

**Barriers, Borders, and Boundaries: Exploring Why There Are So Few African-American
Males in the Public Relations Profession**

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Executive Summary

Why are there so few African American males working in the public relations industry? According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), men represent 50.9 percent of those working in the public relations and related services and advertising sector; women represent 49 percent. Of the total number of men, African American men represent 5.9 percent. Of the total number of women, African American women represent 4.7 percent. Over the years, research has been conducted on the relative low number of African American women in the profession. However, little research has been conducted to understand specifically why the number of African American males in the industry is so low. This qualitative research attempts to provide insights into the answers to this question.

Specifically, this research explores the perceptions, experiences and possible barriers for 32 African American males currently working in the field. While the experiences of this limited number of professionals do not illustrate the experiences of all African American males in the business, their insights do provide a glimpse into the barriers, borders and boundaries that many of them face. Some of the barriers cited by these professionals range from a lack of knowledge and understanding among African American male high school and college students about what the public relations profession is, to being an African American male in a Caucasian female-dominated profession that still has a strong Caucasian male influence, to not having a lot of other African American male colleagues for support and friendship. Additional barriers include but are not limited to African American males not having role models and mentors successfully working in the field from whom they can learn, to not having leaders who can help advance their careers.

This research also explores whether the public relations profession is at a competitive disadvantage to other professions by not having a stronger presence of African American male practitioners. The majority of the professionals in this research said that the lack of African American males working in the field does negatively impact the profession. One of the primary ways the profession is impacted is when organizations do not have the ability to tap into the unique perspectives and points of view that African American males can bring to strategic business discussions. These professionals believe that their perspectives add value not only about public relations and communications strategy but also to the overall business strategy. These professionals also believe that their perspectives, along with the thoughts and ideas of others from different backgrounds and experiences, add to the fullness and richness of discussions. Further, they believe that this diversity of thought and experiences more often than not results in an organization and its leaders reaching the best decisions about their customers and the markets they serve. Most of the professionals also agreed that organizations that compete for market share or share of voice in African American communities are at a competitive disadvantage without representation from African American males in their public relations departments. According to these professionals, the presence of an African American male adds value in discussions when an organization is trying to appeal to all consumers, in general, and in particular African American consumers – especially males.

Finally, this research attempts to offer solutions for turning any barriers, real or perceived, into avenues for positive outcomes for African American males in the profession so that they can grow, develop and make meaningful contributions to the industry. These solutions include hiring leaders ensuring that they have diverse slates of candidates when interviewing for open positions; to intentionally providing growth, development and promotional opportunities as

well as coaching and mentoring opportunities, to openly and intentionally inviting and listening to the perspectives and points of view of African American males on their teams.

Introduction

Why are there so few African American males working in the public relations industry? To begin understanding the answer to this question, it is important to first be reminded of the history of the public relations profession. Most, if not all, historians and scholars of the public relations industry credit Ivy Lee as being the first public relations consultant in 1906, followed by Arthur Page who, in 1927, became the first public relations practitioner (Logan, 2011). These two White male leaders paved the way for the public relations industry to take shape and become the discipline that it is today. As the industry was evolving, the exclusion of African Americans in public relations was “still the de facto norm,” (Logan, 2011, p. 449).

Later in the 1940s, a small number of minorities joined the public relations field. By the year 1960, women represented about 25 percent of the industry (Gower, 2001). However, the field primarily employed White males at least through 1961 (Gower, 2001). African Americans began to enter the field in significant numbers after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Pompper, 2005). As an example, Ofield Dukes was one of those pioneers who blazed the trail during this time so that other African Americans to enter the public relations field (Dukes, 2017). As it pertains to females in the field, L. Grunig (2013) contends that while public relations has become a more female-intensive field, public relations cannot be considered female-dominated because women typically lack the “autonomy, power and influence of men in the field” (p. 40).

In spite of these advances, research shows that there exists the dynamic that the public relations industry lacks racial diversity (Logan, 2011). For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 38.9 million African Americans in the U.S. in 2010 (“Research Finds,” 2010) with 18 million African Americans who were employed or seeking employment in 2011 (“Research Finds,” 2012). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), 559,000 people total were employed in the advertising, public relations and related services industries in 2015. Of this number, men represent 285,000 (50.9 percent); 17,000 (5.9 percent) are African American. Women represent 274,000 (49 percent); 13,000 are African American (4.7 percent).

