

TEACHING BRIEF

**Teaching Race and Cultural Sensitivity in Public  
Relations: The Case of Comic Relief and the  
Western Savior Ideology**

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ABSTRACT

In the following teaching brief, we undertake the task of providing a means for public relations educators to talk about diversity, race, equity, and inclusion in the classroom. We know that educators are asked to teach about these matters; yet, many of them do not have adequate resources from which to draw. So, we provide one such teaching brief. This teaching brief centers on the case of Comic Relief and its perpetuation of the Western Savior Ideology. It then takes readers through the experience of how Comic Relief evolved its approach after public outcry. We have provided critical questions and an essay question an instructor can use to facilitate discussion about and to assess, subsequently, student learning on diversity issues in public relations.

*Keywords:* nonprofit communication, comic relief, diversity, race, public relations education, international PR

In this age of heightened awareness about issues of social justice in the U.S. and abroad, it is becoming evident that if we are going to more fully prepare our students to enter the profession and be successful practitioners, we must address issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, whiteness, privilege, and social injustice in the classroom and overall curriculum (Waymer, 2020). As Flowers (2020) noted, several scholars in the discipline have called for greater intercultural, multicultural, diversity, and international skills and competency for public relations students in the U.S. (Bardhan, 2003; Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005; Taylor, 2001; Tsetsura, 2011; Waymer, 2012a, 2012b; Waymer & Brown, 2018; Waymer & Dyson, 2011). Likewise, the Commission on Public Relations Education (2019), has recognized the centrality of diversity to public relations education—and has “encouraged it—one might say, *mandated* it (emphasis in original)—with new standards for accreditation of schools of journalism/mass communication and certification of public relations programs” (para. 3). In light of current events in our world and the Commission on Public Relations Education’s (CPRE) mandate, the time and opportunity are ripe for public relations education scholars to address diversity matters and racial justice more fully.

We know that educators are asked to teach about these matters; yet, many of them do not have adequate resources from which to draw. In the following teaching brief, we undertake the task of addressing diversity matters and racial justice more fully. After or as part of a PR unit on intercultural communication, diversity, or global public relations, the instructor should introduce the following case. It is best to use this case after the instructor has conducted at least one lecture or seminar on the topics of diversity, intercultural communication, or global public relations so students are at least familiar with concepts used to discuss these matters. At a minimum, if an instructor has no resources from which to draw, the instructor can assign for reading and discussion CPRE’s

(2019) statement on diversity that details four critical definitions (of diversity, culture, segmentation, and stereotypes) and expected outcomes of diversity education in public relations.

STEP ONE: ensure the discussion on diversity in public relations has taken place with students. This sets the stage if faculty want to use the Comic Relief case study to facilitate teaching and discussion of diversity in public relations. The remainder of the case analysis should be covered over at least two class sessions (50-minute or 75-minute sessions).

To familiarize instructors with the case and to demonstrate why it is suitable for teaching diversity matters in public relations, we introduce the case of Comic Relief and provide adequate context for instructors to see its relevance and pedagogical potential.

#### **Assigning and Teaching the Comic Relief Case**

In a subsequent class, STEP TWO is to introduce the case of Comic Relief. Have students read about Comic Relief. Also allow them about five minutes to peruse the organization's website <https://www.comicrelief.com/>. After students have read about the history and mission of Comic Relief and have spent 5 minutes reviewing its website, STEP THREE is to have students read the following news articles in class. The first is written by [Sarah Young \(2019\)](#), and the second was written by [Kitty Wenham-Ross \(2019\)](#). Also have the students read [Comic Relief's \(2019\)](#) response to this situation on Twitter. Students should take about 20 minutes to read both news articles and Comic Relief's brief statement issued on Twitter. Once students are finished reading these items, the instructor should ask Reflection Question 1 and then later Reflection Question 2 located at the end of this teaching brief. These questions should drive conversation with students for the remainder of the class session. At the end of the class session, after students have engaged in instructor-facilitated dialogue around Reflection Questions 1 and 2 above, the instructor assigns for homework the following readings to be completed

before the next class session.

