Students' Perceptions of Diversity Issues in Public Relations Practice

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Abstract

This study examined students' perceptions of race/ethnic issues in public relations practice and how they are influenced by students' level of diversity exposure. Data were gathered from students enrolled in mass communication courses ($N = 417$) at a Midwestern university, and PR and non-PR students were compared. Participants reported moderate diversity exposure and their level of knowledge about the public relations practice influenced how they perceived racial/ethnicity issues in the profession. Their perceived knowledge was also associated with diversity exposure and so was the number of mass communication courses taken. Public relations students were slightly more exposed to diversity compared to others and were less likely to agree with the negative perceptions of diversity issues in the field.

Keywords: diversity, ethnicity, race, public relations practice, public relations education

Diversity and inclusiveness have increasingly become topics of interest in public relations education, research, and practice as the racial and ethnic makeup of the United States population becomes more diverse. Ethnic minorities account for about one-third of the U.S. population and are estimated to comprise more than half of the population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It is also estimated that about 43% of Millennials are people of color, and by 2020, most of the U.S. population under 18 years will be diverse (Elsasser, 2018). Rapidly growing ethnic diversity has prompted U.S. organizations, including academic institutions, to incorporate diversity and inclusion into the workplace (Brunner, 2005; Fiske, Ross, & Keenan, 2016; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). This is with the recognition of the contributions of a diverse workforce to the organization's productivity, competitiveness, responsibility, and overall success (Mundy, 2015; O'Dwyer, 2018).

Embracing diversity reflects how organizations value diverse groups in societies that they serve and the importance they attach to them in their work (Edwards, 2011). Many businesses have embraced diversity and multiculturalism to tap into fast-growing markets while acknowledging that diverse viewpoints promote innovation and creativity, which can improve organizational effectiveness (Brown, White, & Waymer, 2011). International corporations like Apple, Coca-Cola, AT&T, Facebook, and Nike, just to name a few, have published statements that recognize their value for diversity and inclusiveness (Mundy, 2015). As Mark Parker, CEO and president of Nike, stated, the company values the "unique background and experiences everyone brings and want[s] all [employees] to realize their fullest potential…because different perspectives can fuel the best ideas" (Nike, 2018, para. 1). Other organizations have invested extensively in diversity and inclusion. For instance, in 2015, Google announced a $150 million investment in

diversity and inclusion (Mundy, 2015). Academic institutions in the U.S. have also taken a lead in embracing diversity through development and implementation of diversity plans, many of which are publicly accessible online with a simple search.

With a diverse environment comes an urgent need for organizations, both public and private, to adjust the way they communicate to relate to all stakeholders effectively and efficiently. Judith Harrison, a senior vice president of diversity and inclusion at Weber Shandwick, reaffirmed this urgency in a presentation at the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) General Session, noting that "if we are going to communicate with the rapidly changing world of stakeholders in ways that are authentic, resonant and relevant, it is imperative that we treat ramping up diversity in our industry as an urgent, hair-on-fire emergency" (Elsasser, 2018, p. 14).

According to the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2015) diversity in the workforce starts at college campuses, where students learn about other cultures and how to work effectively with those different from them. In the 2016/2017 CPRE report, the diversity team noted, "In order to see [diversity and inclusion] within the public relations industry flourish, change must begin at the academic level through a more diverse student and educator base" (Mundy, Lewton, Hicks, & Neptune, 2018, p. 139). Similarly, Brown, Waymer, and Zhou (2019) have noted that "diversity must start at the classroom level for emerging scholars to embrace diversity at the professional level" (p. 19).

Routinely performing curriculum assessment to determine the level of exposure and integration of diverse content is part of the accreditation process in many academic institutions, such as documenting the number of speakers with diverse backgrounds, but limited empirical data exist on the extent to which that exposure to diversity influences students' perspectives on diversity and inclusiveness in the world of work.

