Diversity in Public Relations: The Implications of a Broad Definition for PR Practice

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Abstract

Diversity and inclusion in the workforce continue to be important topics across industries. In public relations, diversity efforts have led to increases in the number of women in executive ranks and people of color at all levels, but inequalities and under-representation still exist. As the leading professional organization in public relations, the Public Relations Society of America recently released an updated diversity toolkit with a suggested definition of diversity and associated activities. The update defines diversity to include demographic characteristics, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation and also career-related differences. The purpose of this study is to determine if and how the top 50 global PR firms, as identified by the Holmes Report, communicate about diversity on their websites. The definitions these firms adopt are crucial because they form the basis for programs and policies. The specific research questions are: 1) Does the website mention diversity in any of the major sections? 2) If given, what is the definition? Which definition does it fit: traditional, broad without mentioning the traditional descriptors or a combination of both? 3) Does the website mention any diversity-related activities? If given, do the activities match the criteria outlined in the definition? Over half of the websites sampled contained definitions; the majority included expanded conceptualizations of differences, and most did not mention demographic characteristics specifically. Of the nine firms that outlined distinct activities, such as employee networks, all of the activities addressed demographic characteristics of diversity. Implications of these findings on the diversification of public relations and future directions are discussed.

Keywords: Diversity, Public Relations, Inclusion, Websites, Definition

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Diversity and inclusion [D&I] in the workforce continue to be important topics in business. In the field of PR, the D&I efforts have contributed to increasing the number of women in executive ranks and people of color at all levels. However, the field has been criticized for being slow to change (Kern-Foxworth & Miller, 1993; Place & Vanc, 2016; Pompper, 2005; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). As the leading professional organization in PR, the Public Relations Society of America [PRSA] has put forth guidance on this issue beginning in the late 1990s. More recently, the organization created a toolkit with a suggested definition of diversity and associated activities. The most recent update includes an expanded definition of diversity that includes demographic descriptors that historically have been used to describe diversity, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, and career-oriented differences in experience and disciplines (Fisk, Ross, & Keenan, 2016). This trend to broaden the meaning of diversity to include career-oriented criteria is occurring across all business sectors (Tremayne, 2009). The term itself is abstract and historically has held many meanings (Farndale, et al., 2015). In business, the term provides the basis for organizational policies and initiatives, which makes having a clear definition crucial (Digh, 1998). Without a clear definition, historical inequalities may be overlooked, and the initiatives identified for this goal may not be targeted correctly (Geletkanycz, et al., 2018; Iasmina, et al., 2018). A clear definition with specific criteria that is communicated effectively can also help integrate diversity into the organizational culture and ultimately, the field of PR (Digh, 1998).

Because diversity is a challenge for the profession of public relations and having a more explicit definition could be imperative for the success of diversity programs and policies, it is important to determine where the top public relations firms stand on this issue. Also, the field of public relations has not offered a definitive definition of diversity. The purpose of this current research study is to determine how public relations firms define diversity through an analysis of the top 50 global public relations firms as determined by the Holmes Report. Websites were chosen because websites are now the primary form of communication between organizations and the public (Bravo, et al., 2012). The information on the websites of these organizations was analyzed to determine if the firms provided a definition of diversity, what type of definition they provided, and if they identified initiatives meant to achieve diversification. The analysis begins with a discussion of the state of diversity in public relations Differing definitions of diversity are discussed, and an outline of the methodology is presented. The findings are presented and explained. Conclusions about how these firms define diversity and implications of these definitions for the future of D&I efforts in public relations are discussed.

