



Generalizing from PRSA to public relations: How to accommodate sampling bias in public relations scholarship

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges to conducting externally valid, quantitative scholarship in public relations is accessing samples of practitioners that are willing to participate in academic research. One sampling frame would naturally be the membership of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which is the world's largest professional association for public relations practitioners. Yet, even if the question of access were resolved, there still remains the question of external validity, i.e., the issue of whether and to what extent the membership of PRSA (or any other sampling frame) reflects the population of public relations practitioners in general.

The purpose of this study was thus to examine the population of U.S. public relations practitioners and compare it to the PRSA membership, using census data from PRSA and sample data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau. Results of this study are significant for public relations scholarship because they address the fundamental question of external validity, without which no research can claim to offer a true contribution to the body of knowledge in public relations.

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1. Sampling and scholarship

The scholarly study of public relations as a profession – what Pavlik (1987) termed “introspective” research – is bounded by both theoretical and practical issues that constrain the validity and generalizability of research. At the practical level, researchers must find professionals who are available and willing to participate in research. As anyone who has done public relations research with professionals knows, this can be difficult. Yet, public relations scholars have done their best to overcome this issue.

For example, to investigate relationships between organizations and publics, some researchers have relied on specific organizations and their employees, members or consumers (e.g., Sha & Ahles, 2009; White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010). Others have resorted to student samples for this purpose (e.g., Connolly-Ahern, Grantham, & Cabrera-Baukus, 2010; Hong & Yang, 2009; Sha, 2009; Werder, 2006; Yang & Lim, 2009). Still others have obtained non-probability samples of practitioners in hopes of studying not only organization-public relationships from the perspective of the practitioner, but also the views of practitioners themselves on a variety of subjects (e.g., Avidar, 2009; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Li, Cropp, & Jin, 2010; Toledano, 2010).

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With regard to statistically random samples, researchers have used listings of practitioners published in *The Press & Publications Handbook* (e.g., Jin, 2010), while others have sampled members of various professional associations (e.g., Kelly, Laskin, & Rosenstein, 2010), including the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) (e.g., Okura, Dozier, Sha, & Hofstetter, 2009; Kim & Reber, 2009; Sha, 2011a, 2011b; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009).

In the latter case, the validity of generalizations from such research to public relations is dependent upon two related issues. The first issue is the extent to which samples of members are representative of the distribution of relevant characteristics within PRSA; this challenge is compounded not only by the usual self-selection bias of respondents, but also by the “opt-out” option given by PRSA to members who do not wish to receive any research solicitations. The second – and perhaps more important – issue is the extent to which PRSA members on the whole are representative of the distribution of relevant characteristics within the larger population of public relations practitioners.

2. The population of public relations professionals

The most reliable estimates of U.S. population characteristics for public relations come from two different government agencies: the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. Each conducts a different type of random sample survey that provides different but complementary views of population parameters. Researchers may find both sources useful in evaluating the generalizability of their research efforts.

2.1. Occupational Employment Statistics Survey

The Occupational Employment Statistics Survey (OES) of the Bureau of Labor Statistics is a semiannual mail survey measuring occupational employment and wage rates for wage and salary workers in nonfarm establishments. Every November and May, a stratified random sample of 200,000 employers is sent questionnaires. The sample is stratified by industry and geography and drawn from a list of approximately 1.2 million employers created by compiling records from state unemployment insurance filings. Published estimates are based on responses from six semiannual panels gathered over a 3-year period (1.2 million responses). The OES results are supplemented by an annual census of federal government, state government, U.S. Postal Service, and Hawaii local government employment. While there is a significant time lag between published estimates and the current period, the size and scope of sampling provides us with some confidence in the use of these survey results as providing a reasonably accurate estimate of the population with respect to the parameters measured. One shortcoming of the OES is that it does not include self-employed individuals, which means that it excludes independent or solo public relations professionals.

2.2. Current Population Survey

The Census Bureau conducts two surveys that provide population information. The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly probability survey of 60,000 occupied households located in 754 sample areas. Trained interviewers conduct interviews by telephone or in person with a member of each household, who is generally the person who owns or rents the dwelling sampled. To allow for assessment of reliability and continuity, a 4-8-4 participation model is used. Households are included in four consecutive monthly surveys, excluded for 8 months, and then sampled for another 4 months before being replaced. The Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey is a monthly survey of 160,000 businesses and government agency payroll reports. Each sample is selected from a list of approximately 8,000,000 unemployment accounts.

Different methods, sampling variability, and response errors generate different results across these surveys. For example, industry classifications are considered more reliable for the CES than the CPS. But, the CPS provides two types of information that are not obtainable through the OES or the CES. First, it includes self-employed individuals, such as independent public relations practitioners. Second, the CPS includes demographic data, including age, sex, race, family relationship, and marital status. Together, these three sources provide us with data useful in addressing issues of validity and generalizability.

This study thus sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the estimated population of U.S. public relations practitioners?

RQ2: How does the estimated population of public relations practitioners compare to the membership of the Public Relations Society of America?

RQ3: How does the “opt-out” option offered to PRSA members affect the resulting sample frame?

3. Method

To answer these research questions, this study examined publicly available U.S. government data about public relations practitioners, as well as membership information from the PRSA. Specifically, the authors were given access to a census of PRSA membership data from March 2010. PRSA membership information was then compared to population estimates provided by the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS). The authors chose to use CPS data rather than OES data for three main reasons:

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