

Fish out of water: the experience of PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, why it matters and what we can do about it

A report sponsored by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations Research Fund

Caitlin Plunkett-Reilly Chart.PR, MCIPR



Contents

Introduction	3
Literature review	6
Research objectives	8
Research methodology	9
Lived experience of PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds	10
Conclusion and recommendations	24



Introduction

Over the previous decade, attention across professions has rightly turned to improving equality, diversity and inclusion – commonly referred to as EDI in corporate circles – in the workplace.

Socio-economic inequality has been largely missing from this conversation, despite the ways in which it intersects with protected characteristics including ethnicity, sexuality, gender and disability.

There is a clear underrepresentation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds working in the PR industry. Only 21% of PR practitioners were entitled to income support or free school meals as children. Those working in PR are, however, twice as likely to have parents who have a degree (43%). The proportion of PR practitioners with a university degree is more than double that of the average population, at 76% compared to 35%.¹

A quarter of PR practitioners went to private school, compared to 7% of the general population. They earn an average of £12,000 more annually than their state-educated counterparts which mirrors across the wider labour market.²

PR practitioners are also less likely than the general public to accept the influence of family background on career prospects. 44% of the public think where you end up professionally is mainly determined by your background, compared with 29% of those working in PR.³

As set out in the literature review, social mobility has largely been considered in policy terms as an education issue. There is a growing body of research in relation to the labour market, though to date this research has largely focused on a number of key elite professions.

As the analysis reveals, some of the barriers to getting into and getting on in elite professions are also present in the PR sector. There are also some particular characteristics of the PR profession that make it particularly impenetrable for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

At the time of writing, there is a wider acceptance that ensuring diversity within a profession is important – both in the interests of equity but also because it makes business sense. This project has been predicated on the fact that diversity is particularly critical within the PR and communications workforce. We're in the business of communicating with a wide range of audiences, across all kinds of issues. The only way we can do that effectively is if we ourselves reflect the diversity of those audiences.

¹ Chartered Institute of Public Relations (2020) State of the Profession 2020, <https://newsroom.cipr.co.uk/public-relations-out-of-step-with-views-of-general-public-on-social-mobility--cipr-state-of-the-profession-2020/>

² Ibid

³ Ibid



A note on language

The phrase 'people from lower socio-economic backgrounds' does not roll off the tongue, but it is intentionally chosen. Much of the language we see used in relation to socio-economic disadvantage ascribes that disadvantage is a reflection of people's character – 'poor' or 'deprived', for example.

This kind of language fails to reflect that socio-economic disadvantage is structural, and that poverty is something that people experience, it's not who they are.

As such, I have tried as much as possible to avoid using language that contributes – even tacitly – to this perception.

In addition, I have chosen not to use the term working class (except where quoting someone else). This is because it's a term largely self-attributed and that is deployed by people to mean everything from having a distant relative that worked in a manual occupation to people who grew up in abject poverty. In the interests of the clarity and rigour of the research, I have chosen to avoid using this term to avoid risking the inclusion of participants that may consider themselves working class but that comparatively, did not grow up in a lower socio-economic group.

A note on scope

Clearly, the underrepresentation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the PR and communications profession is a reflection of wider structural inequality. This project does not seek to deny or mask that reality – indeed a number of the recommendations call on the UK government to introduce policies that would reduce socio-economic disadvantage in relation to employment across the labour market.

Rather, this study sets out that, in addition to societal change, there are a number of changes that only the profession – in the sense of its professional bodies, its leading voices, its employers and its practitioners - can make. In order to tackle the underrepresentation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the profession, it must reflect on how it has imposed or failed to interrogate barriers to entry and progression within the course of a PR and communications career. This study makes the case that this is not only the right thing to do, but that it's critical to the future of the profession.

Undoubtedly, there will be different views about where the emphasis should lie in seeking to remedy this problem. Striking the right balance between tackling structural inequality, and the role of professional bodies, employers and individual practitioners has been the most difficult part of this project. I have also been anxious about recommending changes to practice that could be perceived as seeking simply to ensure practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds are coached into presenting as middle and upper middle class. For absolute clarity, this project concludes that the contribution of practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds to the profession is not only desirable but indeed vital. The future of a relevant, robust and thriving PR profession is dependent on those practitioners being able to demonstrably draw on their full life experience, rather than mask it.



From the interviews, focus group and wider literature on social mobility, it is clear that socio-economic status intersects with gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability, and that these demographic characteristics compound and exacerbate the disadvantage linked to socio-economic standing. For reasons of capacity, this has not been something I have been able to explore in detail. However, the research does show the critical importance of tackling the underrepresentation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the PR and communications profession as one strand of a focus on improving representation for other underrepresented groups, reflecting the ways they intersect.

The focus of this research project is the PR profession in the UK.



Literature review

Whilst social mobility - how likely we are to climb up (or fall down) the economic or social ladder across our lifetime – has been the subject of mainstream sociological study since the post-war period, it is really only since the new millennium that it has become something that is discussed in the wider public sphere.⁴ In 2005, the Sutton Trust published *Recent Changes in Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and America*,⁵ a landmark study that highlighted income mobility in Britain was low by international standards, and that the generation born in 1970 had seen less income mobility than the generation born in 1958.

This study challenged the perspective in the sociological literature that there had been no change in relative social mobility rates over time. Across UK government policy and the wider public sector and third sector, there have since been efforts to drive up rates of social mobility. Increasingly, these efforts have also been found amongst bigger employers in the private sector,⁶ with businesses endeavouring to be seen to be partaking in these activities.

