Public Diplomacy and Constructivism: A Synergistic and Enabling Relationship
International Studies Association Annual Conference
San Diego, 1-4 April 2012

Panel: Public Diplomacy Theory and Conceptual Issues
Caitlin Byrne, Bond University

Introduction

Public diplomacy (PD) though still operating from the margins of the Australian foreign policy structure is slowly gaining acceptance and traction as an instrument that complements traditional diplomatic practice and contributes to foreign policy outcomes. The recently renewed focus on Australian PD programs provides the opportunity for fresh ideas and discussions within political, bureaucratic and academic circles about the role of identity in, and social construction of Australia's key relationships within its own region. By exploring developments in public diplomacy discussion this paper takes the opportunity to reflect more broadly on the emerging synergies that exist between the practice of PD and the constructivist framework.[1] This paper draws upon recent developments in public diplomacy discussion and Australia's approach to public diplomacy to explore: i) the emerging synergistic relationship between constructivism and public diplomacy and ii) the increasing relevance of constructivism through public diplomacy in shaping Australia's contemporary foreign policy approach. I suggest that constructivism offers a theoretical coherence currently lacking in Australian practice.   In return, public diplomacy offers constructivism a vehicle for concrete action, and furthermore introduces constructivist dialogue alongside Australia's traditionally realist international policy approach.

Questions and insecurities about identity have consistently influenced Australia's approach to and interests in its diverse Asian neighbourhood. The white Australia policy introduced at the time of federation in 1901 defined the Australian identity internally and externally and entrenched a sense of anxiety and wariness – both in Australia of an alien Asia, and in Asia of the hostile and racist Australia.[2] Australia's foreign policy attachment to traditional realism with a dash of liberal institutionalism[3] – played out through longstanding alliances with powerful like-minded friends and active involvement in the multilateral framework of the United Nations, was developed against the background of a 'white Australia', and has dominated Australia's policy approach particularly towards Asia ever since despite being formally dismantled in the early 1970s.

However, the realist approach has left Australia wanting, particularly in terms of building a sense of real and predictable engagement with Asia – a region from which it is vastly different in historical, cultural, political, ideological and societal terms but with which it seeks to engage most deeply. Those nations making up the region– across South East and North East Asia reflect their own diversities that make each distinct from the other. But they also share in an overarching normative and ideational structure - a family resemblance stemming in part from the infusion of Confucian values within their respective societies, but also shared experiences in overcoming colonialism and developing as independent nations. Australia, like New Zealand does not sit within that family circle[4] a social fact that has proved to be a hindrance to Australia's desire for engagement. For the resource-rich, trade

---

[1] This paper draws on the IR theory of social constructivism as proposed by Nicholas Onuf and Alexander Wendt and developed since by others like Hopf, Kratochwil, Adler, Finnemore, Checkel and Zehfuss.

[2] See Neville Heaney, 'The end of 'white Australia' and Australia's changing perceptions of Asia, 1950-1995', *The Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49 (2), 1995.

[3] See Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995).

[4] See Michael D. Barr, *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

dependant, geographically isolated continent of Australia, engagement with Asia is not optional, but fundamental to both short and long-term prosperity and security. The stakes for Australia are high, turning not just on the capacity of material structures but importantly on the exercise of influence through shared ideas, beliefs, values. As John McCarthy, Australia's former Ambassador to Indonesia and High Commissioner to India points out 'it is even more crucial for [Australia] than for other countries like [Australia], to explain what [Australia is] about and to understand what [Australia's] neighbours are about'.[5] It is at this point that PD practice takes its cue. It is also in this context that understanding PD, not just from a practice-based perspective, but also from its theoretical positioning is a useful task, hopefully one that leads to more effective and coherent practice, rather than the hit or miss approach that has at times characterised Australia's developing PD program.