STEP FOUR sets the stage for what happens during the next class session and marks the beginning and in some instances the continuation of tough discussions of diversity issues in public relations. These are the assigned readings: Charity So White's (2020) [blog entry](#) detailing its newfound partnership with Comic Relief; Pragya Agarwal's (2019) [news article/critique](#) that highlights discriminatory language, ideals, and policies nonprofits use as they work with and describe the racially underrepresented communities that are the recipients or targets of their charity; Charity So White's (2021a, b, c, d, e, f) [Our Story](#), [Our Vision](#), [Our Calls to Action](#), [Our Values](#), [How We Talk](#), and [Defining Racism](#) pages on its website; Cipriani's (2020) [article](#) that announces Comic Relief's decision to hire new director of fundraising, Fatima Ribeiro; Comic Relief's (2020a) [press release](#) that announces its decision to hire African directors to work on international appeal films and its (2020b) [press release](#) that reflects its attempts to address racial inequity; and finally Sandhu's (2020) [article](#) detailing Comic Relief's decision to stop using images of starving children in Africa for Red Nose Day events. All links are hyperlinked above.

STEP FIVE asks the instructor at the beginning of class to ask an open-ended question that solicits student feedback about their initial response to the assigned readings. Let this conversation and dialogue take place for about 10 minutes. Finally, the instructor should facilitate discussion further around the more structured questions: Reflection Questions 3 and 4.

STEP SIX allows the instructor the opportunity to assess student learning. The instructor can assign Reflection Question 5 as a short essay to be turned in at a later date, or if the instructor does not want to assess student learning for this unit or case example, the instructor can simply ask Question 5 during the same class period as the instructor asked Questions

3 and 4. Regardless of the approach to assessment the instructor takes, after completing this case analysis and discussion, students should be able to determine how well Comic Relief, via its public relations, was able to deal with diversity issues and needs, and they should be able to measure that success against the DEI outcomes prescribed in the CPRE (2019) statement on diversity provided as a supplement to this unit. In short, students get to see how an organization makes attempts to achieve the CPRE's (2019) ideals about what public relations practitioners should be doing to help organizations be more equitable, diverse, and inclusive—as the commission espouses that “public relations practitioners should be at the forefront in helping organizations respond to these matters” (para. 12).

Now that we have presented specific guidelines for introducing the topic, this case, and facilitating discussion about this case and diversity issues in public relations, we turn to providing more in-depth details about the case for background and context for instructors.

#### **Comic Relief Case Background and Context**

Comic Relief, based in the United Kingdom, is one of the most prominent charities in the world. The organization was founded in 1985 by British comedian, Lenny Henry, and comedy writer, Richard Curtis. The organization is known for raising money, via late-night fundraising shows, for those afflicted by a famine in Ethiopia. By 1988, the organization began hosting its first Red Nose Day, a telethon on BBC, which raised more than £15 million euros for tackling poverty during this first event. (Comic Relief, 2013). Many celebrities, musicians, and comedians take part in Red Nose Day each year, and funds raised by the organization are awarded as grants for multiple charities worldwide; the charity has raised more than \$1.4 billion since the nonprofit's inception (BBC, 2015; Sandhu, 2020). In addition to live events, Comic Relief fronts a hefty budget for their cause-marketing collateral, which includes informational documentaries, original photography, and footage for their youthful and

entertainment-driven social media presence.

In 2019, the charity came under fire for their use of predominantly White British celebrities in their fundraising and advertising campaigns. Simultaneously, claims began to arise about a lack of diversity across the nonprofit sector. In 2020, Comic Relief made the risky decision to completely eliminate the emotional, “tear-jerking” marketing tactic used by several other charities worldwide, and instead they pursued an unprecedented approach. The changes they made both internally and externally not only reflected the success of a company reinventing their marketing strategy, but they also provided a new framework for other nonprofit organizations seeking to integrate greater levels of diversity and agency at the local level.

Students likely are not familiar with the events of 2019 that damaged Comic Relief’s reputation nor are they likely familiar with the actions Comic Relief took in 2020 to address the criticisms and threats to its legitimacy. These factors make it a solid, non-US centric case to discuss and interrogate diversity and public relations.

### **Comic Relief Campaigns in Crisis**

On February 27, 2019, Strictly Comes Dancing champion Stacey Dooley posted a photo to Instagram from Uganda, where she was working on a documentary with Comic Relief. In the photo, the redheaded media personality was cradling a small African child, with his fingers in his mouth and his eyes averted from the camera. The photo was captioned, “OB.SESSSSSSSSSED”; it was also one of several similar posts made as part of the documentary’s marketing material. Within minutes, the internet blew up, full of belligerent social media users accusing Dooley of a “Western Savior complex” and begging her to take the photo down. Member of Parliament, David Lammy instigated the onslaught with a tweet, reading:

The world does not need any more white saviours. As I’ve said

before, this just perpetuates tired and unhelpful stereotypes. Let's instead promote voices from across the continent of Africa and have serious debate (Young, 2019 paras. 3-5).