In UK government policy terms, social mobility has served as a useful vehicle through which to cast narratives in pursuit of different priorities. With New Labour, it was seen through the lens of their drive to reduce child poverty and extending the time students from lower socio-economic backgrounds spent in full-time education via the Education Maintenance Allowance. With the coalition government, the emphasis was on building a fair society and taking a life-cycle approach.⁷ From 2015-19, social mobility was pitched through focus on the quality of teaching and the national curriculum. Later, the emphasis the Conservative Party put on levelling up the country in the 2019 general election, up to the present, framed the conversation. This continued political attention on the role of educational policy in the main has persisted despite evidence that changes to occupational structures will have more influence on absolute rates of social mobility.⁸

Up until a few years ago, there was a broad agreement that social mobility in the UK was low and not improving.⁹ There has been an emerging argument that most analysis shows there has been no decline in the rates of absolute or relative occupational mobility in decades, though there has been a decline in absolute and relative income mobility for people born in the late 1970s and beyond.¹⁰

⁴ Sutton Trust (2022) Social Mobility – Past, Present and Future, <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Social-Mobility-%E2%80%93-Past-Present-and-Future-final-updated-references.pdf>

⁵ Sutton Trust (2005) *Recent Changes in Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and America*, <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/IntergenerationalMobility.pdf>

⁶ KPMG (2022), *Social Mobility Progression Report 2022: Mind the Gap*, <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2022/12/social-mobility-progression-report-2022-mind-the-gap-brochure.pdf>

⁷ UK Government (2011) *Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opening-doors-breaking-barriers-a-strategy-for-social-mobility>

⁸ John Goldthorpe (2013), *Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of the Economists, the Confusion of Politicians and the Limits of Educational Policy*, *Journal of Social Policy* 42 (3), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-social-policy/article/abs/understanding-and-misunderstanding-social-mobility-in-britain-the-entry-of-the-economists-the-confusion-of-politicians-and-the-limits-of-educational-policy/BFFF6A6C213CCC745B7275083DE7C04E>

⁹ The Sutton Trust (2019), *Elitist Britain*, p7, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/elitist-britain-2019/>

¹⁰ Social Mobility Commission (2022), *State of the nation 2022: a fresh approach to social mobility*, p15, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2023-people-and-places>



Whilst not exclusively, some of this disagreement about the trajectory of social mobility in the UK is about measures – absolute mobility versus relative mobility but also in how those measures are quantified – such as interrogating income mobility or occupational mobility. The Social Mobility Commission has attempted to begin to address this through its new index, though they themselves assert that more work is needed to develop this.¹¹

In the last decade or two, there has been increasing focus on social mobility with regard to the elite professions, with a growing body of evidence in relation to occupations such as law and the financial services.

Much of this literature – and indeed wider social mobility literature – is cast through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. The concept of 'habitus' – the norms, values, attitudes and behaviours of a particular social group – is seen as a key driver of both who gets in and who gets on in professions. This is part of a wider body of work that has sought to define social class in a way that better reflects the realities of modern Britain.¹² It's also important to note that this work stresses that 'even when individuals do experience occupational upward mobility they still face challenges stemming from their different social, economic, and cultural resources, class bias, or a sense of emotional dislocation.'¹³

This is perhaps seen most manifestly in two issues of emerging interest – a difference in rates of progression within professions related to socio-economic background and the class pay gap. Social class is the biggest barrier to progression in the workplace, with people from lower socio-economic backgrounds taking around 19% longer to progress through grades within KPMG in the UK than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds in the biggest study of workplace progression to date.¹⁴ The class pay gap – with professionals from working class backgrounds being paid 12% or £6,291 less annually than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds in the same occupation – highlights that inequality persists well beyond initial access to a profession. Given the early success of the introduction of mandatory gender pay gap reporting for organisations employing more than 250 employees in 2017, increasingly there is a push for this mandatory reporting to be extended to the class pay gap.

The evidence also points to the increasing importance of unearned income – via inheritance, the transfer of property ownership within families and other private transfers of wealth in driving persistence of lifetime income across generations.¹⁵ In short, parents' ownership of their home has become a much better predictor of whether or not you will own yours,¹⁶ which undoubtedly impacts on overall intergenerational mobility.

To date, there has been very limited research on social mobility and socio-economic diversity in the PR and communications profession. This project draws on the wider literature in addition to primary research findings.

¹¹ Ibid, p141.

¹² Savage et al (2013), A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment, *Sociology* 47(2), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038038513481128>

¹³ Daniel Laurison and Sam Friedman (2016), The class pay gap in Britain's higher professional and managerial occupation, *American Sociological Review* 81 (4), https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66753/1/Laurison_Class%20pay%20gap_2016.pdf

¹⁴ KPMG (2022), Social Mobility Progression Report 2022: Mind the Gap, <https://assets.kpmg.com/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2022/12/social-mobility-progression-report-2022-mind-the-gap-brochure.pdf>

¹⁵ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023), Intergenerational mobility in the UK, p25, <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/intergenerational-mobility-in-the-uk/>

¹⁶ Social Mobility Commission (2023) State of the nation 2023: people and places, p42, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2023-people-and-places>



Research objectives

Generally, conversations about social mobility outside of the academic sphere tend to focus on access to a particular education institution, group of education institutions or a particular profession. Whilst this project has considered issues of access, it has sought to also look beyond it to consider the lived experience of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds once they have entered the PR profession, and how it feels to be from this underrepresented demographic group as a practitioner. The project aims to shed light on the wider profession's particular barriers and identify recommendations to reduce these challenges, making PR a more attractive sector for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to enter and stay in across their career.

I also want to highlight the particular contribution of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to the profession and the practice of PR rather than solely framing it as something simply to be overcome. The inspiration for this project – beyond a general sense of frustration at the lack of socio-economic diversity and the consequences for the quality of outputs - was the COVID-19 pandemic. This event was the first in my professional lifetime to expose just what is at stake when communication fails, but also the power of clear, disciplined messaging that, for at least some of the time, resonated with the majority of the population. Not all communications outputs are a matter of life or death, but we can't hide from the fact that our work seeks to persuade and influence people to make decisions and we must wield that responsibility with integrity and honesty.¹⁷ Part of that means reflecting all communities, particularly those that are under-served, and building a deep understanding of them. Whilst research is key to this, a socio-economic representative profession provides a further degree of nuanced and behaviourally focused insight which the profession as a whole should prize.