Little research has examined African Americans and leadership in the public relations profession. Logan (2011) examined the leadership landscape in public relations and found nearly all (94 percent) of public relations managers in the United States were White. This was reinforced in the 2010 *PR Week* magazine’s Power List, the majority of whom were White. Additionally, the study found that all the top public relations leaders at the top 25 firms were White (Logan, 2011). In the corporate communications arena, there was one Asian and one Hispanic leader but no African Americans. The author concluded that there were no African American males or females at the highest leadership in firms or corporate communications functions in the U.S.

Results of a survey of Page Society members, the leading professional organization for the top leaders in public relations, found most members of public relations teams are White and female, but the leadership is primarily male (Jiang, Ford, Long & Ballard, 2015). Fifty-three percent of respondents said they were not satisfied with the level of diversity in their organizations.

With the lack of African Americans in leadership roles in the field and the lack of research about this topic, it is important to explore why there are so few African Americans in leadership positions in communications functions. This qualitative study specifically focuses on African American men, exploring the perceptions, experiences, and possible barriers for advancing of those currently working in the field. This research also explores whether the public relations profession is at a competitive disadvantage to other professions by not having a stronger presence of African American male practitioners. Finally, this research attempts to offer solutions for turning any barriers, real or perceived, into avenues for positive outcomes for African American males in the profession so that they can grow, develop, and make meaningful contributions to the industry.

Literature Review

Historical Context

Collins (1989) explored the marginalization of African American executives and how barriers in history may shed light that both African American men and women face today. According to Collins (1989), in the decades before the modern civil rights era, there were few employment opportunities for African Americans with college degrees. Before the 1960s, opportunities for middle-class African Americans were confined to the businesses they could create and sustain themselves in their own segregated communities. During those times, African Americans worked as preachers, teachers, doctors, dentists, lawyers, and morticians. Later, opportunities arose in other areas such as social work and in other publicly-funded social service agencies. The Civil Rights Era of the 1960s and 1970s brought about different employment opportunities for African Americans, with fewer African Americans in roles serving each other. African Americans began working in higher-paying jobs because major corporations began actively seeking to diversify their workforces. According to Collins (1989), during the 1970s and 1980s, the number of African American males in executive, administrative or managerial roles increased annually at two times the rate of white males. At the same time, in spite of more than 30 years of overarching gains in the workforce by African Americans, there were negligible gains for African American males in true decision-making positions where the real power resides (Collins, 1997). A 2005 survey by Business Planning and Research International (BPRI) found that 90 percent of senior communications managers believed that the industry needed to improve the number of minorities at all levels (Brown, White & Waymer, 2011). The first recommendation was to increase diversity in college majors. Brown et al. (2011) contends:

Minorities have few opportunities to become aware of the public relations profession, and that lack of understanding about the profession could hurt the initiative of increasing diversity. Hence, if undergraduate students – which are indeed the pipeline into the profession, regardless of race or ethnicity – are not getting exposed to the field of public relations or have a flawed understanding of what the discipline is, how can one expect the discipline to increase minority representation within its ranks (p. 524).

Brown et al. (2011) found that African American students indeed believe race will play a role in their careers – whether as an asset or a barrier – and they will have to work harder than their counterparts to overcome potential barriers.

Barriers, Borders and Boundaries

In 2014, Appelbaum, Walton & Southerland (2014) conducted a survey of both male and female African American and Hispanic public relations professionals who have entered the field since 2008. The researchers found that four out of ten African American and Hispanic professionals believe they are not treated with respect. Four out of ten also believe they must be more qualified than their Caucasian counterparts. About one-third of the professionals indicated that they believe they have spent more time in entry-level positions than their Caucasian counterparts. In addition, more than half of the professionals indicated that the opportunities they have received are not the same as their Caucasian counterparts. The respondents stressed the importance of having a strong mentor in college and continuing into the workplace, even though they did not have one. The lack of mentors starts in college and follows them into the professional world. In fact, only about one-third of those professionals had a college professor or an advisor who was helpful to them.

