

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE LACK OF  
PHYSICALLY DISABLED PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the

School of Communication

University of Houston

---

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

---

By

Amanda Sebesta

December 2018

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE LACK OF PHYSICALLY  
DISABLED PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS

---

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the  
School of Communication  
University of Houston

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

---

By  
Amanda Sebesta  
December 2018

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the perceptions of physically disabled practitioners in the public relations field. The purpose of the study was to get disabled practitioner's perspectives on the industry to explore how the public relations field is falling behind when recruiting from this group. A qualitative study was done using open-ended interview questions, with the goal of receiving experiences from disabled practitioner's on their time in the industry, discrimination they faced, and how they feel public relations can improve.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Chapter I – Introduction.....	3
Chapter II – Literature Review.....	7
Chapter III – Methods.....	20
Chapter IV – Results.....	32
Chapter V – Discussions and Conclusions.....	50
References.....	59
Appendix A.....	64
Appendix B.....	66
Appendix C.....	68
Appendix D.....	69

## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Context of the Study*

Although the public relations profession has established itself as a legitimate position needed in every industry, it has fallen under the stereotype of a beautiful, blond woman. As was found in a study conducted by Bourdieu (1991), that looked at the perception of public relations practitioners, finding "...one of the stereotypes of PR is a pretty blond girl, a bit of an airhead but is nice to look at ... [I]t is a very old, very stereotyped idea of what PR is but even today it still holds true" (Edwards, p. 210).

A 2008 Public Relations Society of America survey found "...members rank this issue (diversity) as a very low priority" (Applebaum, 2009, as cited in Tindall & Waters, 2012, p. 467). Strides are being made through scholarly research to negate this stereotype by including the experiences of practitioners from different races (Edwards, 2010), genders (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017), sexual orientations (Tindall & Waters, 2012), and other identities. However, the "other identities" that are being left out need to be explored so that the field can expand its understanding of one largely understudied group: disabled practitioners.

In a recent study conducted by Vardeman-Winter and Place (2017) examining workforce diversity of women in the public relations field, they found that public relations research "...from the past 11 years shows that the practice has significant room to grow in terms of welcoming and providing a successful, equitable workplace environment to practitioners from marginalized groups" (Vardeman-Winter & Place,

2017, p. 9). This study seeks to fill that gap in one way, by learning about how disabled practitioners perceive working in the public relations field.

To this point, in 2005 The BPRI Group conducted a survey of practitioners demonstrated the bleak picture of the state of physically disabled practitioners:

...[A]ccording to agency CEOs and corporate communication executives, 0.5% of their public relations employees have disabilities, which compares to the national average of 20% of employees (and 30% of respondents reporting they did not know about the disability composition of their workforce). (pp. 6-7)

Similarly, a 2012 U.S. Census Bureau survey of the U.S. labor force found that there are “[m]ore than 56.7 million Americans—or about 2 in 10 adults –liv[ing] with a disability” (Painter, 2016, p. 229). Specifically, in the PR/communication industry, the U.S. Department of Labor, found that out of 145,355 employed Americans with disabilities, only 776 were in the public relations field (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

Although these findings show low numbers of physically disabled practitioners, there may be an incongruence in the numbers depending on several factors, including how you define the word “disabled.” This leads some to not report disabilities that can be easily hidden. Additionally, if 26 percent of Americans are living with a disability and only 776 people are practitioners, there may be factors influencing these dismal numbers that need more investigation, such as whether hiring discrimination exists among disabled practitioners.

The need for diversity of practitioners has been recognized by a number of scholars and theories, most notably in the hallmark public relations study, “the excellence study” (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Through this study, the authors found that

“...excellent departments should seek more of the scarce supply of minority practitioners to add to their ability to understand the environments faced by their organizations” (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 33). Specifically, when testing three of their theoretical propositions, they posited “...organizations need as much diversity inside as in their environment. Excellent public departments empower both men and women in all roles as well as practitioners of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds” (p. 34). However, despite its acknowledged importance the “... discussion of diversity in public relations practice remains limited to descriptions of the experiences of [racial] minority practitioners” (Sha & Ford, 2007, p. 381). As Gregory (2006) pointed out, “[if] we are going to make some genuine strides in diversity, our industry needs to ask itself some hard questions...” (as cited in Tindall & Waters, 2012, p. 454), like what are leading public relations organizations to be more inclusive? How do we start recruiting more from groups not widely represented?

#### *Purpose of the Study*

With the possibility of under-representation of physically disabled public relations practitioners in the field, I set out to learn about the perceptions of these practitioners as being part of the public relations workforce. I plan to interview physically disabled practitioners about their experiences in the field, with hopes that their data will fill a gap in diversity scholarship. It will also contribute to understandings of how these practitioners contribute uniquely to public relations programming/teams.

My interest in this study comes from two areas. As a practitioner who is physically disabled and employed in a public relations position, my perception has been that there is a lack of information about physically disabled practitioners. I believe this is

detrimental to the field of public relations because this community is one that any person can become a part of at any time (e.g., becoming disabled during life due to an accident or illness versus being born, as we all are of particular races). The public relations field needs to be cognizant of the problem of underrepresentation of the field, including the factors that produce the underrepresentation as well as the consequences of this problem, when employing this group. Thus, the practitioners' data will provide both theoretical and practical implications for the field.

### *Preview*

This paper first presents a literature review about diversity, disability feminist theory and physically disabled public relations practitioners, specifically about the lack of research about physically disabled practitioners in the public relations field. Based on the findings through the literature review, or the lack of findings, I present research questions that guided this thesis. The method for the study is described, including how I gathered and analyzed data from the participant sample. Finally, this thesis will provide an interpretation of the data collected, particularly around theoretical and practical implications to the field. I will also address the limitations in this study as well as what further research needs to be conducted to provide a better understanding of where the public relations field needs to improve.

## Chapter II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Literature Overview*

After a thorough search, it seems that the issue of a lack of disabled public relations representatives is not only affecting the professional side of the industry, but also the research being conducted. When searching for articles about “disabilities” and “public relations” in the academic communication databases, the most current research I found throughout my discovery phase was around 1968, despite the significant policy changes that have occurred around disability rights, for example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the Social Security Disability Reform Act (1984).

In my initial search of literature, I found several recurring themes, including, a lack of diversity in terms of research focus along with a lack of research done in this area. The research I found on the disabled community has been conducted primarily with the blind community, and how practitioners can communicate to this group; but the field is lacking in understanding how to include physically disabled practitioners in the work place.

#### *Lack of Research on Practitioners with Disabilities in Public Relations*

Currently, the field has a lack of current research that focuses on the presence and experiences of disabled practitioners in the public relations field. I searched through academic databases using the terms disabled, practitioner, disab\*, disability, public relations and disabilities from 1960 to current. In addition to looking at academic databases, including SocINDEX, Social Work Abstracts, Business Source Complete, Communication & Mass Media Complete and Humanities and Full Text, I also looked at

various trade publications including *PRWeek*, and the Public Relations Society of America's *Strategist*.

*People with disabilities as a target public*<sup>1</sup>. While there was a substantial number of articles that appeared through these searches, they did not focus on including the physically disabled in the workforce, but rather, how practitioners should communicate with this key public. The articles that were found discussed on a strategic level how public relations firms can target disabled publics, such as the blind, by being inclusive in the types of media they use. Other disabilities, such as cognitive, or developmental, were discussed briefly, but the main focus was on the blind community.

By focusing strategically on pushing the message to disabled publics, without actually understanding or including them in the field, limits how the field can advance when working with this audience, because if practitioners are supposed to understand the wants and needs of all publics, they are missing out on this one group, thereby “othering” them.

*People with disabilities as practitioners*. A recent study commissioned by the Lillian Lodge Kopenhaver Center for the Advancement of Women in Communication analyzed research collected from the past 11 years on the state of research about women in public relations and found that, “women of color, LGBT practitioners, and practitioners with disabilities are underrepresented in the field, and data to generalize their experiences are extremely limited” (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017, p. 2-3).

Vardeman-Winter and Place addressed the lack of research in this area by positing that

---

<sup>1</sup>“A public can be an advocate as well as the target of others’ appeals...[A]dvocates contend with one another as representatives of the public in the public interest: ‘[T]heir messages and judgments are shaped significantly by their perception (whether purposeful or not that their values, interests, and premises accord with—and, as it were, derive authority from—the public’” (Heath, 2007, p. 50).

“...different women’s stories—as well as men’s stories who are not part of the standard White, heterosexual, American experience—are severely underrepresented in public relations practice and research” (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017, p. 9).

Since the lack of results from extensive searching through databases, only provided limited to no information on physically disabled practitioners in the field, this became the driving force for the study. Specifically, there is a need for a more in-depth study on how those who are physically disabled in the field of public relations perceive their positions, and the diversity, in the workforce.

#### *Diversity Research in Public Relations*

To contextualize this study, it is important first to understand the breadth and depth of practitioner diversity research in public relations. According to Sha and Ford (2007), “...public relations scholarship and practice continue to have limited definitions of ‘diversity,’ with most attention being paid to racial and ethnic minorities within the United States” (Sha & Ford, p. 385). While it is vital to the industry to focus on these groups, they are not the only identity groups that are being “othered” or “minoritized.” As Sha and Ford point out, “[m]aximizing diversity in public relations practice is critical to maximizing diversity in public relations scholarship, because development of the latter often depends on data collected from and about practitioners in our field” (p. 392).

Fletcher and Ely (2003) found that:

Analyzing barriers to change and researching communication strategies for others outside dominant social groups is incomplete if it is viewed consistently through a single lens, with a myopic gaze that omits multiple realities and identities, or if

the research relies on myths that construct groups as monolithic entities. (as cited by Vardeman-Winter and Tindall, p. 223)

Restricting our views to only one group can be damaging, which Solorzano and Yosso (2002) and Gillborn (2008), focus on by examining “whiteness” in the industry.

