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Still a lily-white field of women: The state of workforce diversity in public relations practice and research

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ABSTRACT

The state of women's research in public relations is strong. However, different women's stories—as well as men's stories who are not part of the standard White, heterosexual, American experience—are severely underrepresented in public relations practice and research. This review of research from the past 11 years shows that the practice has significant room to grow in terms of welcoming and providing a successful, equitable workplace environment to practitioners from marginalized groups. Specifically, research about the experiences of women of color, LGBT practitioners, practitioners with disabilities, practitioners aged 55 and older, and international practitioners are imperative to understand why public relations continues to be a “lily-white” field of women. To this point, research needs to seriously engage in intersectional research that links diverse practitioners' experiences with negative outcomes (e.g., salary gaps, relegation to technical positions, etc.) and positive effects (e.g., role modeling, entrepreneurship, etc.) for the field and individual practitioners alike. Directions for future research and practical application include examining eurocentrism and systemic racism in the academic and professional fields, overcoming issues of conducting quantitative research as well as issues of valuing qualitative research, linking diversity initiatives to core public relations concerns like crises and corporate social responsibility, exploring other fields' responses to diversity issues, and obtaining external audits by advocacy groups.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The state of diversity in public relations

Historically, women and white practitioners have dominated the public relations field. Research suggests fairly consistent findings of gender composition in the field, with women comprising ~60–70% of the field, and men comprising ~27–37% (Grunig & Toth, 2006). Dozens of studies on gender in the public relations field over the past 30+ years have revealed that gender is strongly correlated to salary, years of experience, chance of fulfilling managerial and leadership roles, professional development opportunities, stigmatization, and issues of work-life fit (Toth, Aldoory, & Sha, 2006). Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that identities considered “diverse” – i.e., those other than the professional norm such as being a man,

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being white, being heterosexual – correlate similarly with professional outcomes in marginalized ways (e.g., Pompper, 2007; Tindall & Waters, 2013).

However, a significant dearth in research exists in knowing the exact nature of these identity discrepancies. For example, despite the significant number of studies conducted around the gender makeup of the field and how that correlates to the salary gap (for a recent overview, see Dozier, Place, Vardeman-Winter, Sisco, & Sha, 2016), virtually no recent empirical research has been conducted to learn how race and gender together affect the salary gap. Important research was conducted in the 1980s and 1990s to learn of the experiences of female (and male) practitioners of color (Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Kern-Foxworth, Gandy, Hines, & Miller, 1994; Len-Rios, 1998; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993), but very little has been done since to progress this research agenda.¹ Furthermore, recent literature has revealed some negative workplace experiences of practitioners of color (Edwards, 2010; Pompper, 2007; Tindall, 2009), our field has not gathered and published data on salaries by racial/ethnic identity, only by gender. Therefore, the salaries of women of color practicing public relations are not researched exclusively, despite that tangential data suggests that their salaries may be the lowest of all practitioners. Like gender salary gap research findings suggest that controlling for potentially moderating variables like years of experience (Dozier, Sha, & Shen, 2012), salary gaps seem to persist largely because of being a woman (Dozier et al., 2016); thus, more focused research on race and salary may suggest that salary gaps are also largely accounted for because of race, and potentially race and gender considered together.

1.2. Hidden data

Attempting to conduct this study revealed major discrepancies not only in public relations research but also in research sources (e.g., U.S. Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics, etc.) that document the overall status of professional communicators' experiences as related to their demographics and sociographics, specifically as broken down by more than race or gender alone. Trying to find out the employment rates and the salaries of, say, women of color in public relations is a futile effort because these data are not available. First, the data available from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics breaks down employment by gender and by race separately, but not as one combined factor. Therefore, we do not know how many African American women, for example, work in public relations (only how many African Americans versus people of other races work in public relations, and how many women versus men work in public relations); furthermore, we do not know earnings by gender and race simultaneously.

Second, we can learn about women of color's earnings in the United States from advocacy groups like the National Women's Law Center or the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR); however, the most tangential data to learning women of color's salaries in public relations is not in our industry, specifically, but rather as part of a compilation analysis of data for women in "professional and related occupations" conducted by the IWPR (Hegewisch & DuMonthier, 2016). IWPR's analysis found that for full-time workers in these "broad occupational groups," White women earned \$978/week, Black women earned \$844/week, Asian women earned \$1213/week, and Hispanic women earned \$853/week. In the same broad category of "professional and related occupations," White men earned \$1363/week, Black men earned \$1062/week, Asian men earned \$1566/week, and Hispanic men earned \$1144/week. These numbers are consistent with the wage gap demonstrated in other studies about professional women's (versus men's) pay as well as employees' of color (versus White employees) pay in that women and people of color and specifically, women of color, earn less than White men. However, this lack of industry specific data is problematic and points to the need for intersectional research in our field.

1.3. The case for a diverse workforce and diversity research

Research that considers the coinciding effects of multiple, co-occurring identities (such as race X gender, or race X gender X nationality) is referred to as intersectional (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality theory suggests that demographics and sociographics are interlocking and occurring simultaneously rather than as distinct, and as such, individual identities cannot be merely added together when conducting statistical analyses of relationships between identity and social measures (Bowleg, 2008). Intersectional analyses that would consider multiple identities simultaneously and their effects on outcomes like salary, enactment of managerial roles, and opportunities for professional development, among others, are important for the field of public relations (Tindall, 2009; Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, & Jiang, 2013). The heightened and often contentious public debate about race, gender, religion, nationality, and sexual orientation in America and international settings requires that organizations – both advocacy and capital-based organizations – have an understanding of the identity issues that affect or are affected by their surrounding communities, particularly through their professional "habitus" (Edwards, 2010). Practitioners delivering organizational news (Ramsey, 2016) and messages and forging stakeholder relationships must have an understanding of how identity matters in public relations relationships (Fawkes, 2015; Waymer, 2012). Practitioners' social-cultural identities like gender, race, age, class, nationality, and sexual orientation affect how they perform as public relations practitioners and specifically, the messages they create for vast groups of people (Curtin

¹ To this point, key word searches of "public relations," "race" OR "practitioners of color" and "salary" on EBSCO including communication, social sciences, and business databases yielded no results consistently for 2005 to present.

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