

## **Bridging the divide: A multidisciplinary analysis of diversity research and the implications for public relations**

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### **Executive Summary**

This paper reviews diversity-focused research in public relations to identify the key

findings, trends, remaining gaps, and best practices regarding how public relations theory and practice can better reflect a diversity focus. To that end, the analysis also pulls in findings from diversity-focused organizational management and organizational psychology literature, in order to understand the business climate and organizational context that public relations practitioners must navigate. The key findings from the two areas of literature parallel each other in important ways and provide specific diversity-focused communication mandates and best practices for public relations.

Public relations diversity-focused literature falls into three main categories: diversity in the public relations workplace; how organizations are leveraging public relations to reach and engage diverse stakeholders; and the growing call for better connection between diversity and daily public relations practice through a multicultural perspective. Among the key takeaways, scholars emphasized that racial and ethnic diversity in the workplace has improved, but much work is needed, particularly regarding access to management positions. Success with diversity efforts begins with leadership itself; leadership must reflect and be directly involved with diversity initiatives. That said, more research is needed regarding markers of diversity beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, as well as the intersections of diversity. In exploring how various types of organizations apply public relations best practices to reach and engage diverse external audiences, scholars increasingly are calling for public relations to drive dialogue with key publics in a way that helps organizations move beyond viewing diversity as important simply because it provides a competitive advantage. In other words, public relations must help build the true value of diversity to organizational culture and convey that value to key publics, while reflecting and addressing broader cultural expectations. Diversity cannot be something distinct from the daily life of a practitioner, yet that connection remains lacking.

The organizational management literature reviewed reflects many of the findings in public relations and falls into three key categories: the traditional business case for diversity and inclusion (D&I), how to improve diverse representation in organizations, and how to move beyond the business case into a more culturally driven focus on “valuing diversity.” This research has explained that the original rationale for D&I leveraged the equality paradigm, which emphasized organizations’ legal and moral imperative to drive diversity. The business case for diversity then emerged as a more effective, tangible rationale for forging a diverse and inclusive organization. It argues that a more diverse organization leads to more creative and inclusive thinking, provides a competitive edge, heightens an organization’s social license to operate, and creates more success in the marketplace. Increasingly, however, scholars have revealed the shortcomings of the business case paradigm. They have called for diversity to become a more substantial driver of an organization’s culture and for organizations to take up the mantle of social justice. Simply put, while much of the literature has focused on the benefits of a diverse workforce and the importance of accountability and action by leadership, there are increasing calls for D&I to go further. Organizations must understand that the business case for D&I risks reducing diversity to a commodity, where diverse groups can be exploited. These scholars emphasized the organization’s responsibility to the individual, and the individual experience, not just to the positive contribution that perspective has in the marketplace.

The research across public relations and organizational management indicates several, consistent key takeaways that inform public relations theory and practice. Taking up the specific public relations call for theory and practice to better reflect a multicultural perspective, this paper ultimately proposes an actionable model to operationalize how the public relations function can

navigate and help champion diversity-specific mandates. It posits that public relations' diversity-specific mandates include addressing structural dynamics (communicating the policies and programs that aid individuals professionally while conveying the benefits of recruiting and retaining diverse employees) as well as cultural dynamics (exploring individual difference as a way to help organizations evolve while responding to external cultural mandates from the communities an organization serves). Public relations' diversity-specific mandates simultaneously include responding to the needs of internal and external publics. Thus, the mandates facing public relations fall into four categories: Internal-structural, internal-cultural, external-structural, external-cultural. As explained, however, more research is needed. Important studies have provided key insight and important benchmarks, but questions remain.

### Introduction

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing focus among practitioners and scholars regarding the role diversity should play in public relations. In 2005, a coalition comprising the 23 major professional communication organizations released a report outlining the state of diversity in public relations (PR Coalition, 2005), which called on public relations professionals and organizations to increase their focus on diversity through an emphasis on recruiting, mentoring, and advocacy. The coalition found a lack of effective recruitment and retention of diverse practitioners, as well as a lack of internal and external conversations regarding diversity itself. The report argued, "Public relations and communications professionals have an important role to play in seeing that there is a sustained focus on diversity in American life.... They can become advocates for diversity and influence others to follow. They can make a difference" (p. 11). Toth (2009) echoed the coalition's call, outlining the increased focus on diversity within public relations and the competencies needed to drive a focus on diversity in public relations. She also provided several foundational definitions of diversity, highlighting Anderson and Collins (2004), who explained, "Diversity is about an awareness of and sensitivity to the intersections of race, class and gender, about seeing linkages to other categories of analysis, including sexuality, age, religion, physical disability, national identity and ethnicity, and about appreciating the disparities of power that produce social inequities" (p. 1). In 2012, the Public Relations Society of America Foundation updated its mission to squarely focus on recruiting and providing the needed resources to support a more diverse industry. As the then-foundation president explained, "from this point forward, the Foundation is re-dedicating its mission to making a difference in the fight against the racial and gender imbalance that exists within our profession" (Rymer, 2012). Recently, Sha (2013) edited a special issue of PRSA's *PR Journal* dedicated to diversity-focused research in public relations, in which she argued that while field's focus on diversity and multicultural issues began in the late 1980s, significant gaps remain. She called on research to move beyond outputs, and focus on how research can help produce long-term, substantive outcomes.

Pulling from academic research and studies commissioned by various professional organizations since the early 2000s, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation by analyzing diversity-focused public relations research completed since 2000, in order to tease out the common findings, themes, best practices, and continued research gaps.<sup>1</sup> To help in that regard, this paper also pulls from relevant business management, organizational communication,

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<sup>1</sup> A handful of studies from the late 1990s also are included.

and organizational psychology research. Insights from these tangential bodies of literature is instructive because it helps paint a more-complete picture regarding the organizational context and business environment that public relations must navigate. In all, this analysis pulls from 108 studies.