Edwards claims that:

[W]hiteness functions as a master narrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27) that silences multiple voices and perspectives, legitimizes dominant groups, and allocates social status to others in relation to these groups. It permeates social institutions, systems, and spaces such that white interests and norms are central, and the interests of other groups remain peripheral. (p. 207)

Edwards discussed “whiteness” and its effects on the industry, finding that practitioners with similar backgrounds tend to gravitate toward one another. Recognizing this attraction, new practitioners to the field “fall into line with the rule” and will alter the behaviors to fit in” (p. 206). Edwards argued that “[r]ecognizing “whiteness” means recognizing its effects and the unearned advantage it represents” (Edwards, p. 207). Although Edwards focuses on race, this is connected to this study because, as with “whiteness”, there is an “othering” when it comes to physically disabled people. Whether intentional or unintentional, like gravitates to like, as Edwards found, and therefore, this can be applied to this study.

Edwards (2010) also brings up “habitus”, or “what it is to ‘be’ a public relations practitioner and to ‘do’ public relations” (Edwards, p. 210). She also argues that “[t]his combines with powerful discourses of merit to make it extremely difficult for minoritized public relations practitioners to voice their concerns or articulate their difference in a way

that is perceived as productive rather than destructive” (Edwards, p. 210). To Edwards’ points, while there may be an attempt to include minority practitioners into the field, the way the field is structured, “others” – or those who are “different” – experience “...[t]he day-to-day ‘othering’ of practitioners through “habitus” and discourse [which are] reinforced through the structures of the profession” (Edwards, p. 217). As argued by Carbado and Gulati (2003) “...employers seek employees who represent diversity but in a way that will ‘fit’ with an organization—they have the right cultural capital, the right approach, the right personality” (as cited by Edwards, p. 214). As Tindall and Waters (2012) claim, that while “...the industry understands the need for conducting campaigns that reach minority communities, they have not yet realized the financial benefits of active recruitment from these communities” (Banks, 2000, p. 468, as cited in Tindall & Waters).

In addition to “whiteness” affecting the industry, scholars have also discussed pigeonholing in length when it comes to minority practitioners. As Edwards (2007) states:

While there are agencies that specialize in diversity communications, a role just in this area—or other stereotypical areas such as communicating to ‘hard to reach groups’—may compromise practitioners who want to avoid being pigeonholed into a single area of expertise. Moreover, the assignment of this particular ‘place’ in the profession is made according to criteria set by the dominant group, which defines the context in which diversity communications are of interest and places them on the periphery rather than at the center of communications exercises. (p. 218)

When it comes to pigeonholing, Edwards continues to argue that “[m]inoritized practitioners therefore have a choice between taking advantage of interest convergence where it exists, and supporting the professional norm, or challenging it, but risking their personal comfort and, potentially, their career progression” (Edwards, p. 218). As it was, and continues to be, an issue in the industry, minority practitioners are often forced into the role and do not feel they can speak out about this compromising position. To counter this trend, Len-Ríos (1998) called for reform: “[A]s the minority work force grows and the number of positions in public relations increases, we should be conscious of how to nurture and support our profession through mutual understanding and creating a comfort level among all peoples” (p. 553).

Although “whiteness” considers race heavily, it still is including the “sameness” one has with another person, leading to the marginalization of the physically disabled. Discussed in the sections below is a connection to intersectionality, the physically disabled, and how “whiteness” excludes them because “...subjects that ‘occupy multiple social locations,’ attends to the complexity of their experiences...” which negates the idea of “whiteness” and how everyone is similar (McCann & Kim, 2017, p. 165). With intersectionality, it allows us to “...[incorporate] the many contradictory and overlapping ways that human life is experienced,” giving us rich content and a deeper understanding of different groups (McCann & Kim, 2017, p. 165).

### *Workplace Discrimination*

In addition to issues around workforce diversity and “whiteness”, it is also important to look at how people with physical disabilities, in all areas of work, are discriminated against. In a study conducted by Noonan, Gallor, Hensler-McGinnis,

Fassinger, Wang, & Goodman, (2004) in which they interviewed successful women with disabilities about their career development, researchers discovered that “[p]overty is a common occurrence for individuals with disabilities. [W]orking-age people with disabilities who do not work, 19% live in poverty, compared with 9% of those without disabilities” (Noonan, et al, 2004, p. 68).

While monetary issues in the workplace are an issue for the disabled, they also face discrimination among their co-workers and managers, leading to slower career progression, and a negative attitude about themselves in the workplace. As Noonan, et al. discovered, women with disabilities in the workplace face barriers that keep their income below workers without disabilities, finding that “...those with disabilities earn even less (about 73%) than women without disabilities” (Noonan, 2004, p. 68). This discrepancy in the workplace can be attributed to anti-disability prejudices that they face, “for example...devaluation, invisibility, stigmatization, and low expectations by society...often [being stereotyped] as dependent, childlike, helpless and incompetent to perform work of any kind” (Noonan, 2004, p. 69).

#### *Media and Disability Stereotypes*

As the physically disabled face discrimination in the workplace, along with preconceived assumptions of the mental state of those with disabilities, we should look to how the stereotypes that the media have enforced about the physically disabled also affect the workforce composition of the field. A study conducted by Patricia G. Devine (1989), found that racism, as originally thought to be based on personal experience, is acquired by political and racial socialization. This causes an automatic activation—often unintentional—when in the presence of an othered group (p. 538).

Mia Mingus (2011), a disability scholar who is physically disabled, illustrated how stereotypes about the disabled have emerged, compared to the stereotypes of “freakery”:

Freakery is that piece of disability and ableism where bodies that are deformed, disfigured, scarred and non-normatively physically disabled live. Its roots come out of...the freak shows of the 1800’s where physically disabled folks, trans and gender non-conforming folks, indigenous folks and people of color were displayed side-by-side. It is where “beauty” and “freak” got constructed day in and day out, where “whiteness” and “other” got burned into our brains. (para. 30)

Lynch (2013) examined hiring managers’ decisions on whether or not to hire a blind, or visually impaired, employee over someone with no disabilities. He found the following:

...[A] majority of managers mistakenly believed there were few jobs in their organizations that visually impaired people could successfully perform. They also thought it was more expensive to hire someone with impaired vision compared to someone without a disability. The majority of managers made it a lower priority to recruit, train, and retain employees with disabilities than to recruit, train, and retain executives, senior managers, young employees, and minorities. (p. 409)

Findings from Mingus’ (2011) and Lynch’s (2013) studies reinforce the notion of the stereotypes that are ascribed to the disabled community. The example that Lynch provides of the hiring managers not thinking someone with a visual impairment can do a job is a prime example. Instead of taking the opportunity to talk with the candidate

further, they ascribe to them that they are unable to do a task without even giving them a chance.

The misconception of what people with disabilities are capable of is still present in today's society. With these misconceptions, along with the stereotype that the public relations field has (e.g., the blond, pretty, White woman representative), it is easy to see how the field can get this type of reputation unintentionally. As Vardeman-Winter and Tindall (2013) argued:

...[P]ublic relations practitioners hoping to break through persistent disparities,...advocates [should] think through the stereotypes they have of the experts and the communities they are trying to help to recognize how othering and stereotypes could be limiting the effectiveness of their work because of damaging effects of representation, particularly in mass media. (p. 230)

While it is important to look at research being done about hiring more disabled practitioners into the workforce and treating them equitably, it is also important to look at how public relations practitioners, when working with the media, or advertising, portray the disabled community. The disabled community, traditionally, has been cast in several stereotypes, ranging from being "othered," or treated as "partial, limited and less than fully human," to being "superhuman, overcoming overwhelming odds to live a normal life in a way that can serve as an example to others," (Painter, 2016, p. 230).

It is through stereotypes like these that fuel everyday thinking when it comes to interacting with those who are disabled. If represented in the media this way, where "...people obtain 'their beliefs regarding health and illness from the discourses and constructions available to them...'" (Murray, 2014, p. 171), it is doing detrimental

damage to the group. For example, it can affect "...interest in hiring, promoting, and training employees. Because of the low level of competence typically ascribed to individuals with a disability, they may be perceived as less suitable in the workplace, especially for supervisory jobs" (Louvet, 2009; Louvet, 2007; Scherbaum, Scherbaum, & Popovich, 2005, p. 158).

In a study conducted by Murray and Forshaw (2014), they looked at how the publication *InMotion*, which focuses on amputees, communicates living with a disability by using three different themes: employment, gender roles in regard to the family, and relationship to family (Murray, p. 172). With those themes as their basis, the authors found that some ads did overlap in theme, but that there was a discrepancy in how they communicated to female amputees versus male amputees. In one of the examples, they found that:

[T]he College Park prosthetic foot is marketed towards a perceived female audience... There are a number of features of this advert which stand out in contrast to that of [an] earlier College Park Advertisement. Although the advert shares a similar construction (picture of shoes, use of a quote, picture of prosthetic product, company slogan), this time the pictured shoes are (red) high heels covered in party streamers, followed by the quote, "I paint(ed) the town red" (with references to painting the town red being commonly understood as celebratory behaviour, such as "partying"). (p. 173)

This study is important because even a disable-minded publication can even miss the mark when communicating to certain groups. With this study in mind, it is important to the field that we need to make sure to not omit any disabled groups. As Vardeman and

Tindall (2010) note: "... [T]he words, symbols, and images [practitioners] build into campaigns represent the attitudes we hope to convey in messaging. How groups are differentially represented in campaign materials, events, and media is of importance" (p. 230).

Similarly, Ralph and Boxall (2015) examined a United Kingdom-based university's publicity materials by looking at how they recruit disabled students. They looked at several factors, including how the university was making strides to improve accommodations for the disabled and specifically, how they were portrayed in recruiting materials requested. Ralph and Boxall found:

Only 34 universities out of a total of 87 examined included photographs of visibly disabled people. Four more used two indirect photographs: for example a photograph of an empty wheelchair and of two people signing. Several universities used more than one image of disabled people and some used the same image more than once. A total of 59 photographs of disabled students were included in 34 publications. The majority of these images appeared appropriate and non-stigmatizing. (p. 375)

With stereotypes influencing decision making in industry, more than originally thought, applying theoretical basis on how we view these issues can help move the needle on public relations being more inclusive when it comes to physically disabled practitioners.

### *Feminist Theory of Disability*

In addition to examining "minoritized" groups in the field, it is important for us to address disability, particularly through a feminist lens. Looking at disability through a

feminist lens allows us to indicate where “...relations of power that operate within all human relationships in which one group rules another” (McCann & Kim, 2017, p. 27). In particular, if we take feminist theory further to analyze under the lens of the feminist theory of disability, as posited by Susan Wendell, “...a feminist theory of disability that takes adequate account of our differences, we will need to know how experiences of disability and the social oppression of the disabled interact with sexism, racism and class oppression” (Wendell, 1989, p. 105).

