3 Methodology

> Phenomena are really out there, and we discover their nature by through finding appropriate measures. Metaphors are re-phrasing of what is there, and metaphors are never completely right or wrong. The investigator must cover many possibilities and alternative interpretations, casting a wide net, quickly identifying and abandoning those measures that show nothing, and moving lightly to avoid being buried in the data. (Faulkner, Maanen and Dabbs, 1984, p. 60)

Introduction

In order to show why more women than men are entering the PR profession it was necessary to use a variety of methods to prove and explain the phenomenon. I have used two methods in the research, making this a mixed methodology approach – being a combination of quantitative and qualitative research.

Primarily, the form of research is phenomenological, in that it has “taken place in natural ‘everyday’ settings and (was) not preceded by research questions, as in positivistic research” (Allison et al., 1996). The leaning towards phenomenalism is also reflected by observation of the phenomenon being studied (the increase of women in PR) and that there is a clear choice on what was being observed (student and practitioner numbers). However, there is also an element of positivism, in that initial consistencies in patterns of female employment and university enrolment were noted through the use of quantitative data (e-mail and phone surveys). The methodologies used, therefore, are a mix of qualitative and quantitative, with the emphasis heavily on qualitative (focus groups and interviews).

Overall, however, the research could be categorised, according to a definition offered by McNiff, et al. (2003) as ‘action-based’, as it is being conducted by a “practitioner [who regards himself] as a researcher, and it is qualitative, concerned with human experience” (p. 14). The qualitative nature of this research project fits neatly with all of the above, and the following processes, as “qualitative research is concerned with individuals’ own accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour ... [and] offers rightly descriptive reports of individuals’ perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, views and feelings” (Hakim, 1987).

Hughes (2005) used this method in his DBA thesis, noting that “while academics have consistent views regarding research rigour and relevance, they had developed varying philosophies and approaches to achieve those outcomes” (p. 7). It became clear to me that research students do not have to rely solely on the traditional positivist approach or isolate themselves from their natural environment to conduct credible research. In fact, they can achieve rigorous, relevant, timely and realistic studies by identifying emerging phenomena within their own profession. This interaction between student-academic, student-employee and industry is effective because not only does it provide access to rich data sources, “it also allows for the observation of complex organisational environments where many important variables are at play” (Fernandez, Lehman and Underwood, 2002, as cited by Hughes, 2005). Action research also has both a personal and social aim. My personal aim was to further improve my ability to undertake higher-level research. The social (or professional) aim of this research was to provide the base for future research on a topic I find fascinating and one which may have wide implications for the industry.

The techniques used are a combination of:

- Historical information (university course enrolment data)
- Descriptive information (surveys, case studies and trend studies)
- “Rich” information (focus groups and interviews, with myself as observer)

The initial survey methodology was, in effect, a census of the ‘population’, defined as the Perth PR industry, which comprises six key groups, as outlined in Chapter One. The purpose was to examine whether the phenomenon existed. Additionally, another census was taken of a similar industry 'population', the media. The purpose of this second census was to compare the way in which the two populations differed in their composition, and to prove the research problem did exist (that is, whether women did actually form the numerically-dominant group within public relations, primarily in Perth). Additionally, as part of the initial data collection, I have included statistics, fragmented as they are, from various US publications to highlight the increase in the number of women entering PR during the past 20 years. These statistics are incorporated into the literature review, as they appeared only in passing in general literature and did not form any separate studies in their own right.

Justification for the paradigm and methodology

The approach taken follows Oliver's (2004) outline of paradigms; this being one of naturalistic enquiry, in which qualitative and naturalistic approaches (literature review, focus groups, interviews) form the predominant part of the research process, with a view to bringing about a rich understanding of people's experience in specific settings (in this case, the PR work and academic environment). Paton (1990) as cited in Merriam (1998) argues that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth".

The primary population is defined as the Perth PR industry.

The population sampling frames consisted of three sub groups:

- Students
- Practitioners, private business and consultants, government PR, non-profit PR, private PR)
- Academics (minor).

The four universities could not provide staff details. These were taken from the Internet, and reflect numbers that teach in the generic "communications" discipline. Academics were therefore not surveyed, but some were included in the interviews. The number of PR-specific academics in Perth is likely to be no more than 12-15 fulltime staff, which would have little effect on the gender composition of the primary population, nor on the result of survey information. In fact, academics do not comprise a core component of the population (the industry, which I define as those working in, or about to work in the commercial sector). However, academics' opinions were considered to have great value in the qualitative research phase; particularly as they would have been able to observe the traits and trends of the student population. For that reason they were included in interviews.

