

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE STUDENTS: USING A CRITICAL RACE
APPROACH TO EXPLORE DIVERSITY PEDAGOGY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

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

Kynetta Joseph Moore

December, 2012

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APPROACH TO EXPLORE DIVERSITY PEDAGOGY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Kynetta Moore, B.S.
Student

APPROVED:

Jennifer Vardeman-Winter, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Lan Ni, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Natalie Tindall, Ph.D.
Committee Member
Georgia State University
Department of Communication

John W. Roberts, Ph.D.
Dean, College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
Department of English

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Abstract

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Kynetta Joseph Moore, Master of Arts, 2012

Thesis directed by: Assistant Professor Jennifer Vardeman-Winter
Department of Communication

The purpose of this study was to explore African American female students' perceptions and experiences with diversity in their public relations education. Additionally, the purpose of this study was to gain insight from the experiences of future African American female practitioners preparing for public relations careers. To frame this study, the critical race theory (CRT) was explored to investigate to what extent diversity pedagogy (e.g., race, ethnicity, and culture) was included in students' training both inside and outside the classroom. The study used qualitative one-on-one, in-depth interviews with African American female public relations students. Findings suggest that students' perceive their experiences with diversity in public relations curriculum have not armed them to tackle demographic disparities in the workforce. Furthermore, students reported that diversity initiatives or acknowledgement outside the classroom (e.g., internships and industry-related organizations) were scarce. This study expanded diversity theory in public relation research by providing scholars guidance on how to improve diversity theory and research in public relations scholarship and programs that can be applied in the workforce to embrace diversity initiatives, training, and advancement. Practical implications include cues to action and suggested factors communicators can employ to improve diversity pedagogy in public relations training.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

With sincere gratitude, I would like to take the opportunity to thank several people who help make this thesis possible...

...first and foremost, to my advisor, **Dr. Jennifer Vardeman-Winter** I give my deepest admiration and respect for guiding me from the infancy of my thoughts to their maturity. Thank you for your unyielding constructive criticism; it has helped me become a more precise writer. Thank you for your detailed attention, availability, patience, direction, and being a model of what it means to be an academician and great person.

... my committee members, **Dr. Lan Ni** and **Dr. Natalie Tindall** , for your willingness to offer your time and expertise for this study. Your experience and accumulated knowledge helped me narrow the focus of my thesis to create a study that is both meaningful and contributing to public relations research. **Dr. Natalie Tindall**, thank you for your flexibility, especially because you are in a completely different state. This study is richer because of you. Thank you for providing purposeful and insightful suggestions on diversity and its pressing issues relevant to this study.

...no less deserving, my **Cougar peers, faculty, and staff**, thank you for offering support, encouragement, and advice throughout my thesis journey and coursework. I truly appreciate all the suggestions and comments I received to help me further develop my thesis focus.

...my **family**, thank you for listening to me rant about my frustrations and challenges, although many of you could not empathize with me, your sympathy was sincerely appreciated. Your kind words and support helped make this journey tolerable.

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To Gloria Mae Moore, my adoptive mother, for believing and seeing the potential in me before I could. Your love was always unconditional and your wisdom is greatly respected and cherished. I feel your presence even when you are gone.

Chapter I – Introduction

Context of Study

Diversity will not disappear (Strenksi, 1994); statistics confirm that the world we live in is suffused with human variations. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), by 2050 the Hispanic population of the United States will become 30 percent of the population and 62% of the country's children will come from a current minority background (e.g., Asian American, Hispanic, African American, Native American, and Pacific Islander/Alaskan Natives).

Moreover, the United States is modeled as the leading country of multicultural diversity and heterogeneous acceptance. For example, nearly 90 percent of *Fortune 500* companies have incorporated diversity initiatives to reflect the growing population of Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics, who make-up a total of 88.2 million people or 30 percent of the U.S. population, with a \$1.3 trillion in estimated combined spending power (Rudan, 2005). Consequently, there is a significant need for public relations education programs to focus more attention on diversity. As ethnic minorities become the majority, there is a growing need to recruit and train more practitioners from various cultural backgrounds as internal and external boundary-spanners for organizations (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001). In addition, there is an overall need for public relations curriculum and the industry to understand and strategize incorporating diversity initiatives that respond to the diverse demands of society.

Furthermore, diversity is critical to public relations practice. Public relations practitioners can and should play a pivotal role in helping organizations adjust to work force diversity. Because communicating with publics and understanding their needs are important factors of their jobs, competent public relations practitioners are able to develop diversity

programs that will create balance in the overall structure and culture of a company.

Conversely, it could be argued that human resources – as company employee interest and welfare are these professionals’ primary concern –should be at the forefront of workforce diversity. Human resources helps to hire the most qualified employees and diversify companies’ staffs. Additionally, human resources make sure that the overall fairness and benefits of each employee is equally distributed.

However, once the employees are hired, there is a need to build relationships and retain ethnic minorities. Therefore, because public relations practitioners interact with publics both internally and externally for a company, they are able to offer guidance regarding diversity inclusion. Public relations practitioners look at not just the general satisfaction of each employee but also realize that each individual’s needs, based on their cultural and ethnic differences, must be considered when enhancing workforce diversity. Thus, public relations practitioners should be on the forefront of diversity initiatives, including advising management, creating strategies to develop greater diversity, communicating with a culturally diverse work force, and fostering understanding among various worker groups (Fry, 1992). Moreover, Brunner (2008) explained that the need for diversity stems from three business necessities: (a) to attract, hire, and promote the best people; (b) to stimulate all employees to contribute their best ideas; and (c) to better understand and serve different markets and market segments. In other words, diversity is not just a cosmetic term; it is vital to an organization’s existence.

Still, diversity inclusion in higher education curriculum is new. For example, aside from the fact that the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) did not adopt or make it mandatory for diversity to be included

in accrediting standards until 2003, higher education institutions now must have diverse and inclusive communications programs (ACEJMC, 2004). According to a section under Standard 3-Diversity and Inclusiveness on their website, schools' curriculum must "foster understanding of issues and perspectives that are inclusive in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, including instruction in issues and perspectives in a range of diverse cultures in a global society in relation to mass communications" (ACEJMC, 2004).

Yet, even with the implemented and revised guidelines, diversity training is still an issue in educational programs. Banks (1995) decried:

...[it is difficult to] tell practitioners and educators how to get from here to there, when "here" represents a profession that demonstrates low recognition of diversity...a poor record of educating for diversity...and low employment of racial or ethnic minorities and other members of diverse populations. (p.115)

Many students are not learning the proper diversity etiquette required to have successful careers in public relations and interact accordingly with immediate colleagues. Diversity etiquette in this context means teaching students how to respect cultural differences, how to design effective cultural campaigns, and how to best communicate with an organization's internal and external diverse publics. Moreover, ethnic and racial diversity discussions should take place more often in the classroom among public relations students and instructors to address issues such as pigeonholing, stereotyping, marginalizing, and navigating power structures (Pompper, 2005b). Thus, "cultural awareness and sensitivity [should] be built into university curricula in which future public relations practitioners are educated" (Banks, 1995, p.117).

Several scholars pointed out the need to infuse diversity into college curriculum. According to Pompper (2005b) “connections between multicultural diversity, curriculum, and pedagogy in preparing public relations practitioners have received little scholarly attention” (p. 300). This is not to say that diversity is non-existent or disregarded in public relations; instead, scholars suggest that it lags behind in theory development, strategic growth, and use. However, this may be attributed to the hidden curriculum of White hegemony in multicultural education that, according to (Jay, 2003), hinders diversity education while simultaneously acculturating students to adopt, learn, and mimic the social, political, and economic beliefs and behaviors of the dominant group or Caucasian Americans.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore African American female students’ perceptions and experiences with diversity in their public relations education in order to learn whether it has prepared them to communicate across diverse cultural groups. As ethnic minorities become emerging majorities, it is imperative to recruit and train public relations practitioners who can see the world from multiple viewpoints and understand the importance of ethical, culturally sensitive communication to publics from various communities and language/cultural backgrounds. Thus, there was a need to explore African American female students’ stances and feelings toward public relations pedagogy, including course content, teaching methods, and academic discussions regarding diversity.

Additionally, as public relations is a feminized field (Cline et al., 1986), the purpose of this study was to gain insight from the experiences of future African American female practitioners preparing for public relations careers. Moreover, African American female

public relations students were studied because of the unique challenges encountered by African American female public relations practitioners. For example, of the few previous studies that have captured African American female practitioners' experiences, various themes have emerged describing common barriers of underrepresentation, discrimination, racism, lower pay, difficulty in job advancement to senior management, insecurities, few role models and mentors, stereotypes, and a lack of scholarship about their status, roles, perceptions, and experiences (Grunig et al., 2001; Hannon, 1998; Kern-Foxworth, 1990; Kern-Foxworth, Gandy, Hines, & Miller, 1994; Mallette, 1995; Pompper, 2004, 2005b; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b; Wise, 1993, 1997). Consequently, it is imperative to know whether the perceptions and experiences of African Americans – as well as other racial minorities – in public relations are being acknowledged and discussed.

African American female students were a valuable demographic for studying how diversity issues were addressed in public relations classrooms. Public relations education should include discussions of how students can be catalysts in their organizations. The experiences of African American female students were important to study to learn whether challenges that ethnic minorities cope with (i.e., stereotypes, pigeonholing, racism, and discrimination) as public relations practitioners were included in class discussions, readings, and assignments. In addition, African American female students' experiences with diversity outside the public relations classroom were worth exploring to learn whether their diversity training has prepared them to respond to a multicultural world and to learn about their practical experiences with diversity.

Moreover, African American female students are not the only group that requires scholarly attention in public relations. Other ethnicities and minority groups are

underrepresented in the field of public relations (i.e., African American men, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, LGBT people, and individuals with disabilities) and each requires additional research and future studies to understand and document their experiences within the diversity movement. However, due to diversity's vast spectrum, African American female students were the sole focus of this study.

Although several studies have addressed the participation of ethnic minorities within the field of public relations and have contributed significantly to the small body of research surrounding minority practitioners (Kern-Foxworth, 1989, 1990; Len-Rios, 1998; Verdugo, 1982; Yamashita, 1992; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993), no studies have observed or addressed the experiences of African American female public relations students. This study seeks to fill that gap. Gaining insight from such students will give scholars guidance on how to improve diversity theory and research in public relations scholarship and programs that can be applied in the workforce to embrace diversity initiatives, training, and advancement. Additionally, this study will help equip current and future generations of practitioners with management strategies in a rapidly changing world filled with cultural differences.

Theoretical Implications

To frame this study, the critical race theory (CRT) was explored. Classroom pedagogy and training directly affect students' abilities to succeed in the workforce. CRT states that "the classroom – where knowledge is constructed, organized, produced, and distributed – is the central site for the construction of social and racial power" (Roithmayr, 1999, p. 5). Using the CRT to frame this study will help scholars and professors further understand that "multi-racial/multi-ethnic classrooms enhance pedagogy and the opportunity

to achieve particular educational goals in ways that cannot be replicated by other means” (Marin, 2000, p. 70).

Ladson-Billings (1999) explained that “the ‘voice’ component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed, a first step in understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress” (p.16). The voice, as it is used in this context, refers to how ethnic and racial groups use their experiences as factual knowledge, and as a shared communal thread to speak about racial hegemony and the unbalanced social order embedded in American culture. I hope the findings will demonstrate, through interviewing students, the importance of teaching diversity and multicultural scholarship that considers cultural differences and racial experiences. By offering personal testaments and anecdotes from African American female students regarding their experiences both inside and outside the classroom, institutions of higher education can move their public relations curriculum and programs toward racial empowerment, emancipation of racial and ethnic mis/under-representations, and recognition that ethnic and racial minority stories are important to include in classroom discussions.

The grounded theory method was also used as a foundation for this study. Grounded theory “is a set of techniques for (1) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from text, and (2) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories” (Bernard, 2000, p. 443) to make general statements about the phenomenon being examined and the observations made from inductive coding. Through a constant comparative analysis of data collection, analysis, and theory, “new theories can be generated or existing theories can be elaborated through a process of modification as new observations are meticulously compared to the

explanations evolving out of perceived patterns from previous sets of observations” (Potter, 1996, p. 152).

Hence, because diversity in public relations curriculum and scholarship lacks breadth, grounded theory was used for this study as an intervention to allow new theories to emerge in which scholars, educators, and students may use to address diversity disparities in the field. Grounded theory, to my knowledge, has not been used to study the variables of CRT, diversity in public relations curriculum, and African American female public relations students. Thus, through grounded theory, I inductively made meaning of the experiences and perceptions of African American female public relations students and allow theory to be constructed that can be used to expand diversity theory in public relations scholarship.

Preview

This thesis presents a literature review about CRT, diversity in public relations curriculum, and African American female students in public relations. Based on the findings of the literature review, research questions and theory are presented to guide data collection and analysis. The method and procedures used for conducting this study are then addressed, including the data gathering method, the interview protocol, sampling strategies, participants, and strategies for data analysis. Results are then presented based on how the data helped answer the research questions, followed by a discussion of how the results connect with previous research findings, literature review, and theory. Finally, limitations of the study are considered, as well as areas for future research.

Chapter II – Literature Review

Literature Overview

Throughout this section, several areas of relevant literature were explored and used to inform this study and guide me in developing my research questions. First, I examined CRT and how it fits within the realms of public relations education. Studies that have examined the connection between CRT and public relations were reviewed for understanding how CRT fits into public relations scholarship, and how it is used to understand African American female students' experiences. Secondly, I examined diversity pedagogy within public relations curriculum. I explored how diversity should be used as an exploratory tool to prepare all public relations students for a public relations career, but instead is overshadowed by conventional curriculum structures or learning models of Whiteness. Finally, I examined literature about African American women's experience in public relations and as PR students.

Critical Race Theory

Roithmayr (1999) argued that the critical race theory (CRT) is an “exciting, revolutionary intellectual movement that [places] race at the center of critical analysis” (p. 1). CRT scholars study race and racism to unmask the disparities and inequalities that exist in society, policy, and educational practices. CRT inherits much of its scholarship and concepts from critical legal studies (CLS), which examines social power and law. Critical race theorists' deviated from CLS in order to broaden the scope of investigation into racial power and law. Ladson-Billings (1999) argued, “CLS scholars critiqued mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of U.S. society as a meritocracy but failed to include racism in its critique.

As a result, CRT became a logical outgrowth of this discontent of legal scholars of color” (p.12). CRT attempts to further the scope of and focus toward racial emancipation.