Alison Kafer (2013) argues that “[h]ow one understands disability in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future; one’s assumptions about the experience of disability creates one’s conception of a better future” (p. 2). Kafer continues to talk about disability studies illustrating that “[d]espite the rise of disability studies in the U.S., and decades of disability rights activism, disability continues to be seen primarily as a personal problem afflicting individual people, a problem best solved through strength of character and resolve” (p. 4).

Moreover, we also need to look at “ableism,” to expand our definitions in the disability community. Mia Mingus posits, “...[a]bleism cuts across all of our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against a mythical norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability” (Mingus, 2011).

Finally, Kafer identifies issues with the term “handicapped,” and how the politicization of the word has shaped our views on the disabled community:

Unlike ‘disabled,’ which potentially has more political overtones, or even ‘differently abled,’ which can be seen as a (naïve and unsuccessful) attempt to

break down able-bodied/disabled binaries, ‘handicapped’ is thoroughly immersed in individual, medical, and charity models of disability. It is a label that makes it easier to see all disabled people as monolithically bound to their adaptive equipment and, relatedly, makes it harder to notice the lack of attention to the experiences or perspectives of disabled people. (111-112)

### *Research Objectives & Questions*

The main objective of this research was to discover the perceptions physically disabled practitioners have about their representation and experiences in the field. I solicited this information from other physically disabled practitioners as well, in order to give a broad view of how the public relations industry is “othering” this group unintentionally.

I based the research questions guiding this study on Tindall and Waters’ (2012) study on gay practitioners’ experiences in the field. In order to address the perception that there is a lack of physically disabled public relations practitioners, the following questions guided my study:

*RQ1: How do disabled practitioners describe their career experiences in the industry?*

*RQ1a: ...structural factors of public relations practice?*

*RQ1b: ...political factors of public relations practice?*

*RQ1c: ...representational factors of public relations practice?*

*RQ2: How do disabled practitioners feel that PR can become more welcoming to disabled practitioners?*

*RQ3: What opportunities and constraints do disabled practitioners feel exist in the PR industry for personal advancement and promotion?*

### **Chapter III**

#### **METHODS**

##### *Methodology*

Since this research topic is a new area that has not been previously researched, it was important to garner in-depth, real-world experience of practitioners in the public relations field. A qualitative study, and not a quantitative study, then, was the best choice for data inquiry. The choice of a qualitative study was needed for this research because “qualitative research is about immersing oneself in a scene and trying to make sense of it...mak[ing] note of small cues in order to...make sense of the context and build larger knowledge claims” (Tracy, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, the choice of qualitative study is “appropriate when investigating understudied populations because existing theory and measures may be questionable or inadequate” (Noonan, et al., 2004, p. 69).

##### *Methods*

Using the method of in-depth interviews, I spoke directly with participants, allowing me to obtain information that cannot be gathered from a quantitative-based survey. By conducting in-depth interviews with practitioners, the participants provided their career and personal experiences with me, allowing participants to reflect on the organizational culture they work in.

Additionally, I obtained information that led to a clearer understanding of how the perception of the lack of this disenfranchised group is affecting the industry internally and externally. These interviews allowed me to learn from participants about their career experiences, in addition to hearing their tone, as these interviews were conducted over the

phone, due to the fact that each participant was located outside of Houston, Tx, and I could not schedule time to fly out to meet in person.

### *Interview Protocol*

The purpose of interviews was to explore the perceptions of physically disabled practitioners in the public relations field. First, open-ended interview questions (Appendix A) gauged the participants' overall perceptions of their current role in their public relations organization. The interview protocol consisted of questions to elicit data about practitioners' day-to-day tasks, to gauge the amount of physical exertion they have experienced, and also any promotions that they received in their time in the field, to see if they are on par with their able-bodied counterparts in the industry, the nature of their disability and how they view the public relations field's attempt to be inclusive of the physically disabled. Finally, the interview protocol included questions about how the practitioner perceives the field and its treatment of physically disabled practitioners.

The interview protocol was developed through researching previous protocols published in studies that focused on disenfranchised groups (e.g., Edwards, 2007; Noonan, et al., 2004; Tindall & Waters, 2012). For example, Tindall and Waters' (2012) study focused on gay public relations practitioners' experiences in the industry, as Tindall and Waters saw a lack of information from the gay community about their experiences in the workplace and the need to include these practitioners' experiences in public relations research. As with the current study, Tindall and Waters "...allowed the participants to describe their experiences in an open manner..." (Tindall & Waters, 2012, p. 456). The interviews explored the participants' perceptions of how the field is making strides to be more diverse and inclusive.

These previous interview protocols helped in creating a semi-structured interview guide. A semi-structured interview guide gives a loose script to work with and allows me to probe differently if necessary. Therefore, I am able to be "...more flexible and organic in nature...enter[ing] the conversation with flexible questions...meant to stimulate discussion rather than dictate it" (Tracy, 2013, p. 139). This semi-structured guide is different from a structured or narrative interview, because it positions the researcher as "...a listener and reflector as much as – if not more than – that of the questioner...[and] may take place during a slow point of fieldwork,...or they may be planned for a specific time," which you are unable to do in a structured or narrative situation (Tracy, 2013, p. 139).

#### *Recruitment & Sampling Strategy*

In order to recruit participants for this study, I used convenience sampling in order to obtain a maximum variation sampling strategy, "because a diverse sample highlights individual uniqueness as well as captures shared experiences" (Noonan, et al., 2004, p. 69). I sought a maximum variation sample, based on the criteria that participants: (a) were 18+ years old; (b) self-identify as a public relations practitioner with at least six months of experience; and (c) self-identify as physically disabled. A maximum variation sample allows me to "...access a wide range of data or participants who will represent wide variations of the phenomena of the study" (Tracy, 2013, p. 135). Although I made an assumption that practitioners with physical disabilities have experienced some setbacks in the workplace based on their identity, this type of sample allows for any and all experiences to emerge and be considered equally valid.

When recruiting, I worked with personal contacts that I have made over the years throughout my career as a public relations practitioner to garner a list of possible candidates. I also looked on LinkedIn and other professional sites to identify possible candidates for inclusion, such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), several amputee organizations (Shriners' Children Hospital, American Association of People with Disabilities, Amputee Coalition and Abled Amputees of America), as well as blind/deaf organizations (National Family Association for Deaf-Blind, The Lighthouse – Houston, and National Federation of the Blind - Texas, Houston Chapter). I determined if they fit the criteria by examining their current career listed on the site/profile, and cross referenced with the company's page to confirm that the information was accurate. I created an Excel spreadsheet that listed out the participant groups and individuals that I reached out to throughout the process, totaling to more than 40 groups and individuals. (Appendix C).

In addition to personal public relations connections, I connected within my own network of physically disabled contacts to attempt to garner more interest in the study. The network that I have created is very informal. Some of my informant's stem from connections with my prosthetist and prosthetics office, who I felt could connect me with physically disabled practitioners. It is important to use informants from the prosthetics and medical field because they are "...experienced and savvy in the scene, [and] can articulate stories and explanations that others would not..." (Tracy, 2013, p. 140). Another connection that I used was a friend of mine from high school who became an amputee as a result of a drunk driving accident.

During my initial contact with possible participants, I included that I am a physically disabled public relations practitioner. I disclosed this information in order to subside any fears that the participant may have since I am asking them to disclose personal information about how their disability may affect their work experiences, because, “disability researchers have claimed that people with disabilities are often treated as research objects who share their experiences rather than as active partners in the research process” (Kroll, et al., 2007, p. 690). I also wanted to disclose this information because “...when researchers and participants collaborate on the basis of common perspectives...the researchers may be able to better help participants to tell a story” (Ellingson, 2017, p. 113). Since this area of research is underdeveloped, it is vital that an accurate depiction of physically disabled practitioners’ experiences is shared, giving me “...an opportunity to make overt the politics that were implicit or harness the power of research to move toward praxis (i.e., making a difference in the world)” (Ellingson, 2017, p. 44).

Once participants were identified, I reached out via email to set up in-person interviews, as this is my method of collecting data. The email (Appendix B) included information about the goal of the study, the anticipated length of the interview, and information on the consent process during their time of participation.

### *Sample*

The sample that I used for this study was public relations professionals of any gender, in either the non-profit or for-profit sector, and who have a physical disability: I started with amputees initially. I then expanded to practitioners who are wheelchair-bound, practitioners who are blind and/or deaf, and practitioners with dwarfism, as the

initial sample recruitment size was not large enough, therefore not yielding any participants. The participants were a mix of male and female and recruited across the United States. Each participant had to have at least six months experience in the public relations industry.

Based on the sample, I attempted to recruit 10-15 public relations professionals throughout the United States. for this study. In order to achieve the maximum variation sampling strategy, I included a mix of public relations professionals from different backgrounds that include age, race, gender and experience to get "...a sample representing selected aspects of diversity...to highlight the uniqueness of the participants as well as their shared common experiences, resulting in 'information-rich' cases" (Noonan, et al., 2004, p. 70). If a physically disabled public relations practitioner was recommended to me outside of the Houston area, I was prepared to conduct a pre-interview via a phone call. I ended up only speaking to four practitioners, with only three being used in data analysis.

The participants in this study were two females and one male, who either worked, or currently work, for the public relations industry. The fourth participant was excluded from the study because their position did not meet the exact requirement as a public relations practitioner. The participant's locations were New York, Arizona, and Los Angeles. They all had at least 5+ years of experience, and all had a physical disability, with two of them being wheelchair-bound, one congenital, and one as a result of an accident, and the other with dwarfism. The average length of conversation with the participants were about 45 minutes, with one lasting an hour and a half in length. All interviews were audio recorded using the iPhones recording application.

*Data Analysis*

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I began looking for recurring themes from the interviews of the participants, in order to begin coding the transcriptions using a manual and computer-aided approach. Opening the transcriptions in Microsoft Word, I read through them, multiple times, and would highlight in yellow the parts that I found to be possibly useful, while highlighting the parts in green that I knew would be the most useful. As I was identifying the quotes for use, themes began to emerge. I then copy and pasted these findings into a new document, to list the themes, and copy under each theme the corresponding participant information. This allowed me to use the constant comparative method, which gave me the flexibility to compare the data that was applicable to each code and modify definitions as they evolved throughout the process (Tracy, 2013, p. 190).

