



# Teaching Public Relations

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## A Comparative Analysis of Ethnic Inclusion in Public Relations Textbooks and Reference Books

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In 1988, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (AEJMC) conducted a survey among its members to see whether there was minority inclusion in textbooks they used in the classroom. The answers to the questions varied, but one answer in particular did not bode well for proponents of the notion that ethnicity is important in textbooks. In response to the question, "Does this textbook ignore People of color?" one respondent wrote the following: "I regret the necessity of this questionnaire. All textbooks I use are basically color blind, as they should be (Luebke, 1988, p. 18)."

The idea that textbooks should be color blind or culture-free is a notion that many researchers would debate. Color-blind textbooks have ramifications, not all of which are desirable. First, they ignore the existence of multiculturalism in the United States. Second, they do not make use of the potential to use textbooks as an instrument of ethnocentric socialization. Finally, they do not provide students with information to design programs and products to communicate effectively with different cultural or ethnic groups.

Kern-Foxworth saw the importance of including ethnic representation in public relations textbooks and reference books and conducted a study in 1990 to examine the quality of ethnic inclusion in selected books. She conducted a content analysis of 60 books published between the years 1979 and 1988 and found relatively few pages that included information about non-whites. Of a total of 21,841 pages examine, 152 pages (0.7%) included ethnic representation in the textbooks.

Nearly 10 years worth of public relations textbooks and references have been published since that first study. This paper reports the findings that result from a preliminary analysis of books published in the last six years, and compares the findings to those of the first study. The purpose of the analysis is to determine if there has been greater ethnic representation. In addition, the study examines the kind of information that has been provided about ethnic groups to determine whether it is useful to the public relations student who would be using that information when he or she entered the work world.

### Developing Culturally Competent Communications

The United States has long not been a homogeneous society. Yet, many books suffer in richness and depth because they represent only one dominant culture:

The primacy of one culture within the national culture does not mean other cultures do not exist. It does mean, however, that many of the messages and materials tend to use the images, symbols, and language of the primary culture and not other cultures within the Nation (CSAP, 1994).

Textbooks are also socializing agents that can be used to introduce a variety of cultures and ethnic groups to students (Kern-Foxworth, 1990). According to Kern-Foxworth (1990), textbooks provide "important perceptions that mainstream students formulate about minorities in society." Several others agree (Van Dijk; 1987; Yuill, 1983; Black, 1967). Some would argue that information about other cultures is greatly needed to facilitate communication across cultures, a process that is complex no matter how you look at it. For effective intercultural communication communicators must understand the cultural variations in the perceptual process that insight to communicate more effectively (Samovar & Porter, 1985).

Today, a great deal of training and writing aims to help communications professionals learn how to design communication tools and public relations campaigns that are culturally competent. For example, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention provides technical assistance bulletins and training for community-based organizations on how to develop culturally competent communications strategies (CSAP, 1994). The bulletin bases the methods of targeting audiences of color on two factors. First, the messages and materials should include a cultural component by incorporating race, ethnicity, language, nationality, and religion. Second, the messages should address audience factors such as age, gender, sexual preference, education level, occupation, and income (CSAP, 1994).

Public relations textbooks should begin to train students to incorporate cultural factors into the public relations process.

### **Method**

The study used the same methodology that was employed in the Kern-Foxworth study. Coders were asked to search the texts for ethnic inclusion. As in the Kern-Foxworth study, the coders reviewed content listings, and the indexes for relevant information, illustrations, and pictures. The coders were given the following key words to look for:

minorities, minority groups, ethnic groups, special publics, urban, blacks, Afro American, people of color, Mexicans, Hispanics, Asian, Native American, civil rights, race relations, racial, stereotyping, and non-whites.

The key words helped ensure there was consistency in the collection of the data because the coders were searching for the same indicators of ethnic inclusion.

The coders used in this study were doctoral students in a doctoral course entitled "Afro American Issues in Communications." The coders were given verbal instructions on what to review, the key words to look for, and how to record the findings of their review. The coders also received coding sheets that provided written instructions on how to collect the data. In addition, coders had to answer the following questions:

1. To which ethnic group did the text refer?
2. Was/were the reference(s) important to the understanding of the status of minorities in America?
3. Did the material offer pertinent information about minorities that would benefit students once they entered the public relations profession?
4. Was the information positive, neutral or negative?

