Significance of race in the US undergraduate public relations educational landscape

Reflections of former public relations students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to address a practical question and problem: what can explain the small number of underrepresented racial and ethnic practitioners in the public relations industry? By placing race at the center of this study via critical race theory, the authors sought to answer the previously mentioned practical question. The authors focused on the undergraduate environment as a pipeline to the profession. The goal was to determine whether issues of race in the undergraduate public relations environment played a role in students' ability to succeed in their public relations coursework and in their ability to secure internships, network with professionals, etc.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors interviewed 22 practitioners with five or fewer years of industry experience. The authors used email interviews to gather data from young professionals. Although email interviews are impersonal in nature, because of a lack of the use of social cues and non-verbal communication (Hunt & McHale, 2007), email interviews are more cost-effective, expand the range of participants that one could interview, and this method allows participants to reflect longer on their answers, which could result in more detail – whereby participants might share information they would not normally share face-to-face.

Findings – The findings reveal that half of the Latina, African American and Asian American participants noted that being underrepresented was not necessarily a hindrance to their academic success; rather, being underrepresented was uncomfortable for them at times, as they believed they had to prove themselves more than whites. Additional findings reveal that in terms of developing social skills for the profession, participants did not experience negative or positive effects of race. Findings are used to gain insight into how to increase diversity in the profession and to gauge the extent to which racial identity plays a role in public relations students' collegiate development.

Originality/value – This study asks racially and ethnically underrepresented applied communication students to reflect on their experiences as undergraduates as a means of refining the undergraduate educational experience to make that experience more attractive for and conducive to academic success for current and future underrepresented applied communication undergraduate students. It's a first of its kind in that regard.

Keywords Ethnicity, Race, Critical, Public relations education, Diversity pipeline

Paper type Research paper

Race remains relevant in contemporary society and especially in public relations despite the fact that research shows that many persons in the USA believe racism is a thing of the past (Orbe 2011; Waymer and Street 2015). Ultimately critical race theory (CRT Delgado and

Stefancic 2012) responds to post-racial society proponents who tend to argue that race matters are concerns of a bygone era by highlighting myriad ways in which US workplaces remain sites of whiteness and unequal racialized privilege and power for whites (Waymer and Heath 2015). Logan (2011) in her application of CRT to public relations articulated:

> CRT scholars understand racism as endemic to American life; are skeptical of dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy; insist on contextual/historical analysis of contemporary conditions; presume that racism contributes to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage; argue that the experiential knowledge of people of color is significant in the analysis of the law and society; and this scholarship works toward eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression (p. 448).

Such a position is consistent with but extends further the quintessential argument for requisite variety and "excellence" in public relations management – a theoretical position that argues that organizations cannot practice "excellence" in public relations if management is not tapping into the unique perspectives that diverse persons can provide (Sha and Ford, 2007).

This theoretical call for diversity in the profession and scholarship of public relations is also consistent with the call from practitioners for diversity in the practice of public relations and our call for diversity in the undergraduate program. Gideon Fidelzeid, the managing editor of *PRWeek*, recently lamented the current racial and ethnic composition of public relations agencies:

> According to the US Census Bureau, "people of color" – and I realize diversity and inclusion goes beyond that – made up 36.2% of the population in 2011 and will climb to 49.9% by 2050. That is an audience most of your PR campaigns target. How can you effectively craft programs for them if your staffs don't represent them? (as cited in Vallee-Smith, 2014, p. 3)

Similarly, Chubb Group, a premiere provider of executive insurance, makes a compelling argument why diversity must be an integral part of business planning and culture:

> If we are to form lasting business relationships with our customers and become a true global leader in the industry, we must understand our customers' diverse cultures and decisional processes, not merely their languages. To do so, we must begin with a diverse workplace. [. . .] To remain competitive for talent and for customers, it is imperative that we attract and value diverse talent and enable that talent to attract and value diverse customers (cited in Waymer and VanSlette, 2013, p. 471).

In short, these examples highlight why racial and ethnic employee diversity in businesses and organizations in general and in the practice of public relations in specific is important – diversity can improve organizational effectiveness by generating a greater number of possible solutions and ideas and can provide organizations with multiple perspectives about the varying ways of thinking about problems, ideas, products and markets in which an organization competes (Pellet, 2004). Thus, in the practice of public relations, much of which occurs within the context of agencies representing corporate interests and in the form of in-house practitioners for businesses and other organizations, one also should expect workplace diversity to be deemed a critical component contributing to overall organizational success (Toth, 2011).