Using deduction, I "...[drew] implications from hypotheses or larger systems of them for purposes of verification... verifying whether that turns out to be total or a partial qualification or negation" (Strauss, 1987, p. 12). In addition to deduction, I used thematic analysis, one process for encoding qualitative information, which looks for patterns among the data as well as outliers, because "thematic analysis is a translator of those speaking the language of qualitative analysis...[enabling] those who use different qualitative methods to communicate with each other" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. vii). This allowed me to group data together according to similar theme and to better understand the answers that are provided in order to answer the research questions.

As themes began to emerge across each participant interview, it was clear that while each participant had differing experiences, there was an overarching issue in the

industry when it comes to employing disabled practitioners. Overall, I identified seven recurring themes for this study, which included: “Discrimination”, “Inclusivity”, “Industry Reputation”, “Accessibility”, “Disability Recruitment”, “Disabled Mindset”, and “Intersectionality”.

### *Validity*

The validity of qualitative research, since practitioners have to rely on what you see, hear, and interpret, as opposed to hard numbers in quantitative research, is debated as an acceptable form of study. With any area of research, it is important to make sure that the data collected are valid and reliable so that if future researchers want to replicate the study, they can. Therefore, I made sure that the study being conducted is continually checked, questioned and interpreted to make sure that the “...argument is sound, well-grounded, justifiable, strong, and convincing” (Kvale, 2002, p. 302).

Since I have a personal connection to the research, which some may consider a problem, I added the confirmability, or the “...direct and repeated affirmations of what the researcher has heard, seen or experienced...,” justifying my assumptions about physically disabled public relations practitioners (Leininger, 1994, p. 105). Using confirmability, I “document[ed] the procedures for checking and rechecking the data throughout the study...[and] can actively search for and describe negative instances that contradict prior observations” (“Qualitative Validity,” 2006). Additionally, I conducted the research with rigor, and “...[practice] the discipline and [have] the motivation to move beyond data and analysis methods that are merely convenient and comfortable” by taking the data and interpreting it from the participant (Tracy, 2013, p. 232). By not taking “favor” with certain companies, people, etc., this provided rich analysis for the

study. For example, when going through themes and coding, I did not exclude the positive aspects that participants shared with me about the field when it came to flexibility of location, and also their passion for doing their job.

Finally, I achieved credibility in my data collection and analysis, which "...refers to dependability, trustworthiness, and expressing a reality that is plausible or seems true" from the perspective of the participant (Tracy, 2013, p. 235). Since the data came from the perspective of a physical disabled practitioner, credibility helps "...describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results" ("Qualitative Validity," 2006).

It was also important to also conduct a member check of the data to improve data credibility. Member checks allow you to bring back your findings "...to the field and [determine] whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 279). It was important to run my interpretations by the participants to make sure my interpretation of their answers were accurate, because we share the connection of physical disabilities, and can understand the hardships, and also to make sure that my judgement is not clouded.

### *Procedures*

I began outreach of participants in February 2018 by reaching out to various organizations on Facebook, email, and through personal contacts for recruitment. Outreach was done with outreach prompts approved by the IRB committee at the University of Houston, and deviated slightly, depending on the organization or individual

I reached out to. The outreach, along with response, or no response, were documented in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet.

After participants responded and an interview was secured, participants were interviewed by phone, as all participants were located outside of my location. Time was also a factor in terms of turning around interview interest and conducting the interviews. Since it was such a small participant pool, I wanted to ensure that I did not schedule interviews out by two weeks, because I wanted to keep the participant's interest high in the study.

During the interview, I introduced myself to the participant, describing again the purpose of the study, describing the procedures of the interview, reviewing the IRB-approved informed consent form, and asking if s/he gives me permission to audio-record the conversation, and reminding the participant that s/he is able to opt-out of the process at any time. All participants agreed to be audio-recorded during the interview process. I began the interview with the participant, using the interview protocol, attached in Appendix A. If a participant expressed concerns about confidentiality during the interview process, since sensitive information was being requested, they were reminded that they can opt-out of the interview at any time. Participants are identified by age, position and gender, by asking that during the interview (in terms of identity). No specific information about their workplace nor their name or physical descriptors were included. These guidelines were communicated to them.

If at any time a participant seemed uncomfortable during the interview, I paused, ask them if they are OK, and asked the participant if they would like to skip that question, noting the observations I make with the discomfort with the question. As the researcher,

“...it is critical for the comfort of each participant and for the quality of the findings...that the [researcher] show patience” (Kroll, et al., 2007, p. 694). While I conducted the interview, I did not notice any discomforts when asking specific questions, with the exception of Participant Three, who I felt held back in a few instances on questions of her disability and how it has impacted her career path. Although she answered, I feel that she was not completely comfortable giving more information. Once the interview concluded, I allowed the participant to add anything s/he feels would be important to the study. I then explained the next steps of the study, including the privacy process that will be enforced throughout the study.

### *Reflexivity*

As mentioned in the introduction for the purpose of the study is my own personal connection to physically disabled practitioners because I myself am physically disabled. I am an amputee who is a hip-disarticulate, meaning I'm missing my right leg, above the knee. It is congenital. I am also in the public relations field in higher education.

I shared that I am physically disabled in my initial outreach of participants in order to add a level of connection with them, providing a level of encouragement for them to speak to me. As a researcher with a personal connection to this topic, it is important to note that “...researchers ‘don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are part of the world” (Ellingson, 2017, p. 45).

As the interview process began with the participant, our connection through our disabilities will provided me with richer data, since I am knowledgeable about the area of amputation, adding another level of comfort to the discussion. As a researcher, and someone who is looking to share these experiences to make an impact on the industry and

academia, I am “...positioned not as ‘a cryptographer or an archeologist... [but rather] a facilitator, collaborator and ‘travel companion’ in the exploration of experience”

(Ellingson, 2017, p. 102).

## Chapter IV

### RESULTS

#### *Summary of Participants*

A total of four participants were interviewed for this study, with three of them being used for data analysis. As mentioned earlier, Participant Four was excluded from the study due to the position s/he was in not being exactly a match in the public relations field. The participants represented organizations throughout the U.S. in Arizona, New York, Texas and California and were all interviewed by phone. The participants had varying roles in the public relations industry, including two who recently left the field to pursue other endeavors, their own outreach businesses, and one who is working in public advocacy for the disabled, but previously worked in the entertainment industry.

Each participant had a physical disability, including two wheel-chair bound participants and one participant with dwarfism.

Participant One is a white male in his early 40s, who has cerebral palsy and is wheelchair bound. He has worked in public relations, in the private and public sector, for the last 15 years, and has currently launched a web business that helps identify disability-friendly vacation locations. He also is a public speaker and is from Arizona.

Participant Two is a white female who is in her late 30s, and was injured in a car wreck, paralyzing her from the waist down. She has worked in public relations for seven years and is currently stepping away from the industry to pursue another career in the same field. She is also a motivational speaker, who shares her story about her disability and is based in New York.

Participant Three is a white female in her late 40s and has dwarfism. She is the only one in her family with this disability. She is currently located in Los Angeles and has five years' experience in the public relations industry. She currently works as the Director for the Disability Equality Index, an organization that analyzes company's inclusivity gains.

During my recruitment phase, I received correspondence from a public relations practitioner, who had a physical disability, who declined to be interviewed. I have named that person "Bob." However, in that communication, he declined, but the reasoning behind it was enough to note in a follow up in Appendix D.

#### *Summary of Results*

The data I collected offers insights about the perceptions that disabled practitioners have about the public relations industry, and how their experiences have shaped their opinions of it. The results also describe the types of salient issues that the industry faces when being more inclusive with this group. In the following section, I will describe the findings in detail, and discuss additional findings about the participant's perceptions. The results are organized according to the themes that answer the Research Questions.

*RQ1a: How do disabled practitioners describe their career experiences in the industry according to structural factors of public relations practice?*

In Research Question 1a, participants focused on sharing their career experiences, current and past, and how the industry, to their perception, was hindering or helping be more inclusive of disabled practitioners. The themes found in this research question were "discrimination," "industry reputation," and "accessibility."

*Discrimination*

A prevalent theme of discrimination appeared when talking to each participant as they experienced it in the public relations field at some time or another. Participant Two, who was a middle-aged female, wheelchair-bound due to a vehicle accident, faced multiple forms of discrimination while on the job that her able-bodied counterparts did not, even including not creating an accessible bathroom.

Participant Three, who is a middle-aged female with dwarfism, currently focuses her efforts on public advocacy for those with dwarfism also pulled on her experience industry when it came to being interviewed for public relations positions.

When I first started out in my career, I ended up applying to over 1,000 jobs in the entertainment industry working behind the scenes. I went on 100 interviews.

Every time I walked in the door I was judged, and never heard back from those interviews. I ultimately ended up going through a temporary placement agency that helped me get placement in some jobs. I think that's what happened that lead me to understand that a lot of people with disabilities would give up, or a lot of people in general would give up after that first or second interview.

Both Participants Two and Three touched on the overall discrimination they faced, but it is important to point out that this discrimination faced had to do with their appearance. Participant One, who was the middle-aged male who is wheelchair-bound, experienced.

I can't tell you how many agency positions I've applied for through the years that magically I just don't get, even though if you look at my curriculum vitae or my résumé, whatever you want to call it, and you look at the job description, I mean

let's tick them off. I think that's really what I dislike the most. On the agency side, particularly, there's just a weird superficial kind of vapid...

This participant seems to perceive there is a connection between the discrimination he faced, and the standard “look” that public relations agency practitioners have. The aesthetic of the public relations practitioner is seen by these participants as being related to an overall industry reputation.

