Power Distance in Public Relations: An Overview from Students Perspective

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Abstract—**In Malaysia, few previous studies showed contradict findings in discussing about power distance in organizations. Therefore, this study focuses on the experience of public relations student's during their internship. Specifically, this study examined the existence of power distance in an organization, from student's perspective. Besides, this paper also suggesting a few steps to be taken in order to improve the internship based on the cultural diversity in Malaysia.**

Keywords—power distance, internship, student,

I. Introduction

Previous studies by public relations researchers have specifically examined the effects of culture on public relations practice (Sriramesh, 2004). Nessmann (1995) and Vercic, Grunig and Grunig (1996) concluded that culture has a role on communication and public relations. In Malaysia, Taylor and Kent (1999) stress the importance of culture in shaping the public relations function practiced. Therefore, it is believed that culture is an important dimension in the formation of public relations practice in Malaysia.

In order to observe the culture within an organisation, Hofstede (1980) defines culture as the collective programming of the human mind that differentiates the members of one human group from those of another. Hofstede (1980 & 2001) identifies power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism versus individualism, and masculinity versus feminist as the four cultural dimensions he identified from his studies.

However, this study will focus on the cultural dimension of power distance, since power distance has been a key factor that differentiates the public relations practice in many developing countries from the practice in developed countries (Tian, 2008).

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A. Power Distance in Malaysia

Power distance refers to the power inequality between superiors and subordinates (Ting and Ying, 2013). The organization hierarchy is very clear in high power distance organizations, where a border is exists between managers and subordinates. Different from high power distance organizations, low power distance organizations tend to have a horizontal organizational structure.

In Hofstede's (1984) study, Malaysia scores very high on this dimension. Lucien Pye, a noted scholar on Asian social and political thought, described Malaysians as a people who respect authority and have a highly personalized sense of power. In a high power distance nation, authority is to be accepted, not challenged (cited in Taylor and Kent, 1999).

In 2011, Yusoff with a sample of 145 CEOs and senior managers, found that two types of industries which is finance industry and trading and services industry have high power distance culture.

However, Ahmad and Bidin (2013) in their study involves 278 respondents who are public relations practitioners have found contradict findings. Power distance in their study has no significance with the public relations practice.

The similarity can be seen from these two contradict studies is the respondents are among the internal stakeholder which is the employees. Therefore, this current study has taken an initiative to get a view from different perspective, which is from student who has just finished with their internship.

B. Internship

An internship is media-related work experience at an on-the-job location, supervised by a professional practitioner, involving a student enrolled in an academically organized program requiring full-time work which provides salary and credit during a specified term (quarter or semester) (Kendall, 1980).

Internship forms a vital part of any student's education, giving the student a chance to hone his or her skills, interaction with more experienced professionals, and practice in different areas of the field. To this point, the Public Relations Student Society of America(PRSA) suggests internships can enhance a student's resume, portfolio, networking, and technical skills (Beebe, Blaylock, Sweetser, 2009), and this is parallel with Evetts (2011), which also mentioned that the professional

values emphasize a shared identity based on competencies which is produced by education, training and apprenticeship socialization, and sometimes guaranteed by licensing.

As stressed by Tsetsura (2011), how people understand and imagine public relations (PR) depends on the ways professionals discuss and describe their jobs and explain what they do to themselves and to others. Therefore, interactions during internship provide students with opportunities to learn by observing how seasoned professionals, their mentors, handle ethically sensitive situations.

Therefore, this study focuses on the experience of public relations students during their internship. Specifically, this study will examine the existence of power distance in an organization, from student's perspective.

As an example, one student in Rompelmean and Vries (2010) study who did internship in Antwerp (Belgium) and discussed that to his opinion the power distance were higher than in the Netherlands (as found by Hofstede) but he estimated these indices lower than the values provided by Hofstede.

II. Findings

A. Perception about Internship

Most of the respondents participated in the focus group undergo their internship in event management company, hotel or marketing compared to be solely in PR department. In the data collected, most of the respondents do not have clear knowledge on the job scope of a PR practitioner as they believed that PR are mostly used in event management neglecting the importance of dissemination of messages or even media relation. Due to this, respondents mentioned that ethic and protocol are very important during their training especially for event management.

However, all of the participants agreed that experience is an important element to provide students with insight on the field. Internship allowed them to get the experience which is also a good opportunity to let them to learn and exposed to operation in the industry so that they can compare and contrast what they had learn in class.

Moreover, they mention that most of the company is more likely to hire someone which possessing experience in the industry. Members which gone for internship in the company getting higher possibility to be hire by the company compared to others as they are familiar with the operation of the company. This shows that the experience that one's own can act as a stepping stone to get the offer in industry.

