

## Diversity in Public Relations

### Special Issue Editor's Note

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For the last several leadership cycles, the Public Relations Society of America has renewed its emphasis on diversity in public relations. Yet, our Society's concern for diversity issues is not a new one. A multicultural communications committee started in the 1990s became the Multicultural Communications Section in 1997. In 2000, PRSA launched a National Diversity Initiative, which evolved into the National Diversity Committee in 2004. In 2010, "PRSA merged the Multicultural Communications Sections [sic] and LGBT Affinity Group with the Diversity Committee, under a broad structure intended to allow for a separate but coordinated focus of different aspects of diversity" (The Story, 2013). On a parallel track, PRSA established in 1989 a Task Force on the Status of Women, which evolved into the National Committee on Work, Life, and Gender. In the last decade, this Committee has expanded the scope of its work beyond gender to include broader work-life issues that often are affected by gender and gender roles.

Despite these important efforts to address diversity in public relations, more work remains to be done, especially if we choose to focus on the *outcomes* of our efforts rather than on the *outputs*. For example, racial minorities remain underrepresented in the public relations field, as well as in PRSA, compared to our percentages in the population (Hazleton & Sha, 2012). And despite the majority of women in public relations practice (Hazleton & Sha, 2012), we remain underpaid, relative to our male counterparts, even when accounting for years of experience, career specialization, career interruptions, manager-technician role enactment, and management decision-making participation (Dozier, Sha, & Shen, 2013).

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Furthermore, even if we consider outputs to the exclusion of outcomes, our conversations about “diversity” in public relations have been relatively limited, primarily focused on gender, race, and ethnicity (Sha & Ford, 2007). This special issue thus seeks to expand our understanding of diversity by including research on other diversity dimensions of people (including age/generation, dependent care responsibility, professional specialty, and sexual identity), as well as diversity dimensions of organizations and nations.

The first article, by Nur Uysal, provides an excellent overview of approaches to organizational diversity: the assimilation model, the diversity management model, and the leveraging differences model. Her study examines how these theoretical frameworks for diversity are pragmatically executed on corporate websites, finding that the diversity management model – with its focus on diversity as a competitive advantage – dominates the websites of companies in the *S&P 500*. However, she argues, public relations would better fulfill its potential by moving our thinking of diversity beyond the diversity management approach to the leveraging differences model, an effort that could be achieved through more open dialogue and organization-public interactions, such as by integrating feedback tools on corporate websites.

Whereas Uysal examines diversity management in corporations, the second article in this special issue examines diversity management in public relations agencies. Recent research indicates that, although the plurality of public relations practitioners work in corporate settings (about 24%), agencies and nonprofits tied as the second-most-common work setting, with about 22% of practitioners each (Sha, 2011). Of course, today’s public relations work force – no matter whether corporate, agency, or nonprofit – includes children of the Millennial generation, those born between 1980 and 2000.

Tiffany Gallicano invited conversations with Millennial employees of public relations agencies to study their perceptions of the diversity climate in their employing organizations. Notably, there were few participants from racial-ethnic minority groups, and Gallicano explicates why the

perceptions of practitioners with “dominant identity markers” (i.e., White men) also are important in our on-going conversations about diversity in public relations.

One finding from Gallicano’s study was that some Millennial agency workers resented what they viewed as special privileges extended to their colleagues who had parenting responsibilities. And according Uysal, one manifestation of the diversity management model in corporations is the mention of work-life balance programs on organizational websites. Indeed, the issue of work-life balance has recently received much coverage in both mainstream and trade media. Yet, the desire for work-life balance and the experience of work-life conflict are not limited to those with children, nor are they restricted to Millennials.

This question of work-life conflict is addressed in the article by Hongmei Shen and Hua Jiang, who explain the categories of time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based work-life conflict. Their survey of PRSA members found that the stress resulting from various types of work-life conflict varied by practitioner age, as well as by their dependent-care responsibilities and professional specialties. The work by Shen and Jiang reminds us that diversity has multiple dimensions. Furthermore, these dimensions often intersect in ways that pose challenges for public relations practitioners, not only in their personal work-life integration efforts, but also in their professional work reaching out to organizational stakeholders.