Critical race theory concepts. Building on concepts or themes outlined in legal studies, CRT employed similar tenets to understand and expand theory in education. According to Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), six main principles define the CRT movement. Although all concepts may be applied to public relations scholarship, three particular themes relate directly to this study. The six themes of CRT are:

...(a) recognition that racism is endemic to American life; (b) skepticism toward...claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy; (c) challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law; (d) centrality of the experiential knowledge of people of color; (e) critical race theory is interdisciplinary; (f) and works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

These themes of CRT were used in this study to expose diversity and multicultural disparities that exist in public relations pedagogy.

Three themes relate more directly to this study and will be further discussed in the following paragraphs.

Recognizes that racism is endemic. CRT asserts that race and racism fabricate American society and continue to be powerful social constructs in our culture. Since the beginning of United States history, race and power have created division and systematic privileging of the dominant group, White Americans, – especially in education. Thus, the

lack of diversity pedagogy in educational systems may be a direct reflection of the racial and social order of society, which privileges Whiteness.¹

Furthermore, race discourse is often controversial and difficult for many educators and scholars to address. However, CRT argues that to prepare all public relations students to improve equality among oppressed groups in society, these conversations must take place more often in the classroom. Kendall (2006) pointed out reasons diversity is rarely discussed:

One of the reasons that issues of diversity such as race, gender, and sexual orientation aren't discussed in the workplace, in classrooms, or at the dining table, for that matter, is fear that the conversation will "get out of hand" – that explosive questions will be asked, that people will be "disrespectful" of one another, and that people will leave angry and upset. (p. 134)

Yet, African American female public relations students are the ones directly affected by the lack of discussion and silencing of race and racism in the classroom.

As Howard-Hamilton (2003) discussed concerning ethnic diversity, when African American female students or students of color in general observe that their racial and ethnic identities or stories are excluded "within the institutional structure or classroom environment and all students seem to be treated from a 'one size fits all' frame of reference, there is a loss of individualism as well as gender and cultural constructs" (p. 20-21). CRT contends that to challenge the status quo and reconstruct public relations pedagogy to incorporate more learning tools for addressing 'difference', this entails deconstructing traditional educational practices and having discussions that may be uncomfortable. However, "until researchers

¹ Whiteness, according to Edwards (2010), is a system that defines and shapes life experiences for those who are White and those who are not. Whiteness functions as a master narrative that silences multiple voices and perspectives. It legitimizes dominant groups, and allocates social status, class, and power structures to others in relation to these groups.

[and public relations academia] discuss diversity and multiculturalism in terms of racism, ethnocentrism, the privileged status of White Europeans controlling the profession, and their responsibility for changes, there will be no real communication or discourse about change” (Aldoory, 2001, p. 124).

*Neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.*² The second CRT tenet that relates to this study is the notion of skepticism toward claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy in society and education regarding race. Critical race theorists’ argued that these Anglo-Eurocentric approaches to education are not realistic, as this is not the nature of the society in which we exist (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999). In other words, race does matter: ethnic minorities are judged by the color of their skin, and Whiteness dominates educational systems in America.

Critical race theorists contend that these concepts were developed and designed to systematically preserve and maintain Whiteness in education. For example, CRT scholars explained how colorblindness, in society and education, “ignores the racial construction of Whiteness and reinforces its privileged and oppressive position. Thus, Whiteness remains the normative standard and blackness remains different, other, and marginal” (Taylor, 1999, p. 185).

² There is a need to define these terms as they relate to this study and CRT. Neutrality and objectivity purports that we are all afforded the same opportunities without regard to race, and that there is a generic set of teaching skills that should work for all students. Colorblindness asserts that we should celebrate homogenization and sameness without looking at one’s race; race is not a factor because we are all equal. Meritocracy is defined as measuring one’s potential abilities by their traits and achievements without regard to race. CRT theorists argue that these traditional approaches do not benefit ethnic minorities and instead benefit the dominant group of Caucasian American. (Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999)

Additionally, Anglo-Eurocentric approaches to education still exist in public relations curriculum. Kern-Foxworth and Miller (1992) decried “the absence of information about multi-ethnic public relations practitioners in textbooks” (p. 21). Public relations curriculum has an obligation to reform its pedagogy to include more requisite variety – the idea that there must be as much diversity or variety internally as there is externally (Hon & Brunner, 2000) – in textbooks to combat traditional notions of neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, and colorblindness. Thus, interviewing African American female public relations students about their educational experiences strengthens our understanding of how diversity pedagogy is situated within public relations education to challenge these traditional approaches.

Centrality of experiential knowledge. The final CRT tenet that relates to this study is the recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color. Experiential knowledge provides a platform to discuss encounters of racism and discrimination that are frequently experienced by racial minority groups, but that often tend to be minimally discussed or resolved. Hence, experiences shared by students– according to Solorzano and Yosso (2002) – “can be used as a tool for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (p. 32). Thus, interviewing African American female public relations students about their experiences with diversity training inside and outside of the public relations classroom enhances our understanding of how prepared students feel to respond to diversity and multiculturalism in society, as well as their public relations careers.

Critical Race Theory and Pedagogy

Critical race theory in public relations education. CRT is important to the advancement of public relations scholarship. In relation to this study, CRT provides a framework for understanding how limited racial depictions and pedagogy, especially in

textbooks, produces limited world-views and expectations of ethnic minorities. Roithmayr (1999) discussed how to use CRT to address racial issues in education:

The use of critical race theory offers a way to understand how ostensibly race-neutral structures in education – knowledge, truth, merit, objectivity, and “good education” – are in fact ways of forming and policing the racial boundaries of White supremacy and racism...[thus] critical race theory can be used to “deconstruct” meaning of “educational achievement.” (p. 2-5)

Moreover, CRT offers a basis to address demographic disparities within higher education, transform and reform instruction, and provide integrated solutions that would benefit all students preparing for a career in the public relations industry.

However, although studies and understanding are limited, Pompper (2005a) introduced CRT as an ideal theory to study race, ethnicity, and culture in public relations. The purpose of her study was to explore a large sample of articles to discover how public relations journals addressed characteristics of CRT (race, ethnicity, and culture). Her findings revealed that of 859 articles, only 138 (15.8 %) included attention to CRT components, resulting in five themes of ‘difference’: study topic, thesis, or focus; methodology and epistemology; sample only; author’s philosophy approach or worldview; and public relations effectiveness antecedent or antidote. She also suggested pragmatic ways to incorporate CRT into public relations which included “embrac[ing] a think race, ethnicity, and culture mantra” (p. 157); connecting more with research participants by being cautious and accurate when disseminating stories shared by various ethnicities and cultural groups; triangulating methods and allowing participants to be more interactive in the data analysis process; and gaining insight and learning from international public relations students (Pompper, 2005a).

Moreover, students can benefit from the CRT approach, as it enhances understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and concerns of various groups.

Critical race studies and public relations students. No relevant studies have used the CRT to examine African American female students (or other women) and their experiences in public relations literature. Few studies have used CRT to study race, ethnicity, or culture in public relations. Consequently, the purpose of this study is designed to fill this gap.

Critical race theory in education literature. Although use of CRT is minimal in public relations scholarship, other disciplines (i.e., anthropology, history, political science, sociology, and education) (Pompper, 2005a), can serve as benchmarks for how to use the theory to study participants. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) used CRT to explore how racial microaggressions – subtle or overt insults (verbal/nonverbal) directed at people of color – influenced the racial climate in higher education. Findings revealed that African American students felt “invisible” within the classroom setting and felt their stories were either omitted, distorted, or stereotyped erroneously in course curriculum. Findings also revealed that students felt whether inside or outside the classroom, they had experienced racism, discrimination, and racial microaggressions in their lives. The study also found that negative racial climates lead to daily frustration, self-doubt, and isolation among African American students.

In summary, “by adopting more CRT-driven studies, public relations scholarship makes fewer assumptions about the realities of public relations from the perspectives outside the White, hegemonic worldview” (Vardeman, 2005, p. 18). Additionally, using a CRT perspective helps to understand the often marginalized and underprivileged positions of racial and ethnic minorities in public relations curriculum.

Diversity Pedagogy in Public Relations Curriculum

According to the National Education Center of Statistics (2010), there has been an increase in bachelors' degrees received in communication, journalism, and related programs from 55,760 in 2000 to 78,009 in 2009. Additionally, the percentage of American college students who are ethnic minorities has been increasing. In 1976, 15 percent were ethnic minorities, compared with 32 percent in 2007. Of the 78,009 communication degrees conferred in 2009, approximately 30,000 students were ethnic minorities (i.e., African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian/Alaska Native). More communication degrees are being awarded to students of color and more racial and ethnic students are making the decision to enter the communication and journalism field. Thus, it is essential that colleges and universities recognize the importance and value diversity has in educational instruction.

Definition of diversity. Due to the vagueness of the term and the broad scope it covers, there is a need to define diversity as it relates to this study. Hon and Brunner (2000) explained "diversity has become a catchall phrase for a complex set of issues" (p. 311) (i.e., racism, gender, multiculturalism, and discrimination). However, for this particular study, diversity is defined as racial, ethnic, and cultural differences that co-exist and intersect in society. According to Allen (1995), "race-ethnicity is salient because it usually is physically observable, its roots lie in affirmative action/equal employment opportunity programs, and it references the fastest rising groups to enter the workplace [and the educational system]" (p. 144). Thus, African American female public relations students' (and students in general) exposure to diversity enhances their personal, social, and moral growth, while preparing them for their own futures and the future of our society.

Yet one could argue that the vagueness and lack of focus of the term diversity in public relations education can be attributed to the hidden curriculum of White hegemony, which is argued to not focus on progressing the field but instead acculturating students to traditional Eurocentric teaching and learning systems.

Hidden curriculum. According to Horn (2003), hidden curriculum can be defined as a “broad category that includes all of the unrecognized and sometimes unintended knowledge, values, and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools and classrooms” (p. 298). It is the “unspoken set of rules” that teaches students what they can do based on who they are. Hidden curriculum may be found in various sources and disciplines; however, for the purposes of this study the hidden curriculum of White hegemony in diversity/multicultural education and the media will be the focus. Jay (2003) suggested that multicultural education aims to reform and transform education to reflect the pluralisms of society that are an immediate part of students’ lives; yet the hidden curriculum of White hegemony in multicultural education works to suppress transformative possibilities. Jay (2003) argued that educational institutions use hidden curriculum to argue for support of multicultural initiatives while also working to uphold their label of multicultural education as a “hegemonic device”, which maintains positions of power for the dominant group and keeps multicultural education stagnant. According to Aldoory (2001), multicultural education as a hegemonic device can also be considered institutional racism because it allows those in power, predominately White Americans, to “create invisible barriers between them and other groups, and silently define what is considered ‘normal’ or accepted” (p. 132).

Moreover, Horn (2003) explained that students and educators alike bring their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes acquired from the media into the classroom, in which the

subconsciously crafted hidden messages of the media affect their experiences in the classroom. Horn (2003) argued that the media -- through the representation of people and places -- has a hidden curriculum of societal order. Thus, to “understand the effects of the media-driven hidden curriculum necessitates an understanding of the media messages about power...identity...and efficacy” (Horn, 2003, p. 298-299) that are designed to uphold White privilege.

Consequently, schools, through their organization, structure, and curriculum (both formal and hidden), aid in the maintenance of hegemony by acculturating students to the interest of the dominant group and the students are encouraged and instructed, both explicitly and implicitly, to make those interests their own. (Jay, 2003, p. 7)

As a result, students such as African American females continue to receive an education non-reflective of racial and ethnic diversity, or the multiculturalism apparent in society.

Diversity in public relations curriculum. Multicultural and racial/ethnic diversity pedagogy is scarce in public relations curriculum. Although statistics show that the make-up of student populations in institutions of higher education is consistently diversifying, curriculum lags behind in diversity inclusion. Scholars and educators agree that public relations curriculum lacks depth and breadth. Tindall (2010) explained, “it is difficult to teach diversity in public relations because of the thin resources (journal articles, books, websites, and collected examples) available” (p. 1). Similarly, Bardhan (2003) found that public relations programs around the country are deficient when it comes to regularly offering courses or building perspectives that are international, global, multicultural, and intercultural. Likewise, Todd (2009) conducted a study to assess practitioners and educators’ perceptions of knowledge and skills public relations students should learn before entering

their professional careers. She found through a series of survey questions that “practitioners are not convinced that educators are teaching students the skills they need to effectively work in today’s industry, and practitioners signaled that PR curriculum is out of touch with industry practice” (p. 80). Nevertheless, this does not mean that educators are not teaching diversity, but instead that more emphasis should be placed on reforming diversity in public relations to reflect the realities of society.

Moreover, theories such as the excellence theory discuss diversity inclusion in public relations curriculum. Grunig (1992) outlined two characteristics of the excellence theory: sensitivity to culture and actual support of diversity. These characteristics emphasized the vital need to hire and promote both women and ethnic minorities in order for public relations to fully affect change in organizations. However, before an organization can improve diversity within its organization, sensitivity to culture and understanding of differences must be addressed in the classroom. The results would be students’ ability to take their knowledge of diversity and apply it in the workforce. Organizations need more public relations students that are able to help create and promote diversity initiatives in their companies. However, students of all races must learn to be agents of change, and this starts with diversity training in public relations curriculum. Consequently, “CRT in education is precisely that intervention that aims to halt racism by highlighting its pedagogical dimensions and affirming an equally pedagogical solution rooted in anti-racism” (Leonardo, 2009, p.4).

Additionally, inattention to diversity scholarship and curriculum, coupled with the lack of diversity discussions in public relations courses, influences how students learn, understand, and categorize difference.

Learning theory. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others (Bandura, 1977). Modeling is defined as doing what others do. Social learning theory has various types of modeling; however, symbolic modeling is most applicable to this study. Symbolic modeling is a person or character portrayed in a medium (i.e., textbooks) (Bandura, 1977). Learning theory argues that what students learn and observe about diversity in the classroom sets the tone for their modeled behavior, cognitive attitudes, and beliefs regarding social constructions of racial and ethnic minorities.

When learning is stagnated by curriculum that is structured by Whiteness, students' exposure and discussion about diversity is limited. Making the classroom a safe haven for learning is essential for overcoming uncomfortable and underrepresented discussions of race and ethnic differences. CRT would argue that the dominant group's instruction and teaching about diversity is the model of learning which students imitate to construct meaning of ethnic minorities. For example, African American female practitioners' experiences with inattention to diversity in the workforce could be attributed to their colleagues' modeling behaviors of diversity training in the classroom that were either nonexistent or minimally addressed.

Thus, to address the hidden curriculum and hegemonic agenda of Whiteness and acculturation evident in public relations curriculum, corrective measures or suggestions are offered in the following section.

