

Millennials' Perceptions About Diversity in Their PR Agencies¹

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By **Tiffany Derville Gallicano**²

University of Oregon

Abstract

Public relations agencies have been under fire for their lack of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity at senior management levels (Fiske, 2011; PR Week, 2001a). Agencies have responded by focusing on recruiting a pipeline of racially and ethnically diverse talent. This study explores the perceptions of the Millennials who are part of this diverse pipeline, as well as the perceptions of Millennials with dominant identity markers, to explore perceptions of agencies' commitment to diversity and respondents' identification of diversity problems through online asynchronous discussion groups with 51 participants.

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² Address correspondence to Tiffany Gallicano, School of Journalism and Communication, 1275 University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403-1275; Email: derville@uoregon.edu.

Millennials' Perceptions About Diversity in Their PR Agencies

A recent PR Week (2011a) editorial admonished public relations agencies for not embracing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity at senior levels of management. It pointed out that most practitioners are women; however, men tend to occupy senior levels in agencies, and women earn far less than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the editorial pointed out that every senior executive featured in the top 12 agency profiles of PR Week's annual Agency Business Report was Caucasian, and 10 of the 12 top agency executives were men. In response to the PR Week editorial, Rosanna Fiske (2011), then-chair and CEO of PRSA, wrote a letter that stated, "Your editorial calling for answers to the lack of diversity at agencies is both welcomed and timely" (p. 23). Although diversity includes various identity markers, for the purpose of this study, the term "diversity" is delimited to any identity marker that is related to gender, ethnicity, or race.

Despite the paucity of diversity in public relations agencies, there are signs of efforts to change. For example, Fleishman-Hillard (2012) has a paid six- to 12-month fellowship program for college seniors and recent graduates who are ethnically/racially diverse. Meanwhile, Edelman (2005) developed a program to recruit employees from historically black colleges and universities, and it launched a pilot mentoring program. Porter Novelli partnered with Together Our Resources Can Help (TORCH), a nonprofit that provides opportunities to underserved students in New York City public high schools (PR Week, 2011b). Porter Novelli gave an eight-week PR101 course to more than 40 TORCH students, raised \$100,000 for the nonprofit organization, hired TORCH interns, and assigned TORCH students to Porter Novelli mentors (PR Week, 2011b).

Thus, a key strategy by agencies is to build a pipeline of diverse practitioners. In the coming years, this pipeline could generate diverse practitioners serving at all ranks in agencies. On the road there, it is imperative that public relations agencies cultivate strong relationships with Millennials, which is why this study is focused on this generational group, which was born in 1982 or later (see

Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010; Winograd & Hais, 2009). After all, Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the workplace, and Millennials are the largest generation in the workplace (Armour, 2005). Nearly 40 percent of Millennials represent at least one racial or ethnic group described by the acronym AHANA³, which stands for African-American/Hispanic/Asian/Native American (Abram, 2007); 20 percent of Millennials are immigrants or the children of immigrants; and Millennials are more likely than other generations to have come from multiracial families (Baggott, 2009).

Beyond the fact that agencies are confronting criticism about their lack of diversity, it is especially interesting to examine Millennials' experiences in the setting of public relations agencies because in this setting, most co-workers and supervisors are public relations practitioners. Thus, public relations practitioners are largely responsible for the work environments that this study's participants experience. Although trade literature addresses exciting diversity initiatives by public relations agencies, it is important to see how the incoming generation of diverse practitioners is actually doing in the agency environment. This qualitative study of Millennial agency practitioners explores the perceptions of Millennials who are diverse by at least gender, race, or ethnicity, in addition to the perceptions of Millennials who have dominant identity markers, such as being Caucasian, male, or both. The latter group is important to include because they contribute to the workplace environment, so their perceptions of diversity and attitudes toward it are important to examine.

Literature Review

Underneath visible signs of diversity problems, evident through the underrepresentation of female and AHANA public relations professionals in top agency positions, lie a host of discrimination issues. This conceptualization section begins with a summary of these issues and then presents research that demonstrates problems with colorblind and gender-blind solutions. After discarding

³ I use acronyms such as AHANA in this paper rather than "minority," "people of color," or non-White unless quoting a source. "Minority" could sound pejorative, "people of color" contributes to the erasure of "White" as a color (thus making it harder to recognize that "White" has a meaning), and non-White constructs "White" as the center or norm.

this approach to change, a theoretical framework is presented for this study: Guinier and Torres' (2002) work on power relations.

This study's inclusion of perceptions from female and AHANA Millennials provides perspectives regarding diversity efforts in the agency workplace (or lack thereof) and areas of improvement from the target audiences' perspectives. If the solution to improving outcomes for females and AHANA practitioners requires a collaborative approach to changing power relations, as Guinier and Torres would argue, then the inclusion of Millennials with dominant identity markers (e.g., male and Caucasian) is insightful for this study, which is particularly interesting given Millennials' proclivity for collaboration (see Tapscott, 2009). Furthermore, as noted above, all employees in a workplace contribute to the experiences of female and AHANA employees, so it is imperative to understand attitudes toward diversity by Millennials with dominant identity markers.

Discrimination

To appreciate the need for diversity research in the workplace and understand previously documented problems, this article explores racial/ethnic discrimination, followed by gender discrimination, in the context of public relations practitioners' experiences. This section concludes with research about discrimination among Millennials in the context of public relations agencies, which is also relevant to this study.