Context: Diversity and Public Relations

In today's media-fragmented world, communication professionals are "expected to deliver more– more strategy, more content, more channels, more creativity, and more measurement" (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2017, p. 1). As the demand for communication increases, the composition of the audiences who are receiving communication is changing. Due to immigration, "the U.S. will not have a single racial or ethnic majority" by 2055 (Pew Research Center, 2016, 10 Demographic Trends section, para. 2). As of 2018, the foreign-born population is the largest in US history, and immigrants are coming from different regions than in the past, such as Asia and Spanish-speaking countries (U.S. Census, 2018). Generational

shifts are also occurring. As of 2019, the Millennial Generation, those born in 1981 to 1996, will be larger than the Baby Boomers. This group tends to be more liberal and less likely to affiliate with political parties than their parents (Pew Research Center, 2016). More women are also entering the workforce. In 2011, in 40% of all households with children, women were the primary breadwinner, but a gender gap in pay still exists. Two-parent households are also declining, and the size of the middle class (as defined by Americans with middle income) is shrinking. Finally, although Christianity continues to be the dominant religion, Islam is the fastest-growing worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2016).

These rapidly shifting demographics demand that public relations professionals be attuned to demographic diversity so they can communicate competently with their audiences (Qui & Murturi, 2016). However, the industry has been criticized for a lack of diversity in education and practice (Kern-Foxworth & Miller, 1993; Place & Vanc, 2016; Pompper, 2005). In the public relations education curriculum, topics dealing with diversity are not discussed in depth (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2006). Instructors "face steep challenges as compared with peers in mature fields with reliable pedagogical tools" (Pompper, 2005, p. 301). In the field, practitioners generally represent dominant social groups. Most practitioners are overwhelmingly White and female (DiStaso et al., 2006). In a meta-analysis examining the status of women in public relations from 2005-2016, Vardeman-Winter and Place (2017) found that White women dominate the public relations profession and that "women of color, LGBT practitioners, and practitioners with disabilities" (p. 238) were underrepresented. According to Pompper (2005), historically, "minorities are underrepresented, under-paid, and marginalized" (p. 299) in public relations. Among minority groups, Asians are grossly underrepresented despite being the fastest-growing ethnic group in the US (Qui & Murturi, 2016). Although an increasing number of people of color fill entry and mid-level positions, senior-level positions continue to be dominated by White men (Ford & Brown, 2015). In "The State of the PR Industry: Defining & Delivering on the Promise of Diversity Report," 62% of those surveyed said they have no Black men in leadership roles, and 37% said they have no Black women (Ford & Brown, 2015). In a study prepared by the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2017), only 44% of public relations practitioners indicated that their organizations reflect the diversity of their clients. Once inside the organization, minority employees sometimes have difficulties due to stereotyping and lack of role models and mentors (Qui & Murturi, 2016). They may not receive equitable opportunities and may be marginalized (Edwards, 2014). Although the public relations industry has progressed in its attention and awareness of diversity, improvement is still needed so that the field can reflect the society it serves.

Definitions of Diversity

The definition of a word is the product of agreement by the people that use it (Roznai, 2014). Although people sharing the same language agree on the general definitions of words, specific meanings can vary across contexts and usage, i.e., from person to person (Iasmina et al., 2018). For example, abstract terms such as diversity or equity can be especially challenging to define because their meanings are complex and variable (Farndale et al., 2015; Tremayne, 2009). However, having definitions for abstract, multi-dimensional words is essential, not only to avoid confusion, but also because they provide the basis for organizational policies and initiatives

(McMorran, et al., 2008). To ensure that policies and initiatives developed align with the intended goal, definitions for these words need to include specific descriptors or criteria (Serarols,et al.). The criteria can also be used to assess whether the initiatives are successful or not and if they need to be adjusted or changed. In the case of diversity, Digh (1998) argued that the term must be defined and clearly communicated to be "embedded in the organizational culture" (p. n.a.).