This expectation is indeed upheld, as finding support for the premise that public relations industry executives are committed to the principle of diversity in the workplace can be done rather easily; however, while diversity recruitment and retention efforts seem well intentioned, finding examples of ways that the industry has put into practice the recruitment and retention of underrepresented racial or ethnic persons/practitioners is far more challenging (see Waymer, 2013). Business Planning and Research International (2005),

in a survey about diversity in the public relations field, found 90 per cent of senior communications managers felt that the industry needs improvement in "minority" representation at all levels. Despite the fact that persons representing these groups constitute around 36 per cent of the more than 300 million people in the USA (US Census Bureau, 2011), the number of persons from these underrepresented groups in public relations falls considerably short of reflecting the demographic percentages of the general population. For example, five years after publication of the BPRI report, a 2010 census of the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA), 22,000 professional members showed that only 14 per cent of the organization's membership self-identified as Hispanic, black and/or Asian/Asian American (Tindall, 2012). Of note is that the aforementioned 14 per cent statistic represents a 100 per cent increase (doubling) of the percentage of PRSA members from underrepresented groups since 2005 (Tindall, 2012).

Although these numerical increases can be deemed as progress in terms of adding diversity to the practice and profession of public relations, many employers and organizations desire to hire more candidates from underrepresented groups. In fact, the LAGRANT Foundation is a non-profit that was established, in part, for the purposes of increasing the number of underrepresented racial and ethnic persons in the fields of advertising, public relations and marketing. Vallee-Smith (2014), a member of the LAGRANT Foundation board, highlighted her frustration with the current state of affairs. Citing the LAGRANT Foundation, Vallee-Smith articulated:

> The demographics of professionals in the public relations industry are shocking. For example, managers in the public relations industry are mostly Caucasian. Only 3.3 per cent of managers are Hispanic (US Department of Labor, 2010); compare this to the US demographic where Hispanics make up 15.4 per cent of the total population. African Americans, however, are even more underrepresented in the public relations industry than Hispanics. The percentage of African American public relations managers is only 2.7 (US Department of Labor, 2010). This means that there are 1,890 African American public relations managers in the US And this small group is supposed to represent the 37.6 million African Americans in the US today. This imbalance is completely intolerable. (Vallee-Smith, 2014, p. 3)

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) reports there were nearly 230,000 public relations specialist jobs in 2012. This figure, however, excludes the more than 1 million jobs in related areas such as advertising sales, advertising, promotions, and marketing managers, market research analysts, meeting, convention, and event planners, and public relations and fundraising managers. Regardless, the field of public relations specialist is expected to grow 12 per cent by 2022.

How will employers, who desire diversity, attract these candidates when so few of their potential employee applications are from candidates from underrepresented groups? The first step to increase diversity in a profession is to increase diversity in the college major that is a path to the field (Brown *et al.*, 2011).

In sum, we argue that this research topic of workplace diversity is and should continue to be a top priority for contemporary leaders. Ford (2010) stressed that contemporary leaders must promote diverse, collaborative efforts in the workplace at all levels; therefore, it is important for public relations and communication executives, as well as public relations educators, to understand how to recruit and retain a diverse pool of potential future leaders in the profession. Public relations education is foundational to this aim, and a key strategy used by agencies to help meet this goal of a diverse workforce is through the construction of a pipeline of diverse practitioners among millennials, whom constitute the largest and most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the workplace today (Armour, 2005; Gallicano, 2013). This pipeline is established through the initial recruitment of these underrepresented

students into the public relations curriculum, and the actualization of the pipeline's potential is realized through the retention and matriculation of those students and their subsequent placement into entry-level public relations positions. Given the fact that research shows that most public relations majors chose the major "by accident" (Bowen, 2009), innovation is needed to diversify the student majors. Such insights can be drawn from capturing, exploring and analyzing the lived experiences of young, diverse practitioners.