Solutions to improve diversity pedagogy in public relations curriculum. Two common themes emerged from public relations and education literature that offered recommendations to improve diversity in public relations. First, several scholars have suggested improving the teaching materials, resources, and methods used to train students. For instance, Hon (1995)

suggested challenging patriarchal curriculum and classroom environments by generating scholarship that is reflective of racial and ethnic minorities' experiences. She stressed that this type of scholarship would benefit students by challenging the dominant discourse of Whiteness while acknowledging the unique experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. Pompper (2005b) suggested "courses in public relations theory, writing, and campaign development and evaluation all should integrate attention to multiculturalism, in addition to stand-alone multicultural courses...incorporating real case studies...[and] requiring readings other than traditional textbooks" (p. 309).

The second theme focused on how training and course materials are used to enhance understanding and students' skills. For example, Maruyama and Moreno (2000) described relevant skills that include: "perspective-taking, acceptance of differences, a willingness and capacity to find commonalities among differences, acceptance of conflict as normal, conflict resolution, participation in democracy, and interest in the wider social world" (p.10).

Likewise, educators and scholars can expand and improve student understandings and skills through more in-depth case studies and hands-on experience inside and outside the classroom. Several scholars have urged organizations and practitioners to forge partnerships with educational institutions to ensure a supply of adequately trained students (Gross, 1985; Fry, 1992). Offering students with essential skills and knowledge pertaining to diversity prepares them to practice the most ethical, logical, and practical steps in their professional careers. Hence, classrooms should be structured and conducted in a way that incorporates experimental and interactive teaching methods to enhance students' perceptions of racial and ethnic minority groups.

In addition to the recommendations provided above, diversity case studies that have been done in the field can also be used as a reference to understand and incorporate diversity into public relations curriculum.

Diversity case studies in public relations. Several studies have examined diversity in public relations curriculum. However, very few studies have examined racial minority students' perceptions of diversity training in public relations. No studies have used the critical race theory to study public relations curriculum and racial minority perceptions. Kern-Foxworth (1990) conducted the first study completed on ethnic representation in public relations textbooks. The study included 60 books ranging from 1979-1988. Kern-Foxworth found that of 21, 841 pages examined, 152 pages (0.7%) included ethnic representation in the textbooks. Hannon (1998) later conducted a comparative analysis on ethnic inclusion in public relations textbooks to see if there had been greater representation since the first study. The author examined 18 books totaling 8,071 pages that used terms positive, negative, and neutral for coding. The books ranged from 1991-1997. Of these, only 97 pages contained information about ethnic groups. Austin (2009) conducted a qualitative study to examine how gender and diversity had been framed over the past decade in modern public relations publications. She found that diversity was often set aside in its own special issues section or column and not integrated throughout the whole publication. She also found that disparities in public relations still exist among gender, racial, and ethnic groups.

Bardhan (2003) studied student perceptions of and experiences with international, multicultural, and intercultural pedagogy in their public relations education. She found that students felt their "public relations courses do not incorporate enough materials in this area, and that more assignments and projects enabling students to explore the international and

multicultural dimensions of the profession could effectively rouse interest” (p.167). Additionally, Pompper (2005b) examined African American female practitioners’ perceptions of multiculturalism in public relations curriculum and its effects on their experience in the workforce. She asserted that multiculturalism is scarce in public relations curriculum and higher education institutions in general. Moreover, she provided suggestions and recommendations to improve multiculturalism in public relations, such as hiring more faculty of color, selecting authors that devote more than one chapter to diversity, and recruiting students of color.

African American Females in Public Relations

The experiences of African American women are relevant to understanding the cultural, social, and economical struggles that consumes their lives. Yet few scholars and educators in various disciplines have specifically examined African American women experiences outside of studying racial minorities as a combined group (Tindall, 2009b). The study of African American women in public relations research is no exception. Grunig et al. (2001) discussed how public relations is a feminized field and feminist scholarship reflects scholarly material that focuses on gender and power in the field. However, although women are the majority in public relations, African American practitioners are underrepresented in all aspects of the industry, from educators to practitioners. Furthermore, African American female students in public relations have not received scholarly attention. This study is designed to fill that gap.

African American female public relations students. According to Becker et al. (2009), African Americans received 12.6 percent – the highest percentage – of the undergraduate journalism and mass communications degrees conferred to racial and ethnic

minorities in 2009, compared to 10.7 percent in 2008. Based on these figures, African American student numbers are steadily growing, which is one of the reasons I wanted to study their experiences in public relations. Originally, my plan was to explore the curriculum and career experiences of African American female public relations practitioners and how the lack of diversity training influences their abilities to be catalysts in their organizations.

However, after further investigation into this area of research, I found limitations that would prevent me from producing a rich and meaningful study. I realized that the inability to affect change is not a result of African American female public relations practitioners' lack of diversity education, but is instead a lack of their organizations' and colleagues' diversity training in their college courses or classrooms. Additionally, I realized that because the field of public relations is dominated by Caucasian women and management positions are dominated by Caucasian men (Grunig et al. 2001), African Americans' abilities to affect change are limited. The underrepresentation of African American females in management positions (Allen, 1995; Pompper, 2004), where decisions are made, restricts their abilities to advocate for diversity initiatives and organizational reform. Finally, I realized that it would be difficult (although not impossible) to find African American female public relations practitioners to interview that had received a degree in public relations or remembered their educational experiences, especially practitioners who may have been out of school for a while.

Thus, I decided to change the focus of this study to examine African American female public relations students and their experiences with diversity pedagogy in their public relations education. To my knowledge, very few studies have examined students in

public relations to learn about their experiences with diversity (Bardhan, 2003; Pompper, 2005b). However, Ervin (2001) conducted a study that explored how African American college students perceived diversity and multiculturalism in their courses. Ervin (2001) argued that an overwhelming majority of African American students felt diversity-oriented courses were important for all students' personal and professional development, but felt that these types of courses were racist and biased against African Americans. These students did not feel attention to diversity and multicultural issues in the classroom would improve race relations or non-African American attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward African Americans.

Furthermore, I chose African American female students because of the unique experiences African American female public relations practitioners encounter in the workforce, which I will briefly discuss in the next section. Moreover, I chose African American females instead of African American male students –although this group's experiences require additional research as well – because African American females outnumber African American males in degrees conferred in public relations or the communication field in general (Becker, Vlad, & Desnoes, 2009). Additionally, I chose to study African American female students' experiences over practitioners to explore how diversity pedagogy is incorporated in public relations classroom discourse to break barriers and challenge dominate structures of Whiteness. In order to understand the experiences of African American practitioners, I think it is necessary to explore the educational experiences of students where, according to the learning theory (Bandura, 1977), these attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are either confirmed or dismantled about racial and ethnic diversity.

African American female public relations practitioners. It is relevant to mention the presence of African American female practitioners because of the challenges this group has encountered in the public relations industry. Additionally, acknowledging their experiences creates a lens that scholars and educators can use to discuss and teach students about ethnic and cultural diversity. Historical accounts of African American contributors to public relations are very limited (Kern-Foxworth et al. 1994; Pompper, 2004). According to Pompper (2004) “a ‘handful of minorities’ joined the public relations field in the late 1940s, but it wasn’t until the civil rights era that ‘significant numbers’ pursued public relations careers” (p. 276). Kern-Foxworth (1989) examined status and roles of minority public relations practitioners and found that “minorities represented seven percent (10,990) of the 150,000 people in the public relations workforce” (p. 39). According to U.S. Labor of Statistics (2010), ethnic minorities comprise 14.4 % of the public relations manager or specialist positions. African American women make up 4.4 % of that percentage. Although racial minority figures have improved in public relations overall, one can argue that very little has changed for African American women in the public relations industry. Howard-Hamilton (2003) explained “stereotypes and inequities continue to exist and create formidable roadblocks for them [African American women] as they attempt to gain educational and economic parity in this society” (p. 20). Moreover, African American female public relations practitioners must battle with gender and ethnicity as factors and barriers to reaching senior management in the industry.

Management barriers. Traditionally, African American female practitioners have experienced barriers to senior management in public relations. African American women hold only 4.5% of management and public relations jobs, compared to White women (39%)

and White men (48.3%) (Pompper, 2004). More recently, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) showed that 60% of public relations managers are women and within that percentage 4.4% are African American, 4.8% Asian American, and 5.2% Hispanic American. Grunig et al. (2001) explained that “diversity in management is critically important to the careers of individual practitioners of color, as well as to the function of public relations itself...Organizations need boundary-spanning managers who reflect the heterogeneity of their environments” (p. 156). Yet several studies have demonstrated the opposite.

For example, Kern-Foxworth (1989) conducted one of the first studies examining experiences of ethnic minorities in public relations. She found that how participants perceived their roles differed significantly from actual performance. The findings revealed that 65 (34%) of participants perceived themselves in middle level/ problem solver roles and 57 (30%) perceived themselves in the professional roles. Yet, participants spent an average of 42% as technicians, 22% as expert prescribers, 23% as communications facilitators, and 16% of their time as problem-solvers. Additionally, the average salary of a non-minority, middle level manager/problem solver process facilitator was \$54, 320 compared to a minority practitioner in this same position or level salary of \$38, 337; a difference of \$15, 983.

In addition to management barriers, African American practitioners have endured barriers to working in the public relations industry because of their race and ethnicity.

Labor market discriminations. The majority of the studies examining ethnic minority practitioners have found that participants have been victims of labor market discriminations. Zerbinos and Clanton (1993) operationalized labor market discriminations

as “having been denied promotion, a salary increase, access to a client, access to a project, or a public relations position because of their race” (p. 85). For example, Len-Rios (1998) conducted the first in-depth interview study with racial minority participants and yield categories that involved the following: discrimination and prejudice which was often times subtle and not easily identifiable; racism; pigeonholing; tokenism; and stereotyping. Similar studies have found time and time again that compared to their White female counterparts, ethnic minority disparities included: race-based assigned task, limited access to client representations and projects, job functions and advancements, minorities being underrepresented and overlooked, underpaid, marginalized, racial and cultural insensitivity, lack of mentorship and role models, lack of diversity support in organizations, lack of minority faculty, and exclusion (Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Kern-Foxworth et al., 1994; Len-Rios, 1998; Mallette, 1995; Pompper, 2004, 2005b; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993).

Although the majority of the studies conducted on racial minorities in public relations have demonstrated barriers to success, some studies have shown the opposite. Kern-Foxworth et al. (1994) found that African American women in public relations perceived themselves as holding “meaningful roles within the profession and interface quite frequently with management”(p. 431). Tindall (2009a) and Tillerry-Larkin (1999) found that although participants experienced barriers based on gender and race, being pigeonholed was not one of those barriers. Few participants from these studies reported being hired or forced to communicate solely with African American or ethnic minority audiences.

Method design has entailed significant shortcomings to exploring African American female experiences in public relations. Pompper (2004) reported that “public relations

researchers tend to operationalize minorities as one homogenous group (multicultural), and findings may be limited by almost exclusive reliance on the survey method” (p. 275-276). Most studies that have examined racial minorities have used surveys to gather information (Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Kern-Foxworth et al., 1994; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993). Although a few scholars have (Malette, 1995; Pompper, 2005b; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b) studied African American females in public relations as separate variables using the qualitative method, other research designs should be used to investigate how their experiences may be different from other racial minorities.

Research Questions

This literature and theory review proposed that although public relations is a feminized field, African American female students' experiences are minimally discussed and represented in public relations scholarship and curriculum. Additionally, ethnic minorities are often combined as a homogenous group in public relations curriculum creating what Vaz (1993) critiqued as a "false universalism" (p. 95). Consequently, the results of not embracing a full integration of diversity pedagogy are misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and insensitivities toward differences of marginalized races, ethnicities, and cultures that carry over into the workforce. Thus, given the literature and theory on the CRT, diversity pedagogy in public relations, and African American female students in public relations, the following Research Questions were developed to guide the data collection and data analysis of this thesis study.

RQ1: What are African American female public relations students' perceptions of their public relations education in U.S. universities?

RQ2: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity in public relations curriculum?

RQ2a: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with race, ethnicity, and culture in public relations curriculum?

RQ3: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity outside of the public relations classroom?

RQ3a: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity in public relations industry organizations (i.e., PRSSA, PRSA, and IABC)?

RQ3b: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity in public relations industry internships?

RQ3c: To what extent do African American female public relations students believe their perceptions of public relations are influenced by media portrayals of ethnic minority public relations practitioners?

RQ4: What recommendations do African American female public relations students have for improving diversity in public relations curriculum?

Chapter III – Method

Overview of Method

As previously discussed in my literature review, ethnic minority studies in public relations suffer from methodological shortcomings. Additionally, of the few studies that have examined racial minority experiences, most have used surveys to gather and analyze data. To my knowledge, no studies have used the qualitative approach to study African American female students in public relations education. Thus, I chose to add to the small body of research on African American women in public relations by using the qualitative method to collect data for my thesis.

I chose to draw upon a critical race methodology grounded in the central tenets of CRT (Jay 2009), which will incorporate in-depth interviews. Jay (2009) argued:

...the value of conducting qualitative inquiry with a critical race lens, noting that the blending of theory and method enhances our ability to utilize lived experiences as a mechanism for directly challenging dominant notions of race and racism in the context of education [and society]. (p. 673)

Additionally, my epistemology – my way of knowing – represents the CRT perspective, which places race and ethnicity at the center of analysis and captures how it functions in society. I will discuss my methods and epistemology in further detail later in this section.

Qualitative Approach

According to Arnett (2007), “qualitative research is neither new nor methodologically set in stone. Scholars continue to expand the scope of what constitutes qualitative research in communication” (p. 30). Qualitative research “seeks to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other

formal transformations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18). Qualitative measures bring texture and depth to findings (Pommper, 2004). Brunner (2008) contended that “qualitative methods are the most useful and powerful when they are used to discover participants’ worlds...Such imagery is personal and involved and does not attempt to fit participants’ experience into predetermined categories” (p. 158). The aim and function of qualitative inquiry is to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Thus, “this humanistic, interpretive approach is also called ‘thick descriptive’ because of the richness and detail to the discussion” (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara 2007, p.23).

According to Bouma and Atkinson (1995), “quantitative research is structural, logical, measured, and wide. Qualitative research is more intuitive, subjective, and deep” (p.208). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) believed:

The process is cyclical in its basic movement; that is, most qualitative studies cycle many times through the same steps (e.g., with researchers doing scouting, data collection, data review and/or analysis, and interpretation, then doing them all over again). The process goes on until the researcher “gets it right” – until an insightful interpretation has been achieved. (p. 66-67)

Additionally, scholars agree that qualitative research is both interpretive and naturalistic:

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) defined qualitative research, as "multimethod" in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them. (p. 2)

Hence, qualitative studies are considered to be interpretive and descriptive studies in which participants and settings are not manipulated by the researcher (Savenye & Robinson, 2005), but instead allowed the freedom to create their own personal meanings and tell their stories.