Establishing the theoretical positioning of PD: A matter of timing

As a former practitioner, I make the connection between the two with an element of caution - not wanting to align PD blindly to constructivism just because it might be a trendy approach, nor to risk burdening PD with an eclectic or redundant attachment to constructivism that Guzzini warns us about,[6] nor wanting to overstate the implications for improved PD practice or acceptance of constructivist theory in international policy development. Furthermore, I flag that there are detailed refinements to be made in progressing this discussion, for example to identify the relevance of PD practice within the factional splits of constructivist thinking, a task that is not appropriate for the purpose of this paper.

An awareness of the recent evolution of PD practice is important to its evolving relationship to constructivism. The pace with which PD has developed and evolved since the 1990s to extend well beyond the boundaries and parameters of traditional diplomacy has been startling, taking both practitioners and scholars at times at times by surprise.[7] There is a sense that the discussion of PD's theoretical positioning is now catching up to practice.[8] The discussion has been absorbed to date by other issues – like the extent of the multi-disciplinary attraction to the field,[9] as well as early preoccupations with definitional boundaries and delineations;[10] and the variety that PD offers at the delivery or tactical end of the policy process. However, debate across these areas has been useful in establishing the nature and scope of PD in practice.[11] With greater understanding of PD practice, scholars are now in an advantageous position to reflect on and explore its theoretical positioning further, including as a part of the broader and refreshing discussion about the future of diplomacy studies and practice.[12]

---

[5] John McCarthy, 'Australia, Asia and Reputation', Heindorff Lecture to the Australian Institute of International Affairs Queensland Branch, 18 August 2010. John McCarthy is currently the National President of the Australian Institute for International Affairs.

[6] Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, 2000, p.147-148.

[7] See for example, Eytan Gilboa, 'Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* vol. 616 no. 1, March 2008, pp. 55-77; and Bruce Gregory, 'Sunrise of an Academic Field', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* vol. 616 no. 1, March 2008, pp. 275-290.

[8] Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Bringing Diplomacy Back In: Time for Theory to Catch up with Practice', *International Studies Review*, Vo. 13, 2011, p. 710.

[9] Eytan Gilboa, 'Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* vol. 616 no. 1, March 2008, p.75.

[10] Distinguishing PD from traditional diplomacy and other related activities like public affairs and public relations while distancing it from notions of propaganda, and psychological warfare. See for example, Jan Melissen, 'The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice', in Jan Melisson (ed), *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, (New York: Palgrave, 2007); and Bruce Gregory, 'Sunrise of an Academic Field', pp. 277-278.

[11] For example such discussions have been useful in recognising the opportunities arising from multi and cross-disciplinary engagement in the field, greater consensus amongst both practitioners and scholars for the broad definitional parameters and delineations, including an emerging acceptance of domestic and international audiences as target publics, and a sense of ease regarding the fluid and adaptable nature of PD activity.

[12] Stuart Murray, Paul Sharp, Geoffrey Wiseman, David Criekemans, Jan Melissen (eds), 'The Present and Future of Diplomacy and Diplomatic Studies', International Studies Review, Vol. 13, 2011, pp. 709-728.

Practitioners though might question why the link to constructivism requires exploration and why is it even necessary to tie PD to a theoretical framework, when in fact the practice seems to be progressing – albeit in fits and starts – from the fringes into mainstream diplomatic practice? Yet, as the Australian context presented here demonstrates, greater activity in the practice of PD does not always lead to more effective outcomes – and PD is at risk of losing meaning in practice or simply missing the mark, if theoretical coherence is not realised.