The term diversity has been defined in many ways. Historically, the term referred to differences in demographics or identity characteristics such as "ethnicity, race, gender, religious belief, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, age, national origin, and culture" (Qui & Murturi, 2016, p. 237). When initial efforts were made to diversify industry in the 1990s, this traditional definition was widely used (Volckmann, 2012). Diversity practices were also implemented that "focused on reducing biases that may cause discrimination or on increasing the managerial representation of minorities (e.g., through a quota)" (Austin, 2010; Buengeler, et al., 2018, p. 289). Organizational training focused on topics ranging from "social justice to awareness and appreciation of differences, and even work-life balance, sexual orientation, age, and disabilities" (Dishman, 2018, Becoming Culturally Sensitive section, para. 1). In recent years, the definition has been expanding (Tremayne, 2009). DeMaria (2009) argued for a definition that is broad and includes many factors, "from race, gender and sexual orientation to style, personality, perspective, and thought process" (p. 2). Buengeler, Leroy, and De Stobbeleir (2018) proposed an approach to diversity that "captures both minority and majority employees' reality, turning both groups into beneficiaries of the diversity practices" (p. 289). According to Edwards (2014), diversity is increasingly defined not according to individual identity or demographic markers, "but in professional terms, as a track record (work across a wide range of sectors for a wide range of clients)" (p. 329), which only benefits the organization and its clients, but not employees. Critics argue that a broad definition can overlook "many unique advantages afforded by talented women and other underrepresented minorities" (Geletkanycz, et al., 2018, para. 12) and potentially disadvantage people of color (Trawalter, et al., 2016). Booker and Dutkiewicz (2018) showed that most people avoid mentioning race, gender, and sexual orientation when they define diversity. They argued it is necessary to include these characteristics in order to create an inclusive culture and develop appropriate training for employees.

The field of public relations has not offered a definite definition of diversity. The PRSA began offering guidance on the topic of diversity in the late 1990s. As the largest professional organization in the field, its leadership in this area is significant. In 2001, the PRSA created a diversity award for state-level chapters to recognize their diversity efforts. In 2004, the serving PRSA president formed the National Diversity Committee. Later in 2004, a diversity website was developed, and in 2005, the organization produced its first diversity toolkit. This toolkit was last updated by the PRSA D&I committee in 2016 (Fisk, et al, 2016).

The 2016 toolkit contains a definition of diversity along with suggestions for education and other initiatives to increase diversity and inclusion in chapters and organizations. The definition "recognizes people from all walks of life…such as market demographics, Chapter/District/Section talent professional pool (corporate vs. agency), and career level which creates an umbrella that is broad enough to cover everyone" (Fisk et al., 2016, p. 4). In this

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definition, career level and type of employment are included as facets of diversity. The committee also suggests that chapters or sections adopt.

> A more inclusive definition of diversity [that] can include primary items related to one's professional life and length of experience, to secondary influences such as religion, socioeconomic status, education, type of job, and job classification, and geographic status. These areas of diversity are just as significant as race or sexual orientation (Fisk et al., 2016, p. 5).

Including job type and classification expands the historical definitions used in the 1990s when businesses began diversity efforts. The D&I committee argued that an expanded definition is preferable because "focusing on a narrow definition is not only too exclusive, but it is also too closely linked to affirmative action… [and] seems to engender resistance from White males and does not accomplish long-term cultural change that focused on utilizing the best talents of everyone." (Fisk et al., 2016, p. 4).

> In order to practice diversity in the organization, the Committee suggests to: Organize a diversity, multicultural or international committee and task it with providing one or more general programs….Identify a particular underrepresented group and dedicate resources to cultivating that group…the Miami Chapter has an extremely successful Hispanic Market Section…Use the establishment of new committees as an opportunity to showcase the talents of people of color and different ethnicities, both as presenters and as committee chairs…work with local PRSSA Chapters or Diversity Departments at local colleges/universities… Dedicate one story per quarter to a diversity and inclusion issue…Partner with other communication and/or marketing-related organizations that concentrate on diverse topics or membership to help drive members and communicate your own initiative (Fisk et al., 2016).

Although the D&I committee included descriptors not historically included in definitions of diversity, the associated activities appear more traditional in nature. The Committee concluded that:

> More work needs to be done in order to meet the needs of our multicultural nation. We need to create a more representative workforce, reach diverse audiences who have segmented communication channels, and create a better understanding of diversity and inclusion in our society (Fisk et al., 2016, p. 7).