While every attempt has been made to provide a comprehensive account of diversity-focused research over the last 15 years, the following analysis should not be considered exhaustive. That said, the analysis does reveal consistent themes and calls to action. Much of the diversity research in public relations and business management remains focused on how organizations can more effectively recruit and retain diverse employees and leadership. Additional research has begun examining how diverse groups, and organizations that advocate for specific minority groups, have applied strategic communication principles. Similar to Sha's (2013) call, however, there is an increasing focus on research that explores best practices in multicultural communication in terms of how to embed a multicultural perspective into communication planning, how to make diversity an integral part of daily public relations life, and how to convey the importance of diversity to organizations, beyond the standard-but-limited "business case" for diversity.

Accordingly, the first part of this paper outlines public relations-specific research, which falls into three main categories: diverse representations in the public relations workplace; how organizations are leveraging public relations to reach and engage diverse stakeholders; and the growing call for better connection between diversity and daily public relations practice through a multicultural perspective. The second half of this paper then incorporates how business management literature has addressed similar topics, including how to improve diverse representation in organizations, and how to move beyond "managing diversity" into a more substantive focus on "valuing diversity."

## **Part 1: Diversity in Public Relations**

### **Diversity in the public relations workplace**

Much of the diversity-focused public relations research has investigated diversity in the public relations workplace, particularly factors related to race, ethnicity, and gender. Beginning in the late 1980s into the 1990s, for example, studies highlighted the lack of racial and ethnic representation in public relations, and the importance of an organization's employees better reflecting the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the marketplace (e.g. Abeyta & Hackett, 2002; Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995; Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Kotcher, 1995; Rose, 2002). More recent research has found that while public relations has made strides, racial and ethnic minorities remain underrepresented based on the general population (e.g. Hazelton & Sha, 2012; Logan, 2011; Sha & Ford, 2007). A key argument across much of this research explains that beyond the fundamental ethical importance of fostering a diverse culture, public relations' mandate to forge effective relationships and productive conversations with an organization's publics makes it particularly important for the public relations discipline to reflect society's growing diversity. Vardeman-Winter (2011) added that, in the process, public relations campaigns and research must directly address its "Whiteness," and how that lens informs, and often obscures, effective understanding of diverse perspectives. She summarized, "In an increasingly culturally diverse and global communication environment... Theories and practices should reclaim the nuances of lived experiences and personal identities that impact how

individuals select, receive, react to, and process messages" (p. 415).

Within this literature, a second area of research specifically addresses gender disparities in public relations. Some studies have highlighted that women working in public relations still earn less than their male counterparts, even though the field comprises mostly women. Dozier, Sha, and Shen (2013) found, for example, that women earn approximately \$8,305 less than their male peers annually, which equates to more than \$332,000 over the course of a 40-year career (p. 13). Additional studies have addressed the different personal mandates facing men and women, such as the role child-bearing plays in career trajectories, as well as negative perceptions co-workers can have regarding related policies (Dozier, Sha., & Okura, 2007; Gallicano, 2013; Toth, & Cline, 1991). O'Neil (2003) added that when exploring gender differences, researchers also must consider the influence of the broader operational environment, such as the structures that influence individuals' power. She found, for example, that in many cases women have a lower amount of structural power, which O'Neil defined as, "a multidimensional construct that stems from the structural arrangement of the organization as manifested in employee support, organizational roles, hierarchical position, and gender ratios of work groups" (p. 161). Participants indicated that the dominant coalition in the public relations workplace comprised 84% men and 16% women, contributing to the lack of organizational power (p. 172).

Third, a growing focus on research related to representation and experience in the public relations workplace has focused on the intersectionality of identities, and how combined factors such as race and gender offer crucial insight not possible when investigating just one diversity dimension (e.g. Sims & Sims, 2008; Tindall, 2009). Pompper's work (2004, 2007, 2012) exploring the experiences of African American and Hispanic women in public relations is particularly instructive. She investigated, in part, the intersections of social capital and relationship building in public relations, and found that the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender create additional workplace hurdles for practitioners. These "double binds" (as Tindall, 2009, termed) create challenges in terms of self-esteem and, in turn, workplace effectiveness. Accordingly, these factors reinforce public relations' responsibility in reflecting and addressing diversity across the field. Pompper (2012) added that one way public relations can more effectively assume its responsibility regarding diversity is to focus on internal public relations—exploring the internal networks and relationships, and the impact those dynamics have on daily practice. She argued, "Within organizations, internal public relations uses communication to foster a livable work environment where diversity is embraced, conflict is minimized, and employees are interconnected and free to form relationships in the course of addressing organizational goals and achieving their maximum potential" (p. 101).

Despite the ongoing focus on diversity within public relations practice itself, this area of research has been limited primarily to representations of gender, race, and ethnicity. Accordingly, scholars have acknowledged that there is much more work to be done; there are more diverse identities and workplace dynamics to be explored. Tindall and Waters (2012), for example, explored the experiences of gay, male practitioners coming out at work. Shen and Jiang (2013), in researching how factors of diversity influence degrees of work-life conflict, explored the "understudied diversity categories... age, family dependent care responsibility, and professional specialty" (p. 73). They argued, in part, that public relations practitioners must remember their responsibility to internal publics and help coach an organization's management regarding the diversity-driven factors influencing potential work-life conflict. Doing so helps

secure the needed resources that will help mitigate internal publics' work-life conflict and, in turn, contribute to organizational effectiveness.

New research commissioned by professional organizations in 2015 and 2016 also has focused mainly on diverse representation and experiences in the public relations workplace, particularly as related to race, ethnicity, and gender. The National Black PR Society found through a national survey (Ford & Brown, 2015), for example, that Black representation in public relations has improved, but representation still lags among mid and senior-level leadership. The study also emphasized the need for PR career sustainability and growth, and the value of networking and professional development workshops as instrumental in helping grow in their careers. A study commissioned by the PR Council (2016), exploring the experience of Black and Latino practitioners, reported similar findings. While progress has been made, access to upper level positions is limited. The study argued that public relations firms must (1) foster a leadership environment that better embraces diverse perspectives, (2) focus on data collection and measurement specific to Black and Latino practitioner experiences, and (3) provide the resources necessary to support Black and Latino practitioners in their careers.