Critical Race Epistemology

According to Gormley (2005), epistemology “addresses the philosophical problems surrounding the theory of knowledge. It answers many questions concerning what knowledge is, how it is obtained, and what makes it knowledge” (p. 97). Thus, I deem it relevant for me to share my epistemology that drives this research as well as this project. My experiences have shaped my decision to research and study African American female students using a CRT approach. My epistemology explains what I hope to accomplish through this research, which is to provide a platform that allows African American women the opportunity to voice their experiences with racial and ethnic oppression, inattention, and underrepresentation.

Personal interest in this study. I am an African American female public relations graduate student. I consider my critical race epistemology – my way of knowing – closely related to my experiences as an ethnic minority student and practitioner in public relations. In the two years that I have attended graduate school, no courses have been offered that solely focused on diversity and multiculturalism in public relations. Additionally, of the numerous public relations courses that I took (including undergraduate leveling courses), few discussions centered on ethnic diversity or culture. Consequently, I developed a desire to explore and research the lack of diversity in public relations curriculum. As I wrote research papers in my public relations courses, I became more interested in learning about the perceptions of ethnic minorities regarding their experiences with diversity as students and as

practitioners. Because of my curiosity, this study was developed to provide ethnic minorities with the opportunity to share their stories and experiences.

Furthermore, my experiences as an intern for several corporate public relations firms drew my interest to this research. I was often the only African American female working in public relations departments and sometimes the only racial minority. Often, Caucasian women dominated the public relations departments or firms. Although not all the time, in some instances, I experienced racism and discrimination. It was often covert and subtle, and co-workers never openly expressed it. It was a feeling that was difficult to identify but often felt through conversations, assignments, and day-to-day interactions. However, I did not share my experiences with anyone until I decided to conduct this study because I was trying to understand if what I thought and felt I was experiencing was the reality of the situation.

Additionally, many of the companies' infrastructures were traditional. For example, management consisted of mostly Caucasian men. Although Caucasian women were in management positions as well, there was a lack of ethnic diversity, and little attention was centered on diversity initiatives. My experiences both inside and outside the classroom demonstrate that demographic disparities exist in organizations and in public relations curricula that uphold structures and ideologies of the dominant group, Caucasian Americans.

Critical race epistemology. Critical race epistemology is an appropriate fit for this research because of its direct connection to CRT tenets. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) noted the fundamental nature of the voice, the "assertion and acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experience of people of color as sources of knowledge" (p. 10). Yet these lived experiences will vary based on each person's individual story.

Furthermore, CRT, critical race epistemology, and critical race methodology are interrelated and intertwined. Each places race at the center of analysis and aims to unmask inequalities that exist in all aspects of society and education. CRT argues that participants' stories, their experiential knowledge, are counted as empirical evidence. Critical race epistemology – the way a researcher may come to know reality – is understood by asking participants to voice and share their stories and experiences. Critical race methodology brings the research process together by using race and racism as the overarching approach and framework for this area of research. It is an alternative approach to traditional methodologies that have been used to capture the voices and shared experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. Critical race methods are slightly different from these because it involves using experiential knowledge (e.g., discussions, archives, and personal testimonies) as a method to study participants. Additionally, outside of experiential knowledge, there are not specific methods that categorize CRT; instead what is being studied (i.e., ethnic minorities) determines the label as a CRT method.

Critical Race Methodology

Because issues of race and ethnicity are important in this study, a methodological approach capable of capturing how race functions was imperative (Jay, 2009). Critical race methodology has a less defined methodological standard than traditional research methods because it is a fairly new alternative to studying the experiences of people of color. Yet, Jay (2009) suggested that drawing on experiences of African American students as valid data using a critical race approach facilitates exposure of daily racism and discriminations experienced due to their race and ethnicity. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) reported:

...critical race methodology [is] a theoretically grounded approach to research that: (a) foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process. [Likewise, it] (b) challenges the traditional research paradigms to explain ...the experiences of [people] of color; (c) offers a liberator or transformative solution to racial, gender and class subordination; and (d) focuses on the radicalized, gendered and classed experiences of [people] of color. (p. 25)

Moreover, Howard-Hamilton (2003) expressed that critical race methodology “attempts to foreground race and racism in the research as well as challenge the traditional paradigms, methods, texts, and separate discourse on race, gender, and class” (p. 23), thus challenging stories of the dominant group. Consequently, as African American female students’ voices were important elements in this study, critical race methodology captures their experiences and aids in data analysis.

Critical race methods for current study. I recruited African American female public relations undergraduate students, who attend the University of Houston, and were juniors, seniors, or recent graduates. Using in-depth interviews and experiential knowledge, I included CRT concepts in my discussion with participants to gather data detailing their perceptions of diversity in public relations curriculum. Additionally, students were asked about their experiences with diversity outside of the classroom (i.e., industry organizations, media, and internships).

In-Depth Interviewing

Based on the open-ended nature of this study’s research questions, qualitative interviewing techniques were used. Hon and Brunner (2000) explained that the “goal of qualitative interviewing is an in-depth and open-ended narrative that does not attempt to fit

participants' experiences into predetermined categories" (p. 315). Thus, perceptions of diversity in public relations curriculum were best revealed using methods that according to Allen (1995), "maximize the depth and quality of input from participants by obtaining their own accounts of their subjective experiences" (p. 151). Additionally, Hon (1995) suggested that "deep probing allows the investigator to discover the analytical categories and assumptions according to which respondents construe their world" (p. 40).

Moreover, this study employed a semi-structured interviewing method. Generally, semi- or unstructured, open-ended, informal interviewing is preferred to allow for more flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes for both the interviewer and respondent (Jackson et al., 2007). Hon and Brunner (2000) explained that interviews encourage participants to express themselves more freely.

Sample

Recruitment. I used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to gather participants for this study. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) explained that snowball sampling "yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest" (p. 141). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) claimed, "these chains of referral create an expanding pool of respondents – a "snowball" growing larger over time" (p. 124). Moreover, most qualitative studies on ethnic minorities in public relations have used snowballing (Brunner, 2008; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Pompper, 2004, 2005b; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b), which could be largely attributed to the underrepresentation and scarcity of racial minorities in the field of public relations.

Purposive sampling is a sample selected in a deliberative fashion that targets a particular group of people that are known to possess certain characteristic under investigation

(Reinard, 1994). For example, professors from courses that I have taken, who may also teach undergraduate students, were asked for names of students that would be interested in participating in this study and meet the study requirements. Likewise, once I began to interview participants, I asked them for possible names of students who could be interested in participating in this study. Additionally, a solicitation email was sent to industry student organizations (i.e., Public Relations Student Society of America and International Association of Business Communicators) to recruit participants. I emailed the solicitation letter to communication professors to share with their students. In addition, I posted the announcement on relevant public relations and communication bulletins around campus.

Upon compiling contact information, participants were contacted via telephone or e-mail to invite them to participate in this study. I then informed them of the objective and nature of this study, as well as its procedures. The recruitment script can be found in Appendix B. After discussing the study and ensuring confidentiality of responses, participants that agreed to an interview were met at a setting or location of their choice on the University of Houston's campus. Additionally, before interviewing participants, informed consent and approval were required; this included an overview of the study, participants' rights, and my contact information. Although incentives for participating were not offered due to lack of funding, personalized thank you cards were sent to each participant along with an offer of access to the final draft of this study. Also, professors offered extra credit as an incentive for students' participation.

Participants. My original intent was to interview a total of 20 students for this study. However, a total of 11 students were interviewed for this study because I reached saturation at this point. Kvale (1996) reasoned that researchers should interview as many participants as

needed to reach a point of theoretical saturation. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) noted that when using purposeful sampling “research is carried out according to criteria of selection that flow logically from the objectives of the project” (p. 122-123). Thus for the purpose of this study, which was framed using CRT, all participants were African American female undergraduate students. I chose upper-level undergraduate students who were juniors, seniors, and recent graduates because of their accumulated knowledge over the course of their public relations education. Students at this level normally have taken the core public relations courses that would include diversity discourse and should still be able to share and recall those experiences. All students participated in one-on-one, face-to-face, in-depth interviews.

All participants identified as African American female public relations students. The students’ ages ranged between 22 and 26 years old. Of the 11 students interviewed for this study, three students transferred their sophomore year. Five participants had recently graduated from the University of Houston (within a two-year period), five students were seniors, and one student was a junior. The majority –10 – of the students majored in public relations and graduated with a public relations degree. Each participant was a declared public relations major as this was the focus of the study. However, one student was a media production major. Although she was not a public relations major, she took mostly public relations courses and she currently works as a public relations practitioner. Thus, because she met the majority of the requirements, I decided to include her as a participant for this study. Each student had attended the University of Houston throughout their entire education (i.e., started as a freshman or sophomore). This was required to ensure students’ abilities to share accumulated knowledge over a three to four year period. Each student must have taken and completed the required public relations course, Principles in Public Relations. Students were

required to take this course because as a core class, it should discuss diversity in public relations. Finally, interviews were conducted until ‘theoretical saturation’ was reached. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated that this occurs once the “researcher reaches a point of diminished conceptual returns; that is, new data feed fewer, if any, new features into categories or explanations” (p. 224). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002) “new incidents add little new value to the concepts [and]...this is as far as the analyst can go in ‘explaining’ the data” (p. 222). Thus, as I began to observe patterns in the data that produced redundant responses, my work in the field had reached its maximum potential, and it was time to start the next phase of data analyses and interpretation.

Interview Procedure

Pilot Test. Before conducting interviews with study participants, I pre-tested my interview questions on two individuals with similar backgrounds and qualities of my participants. I read the questions aloud and asked them to provide brief responses. The purpose of this pre-test was to evaluate the flow of each question and whether they needed to be reorganized or reworded. Through the pilot test, I was able to identify flaws and errors in my interview guide and correct them before conducting interviews, thus increasing the validity of my study. I amended the guide based on the pre-test participants’ suggestions about questions that sounded confusing or redundant. I also changed the order of the questions and grouped them based on topic similarities and concept variables.

Each interview began with rapport building. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested “because the parties usually meet each other as strangers, researchers must do whatever they can to put the participants at ease” (p. 188). In order to pave the way for a meaningful interview I engaged in “interviewer self-disclosure” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p.190) by

telling participants about my personal interest in this study and a little about my personal and professional experience in public relations. Additionally, racial matching added to the ease of conversation. Jarrett (1993) suggested, “moderator-respondent racial matching usually enhances rapport and increases the willingness of participants to respond” (as cited in Pompper, 2005b, p. 304). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explained:

...a researcher’s identities create the basis for affiliating with others who share those attributes. This potential often encourages researchers to consider studying groups and topics that are familiar: women should study women’s issues, African American researchers should study scenes populated by African Americans, and so on. Such pairing can smooth entry, promote empathy, and enhance the quality of data. (p. 142)

Identifying as an African American female who shares the same cultural and ethnic experiences encourages and creates “participant self-discourse” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 190).

However, before rapport was established, I informed participants about the study and their rights. Participants were then asked for permission to audio tape the interview. I informed participants that the information provided during the interview would remain anonymous and that pseudonyms would be used. The participants were asked to sign an informed consent form that was approved by the University of Houston’s Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and informed that their participation was voluntary.

Interview protocol. An in-depth interview guide was created and used for the interviews. The use of an interview guide was implemented to ensure attention to research questions:

Interview guides simply consist of groupings of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants...Questions can be rephrased, broken up into smaller question units, or altered in other ways in order to achieve the goals set out by the researcher. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 195)

I broke down the interview guide based on my three bodies of literature: CRT, diversity in public relations curriculum, and African American female students in public relations. I used the CRT to develop questions about how race and ethnicity are positioned in public relations curriculum and how race affects the experiences of African American female students. I used diversity in public relations curriculum to design questions about students' experiences preparing them for professional careers in public relation.

I began the interviews with "grand tour questions" that lead to more specific questions. For example, participants were asked to share how they became exposed to the field and why they chose to major in public relations. Questions were open-ended to "keep conversations focused, yet flexible enough to give participants the opportunity to self-report in as much depth as desired" (Pompper, 2005b, p. 305). Although all participants were asked the same questions from the interview guide, the order varied based on the conversation styles of participants. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix A.

My original interview guide was revised several times due to the discovery that several questions were confusing (i.e., wording), redundant, or not garnering much of a response among students. Several of the changes to the interview protocol were a result of findings from students' experiences and perceptions of diversity. For instance, initially interview questions asked students about discussion of multiculturalism, ethnicity, and race in their courses as separate questions. During interviews, I noticed students could not

distinguish the difference in the terms and thus responses were given accordingly. Students also felt that I was asking the question redundantly. I combined these questions into one question, which resulted in a more accurate response.

All in-depth interviews took place in person, face-to-face, and one-on-one. Interviews took place on campus at a location of each participant's choosing (i.e., library or an empty classroom). Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour and were audio taped. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested that audio recording "enables researchers to capture the interview more or less exactly as it was spoken...it can [also] free up investigators to participate more fully in the interview" (p. 187). After each interview, I wrote in a journal to keep track of findings and assessments in addition to feelings and observations:

Keeping a journal can be a highly practical project: it can help to manage a rising tide of data by recording field site visits, names of persons met and persons interviewed, and so on. It can also provide a means of reflecting about procedural problems and their solutions. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 167)

After each interview, I wrote down observations and key findings that I needed to explore more closely or questions that needed improvement. I kept a journal to organize the increasing amount of data that this study produced. I wrote about interesting comments during the interviews, demographics and personal information for students, nonverbal cues that the tape recorder was unable to capture, and themes that emerge across all interviews. Journal entries were examined throughout the study to improve questions and observations for later interviews. This allowed me to measure the validity of my data because I was constantly checking and comparing what I experienced in the field.

Data Analysis

After each interview, tapes were labeled with a name, date, and topic to avoid later confusion. The unit of analysis was African American female students' experiences in their own words, which was "analyzed as data according to collective, rhetorical themes, and patterns" (Pompper, 2005b, p. 305). Additionally, each audio recording was reviewed and transcribed verbatim immediately following interviews in order to begin coding data. I manually transcribed all data.

I began coding data during the interview phase to avoid data build up and to generate or establish categories from the data that were grounded in the literature review. During the interview phase, I used open-coding procedures to find emerging themes. This part of analysis is described as grounded theory. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explained that "some categories have their origins in the concepts and research literature that were brought into the project" (p. 218-219). Strauss & Corbin (1994) pointed out that grounded theory is "theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection" (p. 273).