Racial/ethnic discrimination. AHANA practitioners have commonly reported barriers to advancing into senior positions (Ford & Applebaum, 2005; Len-Rios, 1998; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993), lack of promotion (Ford & Applebaum, 2005; Len Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993), salary discrimination (Kern-Foxworth, 1989b; Zerbinos and Clanton, 1993), not feeling like they are part of the organization's informal network (Mastin, 1993), and primarily being hired to work on race-related projects, which is known as pigeon-holing (Ferreira, 1993; Tillery-Larkin, 1999; Yamashita, 1992).

A contemporary challenge faced by AHANA practitioners is microinequities (Ki, 2005; Tindall, 2007). A *microinequity* is a slight against someone that contributes to an environment in which a

person does not feel as though he or she fits in (Rowe, 1990; Career World, 2006; Young, 2006). The idea of “micro” is that it is hard for observers to recognize it; however, the term does not suggest that the infraction is trivial; in fact, it tends to signal greater problems (Rowe, 1990; Young, 2006).

Moreover, it is the cumulative power of microinequities that give them weight in the workplace (Rowe, 1990; Young, 2006). The idea of “inequity” is that the fallout occurs in the workplace and is related to the person’s otherness rather than to the person’s performance (Rowe, 1990).

Microinequities occur anywhere someone is perceived to be different (Rowe, 1990). In contrast, micro-affirmations (Rowe, 1990), also known as micro-advantages (Young, 2006), are small gestures that reinforce a person’s value.

Examples of microinequities include not being introduced, feeling isolated at an employee or client event, being excluded from an informal meeting, hearing careless remarks that are based on stereotypes, having one’s name consistently mispronounced by co-workers, and being exposed to humor that accentuates stereotypes (Rowe, 2006; Rowe, 1990). Microinequities often become apparent by comparison; for example, “when one worker is greeted with a polite how-do-you-do while the guy next door gets a playful pretend-punch, it’s clear in an instant who is in the inner circle and who isn’t” (Rowe, 2006, p.80). Other examples include multitasking while someone is speaking and having fun nicknames with only certain employees (Rowe, 2006).

Employees can be sensitive to microinequities by considering whom they listen to and whom they ignore, whom they include and exclude, and whom they compliment and whom they overlook (Moynahan, 2008). In addition, employees need to attend to nonverbal signals, such as facial expressions, tone, eye contact (or lack thereof), and gestures (Young, 2006). When training an executive to recognize inequities, Young, a former chief diversity officer at JPMorgan Chase, engages in role-play exercises in which he exhibits increasingly less interest in what the executive has to say; executives from companies such as Campbell Soup have praised this method (Rowe, 2006).

In the context of public relations research, Asian-American participants in Ki's (2005) study reported that they struggled with being taken seriously by clients due to their youthful appearance and had their names mispronounced frequently. An African-American in Tindall's (2007) study was asked to change her name because it sounded "too ethnic" (p. 167). Many African-American respondents in Pompper's (2004) study expressed dissatisfaction with their work environment and doubted that it would improve. AHANA practitioners who are also female, LGBT, or both encounter layered barriers (Pompper, 2007; Tindall, 2007).

Another problem is *tokenism*, also known as *compensatory feminism*, which occurs when AHANA practitioners/women are placed in visible positions to show they can succeed, although they have little influence in the organization (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Wrigley, 2002). Placing diverse people in visible positions is a way that some organizations attempt to alleviate criticism without changing their business cultures or structures (Guinier & Torres, 2002). By promoting certain individuals to high-level positions, senior managers can argue that the only barriers to reaching the top are self-imposed rather than structural (Guinier & Torres, 2002).

AHANA practitioners have used several strategies in the workplace to overcome these challenges. A key strategy is having a mentor, which is "essential to the empowerment of minority public relations practitioners" (Tindall, 2007, p. 187; also see Ford & Applebaum, 2005). Another common strategy is *overcompensating*, in which AHANA practitioners do "more in the hope and effort to be viewed as competent, credible, and capable" (Tindall, 2007, p. 188; also see Pompper, 2004). African-American public relations students reported that they expect to use this strategy in the workplace (Brown, White, & Waymer, 2011). Some African-American practitioners in Pompper's (2004) study also shared that switching jobs was a way to increase their salaries and job opportunities, which is known as *out-spiraling career moves* (see Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Public relations practitioners also commonly use humor to alleviate situations that threaten members of a dominant group or to diffuse offensive remarks (Tindall, 2007). Other strategies include developing

resilience to discrimination, quitting, demanding respect, educating clients and supervisors, and increasing the number of AHANA practitioners and business owners (Pompper, 2007). In addition, AHANA practitioners use *bicultural* as a survival strategy to slip between their world and the restricted environments they occupy:

From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting “White,” then shifting to “Black” again, shifting “corporate,” shifting cool. And shifting is often internal, invisible. It’s the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness – often a consequence of living amidst racial and gender bias. (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, cited in Tindall, 2007)

African-American and Hispanic practitioners in Tindall’s (2007) research and African-American respondents in Ford & Applebaum’s (2005) study commonly engaged in biculturalism by shifting between cultures in the workplace and had achieved *bicultural efficiency*, which refers to the ability to shift effectively between cultures. These strategies are individual survival mechanisms that do not change the organizational system.