Two recent reports—from the Arthur W. Page Society and the PRSA Foundation—add key insights. In researching its members' perspectives, the Page Society study found, for example, that in terms of diversity and inclusion (D&I) efforts, there is little accountability among leadership for achieving D&I goals (Jiang, Ford, Long & Ballard, 2016). Moreover, few Page Society members indicated that their organizations have integrated a D&I focus into their business strategy. Accordingly, the report emphasized the importance for senior leadership to be committed to (and accountable for) implementing and enforcing D&I initiatives. These leaders also must be visibly involved with the process itself, and they must provide very clear pathways that ensure a diverse pool of candidates for leadership positions (pg. 13). D&I also must become part of the daily, holistic strategy for organizations.

A report supported by the PRSA Foundation exploring the experiences and perspectives of Black and Hispanic practitioners supported many of these findings (Applebaum, Walton, & Southerland, 2015). The study added that four in 10 practitioners feel they are not treated with genuine respect, more than half feel they have not been afforded the same opportunities as their White peers, and micro-aggressions remain a persistent issues. The study reinforced the role of leadership and the importance of having support structures in place. Moreover, the study emphasized that D&I initiatives should focus on building, “a genuine connection with other employees that makes them feel appreciated and welcome... ‘diversity programming’ without an understanding of why it’s being created and how it supports recruitment and retention does not move the needle to sustain and enhance diversity” (p. 11). The study also indicated that there is an opportunity for public relations to work with (or in) the human resources arena to facilitate D&I initiatives around recruitment, retention, mentoring, and programming.

#### **Diverse Representation in PR**

- Racial and ethnic representation has improved, but access to management remains limited
- Leadership must reflect diversity; they must be visibly involved and accountable
- Gender inequities remain
- Research needed on new areas of diversity and intersectionalities of diversity

In all, the body of research exploring the varying degrees of diverse representation among public relations professionals, and how factors related to diversity influence practitioner experiences, has highlighted consistent findings and calls to action. First, the composition of public relations practitioners must reflect the

diversity of society itself. Beyond being simply the right thing to do, if the field's core mandate is to build mutually beneficial relationships and have substantive conversations with complex, diverse networks of publics, public relations must understand the diversity of those perspectives. Second, while Black and Latino/Hispanic representation in public relations has improved during the last ten years, pathways to mid and senior-level leadership roles remain lacking. In supporting racial and ethnic minorities, studies have called for better support and resources, such as networking and professional development opportunities. Third, studies have consistently found that successful diversity initiatives in public relations start with leadership. Leaders must be accountable for D&I initiatives, they must be visibly involved with an organization's D&I efforts, and they must provide mechanisms to enhance diverse representation among leadership itself. Finally, research has called for a better understanding regarding the intersections of diverse identities, and how those intersections inform the practitioner lens. For example, many studies have explored the experiences of female practitioners, and many studies have explored the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in public relations, but it is crucial for public relations to understand the influence of being, for example, a Black woman in PR. Moreover, public relations research must go beyond gender, race, and ethnicity, and explore additional diversity dimensions, such as sexual orientation and identity, age, and marital status.

Equipped with this understanding regarding diversity among practitioners within public relations, the next sections review emerging areas of diversity-focused research in public relations. First, a small, but growing area of research is investigating how organizations are using strategic communication to reach and advocate for diverse publics. Second, public relations scholars increasingly have called for a better focus on "multicultural public relations."

### **Reaching diverse publics**

A growing area of public relations research is exploring how various organizations are using strategic communication to reach and advocate for diverse publics. Wayner, Cannon, and Curry (2012), for example, applied public relations theory to investigate how two Black churches in major urban areas reach and engage internal and external publics, publics that exist on society's margins. In her study of how health campaigns can better reach Black women in conveying HIV/AIDS messaging, Turpin (2013) found that health communication campaigns must address how the specific intersectionality of identities influences how messages are received. Similar to calls for better understanding of how intersectionality informs practitioners' experiences, Turpin argued that effective public relations planning requires that same focus when researching targeted publics. The lived experience of a Black woman is unique. Campaigns also must account for the intersection of race and gender with additional factors such as age and location. Reber, Paek, and Lariscy (2013) echoed Turpin's call for public relations to better understand the influence race has on how individuals receive health campaign messages. They argued, "racial differences among message recipients, as well as medium of choice among different races for these messages, are often overlooked" (p. 129), when planning health communication campaigns.

Additional research has focused

#### **Reaching Diverse Publics**

- Understanding the diverse needs of individuals
- The power of telling individuals' stories
- New tools and technologies are providing new voices for underrepresented and marginalized
- Priority given to the public over the organization, and the power of grassroots, community-first communication strategy.

specifically on how social movements and social movement organizations are using strategic communication to reach and mobilize diverse publics. One early study (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001) explored, through a focus on dialogic communication, how activist groups used the internet to reach and engage various publics. More recently, Ciszek (2013) explored the “It Gets Better” project, to investigate how non-profit organizations can leverage online communication strategies to reach LGBTQ youth and foster social change. She argued that online, participatory media platforms, such as YouTube, are effective ways to reach marginalized publics quickly and effectively, conveying powerful messages of support that, in turn, contribute to a broader movement’s goals. Moreover, a growing, participatory culture afforded by new technologies are shifting power structures and providing more voice to the marginalized, which public relations research and practice must engage.<sup>2</sup> Ward’s (2013) study, also of the “It Gets Better” project, echoed these findings and emphasized that the campaign’s focus on individual needs and telling individual stories helped build community and forge larger conversations. Mundy’s (2013) study of state-level LGBTQ advocacy outlined a local-first, “Spiral of Advocacy” strategy, where organizations campaign at the most-local level first, building a critical mass of support in order to then campaign at state and ultimately national levels. Similar to Ciszek and Ward’s findings, successful state-level advocacy prioritizes the power of telling the individual story.

Investigations of how strategic communication can be used to mobilize social movements, how organizations can better craft messages to reach diverse, target publics, and how different types of organizations have leveraged public relations practices to reach underrepresented groups, suggest three key directions for diversity-focused research in public relations. First, public relations research should reflect the importance of knowing the individual – from understanding the intersectionality of targeted publics’ identities, to telling the stories of individual experiences. Second, new tools and technologies are providing a new, more powerful voice for diverse groups. Not only is it instructive to investigate how organizations advocating for these groups use these new tools, it also is instructive for more-traditional organizations to learn how to listen and engage those diverse voices as appropriate. Finally, this research raises new questions regarding communication strategy itself, and the benefits of a public-focused grassroots, ground-up approach to communication. In the context of public relations theory, this area of diversity-focused research reinforces the voice of the public, and helps further balance the organization-public dynamic. Ultimately, this nascent area of research speaks to the broader call by scholars to develop public relations theory and practices based on a more holistic multicultural lens. The next section reviews these calls, and how culture is driving a new generation of public relations research.