After I began to use the open-coding procedure and multiple themes began emerging, I used the constant comparative method (a tool of grounded theory) to reduce data to strategic and meaningful categories and to help keep coding under control. This approach allowed for constant "comparing [of] each incident to other incidents in order to decide in which categories they belong. Thus, when considering any new incident, the analyst compares it with incidents that have already been coded into categories" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). Hence, the result of constant comparisons were initial codes from the data that produced a long list of emergent categories that were used to level out data into more

theoretical and focused categories. Once I transcribed and coded all the interviews, I transferred the themes to a word document for further analysis and condensing. Because there was a significant amount of themes, I grouped the themes based on variables and concepts informed by the literature review in addition to connections to research questions. I combined themes based on similarities and relationships. Additionally, in the “inductive spirit of qualitative research, much of the coding is devoted to generating categories from the researcher’s own lived experience” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 219). This method of construction differs from deduction, where a researcher begins with general principals and then constructs an argument showing evidence that supports those general principles (Potter, 1996).

I moved to the integration and dimensionalization phase of grounded theory in which focused coding and categorization were reshaped for deeper meaning (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Any common themes and categories that emerge from coding were integrated and condensed. The process of integration “changes the nature of categories from mere collections of incidents into theoretical constructs” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 222). After my coding scheme was refined to include more focused categories, I returned to the transcripts looking for themes or patterns and coded the text that provided the evidence for each theme (Tindall, 2009b). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggested that “when we do a dimensional analysis, we examine each construct – again by constant reference to the incidents that make up the construct – and try to tease out the key variations (dimensions)” (p. 222). When no new categories appeared, I ended data collection (Savenye & Robinson, 2005).

Validity. To measure validity and accuracy of data interpretation, I used member validation. Member validation means “taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). After drawing my conclusions and when my report was near completion, I checked with participants to make sure my interpretations and explanations of the data were in accord with what was shared during the interviews. Additionally, because member validation can be done throughout the process of collecting data, I asked three participants during the analysis phase of the study to check or assess my analysis for adjustments and corrections that needed to be made. The students were selected based on their data being highly representative of my results section, in addition to their being most likely to provide feedback about the accuracy of my findings. All three students agreed that the findings appeared to be an accurate interpretation of their experiences and perceptions concerning diversity pedagogy in public relations. Thus, adjustments and corrections – after member validation – were not needed.

Chapter IV – Results

Summary of Participants

Eleven students were interviewed for this study. All students identified as African American females. Students' ages ranged between 22 and 26 years old. All students interviewed attended the University of Houston for the bulk of their education; however, three students transferred to the school their sophomore year. All interviews took place in person on the University of Houston's campus, at a location of the student's choice (i.e., library). At the time of this study, five participants had recently graduated from the University of Houston (within a two-year period), five students were seniors, and one student was a junior. A majority of the students majored in public relations and graduated with a public relations degree. However, one student, Amy³, was a media production major. Amy stated that due to the lack of courses in her major, she took mostly public relations courses, and she currently works as a public relations practitioner. Thus, because she met the majority of the criteria, I decided to include her as a participant for this study.

Summary of Results

Overall, the students' perceptions and experiences with diversity both inside and outside the classroom were consistent across all interviews for this study. Students reported their experiences and feelings toward public relations pedagogy including course content, teaching methods, and academic discussions regarding diversity. The data I collected provides a closer analysis of the current state of diversity pedagogy in the public relations sector. The findings will also discuss some of the complexities and barriers of racial identity that African American students rarely disclose but often encounter and experience on a daily

³ Participants were given pseudonyms in order to protect their anonymity.

basis. In the following section, I will discuss these findings in detail. I will also discuss additional findings regarding students' practical experience with diversity and how it has prepared them to respond to a multicultural world. Students' interest in learning about diversity and some of the suggestions that they offered to improve the current educational state and training tactics in public relations programs will be discussed. In analyzing the data, I found that the categories were closely related to the literature review, confirming most of the previous studies' findings in this line of research. Through the *voice* component of the critical race theory, several themes emerged from students' stories such as *racial negligence*, *diversity disparities stagnated*, *deconstructing Whiteness*, *hidden curriculum of hegemony of the media*, *bigotry*, and *endemic issues of marginalization*. The results are organized according to themes that answer the Research Questions.

RQ1: What are African American female public relations students' perceptions of their public relations education in U.S. universities?

After analyzing the data, findings consistently illustrated that students felt their public relations education did not provide them with sufficient skills and knowledge to enter the workforce as public relations practitioners. The findings in this section may be a direct reflection of students' experiences with diversity both inside and outside the public relations classroom. It appears that the lack of diversity training in public relations curriculum and the industry contributed to students perceiving their education to be deficient regarding being prepared to enter the workforce. The results of this section highlight many of the issues that tend to consume the daily educational experiences of students, but remain unresolved. To provide a better understanding of students' perceptions of their education, this section will address students' concerns with *ambiguities*, *lack of student aid*, and *racial negligence*.

Ambiguities

Overall, students felt that their public relations education was decent regarding structure, resources, and design. However, students mainly felt that their public relations education left them with many uncertainties on what having a public relations degree means. For example, Lisa, a recent graduate, felt her public relations education or training left her unfulfilled: “Let me just say, after I graduated, I had a degree in public relations and I was sitting thinking to myself...what is public relations?” Rebecca, a recent graduate, explained that although she liked her professors, public relations course topics, and discussions, she felt depth of training –including training surrounding diversity – (i.e., group activities, practical or hands-on projects, or guest speakers) would have increased her knowledge or understanding of public relations and some expectations for the workforce: “I think it’s a pretty good program. I don’t really think that it goes in as much depth as it needs to really prepare you.” Ashley, a senior, also felt that the University of Houston had a good program but felt it could be better through adding more practical training reflective of the public relations industry.

Additionally, when I asked students what diversity in public relations education meant to them, the definitions varied. By a large majority, students defined diversity in public relations based on what they thought it should or could possibly mean. In many of the discussions, I perceived a significant lack of understanding or misunderstanding of diversity’s place in public relations. For example, Yahara, a senior, thought that diversity in public relations education possibly meant, “being able to put your hands in different projects, like no matter the field I guess? I can do PR work for a hospital or a sports company.” I noticed that when students defined diversity in public relations education, the definition

given was based on prior or general knowledge of diversity – dictionary or pre-college definition – instead of a definition that was conceptualized from what they learned in their public relations courses about diversity. The following section details how some of the ambiguities students have are created from a generalized curriculum that is expected to be ubiquitous to all students.

Vagueness of public relations training. Connected to students' ambiguities of their public relations education was the term generalization. During almost every interview, students used the term *general* to describe what they were taught about racial and ethnic diversity and even public relations. Students thought that their public relations curriculum was taught from a poorly- defined viewpoint. For instance, during interviews, several students discussed how their overall public relations training lacked depth and was instead very superficial in its structure:

Lisa: It's just, public relations in itself to me, the way that it was taught to me, is so much fluff. Like it's so much grey area. Anybody, truthfully anybody can do it, like you don't have to have any certain kind of background. Like, you don't even have to have a degree in public relations, never have taken a class in public relations.

Kenya: I wouldn't say they went into like deep detail. But it was very critical...in all my PR⁴ courses, that you do target and know who your key publics are. They didn't really go into deep detail.

Nia: Straight across the board. They don't give anything specific to one person. I think it's being taught by the book way. It's nothing innovative, just the same way, general.

⁴ It is worth noting that instead of using the actual words *public relations* students often used its abbreviation, *PR*, to discuss their experiences and perceptions throughout this study.

Concurrently, students' perceptions of generalization in public relations programs included the vagueness of diversity pedagogy in public relations education and training. Most of the students talked about how if any discussion of diversity took place, it did not involve in-depth or specific details about any particular ethnic or cultural group. Discourse was still very general. Interestingly, many students expressed concern that what they were being taught about public relations overall was not "fitting" to their needs but instead the dominant group's needs or Caucasian Americans. Students perceived public relations was taught from a White perspective with minimal attention placed on other ethnic and cultural experiences or perspectives. In other words, students felt that the public relations curriculum failed to accurately or meaningfully discuss them according to the cultural nuances of their group:

Amy: I feel like a lot of the classes were generalized. They weren't based to me. I'm not saying they were only based to White people but it wasn't specified, it was general.

Ella: I think the lesson plans are pretty general. Like getting in to corporate is very general, the general public...When I say the general public I mean [*mouths "White" in silence for me to read her lips because surrounded by several students, some White*] people.

Moreover, one student felt that discussion of diversity lacked specific measurable tactics or strategies to target ethnic groups. The student recalled that classroom discussions briefly mentioned not to forget ethnic communities but not necessarily how students should do this:

Donna: If any time you ever discuss multiculturalism or different ethnicities or race, it was to the main point of if you want to do your job well you can't leave out this demographic cause this demographic can fill [or] pump into whatever company

you're working for. More like don't forget about this...not like this is what you're most likely to get out of this community or this is what you're most likely to get out of this race, it wasn't really broken down at all, still very general.

Cynthia, a senior, shared that she felt students are on their own to really figure out what public relations means. She also expressed concern that this aspect of the program, among others, needs to be improved.

Lack of Student Aid

The majority of the students expressed that their overall perception of their public relations education developed from the lack of assistance to students throughout their college experience. Students explained that although there are resources throughout the university available to assist them as needed, the public relations program – staff, advisors, and mentors – could have been more active in helping students prepare for their future careers as public relations practitioners. Overall, students' experiences resulted in two main themes: *learning* and *guidance and mentorship*.

Learning. Students reported that what they learned about the field or how they learned about the field before making the decision to major in public relations was of their own research. Students noted that they would have liked to receive more advice and support from their faculty and staff on choosing a career path. During interviews, several students discussed how they sought advice from peers, researched the topic themselves via the Internet, Jack J. Valenti School of Communications, or some students even mentioned turning to the media for understanding of the field. For example, Lisa, a recent graduate explained how she learned about the field:

My boyfriend at the time was majoring in PR and so he told me about it. Because I was like well I really don't know. I mean I really came to college not knowing what I wanted to do. But he was very adamant about...I don't think you should do that. He was like 'cause you know I'm too far in now' and he was like... 'don't really like it.' Similarly, several students talked about how they used the Internet to learn and read more about public relations:

Ella: So what I did was I just would go online and...Google public relations jobs and then when things started to pop up and I saw all of these things I could do, I was like okay, this is kind of cool.

Amy: I read up on it actually, what they do and what they stand for. I was just kind of like yeah that's what I want to do.

Nia: Internet was the major resource, going online...and talking to other students about it...what their views were ...and getting research from the school of communication itself.

Interestingly, several students reported using the media to learn about public relations prior to any formal training or knowledge of what public relations entailed. Rebecca, a recent graduate, for example, discussed thinking public relations was based on portrayals in the media: "There was this TV show, *I Want To Work For Diddy*. I thought that was like PR, where you have to be his assistant and like help him with everyday task... shaping his brand." Yahara, a senior, mentioned learning about the field in high school and deciding then, public relations was something she wanted to do. She was the only student:

Well, when I was in high school I was kind of deciding between that and broadcast journalism...I kind of worked on our public relations committee so I was part of that

and broadcast journalism. So I knew it was something inevitable that was going to happen...I didn't want to be limited to just one area, with public relations, you can do many things.

Guidance and mentorship. A major theme that emerged from the data was students' perceptions that advice was rarely offered. Many students explained that because public relations is such a broad profession, often times they did not seek advice because they did not know what type of questions to ask. Dating back to high school, students talked about the lack of guidance from counselors about the field of public relations. When I asked students if they had any prior knowledge of public relations in high school, students consistently answered no:

Lisa: High school I had no clue what public relations was.

Ella: No, not at all. I thought of PR as publicity.

Amy: No, I didn't. I don't even think I knew anything about the profession.

Concurrently, when students reached college, they perceived little change in academic guidance or professional development in their public relations program, or the School of Communication in general. Several students reported that their advisors were not very helpful:

Yahara: For one, it's hard to get a meeting with an advisor because it's always booked. It's really hard for communications students. There's only three advisors for the whole school...Once you do get the appointment, they help a little bit. They kind of guide you on what classes you may need to take...But as far as directing me in which field I should enter, no, I didn't get that.

Nia: I went and talked to some advisors here at Valenti and they were not very helpful...I never went to an advisor and they helped me pick out a class or tell me which courses to take. They always just gave me a packet and said follow the curriculum. So, I had to go on *Rate My Professor.com*, stuff like that to find out.

Mentorship developed as a major theme from the data. Students felt that their overall educational experiences could have been better had there been mentors available to seek information about the industry and give advice about career options. Students talked about shared identities and the lack of role models or African American mentors in public relations to ask for advice and guidance. Students explained that having mentors would have aided them in figuring out the best career route and sector of public relations they would fit. However, with the lack of mentors many students felt they had to find their own way:

Rebecca: Black women don't have very many role models or people to look to. Like that's just not something that's happening.

Cynthia: It would be different to learn from like you know, a Black or Hispanic person.

Nia: I feel like we need a mentor that can really give us real life experiences.

Yahara: I don't think they push that out there. I feel like they should do more about trying to get the student involved...We want to be tier one status but we're not putting in the footwork...We do have a career center but it's like they're always in their office. I need you to get out of your office, come to the students, push, and give us guidance.

Racial Negligence

There appeared to be a trend of students perceiving that their public relations education neglected racial and ethnic differences, overall. Students discussed feeling how their education was taught from a predominately White perspective with minimal acknowledgment of the various cultural backgrounds that co-exist in society. The data also showed that instead of embracing diversity, the structure, and style of teaching students about public relations was very conventional and more conforming to a “one size fits all” design. Students’ comments in this area can be categorized via two distinct trends: *visibility* and *acculturation*.

Visibility. Moreover, students reported noticing the often marginalized and underrepresented position of ethnic minorities inside and outside of the public relations classroom. When I asked students what percentage of their public relations courses they felt discussed diversity – ethnicity, race, and culture – the consensus view was less than 10 percent.

Perceptions were consistent when students were asked to talk about the racial and ethnic make-up of students in their courses. Overall most students felt that their classroom make-up included predominately White female students with minimal visibility of ethnic minorities:

Rebecca: It was majority female of course, maybe one or two guys and sometimes none at all. Most of the time it was White girls, you know, Caucasians. I didn’t see many Black people. I didn’t really see a lot of people like me. Maybe it was trickled, like maybe three or four Black people in the class.

Similarly, Ella, a senior, talked about the ethnic make-up in her courses:

Majority White, 85% was White, after that would be – and some of them depend – ...maybe 13% Blacks and then 2% Spanish, or it'd be 13% Spanish and like 2% Black. We had a couple of Asians but most of the Asians...they just kind of kept to themselves.