Discrimination can also result from the *White leader prototype*, which refers to “the notion that leaders in public relations are (or should be) White, which reproduces Whites as actual leaders in a self-sustaining system that makes White leadership appear normal, neutral, and natural, rather than a result of racialized practices” (Logan, 2011, p. 443). The idea of hidden racialized practices is supported by Edwards’ (2010) study in which practitioners experienced difficulty with accounting for race as the reason for their unequal treatment.

Gender discrimination. Barriers that female practitioners face include sexual harassment (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2001; Serini, Toth, Wright, & Emig, 1998), tokenism (Grunig, et al., 2001; Wrigley, 2002), the glass ceiling (Tindall, 2007; Wrigley, 2002), and salary discrimination (Dozier, Sha, & Okura, 2007). Female practitioners also confront the “PR bunny” stereotype, which occurs

when women are reduced to their physical attributes as a combination of sexism, lookism, and ageism (Frölich & Peters, 2007).

Examining men's perceptions of gender discrimination is also important because men tend to be in power positions that give them the ability to change organizational structures (for example, by hiring and promoting diverse employees). Public relations scholars have found that male practitioners and male public relations students do not sufficiently recognize gender discrimination (Grunig et al., 2001; Sha & Toth, 2005); in fact, men perceive more gender equity than women actually experience (Lariscy, Sallot, & Cameron, 1996). Also, some men who agree that gender discrimination could occur do not think it happens in their organizations (Serini et al., 1998). These findings support the idea that diversity-related problems can occur without perpetrators or bystanders noticing them, and contemporary forms of discrimination tend to be subtle (Tindall, 2007).

Both male and female practitioners have expressed struggles with maintaining a healthy work-life balance, and non-parents have complained about the unfair privileges that parents seem to get with regard to flexible leave policies and professional responsibilities (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008). In turn, parents complain when they are held to the expectations that some non-parents have with regard to working until seven- or eight-o'clock at night (Aldoory et al., 2008).

Millennials and discrimination. Prior research about Millennial employees in public relations agencies suggests that more work needs to be done to create strong relationships with diverse Millennials (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012). Specifically, men were found to be substantially more likely than women to believe that their agency believes their opinions are legitimate, and they were more likely than women to be satisfied with their influence in the relationship. Although women's and men's salaries did not significantly differ, AHANA practitioners reported much lower salaries than their counterparts and had far more negative perceptions than Caucasian practitioners about the extent to which their agencies were committed to a relationship with them. In addition, AHANA Millennial practitioners reported feeling significantly more

constrained than Caucasian Millennial practitioners with regard to job security (Curtin, Gallicano, & Matthews, 2011). The next section of this literature review critiques an outdated approach to discrimination, which is to use a colorblind or gender-blind framework.

Problems With Colorblind and Gender-Blind Approaches

Scholars such as Pompper (2005) have discredited the notion that people are colorblind in the sense that race does not influence their perceptions and actions. Guinier and Torres (2002) summarized three problems with the colorblind approach: “(1) it assumes that racial inequality is a problem of individuals; (2) in so doing, it masks entrenched racial inequality; and (3) it acts as a brake on grassroots organizing” (p. 43). Assuming that racial inequality is an individual rather than a collective problem suggests that race has only historical, outdated meanings that have no social or political implications today. Locating racial inequality as a problem within individuals strategically prescribes the solution within the individual rather than at the levels of departments, organizations, and society. A colorblind approach discourages people from identifying racially based inequalities, and solutions that are crafted to change the system are discouraged. The arguments against colorblindness also apply to gender-blind ideologies (Dr. Lynn Weber, personal communication, March 4, 2003).

The colorblind approach also results in problematic views of Whiteness⁴. One view is that White is perceived as invisible in the sense that some White people do not notice their race, do not recognize the history of their color, and see their color as a default non-color, viewing it as the center from which societal norms develop (Jackson, 1999; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Munshi & Edwards, 2011). White people described by these characteristics do not have to negotiate race as part of the identities and lack self-consciousness about how people of other races perceive them (Pajaczkowska & Young, 1992). In addition, some people confuse Whiteness with nationality by associating it with the United States, which marginalizes residents who are not White (Jackson, 1999; Nakayama & Krizek,

⁴ The term “White” is used in this section rather than “Caucasian” to emphasize the privilege that accompanies the skin color, regardless of differences that could exist with regard to ethnicity (see Nakayama & Krizek, 1995).

1995). Men in Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) study were especially likely to confuse race with ethnicity, and in the same study, a small group of participants who recognized their Whiteness in relation to their European ancestry did not explicitly recognize the historical power dimensions that accompanied their identity.

Although White participants in studies have tended to be apathetic about their race and embrace the illusion of colorblindness instead of paying attention to it (Jackson, 1999; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), developing White practitioners' self-awareness of how their skin color affects interactions – even in small ways – can result in micro-revolutionary work by making advancements toward justice in small but meaningful ways (Vardeman-Winter, 2011). In light of the problems with a colorblind and gender-blind approach to discrimination, this paper offers Guinier and Torres' (2002) power relations framework as a powerful approach to structural change.

Power Relations

Guinier and Torres' (2002) work on the three dimensions of power can be applied to partially illustrate why AHANA and female practitioners are still not adequately represented at all ranks in agencies and how the structure can be changed to alter this outcome. The first dimension of power is direct competition in which people fighting oppression are pitted against each other in a zero sum game (in this case, the game is advancing in one's career). Instead of working against each other for a limited number of "diverse" spots, diverse practitioners can instead focus on building alliances across forms of oppression and reject tokenism (see Grunig et al., 2001). Their efforts can be supported by practitioners with dominant identity markers.