Simply stated, Stephanie Howley (2011), Senior Vice President of human resources for Cohn and Wolfe – a global communications and public relations agency – stated:

> The PR workforce does not currently represent the ethnic-minority community in the United States. Therefore, the active recruitment and retention of multicultural talent in PR is necessary to create a diverse employee roster and ensure your agency is equipped to effectively engage all audiences (para. 1).

To achieve these diversity goals, it appears that a logical step should be for industry and academics alike to focus on increased diversity in student composition (Brown *et al.*, 2011), as well as high quality mentoring (Waymer, 2012b) and teaching (Waymer and Dyson, 2011) that addresses issues of race and diversity in the collegiate major. Thus, the question that provides the impetus for this study is as follows:

Q1. What can explain the small number of underrepresented racial and/or ethnic practitioners in the public relations industry?

To explore this challenge, we interviewed 22 racially/ethnically diverse young practitioners (with five or fewer years of work experience in the practice of public relations) to find contributing factors to these former students' success and collegiate graduation (see Appendix for a description of participants).

Statement of purpose for study

As critical scholarship has and continues to gain more acceptance in the public relations discipline (Boyd and Waymer, 2011; Curtin and Gaither, 2005; L'Etang, 2005; Waymer and Heath, 2007, 2016), scholars who aim to study race critically ask questions such as: What would the discipline of public relations look like if "race" was placed at the center of research inquiry, design, and execution? (Waymer and Heath, 2015). Using CRT (see Delgado and Stefancic, 2012) as a theoretical lens, we seek to understand the important aspects in young, diverse, public relations professionals' collegiate (social and public relations coursework) development. AS Pompper's (2005) seminal publication introducing CRT to the study of public relations, a small but growing cadre of scholars have used race and/or CRT as a guiding framework for scholarly inquiry (Edwards, 2012, 2013; Logan, 2016; Waymer, 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, Waymer and Heath, 2016). It is via this CRT lens that we explore the challenges of creating and stocking a pipeline of diverse students for industry.

While the study that follows interviews racially diverse millennials to determine the extent to which their race played a role in their collegiate success (a functionalist pursuit), we take care as not to propagate the dysfunctional aspects of studying race in public relations scholarship by either segmenting publics into priority groups exclusively (Vardeman-Winter *et al.*, 2013) or by treating race as an attribute of a public which can be instrumentalized for the benefit of an organization. Thus, while we privilege race in theorizing and analysis, the appendix lists participants by both race and gender to both acknowledge and show sensitivity toward complex, intersectional identities of practitioners. Additionally, while one by-product of our analysis is to explore possibilities, via the public relations education-to-industry pipeline, for greater representation and diversity among

public relations professionals so that organizations can be more effective in obtaining strategic objectives, we take care to balance that functional desired outcome with the fact that underrepresented persons are ends unto themselves and are more than what they are sometimes pigeonholed to be (Tindall, 2009; Waymer and Heath, 2015). In the section that follows, we highlight relevant education and public relations education literature with a particular attention paid to building a diverse pipeline in public relations education.

Building a diverse pipeline through public relations education

While this study's focus is on building a diverse pipeline of students via the undergraduate public relations education program, we recognize that scholars in many other disciplines are also engaged in such pursuits. In fact, for years, there has been a push by universities to attract more women and underrepresented racial/ethnic persons into STEM fields. Several prominent support and advocacy programs to this effect come to mind including but not limited to: Women in Science and Engineering (WISE), Society of Women Engineers (SWE) and the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE).

The *Journal for Multicultural Education*, in particular, has a track record for granting space and a platform for academics pursuing questions related to attracting, retaining and/ or graduating underrepresented students – particularly in STEM disciplines. For example, authors, via scholarly contributions to special issues in this journal, have explored the following: predicting underrepresented students' success in STEM disciplines (Gipson, 2016); identifying strategies for increasing diversity and inclusion in STEM (Jones, 2016) including increasing their access to these educational opportunities (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016; Wright *et al.*, 2016); building supportive communities for and around these students; and promoting underrepresented student success in these disciplines (Covington *et al.*, 2017). Additional studies in this vein have also assessed summer bridge programs in STEM – programs that are designed to help underrepresented students transition successfully from K-12 education to collegiate education in STEM disciplines (Johnson, 2016); and studies have assessed students' motivation to pursue doctorates in STEM – which is an important consideration given that underrepresented undergraduates often desire to see mentors in their academic disciplines from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds (McGee *et al.*, 2016). While STEM has and will continue to be an important area of scholarly inquiry for diversity pipeline initiatives, we argue that a similar focus should be directed to applied communication disciplines such as public relations education because of the unprecedented interest and growth in these majors and the profession.