However, there were a couple of exceptions. Two students in particular felt their classrooms were racially mixed: “it was actually pretty mixed. I mean we had...Whites or Caucasians. There were quite a few Asians, Hispanics. I mean actually it was pretty mixed” and, “it was diverse. It was White, Black, we had Asians, we had everything. I mean I don't really think it was one more than the other.”

Acculturation. Connected to students' thinking that the discussion of public relations was very generalized, students believed the public relations curriculum was taught from a predominately White perspective, including course content, instructors, discussion, and teaching methods. When students were asked to what extent they felt that the public relations curriculum was taught from a predominately White perspective, many students responded more than 80 percent of the curriculum, while several others responded 100 percent.

With the exception of a couple of students, the majority of participants agreed that based on their training both inside and outside the classroom, they are not prepared to improve diversity initiatives in the workforce:

Lisa: I feel like I'm prepared to deal with White people in the workforce. But as far as diversity in the workforce, no.

Amy: Oh no, no.

Cynthia: No. I'm going to be totally honest...it's not something that was taught at all.

To this point, there were a couple of students that answered yes to the question of being prepared. However, after further discussion and analysis of those students' responses, it appears their responses were based more on their competencies versus the training received in the classroom:

Kenya: I think that it wouldn't be because of my training it would be because of the person that I am and my own personal skills.

Rebecca: Yes, because I have a lot to offer. If someone offers me a position... I'm going to do what's needed to be done and I'm able to do what I need to do.

Lastly, several students felt they had fallen victim to racism and discrimination in their educational experience either directly or indirectly. Students recalled experiences of racism on campus, in the classroom, and off campus in society. Although I will not go into much depth in this section about some of those experiences – they will be addressed in a later section – it is worth noting that the majority of the participants agreed racism still exists but in a different, subtle, and institutionalized form. For example, Nia, a junior, explained, “I never felt like I had any racial issues inside the classroom. I just feel that race wasn't discussed. And I mean it is 2011 and I really do feel like racism still exists.” On a similar note, Kenya, a recent graduate, said, “Inside of the classroom, I don't think that I was really discriminated against. I mean I did see some discrimination. I think that there was some favoritism.”

RQ2: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity in public relations curriculum?

According to students, their experiences with diversity in public relations curriculum have not armed them to tackle demographic disparities in the workforce. Students reported

that minimal effort and awareness has been placed on increasing diversity pedagogy in public relations education. Furthermore, students explained that the teaching methods instructors used to supplement lectures were rarely used to discuss diversity topics, especially those of culture, race, and ethnicity. Students' responses resulted in three major components that best describe their experiences and perceptions of diversity in public relations curricula: *minimal acknowledgment of difference, challenging conventional platforms, and empowering through shared identities.*

Minimal Acknowledgement of 'Difference'

The sub-question asked, *what have been African American female public relations students' experiences with race, ethnicity, and culture in public relations curriculum?* As mentioned earlier, students perceived that topics of race, ethnicity, and culture were neglected and excluded from their public relations education. For example, this was apparent when I asked students to define diversity on a general basis and then again as it relates to public relations education. Students defined diversity in public relations based on assumptions of what it could mean due to lack of adequate information and discussion surrounding the term. However, I did notice a pattern of students using the term *different* in both definitions for diversity. Across all interviews, students' use of different varied according to what they thought the word diversity meant in both instances:

Lisa: Maybe different teachers. You might have an older teacher who's seasoned and then a more younger teacher who is into the more new PR trends like social media and stuff like that.

Amy: Diversity to me just means a mixture of different things or just differences.

Michelle: Well I guess learning about PR from different perspectives? I mean that's what I would think of, like in different ways.

One student, Donna, a recent graduate, gave definitions of diversity that would be ideal according to the literature but are not the reality in public relations education:

Diversity? Demographics, ethnicities. Basically demographics. So I pretty much picture races, backgrounds, different states, countries...Diversity for me, what it should mean is well rounded...Diverse as in like you have a little bit of everything. Even though we're pursuing the same goal, we should be able to reach a higher limit, be able to enhance in different ways. We can take from what this person knows, from what that person knows, from this background, how to appeal to this background, different things like that. That's what I think it should mean.

To further explain students' classroom experiences two main themes emerged: *diversity disparities stagnated* and *use of teaching methods*.

Diversity disparities stagnated. Students' responses seem to demonstrate that traditional Eurocentric⁵ structures in public relations curriculum continues to stagnate discussion of diversity in public relations education. More specifically, students agreed that public relations curriculum favors White culture and has a conformist structure in place instead of incorporating a curriculum that acknowledges cultural pluralism. All students appeared to agree that of the five primary courses offered in the public relations program, none were offered that solely focused on diversity in public relations. Of the courses offered, students talked about how diversity topics were scarce. For example, when I asked students

⁵ Eurocentric in this context refers to the notion that European culture or Caucasians are the standard of all things in American culture such as education and societal order. It implicitly regards European culture as preeminent and neglects attention to the racial and ethnic realities of the world or the need to improve cultural and racial conditions.

what they learned about different races, cultures, and ethnicities, the majority of the students perceived not much:

Cynthia: No diversity. Nothing was ever about ethnicity, race...we never talked about that.

Lisa: I really don't remember us talking about race and ethnicity...ever. Not one time.

Ella: Honestly, in my classes we haven't really talked about a lot of racial or ethnic topics.

Yahara: I don't think we ever just really touch on it at all. It's mostly, this is the lecture, this is how it is, it's not really discussing race.

More specifically, when I asked students what they recalled learning about the experiences of African Americans and other ethnic minority public relations practitioners in the field, students replied they learned more about other areas of diversity – homosexuality and gender – than that of race and ethnicity:

Kenya: I would say that in the courses, we have talked about diversity in certain aspects but we haven't really focused on racial diversity. We talked about homosexuality. We talked more about gender...but I wouldn't say we went into depth about race.

Students also noted that when ethnic minorities were discussed it was normally as a group and rarely separately. In other words, ethnic or racial minorities were not discussed based on their unique differences, needs, and culture but instead grouped homogeneously.

The results found that when instructors discussed diversity, students perceived it was unrelated to the class topic or not beneficial to changing the diversity parameters in public relations education. For example, Lisa, a recent graduate, talked about how a discussion took

place in class about African Americans; but after the discussion was over, nothing had been resolved. Neither was a reason for the discussion given:

We talked about how low income people...don't vote because they don't have access to TV or radio to learn, or they might not have a car so they don't go vote. But then, they don't have access to a TV or radio to learn that there are shuttles that take you to go vote....like the conversation somehow lead to this.

A recent graduate, Nia, talked about a discussion that somehow shifted from talking about Hurricane Katrina to the stereotype that African Americans do not know how to swim.

Interestingly, students explained that if diversity discussions went beyond general information (i.e., diversity is important, various publics require different messages) it took place in non-public relations courses. Lisa, a recent graduate, reported learning about race and ethnicity in her communications law and ethics course. Kenya said she learned about diversity in her global business courses:

Honestly it was not my PR classes that taught me about it. My minor was global business and it was really those courses that really taught me about diversity. Because they teach you about global citizenship and it talks about learning different cultures and different norms in order to work together because we are a globalized world.

Similarly, Yahara, a senior, reported learning about diversity in her advertising course:

It was one particular brand of beer that relates mostly to the Hispanic race and I think they were telling us how they market to that specific group... I also learned about working in various different countries, how to approach working with them... Like how to write a business letter, connecting with those different countries, how to respond to them, and how to make them feel welcome.

During the interviews, students discussed noticing the underprivileged and underrepresented position of ethnic minorities in public relations curriculum. Students talked about some of the discouraging information they learned about ethnic minorities that they still remember. For instance, Michelle, a senior, talked about the visibility of African American public relations practitioners:

It seems like it would be a little bit challenging for me being a Black female to do as well because one of the things that I've learned in my classes is that there are not a lot of Black PR practitioners...in...executive positions...That's one of the few things that I remember about ethnicity that stuck out to me. I was like really, wow? Okay. But then that's when I started to notice, well, most of my classmates are White or Hispanic. So it feels like it may be a little bit more challenging but it's not impossible.

Another student, Ashley, a senior, explained that after observing her overall educational experiences and working as an intern in public relations, true success as an ethnic minority comes from becoming an entrepreneur. She explained that barriers still exist in corporate America for ethnic minorities and that it will be difficult to break them, although not impossible.

Several students mentioned debates and controversy avoidance as reasons diversity was minimally discussed in their courses. Students explained it appeared to them that it would be easier for instructors to not address such topics. Students also gave examples of some of the ways the conversations would get out of control:

Donna: If we touched on it, it would get in a debate... either Blacks would get offended or some of the Whites [would] be like, "well why do y'all get offended. Like slavery happen ages ago, just drop it."

Amy: I think people are kind of scared to put their hands in it. They don't want to cause controversy. Any political aspect involving race, whether it's in the class. They don't want to put their hands in it because they don't want to draw attention or negative feedback... They just don't want the backlash from it.

However, when asked about why it was important to discuss diversity, Yahara said, "It is important because not everybody knows. You can say that we're all in PR but it's a different walk for everyone."

Use of teaching methods. Students stated that teaching methods were used to teach them about public relations. However, students explained that the activities or methods (i.e., guest speakers, textbooks, cases studies, group projects) used as supplements in their courses were not effective in helping them learn about diversity.

When I asked students how helpful textbooks were in teaching them about diversity, students said not much. Rebecca, a recent graduate, explained, "No. And a lot of the books that we read were written by the professor, like written by our professors that were teaching the course. So it wasn't geared toward us." Similarly, students discussed other methods such as guest speakers and how there was a lack of ethnic minorities invited to share their experiences:

Yahara: I really didn't have guest speakers. Everything was mostly by the book. No case studies, maybe the issue management class that I'm in now. But every other class is mostly lecture.

Michelle: About their experiences in the classes? I haven't had anyone talk about their experiences, no.

Ashley: Honestly, it was more like if I got that experience I got it through trade organizations like PRSSA⁶ and IABC⁷.

Cynthia: I had several classes where we had speakers and I can honestly say I don't remember any Black people.

Additionally, a couple of students recalled having more guest speakers in their non-public relations courses than in their public relations courses. This finding demonstrates that students perceive that diversity learning takes place outside the communications program more often through other areas of study (i.e., global business courses).

Challenging Conventional Platforms

Although the bulk of the findings showed that diversity is scarce in public relations curriculum, students talked about some of the ways the curriculum has worked to combat conventional platforms currently in place. Furthermore, students addressed how instructors' proactive efforts contributed to transforming traditional educational designs. The following sections detail students' views through two major variables: *racial and cultural sensitivities* and *instructor influence*.

Racial and cultural sensitivities. Several examples were given by students of how the curriculum has slowly help break barriers in public relations curriculum to demonstrate signs of inclusion. Students described some of the topics covered in their courses:

Ella: I'm trying to think back. Because I know in principles, we learned about like how PR is having more Hispanic females and more gay men involved in PR.

Michelle: It seems like, from what I've learned in Principles, there are a lot more Hispanics, especially because there's a lot more Spanish speaking people that want

⁶ Public Relations Society of America (PRSSA)

⁷ International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)

bi-lingual people to reach that market. As far as Asians, I don't remember really learning much about them.

Ashley: I can honestly say it was only discussed one time in Principles in PR dealing with the demographics of how common women are in PR versus men and how many White women are in it versus minority women and the status of that... But it was just a mention.

However, students noted that these were not regular discussions included in the lesson plan or in the syllabus readings. The conversation often just surfaced somehow during class discussions.

Instructor influence. Students referenced instructors as playing a huge role in the discussion of diversity in public relations classrooms. Students explained that instructors have the ability to pique student interest or deter it. When I asked students, what engaged their interest or decision to like a class, the instructor was given as the number one response. Students explained that when the instructor was proactive and interactive, students' interests were piqued and they were more likely to participate in class discussions. Yahara, a senior, explained what made her like a particular instructor's course:

Well (1) the professor...If you have that support there, that's most important. Like I'm immediately drawn to you. Also, (2) the environment and the way she teaches ...she's very engaging, she's very detailed...and then she asks for your feedback. I learn from giving her feedback and she tells me what direction I need to go to make it better.

The findings show that students felt more comfortable asking questions or discussing diversity topics based on the professor's decision to create a thread of communication

explicitly addressing the topic. Students noted instructors' abilities to influence how receptive students are to learning about diversity based on how diversity is presented, explored, and discussed in courses. To this point, Bardhan's (2003) study demonstrated students sharing similar views. She found that "a majority of the respondents felt that the educator's role is that of an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide who, through affective teaching, is able to open up the world of opportunities to public relations students" (p. 170). Thus, the more inviting, interactive, and engaging professors are concerning diversity issues, the more open students would be to such dialogue—including Caucasian students.

Empowering Through Shared Identities

Although students reported feeling their stories were scarcely visible in public relations curriculum, they stated that they felt empowered when they could identify with others that somehow shared their experiences, including stories and experiences of other ethnic minorities. Students mentioned that they felt empowered when their stories were acknowledged in their education at large. However, students talked about how they noticed the underprivileged positions of racial minorities and the privileged position of White Americans. Lastly, students discussed how the silencing and exclusion of ethnic minority experiences affected their views of themselves and future. Students' feelings can be classified into one of two categories: *student interest* and *psychological effects of exclusion*.

Student interest. During interviews, several students discussed a significant interest in learning about other ethnic minorities and learning about different cultural backgrounds. Students said that it would be interesting to hear from other racial groups about how public relations may be practiced in their cultures: "It would be nice to hear from one of your

peers...I don't want to look at things from just my perspective. I want to learn it from everybody's. Because we will be working with everybody when we graduate."

Students talked about teaching methods that interested them and how the methods could be used to increase diversity discourse in public relations training:

Ashley: I would have loved to learn more about how to understand a culture in PR. Maybe the different PR cultures. Maybe there could be a class about in-house PR or corporate house PR. And then how to handle publics, how to handle publics 101, how to get that information that you might not have.[For example], if you're going to say River Oaks speaking to someone you're not familiar with in that area and you're a Hispanic public relations major, how do you cater to that crowd, how do you get your message across?

Yahara: We can do role play...I think it's very important that we teach that...actually practicing what PR people do professionally, like the actual work they do, in the classroom, more real life clients, and more mock clients within the classroom.

Lisa: In my campaigns class we had to do a campaign for two different companies and one of them was the Houston Dynamos. They were Hispanic when they came in doing public relations for the Houston Dynamos. And so, that was kind of refreshing.