Building on Early Connections

Connecting the practice of PD to the framework of constructivism which as Cesar Villanueva Rivas describes, 'rests on an irreducibly inter-subjective dimension of human interaction: the capacity and will of people to take deliberate action towards the world and to lend it *significance'[13]* is not a new proposition. It is one that has been flagged both explicitly and implicitly from within the PD perspective over recent years. Eytan Gilboa alludes to fresh insights that application of the constructivist approach might produce.[14] Rhonda Zaharna advances a discussion of PD's relational framework (differentiated from its informational framework) whereby the social process of building relationships, through an understanding of and ability to engage in the shared mutual interests of publics is deliberately pursued. Similarly Shaun Riordan refers to PD's responsibility to engage through areas of commonalities and acknowledge differences in ideational structures in order to build momentum towards co-existence and collaboration.[15] Further, Jozef Batora reminds of the importance of involving domestic audiences as PD publics to forge shared value and image platforms around which synergies in engaging with foreign audiences can emerge. The domestic dimension of PD brings its own set of theoretical implications and while not central to the discussion of this paper is an area flagged for further exploration. More recently, Geoffrey Wiseman acknowledged opportunities for exploring PD through a constructivist lens with particular mention of the European scholarly development of Jürgen Habermas's earlier work on communicative action as a promising platform.[16] There are then many connections already made between PD and constructivism upon which to build, and as the previous examples indicate, many paths into which future research programs might be developed.

Developing Synergies: PD Practice within a Constructivist Framework

PD, like constructivism challenges the primacy of material power in achieving outcomes, and offers an alternative model of practice that understands the normative or ideational structures underpinning audience identities and gains influence by engaging through the shared understandings of this inter-subjective dimension, including through social interaction and interplay. In defining PD, Bruce Gregory suggests that PD is 'the means by which states, associates of states and non state actors *understand* cultures, attitudes and behaviour, *build and manage* relationships; and *influence* opinions and actions to advance their interests and values'.[17] Through this definition Gregory places emphasis on the capacity of PD to 'build bridges …over the perceptual gaps'[18] that exist with (some) public audiences as a result of the normative or ideational structures from within which they operate and make sense of their world. By doing so Gregory places PD practice squarely within constructivism's inter-

---

[13] César Villanueva Rivas, 'Cosmopolitan Constructivism: Mapping a Road to the Future of Cultural and Public Diplomacy', *Public Diplomacy Magazine*, Winter 2010, p. 47, (emphasis in original).

[14] Eytan Gilboa'Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy', p.75.

[15] Rhonda S. Zaharna, 'Mapping Out a Spectrum of Public Diplomacy Initiatives', in Nancy Snow and Philip Taylor (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 86-100.

[16] Geoffrey Wiseman, 'Bringing Diplomacy Back In: Time for Theory to Catch up with Practice', p. 711.

[17] Bruce Gregory, 'Public Diplomacy and National Security: Lessons from the U.S. Experience', *Small Wars Journal*, 2008, (emphasis in original).

[18] Rhonda Zaharna, '9/11 Commission recommendations on Public Diplomacy', Written Testimonial to U.S. House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, 23 August 2004 at http://nw08.american.edu/~zaharna/Written_Testimony.html

subjective dimension. Effective PD practitioners today are intuitively and deliberately engaged in this inter-subjective dimension to understand the identities, value positions and norms – both relevant to their own and to others' ideational structures in order to successfully engage and influence publics and achieve policy objectives over time. By dealing in the very currencies that constructivism holds dear and engaging in this inter-subjective dimension, PD offers a vehicle for operationalizing constructivist approaches.

PD manifests through an expansive range of instruments ranging from information delivery such as opinion pieces in media to educational or professional exchange through various modes, speeches and actions of high profile leaders or celebrities, journalistic tours, cultural engagement through arts, sport and literature to the very policies that a nation employs that reflect its identity. The PD instrument chosen in any particular case will depend in each case upon the strategic objective, context relevant to the target audience, and organisational capacities or networks available to conduct or oversee the activity. Effective modern PD is widely accepted to represent a 'two-way street',[19] that projects in such a way as to solicit an interpretation and response from the receiver, including through but also encourages listening and genuine dialogue with publics. As Gregory further suggests, in PD the 'deep comprehension of the interpretations and expectations of others matters more than defining the right message'.[20] The iterative and interactive nature of effective PD does not necessarily accord priority to either structure or actor, and through two-way dialogue or interaction can facilitate the shaping and reshaping of the both the ideational structures involved and the actors themselves over time. In general, it appears that fluid and non-formulaic practice of PD therefore further supports constructivism's concern for mutually constitutive interactions between ideational structures and actors.