The goal of this research, therefore, was three-fold: first, to understand how students perceive issues associated with diversity in the public relations field, second, to determine if there are differences between public relations and non-public relations students in their level of exposure to diversity within their academic programs, and third, to examine if that exposure played a role in their perceptions. Understanding students' perceptions can help educators identify gaps in the curriculum and prepare students for a diverse workforce. This study focuses only on cultural diversity, which entails race and ethnicity (Sha, 2006), two of the elements included in the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) diversity requirements, but with the understanding that diversity goes beyond these two elements. This study also contributes to the existing literature on diversity issues in public relations and provides a unique student perspective that can generate useful class discussions.

Literature Review

Although diversity has increasingly become part of organizations' everyday language and is addressed from various perspectives (Brunner, 2009), there has been no singular conceptual definition, which makes some organizations view it as a vague and amorphous concept when they attempt to adopt it (Austin, 2010). Several definitions have emerged that range from viewing diversity simply as the differences that exist among people, like race, ethnicity, and culture (Pompper, 2004, 2005; Sha, 2006; Turk, 2006) to a more complex multi-dimensional concept. PRSA's definition includes differences in cultures, disciplines, ideals, gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation in its conceptualization of diversity (Fiske et al., 2016). To simplify it, Turk (2006) suggested viewing diversity as having two dimensions: the primary dimension entails unchangeable characteristics (e.g., age, sex, nationality, race, and ethnicity), while the second dimension entails changeable ones (e.g.,

religion, geographics, marital status, and military service). Diversity has also been defined in terms of minority versus majority, where minorities are defined as a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment (Austin, 2010; Gibbons, L. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). In the past three decades, scholars have viewed diversity within organizations as a public relations responsibility (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Kern-Foxworth, 1989; L. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Mundy, 2016). Mundy (2016) views this responsibility to include the development of internal policies that support individuals professionally while responding to the external cultural mandates from the communities that the organizations serve. Such responsibility requires the integration of diversity in public relations education and other forms of training for professionals to effectively carry it out. As Ki and Khang (2008) have suggested, an education that incorporates cultural diversity is likely to make students aware that diversity can be a key element for improved public relations practice.

Diversity Issues in the Public Relations Practice

Excellent public relations practice includes having diverse professionals included in all roles so that decisions and communications can have varying viewpoints (Bowen, 2009; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992). As proponents of the excellence model of public relations (e.g., Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; Roper, 2005) have emphasized, diversity is critical for the success of any organization, but this would require sensitivity of diversity issues among those in decision-making positions. However, as Mundy, et al. (2018) observe, it is the multicultural professionals who are more likely to view the importance of recruiting employees with diverse backgrounds compared to their white counterparts or those in management positions.

Scholars have also continued to examine the intersectionality

of gender and race where few female minorities and those of different sexual orientation venture into the public relations profession (Brown et al., 2011; Mundy, 2015, 2016; Tindall, 2009; Tindall & Waters, 2012). Recent studies have also focused on men as the underrepresented gender in the public relations field (Brown et al., 2019; Pompper & Jung, 2013), although they earn more than women (Chitkara, 2018) and are more likely to get promoted and to occupy management positions. What is missing in public relations scholarship is studies about gay men (Tindall & Waters, 2012). The industry has gradually acknowledged this gap and made some efforts, albeit minimal, such as Fleishman-Hillard's "Out Front" program, which targets LGBT audiences (Tindall & Waters, 2017).

Issues related to cultural diversity in public relations education and practice range from underrepresentation and the status of racial/ethnic minorities to problems with career advancement and job satisfaction (e.g., Abeyta & Hackett, 2002; Elsasser, 2018; Ki & Khang, 2008; Pompper, 2004; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). Racial and ethnic underrepresentation in the public relations profession has been on researchers' radar for three decades (e.g., Austin, 2010; Brown et al., 2019; Kern-Foxworth, Gandy, Hines, & Miller, 1994; Len-Rios, 1998; Poindexter, Smith, & Heider, 2003; Pompper, 2004; Pompper & Jung, 2013). A survey by Business Planning and Research International (BPRI, 2005) found only 17% of practitioners considered themselves racial/ethnic minorities, although senior management felt the need for improvement in recruiting and hiring minorities at all levels. More than a decade later, only an estimated 19% of public relations professionals are non-white (Elsasser, 2018), which indicates room for improvement, particularly in providing access to management positions (Mundy, 2016).