¹⁷ CIPR (2023), Code of Conduct, https://cipr.co.uk/CIPR/About_Us/Governance_/CIPR_Code_of_Conduct.aspx



Research methodology

This research project has used a range of primary and secondary research techniques.

The majority of data collected for this project was from 14 semi-structured interviews and a focus group of 6 further practitioners. The participants in these activities fulfilled specific inclusion criteria:

- Neither parent or main caregivers went to university
- Family received tax credits or were entitled to free school meals.

Participants were from a range of communications specialisms including public affairs, stakeholder engagement, media management, digital and internal communications. They were from both the public, private and third sectors, including agency (working across a range of clients), health, education, local government, energy, financial services and housing.

Of participants in the interviews and focus group, 13 identified as white, and 7 identified as being from an ethnically minoritized group. 8 of the participants were men, and 12 women. 7 participants also identified as living with a disability or a long-term health condition. 4 participants identified as LGBTQ+. Participants were from across the UK, including the three devolved nations, though half were based in London and the South East of England. Participants ranged in seniority from senior officer to director.

The interviews and focus group were supplemented by a survey of 102 PR practitioners of any social background, to understand wider views amongst the full cross-section of the workforce.

Survey participants were again from across the UK, representing all of the regions of the nation. Respondents ranged in seniority from assistant level to chief executive.

A literature review was undertaken and the views of a number of expert figures in the social mobility space – both within the profession and beyond - were also sought. These were:

- Dr Louise Ashley, Associate Professor in Human Resource Management at Queen Mary University of London.
- Duncan Exley, author of *The End of Aspiration: Social Mobility and our children's failing prospects*.
- Dr Penelope Griffin, Director of Higher Education and Impact, Bridge Group.
- Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Foundation.
- Sharon Shortland, Support Worker, iProvision (the CIPR's hardship fund.)
- Sarah and Stephen Waddington, Founders and Directors of Socially Mobile CIC, which provides free leadership training to PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds along with other underrepresented and under-served groups, supporting them to increase their earning potential.



Lived experience of PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds

The overwhelming majority of participants in the semi-structured interviews and the focus group identified some degree of influence of their socio-economic background on their PR career. For some, the influence was negative whilst for others, it was considered more mixed. There was a distinction made between influence on career and practice; all participants who felt their socio-economic background had a negative influence on their career felt it had, however, had a positive influence on their practice – making them a ‘better’ PR practitioner. Some examples of the reasons for this included having a better understanding of the priorities of communities with higher levels of deprivation or of the ‘average’ member of the public, being resourceful, resilient and understanding how to construct messages in clear English.

“I’ve grown up in a background where I’m constantly having to kind of hustle to find other alternatives. I’m a very good problem solver. I’m very good at pivoting when things go wrong. I’m very good at expecting things to go wrong. So, having many backups in my head as I’m doing the thing I need to do and I think that’s actually really helped.”

Interview participant

“Some of the things that people are advocating for, they won’t think about the repercussions on particular groups in society. So, I feel like I have been fortunate to have some understanding that helps benefit some of that or think about how different people might perceive different messages.”

Interview participant

A number of participants also made a distinction between how they felt their socio-economic background had impacted their career at earlier stages compared with the stage of their career they are currently at, expressing being older and more experienced meant they felt they had built the skills and gravitas to overcome the disadvantages they had previously felt.



“I did grow up working class and I’m really proud of that. But I don’t really think about it anymore. It was really obvious to me the first five years of my career. It’s so obvious. And I think back then I wished that I had support. Just saying, these are the behaviours or way of presenting, way of interviewing, way of pretending to have confidence. This is what other people have learned and that’s what you’re missing.”

Focus group participant

An extension of this, participants were split in terms of the degree to which they felt they had to mask their socio-economic background. A number disclosed that they had consciously made their accent sound more neutral, in addition to choosing not to disclose their background and remain as much as possible out of conversations with colleagues about their circumstances growing up. A small number had chosen – at a later stage of their career – to consciously make it part of their personal brand, leaning in to tropes we see in society about ‘working-class’ people, to give ‘robust and no-holds barred’ advice to clients and organisational leadership.

Just over half of participants referenced their particular role or series of roles over the course of their career having a connection to communities like those they grew up in, and it being important to them that they do so. For some, this was about ‘giving back’ to the communities they felt they had left behind for a professional career. For others, it was because it was ‘a world’ they still felt very much a part of. This reflects studies about the propensity of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to pursue prosocial occupations.¹⁸

Tied to this was a concept raised in different ways by a range of participants in different language but which boiled down to the concept of the ‘split self.’ This was a sense of being stuck between two worlds – the world they grew up in and the new, professional world of work they now spent much of their time in. Key was that participants didn’t feel a full sense of belonging in either world and a number talked about the additional energy they spend on navigating both worlds, code switching between the two.

All interview participants raised the kinds of barriers imposed by practical financial constraints. For some, it reduced their pathways into accessing the profession, such as via unpaid internships, or inability to live in London on a starter salary without additional parental support. Some also highlighted ways in which a lack of wider financial stability prevented them from either affording or feeling comfortable with undertaking additional study or other professional development to give themselves a professional advantage, which their peers could without concern.

¹⁸ Ray Tsai Fang and András Tilcsik (2022), Prosocial occupations, work autonomy and the origins of the social class pay gap, *Academy of Management Journal* 65(3), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358390653_Prosocial_Occupations_Work_Autonomy_and_the_Origins_of_the_Social_Class_Pay_Gap



“Even if I could afford to pay that money [on professional development], my working-class background says to me that, no, you can’t be wasting money on that, you need to be saving, spending it on something that’s a lot more tangible.”

Interview participant

More than half of interview participants also raised their anxiety about the particular nature of working with clients and the expectation that they cover the expense of dinners, drinks, coffees and travel upfront to later claim back as expenses. A number of those interviewed shared stories of taking on debt in order to do what they felt was expected of them in this regard, feeling unable to raise this problem with their manager or others in their employing organisation because their perception was that other colleagues did not have the same problem and they felt they would be stigmatised.