In fact, many current rankings, including the Princeton Review (2014; see also Karlan, 2014), place communication, journalism and related academic programs among the ten most popular majors on college campuses across the USA. According to the US Department of Education Institution of Education Sciences' 1971 (year of inception) through 2012 data, few degrees (such as computer and information science and health professions) have grown at a percentage rate equal to or larger than communication-related disciplines, which increased more than 700 per cent since 1971 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). We can only assume that this increase in student enrollment overall has also led to an increase in the enrollment of students from underrepresented groups. If that is the case, then why is there a dearth of underrepresented practitioners in the field of public relations – in which the major should be a pipeline to the industry? Are things happening while students are undergraduates to dissuade them from pursuing careers in the practice of public relations?

There is general agreement between public relations educators and executives about the intended purpose of public relations curriculum in the USA which is to prepare students adequately for the practice (DiStaso *et al.*, 2009; Gallicano *et al.*, 2014; Todd, 2009). While that

overarching agreement is noteworthy, adherence to CRT would require us to problematize that overarching agreement and probe deeper: In what ways would race play a role in students' adequate preparation (both educationally and socially) for industry? This study focuses on in-depth accounts of early career practitioners, both underrepresented and white practitioners, and their assessments of the role of the undergraduate public relations curriculum, student groups such as the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), and mentors. This study also focuses on these early career practitioners' assessments of the effect that the curriculum, PRRSA, and mentors had on them and the role that these "career-preparatory" elements played in participants' current careers and success in hopes of providing more nuanced answers to these questions.

Thus, to increase the racial and ethnic diversity in the public relations workforce, several scholars suggest that the industry must begin building a more diverse pipeline of millennial practitioners through collegiate education and socialization (Armour, 2005; Brown *et al.*, 2011; Gallicano, 2013; Waymer *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, there is a need to understand the challenges that successful underrepresented students faced in comparison to their white counterparts during their collegiate career. When considering the broader issue of student involvement and its impact on career preparation, Astin (1984) noted three areas for examination. The first area Astin (1984) discussed, knowledge skill sets, consists of those items related to the academic-specific knowledge for developing specific skills that graduates are expected to master in preparation to enter the workforce. The second, overall career skills preparation, relates to knowledge of the industry graduates are expected to develop from academic programs, mentors and internships in preparation for entry-level positions. The third, social development, refers to the emphasis programs place on developing personal skills for maximizing success within social context of the workplace. Parvu *et al.* (2014) argued that these three themes closely match the qualities companies expect from graduates: academic-specific knowledge (i.e. "hard" skills), interpersonal competencies (i.e. "soft" skills) and work-based experience, such as completed internships (Parvu *et al.*, 2014). While employers within any field expect graduates to master subject-specific information, most also require an overall set of baseline skills considered as relevant for becoming successful within academic settings and developing into proficient and productive employees. Examining the racial differences in student involvement could help identify gaps in support for underrepresented students and establish better educational, social and professional opportunities for them to become successful in the public relations field. To uncover differences in student involvement between underrepresented students and whites across the three areas that Astin (1984) discussed, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1. In what ways did race play a role in the public relations academic success of young public relations professionals?

RQ2. In what ways did race play a role in the social/pre-professional development of young public relations professionals?

Method
We used email interviews to gather data from young professionals. Although email interviews are impersonal in nature, because of a lack of the use of social cues and non-verbal communication (Hunt and McHale, 2007), email interviews are more cost-effective, expand the range of participants that one could interview, and this method allows

participants to reflect longer on their answers, which could result in more detail – whereby participants might share information they would not normally share face-to face. We chose this method because we wanted to empower participants to detail their experiences with race, in their own words, and on their own time schedule. We asked participants to identify their race and/or ethnicity. We also asked participants questions such as:

- Q1. Do you believe your race helped or hindered your development as a public relations student? Please explain how, and provide specific examples if possible.

- Q2. Do you believe that race impacted the development of other public relations students? Please explain how, and provide specific examples if possible.