Given the past criticism of the public relations field, the new guidance offered by the PRSA, and the significance of defining the term diversity, it is vital to evaluate the contemporary stance of public relations firms on the topic. Recently, Chitkara (2018) reported that among 17 CEOs in the top 100 global public relations firms, there was a lack of consensus over the definition of diversity. Many of the CEOs confused diversity with inclusion. Diversity is often referred to as being "invited to the party" or hired by the organization and inclusion is being "asked to dance" or being given opportunities for

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advancement and promotion. The present study aimed to deepen the understanding of efforts toward diversity at public relations organizations by examining if and how the term is defined, if it is communicated clearly to the public, and if the initiatives matched the criteria found in the definition.

Methodology: Content Analysis

To determine how global public relations firms currently define and communicate about diversity, content analysis was used to analyze the websites of the top 50 global public relations firms. The firms were chosen using the Holmes Report Global Agency Ranking (2019). The Holmes Report defines public relations agencies broadly and considers public relations activities "any activity designed to help corporations and other institutions build mutually-beneficial relationships with their key stakeholders, including but not limited to customers, employees, shareholders, legislators and regulators, communities, and the media" (2019, Methodology section, para 1). The report ranks the firms according to their revenue for these activities.

Websites were chosen as the unit of analysis because websites are the main channel that organizations use to communicate information to the public (Bravo et al., 2012). Organizational websites communicate, "organizational identity, expertise, and quality to potential and existing recruits and clients" (Edwards, 2014, p. 322). The websites in the sample contained similar content and subject sections. All had a home page and sections generally covering the following areas: about, case studies or examples of past work, areas of expertise, careers or join us, and people. Each of these major sections was analyzed to answer three related research questions.
Research question 1) Does the website mention diversity in any of these major sections?
Research question 2) If given, what is the definition? Which definition does it fit: traditional, broad without a mention of traditional descriptors or a combination of both?

The traditional definition is operationalized using demographic terms such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious and political ideologies, and culture. The broad definition is operationalized as not containing any mention of these demographic characteristics and instead refers to other descriptors such as distinct disciplines, work experiences, and perspectives. For this study, a combined definition was operationalized as containing at least one characteristic from the traditional definition as well as at least one from the broader definition. Any firm that mentioned diverse backgrounds or people (employees and colleagues) was also categorized as having the combined definition because these terms are ambiguous and could refer to traditional categories as well as experiences or perspectives. The content for these definitions was developed from examples in the literature and initial analysis of the websites.
Research question 3) Does the website mention any diversity-related activities? If given, do identified activities match the criteria in the definition?

The major sections of each website were reviewed for the activities related to diversity as aligned with the purpose of the study. The goal was to determine if this content was prominently displayed on the page, and if mentioned, determine if it matched the criteria in the definition.

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Findings

The definitions and corresponding number of websites are listed in Table 1 below. Of the 50 websites, 28 (56%) of firms mentioned and defined diversity on at least one major section of a webpage. These definitions were most discussed only in one section of the website, such as the about or careers sections. Only three (11%) of the 28 firms devoted a distinct page to the topic of diversity while most firms included a paragraph or two discussing diversity on a page that covered additional topics. Five of 28 (18%) defined diversity in traditional terms as constituted by differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical ability, religious and political ideologies, and culture. A clear example of the traditional definition is from a firm that states

> only by reflecting the diversity of the audience we aim to engage can we truly serve the needs of our clients. We are committed to providing equal opportunities for all in the workplace regardless of race, religion, gender, orientation, age, or disability and welcome applicants from members of groups currently underrepresented in the workforce (Grayling, 2019, Committed to Equality and Diversity section, para 1).