### **Multicultural Public Relations**

The third, perhaps most promising, area of diversity-focused research has called for public relations to better integrate diversity into theory and every day public relations practice, beyond understanding diverse experiences in the public relations workplace. As one of the key, benchmark studies (Hon & Brunner, 2000) argued,

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a great deal of this research highlights the equalizing and effective role of social media tools in mobilizing social movements, though a good deal of the literature to date is being done outside of public relations. For examples of how additional social movements and movement organizations have used social media, see Costanza-Chock, 2012; Ganesh & Stohl, 2013; Tremayne, 2014; Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012; Papaioannou & Olivos, 2013; Rennick, 2013; Brym, et al., 2014; & Ansari, 2012; Florini, 2014.

The implications for public relations when organizations embrace an integrated diversity strategy may be tremendous... diversity plays a key role in communicating with multicultural audiences, enhancing the organization's image, serving customers, and recruiting the best employees and talent.... no other organizational function is charged with balancing organizations' and public interests in this way" (p. 335-336).

Additional studies have echoed this call, arguing that a disconnect remains, where "diversity" is treated as something distinct from daily public relations responsibilities (e.g. Austin, 2010; Brunner, 2008; Mundy, 2015a). As Pompper (2012), argued, studies teasing out diversity's role in the holistic management of the broader public relations process remain "embryonic" (p. 100).

In response to these calls, public relations research increasingly has called for a multicultural lens, investigating ways in which public relations can leverage multicultural understandings to inform public relations practice (e.g. Martinez, 2007; Mundy, 2015b; Sha, 2006). Diversity-focused literature too often has focused on how diversity can adjust to the system—from a corporate-centric, western-centric perspective—rather than the system changing to respond to an increasingly global and diverse society (Banks, 2000; Bardham, 2013; Garcia, 213; Leichty, 2003). Bardham, for example, found in her analysis of the *PR Strategist*, that the publication often failed to move beyond the western perspective. Moreover, any multicultural discussions focused on the organization, not the public. She argued, "For creative (re)imagining of what public relations can be in a changing world increasing in complexity, a more thorough self-critique and questioning of deep-rooted ideologies is necessary" (pg. 408). Moreover, multicultural public relations requires a wide lens, investigating the influence of a variety of diverse dynamics across publics, beyond race, ethnicity, and gender, to include factors such as sexuality, age, socio-economic status, and ability. Some scholars have argued, for example, that given the role of religion in American society, it is important for public relations practitioners to examine how faith informs cultural environment of individual communities (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2004; Tilson, 2011).

The importance of a culturally driven, public relations process is heightened in the context of crisis communication. As Waymer and Heath (2007) argued, crises shift the dominant power structure, requiring organizations to better listen to and engage those publics that have been marginalized. Organizations must have the tools to approach their crisis response from the perspective of the marginalized publics. Falkheimer, J., Heide, M. (2006) argued, also in the context of crisis communication, that multicultural public relations is an underdeveloped research field.<sup>3</sup> Fatima Oliveira (2013) added that communication professionals acknowledge that understanding culture is key to effective crisis management, but most professionals are not equipped to handle multicultural crises.

Several studies have attempted to operationalize how a multicultural approach to public relations might work. Sha (2006) argued through her focus on racioethnic identities, for example, that organizations must focus on developing intercultural communication competencies. A focus on "intercultural public relations," in turn, allows organizations to shape culturally sensitive communication strategies more effectively (p. 61). Mundy (2015b) added that developing culturally sensitive communication requires organizations first and foremost to define what

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<sup>3</sup> The authors also make a highly problematic and erroneous claim, however, by arguing that risk and crisis communication form the core of public relations theory and practice (p. 187).

diversity means to them—in terms of organizational values and publics—and then to pay attention to the communities it serves, while being willing to ask the tough questions and have the difficult conversations that introduce more-diverse, culturally sensitive perspectives. Additional studies (Gallicano & Stansberry, 2013; Tsetsura, 2011) have argued for the importance of introducing this multicultural perspective early in school, to equip future practitioners with the cultural tools that inform public relations best practices. Perhaps one of the most informative arguments for a shift to multicultural public relations process is Uysal's (2013) analysis of diversity communication on corporate websites. In outlining the shifts in organizational management approaches to diversity, which will be explicated in the next section, she argued for public relations to help position diversity as a core value by helping leverage differences within organizations and driving dialogue with key publics. Public relations' mandate to drive dialogue that leverages difference helps move organizations beyond viewing diversity as something that needs to be managed simply because it provides a competitive advantage. It helps build the true value of diversity to organizational culture, and then convey that value to an organization's publics.

A multicultural emphasis in public relations offers perhaps the greatest potential for public relations research and practice. Such a focus helps move the field beyond seeing diversity as something distinct from daily practice and into positioning diverse cultural dimensions as foundational to organizational values and, in turn, the communication planning process. As scholars have argued, in order for public relations to respond to its mandate of forging effective relationships with key publics, a multicultural perspective must drive the public relations process itself. Such a perspective is reached by removing the western-centric, corporate-centric lens, and

#### **Multicultural Public Relations**

- Diversity as central to, not distinct from, daily PR practice
- Diverse cultural dynamics central to organizational values and, in turn, the communication planning process
- Remove western-centric, corporate-centric lens
- Understand the communities in which an organization lives and serve
- The PR function is uniquely positioned to lead in areas of diversity and inclusion

truly getting to know the diverse publics that an organization serves. As Hon and Brunner (2000) argued, the public relations function is uniquely positioned to drive the value of diversity. No other function has as steep a mandate to drive the conversation. That said, if public relations is to answer this call, it is important to understand public relations' broader operational context, including how organizations view diversity as part of its broader operational business model and strategy. Accordingly, the next section reviews relevant research from business management, human resources, and organizational psychology literature

to get a sense of how diversity has been addressed at an organizational level during the last 15 years. As the review will show, similar to public relations-specific literature, while the importance of having a diverse employee base has been well established, scholars have called for the focus on diversity to evolve into a more substantive part of organizational life, both in terms of organizational operation and how the organization engages its diverse communities.