Immediately, Comic Relief was thrust into the spotlight, as social media users scrutinized the organization's previous fundraising materials and use of celebrity influencers to promote their causes—a key aspect of their cause-marketing strategy. An earlier documentary from 2017 resurfaced, showing singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran trying to quickly pull money from his own wallet to front the cost of a hotel for two homeless children in Liberia. This documentary was called “poverty porn” (para. 1) by aid watchdog groups (McVeigh, 2017), and Sheeran and the organization were accused of using an emotional marketing appeal that sacrificed the dignity of the children pictured and painted a limited narrative where Sheeran was the leading character coming to the rescue (McVeigh, 2017). Other photos used as promotional material by Comic Relief showed media personalities Ben Shephard and Fearne Cotton handing out Malaria nets in Uganda—two smiling celebrities in a sea of otherwise sad faces (Wenham-Ross, 2019). Many social media users were outraged.

### **Comic Relief's Response**

Comic Relief used Twitter to issue a response almost instantaneously after Lammy's tweet. Instead of apologizing for Dooley's actions or their own, the organization expressed gratitude that Dooley “agreed to go to Uganda to discover more about the projects the British people have generously funded, and (we) make no apologies for this” (Comic Relief, 2019, para. 1). Further, Comic Relief expressed that they had offered David Lammy an opportunity to help them with their filming efforts, and he had not taken them up on the offer; however, “Lammy said it was “simply not true” that he had not responded to the offer, adding he had held two meetings with the organization” and that Comic relief “had “fallen short” of what he called its “public duty” to promote racial

equality and serve minority communities” (Badshah, 2019, para. 5). Publics’ feelings toward Comic Relief’s response were divided as the story circulated around the United Kingdom and beyond. Some threatened to pull their aid from British charities altogether, while others emphasized that Comic Relief and the celebrities the organization used in their public relations efforts were not at fault for using what influence they had for a good cause.

### **Lack of Diversity in the Third Sector**

Charity So White (2021d) used the spotlight around issues of racial insensitivity and inequality given to the third sector to make their case that a lack of diversity at the management level of nonprofit organizations and unaddressed issues of institutional racism account for the minimal or stereotypical representation of people in developing countries seen in marketing materials. Charity So White was formed just three months after Comic Relief’s crisis with Stacey Dooley, and Charity So White’s hashtag trended on Twitter as thousands of racial and ethnically underrepresented persons shared their experiences of exclusion while working in or with the charity sector. At the center of the outrage was training materials used by a charity named Citizens Advice and its guidelines for working with Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities; these guidelines were based on racist stereotypes about these communities being a “cash-centric culture,” having “low literacy levels,” and their having a fondness for “gender discrimination.” Citizens Advice presumed these stereotypical characteristics to be prevalent in these underrepresented cultures (Agarwal, 2019). Charity So White emphasized that these stereotypes could affect funding for charities led by racially and ethnically underrepresented persons working on the ground in developing countries, especially when third sector leadership demonstrated an inherent lack of diversity and racial insensitivity.



### **The Transformation of Comic Relief**

Many had moved past Comic Relief's crisis by August of 2019, accepting their statement about Stacey Dooley as well-intentioned naivety. Yet, the leadership at Comic Relief stayed engaged in the conversations happening in the third sector, and the leadership began to meet and strategize with the team at Charity So White at the end of 2019 about how Comic Relief could better represent and support communities in the countries, specifically developing African countries, where they had proverbial boots on the ground for their humanitarian efforts. Comic Relief planned strategic changes over the course of the next 18 months, and the result was a new cause-marketing and promotional strategy—one designed to minimize the Western savior ideology in their communication, and the angles with which they framed life in other cultures.