Besides, experience helps a lot when PR practitioners deal with crisis. Experience provides insight to aids decision making when dealing with crisis. It builds up the confidence of the PR practitioners as they are familiar with the crisis and master the proper way to resolve the crisis. Participants

conclude that knowledge that they gain from books and class is just a basic for them to handle matters, practical judgment and experience is the most important element when deal with real crisis.

However, according to one of the respondents, he was given multi-tasking during his period of internship which clearly shows the failure in providing opportunities that enhance autonomy. For him, CEO or top management, have not recognized PR and communication as first level management function. Other respondents also agreed that most of the management only recruits PR practitioners as the medium helping them to create event and for multi-tasking when asked on their job scope during internship.

Besides, for those respondents working in event management companies, 3 months were insufficient for them to thoroughly learn or acquire necessary skills as they need to be engaged in long-term strategic planning with both internal and external public. Furthermore, respondents choose to utilize the acquired PR skills and knowledge in other field of work instead in PR as discovered.

Interestingly, respondents also highlighted how the power distance contributes to the undermining their authority and decrease the effectiveness of their duties during the internship.

B. Power distance in PR practice

Sriramesh and White (1992) predicted that excellent or termed as professional PR would be most likely in cultures with low power distance, high trust among workers, low individualism/ high collectivism, low uncertainty avoidance and high femininity approach.

In all the group sessions conducted, the respondents were clearly disturbed by term *power distance* as they believe that it undermine the authority and confidence of respective party.

In a group session conducted, one of the respondents related his experiences in power distance during his internship. As he was doing marketing and a client contacted him, he was forced to put the client on hold and consulted his superior for further action. These caused loss of confidence and interest of clientele on him and also his company.

After his disclosure, the others also affirm that they face the same situation during their internship. As PR practitioners might engage in crisis management or more to marketing now, the power distance lead to inability of the practitioner to act accordingly.

In fact, another respondent mentioned that the Next for in-house practitioner, it is mostly controlled by Head of Department and likewise for other company to be controlled by boss whom have insufficient knowledge of the profession in the field, PRs' are relegate to be doing to technical task.

III.   **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of this study therefore support the results of study by Hofstede (1984) and Yusoff (2011). By referring to the students experiences, unbiased results can easily been gathered as their point of view is not influencing by any parties.

Meanwhile, it has been highlighted that most of the respondents stressed that there is so much difference from what they know from books and class and what they have learned during internship. They commented that knowledge that gains in class is insufficient for them to know about what happen in industry.

Internship has giving them a chance to adapt themselves in the industry and power distance as one of culture dimension. It is undeniable that an internship which provide students with the chance of learning something which may be totally different from what they learnt in the class, can also influencing a student's career choice either to remain or to change (Kim and Park, 2013).

Furthermore, there is wide variance in internship policies, in the number of hours of credit, the number of internships taken, degree of voluntariness, compensation, and type of evaluation. Some differences in internship programs are acceptable, but there are some basic precepts applicable to all internship systems (Gibson, 1998). One of them is students should be exposed with cultural diversity.

In China, the collaborations between universities and selected PR firms have offered students great opportunities to acquire professional experience. Prior to starting a project, students would communicate frequently with the internship center to learn an organization's culture, structure, management styles, and its various publics (Zhang, Lou and Jiang, 2011). Previously, Creedon and Al-Khaaja (2005) suggest that by adding non-Western case studies to prominent textbooks in PR would provide a launch pad for classroom discussion**.**

This is relevant as current PR defined by Sriramesh (2009) stated that "Public relations is the strategic communication that different types of organizations use for establishing and maintaining symbiotic relationships with relevant publics many of whom are increasingly becoming culturally diverse." The "relevant publics" in this definition are becoming increasingly "diverse and global" and therefore in order to be effective, PR practitioners should be "well educated and sensitized to communicating in a global environment" (cited in Sriramesh and Duhe, 2009). Therefore, PR students should be trained to go beyond single identity markers when creating PR plans and learn to recognize that people have multiple axes of identity (Gallicano and Stansberry, 2011).

Specifically for students of PR, recognizing multiple dimensions of diversity is crucial because such understanding will provide a good insight into how global PR operates and is practiced. Understanding diversity beyond race, ethnicity, age, and gender may help to discover why PR practitioners succeed or fail when they utilize similar campaign strategies in different countries around the world (Tsetsura, 2011). And, by staying in Malaysia which very rich with cultural diversity, academics, practitioners, and students should take this opportunity to produce and develop a future PR practitioners that competence in managing cultural diversity in any situation.

It is undeniable that the first step to start is through cultural diversity exposure during internship, and it is important to distinguish that there are differences between Malaysia and other countries, from a cultural perspective.

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