Although the racial/ethnic makeup has gradually improved within organizations, issues related to the promotion of racial/ethnic minorities, especially women who rise to the senior management level,

have consistently emerged (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Pompper, 2004, 2005; Simpson, 2018). CPRE (2015) has observed that many racial/ethnic minorities fall out of public relations from their organizations or the practice entirely somewhere between earning a degree and staying long enough for promotion, which is about five years. Several reasons that prevent them from rising to senior management level include discrimination, limited opportunities for career advancement, being overlooked or underappreciated, and only being assigned to minority-related campaigns or public affairs projects (Brown et al., 2011; Pompper, 2004).

Cultural diversity in public relations education has also been a major concern. Despite its popularity compared to other mass communication areas (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2009), the public relations discipline has not been equally attractive to racial/ethnic minorities both among faculty and students (Brown et al., 2011). Part of this shortage has been associated with the lack of role models, mentors for young professionals or success stories about minorities in public relations (Maul, 2008; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). Studies have indicated the importance of career role models and noted cultural diversity at the senior level of management in the public relations industry as critical not only for current and prospective students but also for young professionals (Curtin & Gaither, 2006; Len-Rios, 1998; Qiu & Muturi, 2016).

Although professional organizations have provided some guidelines on how to diversify public relations education, there is a dearth of research that empirically examines barriers associated with diversification from the students' perspectives, specifically the level of exposure to diversity as they prepare to join the workforce. Mundy et al. (2018) suggested a focus on how diversity and multicultural perspectives are taught in the classroom and a commitment among educators to integrate diversity and inclusion-focused topics in the curriculum.

Perceptions of Race/Ethnicity Issues in Public Relations

How society views certain races/ethnicities reflects workplace perceptions and the nature of assignments given to them within an organization. Pre-existing racial/ethnic perceptions and stereotypes hinder hiring and progress in diversification. For example, all Hispanics are presumed to speak Spanish (Abeyta & Hackett, 2002) and Asian practitioners are seen as having a similar physical appearance— younger-looking, shorter, unable to speak English, and introverted (Ki & Khang, 2008). African-American stereotypes are associated with Black neighborhoods and with the physical appearance of males, which are based on misconceptions and ideas about male masculinity and sexuality (Tindall, 2009). The angry black woman and the welfare-mother stereotype are also consistent in media portrayals (Lind, 2013) and may have a strong influence on hiring decisions.

With limited racial or ethnic diversity, the public relations field has been a white-dominated profession where hiring culturally diverse professionals is an anomaly (Brown et al., 2019; Pompper, 2004), which led Layton (1980) to reference the field as the "last of the lily-white professions" (p. 64). Agencies were historically uneasy about matching people of color with white clients (Layton, 1980), an issue that has faced many organizations more than two decades later, where minorities are commonly hired exclusively to communicate to consumers or publics in their minority group or to fill quotas (Brown et al., 2011; Pompper, 2004; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). Scholars have referred to these as "show positions" for minorities with no real policy-making input or development of their talent and careers (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995; Tindall, 2009). This issue has contributed to job dissatisfaction and lack of progress among racially/ethnically diverse public relations practitioners.

In a documentary about being Black in public relations, professionals underscored the small number of racial/ethnic minorities

and their everyday challenges, which include the lack of opportunities within their organizations to progress and advance their careers in the field, unlike their white counterparts (Simpson, 2018). Likewise, African-American students expressed discomfort about being assigned exclusively to campaigns aimed at their race, noting that "one of the reasons they were attracted to public relations, in the first place, was the potential for the variety of activities and they did not want to be pigeonholed or locked into any certain type of work" (Brown et al., 2011, p. 526).

Other challenges include discrimination and everyday racism, such as racial insensitivity in the form of comments, behaviors, and actions from colleagues and supervisors (Tindall, 2009). This implies that although hiring is important, retention is critical, and programs should address the specific needs of minority employees. Literature also suggests diversity-driven initiatives should go beyond recruiting and hiring a diverse workforce by focusing on determining ways to convey to stakeholders the benefits of a diverse workforce and by better integrating diversity values into organizational culture (Brunner, 2009; Mundy, 2015).