Competitive Disadvantage & the Business Case for Diversity

Some research explores whether the public relations industry is at a competitive disadvantage because of a lack of African American practitioners. This includes not having representation at the table where decisions are made (Len-Rios, 1998). (Mundy, 2015) indicates that there is still a big disconnect between the need for the field of public relations to be diverse and how that need translates into everyday practice. Mundy points out that making the field of public relations more diverse starts at the collegiate level with a diverse faculty who can bring a multicultural focus to students in the classroom. Research indicates that diversity strengthens organizations. According to Mundy (2015), “a focus on diversity builds a stronger workforce able to learn from each other, which leads to more creative, strategic thinking that can help set apart an organization in the marketplace” (p. 8). Embracing this diversity will allow businesses to better respond to the needs that exists in their communities and will add another set of important experiences to the business discussion (Len-Rios, 1998). Using the excellence theory as a guide, Pompper (2004) contends excellence and diversity in organizations are inextricably linked and communications is more likely to be excellent when ethnic diversity is supported. In spite of the compelling data presented by some research, there still is not complete alignment within the public relations industry on the value of diversity within an organization.

Based on the literature, it is important to understand why there are so few African American males in the public relations industry, and what barriers exist to serving in leadership roles. To do this, a qualitative study was used to explore the “whys” and to offer an in-depth understanding from personal experiences. This study focused on three primary research questions with several accompanying interview questions.

Research Questions

RQ1: Once African American males graduate from college and enter the public relations profession, what are the barriers (real or perceived) that keep them from advancement in the field?

RQ2: What responsibility, if any, do the key decision makers at an organization have in ensuring that more African American males have an opportunity to advance in the field?

RQ3: What impact, if any, does the lack of African American males in the public relations profession have on the profession?

Methodology

The researcher took a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth phone interviews with 32 African American men across the United States working in the field of public relations, communications, marketing communications and other related disciplines. These interviews were conducted over a five-week period from February to March 2017. The researcher wanted to focus on identifying the professionals whose jobs require a mastery of the broad set of skills required to be successful in the public relations industry. These skills include oral and written communications, strategy development, and client advice and counsel. Professionals who work in public relations, marketing communications and other related fields such as public affairs were interviewed. This approach allowed the researcher to expand the pool of professionals who could be interviewed beyond those whose job titles include public relations.

Demographics of Respondents

To provide a richer understanding of the results of this research, it is important to first understand more about the demographics of the 32 African American males who were interviewed for this study. Each of the 32 African American males interviewed work in the public relations field. They range from 21 to 65 years old, with the average age being 47.2 years. Collectively, these professionals have worked an average of 20.6 years in the field, ranging from a low of two-years to a high of 36-years. Each professional has at least a bachelor's degree, with 18 having degrees in either public relations, journalism, mass communications or a related field. Of these 32 professionals, 16 have advanced degrees, including 15 with a master's degree and one with a juris doctorate degree.

Of the 32 professionals, three consider themselves entry-level professionals, nine consider themselves middle managers, 13 consider themselves senior managers, and seven consider themselves executive managers. The 32 professionals are primarily clustered on the East Coast and in the South, with 10 states represented. Six of the 32 professionals have experience serving as public information officers in the military. Each professional was asked 22 questions about his educational and professional background, along with his experiences in the field. Based on the transcripts, the researcher identified major themes and relevant discussions that surfaced in each of the interviews. Those themes were then grouped in a document under the three broad research questions based on the specific interview questions. Once all of these linkages were identified, the researcher then wrote a detailed narrative to illustrate the collective journey described by the professionals who participated in this research.

Results

Barriers are Wide-Ranging

The major barriers respondents identified include: a lack of knowledge and understanding among African American male high school and college students about what public relations is as a profession; being an African American male in a Caucasian female-dominated profession that still has strong Caucasian male influence; and the lack of African American male colleagues for support and friendship. Additional barriers include, but are not limited to, African American

males not having role models, not having leaders who could help advance their own careers, and colleagues feeling intimidated by a confident African American male in the workplace.