Recasting Australia's identity in Asia: An Emerging Convergence between PD and Constructivism

Having identified PD practice within the constructivist framework this final section hones in on Australia's PD recent approach towards its Asian neighbourhood. While several important PD activities were evident in Australia's approach towards the region in earlier decades, the year 1990 provides a starting point as it coincides with the explicit uptake of the PD language within foreign policy circles. At this time, former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans suggested that 'the essence of PD is the shaping of attitudes in other countries in a way which is favourable to our national interests'[21] and encouraged diplomatic practitioners to shift the nature and targets of their practice and 'cast the net much wider, beyond the influential few to the uninvolved many'.[22] To this end, Evans noted that PD:

> …is not just about what we do overseas. It is also about engaging the Australian community to better understand our policies and objectives, and about helping Australians – through language teaching, a wider range of cultural contacts, a better informed media and the like – better to understand the world around us: not just informing others about Australia, but also in informing Australia about others.[23]

---

[19] Melissen, 'Between Theory and Practice', p.18. Also, Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 111; Nicholas Cull, 'Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past', *CPD Perspectives*, October 2009, p. 18.

[20] Gregory, 'Public Diplomacy and National Security: Lessons from the U.S. Experience'.

[21] It is worth noting that at about the same time that the new generation of constructivist scholars were advancing their scholarship, and social constructivism was receiving far greater attention within the mainstream IR agenda than before. See for example, Christian Reus-Smit, 'Constructivism', in Scott Burchill, Richard Devetak, Andrew Linklater, Matthew Paterson, Christian Reus-Smit and Jacqui True (eds), *Theories of International Relations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 216.

[22] Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 66.

[23] Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*, p. 71.

Evans' early insights into the new public diplomacy in the 1990s challenged the traditional realist focus on material capabilities (or lack thereof) as defining Australia's interests.[24] Furthermore, he moved beyond the traditional domestic-international distinctions so well entrenched in traditional approaches and practice. Evans' emphasis on PD in practice also reflected a broader policy move to recast the Australian identity in the Asian region, taking advantage of the economic opportunities while maintaining close attention to regional security. Evans' approach was about 'Australia actively seeking to carve out a new place for itself in the Asia-Pacific region';[25] potentially even reconstructing the Australian identity as 'the odd man in'[26] in Asia.

A new raft of PD activities encompassing information, education exchange and cultural relations were subsequently promoted through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) with some vigour. These included the expansion of bilateral foundations, councils and institutes, to encourage closer relations and mutual understanding with particular countries in the region including Japan, Indonesia, Korea and India. At the same time, Australia launched its international satellite television broadcasting into Asia in 1993, presenting English language and Australian news, film and TV content such as *My Brilliant Career*, *Return of Eden*, *Neighbours* all aimed at projecting and shaping the image of Australia among ordinary people in the region.[27]

Given the one-dimensional, one directional nature of much these early PD efforts, the regional response was unsurprisingly low-key. Alison Broinowski's research into Asian perceptions of Australia in the 1990s revealed that Australian images projected through information and cultural promotion had simply missed the mark. The Indonesians for example, 'recognised no golden summers, no brilliant career, no fortunate life, no fair go, nor anything of distinction about Australia'.[28] According to former Australian career diplomat, Richard Woollcott, 'some of our neighbours see us – or some of us – as still racist, uncouth, assertive, self-righteous, intrusive and pre-occupied with sporting prowess; as unwilling to make the effort to understand their cultures and the complexities of their societies'. Rather than find a place as the odd man in Asia, Australia despite new efforts in PD was cast more visibly as the 'odd man out'.[29]