## **Part 2: The Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Marketplace**

### **As the story goes: The Business Case for Diversity**

“Diversity & Inclusion” (D&I) have become central to standard business practice. Today, many major corporations invest in extensive “D&I” programs, often led by CDOs (Chief Diversity Officers). As Henderson and Williams (2013) argued, “It is no longer a viable strategy for companies to stick their collective ‘heads in the sand,’” when it comes to valuing diversity and respecting diverse marketplaces (p. 1). The dominant narrative used to convey the importance of D&I has focused on the business case for diversity. Although a growing area of research is challenging this paradigm and shifting it in important ways (as will be discussed in the next section), it is necessary first to outline the business case premise. As the story goes, a value in diversity leads to recruitment of a diverse workforce, which in turn introduces diverse perspectives and ideas, makes an organization more creative, allows the organization to better engage new markets and respond to stakeholder expectations more quickly and effectively, and thus makes an organization more competitive. Research consistently has supported the business case rationale. Herring (2009) found, for example, that increased racial diversity in an organization corresponds to higher sales revenue, customer base, market share and profits. He explained that the findings are consistent with prior studies; a diverse workforce, “allows companies to ‘think outside the box’ by bringing previously excluded groups inside the box” (p. 220). The Williams Institute—UCLA’s center dedicated to LGBTQ law and public policy research—found that LGBT-supportive workplaces also are linked to positive business-related outcomes, as well as increased job satisfaction and job commitment (Badgett, Durso, Kastanis, & Mallory, 2013). Noland, Moran, and Kotschwar (2016) found a correlation between a greater number of female leaders and firm profitability.

An industry study produced by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2009) echoed these arguments.<sup>4</sup> A global survey of 500 corporate executives (coupled with 40 executive interviews) found that while there are a range of arguments for diversity—including legal quota requirements and the fundamental moral imperative—a majority of respondents emphasized the business case, and the business benefit of tapping into a broader range of perspectives, backgrounds, and skill sets. Recruiting new types of diverse talent can help organizations understand customers better and, in turn, increase sales. Accordingly, the survey indicated that the top two measures organizations use to promote and monitor D&I are “systematically widening recruitment pools to tap new sources of talent,” and initiating employee policies aimed at promoting work-life balance (p. 14). The study concluded, in part, “Diversity produces better decisions because a broader range of factors and backgrounds are brought to bear in the decision-making process, and Diversity improves a company’s image in the marketplace” (p. 16). Pandey, Shanahan, and Hansen (2005) added that organizations effective at promoting their D&I initiatives can improve shareholder perspectives regarding positive organizational performance and lead to potential financial gain.

Indeed, the business case for diversity can be found in a quick survey of corporate communications, from websites to mission statements. Coca-Cola’s diversity mission for example, is to “mirror the rich diversity of the marketplace we serve and be recognized for our leadership in Diversity, Inclusion and Fairness in all aspects of our business, including Workplace, Marketplace, Supplier and Community, enhancing the Company’s social license to

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<sup>4</sup> SHRM commissioned The Economist Group’s Economic Intelligence Unit to produce the study.

operate” (Coke, 2014). Apple Corporation’s Tim Cook explained that the company relies on employees’ diverse perspectives and experiences, in arguing, “Inclusion inspires innovation” (Cook, 2015). Facebook echoed that diversity is “good for our products and for our business... Having a diverse workforce is not only the right thing to do – it’s the smart thing to do for our business” (Williams, 2015).

Equipped with the business rationale for diversity—and similar to much of the diversity-focused research in public relations—a good deal of human resource and organizational management research has focused on how to ensure diverse representation among an organization’s employees and leadership. A report produced by Deloitte regarding D&I among the Canadian workforce (Garr, Shellenback, & Scales, 2014) explained that customers and stakeholders are changing. Accordingly, expectations regarding diversity are increasing. There remains a gap, however, in terms of organizations recruiting diverse talent that reflects the changing marketplace. Organizations therefore must determine best practices in recruiting diverse talent and developing an inclusive culture.

Also similar to trends in public relations literature, a good deal of this research has focused on diversity related to race, ethnicity, and gender, but there have been calls to broaden the scope of diversity dimensions. Ashley and Empson (2012) found, for example, the need for law firms to do a better job recruiting associates from diverse social and economic classes. Additional studies have highlighted the growing importance of understanding the LGBTQ perspective in the workforce (King, Reilly, & Hebl, 2008; SHRM, 2016), emphasizing the importance of an inclusive environment in which employees can disclose their sexuality and gender identity, and suggesting workplace policies and programs that can support employees who are transitioning genders.

To that end, research has identified sets of best practices organizations can use to aid in creating diverse and inclusive workplace environments. In the context of the healthcare industry, for example, two studies found the benefit of a patient-centered process, which included a better focus on team involvement in developing process improvements, an emphasis on training, better messaging and communication strategies to convey their efforts, and the implementation of a rewards and incentives program (Dreaschlin, Hunt, and Sprainer, 2000; King, Green, Tan-McGrory, Donahue, Kimbrough-Sugick, & Betancourt, 2008). Additional studies have emphasized the importance of measurement, including evaluation of an organization’s degree of diversity sensitivity, as well as identifying and measuring diversity-related skills deficiencies (Turnbull, Greenwood, Tworoger, Golden, 2010 & 2011). In arguing, “What gets measured gets done,” for example, Giovannini (2004) proposed a four-step D&I process, which includes setting relevant, realistic and measurable goals, establishing accountability and rewards, monitoring implementation, and documenting results. Similar to one of the findings in the PRSA Foundation’s Applebaum, Walton, and Southerland (2015) study, Marques (2006, 2010) argued for a human resources department that is better integrated throughout an organization, arguing for “a continuous diversity-focused communication flow between the HR department, strategic management, and departmental management” (2010, pg. 444).