Most of the professionals interviewed for this research believe that a major barrier is a lack of knowledge about the field of public relations as a viable career option for African American males to consider when they are in high school and college. Without early awareness of the profession and the skills that it takes to be successful in the field, many believe that the number of African American males who enter and remain in the profession will continue to be low. A professional from the health care sector said that many African American males in high school and college view public relations from the lens of what the media portrays, not fully understanding and appreciating the breadth and depth of the profession. “A lot people I went to school with wanted to do entertainment and sports marketing. I don’t know if people really think about corporations having an actual marketing communications function,” he said. Another professional, also from the health care sector, said “They know LeBron James, Jay Z and Beyoncé. They don’t know the person behind the scenes. Our opportunity is to introduce them to the (public relations) professionals behind the scenes who helped craft the messages and develop the images for their brands,” he said.

Another barrier cited by the professionals who participated in this research has been a lack of role models and mentors for them once they entered the field. Regardless of how long these professionals have been working in the field, there is a strong sense among them that role models are needed throughout every step of their professional journey. As one professional from the corporate sector said:

When I wanted to get into PR (from journalism), I couldn’t find another African American male to be a mentor to me on the senior level as I was trying to walk this PR road. I did find a couple of African American females and they helped me. They told me about their plight. Not finding any other African American males who were specifically in management roles was a challenge. I was usually the only one.

Another professional who started his career as a military public affairs officer and now works for a major corporation said:

You’ve got to have a mentor of another color who’s going to help you along the way. There just aren’t enough males of color in this profession to help you. I was very fortunate. I had a guy who was in the military with me. When he retired and got out, he kept using me for roles in organizations he worked with. I’d never be here if weren’t for him to bring me along.

Similarly, another professional said, “Finding good mentors doesn’t just mean African Americans. It means really good mentors who take an interest in our personal and professional development.”

Another barrier that surfaced for the majority of the professionals is the challenge of working in a profession that is dominated by females. One agency professional offered this experience:

I had to understand that the culture I was coming into was primarily white women whose experiences have been different from my own. I had to figure out how to play in that space, how to think like they think. I had to try to balance how aggressive I wanted to be and how I wanted to interact with people who are unfamiliar or not really used to being around someone like myself.

One professional who works for the U.S. government offered that African American males often do not have access to fellowships, mentorships and sponsorships like their Caucasian counterparts. “We need sponsors – not mentors – someone who will be an ally and a champion and break through the group think,” he said. The majority of the African American males in this research acknowledged that while white males are not a majority in the profession in terms of absolute numbers, they still hold many of the most senior leadership roles in the field, thereby wielding a lot of influence.

Additionally, many of the African American males indicated that some of the white males with whom they have worked have been less supportive as they advance their careers, creating another barrier for them to overcome. “Senior management grows up in a world that’s dominated by white males,” according to a professional in the nonprofit sector. “There’s a hierarchy that they’re used to. That’s what’s comfortable for them. That’s what keeps them on top. They’re uncomfortable with anything that looks to change that paradigm.” Another professional from the non-profit sector said, “I think (finding jobs in) public relations is ... a lot of referrals and recommendations from the good-old-boys. Basically, it’s a network of people who look out for folks,” he said. An agency professional said “when the white guy in public relations retires, he’s going to hire another white male to replace him. Who’s going to hire the black kid?”

Many of the African American males who participated in this research believe that both race and gender have been barriers. As it pertains specifically to race, one communications consultant said:

I actually think that if I was Caucasian I would have gone farther faster. When I started (36 years ago), I was the only African American in the PR department and one of a few in the company. I would get into manager roles and see others being promoted and moving ahead and nothing was happening for me. I would move to other companies after two to three years to get the promotion that I thought I deserved and to make more money.

Another communications consultant said, “It was clear that my color had to do with some things. Everybody doesn’t acknowledge you in the same way or give you the same respect as they do others. I had to recognize that race was an issue in my development, growth and advancement opportunities. This made me recognize that I had to work even harder.” Combining the dynamics of race and gender has resulted in additional barriers for many of the African

American males who participated in this research. A former military public affairs officer who now is a corporate public relations professional said:

People think just when you walk through the door that you're intimidating. You have to take a part of yourself and place it in a corner to fit the mold. The worst thing you can do is be seen as threatening. You have to go along to get along. By putting that piece of you in the corner, you're able to survive and fit in. You may have some anger about that, but you learn to manage it.

