence,” “I need to improve public speaking,” and “I need to improve my writing skills.” However, these comments reflected students who were aware that they were new and developing in their field, rather than students who simply would not be able to function in an entry-level public relations position.

Concerning areas in need of improvement, one respondent suggested more specific skill-building opportunities were needed such field trips or training sessions, because “[covering] the curriculum is not like having training sessions.” Specifically, it was suggested that public relations students be allowed to set up events as a way for students to practice their public relations and public speaking skills.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

There is a healthy interest from Emirati citizens for careers in public relations, and Emirati public relations students at Canadian University Dubai represent a majority of the public relations students at the institution. This indicates the likelihood for locals to take up more public relations positions in Emirati society. This can help Emiratis remain influential in their own country in the face of their minority numbers. Consistent with past studies, this study confirms a preference for public sector work versus private sector work among Emiratis. Most of the students, particularly the males, said that they are either currently working in, or headed for, a career in the public sector, naming such places as Immigration, Civil Defense, Dubai Police, Office of the Sheikh, Dubai Community Development Authority, Dubai Customs, and Mubadala (a state-owned national wealth fund). Ultimately, such aspirations may pose a possible barrier to career success in public relations career success in light of the literature which suggests that public sector employment opportunities are shrinking, and that the effects of the government’s Emiratization policy are limited (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2014).

Upon analysis of interview results, overall, students are gradually socializing into the profession and building a professional identity, as evidenced by the many university/programmatic inputs and relational inputs noted by interviewees. Professional identity and socialization are supported, to some extent, at the institutional level (program and courses). Students positively cited course work, internships, field trips, and the graduation project. This academic foundation shapes their overall set of professional beliefs, values and experiences going into the profession of public relations, and is positively associated with the construction of professional identity (Tuluas & Gokturk, 2017; Ibarra, 1999). At the relational level, students reported strong and positive relational ties with faculty, overall. Positive professional experiences and interactions are also associated with the construction of a professional identity (Beijaard, et al., 2004; Dutton et al., 2010).

The idea of developing a mentoring program holds possibilities. Structured mentoring opportunities exist in other public relations programs and it is possible that, for a highly relational culture, like the Arabic culture, the idea of developing mentoring programs is worthy of exploration. This would expand public relations students' opportunities for socialization into the profession through relationships (see Lankau & Scandura, 2007), thereby additionally contributing to the construction of their professional identities.

The area that showed the greatest limitations to the development of professional socialization and to the construction of professional identity was the individual level, i.e. the students themselves. While the development of professional knowledge and skills from programmatic inputs is central to the construction of a professional identity, and relational inputs play an important role, the development of a professional identity is not limited to these - individual self-inputs also play a role (Gardner, 2008; Smith & Hatmaker, 2014). Students seemed to recognize the value of self-inputs, but they also consistently admitted it to be an area of weakness. Collective professional identity may be formed through course work, shared experiences and relational supports, but personal professional identity may be hindered if students are not contributing aspects of their personal identity towards professional socialization. Additionally, in this study, the effects of patriarchy are revealed; female students can be either encouraged or hindered in their self-development and in their choices, depending on the decisions of their male head of the household (see Williams, Wallis, & Williams, 2013). Cultural factors are playing a significant role.

Certainly, the true challenge appears to be at the individual level and includes the need for more student agency and proactivity. In light of this finding, it would seem fruitless for the institution, or the faculty, to provide the additional self-development opportunities that students requested (such as outside training workshops, or more networking opportunities) unless such opportunities were woven into the coursework as required activities.

In summary, the process of professional socialization and construction of a professional identity is occurring, particularly at the institutional and relational levels, but there is opportunity for greater development to occur at the individual level.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Because this is a study of a specific group of students at a specific university, results are not meant to be generalizable. It is exploratory, providing a window view. It provides specific results in a specific context. However, the study could be expanded to other public relations students in UAE to confirm results. The study could also be expanded to any other program in UAE as a means to predict student preparedness and Emirati representation in other sectors, such as medical, oil, real estate, engineering, finance or entrepreneurship, etc. It could also be used to examine potential for student success in any program in any country where student success is particularly vital, such as it is in the UAE.

Further research could also identify the specific barriers that students are encountering and/or to investigate means of overcoming those barriers. A deeper investigation into cultural aspects and impacts could shed additional light and suggest additional supports (see AL-Ajmi, 2007). Lastly, the subject of mentorship could be explored as a potentially effective relational input into the construction of professional identity of the UAE public relations student, or be suggestive as an effective relational tool in other post-secondary programs.

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APPENDIX A – INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Do you face any barriers toward obtaining your public relations education here at CUD? If so, what are they?
2. What things does the institution do to develop you? E.g. Course work, advising, etc. What things do you participate in?
3. To what extent do you think that your PR courses and your program, in general, are preparing you to become a PR professional? What is lacking? What needs to be improved?
4. What things do faculty do to develop you, if anything? What do you wish they might do?
5. Do you get tips and information from faculty members about PR practice?
6. What things do you do to develop yourself? (e.g. proactively pursue faculty, etc., get your own internships and experiences, etc.)
7. Have you received any field training or taken any special initiatives outside of required classwork, to develop in public relations?
8. Do you think you have the right skills to practice public relations? If not, what else do you think needs to happen?
9. Do you think your current experience as a student is preparing you properly for the field of public relations? Why or why not?

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