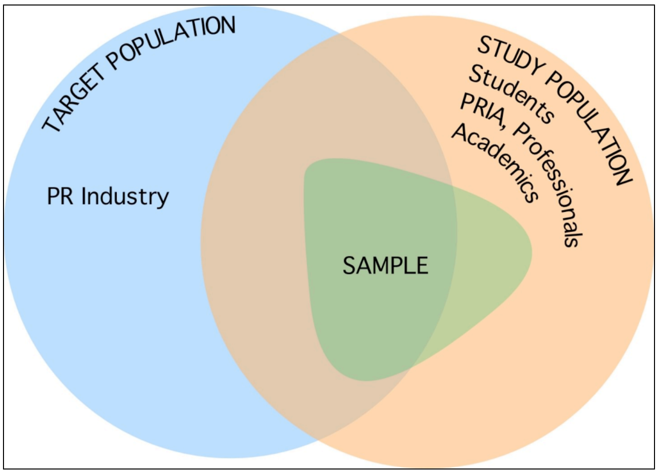

Figure 16: Target population and sub-groups.

A census of the entire population was conducted to gather the initial statistics on how many males and females comprise the industry in Perth. The definition of a census is "the collection of information from all members of a population" (Broom and Dozier, 1990). This was considered the best method because the population is small, and "not every public is so large that sampling is necessary" (Broom and Dozier, 1990). I conducted the census by phoning every PR consultancy listed in the Perth metropolitan phone book, and every government Department PR division. I phoned all 62 PR practices listed in the 2005 Perth Yellow Pages. About 15 of the businesses listed had closed, giving a total of 47 practices contacted.

A phone census of all 30 WA (Perth-based) Government Departments with PR professionals was undertaken, with a 100 per cent return. Respondents were asked to provide the number of fulltime male/female workers involved directly in the PR function.

The four Perth universities offering PR Degrees or PR majors (Edith Cowan, Curtin, Notre Dame and Murdoch) were asked to provide student enrolment statistics, with male/female breakdown, in communications courses (and PR where possible) for as many years as possible. All four responded.

All companies, government agencies, charities and universities provided figures. By conducting a census, exact information about the entire population could be obtained, rather than relying on estimates about the population based on a sample. The census was conducted between 21 February and 18 March, 2005.

The PRIA State and national bodies were contacted by e-mail and asked to supply membership figures (male/female) for as many years as possible. Unfortunately, neither body could provide statistics other than for the current financial year (2004–05).

A purposive sample was obtained by sending e-mails to all 126 accredited practitioners listed on the PRIA's national website (the PRIA only lists members who consent to public listing).

The population was initially stratified into two industry groups (university students and practitioners) and then further stratified. University students were broken into second- and third-year students (male and female). First-year students were not included as it was deemed many had not yet decided to study PR as a Major. Practitioners were broken into the following groups (government PR, not-for profit PR, private practice).

Because the number of elements in the sub-groups were unknown and could not be individually identified, the sampling design of these groups meant initial surveys were conducted using non-probability purposive sampling, which is used in certain circumstances, as outlined by Trochim (2002) "where it is not feasible, practical or theoretically sensible to do random sampling." Miles and Huberman (1994) and Merriam (1998) also agree that "non-probability sampling is the method of choice for most qualitative research . . . to solve such problems as discovering what occurs, the implications of what occurs, and the relationships linking occurrences". For me, this method was used, not because it was convenient, but because it meant all sub-groups had an equal opportunity to provide details.

As the aim is not to show bias (Kumar, 1999) every university, practitioner and government department was contacted and given the opportunity to provide details. The sampling frame list covered the entire population. The methodology was also deemed purposive, as I judged those sub-groups could "provide the best information to achieve my study's objectives" and that the people in the groups listed "are likely to have the required information and be willing to share it" (Kumar, 1999, p.276). These are features of many qualitative studies. The size of the professional census reflected the relatively small number of practitioners in Perth.

Instrument design

The primary measurement devices to examine PR practitioners' levels of knowledge and opinions of the issue, were two initial surveys – one each for professionals and students – focus groups and interviews. These attitudinal questionnaires used a mix of closed (75 per cent) and open-ended, unprompted questioning. The aim was to gauge people's attitudes, beliefs and opinions about gender in PR. The questionnaires were first pilot-tested on a group of 10 PR professionals and 10 PR second and third-year students (five male and five female of each). Surveys were also validated by consultation with supervisors and two Perth-based academics, Dr Doug McGhie and Vince Hughes (then an MBA, now Dr). Survey construction was analysed and tested by Brisbane PR consultant Sonia Palazzo and Sydney communications professional Paul Ellercamp. The statistical validity and reliability of the data was verified by Kevin Murray, from the mathematics department at the University of Western Australia.

The key constructs being measured in the surveys included:

- the population's level of awareness of gender imbalance,
- the level of importance the population attached to gender in PR,
- the attitude of the population to gender imbalance.