The second dimension is the game's formal and informal rules that shape the game's outcome (Guinier & Torres, 2002). For example, Edelman (2005) discussed the informal rule common to public relations agencies of primarily recruiting new talent based on employee referrals and word of mouth communication with connected people; for example, four of his agency's recent interns at the time were children of his friends. As Edelman explained, this type of rule results in recruiting talent

into the pipeline that tends to be privileged. An example of a formal rule that can help change the outcome of the game is Bank of America's rule in which senior executives receive financial incentives when they hire, promote, and retain AHANA employees (CareerBuilder.com, n.d.).

Finally, the third dimension of power refers to the right to influence decisions and opportunities, and psychological factors commonly play a role in this dimension (Guinier & Torres, 2002). The White leader prototype (Logan, 2011); the male leader prototype, as identified in this study; and tokenism (Grunig et al., 2001) are examples of phenomena that can psychologically work against the ability of female and AHANA practitioners to confidently and meaningfully participate in opportunities and decisions, and these phenomena can be used to undermine their legitimacy (e.g., "We have 'token' black people on our teams"). Agencies need to be aware of the negative psychological phenomena they need to overcome by finding ways to demonstrate that female and AHANA practitioners have influence on their decisions.

Research Questions

As previously discussed, there is a significant history of discrimination among public relations employees based on race/ethnicity and gender (e.g., Ford & Applebaum, 2005; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001; Kern-Foxworth, 1989b; Ki, 2005; Tindall, 2007; Wrigley, 2002; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993). Furthermore, recent research suggests that agencies need to do a better job of valuing their diverse Millennial employees (Curtin et al., 2011; Gallicano et al., 2012). To explore this issue further, this study investigates Millennials' perceptions about their agencies' commitment to diversity through the following research question:

RQ 1: Do Millennial employees think their public relations agencies value diversity and why or why not?

It is important to include the opinions of not only AHANA and female employees but also employees who have dominant identity markers, such as Caucasian men. The inclusion of employees with dominant identity markers is important because they contribute to diverse employees'

environment (at least through microinequalities and microaffirmations), and it is important to explore their sensitivity to diversity issues, especially given the approach to power relations by Guinier and Torres (2002), which involves building allegiances to reject discrimination and tokenism at the first level of power. Furthermore, at the second and third levels of power, it is important to explore support (or lack of support) among all employees for their agencies' rules and opportunities that could ultimately result in structural improvements to the representation of diverse employees in top positions at agencies.

A second research question was explored to identify fairness issues that Millennials confront:

RQ 2: Do Millennial agency employees see any challenges at their public relations agencies based on gender, race/ethnicity, or something similar, and if so, what problems do they identify?

Participants with dominant identity markers (e.g., Caucasian men) were included in this question to discover their awareness of inequities that co-workers face and provide a sense about the extent to which participants recognize the privileges that accompany their dominant identity markers. The opinions of AHANA and female practitioners were sought because they are the most likely groups to detect challenges based on race/ethnicity, gender, or both due to their personal experiences.

Method

The research was conducted through online, asynchronous discussion groups, which was an appropriate method for Millennial Generation participants (see Stewart & Williams, 2005). Asynchronous online discussion groups have many advantages. Participants can share more openly than they might otherwise do because of the lack of face-to-face interaction and the assignment of a pseudonym (Houston, 2008; Oringderff, 2004; Valaitis & Sword, 2005). In addition, researchers have found that this method results in more deeply reflective monologues and the sharing of more personal stories and emotions than would result from a face-to-face focus group (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006). Also, the balance of conversation tends to be more equal in an asynchronous online discussion

group than it is in face-to-face focus groups, and every participant responds to every question asked (Graffigna & Bosio, 2006).

Recruitment

For a prior stage of this study, a survey was conducted, and participants were invited at the end of the survey to contact me if they wanted information about participating in an online discussion group that would include a \$100 incentive. Interested participants then received information about the discussion group procedures, and those who were interested provided their informed consent to participate. Of this study's 51 participants, 40 volunteered from the survey. Survey participants had been recruited from Twitter, Facebook, and public relations blogs, as well as an email to PRSA members with two years of experience or fewer. I attempted to fill all remaining spots with participants who were racially/ethnically diverse; however, despite reaching out to diverse communication organizations and diverse interest groups of communication organizations for help, my efforts resulted in recruiting only one African-American participant. A few of the remaining spots were filled by my former students, and serendipitously, some of my participants decided to tell their friends about the opportunity, many of whom happened to be racially/ethnically diverse, and I enrolled them in the study after receiving their informed consent.

Procedures

Focus Forums was used for the discussion group software. Participants could not see future questions or how other participants answered each question until they had responded. Upon responding, participants read and commented on other people's answers. Participants often asked each other follow-up questions and responded to each other's answers. The software also enabled me to ask private probes that only the participant could see or public probes in which other respondents could add their comments.

I invited participants to share their age, gender, race, ethnicity, and salary with me prior to the first day of the discussion groups for demographic purposes, and I let them know that they did not

need to share this information unless they were comfortable doing so. Nearly all participants shared their information, and any participant who was not solely Caucasian was placed into the same discussion group. Unfortunately, there were not separate discussion groups for each race and ethnicity due to a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the sample.