Along the way, successful D&I programs require the buy-in of leadership. Studies have emphasized, for example, that the public increasingly is paying attention to the make up of corporate boards, to see if they reflect stakeholder diversity (Bear, Rahman, & Post, 2010; Konrad, Kramer, & Erkut, 2008). As Bear et al. argued, “one expects board composition to affect corporate reputation, especially when it comes to salient characteristics such as the diversity of

board resources and board gender composition” (p. 1). Moreover, as the diversity of a board increases, the perceived and actual communication barriers facing underrepresented communities decrease. Dreachslin (2007) added that leaders should expand their network of friends to reflect more diversity, approach decision-making from the position of a minority group, be involved in an organization’s diversity initiatives, and pursue executive coaching—developing a relationship with someone who can help coach or tease out diversity-related decisions.

In all, many of the findings in organizational management literature focused on diverse representation in organizations echo many of the findings in public relations research. Research has called for a wider range of diversity across organizations, moving beyond just factors related to race, ethnicity, and gender. Moreover, successful D&I programs depend on leadership. Leaders must reflect diversity, and they must be visible in the implementation and follow through of D&I initiatives. Research also has emphasized the importance of providing incentive and reward programs, developing strong communication strategies to convey D&I initiatives, and creating a management structure that allows cross-collaboration among all units responsible for D&I success, including the possible partnership between human resources and key communication functions.

While research regarding how organizations can achieve diverse representation among their employee base and leadership remains important, an additional set of research has challenged the long-term merits of the business case for diversity. As the next section will outline, there has been a shift over time regarding how and why organizations have emphasized D&I. Similar to calls in public relations literature for a focus on “multicultural public relations,” there has been a growing call to investigate how organizations can sincerely embed diversity as a more substantive part of the business model, beyond the business case rationale.

### **Managing Diversity vs. Valuing Diversity**

While there are strong arguments to be made regarding the business case for diversity, a significant area of research has challenged the paradigm, arguing that it limits the true potential and value of diversity and inclusion in organizations. Mease (2012) explained that the business case emerged, at least in part, as a result of resistance to early D&I initiatives. The business case provided a strong, effective rationale for why diversity and inclusion is important, compared to earlier rationales tying D&I to moral imperatives and/or government mandates (see also Kelly & Dobbins, 1998; Kulik, 2014; Oswick & Noon, 2014). Simply put, it was easier to get employees on board with diversity if they understood its business impact. In the process, however, scholars have argued that the business case reduced people to commodities, and consequently reinforced existing hierarchies. As a result, as Kirby and Harter (2001, 2002) argued, it has privileged managing diversity at the cost of valuing diversity. Managing diversity speaks to an organization’s business mandate, while valuing diversity speaks to an organization’s social justice and advocacy mandate; there must be a balance of both. The business case reinforces the objectives and goals of management—not necessarily those of the underrepresented groups in the organization.

As a result, the shift in the early 1990s and early 2000s to diversity for business sake created a limited dichotomy for diversity-focused research (Tatli, 2011, pg. 238-239). Diversity literature became focused on tangible outputs and effects in the western, corporate-centric marketplace, rather than how to make D&I central to organizational culture (Heitner, Kahn, & Sherman, 2013; Church & Rotolo, 2013; Theodorakopoulos & Budhwar, 2012). Consequently,

“D&I” became the industry term, and the individual meanings of “diversity” and “inclusion” became obscured (Roberson, 2006). Scholars have researched the effects this focus has had on workplace culture (Prasad & Mills, 1997; Verhoeven, 2008), including how it limits an organization’s ability to create true social cohesion. Perriton (2009) argued, for example, that the business case has proven “just as ineffectual in bringing about change as the [former] equality discourse” (p. 224). She provided the example of the business case for women, explaining that the case focuses on recruitment, training, and development of the female workforce, not necessarily pay equity or similar policies once on the job. In other words, the business case rested on the business needs, not the personal needs of a diverse public. As she argued, “The standard business case is problematic because it constrains, rather than opens up, the discussion of social justice issues in the workplace” (p. 240).

Research by a core group of psychology scholars takes this perspective further (Dover, Major, Kaiser, 2016a; Dover, Major, Kaiser, 2016b; Kaiser, Jurcevic, Brady, Major, Dover, & Shapiro, 2013). They found that high-status, dominant groups (i.e., white men) often feel threatened by pro-diversity and inclusion messaging (reinforcing prior arguments regarding the limitations of the equality/morality paradigm). More importantly, their research found that these high status groups often assume their organization is fairer and more inclusive, simply by virtue of the fact they have active D&I programs focused on the recruitment and retention of diverse employees, and developing provisions such as diversity policies, diversity training, and diversity awards. As a result of having specific D&I mechanisms in place, however, majority groups become less sensitive to workplace discrimination and react more negatively against minorities who claim discrimination. The researchers recommend that leadership be aware of these potential effects, and play a stronger role in developing stronger messages and programs focused on inclusiveness (2016b, p. 4). Organizations also must understand that talking about the importance of diversity and training employees about diversity is a different challenge than creating an inclusive environment in which minorities and women know they are treated well and their perspectives respected. Organizations truly must address the expectations and interest of underrepresented groups, and leadership must be held accountable.

How then, do organizations navigate expectations, given the benefits of touting the tangible business case on one hand, and the challenge of creating a truly inclusive culture that values diversity on the other? As one of Mease’s (2012) research participants explained, “We have to make sure that we continue always to connect our head and heart.... The head is around the business, the heart is around why we do it, because we want to feel engaged” (p. 397). Accordingly, Mease’s study found that one possible approach to achieving this balance is “sequencing,” where organizations first establish buy-in for the business case, but then move to a focus on long-term engagement, fostering engagement that builds trust and commitment (p. 398). Too often, organizations fail to go beyond the business case. Ely and Thomas (2001) explained that over time organizations have argued for diversity on the basis of (1) discrimination and fairness, (2) access-and-legitimacy, or (3) integration-and-learning. The discrimination-and-fairness perspective reinforces the original equality frame, the moral (and legal) mandate to treat everyone equally. The access-and-legitimacy perspective underscores the business case—by demonstrating that an organization reflects the communities they serve, they are able to gain access and establish legitimacy with key targets. The authors argued for the third perspective, integration-and-learning, which leverages diversity as an important resource from which the broader organization can learn and change. Beyond the business rationale of contributing to

profits, this perspective positions diversity as a key tool to overall workplace effectiveness and evolution. As the authors explained, “the insights, skills, and experiences employees have developed as members of various cultural identity groups are potentially valuable resources that the work group can use to rethink its primary tasks and redefine its markets, products, strategies, and business practices” (p. 240).