### *Industry Reputation*

As mentioned in the literature review, the industry has a reputation of being overly focused on the “appropriate” appearance of practitioners representing a company. As Vardeman-Winter and Tindall (2013) stated:

...public relations practitioners hoping to break through persistent disparities,...advocates [should] think through the stereotypes they have of the experts and the communities they are trying to help to recognize how othering and stereotypes could be limiting the effectiveness of their work because of damaging effects of representation, particularly in mass media. (p. 230)

This seems to resonate with the participants’ experiences, that this was not only an important aspect of the job, but almost a requirement. As Participant One said:

Public relations, especially on the agency side, when I clearly had the right experience for a ton of these positions, you roll into an agency and everybody's just, you know, it's just full of beautiful people. I'm a good-looking dude, but I'm different than they are.

Participant Two also pointed out that the public relations industry reputation is not as diverse as they claim to be. As Participant Two notes: “[when] you walk into

[agencies], they all look the same... I think it's superficial. I think it's demanding. I think it's ... I don't know what the right way to say this word is ... exclusionary.” Participant

Two also described the industry as a field that:

...[is] really hard if you have a disability because PR is known for a few things, right? It's known for being aggressive, for super long hours. There ends up being a lot of random crap that you have to figure out how to do, and sometimes, it's physically demanding. The mentally demanding part is easy. It's the physically demanding part that's difficult.

### *Accessibility*

The final theme that tied to Research Question 1a was Accessibility. I defined accessibility in terms of how the job was enabling for the disabled practitioner to do his/her job equally as an able-bodied practitioner would, as well as helping the disabled person succeed as a public relations practitioner. Overall, each research participant had an accessibility issue that s/he faced during his/her time in the public relations field, especially when it came to physical activity that a public relations job requires. For example, Participant One, recalled:

There were a ton of times where I was in charge of setting up town hall meetings for our elected board, and I would have to get chairs set up and everything else. I didn't ask for help. I didn't complain about it. I just did it because I was scared to death that if I asked for help they'd be like, 'What are you talking about?' In a lot of ways, I didn't ask for help because I was afraid if I did it would affect my job status.

Public relations positions require an amount of travel, working lunches, events, being out in the public, and that takes a toll on any practitioner, physically abled or disabled. But for disabled practitioners, Participant One suggests they may hesitate to ask for assistance for fear of not “rocking the boat.” Similarly, Participant Two discussed travel concerns, specifically about possible exclusions from travel activities, based on assumptions others may have about what a disabled practitioner can or cannot do:

I definitely know I've been excluded from new business opportunities 'cause some people that I worked with didn't have a view of the amount that I could do, physically. That I could travel for a few days and kind of hold my own, or ... I think sometimes they just wouldn't wanna deal with the hassle of ... It's some extra work to make sure that there are accommodations for me. Or sometimes you go some place, and you don't know for sure that there are gonna be accommodations for you.

Participants perceived accessibility accommodations as positive at times. For example, Participant Three saw a plus to public relations, because of the flexibility it allowed her when working from remote locations. Although both Participants One and Two complimented this fact, they still noted that the industry still relies a lot on physical attributes for attendance at conferences, being the “face” of the company, and that requires a certain stamina that can be difficult for those with disabilities.

*RQ1b: ...political factors of public relations practice?*

As we delve into Research Question 1b and look at the political factors of the public relations practice, a few themes developed early on when speaking with the participants, some of which applied to RQ1a. The themes of “invisibility and

appearance,” “discrimination through exclusion” and “inclusivity” will be outlined below to answer RQ1b.

### *Invisibility and Appearance*

As mentioned in the literature review, the public relations industry has a reputation of employing blond hair, “bimbo-esque” women to be the face of the company. This hinders outsiders’ perceptions that the industry is not inclusive of a diversity of people it employs, which is what many of the participants vocalized, notably Participant Two.

Lifestyle PR is as bad as it sounds. Like, lifestyle, entertainment PR, it's very...Unless you're pretty, you're probably not going to go far. I mean, typically, you walk into those places ... and I've interviewed at a million of those PR firms ... and I have never gotten past the first-round despite being equally smart as everybody else around me.

Additionally, Participant One talked about style, and being put together, and how physically disabled people have to raise their standards in how they dress and look, lest they be perceived as someone who cannot physically take care of themselves.

I put a lot of thought and effort into how I look and how I present myself because I feel like again ... I'm not saying people have to wear designer stuff because that's not true, but we as people with disabilities we have to be more put together than our able-bodied counterparts because we're being judged 10 times as harshly, I feel.

Participant Three, while not talking directly about her experience with how she was judged for a look, talked about the implications that the public relations industry has on practitioners who even have invisible disabilities.

I think I've seen a lot of people who have invisible disabilities, and they're something they feel they have to hide from people based on how they see people with physical disabilities and how they're treated. I think it's important for people with disabilities to take ownership, and I've been fortunate to take ownership because I can't hide my difference.

To Participant Three's point, people with physical disabilities, who are in such a forward-facing role, aren't able to hide their "imperfections" like someone with an invisible disability. That's why, like Participant One talked about overcoming those limitations, when practitioners see consistently that their industry is dragging out the same type of professional, you are less likely, if you have a "difference" to apply for that job. It's just like seeing women in leadership roles, or people of color in roles of power, that creates positive growth in those identities to strive toward that. If we don't see it, we won't pursue it. We'll talk more on this in the Inclusivity section below.

#### *Discrimination Through Exclusion*

The theme of discrimination through exclusion became apparent once again for RQ1b, but not so much in discrimination from their peers in the public relations field, but by the publics they would work for, thereby making its way into the industry. As Participant Three noted in her early days of her career:

I was almost excluded from something in a previous job. I had worked in television casting. People were all invited to this award ceremony. Someone said

to me, 'oh, you know what? I don't really know if you're going to be able to go with us because you might get trampled.' I ended up going, but it was that assumption that felt really uncomfortable. I think it's just the assumption that others put on me. I can do a lot more physical activity than one may think or assume. I think the biggest thing that came out of that was don't try to prevent me from doing something that I'm fully capable of doing.

That perception that was attributed to Participant Three was definitely not the case, and someone who was outspoken, was able to communicate to that co-worker on how wrong they are about someone with dwarfism, and how to correct it. Participant Three also added:

I spent most of my early stages of my career trying to change what we see in the media, because that effects how we're treated in society. That was a slow-moving industry. I figured also going out there and doing some public speaking, and sharing my story, hoping that it can reach as many people as possible. I really just don't want other people to be treated in a way where they would be ignored just because they're different.

As Participant Three noted, it's great for disabled people, of all types, to go out and dispel some of the misperceptions that able-bodied people have of the disabled, and as Participant One noted:

I think the worst thing we can do, and this is the universal 'We,' this isn't just people with disabilities. The worst thing we can do is not acknowledge that inherent bias exists in all of us. The only way we can eradicate it is if we admit that it exists.

As Participant One noted, with the bias in society, it is important to note that the public relations industry also has a clear disconnect in recruiting people with disabilities.

As Participant Two added:

I don't know if you've been having a hard time finding people. I have yet to come across another person with a physical disability since I started my career. There are things that they can do, but I think first the industry needs to understand that it's a problem, and it's a serious problem. I think with disability, the issue is not the disability, the issue is society's view of it.

### *Inclusivity*

A final theme that was prevalent in my conversations with the participants was the theme of inclusivity. Responses ranged from how the industry can be more inclusive, to how participants have experienced, or not experienced, inclusivity during their careers. For example, Participant Two perceived that the disabled are always the last to be included in the inclusivity conversation: “I think every industry has a problem with recruiting disabled practitioners. It's just, really, we're the one minority that's never thought of, in anything.”

Also, Participant One circled back to his statement of bias and how that is shaping the industry to not be inclusive:

The reason we're underrepresented is because nobody is giving us opportunities. Every job that I've had whether I've gotten promoted or left for another opportunity, people say, ‘The best thing I did was hire you. You know your stuff. You worked your butt off. It was a great decision.’ I'm like, ‘Hey, the reason I did

that is because the next time an applicant rolls in here who's in a chair, I want you to remember what you just said to me and give that person a chance.'

*RQ1c: ...representational factors of public relations practice?*

Finally, as we look at the last facet of Research Question 1, and the representational factors of public relations, the theme of "intersectionality and identity."

*Intersectionality and Identity as a Disabled Practitioner*

Throughout my conversations with each participant, the themes of identity, multiple identities, and how they all collided to make who they are, emerged. I think this is important for public relations to consider, because those in the field have to know who their publics are, how they identify, and how to communicate best with them. As much as the participants have talked about looks, being disabled, whether it is in a chair, amputee, or dwarfism, is an inherent part of each participant. As Participant One claims: "[A] lot of people may look at it as like, 'Oh, that sucks that guy's in a chair,' but I look at my chair as part of me, and without it I couldn't be who I am and do what I need to do."

When it comes to identity, and how it plays a role in how public relations practitioners communicate with publics, Participant Two acknowledged how her identity of being a woman, and disabled, plays a role.

Sometimes I would get brought on projects at work because of my situation where they would know, "Okay. Well, [her name] [is] gonna have a little bit of a different slant to this," because I'm a compassionate person. Which, I guess part of it is being a woman, whatever. And my chair plays a role in that, and how I approach things. So I think that that's a culmination of who I am, totally. We're

not in the business of doing things from just logic. So who you are ends up impacting every campaign you do.

Identity of a practitioner plays such a significant role in the industry, that if a company is trying to do campaigns that appeal to all, and is inclusive of all, should include disabled practitioners. Additionally, Participant Three notes that also being a woman, and who has dwarfism, may be different for a male with dwarfism, which leads to the factor of pivoting identities.

I know that there's a discrepancy among women in the workplace as well. I think it's important to identify that being a part of my difference, because there have definitely been times where I think, 'Oh, that's because of my dwarfism.' But it's actually because I'm a woman. It's not always that it's because of my dwarfism where someone may react. I don't know if that's more of in an everyday life situation more than their working environment itself, but I feel that it can contribute to that. It can affect promotions. It can affect just how I'm perceived in the work place. I think maybe it still could be different with a male who has dwarfism.

In terms of being a woman, the public relations field has been very welcoming, and a successful industry for women. As Participant Two states:

I think PR is one of the few industries where women tend to do okay. We're still not at the top—but we tend to do okay. I've really only ever had one situation where I worked with a real chauvinist. But other than that, I've been very fortunate, in terms of how I'm treated as a woman. I think that it's very easy for me to forget the privilege that comes with being a white woman. Because I know

that the experience for people with disabilities of color is much more difficult than mine. Like, I think that my stuff is hard, and I can't even begin to imagine what it is to be a person of color and disabled.