Psychological effects of exclusion. As far as inside the classroom is concerned, I perceived that students communicated a sense of self-doubt and loss of individualism due to the often marginalized and silenced positions of ethnic minorities in the curriculum. I do not think that students felt that they were incapable of being successful, but I do think that students felt that the current state of diversity in public relations education can be

discouraging regarding their future. For example, Rebecca, a recent graduate, expressed some of her concerns while she was a student:

If you go to this principles course, this editing course, this digital course and all of the people that are teaching you are White or not Black, you kind of get scared...and then you're also surrounded by like 25 other people in the course and they're not Black either... you think to yourself, well if I go into a job and these 25 people are in there to apply for the job...it scares me, it really scares me.

Similarly, Donna, also a recent graduate, voiced concerns that teaching students from a primarily Caucasian perspective deters ethnic minority students' from deciding to pursue public relations as a career option:

It's from one perspective. I think it can maybe inflict people to give up. Maybe make them change their minds or think... this is something they can do, something they enjoy doing, and something they can be good at doing but then it's like okay, 'maybe this isn't for me or how can I help my community with this cause everything I'm learning about it is actually for 'this' community. I came here because I want to make a difference but this is obviously where I can't find it.' But really it is the correct avenue it's just that it's not taught to were this is how you can appeal or help in different areas, I would say.

Several students expressed that they noticed the racial make-up in their courses.

Students perceived that they were not being discussed. These observations aroused feelings of neglect and uncertainty. Students talked about how frustrating it was to observe the lack of people who look like them in textbooks or who visit as guest speakers in their courses.

Students also reported frustration regarding learning about diversity in their courses, and the

information is discouraging. For example, one student stated earlier that she learned African American practitioners rarely hold executive or management positions in the field.

Deconstructing Whiteness

Students expressed the need to take a closer look at the underlying issues of racial privilege. Students talked about the difficulty to change the current condition of public relations curriculum because it is derived from larger, traditional educational structures.

Several students talked about how for most White Americans marginalization is not an immediate or daily issue. Students felt that the differences in racial realities, perspectives, and experiences created a platform that is Eurocentric:

Donna: The thing is, some of them [*Caucasians*] don't mean any harm but it's just kind of like I guess they're just unaware. They're an unaware public. They don't know the history. So that's why I say it's an unaware thing... apparently [they don't] know what it's like to struggle, apparently [they don't] know the race card.

Amy shared similar thoughts regarding non-minority students' interest in discussing diversity:

Honestly not much...not that they would be opposed to it but just people won't agree with it. They would never see what we see. So it wouldn't be so much offending them...but it would just be the fact that they just wouldn't agree and they probably have no idea what I'm talking about.

Students perceived the inability to speak freely about diversity topics simply because the discussions never took place to begin with:

Lisa: In some classes, some professors make you feel like, you know, anything goes... let's discuss it... We didn't care, we'd raise our hand if we had something to

say. But some professors it's kind of like...well there wasn't ever a discussion to begin with. So how could you even think to lean that way if the class is structured differently?

Ashley, a senior, talked about how students were just not interested in discussing diversity: "There were a few conversations. Maybe one or two students but it seem like people didn't want to go on more about it. It was like you know, let's get to the next topic." Findings suggested that students appeared to be interested in learning about diversity but challenges of racial privilege and Eurocentric worldviews created barriers to incorporating such topics into the lesson plan. However, this does not mean that instructors intentionally exclude diversity discourse from their lesson plans but instead means that instructors may not know how to incorporate such topics or promote and facilitate these discussions, especially because many of them are members of the dominant racial group.

Additionally, results illustrated an avoidance of diversity topics due to their controversial nature and diversity not being of immediate relevance or reality to the majority of students in the classroom, which were Caucasian Americans. Consequently, the omission of diversity discussion creates a fissure to expand White hegemony in the public relations curriculum and classroom.

Students discussed the need to reconstruct race, ethnicity, and culture in public relations education because many questions they had were left unanswered. For example, Nia, a junior, talked about her curiosity of African Americans in the field: "I want to know like where are they? Where are all the Black or just not White public relations practitioners? Yea, where are they? Like are there any? And like how would they teach?" A majority of the students believed that change is ideal; but because the majority may not fully identify with

ethnic minority issues, the conventional educational systems currently in place would continue to be the norm. One student, for example, clarified the difficulties involved in discussing African Americans in public relations:

Donna: As far as African Americans, it's hard to do that cause a lot of things we discuss either it's a different reality so they won't really understand it [or] it'll go completely over their heads. Of course, the four Black girls in the department would be like 'oh you're right, oh this is awesome.' But everybody else is kind of like, 'yeah but at the same time this is only... 12% of what I'll be selling too, 12% of what I'll be interacting with'.

Additional Findings: Defining Multiculturalism, Ethnicity, and Race

As one of the goals of this study was to get a solid grasp on students' perceptions and experiences with diversity in the public relations classroom, several interview questions were dedicated to understanding how topics of diversity such as multiculturalism, ethnicity, and race were addressed and discussed. More specifically, the following question was asked: "How has multiculturalism been discussed in your courses?" Similar separate questions were asked about ethnicity and race. However, as I discussed in the method section of this study, during interviews I noticed that students were not able to distinguish the difference in the terms and thus responses were given accordingly. Students also felt I was asking the questions redundantly. I combined these questions into one which resulted in a more accurate response.

Interesting to note from these findings is students' inability to differentiate the terms and perceiving them to have the same meaning, especially since the students are both African American and ethnic minority. During interviews, it appeared that students discussed these

terms based on assumed meaning rather than what they learned about them in their courses. I do not think students are incapable of understanding the differences but instead believe lack of discussion in the public relations curriculum has influenced their ability to accurately define and explain experiences and perceptions of the terms.

RQ3: What have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity outside of the public relations classroom?

Similar to experiences in the classroom, students reported that diversity initiatives or acknowledgement outside the classroom were scarce. The findings showed conventional structures of racial privilege and lack of cultural sensitivity to ethnic minorities. Findings also showed examples of masked inequalities, including racism and some discrimination.

Furthermore, of 11 students interviewed for this study, only four students reported being members of student-affiliated public relations organizations. Additionally, only five students reported completing a public relations internship. Only two students reported participating in both an internship and student organizations simultaneously. When asked why students had not completed an internship or participated in student organizations, the majority of them explained it was due to financial obligations. Students talked about having to work to pay personal bills and tuition bills. Students discussed that they worked and went to school full-time, thus not having time for other activities. One student, Kenya, a recent graduate, reported having to raise her son – she was the only student that reported having a child – thus not having time to complete an internship. She did, however, discuss that she planned to complete an internship now that she has graduated. Additionally, three major factors summarize students' experiences with diversity outside the public relations classroom

and will be discussed the following sections: *perplexing realities of inclusion, dismantling conventional workforce climates, and hidden curriculum of hegemony of the media.*

Perplexing Realities of Inclusion

The sub-question asked, *what have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity in public relations industry organizations (i.e., PRSSA, PRSA, and IABC)?* Although not many students participated in public relations industry organizations, the bulk of comments about student organizations addressed Public Relations Student Society of American (PRSSA). Only one student talked about the International Association of Business Communicators. Students felt that PRSSA was confusing in its effort of inclusion. For example, Cynthia felt that PRSSA would recruit ethnic minorities but once the students registered, not much was done to recognize or retain their presence: “We promote it [diversity] through the University of Houston. But when it comes to branching off into trade organizations, it’s more of just get members, that type of initiative.”

Although not many students recalled PRSSA bringing awareness to cultural differences, one student did recall having a couple of guest speakers that were African American:

Michelle: Well last year we had two speakers come out that were Black females. One was older and one was younger. So that was helpful for me you know, to see Black practitioners come give us advice and talk about how they got to where they are.

Outside of those two speakers, I can’t think of anything that was beneficial to me.

Everybody else was White.

Students expressed interest in learning from other ethnic minorities – and minority groups in general – about their experiences and journey to being successful.

By a large majority, students felt that PRSSA privileges Whiteness. Students discussed noticing the lack of ethnic minorities in the organization and the lack of guest speakers that were racial minorities. Students also recalled the lack of ethnic minority-owned public relations companies they toured. Students reported noticing in PRSSA that the majority of the speakers, executive board, and members were Caucasian:

Ella: We have had speakers but they have been White.

Lisa: I did notice with PRSSA, there weren't any Blacks on the executive board. My last semester I was on the board, I was the only one.

Michelle: I didn't know until I got into PR that most of PR practitioners are White. And going to the meetings, a lot of the times in the meetings, I'm like one of maybe 3 at the most Black people at the meetings.

Ashley: It's not as welcoming as I would like it to be. Welcoming as far as like well dealing with race...everyone doesn't like to mix. It looks like everybody just stays in their own little groups.

Consequently, students talked about feelings of isolation and self-doubt, not from competencies but instead not being accepted. Students reported that their feelings and the state of diversity in PRSSA could be improved with more attention toward enhancing overall diversity platforms. On the contrary, Ashley talked about IABC and her views were counterintuitive toward diversity in the organization: "I think honestly a little bit...better. I see a little bit of everybody...there's corporate, there's PR, there's advertising, and there's photography. So you see a lot of different backgrounds in the field."

Dismantling Conventional Workforce Climates

The sub-question asked, *what have been African American female public relations students' experiences with diversity in public relations industry internships?* Overall, students described their experiences with working in the public relations sector as eye opening to the dire need to dismantle conventional workforce climates. Students felt that diversity initiatives in the workforce are minimal to non-existent. Students also talked about how completing public relations internships has helped them prepare for the possible formidable road blocks ethnic minorities encounter in the industry. This theme is composed of the subthemes: *bigotry, psychological effects of exclusion, and embracing diversity.*

Bigotry. Several students talked about indirect and subtle encounters of racism and discrimination. Students explained feeling racism is subliminal but just as present in the workforce as it was decades ago:

Yahara: Oh yea. Definitely. It's not as brutal as it was before, but it still exists. It's maybe hidden sometimes. It's a lot of it in corporate American, I would say. I guess like job offerings. They would give a job to, an under-qualified, an undereducated, Caucasian male over –I'm going to use females again – an African American. She has her Master's degree, she's done internships, she has experience...she has contacts that can benefit your company but because he's a male and he looks to part, they give it to him. I totally think it has something to do with it.

Of the students that completed internships, they felt that lack of concern for diversity plagues the public relations workforce. From recruiting, to hiring, to retaining employees that are ethnic minorities, students reported not seeing these sorts of initiatives taking place. Students reported that the majority of the company employees where they completed internships were Caucasian. Students also mentioned that the majority of the interns were

Caucasian as well. For example, Lisa, a recent graduate, said, “I did an internship at Houston Magazine. I think I was the only Black one there.”

Students described some of their experiences and opinions about working in corporate America. Experiences range from feelings of indirect racism to difficulty in finding a job:

Ashley: It’s that sense where I don’t want to accept it but it is a double standard. I’ve been applying like crazy to jobs but I feel that probably race does play a factor.

Amy: Many people who do the corporate work, I think it’s hard to see minorities in it. Because of like corporate America and how mostly corporate America is formed of White prospects. It’s still a challenge to get in the field.

Lisa: So at Houston Magazine it was me and maybe two other interns [*both White*]. And it seemed like everybody was nice to the other two, like really nice. I don’t know, maybe I just wasn’t out-going enough or you know, I don’t know why. But I don’t want to say that it was (pause) maybe I don’t want to believe that it was a racial issue.

Because of the many barriers to breaking acculturating standards in the industry, several students talked about going into other industries such as sales, marketing, law, and even music. Students also discussed starting their own practice to better themselves in the field.

Psychological effects of exclusion. Students addressed their frustrations and concerns with working in the field. Students’ experiences demonstrate feelings that conditions in the workforce are not improving. Students talked about feelings of being an unwanted presence and not belonging. Students also discussed feeling that the exclusive nature of diversity in the field is disturbing and disappointing. For instance, one student talked about how she never

felt like she was part of the team where she worked. Another student, Rebecca, talked about deserving respect:

Sometimes it can be hurtful. It's like well, I went to school for all of these years and still don't have the backing and setting which you feel like you went to school for. I feel like if I'm in school for four years and I've accomplished something, I should get a certain level of respect for that and it's not always given.

Moreover, several students talked about feeling drained from having to work even harder because they are ethnic minorities. Students also talked about feeling that they are often judged different because of their race and that in itself can be very discouraging.

Embracing diversity. On the contrary, a couple of students did talk about how some of their employers embraced diversity or cultural differences. Interestingly, students discussed that many of their supervisors were minorities themselves. For example, Lisa, a recent graduate talked about her current employer:

With my new job, I don't think like race is an issue. My boss, she's White and Jewish. But she is a activist for like injustices...[and] she writes books on racial injustices. I'm just fortunate to have a job with a boss that's very open-minded. Like I never felt race was an issue at all over there.

Another student discussed a similar environment where her supervisor was Hispanic and never felt race was an issue or feelings of not belonging. Students expressed that acknowledgement of difference and culturally in-tune initiatives were rarely visible in the public relations industry but agreed that awareness benefits both internal and external publics.

Hidden Curriculum of Hegemony of the Media

The sub-question asked, *to what extent do African American female public relations students believe their perceptions of public relations are influenced by media portrayals of ethnic minority public relations practitioners?* Students did not feel that media portrayals of ethnic minority public relations practitioners influenced their perceptions of public relations. Additionally, students said that discussion of how media portrayals of ethnic minority public relations professionals have influenced their perceptions of public relations have not taken place in their courses. Students also reported never discussing media portrayals of ethnic minority public relations practitioners in the media.

All students used the term *glamorous* to describe how the media portrays public relations. However, most students agreed that the field is not always so glamorous. Students reported that before they knew much about the field, the media somewhat influenced their perceptions with its glamorous portrayals. Several students explained that the glamorous portrayals of public relations in the media also attracted their interest to studying or majoring in public relations:

Lisa: When you think about public relations, and you look at it on TV, or you read about it, it is like this glamorous job. Like, you get to go to the media, you get to talk to people and be on TV and speak about things, and...that might be what attracted me to that. But my job is not like that at all.

By a large majority students said that they had not seen many portrayals of African American public relations practitioners. Of the images students reported seeing, students felt that the portrayals were not accurate and were often negative. Students explained that when they did see African American public relations practitioners in the media, it was mainly in entertainment television. For example, Ella, a senior explained, “Any African American

public relations professionals I see have to do with entertainment.” Several other students felt that African American portrayals in the media overall were often marginalized and stereotypical. Students discussed feeling that the media often ignores positive portrayals of African Americans as leaders, who contribute to the well-being of society:

Rebecca: I feel like some can be stereotypical or they put you in a box. Like maybe you work for a law firm but you’re a secretary, not a director, you’re not a lawyer, you’re not that and that’s what can be a little disappointing. They don’t want to give a Black woman a role that’s overseeing 100s of employees or something of that nature.