Additional scholars have echoed this perspective, arguing that diversity should be a driver—an organizer, a constructor—of an organization’s dialog, rather than playing service to that dialog (Norander & Galanes, 2014; Mannix & Neale, 2005; Allen, 2007). In asking “why is the reality of diversity less than the promise?” (p. 31), for example, Mannix and Neale contended organizations should explore, not exploit difference (pg. 45-46). Similar to other scholars’ calls, the authors also emphasized the importance of accountability in driving these discussions. Directly reflecting Ely and Thomas’ findings, they added that diversity—in driving these discussions—should serve as a bridge, helping drive “knowledge generation, sharing, and elaboration” across an organization (p. 46).

Several of the key takeaways from the business management and organizational psychology literature echo many of the trends in the diversity-focused public relations research. Much of the literature has focused on representation in organizations and the best practices that help ensure an organization—beginning with its leadership—can best reflect the diverse cultures it serves. Reflective of public relations’ scholars call for “multicultural public relations,” this last section of literature calls for a reconceptualization of a new D&I paradigm, beyond the business case. The original rationale for D&I centered around the equality paradigm, touting the legal and moral imperative organizations have to drive diversity. The business case for diversity then emerged as a more substantial, tangible rationale for forging a diverse and inclusive organization. Scholars have revealed the shortcomings of the business case paradigm, however, and—similar to public relations research—have called for diversity to become a more substantial driver of an organization’s culture and for organizations to take up the mantle of social justice. As Perriton (2009) argued, such a move requires—in part—not just hiring a diverse workforce, but understanding the needs, expectations, and perspectives of that diverse workforce.

Certainly there exist many more areas of literature that inform best theory and practice related to diversity and inclusion in public relations. Arguably, management literature’s work on stakeholder theory would be instructive (e.g. Brenner & Cochran, 1991; Brower & Mahajan, 2013; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Smudde & Courtright, 2011), as would research regarding how marketers have used diverse spokespersons or targeted diverse audiences (e.g. Carrabis & Pverill-Conti, 2011; Mansori, 2012; Puzakova, Kwak, & Bell, 2015). The focus for this paper, however, was to address how public relations literature has addressed diversity in terms of theory development, best practices, and remaining challenges, and then to pull in relevant literature from organizational management and psychology literature that has tackled some of the same topics. Accordingly, while the analysis is not exhaustive, it does reveal some consistent, key takeaways.

### **Discussion: Implications for Public Relations**

The public relations literature and organizational management literature reviewed here parallel each other in several ways, yet two specific areas of research provide important direction for public relations research and practice. The first area provides key lessons regarding diverse representation within and the experiences of traditionally underrepresented groups and women in

public relations. Scholars have found that diverse representations and experiences have improved in organizations over time, but challenges remain. Racial and ethnic practitioners, for example, still lack equitable access to mid- and senior-level management and executive positions. Women are still paid less than men. Moreover, researchers have just begun to explore new dimensions of diversity in the workplace, beyond race, ethnicity, and gender. Significant gaps in the literature remain regarding the experiences of other underrepresented and traditionally marginalized groups. Similarly, scholars have called for more research highlighting the intersectionality of identities in the workplace.

This area of research also has indicated consistent sets of best practices to ensure a diverse organization. These practices include providing substantive networking opportunities and resources for professional development. Retention also requires clearly mapping out ways to advance to leadership positions, and to not silo or pigeonhole employees into certain roles. Employees need to feel connected throughout an organization. Research also consistently has reinforced the central role of leadership to drive D&I. There must be accountability (including incentives and rewards programs) in order to ensure an effective D&I program. Leaders also must be visibly involved; studies repeatedly have argued that leaders must walk the talk. Finally, across these initiatives organizations must measure. Beyond tracking recruitment and retention rates, organizations must have a sense of employee experiences, if they indeed are being given access to leadership opportunities, and if leadership has followed through on their D&I-specific promises.

The second major research area that provides important direction for public relations theory and practice also provides public relations with its greatest potential. Public relations research has called for a better focus on “multicultural public relations,” where the understanding and engagement of diverse cultures helps steer the planning process. This literature also emphasizes the public relations function’s heightened responsibility to be the organizational champions of diversity and to take the lead in conveying diversity values to key publics. Diversity cannot be something distinct from the daily life of a practitioner, yet that connection remains lacking.

Organizational management research supports these calls. While the “business case” for diversity has provided the dominant D&I narrative for a generation, scholars are calling for a more substantive approach to diversity, where organizations explore the diversity of their internal and external communities, and use those spaces to learn from each other and contribute to organizational change. As argued, the business case for D&I risks reducing diversity to a commodity, where diverse groups can be exploited. Instead, these scholars emphasize the organization’s responsibility to the individual, and the individual experience, not just to the positive contribution that perspective has in the marketplace. Most importantly, although the organizational management research understandably has focused on diversity’s role in the daily life of a business and place in larger business model, the research consistently emphasized the central role that strategic, solid communication should play. In other words, although that research was not done through a public relations lens, it squarely emphasizes the importance of the communication planning process in moving beyond the business case and helping an organization better convey true value for diversity to internal and external communities.

To that end, public relations and organizational management scholars again indicated several, consistent best practices. Some studies highlighted the specific importance of message development and executive coaching. Additional research emphasized the benefit of establishing work teams comprising individuals from all parts of an organization that drive conversations of diversity. Third, truly embedding the value of diversity across an organization requires coordinated communication planning and execution across the organization—partnering with all functions that play a role in D&I, such as the C-suite and human resources—in order to reach internal and external stakeholders. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, research calling for a move beyond diversity’s business case also argued consistently for a better focus on dialogue with internal and external stakeholders. Creating an inclusive dialogue and maintaining that dialog over the long term as part of daily organizational life, helps define organizational culture and inform an organization’s internal and external communication mandates. As a result, it helps organizations approach diversity as something valued rather than managed.