- Q3. Do you believe your race was a factor in your ability to build networks with other students? Please explain how, and provide specific examples if possible.

- Q4. Do you believe your race was a factor in your ability to build networks with communication professionals? Please explain how, and provide specific examples if possible.

- Q5. Do you believe your race was a factor in your ability to find and complete internships and other professional activities outside of the classroom? Please explain how, and provide specific examples if possible.

- Q6. Along with technical skills, students typically develop "soft skills" (projecting a professional image, work ethic, passion, maturity, time management, etc.). What do you think MOST helped or hindered you from developing those skills during your collegiate career?

- Q7. Do you believe your race and/or gender had an impact on your development of those "soft" skills? If so, please explain. These questions are derived from the two research questions above.

Participants
We interviewed 22 young professionals: 13 African Americans (9 female, 4 male), 6 whites (5 female, 1 male), 2 Asian American (1 female, 1 male) and 1 Latina. The average time of employment in public relations or a related profession was 2.59 years. Data were collected until iteration and redundancy was found, consistent with McCracken's (1993) approach that favors repetition over sample size for qualitative examination.

Procedure
We used a convenience sample to identify participants, and they received $50 for their participation. Owing to the nature of the topic, we recruited participants we already had a previous relationship with in hopes that such rapport would result in deeper, more personal data. We collected data in two phases. First, we sent an initial, interview guide to each participant, providing participants two weeks to craft responses. Once participants

completed the initial interview guide, we examined the answers and sent three to five follow-up questions, usually based on the need for clarification or elaboration on a particular thought. We allotted one week for to complete follow-up questions.

Data analysis

We reviewed responses and made notes about any key findings, repetitive information and unusual information. Using inductive analysis as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), we took each transcript and researcher summaries and denoted conditions, context and consequences to create, link and classify sub-categories of information. This method allowed the analysts to make conclusions without making assumptions not based on the data. Once all data were collected and synthesized, the first author conducted follow-up member checks with four respondents. The first author conducted follow-up interviews via Skype to allow participants the opportunity to elaborate on the themes that emerged via this study and to discuss the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the emergent themes. Participants acknowledged the emergent themes as important and representative of their collegiate lived experiences. Thus, these four respondents validated the themes presented in this study.

Results

The first research question examined the role and significance that race played in respondents' academic success – measured in terms of success in completing and learning key objectives via the public relations curriculum. Half of the Latina, African American and Asian American respondents indicated their race had no impact on their educational development; in their view, race neither helped nor hindered their development. The other half of these respondents noted that being underrepresented was not necessarily a hindrance to their success; rather, being underrepresented was uncomfortable for them at times, as they believed they had to prove themselves – more than their white counterparts – in the classroom:

> As a minority, I do feel that race always plays an intricate role in every aspect of life. I was one of only a handful of African Americans enrolled in my school's program, and in some aspects I had to "prove" myself.

In addition, being underrepresented in the classroom was often uncomfortable for minority students:

> As an African American woman I had to sometimes be uncomfortable in order to ensure that I was receiving the same opportunities that all student received. Even today it sometimes feels like I have to fight societal images placed on black women. When I present myself I want to ensure that I not only present myself in a favorable way for me, but for the other black women who may follow me or be up next for my seat.

There were also white students who witnessed the extra effort required of underrepresented students in the classroom environment:

> If not exceptionally academic, the minority students may not experience the extensive advising, knowledge of opportunities or receive special attention from college administrators that their Caucasian peers receive.

Respondents also mentioned that minority students are clearly an unrepresented population with the public relations profession and classroom:

There are not enough minorities, a black, female friend once told me that she was intimidated when she walked into a lecture hall full of white sorority girls. It is intimidating, but it is not a problem we cannot overcome.

The second research question inquired if respondents perceived race as a factor in their social development while attending school. Social development is measured in terms of acquiring soft skills, ability to secure internships and ability to network with professionals. Overall, most (18 of 22) respondents indicated race had little or no effect on their own individual social and pre-professional development. Yet, almost all (21 of 22) respondents expressed awareness that race can shape how others perceive abilities. Two major themes emerged:

(1) Most students expressed being aware of the existence of racial differences in society. They also recognized how people can be treated differently based on raced, even though most participants indicated that race did not greatly affect them individually.