For the purpose of this study the terms positive, neutral or negative were defined to the coders as follows: Positive text or visual was defined as any description that portrayed persons of color as being solid citizens and /or as possessing "good" qualities such as intelligence, honesty, integrity, hardworking,

healthy, clean etc. Neutral text or visual was defined as providing pure facts such as demographics or statistics. Negativity was defined as any text or visual that portrayed stereotypes of people of color or that did not portray them as solid citizens. They had "undesirable" qualities and, for example, were poor, dishonest, dirty, or unhealthy.

The coders worked in teams of two. One person reviewed the text and the other recorded the findings on a coding sheet. The investigator reviewed the books and data recorded on the coding sheets.

### Results

Eighteen books were examined totaling 8,071 pages. Of that number, 97 pages contained information about ethnic groups. The year that had the greatest ethnic representation was 1995, with 32 pages (32.99%). The year with the fewest number of pages was 1993 with only 2 pages (2.06%). Two books had no reference to persons of color at all. The Kern-Foxworth study found the most references in the year 1988 with 51 pages (22.6%). The year with the fewest number of pages was 1979 with 2 references (1.3%).

Four of the 18 books portrayed persons of color in a positive manner. Eight books presented facts about ethnic groups and therefore represented the groups in a neutral way. Three books portrayed ethnic groups in a negative fashion.

**Table 1: 1.2% Ethnic Representation in 8,071 pages of Public Relations Textbooks and Reference Books**

Year	Total Books	Total Pages	Pages with Ethnic Representation
1991	1 (5.5%)	458 (5.68%)	3 (.09%)
1992	3 (16.7%)	1148 (14.22%)	31 (31.9%)
1993	1 (5.5%)	420 (5.2%)	2 (2.06%)
1994	.	.	.
1995	5 (27.8%)	2355 (29.18%)	32 (32.99%)
1996	5 (27.8%)	2253 (27.91%)	12 (12.34%)
1997	3 (16.7%)	1437 (17.8%)	17 (17.5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>18 (100%)</b>	<b>8071 (100%)</b>	<b>97 (100%)</b>

The interpretive analysis of the texts and visuals are reported below according to the questions on the coding sheets.

#### To which ethnic group did the text refer?

When a textbook included references to an ethnic group, the most frequently cited group was the African American. The second most frequently cited ethnic group was the Latino. Only one reference was made to each of the following groups: Kuwaiti, East Indian, Korean, Iraqi, Dominicans, Argentines.

**Was/were the reference(s) important to the understanding of the status of minorities in America?**

Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg (1996) discussed the problem of discrimination in America.

McElreath (1997) made an attempt to provide the reader with insight into the status of African Americans and other ethnic groups in the public relations profession. In addition, some text presented information on cultural relativism.

**Did the material offer pertinent information about minorities that would benefit students once they entered the public relations profession?**

Hendrix (1992, 1995) provided case studies to illustrate how communication strategies can be designed to reach ethnic groups. For example, one case examined the strategy used by public relations professionals to deliver health promotion messages to an Hispanic community in the United States.

Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore (1997) took a similar approach. Their text provided samples of public relations tools such as information kits and newsletters that included text and photos that represented different ethnic groups. Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (1996) provided samples as well, including a bilingual mail insert (english/spanish) and a public service announcement designed by the American Heart Association to reach African Americans, a group that is at high risk for heart disease.

Smith (1996) listed ethnic professional organizations that help practitioners target specific groups.

**Was the information positive, neutral or negative?**

Some texts were interpreted as portraying members of ethnic groups in a negative manner. For example, one book included several photographs of people of color in need. Some were portrayed as hungry, and others as needing money for scholarships.

Another book did not present a balanced view of members of ethnic groups and discussed only the problems they faced. Another book provided a distorted view of African American by presenting them only as entertainers.