As public relations professionals, all identities bring our decisions to light.

Someone who does not have experience as being a person of color, should not be making the decisions for a campaign aimed at that audience. As public relations looks to diversify an already diverse public, it is imperative to include multiple views and experiences to the table.

*RQ2: How do disabled practitioners feel that the public relations industry can become more welcoming for disabled practitioners?*

Research Question 2 explored how disabled practitioners think the industry can improve, based on their experiences. The two themes that we will focus on in this section is “recruitment” and “disabled practitioner’s mindset.”

### *Recruitment*

Each participant was asked how they think the industry can do a better job of recruiting disabled practitioners during the interview. Based on each practitioner’s experiences, the feedback provided all linked to getting to future practitioner’s early. As Participant Three states:

I think making, just in general, for when people are being taught in schools about it, making it known that it's something that anyone can aspire to do. It doesn't matter where you are coming from or what your abilities are, especially now with the platform of the internet, there's really nothing that can stop anyone who is interested in the field.

To Participant Three's point, technology is making it easier for all industries to conduct business via the internet, and not face-to-face, as it had to be previously. As stated earlier by Participant Two, the public relations field isn't as physically intensive, in some regards, as it is mentally taxing, which is a great fit for disabled practitioners.

To continue the conversation of further recruiting disabled practitioners into the public relations industry, Participant One says we need to work on removing our biases.

I think we need to have in public relations and in every facet of corporate life, we need to put some money behind inclusion and diversity specialists and vice presidents of inclusion and diversity because it starts there. If inclusion and diversity is part of the fabric of an organization and you look at résumés, you block out the names, you can't tell if somebody's a minority based off of their name. Let's say they went to a historically black college or something like that. Stop looking at those cues and stop using cues of disability or race or whatever it is as a reason not to give somebody an opportunity.

In addition to removing biases, Participant One also states the importance of everyone being open to asking questions, understanding their difference, and being receptive to learning about differences and your personal misunderstandings/biases:

By having those conversations and by starting at the top and making it a priority in the hiring process, it's hire the best possible person. If a candidate comes in who's in a chair or who is an amputee or whatever the case is, don't freak out. Ask them what they ... Just simply say, 'What can I do to put you in a position to be successful for this interview?'

*Disabled Practitioner's Mindset*

This theme refers to a disabled person's perceptions of the disabled community in general. An interesting connection arose when speaking with Participant One and Participant Two, in regard to how the disabled community conducts public relations for themselves' in order to dispel myths, rumors and biases. Participant One put it:

In some ways PR just seems like a natural fit for me because my entire life is public relations. Right? Unless I trust you and unless you ask me a direct question, I'm never going to tell you what's hard.

In addition to masking what would be difficult as a disabled practitioner, Participant One also expands on this feeling of having to "prove yourself" in your job, more than your able-bodied peers.

There's always kind of awkward like feeling out period. Once you get a job, you know, you kind of have to prove ... Like everybody else, you kind of have to prove that you can do it... I don't know if this is right or wrong, but this is certainly now I've always felt.

Participant One's point goes back to biases and discrimination faced in the industry.

*RQ3: What opportunities and constraints do disabled practitioners feel exist in the PR industry for personal advancement and promotion?*

Research Question 3 focused on how disabled public relations practitioners can see the benefits, and the pitfalls, of the industry in order to advance in this field. Themes that emerged were "company asset" and "flexibility."

*A Unique Asset to a Company*

As discussed earlier, seeing yourself reflected publicly produces the perception of being included and belonging by authoritative figures in an industry. Participant Two nicely put it: "...[A]ny PR person, who we are, and our identities, impact the way we approach a campaign, or approach a client. It's why it's so important."

And continued further, Participant Two said:

I think the one thing that I've tried to stress upon, to at least my colleagues, is that folks with disabilities tend to have a different type of skill set. It's, like, we still have the same basic skills. But, in some ways, we're a larger asset to a company because problem-solving skills are such a priority when it comes to PR, every day. Every day of your life, if you have any type of disability, you're constantly problem-solving. And you're doing it without even thinking.

Problem solving, and public relations, go hand-in-hand, and as Participant Two states, disabled people are quick problem solvers in our everyday life, so it is a natural asset.

As Participant Two brought up the problem-solving aspect, it is also important to note that the public relations industry, while intense at times, is mostly a mentally intensive job, as Participant Two put it:

I think the industry should do a lot more to recruit people with disabilities. 'Cause it really is a perfect industry for folks with disabilities to show off what they can do because it is such a ... mostly ... mentally-intensive job. I mean, listen, I think it's every industry. I think every industry has a problem with recruiting disabled practitioners. It's just, really, we're the one minority that's never thought of, in anything.

In addition to problem-solving, disabled practitioners bring in their experiences, and background, in order to advocate for others that may not have their voice normally heard. As Participant Three claimed:

I felt that [PR] was a great opportunity to help the voiceless, help people who are afraid to help themselves ... I don't think every person with a difference needs to work in an advocacy type role, but I think we also need to have good people in advocacy type roles. I think it's important to have people who are willing to speak on behalf of more than just themselves. I've always been open to helping others and trying to understand their stories, and what they're going through, and how I can advocate in a more all-inclusive way than individualistic.

### *Flexibility*

As participants noted the increased skill of problem solving, the industry also has a reputation, among the participants in terms of flexibility, which can lead to a better environment, and development along the way.

Participant Two mentioned that due to her disability, she does require working from home. She praised the industry on being flexible on location by adding:

There are many professions, now, that are like it. It's the type of job where it's a little bit easier to work remotely if you need to. And I was in the classroom for a little while, and it was really hard for me to be in the classroom every day. I have some stomach issues that go along with the wheelchair, and I realized, 'Oh my god, I need a job where I can work from home, sometimes, when I need to.' And so, it didn't impact like, 'Oh, PR.' But that idea, 'Man, a job where I have the

opportunity to work remotely when I need to,' is something that I should probably consider.

Participant Three also had the same feedback when it came to the public relations industry and flexibility of working from any location necessary. "My job allows me to work remotely. A typical day is usually going to a coffee shop and working from the coffee shop, taking phone calls."

Through both of these examples, it is also important to note that technology will come into play for physically disabled practitioners, because of the advances it is making. For example, you can now Skype with anyone in the globe, and they would never know if you had a physical disability, if you are in the chair. This allows you to remove the veil of "looks" previously discussed.

## Chapter V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### *Discussion Summary*

The purpose of this study was to fill the gap in academic research on the experiences of physically disabled practitioners in public relations, and how the exclusion of this group—whether it is deliberate or unconscious—can negatively affect the industry. Although a lack of research on physically disabled practitioners suggests that the population is low, the lack of recruitment is very telling of how this is an issue in the public relations industry. This dearth of research and of possibly an underrepresentation of the group among public relations practitioners signals a significant diversity problem in the field. Throughout the findings of this study, there were implications, both in theory and practice of public relations. This section includes an in-depth discussion of these findings, along with implications, limitations of the study, and areas for future research.

#### *Diversity Should Lead to Creativity in Public Relations*

As mentioned previously, when it comes to diversity, Sha and Ford (2007) discussed the limited definition of diversity that public relations scholarship typically adopts, which is by paying most attention to racial and ethnic minorities. Despite the supreme importance racioethnic diversity is among practitioners, limiting definitions and practices of “diversity” to racioethnic identity is highly problematic in this field. Specifically, it excludes other identities that are not solely defined by race, and also opens the door for “whiteness” and “habitus” to be used as the main narrative in the industry. In regard to “Whiteness,” as Edwards discusses:

“whiteness” functions as a master narrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27) that silences multiple voices and perspectives, legitimizes dominant groups, and allocates social status to others in relation to these groups. It permeates social institutions, systems, and spaces such that white interests and norms are central, and the interests of other groups remain peripheral. (p. 207)

As Participant One emphasized going into a room or interview filled with white, good-looking males, it made him feel inferior. Participant One, who is also white, didn't fit all the criteria that “whiteness” requires as the “social norm” because of his physical limitations. This also falls into the category of discrimination that each participant experienced, in terms of pre-conceived assumptions of their abilities, and value to the industry.

Participant Two, who talked about public relations needing more of a mental capacity than physical to do the job, and how, as problem solvers in everyday life, we can think of creative solutions to problems, ties into an opinion blog from *The New York Times* about how disabled people are the original “lifehackers.” As it states:

...[O]ur unique experiences and insights enable us to use what's available to make things accessible. Yet, despite this history of creating elegant solutions for ourselves, our contributions are often overshadowed or misrepresented, favoring instead a story with a savior as its protagonist. (Jackson, 2018, para 10)

The disabled community has always had to think outside the box and has always had to stand up to “whiteness” in order to get their ideas heard. Touch screen technology on iPhones was created by someone with arthritis, but we only think of Steve Jobs when we think of that technology. So in public relations, “whiteness” is also adding another

layer in terms of disability. Each participant that I spoke to was white; yet, despite their “whiteness”, they continued to feel excluded. Thus, our field’s understanding of diversity should expand to (a) understandings that “whiteness” is not solely about color but also implicitly about ability, gender, and other identities as well, and (b) explicit expansions of the definition of diversity coupled with recognition of creative innovations that should be incorporated into workplace structure, culture, and policy.

Furthermore, Edwards (2010) argues that workforce “habitus” “combines with powerful discourses of merit to make it extremely difficult for minoritized public relations practitioners to voice their concerns or articulate their difference in a way that is perceived as productive rather than destructive” (Edwards, p. 210). This point of “habitus” resonates with Participant One’s feedback about disabled people having to work harder to fit in with their counterparts. As he recalled:

...[A]s a man in a wheelchair who's practicing PR and public affairs and all this stuff at a very high level, I feel like there's no margin for error. I feel like if I fail or if I don't meet my own expectations and just crush it, people are going to be like, ‘Well, why did we hire this guy?’ Whereas if an able-bodied employee gets hired, and they don't work out, nobody thinks about it.