Six of 28 (21%) defined diversity in broader terms; they used none of the traditional terminologies and mentioned only career-related differences, such as discipline, work experience, and perspective. An example is a firm that mentioned how the organization "can bring together diverse experience and expertise to solve any client challenge" (Teneo, 2019, Teneo Way in Action section, para 2.). This definition highlights the benefits of diversity to clients. Seventeen of 28 (61%) firms defined diversity using the combined definition. One example of this definition is a firm that stated, "our soul is defined by our diversity- of ideas, of expertise, of culture, and of people" (MSL, 2019, Purpose section, para. 1). The firm also explained how it promises "to our clients, our people, and the world that we not only embrace the difference in the world, but also engage multiple perspectives and holistic thinking in everything we do" (MSL, 2019, Purpose section, para. 1). This definition includes diverse "culture," which is a traditional demographic characteristic, but it also mentions diverse ideas perspectives, which refer to broader criteria. Over half (59%) of the firms that presented a combined definition did not mention traditional diversity descriptors such as race and gender. Instead, they used the terms "background" or "people" (employees and colleagues) in addition to career-related criteria, such as talent and experience. In total, the majority (82%) of the firms that mentioned diversity used either the broadest definition or the combined.

Definition	Number of Websites
None	22
Traditional	5
Broad	6
Combined	17
Broad and Combined	23

Table 1. Definitions and corresponding number of websites

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Nine of the 28 (32%) that mentioned diversity identified specific activities. In all nine cases, stated activities addressed the traditional demographic criteria of diversity. Activities included (a) recruiting, (b) creating support networks and advancement initiatives for women and minority groups, (c) partnering with community organizations for education and advancement of these groups, and (d) training for organizational diversity. The WE Communications website outlined one of the most comprehensive programs in this study. This organization does work in three areas to create "an inclusive workforce, industry, and community" (WE Communications, 2019, Diversity and Inclusion section, para 1). The organization partners with groups that support equality and opportunity and provide "flexible and inclusive employee benefits… [and] strive to be open to diverse perspectives, ideas, people, and backgrounds" (We Communications, 2019, Diversity and Inclusion section, para 9-10). Interestingly, seven of the nine organizations defined diversity with broad descriptors, but then offered initiatives that address traditional characteristics.

Discussion

The purpose of the analysis was to determine how some of the largest global public relations firms define diversity in 2019. Specifically, the goal was to determine if these firms provided a definition of diversity on their website, and if given, what type of definition?

Research question 1. Does the website mention diversity?

In response to research question one, over half the firms (56%) mentioned diversity in the top-level sections of their websites. However, many presented the topic as a section on a page that included other topics and did not integrate it throughout the site. According to Austin (2010), integrating the topic of diversity across organizational communication demonstrates organizational commitment. The firms in this study could better demonstrate their commitment to diversity by integrating the topic throughout the website of their organization. In addition, although over half of the firms in this analysis mentioned diversity, the other 44% did not include it on their websites; thus, they did not use their primary form of communication with the public to communicate about diversity. According to Digh (1998), it is essential that the definition of diversity be clarified and communicated to effectively integrate diversity into an organization's culture, climate, and mission. Only when the goal of diversity is embraced by the culture of multiple public relations firms will the industry begin to truly reflect the population it serves. Qui and Murturi (2016) argue that discussions of diversity in public relations need to go beyond the firms to society-at-large to reach diversification of the industry. Such discussions could start with the largest firms taking the lead by developing clear understandings and policies on diversity and prominently communicating these to the public on their website. Ultimately, the industry could come together as a whole to discuss the meaning of diversity and develop a holistic definition to implement industry wide.

Research question 2. If given, what is the definition? Which definition does it fit: traditional, broad without a mention of traditional criteria or a combination of both?

Of the 28 firms that displayed a definition on their website, only 18% provided a strictly traditional definition. The remaining 82% provided either a broad definition or a combined definition. These findings indicated that public relations firms are moving toward a definition of diversity that includes broader criteria. Although this broader definition may create less societal