(2) Perceptions of how race potentially affects social and pre-professional development varied according to the race of the respondent.

While the majority of respondents, as indicated above, expressed race did not impact them personally, most (5 of 6) white respondents expressed this sentiment:

I do not believe that race has an impact on a person's ability to develop as a PR student or any student for that matter. I believe that if a student wants a crutch to lean on or claim things didn't happen for them because of x, y, and z then they will come up with one. . . . In my opinion the ability to develop in this aspect comes from one's own desires, not the assigned traits they were given at birth.

Yet, the majority of underrepresented participants expressed agreement with the above sentiment, but added the caveat that for them personally, it was their abilities and desire to succeed that shaped their career paths rather than race:

I believe that race only becomes a factor when you make it one. I never thought about my race or gender while I developed my skills. I just see myself as a human; as an American.

While most respondents emphasized often that race did not personally affect their ability to build social relationships, this is not to imply that experiences of students based on racial differences did not occur. Both male and female underrepresented respondents gave examples of being aware of how they can be judged differently than their white counterparts:

As an African-American woman, it can sometimes feel that I have to fight societal images of black women before I open my mouth and utter a word.

Underrepresented males also indicated perceptions that others rely on racial stereotypes within the social settings in which they were a part. These beliefs can be seen as manifesting in ways that influenced these underrepresented males' behavior choices. A hyperawareness of self-presentation was noted as a means to confront and change other's negative bias. Consider the following:

I pride myself on my appearance because I know the perception most people have when they look at younger black men is not positive. I try and defy those stereotypes and break the mold by wearing something that makes a person second-guess their assumptions. . . . My appearance is the only thing that I have control over and I want to ensure that I am putting my best foot forward."

White respondents for the most part indicated race as a nonfactor personally; however, they recognized that race may affect social opportunities related to careers. Several respondents

expressed that being white can be both a disadvantage and advantage at times. Disadvantage occurs in their ineligibility to receive earmarked funding allocated for the specific purpose of advancing underrepresented student achievement and representation in college. Advantage occurs,

> [In] Being in the majority of public relations professionals (white, female), I think the way these two characteristics affect me most is the fact that I have a lot of competition that looks and speaks like I do. That being said, it may have also helped me since I "fit the mold" of the traditional candidate.

Although relatively few examples of race specifically impacting social development were given, most respondents did mention race as something that just is in society and impacts in numerous ways. For example, in one response, a student stressed self-determination as the main factor of her success, stating "I would attribute my ability to build networks to my personality and willingness to learn more so than my race/gender." Yet, the same respondent also echoed what most respondents expressed as an overall recognition that race is intertwined throughout academic programs and society:

> As a minority, I do feel that race always plays an intricate role in every aspect of life. I was one of only a handful of African-Americans enrolled in my school's program so I feel that in some aspects I had to work harder to 'prove' myself.

In discussing race, several respondents expressed the complexity of determining to what degree it impacts social development, citing other inter-sectionality factors, such as socio-economic status and peer interactions, especially within student organizations, as interacting with race as a means of either providing or limiting opportunities for the underrepresented students:

> Class and race go hand in hand. If we consider hierarchy and degrees of separation, the Caucasian student from a lower class is still more relatable for the Caucasian staff member than the African American student. In the university setting, the physical appearance of said Caucasian student is likely to be similar to the Caucasian student from a higher socioeconomic class. . ... However, there is no outfit that the African American student can wear in the classroom that will disguise their skin color. Unlike socioeconomic status, skin color is always apparent. The Caucasian student who does not have the extra time to hang around the office may receive the benefits of favoritism in a delayed fashion but they are likely to receive them whereas their African American peers may very well not receive them at all."

In addition to the perception of being treated differently by mentors based on race, respondents also noted other non-program and non-career preparation factors that influenced either positively or negatively their social development while an undergraduate:

> The race division at times was just as distracting as the Greek vs. non-Greek issues in the classroom. I have to say I noticed more negative and heated things that occurred between students as a result of race and/or the Greeks (many times the two were intertwined) than positive. I do not believe there is much the professors could do to help this issue. I think one of the biggest issues is the Greek community blatantly excluding minorities.