### **Changing Internal Leadership**

While the leadership team at Comic Relief sought to transform their external communication strategy, they first looked inward for a new candidate to fill the role of Executive Director of Fundraising and Creative—the head of their integrated marketing efforts. In August of 2020, they selected Fatima Ribeiro. Ribeiro is a Muslim woman of Portuguese and Gujarati descent who served as marketing director for the nonprofit Islamic Relief over a span of five years; furthermore, Ribeiro received awards for her Ramadan fundraising campaigns, including Third Sector Marketing Campaign of the year in 2019 (Third Sector, 2019). Choosing Ribeiro for the job brought to the organization the perspective of a woman from a culturally diverse background whose stated mission and prior work experiences were focused on helping others understand the beliefs and values of marginalized communities. For example, in her previous Ramadan campaigns for Islamic Relief, she featured references to a verse from the Qur'an splashed on the sides of buses across the UK; the marketing message generated traffic from those outside the Muslim

faith to their website. Many persons from those outside the Muslim faith, out of curiosity, looked up the references, and several gained a greater understanding of the month of Ramadan and its significance to those taking part in the spiritual ritual (Ahmed, 2019; Third Sector, 2019). Hiring Ribeiro can be seen as Comic Relief's newfound commitment to inclusiveness in their storytelling and marketing techniques.

### **Prioritizing Local Voices and Creating New Influencers**

After Ribeiro's hiring, the first external decision Comic Relief made in October of 2020 was to stop sending British celebrities, like Dooley, to African countries as influencers. The charity decided to remove footage of starving and ill children from their documentaries, even though that particular tactic was considered effective because it successfully elicited emotion from stakeholders who often gave money to support needy children (Sandhu, 2020); however, such imagery did not provide a more accurate representation of development on the continent as a whole. To adequately portray life in the countries where they operated, Comic Relief announced plans to bring members of communities on air as storytellers, captured by local filmmakers and photographers. In a press release dispatched on October 28, 2020 by Comic Relief, President and co-founder, Sir Lenny Henry stated:

African people don't want us to tell their stories for them, what they need is more agency, a platform and partnership. I have seen first-hand what it means for African communities to see someone who looks just like them in charge of directing films. (Comic Relief, 2020a, para. 12)

Furthermore, Kenyan filmmaker and director of one of Comic Relief's newest documentaries, Eugene Muigai, added:

This opportunity makes people like us feel like we are finally being listened to. For so long we've seen people tell our stories, misinterpreting intentions, beliefs and the values we hold. It has

led to a loss of culture and pride among our people. (Comic Relief, 2020a, para. 17)

Comic Relief also announced that high profile supporters could continue to play an influential role in entertaining and narrating during their Red Nose Day telethons, and they could continue appearing in and supporting other marketing materials created in the United Kingdom; however, the representation of Africans and African culture would be led by members and directors of those local communities. Comic Relief followed these decisions with an online event, releasing three new films from Kenyan filmmakers tackling the difficult topics of mental health, climate change, and child marriage (Comic Relief, 2020a).

### **Conclusion**

While Comic Relief's initial response to 'White Savior' criticisms was deflective and unapologetic, the organizational changes made in the following 18 months reveal time spent listening and seeking to understand the responsibility given to the third sector to help facilitate storytelling. The result is a series of initiatives which set a new precedent for charities with a substantial level of exposure, including changes to the marketing tactics they use. Comic Relief's CEO, Ruth Davidson, emphasized that despite the radical changes to the organization's practices, they still knew that they could maximize their efforts to fund those in need and reduce donor fatigue, by showing the ways that developing countries across the world are changing for the better. Davidson stated, "what prompts people to give is an emotional connection—that doesn't have to be pity. It can be joy, it can be anger, it can be a sense of positivity and hope" (Sandhu, 2020, para. 6). All of the organization's changes—including the broadcasting of their localized films—will be on full display in March of 2021, with their internationally acclaimed and televised Red Nose Day.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Do you believe that Comic Relief did anything wrong in their initial

response to criticisms of perpetuating the Western Savior ideology?

Why or why not?

2. Given the backlash, in retrospect what specifically could Comic Relief's public relations team have done differently in their initial response to backlash for Dooley's photo?
3. Given your knowledge of diversity issues in public relations, how could a more nuanced understanding of cultural sensitivity, diversity, equity, inclusion, or race have allowed Comic Relief to execute a better humanitarian campaign?
4. What are alternative ways that influencers can aid in promoting a nonprofit organization to their audiences without taking the spotlight off of local efforts?
5. Evaluate Comic Relief's decisions to change course, to partner with Charity So White, to hire Fatima Ribeiro as Executive Director of Fundraising and Creative, and to change how they created campaigns—by using local filmmakers and photographers for example. Share your evaluation and thoughts.

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