Public relations researchers have also identified gaps in the existing literature on issues that continue to hinder minorities' successes in the field. For example, in a study on framing diversity, Austin (2010) found that most studies focus primarily on Hispanic and Black populations, with only a limited focus on Asian Americans, Native Americans, the LGBTQ communities, and almost none on the Jewish community. Prior research has reported an absence of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, both as subjects of news and as reporters (Poindexter et al., 2003). Overall, several gaps exist in the literature concerning public relations employees who have a diverse racial/ethnic, religious background, and/or physical ability.

Awareness and sensitivity to diversity-related issues in public relations are important and necessary for change to occur. The profession

emphasizes the engagement of stakeholders and the critical role of research in understanding how to best meet their needs while building relationships. Public relations education is a step towards the necessary change in the profession, given that students are tomorrow's professionals. As one of the most promising majors for communication that provides students with ample career opportunities (DiStaso et al., 2009), public relations is an opportunity to sensitize students to these issues with the anticipation that they play a role in the needed change in the field.

Diversity Exposure in Public Relations Education

Diversity and inclusiveness in public relations education are addressed through recruiting a diverse faculty and student population and incorporating diversity-related topics within the curriculum (Brown et al., 2019; Brunner, 2005; Turk, 2006). ACEJMC (2018), the accrediting body of mass communication programs, has diversity as one of its standards to enhance diversity within the curriculum. The standard requires programs to develop diversity plans to address gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation; a curriculum that includes instructions on issues and perspectives related to diverse cultures in a global society; and an environment that is free of harassment and all forms of discrimination (ACEJMC, 2018). In achieving the curriculum requirements, ACEJMC recommends to either organize a stand-alone course or incorporate diversity in an array of courses. These requirements are set to help students understand how to communicate and work effectively in a diverse workplace and to keep pace with the changing demographics of the organization's external environment (Turk, 2006).

Professional organizations have also played a key role in facilitating diversity in public relations education by making recommendations and providing resources to the academy for higher education to expose students to diversity as they prepare to join the workforce. For example, ACEJMC (2018) requires programs to develop

curriculum and instruction that educate faculty and prepare students with diversity and multicultural knowledge, values, and skills, and to document their efforts to ensure representation of diverse races and ethnicities among the faculty and student body. Additionally, CPRE has developed curriculum guidelines that emphasize diversity and globalization (Turk, 2006), while the PRSA Foundation has created a book titled Diverse Voices, which features diverse professionals' challenges and success stories to enable educators to familiarize public relations students with racial/ethnicity issues in the field (Elsasser, 2018). Scholars have also provided examples on how to integrate diversity into the curriculum, such as in research designs and methodologies that recognize diversity (Pompper, 2005) and using examples or choosing textbooks that include minorities' roles to make students aware of the fundamental role of diversity in improving public relations (Ki & Khang, 2008). Exploring diversity in communication strategies (Curtin & Gaither, 2006) would also enhance the understanding of diversity and how to incorporate it into public relations education and programming.

Recruitment and retention of diverse students and faculty are crucial in diversity exposure within academia, although studies have continually raised concerns about racial and ethnic disparities in public relations education (e.g., Brunner, 2005; Fiske et al., 2016; Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Ki & Khang, 2008, Len-Rios, 1998; O'Dwyer, 2018; Tindall, 2009). As research has demonstrated, a key reason for students to select a major is the influence from interpersonal relationships with advisors, faculty, family, and friends, as well as prestige and job value (Brown et al., 2011). Parents especially have an influential role in a student's career choice. For instance, Asian American communities stress prestigious careers, such as law and medicine, while discouraging their college-age children from seeking education in service-oriented jobs such as public relations (Ki & Khang, 2008; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). To enhance

exposure, ACEJMC provided tips for the diversification of academic programs, some of which involve leadership talking about diversity regularly, forming diversity committees, aggressively recruiting minority students in high schools, creating student chapters, mentoring minority students, among other efforts (Ceppos, 2018).