Evans' subsequent presentation to ASEAN of a specially commissioned map of the East Asian Hemisphere by which he literally drew Australia into the Asian frame[30] simply reinforced ideational differences and further isolated Australia. As then Malaysian Foreign Minister asserted, 'If I look at a map, I believe that it says that Australia is not a part of Asia…We are a part of Asia and Australia is down there. Australia is another continent'.[31] Rather than building bridges into the Asian region, Evans' one-way cartographic push for Australia to be accepted as a part of an East Asian Hemisphere emphasised a bullish insensitivity towards the ideational structures with which he hoped Australia could engage, serving only to accentuate Asian intransigence towards Australia.

---

[24] See: Peter Edwards and David Goldsworthy (eds) (2004) *Facing North: A Century of Engagement with Asia*, Vols 1 and 2, Melbourne University Press: Carlton; H. Wolfsohn (1953) 'The Evolution of Australia in World Affairs', *Australian Outlook*, Vol 7, no.1, pp. 5-6; Stewart Firth (2005) *Australia in International Relations*, Allen & Unwin: Crows Nest, pp. 22-49; Allan Gyngell (2005) 'Australia's Emerging Global Role', *Current History*, March, pp. 99-101; Alan Bloomfield and Kim Richard Nossal, 'Towards an Explicative Understanding of Strategic Culture: The Cases of Australia and Canada', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 292-294.

[25] Rosaleen Smyth, 'Managing Australia's Image in Asia', *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 1995, p.223.

[26] Richard Woollcott, 'We must be the Odd Man In', *Weekend Australian*, 17-18 April, 1993.

[27] Evans and Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*, p.67.

[28] Alison Broinowski, *About Face: Asian Accounts of Australia*, (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2003).

[29] Mark Riley, 'Asia's Odd Man Out', Sydney Morning Herald, 9 November 2002.

[30] Former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans produced the new East Asian Hemisphere map to his counterparts at the 1995 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Annual Conference in Bangkok.

[31] Robert Milkin, 'East sees red over Oz map wizardry', *The Independent*, 5 August 1995.

The following year in March 1996, despite active lobbying on the part of Australian officials Australia was specifically and deliberately excluded from participating on the Asian side of the table to the first meeting between ASEAN and the European Union (known as ASEM), and was therefore deliberately excluded from possible re-imaginings of the region. The power of such exclusion it should be noted was significant. At the same time domestic discontent in Australia with the elite political push towards Asia moved to the foreground, resulting in electoral defeat for the Labor government and opening the way for renewed nationalist sentiment within the nation.[32] PD practice was seen as relatively ineffective, and subsequently scaled down for the following decade by the newly arrived conservative Howard Government.

A return to constructivist theory indicates there were deficiencies in the realisation of the Australian approach through this period. While Evans' rhetoric and PD model marked a fresh turn to the potential of identities and their related inter-subjective dimension, Australian practice was constrained by a superficial, one-sided and one-way approach with relevance only to the Australian context and Australian interests, rather than seeking to explore common areas of shared understanding. As Australia's first Ambassador to China, Stephen Fitzgerald reflects, 'Australia will never truly be a part of the in group … [we] are dealing with or courting or aspire to belong to unless …[we] are able to enter into the fullest possible two-way communication'.[33] He alludes to the complexity of this two-way engagement at an inter-subjective level, noting that,

> We have to set out to know more people, more closely in more countries than any other nation in the region. And in their language and culture. Where we do not have the language we must start with the culture, and where we do not have that, we must start with the self-knowledge that we are outsiders and have to find someway of getting onto the inside.