This participant’s experience directly correlates with “habitus”, defined by Edwards (2010). For able-bodied practitioners, to “do” public relations, is to operate on their regular level, but for disabled practitioners, we have to operate, or feel we must, operate on a higher level to prove ourselves in even the smallest task. This subtle form of workplace discrimination in public relations puts increased pressure on the disabled practitioner, which most participants reported they felt they could not express at the

workplace. So again, inclusivity is so important to current disabled practitioners, and we're doing a disservice to the public relations community by not having them involved. We can help in problem-solving, and we also work hard to prove ourselves.

### *Workplace Discrimination*

Coupling the stress of hiding the “overworking” disabled practitioners feel they have to perform. Noonan et al.'s (2004) study of women with disabilities suggested salary discrimination as well: women with disabilities were earning less than their able-bodied counterparts, potentially because of prejudices, stigmatization, and stereotypes. Each of the participants interviewed for this study, at some time or another, faced this discrimination from co-workers or employers in the public relations field.

Noonan et al. also found that the anti-disability prejudices that they face, “for example...devaluation, invisibility...often [being stereotyped] as dependent, childlike, helpless and incompetent” (Noonan et al., 2004, p. 69) correlates with this study's data. Participant Three's experience of being told she wouldn't be interested in attending an event because she would be “trampled” played on these assumptions that she was unable to perform due to her dwarfism. This experience from Participant Three also leads into our next section of stereotypes and media's coverage of disability.

### *Feminist Theory of Disability*

Feminist Theory, along with the Feminist Theory of Disability, plays a huge role in this study. Feminist Theory, as defined by McCann and Kim (2017), examines “...relations of power that operate within all human relationships in which one group rules another” (p. 27). We can see within this study that the dominant group in the

industry is able-bodied, thereby “othering” disabled practitioners who are either interested, or currently in, the field.

Similarly, Feminist Theory of Disability “...takes adequate account of our differences” in this, “we will need to know how experiences of disability and the social oppression of the disabled interact with sexism, racism and class oppression” (Wendell, 1989, p. 105). Perhaps this is the definition of what public relations should be and model their industry after. Although the field has largely generated out of a strategic management model of organizational communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), it excludes the things that make its practitioners unique, including all the challenges and innovations each group of practitioner’s experiences and can bring to the table.

#### *Additional Implications*

As mentioned previously, there was an email correspondence I had when recruiting began for this study. “Bob” reached out, sharing his information about his public relations experience, his disability, and he asked for some clarification about the study. I provided this information and “Bob” ultimately turned me down, saying he did not want to group disabled people unfairly, and “make assumptions that weren’t there.” Although he declined, I think his response in declining was telling about the need for this research.

During our conversation, “Bob” said there are a lack of practitioners with physical disabilities, but by giving his perceptions, would be marginalizing those people. I disagree with “Bob” on this point. I think by not talking about differences, whether it be dis/ability, race, gender, etc., we as practitioners are doing a disservice to our publics

(Appendix D). How can we speak to our publics without understanding the issues they are facing? This, in my opinion, leads to tone-deaf campaigns, and statements.

In addition to “Bob’s” point about not wanting to marginalize or bring up unwanted stereotypes, I think Participant One stated it best when it comes to disability and employment. Participant One said:

I think you're trying your best as someone with a disability to put your limitations outside of your mind, but in a job situation you can't help it. It's going to come up. I think if you think about it too much as somebody with a disability applying for a job, if you think about all the stuff you can't do too much, you could paralyze yourself with fear. You just got to do it. You just got to get out and figure it out.

This observation by Participant One makes the point that as physically disabled practitioners, we cannot hide our difference or disability, unlike other groups (sexual orientation in particular) so we have to face it head on and address it.

### *Practical Implications*

This study also shows that by the lack of participants, this group is dramatically underrepresented in the field. To this point, the field doesn’t define groups that are “minority groups” and it is clear that PRSA excludes the disabled community from the PRSA diversity website (more on this below). This may affect younger generations and their perceptions of whether the field is open to them or not, either as a disabled people or someone who wants to work in an environment in which a diverse set of practitioners—including disabled practitioners—are welcome. To younger generations who place more value on body-positivity movements, a field that is slow to progress in this way may be socially and politically penalized.

Additionally, when communicating via email with practitioner “Bob,” who was also physically disabled, remarked that he is not responsible for speaking on behalf of all disabled people that are in the industry, for fear of over-simplifying and/or stereotyping all physically disabled practitioners. I think this statement is telling about public relations as a whole, because we are always working to define our publics, but there is always a hesitation to 1) bring our own identities to the table and 2) separating groups so much that we unintentionally pander or “other” them. I think this was displayed in “Bob’s” statement about not being involved because as a person representing the industry, who has a physical disability, you don’t want to be the stereotype that you are working against.

However, diversity needs to be discussed and brought to the table in all cases, or else the industry will fall behind when working with certain groups and fall into the “whiteness” and “habitus” of practitioners (discussed earlier).

#### *Limitations of the Study*

The biggest limitation is the low sample size for this study. As mentioned in the methods section, I reached out to more than 40 individuals and organizations, as well as expanded the sample audience to more than just amputees, but to wheelchair bound, dwarfism, and blind and deaf practitioners. I also was able to offer a \$30 gift card incentive later in the recruitment process, but I could not recruit any additional participants.

At the beginning of the thesis process, the assumption was that the participant pool would be small to begin with, because we were working on the assumption that there was a lack of disabled practitioners in the field. The lack of response from reaching

out proves that point. So while the original recruitment total was not reached, it's important to note that this is substantial evidence when adding to the argument that the industry is behind when recruiting this group as practitioners.

### *Future Research*

This study has great potential to be taken further in different areas of disability. While I only looked at the physical side, the most visible of disability, it would be interesting to see if a future study focusing on invisible disabilities, such as ADHD, migraine sufferers, auto-immune illness, etc. would yield a larger sample size as they are able to "hide" the disability.

Although this was a small sample, I still would like to further this study to try and find more participants and learn about other experiences. This may require another expansion of the definition of a physical disability, but I think that focusing heavily on a group that cannot conceal a disability, in such an industry that values looks, would be important to help the public relations industry when considering diversity. Even the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Diversity & Inclusion page defines their mission as:

The PRSA Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) Committee is committed to building consciousness by increasing visibility of D&I standards, resources and best practices for racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation and gender differences, as well as diverse skill sets, mindsets and cultures at all levels of the organization.

(PRSA.org)

This description completely overlooks the disabled community altogether, which tells me that the industry feels this is a non-issue. This is detrimental to the field because,

one in four Americans are disabled, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's 2018 study, and anyone, at any time, can become a member of this group.

### References

- Applebaum, L. (2009, December 23). *Multiculturalism, diversity and PRSA: Trying something new*. Retrieved March 19, 2018, from <http://prsay.prsa.org/index.php/2009/12/23/multiculturalism-diversity-and-prsa-trying-something-new/>.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power* (G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Trans.). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Carbado, D., & Gulati, M. (2003). The law and economics of critical race theory. *Yale Law Journal*, 112, 1757-1828.
- Disability impacts all of us. (2018, August 27), from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: Retrieved November 9, 2018, from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.
- Economic picture of the disability community project: Data sets [Table; Excel]. (2012) from United States Department of Labor website: Retrieved July 3, 2018, from <https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/DisabilityEmploymentStatistics.htm>.
- Edwards, L. (2007). "Race" in public relations. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (2nd ed., pp. 205-221). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Ellingson, L. L. (2017). *Embodiment in qualitative research*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fletcher, J. K., & Ely, R. J. (2003). Introducing gender. Reader in gender, work and organization, 3-9.

- Murray, C. D., & Forshaw, M. J. (n.d.). "Look and feel your best": Representations of artificial limb users in prosthetic company advertisements. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 36(2), 170-176. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09638288.2013.782365>.
- Gillborn, D. (2008). *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* New York, NY/US: Routledge.
- Grunig, J. E., Grunig, L. A., & Dozier, D. M. (2006). The excellence theory. In C. H. Botan & V. Hazleton (Eds.), *Public relations theory II* (pp. 19-54). New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, J. E. (Ed.). (1992). *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jackson, L. (2018, May 30). We are the original lifehackers. *The New York Times*, Opinion website: Retrieved November 9, 2018, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/opinion/disability-design-lifehacks.html>.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Bloomington, IN/US: Indiana University Press.
- Kroll, T., Barbour, R., & Harris, J. (2007). Using focus groups in disability research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(5), 690-698.
- Kvale, S. (2002). The social construction of validity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The qualitative inquiry reader* (pp. 299-325). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Layer, F. (2015, July 27). *PRCA encourages disabled people to join PR industry*. Retrieved July 18, 2016, from <https://www.prweek.com/article/1357744/prca-encourages-disabled-people-join-pr-industry>.
- Leininger, M. (1994). Evaluation criteria and critique of qualitative research studies. In J.

- M. Morse (Ed.), *Critical issues in qualitative research methods* (pp. 95-115). Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE.
- Len-Rios, M. E. (1998). Minority public relations practitioner perceptions. *Public Relations Review*, 24(4), 535-555.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods*. SAGE.
- Louvet, E. (2007). Social judgment toward job applicants with disabilities: Perception of personal qualities and competences. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 52, 297–303.
- Lynch, K. A. (2013). Survey reveals myths and misconceptions abundant among hiring managers about the capabilities of people who are visually impaired. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness (Online)*, 107(6), 408.
- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753-1760.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>.
- McCann, C. R., & Kim, S.-K. (Eds.). (2017). *Feminist theory reader* (4th ed.). New York, NY/US: Routledge.
- Mingus, M. (2011, August 22). Moving toward the ugly: A politic beyond desirability [Blog post]. Retrieved from Leaving Evidence website:  
<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/moving-toward-the-ugly-a-politic-beyond-desirability/>.
- Noonan, B. M., Gallor, S. M., Hensler-McGinnis, N. F., Fassinger, R. E., Wang, S., &

- Goodman, J. (2004). Challenge and success: A qualitative study of the career development of highly achieving women with physical and sensory disabilities. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 51*(1), 68-80.
- Painter, C. (2016). The complexity of disability. In M. E. Len-Rios & E. L. Perry (Eds.), *Cross-cultural journalism: Communicating strategically about diversity* (pp. 227-248). New York, NY/US: Routledge.
- Qualitative validity. (2006, October 20). Retrieved August 11, 2017, from <https://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php>.
- Ralph, S., & Boxall, K. (2005). Visible images of disabled students: an analysis of UK university publicity materials. *Teaching in Higher Education, 10*(3), 371-385.
- Scherbaum, C., Scherbaum, K.L., & Popovich, P.M. (2005). Predicting job-related expectancies and affective reactions to employees with disabilities from previous work experience. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 35*, 889–904.
- Sha, B.-L., & Ford, R. (2007). Redefining “requisite variety”: The challenge of multiple diversities for the future of public relations excellence. In E. L. Toth (Ed.), *The future of excellence in public relations and communication management: challenges for the next generation* (pp. 381–398). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Solórzano, D G., and Yosso. T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 8*, 23-44.
- Stewart, D. A., Law, M. C., Rosenbaum, P., & Willms, D. G. (2001). A qualitative study of the transition to adulthood for youth with physical disabilities. *Physical & Occupational Therapy in Pediatrics, 21*(4), 3-21.