Additional forms of exposure, which can be incorporated into the curriculum, include observances of public and diversity holidays celebrated by other cultures and populations. The PRSA Diversity and Inclusion toolkit lists several diversity holidays celebrated by various cultures and populations, such as Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday in January, Black History Month in February, Asian Pacific American Month in May, and Día de la Raza or Day of the Race in October, among others (Fiske et al., 2016). As Edwards (2011) argues, understanding diversity and experiencing it is important because public relations produces discourses that help constitute and sustain the relative positions of diverse groups in society, as well as in the profession itself. There are, however, gaps in evidence-based information on the effect of that experience on their perceptions of public relations and diversity-related issues.

Research Questions

RQ1: Do perceptions about race/ethnicity issues in public relations vary based on the participants' levels of diversity exposure?

RQ2: Does perceived knowledge about the public relations practice influence students' perceptions of race/ethnicity issues in the field?

RQ3: Is there an association between the level of diversity exposure and the perceived knowledge about the public relations profession?

RQ4: Does the number of mass communication courses taken have any influence on (a) diversity exposure and (b) race/ethnicity perceptions of public relations?

RQ5: Is there any significant difference between public relations students and those in other academic concentrations in (a) their perceptions of race/ethnicity issues and (b) diversity exposure?

Method

This study is based on an online survey administered to college students at a large Midwestern university ($N = 417$). The mass communication program has three sequences—advertising, journalism, and public relations—with approximately 600 enrolled majors and minors. All students enrolled in mass communication courses in the spring semester received the survey, which included majors, minors, and those taking electives or cross-listed courses between mass communication and other disciplines. Following approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects, the registrar's office provided the list of students with email addresses only. Each participant received an email generated from the Qualtrics survey system requesting them to participate in the survey. As indicated in the informed consent form, participation was voluntary, and only those who consented could proceed with the survey. The system sent three reminders to those who had not completed the survey after three, six, and nine weeks, respectively.

Measures

The main variable in this study was the students' perceptions of race/ethnicity issues in the public relations field. Other key variables included diversity exposure, perceived knowledge of the public relations profession, the number of courses taken in mass communication, and whether they were in mass communication and the public relations sequence. Demographic factors included age, gender, race/ethnicity, and year in college.

Perceptions of race/ethnicity issues in public relations were measured with 11 items adapted from several studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2011; Ki & Khang, 2008; Qiu & Muturi, 2016; Tindall, 2009). The

items asked participants to indicate their level of agreement with a list of statements that scholars have addressed as race/ethnicity issues in the public relations field. Statements included perceptions of public relations as a white-dominated profession; racial/ethnic minorities being assigned only to technician roles and racially/ethnically-based assignments; earning lower salaries; putting more effort in for the same amount of achievement as their White counterparts, and not making career progress due to their race/ethnicity. A 5-point Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) measured the items in the scale, which also had a reliable internal consistency (Cronbach α = .82).

Diversity exposure is the opportunity to interact with and learn from or about those with culturally diverse backgrounds in formal or informal settings. The scale was developed from reviewed literature, specifically from the ACEJMC diversity standards, PRSA recommendations, and several academic and professional publications (e.g., ACEJMC, 2018; Brown, et al., 2011; Brunner, 2005; CPRE, 2015; Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995; Edwards, 2011; Fiske et al., 2016; Ki & Khang, 2008). The questions focused on various opportunities where students can receive exposure to cultural diversity, such as enrolling in stand-alone diversity courses; enrolling in other courses that address race and ethnicity issues; completing assignments that require a diversity component; working on class projects with members of other races/ethnicities; having instructors or academic advisors with diverse backgrounds; or participating in guest lectures, internships, or service-learning projects that involved some diversity aspects. The items in this dichotomous variable were coded as 1 (yes) and 0 (no) and summed to create one composite variable "diversity exposure" with a possible total score of seven points (range of 0 to 7, M = 4.85, SD = 1.74; median = 5). The variable was then categorized as low exposure (below 3 points), moderate exposure (3-5 points) and high exposure (above 5 points).

Participants' perceived knowledge about public relations practices was measured by asking students how much they believed they were familiar with the profession. Previous studies have indicated the lack of knowledge among students, professionals, and personal influencers is a key deterrent in the diversification of the public relations practice (Ki & Khang, 2008; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). This was necessary because the survey was conducted among all students enrolled in communication courses, some of whom were not in public relations but may have learned or had perceptions about the field from other sources. The one-item measure "How knowledgeable are you about public relations practice?" had three options (1) "not knowledgeable at all," (2) "mildly knowledgeable," and (3) "very knowledgeable."