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews and focus group data highlighted a number of additional key themes they came up repeatedly from the vast majority of participants in the survey and focus group. It’s important to say though that different participants put different levels emphasis on these issues – for some they came up multiple times over the course of the 45-minute to one-hour interview, for others only as a passing reference.

‘Falling in’ to the profession

Nearly all participants spoke of falling in to the profession, whilst a minority (3 of the 20 participants) undertook a degree in PR or communications. The majority of participants were not aware of the communications profession at all, though some spoke of wanting to work as a journalist or writer as a child or teenager.

There was near a 50/50 split between participants that had worked in PR for their whole career, starting with an entry-level role or internship, and those who started in a different role or discipline and later moved in to communications. The latter group of participants were all working in either the civil service or local government sector delivery-focused roles at the time they moved across in to PR. This is echoed in the civil service where people from lower socio-economic backgrounds disproportionately work in operational or delivery roles.¹⁹

The majority of participants set out that they felt it was important that the profession and employers of communications professionals make a proactive effort to reach young people earlier in their education. This was coupled with an emphasis that schools, local authorities and government need to improve careers provision.

¹⁹ Sam Friedman (2023), Climbing the Velvet Drainpipe: Class Background and Career Progression within the UK Civil Service, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 33 (4), <https://academic.oup.com/jpart/article/33/4/563/6760954>

Recruitment processes

A majority of interview and focus group participants raised that PR and communications roles were nearly always advertised as requiring a university degree, whilst being united in their view that they were confident a non-graduate could be just as effective of a practitioner.

More than half of participants advocated for employers using contextualised recruitment processes, and ensuring that job descriptions were written in plain English with a focus on skills over more nebulous traits and attitudes, many of which can be interpreted as being class coded. Examples shared in relation to this point were terms such as 'self-starter', 'polished', 'ability to work with minimal supervision', and 'excellent public speaking skills.'

This reflects the findings of the Social Mobility Commission that "elite firms define talent according to a number of factors including drive, resilience, strong communications skills, confidence and polish – all can be mapped on to middle-class status and socialisation."²⁰ Furthermore, recruitment processes for many graduate roles include soft screening for "legitimated cultural and social capital that matched existing staff and clients."²¹

Participants also raised their perception – with a number citing specific examples – of roles not being advertised but instead being given directly to a contact of someone in senior management, or on the basis of a personal recommendation, rather than through an open and transparent process. When these instances were challenged, the term 'fit' was repeatedly used in relation to why recruitment had been undertaken in this manner. There was also a perception that these kinds of informal recruitment exercises were viewed by those undertaking them as a one-off or an exception in response to particular business need, without thinking more broadly about wider recruitment practices in other teams across the organisation and the kinds of candidates they were not employing as a result.

"I think there needs to be more work there and recording who is applying for jobs. So, getting a sense of 'are we attracting a good crop of people from a variety of backgrounds?'"

Interview participant

²⁰ Social Mobility Commission (2015), Non-educational barriers to the elite professions, p6, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/non-educational-barriers-to-the-elite-professions-evaluation>

²¹ Kim Allen and Nicola Ingram (2018), Talent-spotting' or 'social magic'? Inequality, cultural sorting and constructions of the ideal graduate in elite professions, *The Sociological Review* 67 (3), <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0038026118790949#:~:text=Using%20Bourdiesian%20concepts%20of%20social,fair%20access%20to%20the%20top>



The unspoken rules of the game

A common theme with interview participants, focus group attendees and survey respondents was the indistinct nature of many skills prized within the profession and a feeling that what made good communications practice was both classed and subjective. For some participants, this was more about behaviour in professional workplaces generally, and the sense that whilst being unspoken, there was set of behaviours and markers they felt had to be observed. Examples included softening a regional accent, sticking to certain 'small talk' topics and communicating – particularly with clients – in a way that showed an appropriate degree of motivation and enthusiasm whilst maintaining a sense of professional detachment.

“I think you end up in a situation where you edit yourself because you want to seem more professional and you don't have a reference point of what that is. And I think you also spend a lot longer trying to decode what is professional.”

Interview participant

“I think the thing that I wish that I had the most was some behaviours of a workplace.”

Focus group participant

“There's no rulebook, there's no guide on the do's and don'ts and the etiquettes of navigating conferences to roundtables, even the language you use when you communicate with people.”

Interview participant

Some participants said that they felt, particularly in relation to PR and communications, that there is a distinct lack of clarity about what good looks like, what makes a good PR practitioner and that the pathway to progression is unclear as it's not a case of undertaking additional qualifications or exams to practise at a particular level. A number of participants cited initiating conversations with managers about progression or development and coming away no clearer about the additional skills they needed to build to progress, with conversations instead focusing on more imprecise concepts like the need to grow gravitas and reputation, being more 'polished' in delivery and embodying company values.

This is something that Dr Louise Ashley, Associate Professor of Human Resource Management at Queen Mary University London says can be difficult to overcome:



“If we use objectivity and merit as our sort of ideal or our goal, we can do that to some extent, but we have to be really careful with that because there are some jobs where objectivity and neutrality are just not ever going to be realistic goals. And I think that’s probably true in PR, because it’s such a relationship-based profession. And I’m not sure when something’s really based on relationships – and that’s quite inevitable, isn’t it – that’s not going to change. How can you make that entirely objective? I’m not sure if you can so then we need to think about what other measures of fairness we can deploy.”