Additionally, as it pertains to culture, several of the professionals spoke of overcoming the barrier of having to master the nuances of the majority culture while also remaining true to their culture. For most of the professionals, this includes knowing how to appropriately communicate, how to dress, and how to interact in business and social settings. One agency professional said: "There's a social code that goes along with being in the industry." He explained the after-hours gatherings that sometimes occur over drinks or dinner at restaurants or bars may not be conveniently located to where African American professionals lives. He said:

If you were invited, you had to decide if you were going outside of your neighborhood and have a few drinks or not. You may not go to every one of them but you do want to go to some. That's where you find out what new positions are coming available, what new business is coming into the firm. If you're not taking advantage of these gatherings, you often lose out.

A professional in the corporate sector acknowledged that "there's a dress code. I recognize, as a black man, it's definitely important to be cognizant of my dress and how that is perceived by others." He added "if I walk into a meeting suited up and everyone else has on an open shirt and khakis that can be misinterpreted as 'you're trying to exert some kind of power.' You can't come in looking sloppy but you want to make sure that you're taken seriously." Regarding communication styles, one U.S. government agency professional said, "You almost have to be bilingual. When I go home with my 'boys' or my 'frat brothers,' we speak in a different tone, a different rhythm. When you're here Monday through Friday, you have to speak the language of business. That includes mastering the English language and being able to express yourself not only verbally but in written form."

Still another professional in the health care sector said sometimes it is just as important to know what to do as it is what not to do. He said, "In our culture, we shake hands with another brother (e.g. an African American male) and put our hands on his back. In our culture, it says that 'I respect you as a brother and you're a person that I hold in high regard.' You can't do that in corporate America," he said. Another barrier that some of the professionals noted related to working with leaders and colleagues who appeared to be unable to provide meaningful coaching and guidance to help advance their careers. "My first review said that I was disgruntled! That's a powerful word to say to a 22-year-old kid – especially when it's not true," said one professional who has now worked in the field for 17 years. He added, "When I wouldn't speak up they would say I wasn't being participatory. I believe that the white women I worked with hadn't been exposed to a black man aside from the athletes where they went to college. I (also) had someone to say 'you have a father?' It was that kind of environment,"

On a related point, many of the African American professionals felt that their leaders and colleagues were intimidated by their knowledge, their confidence or simply their physical presence. One corporate professional said, “They think, ‘He’s been to school. He’s won awards. He’s got plans. Is he trying to take my job?’” Concerning performance in the profession, most of the professionals also believe that they are held to higher standards or different expectations than their counterparts. “It’s a fine line but you have to walk it,” said one professional from the non-profit sector. He added, “It exists across the board in other businesses as well. There’s a lack of allowance for any kinds of errors. You don’t get that option. After a while, if you want to move up the ladder, you begin to see that.” Another professional in the nonprofit sector said, “My parents always told me that we, as African Americans, had to always be twice as good as our counterparts. You always feel like you’re at a starting line further back than others.”

Key Decision Makers Play a Critical Role in Closing the Gap

The professionals who participated in this research offered several perspectives on the role that the key decision makers at an organization should have in ensuring that more African American males have an opportunity to advance in the public relations field. Their thoughts included specific actions for an organization’s chief executive officer and his or her leadership team as it pertains to diversity in general and the role of African American males in particular. The professionals believe that an organization’s hiring leaders, including human resources professionals and direct-line supervisors, regardless of their own job levels must be intentional about identifying African Americans to be a part of the slate to fill all open positions, including those in public relations.

In addition, the majority of the professionals believe that the CEO or the most senior leader sets the tone for an organization’s culture. They believe that if an organization has a culture that supports diversity and inclusion, then typically the CEO has articulated this as a priority and has ensured that the organization’s most senior leadership team reflects the diversity of its workforce and customer base. One professional consultant said:

Leadership is top down. You drive the culture of your organization through your actions and your inactions. You control and influence who is brought on. If you pass the buck on these decisions and say that’s HR or that’s the hiring team and act as though these functions don’t report to you, that’s a way of passing the buck.