The survey was validated in multiple ways. First, face validity was established through reading the questionnaire multiple times by the researcher and research assistant to ensure that all questions were appropriately worded. Second, the data were cleaned to remove incomplete cases and to label the values appropriately based on the survey variables; also, negatively stated questions were reverse-coded. Gathering data online eliminated human errors that often occur in manual entry. This was followed by running study descriptives (frequencies and means) to verify that the data were error free. Finally, reliability analysis for the race/ethnicity perceptions was performed to determine internal consistency with an acceptable Cronbach's alpha of 0.70 (Taber, 2018).

Sample Characteristics

The sample was composed of 39% males ($n = 164$) and 61% females ($n = 253$), with an age range of 18 to 38 years. The sample was evenly distributed across undergraduates with 22% freshmen ($n = 93$), 20% sophomores ($n = 84$), 26% juniors ($n = 109$), and 27% seniors ($n = 111$). Only about 5% were graduate students ($n = 20$). The sample was predominantly Caucasian (82.5%), while ethnic minorities accounted for

about 18% (n = 73). About 68% of participants (n = 283) were in mass communication. Another 134 students (32%) were from other disciplines but enrolled in one or more mass communication courses. Among mass communication majors, 45% (n = 127) were in public relations and 55% were in other concentrations (advertising, journalism, or pre-majors).

About 228 students had taken fewer than three mass communication courses, and 216 (52%) had taken a mass communication course that had addressed diversity issues. Likewise, 290 students (70%) had taken a course outside of the mass communication discipline that had a diversity component. Among those who had taken fewer than three courses (n = 228), only 29% (n = 67) indicated a high diversity exposure. The majority of them (n = 129) were moderately exposed to diversity issues (3-5 points), while 32 students (14%) had limited exposure to diversity (< 3 points). Overall, public relations students had slightly more exposure to diversity (M = 5.13, SD = 1.58) compared to others in the mass communication field (M = 4.73, SD = 1.79). About 49% (n = 62) had moderate exposure, while 46% (n = 58) reported high exposure to diversity, and only 7 public relations students (6%) reported low exposure compared to 31 (11%) non-public relations student in that category.

Results

The first research question (RQ1) examined if the students' levels of diversity exposure affected their perceptions of race/ethnicity issues in public relations. Overall, students had low perceptions of racial/ethnicity issues in public relations (M = 2.31, SD = .724), which means they did not agree with the statements that reflected diversity issues in the field. Results show that diversity exposure was not a significant predictor of students' perceptions of race/ethnicity issues (β = -.007, t =-.152, p > .05). This means there was no relationship between students' perceptions about race/ethnicity issues in the field and their exposure to diversity. Those who were more exposed to diversity in various forms were not more likely to

be aware or concerned about race/ethnicity-related issues in the public relations profession.

The second research question (RQ2) examined if participants' perceived knowledge about the public relations profession had any influence on their perception of race/ethnicity issues in the field. The majority (73%) of the students reported being mildly knowledgeable about public relations practices ($n = 305$), 14% indicated being very knowledgeable ($n = 57$), while (13%) were not knowledgeable at all ($n = 55$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed, and the results showed that their perceived knowledge about the profession significantly influenced how they perceived race/ethnicity issues in the field ($F (2, 414) = 4.077, p < .05$). A Bonferroni post-hoc analysis showed significant differences between those who perceived themselves as very knowledgeable and those who were not at all knowledgeable about the public relations profession ($p < .05$), but no other differences were observed.

The third research question (RQ3) examined the association between students' perceived knowledge of public relations practice and the level of diversity exposure. Pearson's Chi-Square analysis showed a significant association ($\chi2 = 15.009, df = 4, p < .05$). Among those who perceived themselves as very knowledgeable about public relations (54%) were more exposed to diversity issues, whereas the majority of those who were mildly knowledgeable indicated low diversity exposure (63%).