Dr Louise Ashley

Focus group participants spoke of people knowing how to play the game, referencing behaviours like signalling being well-connected (both professionally and outside of work) and participating in similar pursuits outside of work as management. This has been referred to in the literature as the “accruing and mobilisation of valued capitals.”²²

Confidence

Every participant in the focus group and interviews raised – explicitly or tacitly – the issue of confidence and this being key to their perception of practitioners that ‘got on’ in the profession. Many participants talked of this as being seemingly ‘innate’ amongst practitioners from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants contrasted this with their sense of feeling constantly out of place and out of their depth in their day to day work, and the psychological burden of this in addition to their workload.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been able to shake off that I feel like a fish out of water. In the office, with clients, even as I’ve moved up the career ladder, I feel as though I’m constantly battling a perception that I don’t sound as professional as I should, that I don’t fit, and that ultimately, I’m not as competent as my peers with a different background. Perhaps it’s imagined, but I worry about it a lot and overcompensate in terms of working hours and saying yes to everything.”

Interview participant

I was struck that all interviewees said at one point or another that they felt they had been lucky in their career. For some, this was being in a particular place at a particular time, meeting a particular individual or having a kind of lucky break in being given an opportunity they didn’t feel they had earned. It was difficult to probe this properly within the confines of a one-hour interview but it seemed

²² Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Nicola Ingram & Richard Waller (2013), Higher education, social class, and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (5), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01425692.2013.816041>

that when pressed, interview participants appeared to have a deep-seated, and sometimes subconscious belief, that they didn't deserve the professional success they had achieved to date.

Networks and sponsors

Across interviews, the focus group and the survey, networks were the thing most commonly cited when people spoke about the ways in which PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds find themselves at a disadvantage to their peers.

"I was building up a network from scratch rather than someone knowing someone or my parents knowing someone and almost not really having anyone that I could speak to say what is it like to work in PR or marketing, comms, all that kind of thing."

Interview participant

A strong professional network was perceived by participants as being critical both in accessing and progressing in the communications and PR profession. A number of participants shared that they hadn't made this realisation until a number of years in their career.

"I don't ever remember being told, like, oh, it's really important that you build your own professional network and you have to be proactive about it, doesn't just happen."

Interview participant

Socially Mobile CIC, an organisation that provides leadership courses to PR and communications practitioners free of charge when they are from lower socio-economic backgrounds or other under-served groups, ensure they support cohorts to build their network as a key cornerstone of preparing them to progress in their career.

"What we see cohorts needing the most support with is building a network, making connections and growing their contacts. We also see that sponsorship both within and outside the workplace is transformational."

Sarah Waddington

Sponsorship – where senior leaders in a workplace or profession recognise the talent of an individual practitioner and work closely with them to mentor, coach and promote them - tends to be based on cultural affinity, which again puts practitioners from a lower socio-economic background at a disadvantage. That said, a number of interview and focus group participants highlighted a sponsor (whilst largely not referring to them using this term – but more as someone that had been pivotal in the life of their career). A number of these participants said explicitly that these sponsors had themselves been from a lower socio-economic background and had intentionally used their patronage to support someone facing the kinds of barriers they had experienced.



Progression

Most interview and focus group participants expressed that they were generally happy with the trajectory of their career, though more than half acknowledged things they would have liked to have done or had the opportunity to do. For some, they explicitly tied this to their socio-economic background – not being able to take up roles that didn't offer the required financial security, or having a limited pool from which to seek work due to geographic location or a lack of confidence. For others, it was about different factors such as having had children.

The majority of participants raised that the processes by which people gained promotions within the workplaces they had worked in were opaque, and that there weren't obvious skills or experience-based reasons why some colleagues in their organisation had been promoted ahead of them.

“There isn't necessarily a formal method of knowing where you are and what you need to do to get that promotion.”

Interview participant

Duncan Exley refers to these as the 'protocols of progression', and says they are complex and not easily learnt, but rather about an 'elite workplace skillset that you don't learn by reading books.'²³

In relation to progression, interview, focus group and survey participants shared perceptions of the concept of 'fit' and 'polish' as the key differentiating factors between people who get on and those who don't. Again, the perception was that the notion of these ideas is inherently class-coded and about indicators of middle-class codes being misrecognised as markers of objective skill, talent and ability.²⁴

The prizing of 'polish' can be particularly problematic in the context of PR and communications roles because it is considered a signal of providing high quality advice – where who you are and how you present is perceived in terms of what you know.²⁵ In a profession that is ultimately advisory at its root, how 'polished' someone else will have a greater bearing on perceptions of their competency.

²³ Duncan Exley (2019), *End of Aspiration: social mobility and our children's fading prospects*, p167

²⁴ Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (2019), *The Class Ceiling: why it pays to be privileged*. P132

²⁵ *Ibid.*

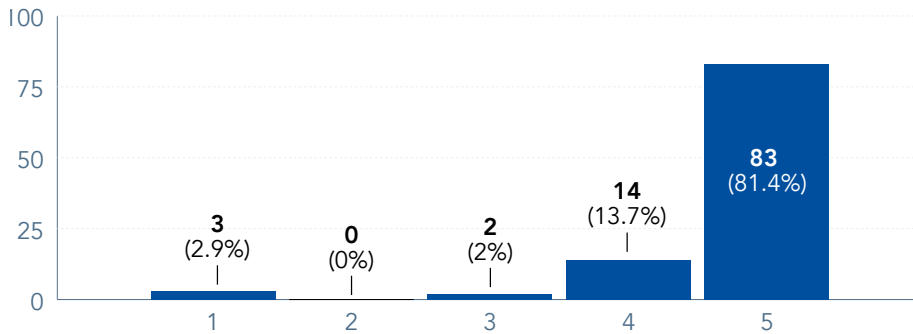


Survey analysis

The survey showed that overwhelmingly, PR practitioners consider socio-economic diversity within the profession to be important, with 81.4% strongly agreeing with the assertion and a further 13.7% agreeing. 2% of respondents neither agreed or disagreed, with 2.9% of respondents strongly disagreeing.