Several professionals said that most CEOs and most senior decision makers are not aware or are not concerned about the lack of African American males working in public relations. “Who’s going to tell them?” asked one of the corporate professionals. “Then you have to explain why it’s important. They’re running the company. And, it’s hard to make it an issue when you see so many African American females (in public relations) who are thriving.” Another professional from the corporate sector said, “I don’t know if the senior decision makers even consider it a concern worth considering. I don’t think there’s anything that triggers senior officers to say ‘we’ve got a problem,’” he said.

Several of the professionals cautioned against hiring leaders who say they are unable to find qualified candidates. “I no longer buy that as an answer,” said an agency professional. “You have to look harder. You may need to recruit in different locations and schools but it has to be a concerted effort. If you just reach out in general and hope they will come, it doesn’t work,”

he said. The professionals who participated in this research also agree that deliberate actions should be taken to develop and retain African American males once they are hired. For these professionals, this includes ensuring that they have direct leaders who can understand them and relate to them. These professionals also want to work for an organization that values their strategic contributions and is willing to invest in their career growth and development. He added that the most senior leaders should “make sure that you are grooming the African American talent (currently in your organization) so that when jobs do become available, they can go into these roles.”

The professionals who participated in this research agree that it is important to them for the most senior decision makers to openly acknowledge the value that they along with their colleagues bring to the public relations profession. These professionals want to work in a field that is perceived by the most senior decision makers as adding strategic value in support of an organization’s purpose. One of the professionals asked, “Who wants to go into a dead-end job or a job that’s not valued? They (most senior decision makers) have to talk about it (public relations) as something of value. They (public relations professionals) have to see a career pathway that makes sense.” Still another professional who is a communications consultant said, “The higher ups don’t necessarily value PR, so I don’t think they’ll get that deep and say ‘there are no African American males here.’ It’s just not in their realm of thinking. If there’s no money or impact to the bottom line, they’ll keep going like they’re going.”

Lack of African-American Males in the Profession Does Have an Impact

The majority of the professionals who participated in this research believe that the lack of African American males working in the field does negatively impact the profession. In their opinions, organizations do not have the ability to tap into the unique perspectives and points of view that African American males bring to strategic discussions because there are so few present. The professionals who participated in this research believe that their perspectives add value not only to discussions about public relations and communications strategy but also about overall business strategy. These professionals also believe this diversity of thought and experiences helps an organization and its leaders reach the best decisions about their customers and the markets they serve. Simply stated, “Diversity isn’t just about color. It’s about thought and opinion,” according to a professional in the corporate sector.

Many of the professionals also believe that the public relations profession will remain at a competitive disadvantage from a talent perspective. Several who participated in this research believe it will become increasingly more difficult to attract and retain African American males in the public relations field if those who are considering the field do not see examples of other successful African American males. According to one 25-year-old professional, “If young, aspiring college students aren’t seeing diversity in potential places of work, it can be discouraging. In the long run, it will hurt the industry as a whole if African American men stop expressing interest in the field due to lack of representation.”

A 51-year-old professional said, “You put yourself at a competitive disadvantage across the board if you limit the pool of talent you can choose from. There’s a certain experience that everybody has – not just racial or ethnic diversity but socioeconomic, geographic and religious. You’re limiting yourself without this diversity of talent and thinking,” he says. By comparison, a small number of the professionals who participated in this research do not believe that the lack of African American males in the field places the profession at a competitive disadvantage. Instead,

they believe the presence of African American women in the profession helps compensate for their absence. There are disadvantages, though, according to one professional, of relying solely on African American females. He said, “You don’t have that (African American male) voice. As good as they are, they can’t represent the voice of an African American male like an African American male.”