The procedure of measurement in the survey contained a mix of nominal and ordinal scales. The first third of the surveys contained questions designed to give a nominal measurement by building profiles of individuals in terms of sex, years in the profession, income, level of experience and areas of specialisation. In the second part of the surveys, respondents had to provide answers based on an ordinal (scaled or ranked) level of measurement, relating to aspects of the careers/study such as levels of satisfaction, areas of interest and perception of gender in PR. These questions used a mix of itemised and comparative ratings.

The final 12 questions contained a mix of closed questions (yes/no options) but with additional space for respondents to make open-ended comments on the reasons for their answers. No questions made any statements about aspects of the PR industry. This was considered the best way to avoid misunderstanding and to elicit unbiased answers, and follows the thinking of Davis and Cosenza (1985), who state that "different people attribute different meanings to the same word and all individuals have a different frame of experience when reading and interpreting questions." The use of open-ended sub-questions also worked in tandem to produce a more in-depth understanding of respondents' thoughts, beliefs and attitudes.

A second survey of students was conducted from mid-January to mid-February 2005. This web-based survey consisted of 10 questions, designed to further expand on the year's worth of research undertaken (at that time). The additional survey was prompted by two factors: (a) It had become apparent that the focus of my study should be students, as they are the sub-group where the phenomenon is taking place and will be most influential on the industry in the coming years, and (b) influenced by separate pieces of research conducted in 2005 by two US students, Rebecca Folmar and Gina Noble, on the same topic. It should be noted that these students' questions were not used directly (merely as guidelines), as many of them I thought not worthwhile (such as asking students if they would interrupt their careers to have children – this because students probably would not be thinking about having children). In any event, most of their questions had been framed in my initial survey. Questions are contained in the annexes. The overall aim, however, was to consider what influences students to major in PR, and what (if any) differences are there between gender with regard to this.

In order to reach an even more in-depth understanding of the complex issues of my study, an "active interview" methodology for focus groups was used to research the way professionals view the industry. This approach to qualitative interviewing, outlined by Holstein and Gubrium (1995), recognises that interviews are not free from subjectivity and that the researcher is integral in creating meaning and understanding through a loosely-structured format with the participants. The researcher guides the conversation according to the research agenda, and the questions presented are intended to provoke responses that address these agenda.

The aim of the qualitative process (interviews and focus groups) was to study some of the results that have turned up in the quantitative survey in depth, but also to bring out some new perspectives and to review them as they were seen by PR professionals and students.

In the professional focus group, practitioners discussed [what they thought were] the most interesting problems brought to light by this study. The result of this discussion may provide further inspiration by putting the new results of the surveys into perspective.

This approach allowed for flexibility in the research process, allowing the researcher to ask additional questions that explore the research questions in further detail than a formal, structured interview methodology. PR academic James Grunig (1992) specifically recommended qualitative methods for gaining deeper, more candid responses with research participants than quantitative research can assess, especially for groups such as PR practitioners, who may not respond to a survey. According to Grunig, the semi-structured and in-depth interview may also advance a researcher's ability to understand what the interviewee really thinks about an issue. This allows for a measure of introspection and more detailed answers than would have been provided if a formal process was followed. Also, the act of interviewing the participants face-to-face in their own environment was intended to increase the comfort level of the subjects, and increase the flow of communication.

The method of collecting and collating initial survey data was labour-intensive. No research assistant was used. An initial e-mailing announcing my study was sent in May 2005 to 146 potential practitioners. (Methods were outlined in chapter ??). This was the maximum number possible, due to privacy limitations imposed by the PRIA and by companies and government departments who could not provide personal details of employees, or pass on details to them. My study was also publicised on the PRIA's national web site and in the WA Branch's newsletter. A total of 63 Perth professionals eventually participated, with 40 indicating their intention to be interviewed, and a 11 being available for a focus group.

In collecting professional survey data, the following procedure was followed:

1. Surveys were received by e-mail and the data collated in MS Excel, from where all responses were calculated.
2. Copies were made of the original MS Word surveys, with the originals being filed. From the copied files, questions 1–15 (multiple choice) were deleted. Questions 16–26 were edited and converted to text-only format for importation into HyperResearch, a Mac-based qualitative data analysis program.
3. Separate projects for both the professional and student surveys were set up in HyperResearch.

4. The analysis depended on defining coding (key words or phrases) which were identified in the editing process and then applied to each survey response.

Each (initial professional and student) survey return took about one hour to process. After analysis, the results were then written into the thesis.

A total of 128 responses were received for the final web-based and "in-house" (student-only) survey, which was limited to 10 questions, seeking further information on the personality traits of PR students. A total of 30 responses were also received via a web-based survey, hosted by Web Monkey, from a contact list of 57 students, giving a response rate of 66 per cent. A further 116 surveys of second- and third-year students were conducted at the two major universities (Curtin and ECU) in March 2006. A total of 18 were invalid.