The fourth research question (RQ4) focused on the number of mass communication courses taken by the time of the survey and how it affected students' diversity exposure and their perceptions of ethnicity issues in public relations. Results from one-way ANOVA show that the number of courses taken in mass communication also influenced diversity exposure [$F (3, 413) = 11.069, p < .001$]. A Bonferroni post-hoc analysis showed variation in diversity exposure among those who had taken one

or two mass communication courses and all other groups. Similarly, there was variation in the perceptions of race/ethnicity issues in public relations based on the number of courses taken in the discipline [F (3, 413) = 2.960, $p < .05$]. A post-hoc analysis also showed specific differences in ethnicity perceptions between those who had taken one or two courses and those who had taken three or four courses ($p < .05$).

The final research question (RQ5) examined if public relations students' perceptions of ethnicity issues in the field and their exposure to diversity differed from all the other students. T-test analyses indicated a significant difference between those who were in public relations ($n = 127$) and other participants ($n = 290$) in their perceptions of race/ethnicity issues in public relations ($t = -4.755$, $df = 291$, $p < .001$). Participants in the public relations concentration were less in agreement with the statements on race/ethnicity perceptions ($M = 2.08$, $SD = .610$) compared to other students ($M = 2.41$, $SD = .748$), with a moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = .49$). There was also a significant difference between diversity exposure between public relations students and others ($t = 2.318$, $df = 270$, $p < .05$). Those who are in public relations reported more exposure to diversity ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.58$) compared to others ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.79$) but with a relatively small effect size (Cohen's $d = .24$).

Discussion

Most of the literature has explored diversity issues in public relations from a professional's perspective, specifically on the underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minorities, their experiences, and challenges for succeeding in the field. Extant literature has also focused on the need for diversity in public relations education, from recruitment and retention to curriculum adjustments to incorporate diversity-related content and experiences for students as they prepare for a diverse workforce. The current study focused on students' perspectives to understand how they perceive race/ethnicity issues in the public relations

field and the extent of their exposure to diversity, which is important in determining gaps in the curriculum and other forms of diversity exposure. As one of the most popular mass communication disciplines (DiStaso et al., 2009), public relations attracts students from a variety of academic backgrounds (e.g., agriculture, marketing, fashion and design, tourism, public health), given its relevance and applicability across disciplines. Although they are likely to be exposed to diversity from other disciplines, it is equally important for them to understand the critical role it plays and the diversity-related issues in the public relations field prior to joining the workforce.

Despite the emphasis on diversity in the field, results from the current study did not find diversity exposure to significantly influence how students perceived race/ethnicity issues in public relations. Overall, students had moderate exposure to diversity and a low level of perceptions about race/ethnicity-related issues in public relations practice. This is possibly due to the lack of focus on discipline-specific diversity issues in the courses taken or informally through participation in diversity-related events and activities during their academic career. The current study found about 48% of all participants had not taken a mass communication course that focused on diversity, 35% had not participated in multicultural or diversity-related events, and about 28% had not worked an internship or other projects outside of class that included people with diverse backgrounds, all missed opportunities for experiencing diversity.

There was an association between the number of courses taken in mass communication and students' perceived knowledge about public relations practice. Previous research has associated the lack of knowledge about public relations with misconceptions about the profession (Bowen, 2009). As current results have shown, public relations students were more knowledgeable about the practice, as expected, and more exposed to diversity-related issues. They were also more likely to learn about

the profession, including diversity-related topics. About 64% of public relations students had taken a course where the instructor addressed some aspect of diversity. They were also likely to learn about diversity issues through interacting with professionals and guest speakers, as well as participating in student activities and clubs, including Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) and internship programs that are likely to expose them to diversity issues.

Implications

This study has several implications for public relations education and, consequently, practices. First, there is a need to expose students to discipline-related diversity, focusing more on various elements organizations face in the diversification of the profession. Although institutions have made efforts to diversify through offering diversity-related courses, recruitment, and retention of culturally diverse students and faculty, it is also important not only to sensitize students about cultural diversity issues but also challenge them to develop workable solutions and strategies that they may apply once they join the workforce.