Participants in the racially and ethnically diverse focus group were informed that all others in their focus group were African-American, Asian, Latino/Latina, or multiracial, with the hope of creating a safe space for sharing. Caucasian participants who were not multiracial were placed into focus groups by their geographic time zone to increase the opportunities for interaction while completing the questions.

I conducted the first two discussion groups from a Friday to Sunday and then the last three discussion groups the following weekend from a Friday to Sunday. Participants spent about an hour a day with the online discussions for a total of three days, and some respondents spent about 90 minutes a day. Due to space constraints and the abundance of data participants shared, this article is delimited to the questions that were focused on diversity.

An important part of reporting qualitative procedures is to describe how the researcher positioned herself, which can affect participants' responses (see Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As someone who is committed to seeing the success of diverse practitioners in the workplace, I was eager to interact with AHANA practitioners, although I was disappointed that I did not recruit more of them. I did not disclose my race to participants; however, they could have seen easily that I was White and perhaps inferred that I was a Generation X member through an Internet search. I was uncomfortable with the power differential that I experienced based on my race, age, and status as a professor and researcher, although some factors helped, such as being outnumbered by the other participants and having the information exchange occur online.

My real name appeared with my participation, and my avatar was a panda. I hoped that racially and ethnically diverse participants could see I was an ally through my follow-up questions and

interactions with them. For example, in response to a participant talking about the absence of African-Americans in her agency, I offered to connect her and anyone else who was interested with a mentor at another agency who was of the same race/ethnicity, and I followed through with the one person's request for this. I also empathized with diverse respondents by offering supportive comments when they shared negative experiences.

Data Analysis

I first read through the transcripts once and then upon a second reading, I copied and pasted only the data that were relevant to the research questions into a separate document (see Miles & Huberman, 1994). After data reduction, I took each response to a question by a participant and copied and pasted it into another new document. The unit of analysis was the sentence, and when a sentence included more than one theme, I copied and pasted it into multiple thematic categories in the data analysis document. With each participant response, I also recorded all conversation that the response generated, such as agreement other participants expressed and follow-up questions that were asked. Some participants circled back and reiterated key points in various questions so within a theme, the data were organized by all of a participant's instances of expressing the theme.

At this point, the instances were labeled with participants' pseudonyms (e.g., Indigo3), so the next step involved the use of a code key to record participants' gender, race, and sexual orientation next to their comments. Participants' comments were then organized by race and ethnicity and then by gender to enable a search for patterns and differences within and across identity markers.

Results

Demographics

Of the final participants, about 78% were women and about 22% were men, which approximates the percentage of women (71%) and men (29%) in public relations professional associations (e.g., PRSA/IABC, 2000), although Census data suggest that women comprise only 59.2% of public relations professionals (Hazleton & Sha, 2012). Approximately 78% were solely

Caucasian (31 women and 9 men), 12% were African-American (5 women, including an African-American Caucasian and 1 man), 6% were Asian-American (3 women), almost 2% were Latino (1 man), and nearly 2% identified as Latina-Caucasian (1 woman). The difficulty with attracting more racially and ethnically diverse participants is reflective of the lack of diversity in the field (see Hazleton & Sha, 2012). Due to the lack of Native American participants and respondents' identification as Latina or Latino rather than Hispanic, the acronym ALA (rather than AHANA) is used in the results sections to refer to the discussion group with African-Americans, Latinos and Latinas, and Asian-Americans.

RQ 1: Do Millennial Employees Think Their Public Relations Agencies Value Diversity and Why or Why Not?

Employees' responses to the initial question of whether their agencies valued diversity differed greatly, and employees with one or more diverse identity markers (based on race/ethnicity and gender) were far more likely to answer no to this question than White men were. Specifically, about two-thirds of the non-Hispanic Caucasian men, a little more than half of the non-Hispanic Caucasian women, and few ALA participants believed their agencies value diversity. Despite the differences in this response among Caucasian men, women, and ALA participants, reasons for perceiving diversity or identifying a lack of commitment to it were similar across demographics.

These reasons are presented below, followed by a theme from Caucasian women about valuing diversity too much.

Reasons for perceptions of valuing diversity. One of the most important reasons for perceiving an agency's commitment to diversity, for both the ALA group and the Caucasian discussion groups, was the presence of employees with various nationalities, genders, races, and sexual orientations in the workplace who enjoy working with each other. Also worth noting is that several Caucasian women perceived racially diverse employees as representing their agencies' commitment to diversity: "I feel like we have 'token' black people on our teams. They are very qualified and do their

jobs well, but they are also there for another reason.” A couple African-American women and an African-American man, however, talked with each other about their desire to avoid being “seen as the ‘diversity’ person at the office,” and one participant noted that she disliked the assumption but enjoyed the leadership opportunity she received to work on a particular account.

Another principal reason for perceiving a commitment to diversity, offered by the ALA group and the Caucasian discussion groups, was the establishment of committees and programs to help diverse employees. Examples include a multicultural practice group that promotes diversity in the workplace; an employee exchange program, where “employees can work in different countries and experience the lifestyle and cultures of different countries’ agencies;” and programs for women, racially and ethnically diverse employees, and LGBT employees that involve mentorship and are designed to advance their careers.