The choice of qualitative interviews opens the possibility of gradations, as well as more intricate studies, updated regular interpretations, and the raising of important issues. The use of personal interviews has also been used to generate ideas, and provided room for wider analysis of the phenomenon, due to the interviewees being allowed to raise subjects themselves. Furthermore, the subjects were able to express wishes and make recommendations in other areas of PR, which, while not central to, is an important aim of this project.

The dialogue with the practitioners and students was mostly informal, but comprised questions chosen and formulated on the basis of results from the surveys. This increases the possibility of making a comparison of the interviews, which were all conducted by myself. This minimised any differences that may have occurred if several interviewers were used. Questions and locations were standardised in order to assist in the production of unbiased data. The selection of respondents who can participate in the qualitative survey (interviews and focus groups) was limited to the people forming part of the quantitative section, and who have agreed to take part in the qualitative survey.

For the purpose of being able to identify generalised patterns in motives, attitudes and opinions in connection with being a PR professional or student, a number of themes were selected. The interpretation of the interviews was systematised by reviewing, editing and analysing the interviews in relation to the following themes:

- What motivated the subject to enter PR.
- Their opinions on imbalance.
- Did they think males or females were better-suited to PR?

The identifiable patterns that can be "generalised" in relation to these themes are supported by and built up in the report around selected quotations from the interviews, but new and interesting points of view are also presented. Thereby this part of the analysis is also used to generate ideas.

Because much of the research (interviews, focus groups, open-ended questions) was qualitative, and therefore subjective, it has been recommended that my "personal experience be recognised prior to such analysis" (Morse and Richards, 2002). Accordingly, it should be noted that as the primary researcher in this study, I am a public relations and journalism professional, with more than 20 years experience, both in the public and private sectors. While conducting this study I was working initially part-time as a PR Officer for the Army, and then fulltime contract work for the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, WA Office for Seniors Interests, WA Department of Agriculture, Australian Bureau of Statistics (mid to late 2006). I completed my thesis while working fulltime as the senior PR Officer for RAAF Air Command in Sydney (September-November 2006).

Limitations

Due to the small size of the population, subjects were drawn from a purposive (judgmental) sample. There are limitations with this method.

However, the relatively low response is indicative of a combination of the small numbers in the Perth PR industry and the limited amount of time people have to devote to being involved in such a study.

As with any study of this type, it will always be a problem to find the extent to which the results of qualitative interviews can be “generalised”, but by using interviews it is possible to search for patterns in the respondents’ attitudes, opinions, and descriptions of the profession.

As explained elsewhere, the final number of people willing to participate in focus groups and interviews was relatively low. In surveys with so relatively few respondents, a choice has always to be made between few or many selection criteria. In the light of the aim of the survey, relatively few criteria have been chosen. It also proved problematic to obtain detailed data on individuals and their work, because they were promised anonymity in connection with the quantitative survey.

Summary

Chapter Three outlined the methodologies and techniques used to conduct the research. This included an initial census of the population, surveys, focus groups and interviews. A summary of the process appears in figure 17. While survey numbers were relatively low (particularly with regard to PR professionals) they are indicative of the small size of the Perth PR industry. However, the actual response rate, being high, should provide an accurate picture of the industry nationally. This is particularly the case with the extensive open-ended answers, interviews and focus groups, which form the main source of information for this study.

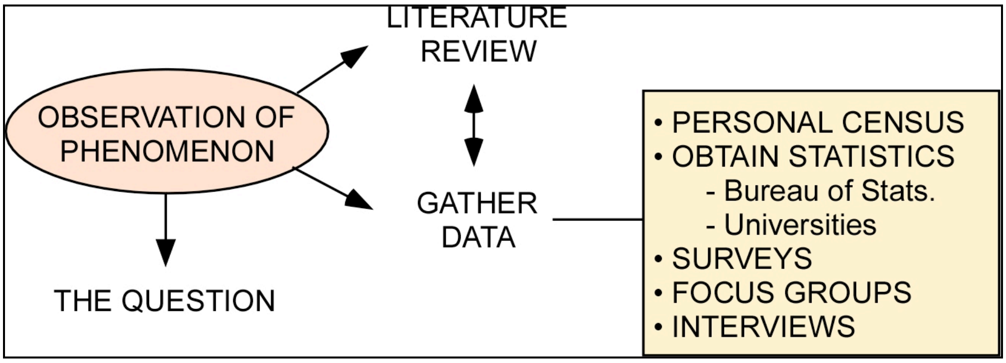

Figure 17: An overview of the way the research was structured.