Second, diversity is a broad term with multiple meanings, and public relations education could focus on various aspects in a separate class to provide a clear understanding of various issues in the field. For instance, in addition to introducing a stand-alone course on diversity, which ACEJMC (2018) recommends, it is important to introduce discipline-related content at various academic levels and to focus on different aspects (race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and so on), so students are more sensitized throughout their curriculum. For example, CPRE recommends an ethics course for public relations programs (Bortree, Bowen, Silverman, & Sriramesh, 2018) and building a discipline-specific diversity unit into that course and other required courses would enhance exposure and understanding of how to ethically work with a diverse population.

Third, recruiting students from diverse backgrounds, retaining students, providing academic and career mentoring, and creating supportive environments where they can thrive would enhance diversity in public relations education. However, addressing diversity within the curriculum is not a walk-in-the-park for all instructors. To some, it can be a rather sensitive issue that requires a concerted effort and skill to incorporate effectively into existing curricula. This implies the need for policies and resources to support diversification not only at the institutional level but also within specific units to support faculty to develop skills for a diversity-focused education.

In addition to using textbooks and other professional materials as recommended in previous research (Ki & Khang, 2008), it is important to also provide opportunities for professionals from diverse backgrounds to contribute to public relations education within and outside the curriculum. With institutional support, this may take the form of guest speakers, job shadowing, career mentoring programs, internships, and getting involved in student clubs (e.g., PRSSA) and other organizations that attract a diverse group of students, all of which are likely to enhance students' understanding of diversity while sensitizing them to discipline-specific issues.

Limitations

This study had a few limitations that need to be taken into consideration in future studies. First, it was conducted in one school and, therefore, not generalizable to other public relations programs nationally. Second, the make-up of respondents who were predominantly Caucasian also affects generalizability. However, as CPRE (2015) indicated, ethnic and racial diversity is an issue on some campuses but not all, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. It is, therefore, important to examine different situations from each institution or similar institutions, especially in developing policies and strategies that apply to each

situation. Furthermore, the study may have issues of external validity due to self-reporting, although reliable internal consistency was attained in all scales ($\alpha > .70$). The study also relied only on associations and, therefore, cannot assume any causal linkages. Despite these limitations, the study provides insights that may be useful in curriculum revisions as mass communication programs seek to incorporate diversity much better to meet accreditation requirements while preparing students for successful careers in a diverse workforce.

Conclusion

The need for organizations to cater to diverse publics becomes more evident as the U.S. population continues to diversify, and academic programs play a key role in meeting that need. With an emphasis on diversity, communication and public relations programs focus on strategies to reach and build strong relationships with a diverse customer more effectively. A lack of diversity within an organization and among key stakeholders may, therefore, be viewed as a public relations problem and may demonstrate gaps in training for public relations professionals.

Understanding and incorporating diversity within organizations is one of the key principles of excellence in public relations practice (Dozier et al., 1995; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992). Excellence, however, can only occur when practitioners are well prepared to address all the necessary aspects, and diversity plays a significant role in creating it. This starts with understanding the existing gaps and addressing them using a multi-dimensional approach—research, education, and practice. The current study examined the issue from students' perspectives to provide insights for public relations education.

Further research to validate the survey used in the current study in different diversity contexts (cultural, geographical, socioeconomic), replicate it in racially diverse institutions, or conduct a comparative study in institutions across the country could provide useful insights for

public relations education. Additionally, research that places focus on other aspects of diversity and different stakeholders is recommended. For instance, investigations into public relations managers' perceptions of diversity and the challenges they face in diversifying the workplace would be a valuable contribution. Given that diversifying the workforce is viewed as a public relations responsibility, it would be important to examine how employers view diversity, their likelihood of supporting it, and the role of public relations within organizations.

From an education perspective, mass communication faculty play a vital role in influencing perceptions about the public relations field. Understanding their perspectives about diversity in the discipline and how they incorporate it into their courses and the overall curriculum is an area that requires research. Other areas of diversity that require more empirical studies include ageism, classism, disability, sexual orientation, and other socio-cultural and ideological differences in public relations practice. As programs strive towards diversity as part of excellence in public relations, it is important to document success in diversification, such as job satisfaction, empowerment efforts, and the potential for career progression in the practice among ethnic minorities and other diverse groups.

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