Strauss, A. L. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. Cambridge University Press.

Tindall, N. T., & Waters, R. D. (2012). Coming out to tell our stories: Using queer theory to understand the career experiences of gay men in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 24*(5), 451-475.

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Vardeman-Winter, J., & Place, K. R. (2017). Still a lily-white field of women: The state of workforce diversity in public relations practice and research. *Public Relations Review, 43*(2), 326-336.

Vardeman-Winter, J., & Tindall, N. T. J. (2010). Toward an intersectionality theory of public relations. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (2nd ed., pp. 223-235). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Wendell, S. (1989). Toward a feminist theory of disability. *Hypatia, 4*(2), 104-124.

## Appendix A

**Interview Guide**

Thank you for taking time to talk with me today. I'm interviewing people who identify as public relations practitioners and as disabled. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions – I'm interested in hearing your perceptions of working in public relations as a disabled person. I will not ask you to include your name or the name of your organization or any other identifying factors. You may choose to not answer any of these questions or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

First I'd like to start by talking about how you got into your current public relations position.

- 1) Tell me about your current job.
  - a) *Probe:* Describe a typical day at your job.
  - b) *Probe:* In what ways do you consider yourself a public relations practitioner?
  - c) *Probe:* What do you like best about the public relations profession? Why?
  - d) *Probe:* What do you like least about the public relations profession? Why?
- 2) How would you describe the culture at your organization?
  - a) *Probe:* if you were to describe your organization in five words, what would they be?

Next, I'd like to talk specifically about your disability.

- 3) What is your physical disability?
- 4) In what ways has your disability been a challenge for you, personally?
- 5) In what ways has your disability been an opportunity for you, personally?

Next, I'd like to ask you some questions that reflect on some of your workplace experiences, particularly as you perceive others understand your disability.

- 6) Why did you want to get into the public relations field?
- 7) To what extent did you being a disabled person factor into your decision to enter the public relations workforce?
  - a) *Probe:* In what ways was it a factor?
- 8) In what ways do you feel the public relations industry, as a whole, is welcoming to disabled practitioners?
  - a) *Probe:* How have you experienced this, personally?
- 9) In what ways do you feel the public relations industry, as a whole, is limiting or negligent of disabled practitioners?
  - a) *Probe:* How have you experienced this, personally?
- 10) In your work environment, in what ways has your disability come up?
  - a) *Probe:* With co-workers?
  - b) *Probe:* With bosses/superiors?
  - c) *Probe:* With clients?
  - d) *Probe:* With other stakeholders, like media personnel?

- 11) What other identities of yours do you feel is or are important for you as a PR practitioner? (For example, gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, religion, or other identities)
- a) *Probe*: Do you feel this other identity interacts with your identity as a disabled practitioner?
  - b) [If yes] How so?

Now I'd like to ask you about the physical and hierarchical structures of your workplace and your role.

- 12) How much does your position require physical activity?
- 13) Do you think that the possibility of physical activity holds disabled candidates back from applying for PR positions?
- 14) Do you feel you have been excluded from tasks that required physical activity because of your disability?
- a) [If yes] What was that experience like for you?
  - b) [If no] What do you attribute that to?
- 15) Do you feel you have ever been passed over for a promotion or project because of your disability?

In this last section, I will ask you about your perceptions about some broader representations of disabled people, particularly in the media.

- 16) To what extent have you seen campaigns including or relating to disabled people?
- a) *Probe*: In what ways were they problematic?
  - b) *Probe*: In what ways were they empowering?
- 17) How do you feel the media represents disabled people?
- a) *Probe*: What role do you feel like public relations people have in these representations?

Finally, in what ways do you feel your organization, and/or the public relations industry could become more welcoming to disabled practitioners like yourself?

Those are all the questions I have for you today.

- 18) Is there anything you would like to add that I did not cover?

Thank you, again, for taking time to share your experiences with me!

## Appendix B

**RECRUITMENT PROMPTS/MATERIALS****Email Correspondence**

Greetings,

My name is Amanda Sebesta and I am a graduate student at the University of Houston Valenti College of Communications.

I am reaching out today to see if YOU/MEMBERS OF ORGANIZATION would be interested in participating in a study I am conducting for my thesis in order to graduate from the graduate program for public relations. The study focuses on the experiences of physically disabled practitioners in the public relations field.

I have reached out to YOU/YOUR ORGANIZATION in order to identify possible candidates for the research, including yourself. The criteria includes a public relations professional with about 1-2 years of experience, male or female, and someone who identifies as physically disabled. It would require no more than an hour and a half of their time for an in-person interview.

If YOU/MEMBERS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION would be interested in participating in this research, please share with your members, or pass along my information, to reach out to me to set up a scheduled interview time.

Thank you so much.

Amanda Sebesta

**Verbal Script (phone call)**

Hello!

My name is Amanda Sebesta and I am a graduate student at the University of Houston Valenti College of Communications. Do you have a few moments to speak? [IF NO, ASK FOR TIME TO CALL BACK]

I am reaching out today to see if YOU/MEMBERS OF ORGANIZATION would be interested in participating in a study I am conducting for my thesis in order to graduate from the graduate program for public relations. The study focuses on the experiences of physically disabled practitioners in the public relations field.

I have reached out to YOU/YOUR ORGANIZATION in order to identify possible candidates for the research, including yourself. The criteria includes a public relations professional with about 1-2 years of experience, male or female, and someone who

identifies as physically disabled. It would require no more than an hour and a half of their time for an in-person interview.

If YOU/MEMBERS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION would be interested in participating in this research, please share with your members, or pass along my information, to reach out to me to set up a scheduled interview time.

Thank you so much for your time and help.

### **Social Media Post(s)**

Facebook (To PRSA Houston Page):

THESIS RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED: If you a public relations practitioner with 1-2 years of experience or more, male or female and have a physical disability, please reach out to Amanda Sebesta at [asebesta@uh.edu](mailto:asebesta@uh.edu) to participate in an interview for a thesis study on the experiences of physically disabled practitioners in the public relations field.

IMAGE: Stock image (non-copyright) of person writing on a piece of paper.

## Appendix C

**List of Organizations and Individuals Contacted**

Amputee Coalition  
American Orthotic & Prosthetic Association  
PRSA Houston  
PRSA National  
Disability March (Facebook Group)  
Lucky Fin Project (Facebook Group)  
Shriners Children Hospital (Houston)  
Able-bodied Amputees of America  
Amy Rosetta  
Ottobock USA  
National Center on Disability and Journalism  
American Association of People with Disabilities  
National Disability Rights Network  
Boston University College of Communications  
UT Austin Stan Richards School of Advertising & PR  
Texas State University School of Journalism and Mass Comm.  
University of Florida College of Journalism and Comm.  
UNT Mayborn School of Journalism  
Kristen Parisi  
PR Daily  
Zach Baldwin – American Association of People with Disabilities  
The Mighty  
Shriners Children Hospital (Headquarters)  
Institute for Diversity and Empowerment (USC)  
Fred Cook (Director of USC Center for PR)  
Foundation Fighting Blindness  
Houston Council of the Blind  
National Federation of the Blind - Texas, Houston Chapter  
The Lighthouse Houston  
National Family Association for Deaf-Blind  
Houston Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities  
The Disability Equality Index  
International Network of Women with Disabilities  
Public Relations Foundation of Houston

## Appendix D

**Conversation Reflection**

So I had this back and forth email with a possible participant, who ultimately declined. They were a disabled public relations professional, who didn't want to speak to me based on the interview questions I sent him on the study. They felt they couldn't speak on behalf of all disabled practitioners, and no one needed to be their voice. They also felt that this study would also group disabled people unfairly and make assumptions that weren't there. Let me unpack this, because I was really disappointed to get such a short-sighted response, when others have been so welcoming to for this research.

When it comes to perceptions, and speaking on someone else's behalf, I don't think this public relations professional completely understood the study. Your experiences form your perceptions. Your experience is what I'm looking to share. In your words, not mine. I'm not quoting myself. Obviously, I'm not trying to marginalize any groups, but at the same time, they are already being marginalized if they aren't being included in the industry. This PR professional also thought that maybe it isn't the industry that's being exclusive, but there's no interest from disabled people to go into the industry. Well why is that? Is that because we aren't represented (which this person admitted we are under-represented) and clearly with no real role model to lead the way, or anything like that, why would anyone want to join the industry?

When it comes to their statement on grouping/clustering the disabled community unfairly, I think this is a coward's way out. As public relations professionals, we are always grouping and aligning our messaging with how different publics need to hear it, so saying that we're going to segment them even further is something that the industry is

probably being too cautious of. If we don't parse out groups that we clearly have an under-representation of, how can we work to include? As far as his comment on assumptions about the industry as a whole, I think this is a person, while disabled, who doesn't want to think that the industry wouldn't be welcoming. I don't either, but after my interaction with actual research participants, there is clearly a fundamental issue with the industry and including disabled practitioners. That's not just me pulling the idea out of thin air and saying, "let's make up a problem," I have people backing me up saying this is a problem.

When this professional reached out to me, I was so excited, because it was my first interaction, only to have my dreams dashed about getting a participant, and it made me doubt if the study was even worth doing, or if any other public relations professional would be willing to participate in the study, but I think this person was an outlier. Every other interaction has been fantastic, and if someone couldn't help, they would try and find me someone who could. It is clear to me that this study is needed and that the public relations field needs to wake up and get to work on including these disenfranchised groups.