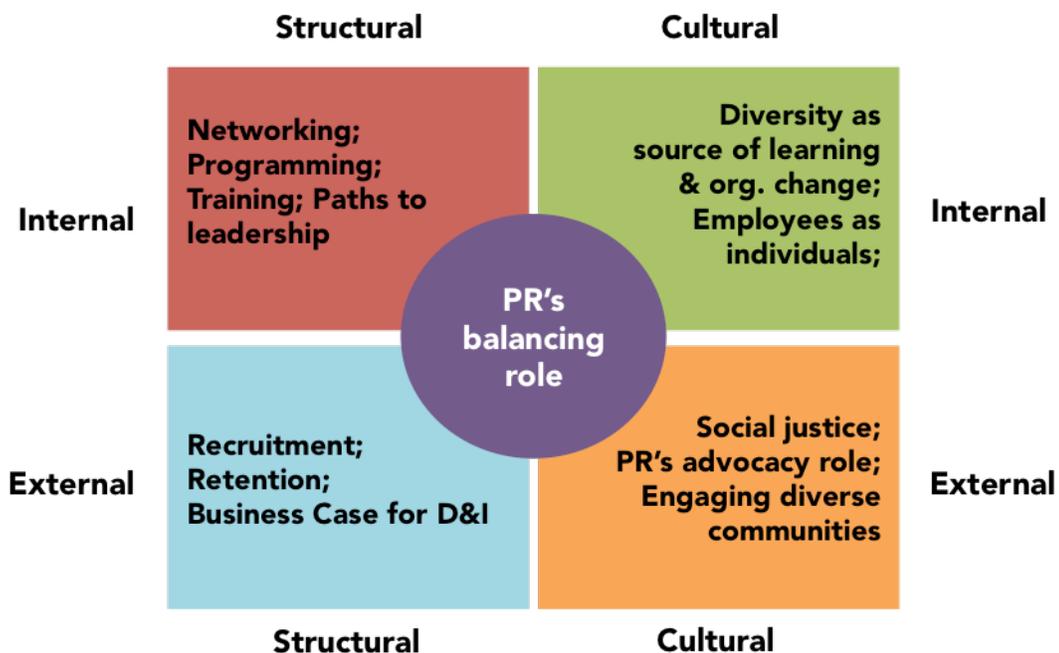
#### **Organizational Management Best Practices**

- Coordinated communication planning and execution across an organization—partnering with C-suite and HR
- Message development and executive coaching
- Constant, consistent, inclusive dialog internally and externally
- Working teams composed of representatives across organization to drive conversations

That said, as Mease (2012) argued, the business case for diversity should not be abandoned, necessarily. As her research participants indicated, there must be a balance between the head and the heart, between an organization’s commitment to the bottom line and an organization’s commitment to its employees’ lived experiences. The business case can help establish stakeholder buy in, but organizations must then take the D&I conversation to a new, more-substantive level. Accordingly, on one hand the communication function must convey the more-structural elements in place such as what is being done in terms of diverse recruitment and retention; networking, training, and programmatic opportunities; the paths open to leadership positions; leadership’s role in and accountability for success; and—as appropriate—how and why a diverse employee base reflects helps better engage the communities an organization serves. On the other hand, the communication function must convey the cultural dialogue within the organization itself, how that dialogue has shaped organizational values, and how, in turn, those personal and social justice values reflect important issues in local communities. Put another way, one set of messages conveys the structural provisions in place that reflect a sound business model committed to D&I. The second set of messages conveys an organization’s cultural focus, concerned with employees as individuals (with diverse individual needs and perspectives), how those perspectives can help organizations change for the better, and in how an organization can better respond to the broader conversations happening in the communities they serve.

At the risk of oversimplification, based on this analysis Figure 1 is an attempt to operationalize the various diversity-specific mandates facing public relations. As explained, the public relations function must help coordinate communication across an organization with a focus on internal and external stakeholders simultaneously. In the process, communication planning must be focused on conveying structural (D&I policies and programs) as well as

cultural messages. Taken in concert, therefore, the literature indicates that diversity-focused communication can be understood through one of four contexts: internal-structural; external-structural; internal-cultural; external-cultural. Internal structural communication highlights the programs, training, networking, development opportunities, and paths to advancement. External structural communication conveys the business case for diversity, while highlighting an organization's recruitment and retention efforts. Internal cultural communication focuses on how diversity helps organizations learn and change—where diversity-centered dialogue help inform and shape organizational culture. From this perspective, organizations work to understand employees as individuals with individual stories, needs and expectations. External cultural communication, then, focuses on broader social justice issues in the communities an organization lives and serves, and how its own culture and strategic messaging reflects and addresses the diverse needs of those communities. In the process, it reaffirms public relations' responsibility specific to advocacy.



**Figure 1: Multicultural Public Relations Mandates**

Messaging focused on specific internal, external, structural and cultural communication needs

Ultimately, it is public relations' responsibility to help balance diversity-focused communication among these four areas, helping discern which area might receive too great or little of focus, to determine if and how messages might overlap, and to work with management to determine what type of communication strategy across the four contexts is best for the organization. Accordingly, while the proposed model does distinguish four separate areas of diversity-focused communication, they should not be seen as operating in silos. Indeed, they overlap and should inform each other while contributing to a holistic diversity-focused communication strategy. It could be fruitful to apply this model in future research, perhaps evaluating various organizations' public relations diversity efforts to determine where they fall more and less heavily on the proposed grid.

## Conclusion

Diversity-focused research in public relations has gained traction in important ways during the last decade. It has provided key benchmarks in terms of the remaining disparities in workplace diversity and gender equity, as well as gaps in terms of what we know about additional markers of diversity and intersections of diversity. Additional research has provided foundational insight regarding how public relations can better integrate a multicultural lens into the public relations process. As outlined, research from tangential areas such as organizational management in many ways has paralleled the trends in public relations. This study hopes to contribute to the discussion and help tease out research directions for a new generation of diversity-focused research. Questions remain. New markers of diversity in the public relations workplace need to be explored. A small, but growing area of research is exploring how public relations can be used to further social change and reach diverse groups. Finally, more studies are needed addressing how public relations can better incorporate a multicultural lens into the public relations process itself.

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