The majority of the professionals who participated in this research agreed that organizations that compete for market share or share of voice in African American communities are at a competitive disadvantage without representation from African American males in their public relations departments. These professionals believe that the presence of an African American male adds tremendous value in discussions where an organization is trying to appeal to all consumers, in general, but in particular to African American consumers – especially males. “If your (public relations) team is all white guys from some small town, what experiences can they draw on if you’re marketing a campaign to urban black males?” asks one professional consultant. “By the same token if you have all southern rural black males on the team, how do they relate to urban white males? There’s power in diversity,” he said.

Another professional from the local government sector said, “Having a lack of any particular group has had a negative outcome, as we’ve seen in some of those public relations disasters. A lot could have been headed off by having someone in that group saying ‘We can’t put that ad out there or we can’t do that because it will offend people.’” Still another professional who started his public relations career as a military public information officer recalls some of the challenges he had while trying to recruit African Americans to join his branch of the military. “I would go into these communities (to recruit) and I’m told to my face that there’s not a place for African Americans or minorities in the military. Why? Because all of their posters and marketing materials communicate a different story. This happens if the entire marketing firm is full of white people,” he said.

Discussion

In general, the results of this research provide insights into why there are so few African American males in the public relations industry and what barriers exist to African American males advancing into leadership roles. Based on the perspectives and experiences of the 32 professionals who participated in this research, those barriers range from a lack of knowledge and understanding among African American male high school and college students about what public relations is as a profession, to being an African American male in a Caucasian female-dominated profession that still has strong Caucasian male influence, to not having a lot of other African American male colleagues for support and friendship. Additional barriers include but are not limited to African American males not having role models and mentors successfully working in the field from whom they could learn, to not having leaders who could help advance their own careers, to feeling that their presence as a confident African American male in the workplace willing to join with their colleagues to make a positive contribution for their organization was intimidating to others.

Based on input from the professionals who participated in this research, most senior decision makers in an organization have a responsibility to ensure that more African American males have an opportunity to advance in the field. Their thoughts include specific actions for an organization’s chief executive officer and his or her leadership team as it pertains to diversity in

general and the role of African American males in public relations in particular. Those suggestions include identifying young men in high school with the skills and interests necessary for success in the public relations field. The research participants then suggested everything from the most senior decision makers hosting informal conversations with students to more formal workshops and training sessions to educate young men about the profession as a viable career option. Others suggestions included strategically recruiting at colleges and universities, including historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) where larger numbers of African American males are enrolled. These professionals also stressed the importance of mentorships, along with partnering with other African American organizations with memberships of college-educated men. These organizations include the African American fraternities whose members engage in civic and community service work.

Finally, the majority of the professionals said that the lack of African American males working in the field does negatively impact the profession. One of the primary ways the profession is impacted is when organizations do not have the ability to tap into the unique perspectives and points of view that African American males bring to strategic discussions because there are so few present. The professionals who participated in this research believe that their perspectives add value not only to discussions about public relations and communications strategy but also about overall business strategy.

These professionals believe that their perspectives, along with the thoughts and ideas of others from different backgrounds and experiences, add to the fullness and richness of discussions. They also believe this diversity of thought and experiences more often than not results in an organization and its leaders reaching the best decisions about their customers and the markets that they serve. Many of the professionals also believe that the public relations profession will remain at a competitive disadvantage from a talent perspective. Several of those who participated in this research believe it will become increasingly more difficult to attract and retain African American males in the public relations field if those who are considering the field do not see examples of other successful African American males.

By comparison, a small number of the professionals who participated in this research do not believe that the lack of African American males in the field places the profession at a competitive disadvantage. Instead, they believe the presence of African American women in the profession helps compensate for their absence. Most interviewees agreed that organizations that compete for market share or share of voice in African American communities are at a competitive disadvantage without representation from African American males in their public relations departments. Additionally, the presence of an African American male adds tremendous value in discussions where an organization is trying to appeal to all consumers, in general, but in particular to African American consumers – especially males.

In spite of the barriers that these professionals have faced over the course of their careers, most remain committed to the field of public relations as a career path. They also are strong advocates for the strategic value that the discipline of public relations brings to an organization. These professionals view the field of public relations as a set of skills not to be taken for granted or underestimated by others. “Everybody thinks they can do your job,” said a corporate communications professional. “They’re not qualified. People don’t understand there’s expertise to this career field. They may be a good writer, but they can’t do your job as well as you do.” He added, “I always tell my boss that you don’t want me to be the CFO, or the engineer. So why would you want somebody else who’s passing through to give you communications advice?”