Microaffirmations also played an important role. One form of a microaffirmation was taking an interest in each other’s cultures, both informally through conversation (as explained by a Latina-Caucasian) and formally through agency events (as explained by a Caucasian woman): “We often celebrate religious events from multiple cultures and religions in my workplace.” Another important microaffirmation was co-workers’ nonverbal support when addressing diversity issues (as explained by a Caucasian woman):

Male coworkers don’t roll their eyes during talks about women and fair pay issues: They take it just as seriously as women who are concerned and seem to not only accept that it is a problem but they’re also interested in fixing it.

In addition, a valuable microaffirmation was a welcoming atmosphere for expressing cultural identities: “I have dreadlocks and on casual Fridays, I don’t feel self-conscious about wearing a Rasta hat or tam over my hair.”

Reasons for perceptions of not valuing diversity. Just as reasons for perceiving an agency’s commitment to diversity included a multicultural committee and the presence of diverse

employees, conversely, the most commonly reported reasons for believing an agency lacks a commitment to diversity included the lack of a multicultural committee that could work on recruiting and retaining diverse employees, the small proportion of ALA employees in the office, and the small number or complete lack of ALA employees and women in senior positions. These agency characteristics left both ALA and Caucasian employees of both genders to conclude that their agencies' commitment to diversity was absent or limited to "a lot of talk on email." Summarizing these reasons, an African-American woman wrote:

If my agency values diversity, I am completely out of the loop if that is the case.... There are only so few minorities in an office of 200+ people (especially on the account team side), and we have no diversity in our executive committee or senior agency leadership. It would be great if we had a diversity committee at work that could address issues like this and propose solutions for how we maintain a more diverse staff.

Similarly, a Caucasian woman noted, "I think it's definitely a 'man's world' – my organization talks about diversity, but our upper management is all white male. Yes, there's a lot of females and minorities, but they're not the ones in power."

A Caucasian man wrote:

My company appreciates diversity, but it doesn't value it, if that makes sense. It's like how I appreciate broccoli as a vegetable. I respect broccoli, but I don't value it by eating it and savoring the little trees. Having lived in foreign countries and experienced true diversity, it's sad how much everyone at my agency is the same. Not much difference in age range, all the same color, similar educational backgrounds.

This response elicited several comments of agreement by other participants.

Another reason for perceiving a low commitment to diversity was the perception of agencies' narrow definitions of what it takes to be diverse: "I think many agencies consider themselves diverse if their gay employees feel comfortable being out of the box – even if they are all white," and "The

partners say they value diversity, but what they really mean is that they will consider hiring an employee who didn't major in public relations." Two Caucasian women expressed similar responses, noting that their agencies only valued weak forms of diversity, such as a background in radio or TV, as judged by the extent to which their agencies emphasized these backgrounds in the workplace.

Concerns about too much diversity. In some cases, Caucasian women expressed concern about racially diverse colleagues who were taking exciting opportunities away from them or were incompetent:

We've had a situation where a specific employee is always included on new business so that we appear diverse. As a result, less diverse individuals are rarely brought into new business efforts or given the opportunity to grow in this area.

Another Caucasian woman who agreed complained that her African-American colleague pulled the team down and her agency wouldn't fire him because he contributes diversity to the agency. In addition, another woman remarked:

I think we need to face the facts of the type of people who are interested in public relations. In the end, I would want someone qualified and easy to work with on my team regardless of any other factors.

RQ 2: Do Millennial Agency Employees See Any Challenges at Their Public Relations Agencies Based on Gender, Race/Ethnicity, or Something Similar, and If So, What Problems Do They Identify?

About half of the ALA participants and about half of the Caucasian participants identified challenges based on identity markers. Participants expressed concerns related to gender, race/ethnicity, and parenthood.

Gender issues. The most common issue related to perceptions of different treatment based on gender. One common gender issue was perceptions of men getting less work than women:

Men get away with more at the junior level in our office and on our team. They slide by without getting a lot put on their plate and manage to appear busy with only a few things, while the young women in our office slave away. There's a million instances of this, as it happens on a daily basis, so naming one would be trite.

Another gender issue involved concerns about men in junior positions receiving more important work than women and being promoted more quickly than women:

In my office, there's a 5:1 ratio of women to men. So there is a dynamic in the office of the men being favorites because there are simply so few of them. Because they often look at things and relate to things differently than women, their points of view often seem very innovative and they're very confident in all good things, especially for clients. But in the end, it makes it hard to compete for promotions and management positions when they look so much better at managing. It's just the nature of the industry.

A man commented, "It's hard to tell, but I think from time to time I do get some benefits because I am a male in a female-dominated workplace and industry."

A less prominent gender issue was one woman's experience with sexual harassment:

"I had a female boss tell me that it was my 'own fault' for being sexually harassed at a conference and that I shouldn't 'dress skanky' – I was wearing an Ann Klein fully covered business pant suit with a button down! It was the ultimate insult."

Race/ethnicity issues. In addition to gender concerns, ALA participants identified several challenges related to race/ethnicity. One such challenge, which was expressed by most of the African-American women, was the lack of racially/ethnically diverse people in executive positions who could act as mentors:

It's tough not to have anyone to look to for guidance or mentoring who doesn't look like me. It's not to say I don't have white friends and colleagues who I trust and endear, but occasionally, it would be nice to have a role model that looks like me in my office!

Participants also questioned whether their agency would seriously consider promoting them to prominent positions in the agency, given the lack of diversity at top levels.