1a. Ensuring socio-economic diversity in the PR profession is important

102 responses



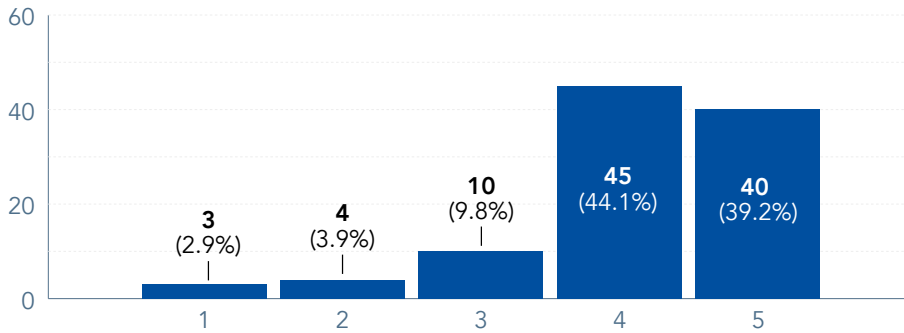
Respondents were invited to share the reasons why they considered socio-economic diversity in the PR profession to be important, with the most common words and phrases shared showed in the word cloud below. The most common word – audience – was raised in relation to the importance of ensuring messages resonated with audiences.



The majority of respondents to the survey agreed or strongly agreed (44.1% and 39.2% respectively) that there is currently a lack of socio-economic diversity in the PR profession.

2. There is currently a lack of socio-economic diversity in the PR profession

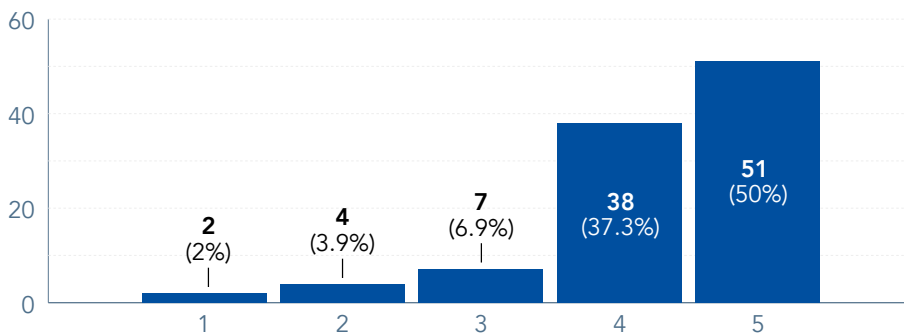
102 responses



Half of respondents strongly agreed that people from lower socio-economic backgrounds find it harder to progress in their PR careers compared to peers from more affluent backgrounds. A further 37.3% agreed.

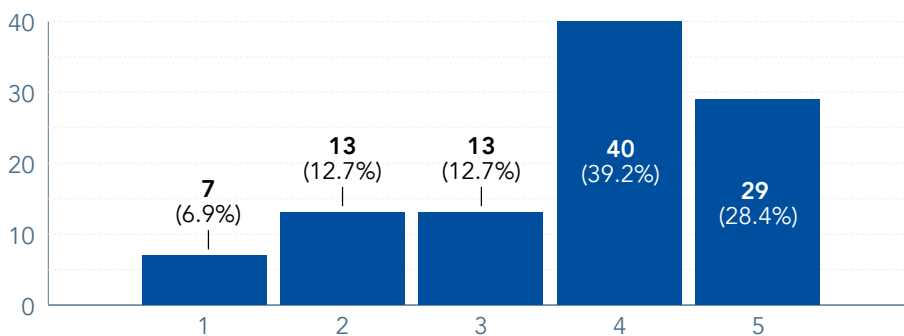
3. People from lower socio-economic backgrounds find it harder to progress in their PR careers compared to their peers from more affluent backgrounds

102 responses



4. There are characteristics specific to the PR profession and roles within it that make it a difficult for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to progress in their career

102 responses



More than three quarters of survey respondents said they felt there were characteristics specific to the PR profession and roles within it that make it difficult for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to progress. Examples provided included:

“I think regional accents (particularly from areas where the accents are the most ‘unloved’) can be deemed as a bit of a roadblock to progress in a PR career. Many would feel required to neutralise their accents in order to fit in to the fold.”

Survey respondent

“As PR is very much about communication and engagement there is likely to be a lot of bias around how people speak and judgement on whether they will be well placed to engage with relevant stakeholders.”

Survey respondent

Again, the word cloud below highlights the words most commonly used when respondents were invited to share their thoughts on why they thought there were specific characteristics of the profession that acted as a barrier to progression for people from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Many of these reflected themes that came through in the interviews and focus group.



Suggested actions

A range of suggestions were raised in interviews, the focus group and in response to the survey on how we can improve socio-economic diversity within the PR profession. The most commonly raised have been grouped below by theme:



Measurement

Measurement was something that came up in relation to a number of the key issues highlighted above. Whilst the demographic data (albeit flawed) shows a clear lack of socio-economic diversity in the PR profession and the survey results that the majority of respondents accept this is a problem, there is a lack of clarity about what exactly the problem is. Without understanding it, we can't accurately remedy it.

In the first instance, measurement is critical because it provides the data and evidence that action is needed:

“Having evidence of the issue definitely helps: when senior managers can see that it takes longer for employees from some backgrounds to progress, they have to do something about it.”

Dr Penelope Griffin, Bridge Group

But measurement also helps us ensure the notion that ‘something must be done’ becomes ‘the effective thing must be done.’ This project has intentionally focused on lived experience to build a deeper understanding of what the barriers to PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds are.

Whilst people from lower socio-economic backgrounds face distinct challenges, we also have to bear in mind that other groups will also face a number of barriers comparative to their peers from wealthier backgrounds:

“When I work with organisations who have identified that they have an issue attracting and/or including people from working-class backgrounds, my data-gathering often reveals that it’s not just ‘working-class’ backgrounds that are underrepresented, but any socio-economic background other than ‘professional/ managerial’ - i.e., that many ‘lower’-middle-class backgrounds are also underrepresented.”