Today, although Australia's approach remains somewhat fragmented and much of the programmed PD activity places strong emphasis simply on message projection, there is evidence of a shift towards two-way, even collaborative discourse with regional partners, including through bilateral inter-faith dialogues, transnational education partnerships, sporting outreach and extended two-way cultural programs. For example, the Australian Embassy in China has recently commenced micro-blogging in Chinese language (though outside usual DFAT sanctioned practice) to encourage ongoing culturally-related conversation. This move has followed the year of Australian culture in China, and the development of a standalone Australian PD website and portal for Chinese audiences. Similarly, domestically oriented initiatives like the *Australia 2020 Summit*, the current consultations on *Australia in an Asian Century*, combined with growing participation of Australians in citizen diplomacy, such as a new national project, *Parents Understanding Asian Literacy* suggest the constructive involvement of domestic publics in shaping perspectives about the Australian identity within Asia. It is notable that the impact of such activities is not tracked in systemic way to establish their value either from a practice or theoretical perspective. The absence of consistent, long-term evaluative research is furthermore problematic for establishing a clear causal link between PD and potential outcomes. Yet in 2011 Australia's Prime Minister was invited to represent Australia as a part of the Asian community in the most recent ASEM dialogues. This invitation represents a shift in thinking, both within Australia about its own identity, and also within the region itself.[34]

Inconsistencies remain of course.[35] In terms of broad international identity, Australia is still considered a part of the Western European and Others Grouping (WEOG) within the United Nations,[36] and was

[32] Mark Riley, 'Asia's Odd Man Out'.
[33] Stephen Fitzgerald, 'Is Australia an Asian Nation', (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1997), p. 173.
[34] In addition, in 2010 Australia was accepted into the Asian Football Confederation, meaning that in terms of international soccer competitions, Australia is considered to be an Asian nation. The sporting exchange opportunities for a wave of young generation Australians and Asian soccer players as a result of the change is extensive.
[35] Australia is still considered a part of the Western European and Others Grouping (WEOG) within the United Nations, and was rejected in 2010 from joining the Asian Games – the reported rationale being the potential implications for the Oceania Games should Australia leave that grouping.

rejected in 2010 from joining the Asian Games – both having an impact on perceptions of identity. While active tourists through the Asian region, very few Australians have a in-depth understanding of the cultures, language and societies within the Asian region evidenced through declining student numbers in Asian literacy programs. The implications of this are twofold, firstly it suggests a disconnect between current international policy aspirations and those of the domestic public, and secondly that Australians generally are poorly equipped to engaged in transformational discourse that is otherwise encouraged by PD and constructivism's approach.

While Australia's overall policy and PD push to engage more closely within its region and benefit from the predictability that comes with aligned and understood identity positions is moving at a fits and starts pace, it is nonetheless moving in a way that attaches it to the theoretical framework offered by constructivism. The relationship between PD and constructivism has magnetic qualities. Through their respective channels both challenge the primacy of material structures and attach value to the ideational. Both deal in the currencies of identity, ideas, culture, values and norms. However, these parallels alone provide insufficient grounding to position PD alongside constructivism. The synergies become more visible when PD practice encourages and engages audiences in discourse[37] within the inter-subjective dimension. Working towards and building on areas of commonality, PD allows for the shaping and reshaping of respective identities over time potentially impacting on the preferences and actions of those identities and enabling change, not otherwise predicted through a sole reliance on material capabilities. In broad terms it appears that PD is drawn towards the constructivist framework, and when appropriately applied can satisfy its core ontological requirements; while constructivism is similarly drawn to the promise PD holds for operationalizing theory. For Australia, these synergies have not yet been realized, but offer potential for practitioners to build more effective and influential PD practice, both with domestic audiences as well as the diverse and vastly different audiences of its Asian neighborhood. At the same time, as practitioners refine and develop PD practice to at least consider engaging and influencing domestic and international audiences through the inter-subjective dimension, constructivism may find a niche space in the development and delivery of Australia's otherwise, traditionally realist international policy approach.

---

[36] Australia's current campaign for one of two available temporary seats on the United Nations Security Council is reinforce Australia's identity disconnect from the Asian neighborhood.
[37] Hopf suggests discourse relates to the power of knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology and language. See Ted Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, Vol 23 (1), 1998, p.