A second challenge related to race/ethnicity was the microinequity of biculturalism:

There's a cultural barrier that makes me have to choose a side. I either assimilate and join my colleagues and supervisor's cultural preferences (e.g., admitting to liking only certain types of movies or music, not bringing up parts of my culture because they don't get it [I've done this before and heard crickets in the room and nearly died of embarrassment from the blank looks on people's faces when no one recognized a cultural reference I made during a brainstorm...], acting like I "get" whatever topic they're discussing so I can fit in, etc...) or I stay true to who I am but risk advancement and opportunities.

A third challenge related to race/ethnicity was perceptions of needing to overcompensate without overdoing it, the latter of which would position the employee as a threat: "I feel like I have to be great at my job in order to up the chances of hiring other minorities but also not too threatening so that no one will become threatened and try to push me out."

Parenthood issues. Some Caucasian participants reported fairness challenges with mothers getting too many privileges or being treated disrespectfully by upper-level managers without children. Privileges for parents included fewer hours and more leeway with flex time:

I am single and childless and often have to stay late and work harder than my married, child-having peers. I think that this is unfair. I work weekends and often have to do nights, when many women in my office would think nothing of taking a 2 or 3 hour lunch if something child-related came up. ... It seems that the single worker is encouraged to put his/her life second to the company and the married worker isn't.

Discussion

Regarding the first research question, Millennials had various views about whether their agencies valued diversity; however, their reasons for perceiving a commitment to diversity or not perceiving it were generally consistent and demonstrate the importance of several actions:

- Hiring many qualified employees who are diverse based on race/ethnicity and including them, as well as Caucasian women, at top levels.
- Creating a mentorship program and other opportunities to advance the careers of diverse practitioners.
- Establishing a multicultural group that can work on improving diversity in the workplace.
- Inspiring a culture that promotes microaffirmations and discourages microinequities.

Regarding the second research question, the results showed the continued presence of inequities in the workplace, such as biculturalism and overcompensation. These issues also emerged in Tindall's (2007) study, and this study builds on her work by noting that a concern with overcompensation is to not overdo it too much for fear of getting pushed out (due to being viewed as a threat). Building on Logan's (2011) work about the white leader prototype, this study also found initial evidence for a *male leader prototype* based on a comment in which a woman from the ALA discussion group explained that it was natural for men to be in top management positions "because there are simply so few of them" and "because they often look at things and relate to things differently." This was a fallacious argument to make because racially/ethnically diverse practitioners would dominate senior positions if this logic held true (i.e., similar to men, they are largely outnumbered in public relations agencies and bring diverse perspectives to the table). Gender issues also included perceptions of men receiving less work than women, receiving more important work than women, and being promoted more quickly than women. Inequities were also perceived based on inconsistent treatment of parents (whether they received more flextime and fewer hours or whether they received

disrespect from managers without children). This was an issue that also arose in Aldoory et al.'s (2008) study.

Power Relations in Agencies

Based on Guinier and Torres' (2002) theoretical framework, the first dimension of power involves a zero sum game struggle among diverse practitioners for limited "diverse" spots. As applied to this study, however, the scope of the competition was broad in the sense that racially/ethnically diverse practitioners did not express views about competing with each other, but some Caucasian participants perceived that racially/ethnically diverse colleagues were taking important opportunities (such as new business) away from them. This zero sum game approach produces resentment and disrupts the ability for co-workers to build alliances across identity markers. Although agencies should be applauded for putting racially/ethnically diverse practitioners on the fast-track for promotion, they should also give equal opportunities to Caucasian Millennials to avoid perceptions of tokenism by both diverse employees and employees with dominant identity markers (see Grunig, et al., 2001; Wrigley, 2002). Caucasian Millennial practitioners themselves, however, can also temper possible feelings of resentment when getting passed over for an opportunity by recognizing the qualifications of the person who received the opportunity and by getting on board with the goal of changing the disenfranchisement of racially/ethnically diverse practitioners.

The second dimension of power in Guinier and Torres' (2002) framework is the formal and informal practices that produce the "game's" outcome. Agencies' decisions to put racially/ethnically diverse Millennials on new business accounts (ideally, with the intent to groom them for senior positions rather than to superficially show a commitment to diversity) is an example of an informal rule that can result eventually in changes to the diversity of an agency's senior management. Establishing mentoring programs for diverse practitioners and other opportunities for advancement also represent ways to affect outcomes.

Guinier and Torres' (2002) third dimension of power—the characteristics of who has the right to influence decisions and opportunities—was also at play in this study, with racially/ethnically diverse practitioners fearing they will never reach senior positions in their agencies because no one at the top looked like them. Certainly, the employment of qualified racially/ethnically diverse practitioners at top levels can have a major impact on the psychological factors that influence this dimension. In addition, some Caucasian women praised the natural leadership abilities of their male colleagues, including men's confidence and innovative ideas. Microaffirmations toward female colleagues about their ideas can help with confidence challenges.