Duncan Exley, author of End of Aspiration

In making the case for the mandatory reporting of the class pay gap by organisations with more than 250 employees, Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Foundation, advocates for the regulation on the basis that what gets measured is what gets done, pointing to the reduction in the gender pay gap since mandatory reporting was introduced in 2017.²⁶

He also encourages organisations not to wait for mandatory reporting to be introduced but instead encourages them to start the practice of data collection and reporting without delay:

²⁶ Social Mobility Foundation (2023), Levelling the Playing Field, <https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/campaign/the-class-pay-gap-2023>

“There are three reasons businesses and other organisations should collect and report on their class pay gap data. Firstly, it’s what is right and fair. Secondly, in a tight labour market, recruiting and retaining the best and brightest means ensuring people that deserve to progress do. In my experience, increasing diversity means increasing excellence. Finally, regulators and a number of key professions are looking at this and a number of bigger employers are voluntarily publishing their own data. Organisations can get ahead of the curve on this issue and enhance their reputation as a good employer.”

Rt Hon Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Foundation

Accountability

Participants welcomed recent progress the CIPR in particular has made on EDI with the publication of its strategy in August 2023,²⁷ the iProvision 75 fund to support training and development for practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds and them being the first professional body to achieve the National Equality Standard (NES).²⁸ They were also pleased to see the recent addition of a number of new EDI resources produced in partnership with the CIPR’s diversity and inclusion network, providing members with a wider range of resources to access.

There was a desire for the CIPR to provide some further accountability – both to itself and in terms of its membership – to progress this important work. In particular, participants are keen to see a roadmap for delivery of the EDI strategy, individual and corporate members being held to account for building a more diverse PR profession and for some specific resources aimed at increasing awareness of the lack of socio-economic diversity in the profession and empowering members to tackle it.

“In order for CIPR members to complete a CPD cycle they have to make up five points that cover ethics. One way the CIPR could signal commitment to building a profession that is more socio-economically inclusive would be to introduce a requirement to make up points that cover EDI.”

Sarah Waddington

²⁷ CIPR (2023), CIPR launches first EDI strategy to build a stronger and more diverse PR profession, <https://newsroom.cipr.co.uk/cipr-launches-first-edi-strategy-to-build-a-stronger-more-diverse-pr-profession/>

²⁸ CIPR (2023), 75 fund, https://www.cipr.co.uk/CIPR/About_Us/_iprovision/75_fund.aspx

Alternative routes

As mentioned in the recruitment section above, there was significant support amongst interview, focus group and survey participants for the growth and support for alternative routes into the PR profession beyond a university degree. Participants specifically mentioned the need for support for apprenticeships and more generally employing contextualised recruitment practices to ensure equitable access to the profession. This was coupled with a desire to see more action from the profession in terms of engaging young people on the opportunities of a career in communications, through strengthened careers advice. Participants repeatedly said that they felt this activity in particular was critical to securing the future of the profession.



Conclusion and recommendations

On the 75th anniversary of the CIPR, thoughts naturally turn towards the future of the profession and how we secure it.

There is undoubtedly a range of challenges ahead – from AI to the weaknesses of the current lobbying register, there will be no shortage of demands on the profession in the coming years.

The research undertaken for this project has highlighted that there is a range of challenges faced by PR practitioners from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and that, without tackling them, the profession undermines its own success by failing to seize the opportunities that a socio-economically diverse profession offers.

The challenge is the complexity of the problem – there is no silver bullet, something that experts in the social mobility field are keen to make clear:

“Increasing social mobility requires a combination of structural changes and personalised support. There is no single lever.”

Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Foundation

As set out in the introduction, socio-economic inequality is structural and present across our society. The recommendations of this project seek to address the structural inequality in the labour market whilst also ensuring the PR profession, employers and individual PR practitioners are playing their part and taking responsibility for addressing the underrepresentation of people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in communications and PR.

To government

Mandate all organisations with more than 250 employees to collect and publish data on their class pay gap.

- In 2017, gender pay gap reporting for employers with more than 250 employees was made compulsory under law. Since then, the gender pay gap has decreased from 18.4% to 14.9%.²⁹ The evidence shows that mandatory reporting works. As the class pay gap continues to rise, government should compel organisations to broaden their pay gap analysis to cover socio-economic background. The measure of this must be clearly defined, and focus on one or a combination of the following measures:
 - Grew up in a household where they were eligible for free school meals and/or income support.

²⁹ Official for National Statistics (2022), Gender pay gap in the UK, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/bulletins/genderpaygapintheuk/2022>

-
- Neither parent or caregiver attended university or held a qualification equivalent degree.
 - Parental/caregiver profession aged 14.

Properly fund every secondary school and post-16 education setting with the funding to deliver high-quality careers advice and guidance from year 7 through to year 13.

- Nearly all participants in the interviews and focus group undertaken as part of this project 'fell into' communications and it was not a career path they had been aware of when considering their options. Careers guidance is patchy across the country, with a swathe of young people receiving no or brief, low quality support at age 16. A more comprehensive careers guidance offer would help young people identify their interests, strengths and the full range of careers available to them.

Fund local authorities to provide local careers advice and guidance to adults in partnership with local job centres.

- Whilst we have a National Careers Service in the UK, it serves predominantly as an information hub. Local authorities should be funded to deliver targeted careers advice through community centres, libraries and education institutions.

Commence the socio-economic duty, section 1 of the Equality Act 2010.

- This would provide a legal framework by which workplace discrimination on grounds of socio-economic background could be challenged. It would also trigger a wider public sector duty on public sector entities to monitor and report on their efforts to tackle discrimination of this kind.

Bring back the Child Poverty Unit, child poverty reduction targets and re-extend the scope of the Social Mobility Commission to cover child poverty.

- As referenced in the literature review, there is concern that the industry of social mobility focuses on individual-level responses to structural inequality rather than looking at the root causes of socio-economic disadvantage. Government could significantly bolster the success of their efforts to level up the country and boost social mobility by again setting targets to reduce child poverty and reinstating the Child Poverty Unit – historically a joint body sitting between the Department of Education and the Treasury – to coordinate progress towards such targets.

To the profession

The CIPR, the PRCA and other communications professional bodies should work with education providers to devise a number of communications apprenticeships.