Another professional said, “You think you can do my job because you don’t understand it. It’s no less technical and it’s no less rigid than yours. And you think that because you can talk, you can do what I do. Nobody truly understands the value of it (public relations) until you absolutely need it.”

The advice from many of the professionals to African American entry-level male professionals and to those considering a career in the field of public relations is not to become discouraged. They suggested that the next generation should focus on sharpening their strategic and tactical skills along with their oral and written communications skills. They also should develop and build relationships with mentors and leaders who can help advance their career goals, and seek opportunities to learn and grow beyond their current assignments. This includes becoming a member of professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America or Public Relations Student Society of America, or the International Association of Business Communicators, or the National Black Public Relations Society, or the National Association of Black Journalists, which has a professional component for public relations practitioners.

Another U.S. government professional suggested, “Master the English language and be able to express yourself not only verbally but in written form.” Also, one local government professional said, “Learn Spanish at a minimum. If you do that, you’ve increased your net worth ten-fold, given the number of Spanish-speaking people that there are here now.” He added, “You have to learn how to become unnaturally calm (in a crisis). If the public affairs officer is losing his head, then it’s all going to hell quickly!”

A professional from the corporate sector offered this advice, “Be flexible, especially if you’re young. Go to new places. Travel internationally. All of these things will add an element of diverse experiences that will make you very attractive to employers.” Regarding continuing education, a professional from local government said, “Make sure they (students) consider the double major or go back to get your master’s. It will help them to market themselves and move beyond just being a specialist. It also will give them the flexibility if they have something else to offer after working in the field of communications.”

In summary, this research provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of 32 African American male professionals in the public relations industry. While the experiences of this limited number of professionals do not illustrate the experiences of all African American males in the business, their insights do provide a glimpse into the barriers, borders and boundaries that many of them face.

Conclusions

From this research, it can be concluded that in general, the experiences of the 32 African American male professionals are consistent with many of the experiences illustrated in the literature. For example, similar to research from Brown et al. (2011), the participants agree that their race has played a role in their careers – whether as an asset or a barrier. The participants also believe that because of their race they have to work harder than their counterparts to overcome potential barriers. Consistent with research from Len-Rios (1998) the participants believe that the public relations industry is at a competitive disadvantage by not having African Americans at the table where key decisions are made. Along these same lines and consistent with research from Mundy (2015), the participants agree that there is a disconnect among decision

makers on the need for the field of public relations to be more diverse. In spite of the challenges that these participants have faced in their careers, the overwhelming majority remain committed to the field of public relations. At the same time, they remain hopeful that decision-makers will become more open to intentionally making opportunities for African Americans in general, and African American males in particular, to enter the field, to advance and to thrive at all levels.

There are limitations to this research. The first limitation is that this study only included the perspectives of 32 African American males from the public relations industry. Although the results and conclusions appear appropriate for this relatively small group, the researcher acknowledges that these findings cannot be generalized to the experiences of the broader population of African American male practitioners. Another limitation is the lack of scholarly literature specifically on this topic. Regardless, the literature that is available provides a thought-provoking foundation from which to advance this research. Finally, another limitation is the fact that the researcher also is an African American male public relations professional who could personally identify with many of the stories and experiences shared in this research. However, this researcher attempted to conduct this study and analysis without allowing his own experiences to bias the outcomes of these findings.

This body of research provides insight into the challenges of African American males as they enter the field of public relations and as they attempt to advance their careers. At the same time, this research sets the stage for future research on this topic. Specifically, future research could focus on strategies to bring more African American males into the profession. This research could include recommending partnerships among some of the public relations industry's professional organizations and their members to develop and implement strategies to support the hiring, retention, advancement and promotion of African American males in the profession. Future research also could focus on the experiences of African American males in the profession compared to the experiences of White males in the profession. This research would provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of African American and White males with the goal of understanding and learning from their similarities and differences.

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