Also, when research shows that social networks are key to underrepresented students success – especially in the case of African American success (D'Augelli and Hershberger, 1993; Palmer and Gasman, 2008) – it is clear how underrepresented students' lack of access to organizations such as sororities (when these underrepresented students attend predominantly white institutions (PWIs) can place them in a place of "less advantage" in comparison to their white counterparts – especially when this form of student engagement

has been found recently to have a positive relationship with college satisfaction, grades, retention, and 4-year graduation among female students (Bowman and Holmes, 2017).

Overall, the majority sentiment was that participants did not experience either negative or positive effects of race relating to developing social skills for public relations professions. However, race is still noted mentioned indirectly when a white female participant was asked about race and the social development/dimensions of the undergraduate experience.

> I noticed the majority of students sat with people of their same race in the larger classes. I never noticed an instance where someone went out of his or her way to exclude someone. Usually whites and minorities divided themselves without interacting.

This statement seems innocuous but does not take into account the motivation for underrepresented students to self-segregate. (For a detailed explanation of why underrepresented persons tend to segregate when they are in large groups such as cafeterias and in this case the big lecture hall, see the work of psychologist Tatum, 1997).

Discussion

Using CRT as a theoretical lens, we sought an explanation for a practical problem: what can explain the small number of underrepresented practitioners in the public relations industry? Like Logan (2016), we want to use CRT as a critical analytical tool in hopes that it "could one day serve as a productive source of creative inspiration and innovative praxis for public relations practitioners, students and scholars if it were to be proactively integrated [. . .]" (p. 106). We chose to focus on the collegiate pipeline to see whether the issue could be explained in part by events occurring during college. Our findings indicate that the dearth of underrepresented practitioners is not the by-product of an unwelcoming environment, lack of mentoring or lack of teaching race critically in the undergraduate public relations curriculum. Thus, in terms of *RQ1* and *RQ2*, based on participant responses racialized experiences in the undergraduate public relations environment do not provide explanation for the few numbers of underrepresented persons entering the profession. However, participants – especially those from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups – did acknowledge that race remains relevant in society. Yet, race does not or did not affect them personally as undergraduates in public relations.

We, however, seek to interrogate this finding further as is expected from an application CRT framework. Perhaps the former students are in denial about the effects of race on their education. Maybe the researchers' prior acquaintance with the participants may have affected the study's results in this way. As the Co-PI researchers who were primarily responsible for the data for this study, it is important to note that we are also underrepresented faculty – we're both African American. Being sensitive to issues of race ourselves (Fox, 2001, for a guide for instructors who want to promote informed and honest discussion about race and racism in college classrooms), we might have created classroom environments that allowed students to focus more on the content delivered and not on the racialized classroom space. Another way we interrogate this finding is by offering the possibility that these participants perhaps suffered from the "third person effect", in which problems (in this case, race) affect only others, but not themselves. Perhaps, the real finding is *not* that racial barriers and challenges are not noticed, but rather that they are not *admitted* by the participants, especially by ex-students to their former professors. This is compounded by the fact that we are more likely to stay in touch with our most successful students. If this is indeed the case that participants are minimizing or diminishing the role that race played in the development of students, such actions serve to maintain the hegemonic power structure or the dominant discourse of "individual meritocracy".

Conversely, if we trust what emerged from our data, then we as academics and scholars should view these findings as progress; young professionals (who represent graduates of communication programs from various US universities) – and especially those who identify as underrepresented – did not perceive race as playing a significant role in their undergraduate experiences. This indicates that if underrepresented students can be recruited successfully into the major, racial barriers will not play a factor in their overall success and graduation. If this finding is generalizable, then this suggests that efforts to diversify the public relations education-to-industry pipeline should focus primarily on attracting underrepresented students to the public relations major and secondarily focus on maintaining a welcoming environment.

Thus, if we accept these findings, then we have to accept that some other factors beyond graduation, such as organizational workplace culture, glass ceiling effects or graduates not identifying with the organizations that initially employ them, lead to talented underrepresented leaving the profession prematurely. We interviewed early career practitioners for this study; however, it would be interesting to see whether these underrepresented practitioners remain in the profession in 10 years. In a follow-up study, researchers could identify underrepresented practitioners that have left the profession to determine whether the industry needs to address organizational culture issues to retain underrepresented practitioners. It does little to recruit these persons if there is no mechanism in place for retention.