resistance, diversity of the workforce in traditional terms continues to be an issue for the public relations industry. The move to a purely broad definition before demographic diversity is achieved could lead to fewer opportunities for women and members of minority groups (Geletkanycz et al., 2018). In addition, among the 17 firms that used the combined definition, only 41% also specifically identified traditional markers. Most used terms such as background or people (employees and colleagues) to refer to demographic diversity. The fact that criteria such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation, disability, and culture were left out of many definitions may indicate that the organizations were avoiding these terms. The problem with omitting these terms is that subsequent policies and programs might not address the disparities linked to demographics, and thus, these policies and programs could be ineffective (Booker & Dutkiewicz, 2018). Dhaliwal, Crane, Valley, and Lowenstein (2013) argued for the need to create a broad and inclusive definition of diversity, but also one that specifically includes traditional demographic factors such as age, race, gender, and sexual orientation. For example, rather than only mentioning diverse backgrounds, cultures, and people, organizations could follow the PRSA guidance and include these traditional demographics. Such a definition shows the importance of continuing to address societal inequalities but also demonstrates the value of other types of difference. Adopting this type of definition for public relations firms reveals the awareness that the field is not sufficiently diversified while including broader types of career-related difference reveals an understanding that differences are not limited to demographics. In addition, once a definition is adopted, it should be clearly communicated to employees. Many of the CEOs of the top global public relations firms are unclear about their organization's definition of diversity and often confuse it with inclusion (Chitkara, 2013). Employees at all levels of the firm should know what is meant by diversity and inclusion in their organization and what steps the organization is taking to ensure both.

Research question 3. Does the website mention any diversity-related activities? If given, do the identified activities match the criteria in the definition?

Thirty-two percent of the websites containing a definition of diversity mentioned associated activities. Ironically, all of these activities, such as support networks for women and minority groups, are only meant to address a traditional definition of diversity. Most of the firms that identified diversity initiatives used a broad definition of diversity, which creates a misalignment between the definition and the activities. As a result, the firms will not be able to determine if the initiatives are achieving the desired outcomes. Also, most of the activities of these organizations have been criticized. Diversity networks have increased prejudice by isolating women and members of minority groups and emphasizing their differences. Other efforts, such as targeted recruitment, may open doors, but do not promote employees' feelings of inclusion once they are inside an organization (DeMaria, 2009). If the field of public relations is moving to a broader definition of diversity that includes types of difference beyond demographic characteristics, then diversity activities should reflect this shift. Current efforts to secure traditional diversity should be improved and expanded to include support and training for dealing with career-related diversity. Efforts by all firms should match the specific criteria outlined in the adopted definition. Efforts should also address prejudice in the workplace and the inclusion and acceptance of all employees (DeMaria, 2009). Specific recommendations for public relations firms based on the answers to the above research questions are located in Table 2.

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Recommendations
1. Develop a definition of diversity based on specific criteria that includes both traditional and broad characteristics of diversity.
2. Show organizational commitment to diversity initiatives by communicating the definition and activities across organizational communication to all stakeholders.
3. Align diversity-related activities to the criteria identified in the definition to allow assessment and ensure effectiveness.

Table 2. Recommendations for public relations firms

Conclusion

Over half of the top 50 global public relations firms communicate their commitment to diversity on their primary form of public communication; however, many do define diversity using broad descriptors. Because White men still hold most of the executive positions in public relations, these inequalities should be explicitly addressed and discussed in this professional field as well as the larger society. A definition of diversity that reflects the PRSA guidance might help focus policies and programs on many types of diversity and inclusion, thus, moving the field of public relations toward fuller diversification. Once a definition is identified, it should be communicated clearly to employees and the public on the website. All employees, especially CEOs, should know how their organization defines diversity and defines inclusion. In addition, initiatives should be expanded to address other diversity factors and linked to the criteria identified in the definition.

Although the field of public relations better reflects the diversity of society today, work still needs to be done to achieve diversification. Implementing the suggestions in this study can promote consistency within the field and lead to more effective initiatives. Future research on this topic should expand this study by examining factors internal to the firms, leadership, and employees. Researchers could trace the historical trajectory of firms' demographic compositions in comparison to diversity initiatives to determine ways in which organizations have changed over time. Demographic breakdowns could also be compared to the criteria found in the definitions of diversity. Additional research might also examine the specific D&I activities for each of the firms and survey employees to determine effectiveness. These studies could add to the understanding of the state of diversity initiatives in public relations and identify additional areas to be addressed.

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