- Some young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds need to work straight out of school, and there may be social pressure to do so. The CIPR, the PRCA and other communications professional bodies should promote a range of routes into the profession and consciously reflect this in reports, events and other outputs.



Include questions about socio-economic background of practitioners in every annual State of the Profession survey in addition to collecting demographic data on members of special interest groups and committees.

- It is welcome that data on socio-economic background of members has been included in some State of the Profession surveys, but collection and publication should be extended to every annual member survey. Special interest and regional groups should also be required to collect demographic data from their members including socio-economic background, and committees should be expected to address under-representation via the following elections. It is welcome that the CIPR collects demographic data via the CIPR website member platform and they should run regular campaigns to persuade members to submit it.

Make EDI a mandatory component of CPD.

- Currently, members of the CIPR that undertake continuous professional development (CPD) have to log 5 points of ethics-related activity in order to be able to 'bank' one annual cycle. The CIPR should extend this compulsory component to a further 5 points achieved from undertaking an EDI activity. As part of this, the CIPR should produce a number of specific resources on this issue, as they have done for other EDI issues.

Set out a path to implementation for the EDI strategy

- Research participants interviewed later in the process welcomed the EDI strategy published by the CIPR in August 2023. They were united in their desire to see a subsequent plan for implementation with clear measures and milestones.

Future corporate membership of the CIPR should be predicated on evidence of equitable employment practices.

- Corporate members of the CIPR enjoy a number of benefits including discounted training course fees and reputational bolstering. The CIPR should evidence its commitment to EDI by making corporate membership conditional on evidencing practices including employing contextualising recruiting processes, providing clarity to employees on routes to progression, paying at least the Living Wage as defined by the Living Wage Foundation, and having a plan or strategy to increase the socio-economic diversity of their workforce.

To employers

Collect, analyse and publish data on employees' socio-economic backgrounds. As part of this, produce, publish and regularly assess progress against a strategy for increasing socio-economic diversity within the workforce.

- As set out above, measurement works, because it prompts action. Collection of data from employees on socio-economic background will provide organisations with a baseline so they can understand where they're starting. Once this data has been analysed, a strategy for improving socio-economic diversity in the workforce should be published along with the data. Progress on this strategy should be regularly assessed, and data published annually. As part of this, organisations should consider entering the Social Mobility Foundation's annual [Employer Index](#).



Run transparent, contextualised and fair recruitment processes.

- The interviews, focus group and survey undertaken for this project highlight a perception that being offered a job, and progressing in a job in PR is still about presenting in a particular way and leveraging networks and sponsorship. Advertising all vacancies, using contextualised recruitment practices and being transparent about salary should be usual practice. Employers should also offer flexibility for interview processes and cover the cost of travelling and participating in interviews upfront.

Remove qualification barriers to roles within the organisation.

- As part of fair recruitment processes, employers should remove, as far as possible, the requirement for a university degree for roles. Employers should be open-minded about the range of work and wider life experiences that can equip someone to be an effective communications practitioner. Organisations should consider whether they can offer apprenticeship programmes.

Set out clear routes to progression across the organisation.

- A lack of understanding about how to progress in organisations was also reflected in data collection along with a perception that promotions were largely reserved for those cast in the image of those promoting them and other senior colleagues. Organisations should set out clear paths to progression and interrogate decisions before a promotion is offered to ensure this path has been followed. Organisations should have a clear offer to employees on available support for professional development and there should be a clear process for awarding this support.

Provide employees with access to money to cover the cost of client coffees and dinners, work-necessitated travel and other such outlays upfront, rather than requiring them to retrospectively claim expenses.

- Whilst there is rationale in companies requiring the provision of a receipt to claim expenses, it assumes that all staff have the available resources to pay for such expenditure upfront without incurring significant financial harm. There is also further risk of late payment due to administrative or other errors. As far as possible, employees should have access to company credit cards, pre-paid cards or business accounts, and organisations should work to adopt an open and inclusive culture where the norm is to provide employees with the cost upfront.

To practitioners

Recognise your own role in building the culture of the profession.

- All of us have a role in building an inclusive and diverse profession. In your workplace and professional network, start conversations about the lack of socio-economic diversity, consider what specific barriers there would be to people from lower socio-economic backgrounds entering, progressing and participating in your workplace and other professional activities. Call out examples of active or latent discrimination on the basis of socio-economic background.

Consider mentoring an early career practitioner via the CIPR, other schemes or informally.

- Having a mentor has benefits for everyone but, as uncovered in the interviews and focus group, particularly for people from underrepresented groups. Practitioners should consider if they can take on an early career mentee either through the [CIPR](#), the [Social Mobility Foundation](#), [I Have a Voice](#), the [Taylor Bennett Foundation](#) or other schemes.

Commit to undertaking a minimum of one EDI-focused activity as part of CPD every year.

- If you track CPD, make a personal commitment to ensuring at least 5 of your 60 annual points relate to EDI to expand your own knowledge, understanding and ability to drive change in the profession.

Encourage your employer to embark on a drive to improve socio-economic diversity within your organisation.

- Start a conversation with your employer about improving socio-economic diversity in the workplace, encouraging them to collect data on socio-economic background from employees, to take the [Social Mobility Pledge](#), partner with the [Social Mobility Foundation](#) and enter their annual [Employer Index](#), or support [UpReach](#) to offer work experience and support. You might also want to suggest your employer directly approaches local schools to see if they could deliver a careers talk or similar.

Reflect on how you reach your audiences, and whether the lived experience of those audiences is reflected in your messaging. If not, take action to ensure it is.

- This research has highlighted that better socio-economic diversity across the profession is important not just because it's the right thing, but because it makes our communications better. Practitioners should all be thinking critically about the reach of their communications, particularly in relation to under-served groups, and where possible collaborating with these groups to co-produce messaging.



Chartered Institute of Public Relations

+44 (0)20 7631 6900

[@CIPR_Global](https://www.cipr.co.uk)

[cipr.co.uk](https://www.cipr.co.uk)