Implications for Educators

With two-thirds of the non-Hispanic Caucasian men, a little more than half of the non-Caucasian women, and only a few ALA participants believing their agency values diversity, the results of this study suggest support for a continued trend in which public relations practitioners with dominant identity markers are less likely to identify challenges faced by diverse practitioners (see Grunig et al., 2001; Lariscy et al., 1996). Of course, it could just be a coincidence that the non-Caucasian men in this study happened to be at more diversity-friendly agencies than the women and ALA participants, but there is theoretical support for the conclusion that it is more difficult for people with dominant identity markers to recognize macroinequities (such as disparities in rank) and microinequities (see Gallicano, 2013; Haraway, 1988). As explained by Haraway, "There is good reason to believe vision is better from below the...platforms of the powerful," so she encourages people to "learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view" while acknowledging that all points of view require critical analysis (p. 584).

Based on the possible lack of vision among many Millennial practitioners who have dominant identity markers, a key recommendation is to ensure diversity is not treated superficially in public relations education, which commonly occurs when educators divorce it from its historical and social context and simply treat it as a business asset for requisite variety (see Munshi & Edwards' 2011

discussion). This is easier said than accomplished, so it would be valuable to see public relations educators develop and share lesson plans that involve substantive treatments of race that include the following components:

- Documented inequities confronted by women and racially/ethnically diverse practitioners (see the literature review and consider highlighting Millennials' quotes from the results section).
- An explanation of the source of these inequities, with reference to historical inequities and contemporary statistics on social disenfranchisement.
- Strategies for improving the workplace environment (see the implications for managers section later in this discussion).

There are several reasons why increasing vision among Millennial practitioners, including those with dominant identity markers, is important:

- To change attitudes toward diversity in the workplace (i.e., some Caucasian practitioners in this study restricted the problem to diverse individuals themselves, which is the type of treatment of race that Munshi and Edwards, 2011, warned about).
- To motivate practitioners to build alliances across identity markers for social change in the workplace, as advocated by Guinier and Torres' (2002) power relations framework (i.e., pay or rank should not correlate with identity markers).
- To empower and inspire practitioners to engage in microaffirmations and avoid participating in microinequities.
- To help young employees understand why the top levels are dominated by White men, thereby eroding the White leader prototype (Logan, 2011), which suggests that White people are the only natural leaders—which was similar to an issue that arose in this study regarding the perception of men as the only natural leaders.

Implications for Managers

In line with Collins' (2001) advice to "get the right people on the bus" (p. 41), public relations agencies should do their best to identify job candidates who are committed to diversity. Having supportive co-workers makes a difference for diverse practitioners. Participants discussed their appreciation for micro-affirmations by their co-workers; for example, an Asian-American woman discussed how it was meaningful to her when she learned that her co-workers tried out hobbies and practices from her culture, and a Caucasian woman expressed appreciation for her male co-workers when they didn't roll their eyes and instead were seriously interested in pay equity for women. By comparison, other Caucasian practitioners seemed to adopt problematic views of diversity. For example, one woman expressed that the industry needed to "face the facts of the type of people who are interested in public relations." The Caucasian women who identified "token black people" who are "there for another reason" also appear to assume White leadership as the standard. These examples are offered to illustrate the importance of "getting the right people on the bus"; in other words, people who will contribute to a supportive environment for diverse practitioners.

One of the most important ways to demonstrate commitment to diversity is to hire numerous people at all levels who are diverse based on various combinations of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender. Recruitment, however, is just the initial step. The next step is to retain diverse practitioners, and this study offers suggestions for doing so:

- Promote diverse executives into senior positions when they are qualified.
- Create a mentorship program in which junior executives are paired with senior executives (preferably, senior executives who look like them).
- Establish a cultural group who can plan events and promote diversity in the workplace while ensuring that practitioners who have these responsibilities have an adjusted workload to prevent this from being an extra burden (see Tindall, 2007).
- Ensure an equal workload among employees, regardless of identity markers.

- Encourage employees to take an interest in different cultural practices, such as trying food from different cultures, which can result in microaffirmations (see Rowe, 1990) and curtail the bicultural shifting that ALA members do (see Tindall, 2007).
- Create an environment in which people are encouraged to express their identities, such as wearing dreadlocks or displaying photos of a same-sex partner.
- Demonstrate interest in the opinions of diverse practitioners and give them meaningful responsibility; give Caucasian practitioners opportunities to participate in exciting endeavors, such as new business, to avoid feelings and perceptions of tokenism when a non-Caucasian practitioner is routinely the only junior person invited.

Limitations and Future Research

A qualitative method was used for this exploratory study to enable participants to characterize their experiences in their own words. A drawback of this method is that the data cannot be generalized, although it provides initial insight into Millennials' perceptions and experiences regarding diversity in the workplace. Also, I had hoped that my recruiting efforts would have resulted in recruiting more than 11 racially and ethnically diverse participants, although notably, these participants are difficult to find given the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the industry, and limiting participation to Millennials who worked in public relations agencies further reduced the pool of potential participants. Reasons for perceiving an agency's commitment to diversity or not did not seem influenced by demographic characteristics, which helps justify the inclusion of 9 Caucasian men in the sample. Another major limitation was the inability to recruit more than one LGBT participant, which limited the scope of this article.

This study suggests several directions for future research. Research is needed to explore the experiences of LGBT Millennial practitioners. In addition, the results of this study pointed to the importance of establishing a multicultural practice committee—research about how this committee can produce change would be valuable. More research is also needed to investigate additional ways

agencies can enact change within the three dimensions of power (see Guinier & Torres, 2002). It would also be useful to conduct a longitudinal study to identify the extent to which Millennial practitioners believe their agency is committed to diversity and how the results might change over the course of time, which would demonstrate industry improvement or stagnation.

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