In sum, scholars have used CRT successfully to highlight the lived experiences and challenges that underrepresented practitioners face (Edwards, 2010). CRT remains a useful lens to explore issues of demographic disparities in the public relations practice in the USA and in the US undergraduate public relations educational space; however, our support for the use of the construct via this study is not as strong as we would like it to be. Maybe the combination of the higher education classroom culture, the focus on critical thinking, and the development of technical skills via a rigid, five-course sequence, and the homogenous age population is powerful enough to blunt the effects of race in the social and curricula preparation for industry? Another plausible explanation is the declining significance of race (Wilson, 1978) in higher education environments – whereby an environment that champions liberal and diverse thinking lessens the effects of race alone on students who are living and "being" in these environments. Therefore, we may need to pay greater attention to the intersections of identity including race, class and gender and the roles they collectively play (Vardeman-Winter et al., 2013) in the lived experiences of public relations practitioners (and students).

Regardless, what is noteworthy is that underrepresented students in large part did not deem their race as a critical barrier in their public relations instruction. If this is valid, then diversifying the profession lies in getting underrepresented students into the major in larger numbers, getting them into the profession in larger numbers, and keeping them in the profession for longer time periods. While much of our attention to pipeline issues in higher education focuses on STEM, we make a compelling argument that more attention should be paid to diversifying the applied communication pipeline via higher education. When research shows that in times of organizational crisis (terrorist attacks, chemical plant explosions and hurricane evacuations) underrepresented populations prefer to be communicated with by someone who is both sensitive to their needs and similar to them (Heath et al., 2009), professional diversity is not just in vogue, but can be the difference between life or death. It is imperative that we echo industry's call and bring our research expertise to the table to address diversity education-to-industry pipeline issues head-on. This study is our attempt to do just that.

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Appendix. Participant information

Race	Gender	College attended	Years in PR profession	Official job title
African-American	Female	Alabama State University	2.5	District Recruiter
African-American	Male	Alabama State University	n/a	Executive Director
African-American	Male	Alabama State University	4.5	Marketing/Communications Manager
African-American	Female	Alabama State University	1	Customer and Employee Affairs Coordinator
African-American	Female	Alabama State University	1	Public Relations Assistant
White	Female	Alabama State University	1	Brand and Integrated Marketing Post-Grad
White	Female	The University of Alabama	1.5	Digital Marketing Coordinator
Asian-American	Male	The University of Alabama	<1	Account Coordinator
Hispanic/Latina	Female	The University of Alabama	<1	Intake Coordinator
African-American	Female	The University of Alabama	1	Communications Associate
African-American	Male	DePaul University	1	Research Associate
African-American	Male	Arkansas State University	5	Director of Public Affairs
White	Female	Arkansas State University	5	Talent Acquisition Specialist
African-American	Female	Delta State University	1	Assistant Director of Public Relations
African-American	Female	Eastern Michigan University	5	Assistant Editor
African-American	Female	Eastern Michigan University	1	n/a
African-American	Female	Florida International University	1	Event Coordinator
African-American	Female	Eastern Michigan University	2	Events Project Manager-Promotions
White	Female	Virginia Tech	4	Online Communications Associate
White	Female	Texas A&M University	2	n/a
Asian-American	Female	Virginia Tech	5	Assistant Director for Strategic Partnerships and Public Relations
White	Male	Virginia Tech	4.5	Associate Strategist

About the authors

Damion Waymer (PhD, Purdue University) is Professor/Chair of Liberal Studies at NC A&T State University. Prior to his arrival at NC A&T, he led aggressive faculty recruitment initiatives in his role as Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs, Development and Diversity at the University of Cincinnati. Via his research, he addresses fundamental concerns about issues of power, race, class and gender, specifically, and how these social constructions shape and influence the ways that various stakeholders receive, react and respond to messages. Damion Waymer is the corresponding author and can be contacted damionwaymer@gmail.com

After completing his doctoral studies at The University of Alabama, Kenon A. Brown joined its Department of Advertising and Public Relations in August 2012 as an Assistant Professor. His teaching specialties include strategic communication management, research methods and communication campaign planning. His research interests include image and reputation management, particularly in sports, and minority recruitment in mass communication.