One book was particularly positive in its portrayal of members of ethnic groups. A 1991 textbook included several photos of minorities as having admirable qualities and/or high-status positions. For example, there were photos of Japanese executives in an annual report, an African American scholar, and a poster of Indira Gandhi accompanied with text that portrayed her as an Indian heroine. A 1995 textbook was similar in its presentation of different ethnic groups. There were several photos that portrayed different groups from all walks of life, but in a positive manner. This book had photos of African Americans (as entertainers, leaders, fun-loving kids) and a Kuwati girl providing expert testimony at a congressional hearing.

**Discussion**

The majority of the textbooks analyzed in this study contained information that was neutral about ethnic groups -- which is not at all a sad circumstance. That finding indicates that the text was providing some information about an ethnic group that a student could use later, at least conceivably, in the design of a culturally competent communication strategy or product. However, the findings also indicate that there is not nearly enough of this information provided. There is no remarkable difference between the ethnic representation in 20 year-old books and those published in 1997. Another problem is that the textbooks that include information about ethnic groups tend to focus on African Americans and this creates an inaccurate view of the multiculturalism that exists in America.

While the comparison between the results of this study and those of the Kern-Foxworth study are limited, the findings indicate that textbooks have not changed much in the last 20 years. That finding certainly warrants further analysis and discussion to determine how effectively we are training and preparing the public relations student when we are using textbooks that are "outdated." Specifically, further research is recommended to assess whether a textbook that excludes discussion of ethnicity adequately provides the student with the insight and information necessary to design and implement public relations campaigns in a highly segmented society.

## **Appendix** **Books Used in the Analysis**

### **1991**

Newsom, D., & Carroll, B. (1991). *Public relations writing: Form & style*. (3rd ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

### **1992**

Hendrix, J. A. (1992). *Public relations cases*. (2nd ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Seitel, F. (1992). *The practice of public relations*. (5th ed.). New York, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Wilcox, D. L., Ault, P. H., & Agee, W. K. (1992). *Public relations: Strategies and tactics*. New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

### **1993**

Simon, R., & Wylie, F. W. (1993). *Cases in public relations management*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Business Books.

### **1995**

Goldman, J. (1995). *Public relations in the marketing mix*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Business Books.

Hendrix, J. A. (1995). *Public relations cases*. (3rd ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Newsom, D., & Carroll, B. (1995). *Public relations writing: Form and style*. (4th ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Wilcox, D. L., Ault, P. H., & Agee, W. K. (1995). *Public relations strategies and tactics*. (4th ed.). New York, New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.

Wilcox, D. L., & Nolte, L. W. (1995). *Public relations writing and media techniques*. New York, New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.

### **1996**

Bivins, T. (1996). *Handbook for public relations writing*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: NTC Business Books.

Kendall, R. (1996). *Public relations campaign strategies: Planning for implementation*. (2nd ed.). New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishing Company.

Newsom, D., Turk, V. J. & Kruckeberg, D. (1996). *This is PR: The realities of public relations*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Parsigian, E. K. (1996). *Proposal savvy: Creating successful proposals for media projects*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

## 1997

Baskin, O., Aronoff, C., & Lattimore, D. (1997). *Public relations: The profession and the practice*. (4th ed.). Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark Publishers.

McElreath, M. P. (1997).

Managing systematic and ethical public relations campaigns. (2nd ed. ). Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark Publishers.

Wilcox, D. L., & Nolte, L. W. (1997). *Public relations writing and media techniques*. (3rd ed.). New York, New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.

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Black, H. (1967). *The American school book*. New York, New York: William Morrow.

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention. (1994). *You can use communication principles to create culturally sensitive and effective prevention materials*. Washington, DC: University Research Corporation.

Griffin, E. (1994). *A first look at communication theory*. New York, New York: McGraw Hill.

Kern-Foxworth, M. (1990). Ethnic inclusiveness in public relations textbooks and reference books. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, 2( 2), 226 - 237.

Luebke, B. (1988). *Unpublished report to the AEJMC Task Force on Minority Affairs*. Portland, OR: Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

Marcus, L. (1960). *The treatment of minorities in secondary school textbooks*. New York, New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

Pratt, D. (1972). *How to find and measure bias in textbooks*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

Samovar, L. A. & Porter, R. E. (1985). *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1987). *Communicating racism: Ethnic prejudice in thought and talk*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Yuill, P. J. (1983). *Little Black Sambo: A closer look*. New York, New York: The Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Education.

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