This intersection of diverse identities – called “intersectionality” by academics – is further explored in the article by Tiphane Turpin, who examines the segmentation of target publics by demographics, a common public relations tactic. She uses Black feminist epistemology to explore why HIV/AIDS education campaigns that target Black women apparently are not effective, given the alarming statistics regarding HIV/AIDS in this population. Why this lack of effectiveness in these communication campaigns? One answer examined by Turpin is that Black women feel that campaign messages stereotype them by race and by gender, usually ignoring other dimensions of their identities, such as age or geographic locale.

Also examining audience segmentation by race in a health communication context, Bryan Reber, Hye-Jin Paek, and Ruthann Weaver Lariscy surveyed middle-school students across four school districts to determine how their information-seeking behaviors vary by their choice of communication media. They found that, in this age cohort, race significantly predicted information seeking, with non-white adolescents significantly more likely than white adolescents to seek health information. They also found that, aside from race, the more the participants read print media but the less they watched TV and used the Internet, the more likely they were to seek health-related information. These results are important for public relations practitioners trying to reach segmented publics with health-related information.

Despite the numerous health communication campaigns promulgated by public relations efforts over the last few decades, only in more recent years have campaigns addressed more sensitive issues, such as mental health and suicide. Of particular note have been efforts to prevent suicide in marginalized groups, such as adolescents who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT). Yet, published research on LGBT issues in public relations, compared to other considerations of diversity, remains lacking. Similarly, Gallicano notes in her study the lack of participation from agency Millennials who self-identified (or who were willing to self-disclose as being) as LGBT.

Thus, this special issue brings attention to the intersection of LGBT considerations and public relations practice by offering two articles that examine the *It Gets Better Project*, launched to provide support for LGBT youths. Most scholarly journals would avoid publishing two manuscripts that are so similar in content. However, I chose to include both of these case studies to illustrate another aspect to diversity in public relations – the diversity of analytical approaches to handling similar questions.

For example, Jamie Ward's literature review introduces readers to texts from sociology and education, while Erica Cisnek's literature review is grounded in more traditional public relations scholarship regarding types of publics, activism, and dialogue. Ciszek qualitatively examines multiple media channels, while Ward focuses on videos posted to the *It Gets Better Project's* YouTube channel.

Ward examines user-generated content (UGC) in the context of commons-based peer production, whereas Ciszek’s article uses the term “participatory media” in her examination of message amplification.

Despite their differing terminologies, theoretical approaches, and methodological foci, Ward and Ciszek arrive at some similar conclusions that have implications for diversity in public relations: (1) transgendered individuals remain a largely invisible public; (2) giving people the opportunity to use their authentic voices for storytelling empowers them as organizational publics; and (3) social media are powerful tools for conveying and amplifying institutional messages.

Finally, the last article in this special issue provides another opportunity for public relations scholars and practitioners to expand our view of “diversity.” In the United States, we often think of our country as being a “melting pot,” made up of immigrants (both voluntary and involuntary) from other places. César García’s article reminds us that the United States does not have a monopoly on diversity, as he explores the relationship among state power, clientelism, and economic structure in Southern European countries. García also questions why the term “diversity” has largely been used in the context of intra-U.S. differences, while “globalization” addresses differences outside the country. He argues that these two concepts should be merged, so that broader notions of diversity can be considered in the context of a globalized public relations practice.

This special issue on diversity in public relations would not have been possible without the support and participation of those professionals who gave of their time and expertise to blind-review manuscripts submitted for publication consideration. Thus, I would like to thank the following reviewers for their contributions to this publication:

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From my initial conversations with Wright regarding this special issue idea, to the original call for manuscripts, to the final publication of these eight articles, this special issue on diversity in public relations has been about 28 months in the making. More than a decade ago, in a comparable timespan, I gave birth to my two children. From that experience, I know that a mother can only shelter her offspring for a limited time before gently releasing them into the world, where they must be received on their own terms and judged on their own characters.

And so I release to you this special issue on diversity in public relations, in the hope that these articles will make a contribution to both public relations scholarship and practice, just as I hope that my own children will one day make a contribution to both our human society and our interconnected world.

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