Yahara: I don’t want to keep going back to reality TV but they’ll paint a totally different picture of African American women...they’re angry, they’re the B-I-T-C-H... [and] they’re very sexualized.

Donna: The media, anything you see about us[African Americans] in the media we’re doing negative things, we’re doing wrong things, we don’t do ish, never going to be ish, and I think a lot of them are believing it... It’s like we’re letting media portray who we really are. It discourages them or pollutes their minds... And I hate that right now the images of African Americans, for us to make it, have to be a record deal or sports ...that’s the only thing that the media praises us for.

Many students discussed how the media was sometimes used as a secondary source to form opinions about other ethnic minorities because of its tendency to inaccurately depict various groups. Students said that they used various forms of media such as the internet, television, reading books, or newspapers to learn about other ethnic groups. However, students talked about relying on their peers or friends that are ethnic minorities as a primary source to answer any questions or concerns they may have. Students discussed the inability of the media to

fully influence their perceptions of how to think about any particular group because of how the media has incorrectly portrayed African Americans consistently in society.

Additional Findings: Hidden Identities, Complexities of Racism, and Interpersonal Learning

In analyzing the data, several themes emerge that did not directly answer the research questions for this study but were relative to the findings. In particular, students discussed some of the more profound and complex issues of being African American in society that go beyond educational systems. Additionally, students discussed feeling the need to conceal their identities due to the realities of racism in corporate America. Lastly, students credited their everyday life experiences as contributing to their learning about various ethnicities and cultures. Three major themes emerged from students' comments about being African American and learning about public relations: *endemic issues of marginalization, meritocracy, and interpersonal learning.*

Endemic Issues of Marginalization

Students made a point to discuss the harsh realities of being an ethnic minority in America. The data revealed that many of the problems that exist in public relations education and the field are a direct reflection of the larger issues of marginalization of ethnic minorities endemic in society. For example, all students felt that racism still exists in America. Students felt that racism has been reincarnated into a more subtle form and is often times difficult to detect. Students also noted feeling that institutional racism is another form of racism that exists, especially in educational systems. For example, Donna, a recent graduate, talked about a racist cartoon that was allowed to be published in the University of Houston's student newspaper:

The racism I have ever seen here or discrimination was [when] UofH had the nerve to make a political cartoon about us from New Orleans. And then I hate, honestly I HATE [*leaned into recorder to emphasis word*] the political cartoons at UofH. If they have this outlook of this race or this situation, it'll be the picture of them just doing something deliberate, and this is how deliberate this cartoon was. It was an African American male from New Orleans sitting on a cot. Apparently as maybe the stadium... and he was talking to the nurse... a White nurse, wearing a Red Cross outfit. And it said, 'what's up shortie, how about I take you out with my FEMA card'... African Americans on campus were ticked off too.

Moreover, several students discussed the frustration and pressure of having to work harder than most to prove their competencies or to be minutely accepted. Students also talked about how African Americans are acknowledged more often for the negative versus the positive things they have accomplished in society:

Ashley: People say that racism or framing doesn't exist but it does and those people with the high paying jobs are predominately White people. Correct me if I'm wrong but maybe that mix was maybe 90% because I don't know if everyone is White in the group but they look White and they pull themselves off as White.

Michelle: I feel like I have to consistently be looking, consistently trying to perfect whatever I do. I have to look over my shoulder. I think I have to work harder. I just kind of feel like you know, that's just the way it is.

Rebecca: I just think that society doesn't want to accept the fact that Black people are intelligent and sometimes in most cases more intelligent than others. I feel like Black

women, especially, are very determined and are very on top of what they want to do and a lot of times people can be scared of that.

Nia: Everything is Americanized. It's seen one way, it's not seen various different ways. So, if there's a stereotype it's going to stay, they build on that stereotype and that's what they see. They don't see the real face value of everything.

Meritocracy

Students explained that race does influence judgment of their performance. When applying for a job or sending out a resume, students said that they felt the need to hide any reference of their race. Students perceived the need to conceal their identities because they felt that race does sometimes influence a company's decision to interview and hire potential employees. Students mentioned feeling the need to hide their identities in order to be given a fair chance of qualifying for a job based on their skills and not their race:

Lisa: I worked for a woman who does the national pre-law Black conference. I don't list that on my resume because I don't want people to know that I'm Black off the back just on paper. I want them to be able to see me like everybody else on paper. Because if they really are racist, not saying that everybody is racist, but some people do feel like a Black person wouldn't fit here. So I just don't want them to know I'm Black before they meet me. Because it does sway people's opinion, so I don't list that.

Rebecca: I try to be very general, vague. But I try to bolster the things that I've done. Like the qualities and things that I've learned...I don't want to send this out to somebody and I'm not looking right. I already have the name. If they see me, I'm Black. I need everything that I present to be on a higher level.

Interpersonal Learning

Several students referenced daily life experiences and interactions with people as a tool or resource used to help them understand some of the vagueness present in their public relations education. Working on their jobs and interacting with various people of various publics on a daily basis, helped students form opinions that are more cohesive about public relations and what it should mean for them:

Lisa: Well okay, so at work, we have a tequila client...If we want to get them some coverage, we may look for some Hispanic radio stations or something like that. But that's not something I learn through school, this is something I've been learning with my job. So I guess the longer I work, the more experience I'll gain.

Ashley: I have had to learn that through my job and just how society is. You won't get experience in any field unless you actually get into it. Even though I'm working at a restaurant and it's not public relations based all the way, I'm dealing with clientele and that's how I get to understand and study publics, through my job.

I noticed during some of the interviews, a few students discussed message designs and how it is different for various publics based on that publics need. When I asked one student to define diversity, she gave a very elaborate and detailed definition that many students did not give that vividly captured what diversity should mean, according to the literature. When I asked students whether they had gained such knowledge and grasp of diversity from their public relations training, students said, "no. I think I learn that in life," "just common sense. Oh and working at Pizza Hut," "no I didn't learn that here. I learned it somewhere else," and, "just by perception and looking, there's not very many in the field I would say." Overall,

students credited their outside classroom experiences as a contributor to learning about and understanding public relations.

RQ4: What recommendations do African American female public relations students have for improving diversity in public relations curriculum?

Students provided several suggestions for improving diversity conditions in public relations education, student organizations, and the workforce. However, students felt that it would take strategic planning and input from students before such initiatives could take place. For example, Donna, a recent graduate, felt that it would have to be in demand:

I feel like if the majors aren't diverse enough to talk about diversity than it won't be talked about. We need more of us [ethnic minorities] in here. If more of us are in here by force, more of us are paying tuition, than they have to conform, they have to... So I think for diversity to be talked about in class it would have to be in demand.

Students' recommendations can be grouped into two main themes: *classroom* and *student organizations and workforce*.

Classroom

Students reported that their public relations education needs to be reconstructed in the areas of course content, discussion, methods used, involvement, and mentorship. Some of the main suggestions that were given by students to improve diversity pedagogy in public relations education included: having courses strictly for the topic, more group projects, more practical assignments, and more guest speakers. For example, several students discussed creating a diversity public relations course – maybe as an elective – to address message designs for different cultural backgrounds, understanding publics, and how race affects job experiences:

Michelle: I would have like to maybe have projects or class clients that have issues with reaching certain cultures and their challenges with that, and we would have to maybe help them with those issues. [Also], maybe what PR agencies deal with when trying to work with clients that have different perspectives from most of the people that work there.

Lastly, one student discussed the need to improve the current structure of public relations programs:

Yahara: I kind of went into this like blind I guess you can say. I didn't know it was going to be like this. Like when I thought of public relations, I thought of you know, press releases and stuff like that. I didn't really think of the technical part of it. I was just ready to get to the action and work. I want it to be more hands-on. I feel like that's what we're lacking.

Student Organizations and Workforce

By a large majority students suggested having guest speakers that are ethnic minorities as an improvement tactic in addition to touring or visiting minority-owned firms or companies. Students agreed that having guest speakers was refreshing because it not only gave them someone to identify with but gave them some insight into their future as public relations practitioners of color. For example, Ella, a senior, suggested, “[having] practitioners come in as guest speakers and tell us about things that they’ve gone through with diversity in different cultures...Because different cultures see things differently and take them differently.” A couple of other students suggested possibly starting a new organization that brings awareness to the lack of diversity in the field.

Chapter V – Conclusion

This study used a qualitative approach to explore African American public relations students' experiences and perceptions of diversity pedagogy in their education. Additionally, students' experiences outside the classroom were explored to learn whether their diversity training has transitioned into the public relations workforce. I found that major themes that emerged in the data were closely related to the literature reviewed for this study such as *racial negligence, deconstructing Whiteness, and dismantling conventional workforce climates*. The critical race theory (CRT) was used as a framework for this study to investigate the masked inequalities and disparities that exist in public relations education and the hidden curriculum of White hegemony apparent in society. CRT was also used to frame this study to expose the conventional educational structures that currently consume public relations curriculum.

Furthermore, the results revealed that African American public relations students do not feel they are prepared to improved diversity initiatives in the workforce based on the training they have received both inside and outside the classroom. The results also revealed that diversity discussion is scare in public relations education and conventional educational practices still plague the curriculum.

Moreover, African American female students in public relations have not received scholarly attention. This study was designed to fill that gap and further diversity theory in public relations scholarship. There were several interesting findings and implications that developed from this study that can benefit both the theory and practice of diversity in public relations. This section includes an in-depth discussion of those findings along with additional

findings and implications. Practical implications, limitations of the study, and areas for future research are also discussed.

Critical Race Theory

As discussed in the literature review for this study, CRT scholars study race and racism to unmask the disparities and inequalities that exist in society, policy, and educational practices. CRT is important to the advancement of public relations scholarship because it places a closer lens on what students are learning in their courses. In relation to this study, CRT provides a framework for understanding how limited racial depictions and pedagogy, especially in textbooks, produces limited world-views and expectations of ethnic minorities. I found that the findings confirmed my expectations that diversity in public relations curriculum would be scarce, especially since I experienced this first-hand in my courses as a public relations student. It appears several years later, current students' experiences are very similar.

To that end, this study confirmed Pompper's (2005a) findings that there is a lack of theory and discussion surrounding diversity in public relations; CRT would be an ideal paradigm to expand this area of research. She found, after reviewing 859 articles published in the *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, only a small percentage devoted any attention to race, ethnicity, and culture differences. Pompper also pointed out that "of public relations scholars that have attended to difference, none challenged mainstream theory by advancing new theory from an underrepresented perspective" (p. 146). Seven years after her study, my thesis produced similar findings from students interviewed for this study. For example, students acknowledged diversity was discussed in public relations curriculum but they felt the discussions were minimal.

Additionally, Pompper found that the small amount of articles that discussed minorities homogenized race, ethnicity, and culture. Similarly, when students in this study were asked how ethnic minorities were discussed in their textbooks and courses, they responded that ethnic minorities were discussed homogeneously instead of as separate cultures with varying backgrounds and unique ethnic differences.

According to Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), six main principles define the CRT movement. However, three principles in particular were more closely related to this study: *recognition that racism is endemic to American life; skepticism toward claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy; and centrality of the experiential knowledge of people of color.*

Recognition that racism is endemic. The findings showed a larger issue of racial and social construction in society that surpasses the issue of diversity inclusion in education. Students discussed feeling that racism still exists in society and some students had experienced racism and discrimination at some point in their lives. Students felt that society has decided what it means to be African American or ethnic minority. For example, one student talked about how stereotypes of African Americans – laziness, anger, attitudes, and lacking professionalism – create barriers to working in corporate America and being accepted. Students also noted that the standard in society, the norm of how culture is practiced, privileged Whiteness. Thus, the findings demonstrate that before change can be expected in the classroom it must first be addressed in society on a larger level of acceptance and inclusion.

Moreover, students talked about the avoidance of diversity issues in their courses. Students explained that when the conversations of diversity took place in their courses, they

did not last long due to students becoming offended or debates becoming unruly. Critical race theory argues that the inability to prolong discussion of diversity topics in students' courses – especially conversations of race – is a direct reflection of the avoidance of diversity discussions in society as a whole. Consequently, when issues of race and ethnicity are addressed in students' courses, the overwhelming tension from being ignored or silencing of issues causes explosive reactions and debates among students. The findings supports Kendall's (2006) argument of people avoiding issues of diversity for fear that the conversations will “get out of hand” or people will leave the discussion upset and angry. Yet, not addressing the issues of diversity for fear of arguments foils the progression of diversity discourse in the public relations curriculum and the ability to break acculturating structures of Whiteness.

Neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy. CRT shows skepticism toward claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy in education and society regarding race. Although students never directly used these terms, the findings, repeatedly demonstrated that traditional approaches to education do not benefit students of color. The public relations curriculum does not challenge these traditional approaches. For example, students revealed that they are color-conscious and not at all colorblind. Students observed in their courses, PRSSA, and in the workforce that Caucasians dominate public relations and that ethnic minorities are minimal to non-existent in the field. Moreover, CRT theorists would argue that colorblindness does the complete opposite of its definition. Colorblindness means we should celebrate homogenization; race is not a factor because we are all equal. Yet ethnic minority stories and voices are silenced, neglected, invisible, and

mis/under- represented in public relations education. The findings suggest that these terms are part of the hidden curriculum of White hegemony in society.

Students also noted that course structures and what was discussed in their courses did not address issues that relate to their struggle, but instead privileged Whiteness. Additionally, the results supported Howard-Hamilton's (2003) findings that when students observe ethnic minority stories are excluded and students are taught from a race-neutral perspective, there is a loss of individualism and self-assurance. Students in this study expressed feelings of exclusion and isolation when their stories were underrepresented or omitted in public relations textbooks and classroom discussions. Even more, race-neutrality argues that we are all afforded the same opportunities and there is a "generic set of skills" that should work for everyone. Yet, through the framework of CRT, the findings show we are not all afforded the same opportunities and this is rooted in historic contents of race. The lack of ethnic minority stories and experiences in public relations course content, discussion, and textbooks is an example of the unbalanced, underprivileged position of African Americans in society. Thus, demonstrating the hidden curriculum of White hegemony, which is argued to not focus on progressing the field but instead acculturating students to the traditional Eurocentric teaching and learning systems.

Even more, students explained feeling they are judged by the color of their skin and not by their competencies or achievements in society. Students discussed feeling that they, as African American women, have to work "ten times as hard versus that of a White woman." Students reported the need to exclude evidence of their race on job applications and resumes in order to be given a fair opportunity as everyone else. Students also expressed that it is difficult to be accepted to the same standard of Caucasians due to the barriers and stereotypes

attached to their race. Thus, the term meritocracy does not appear to benefit ethnic minorities. The findings suggest that these terms, created not by ethnic minorities but by Caucasians, reflect an illusion of equality that instead systematically preserves Whiteness in America.

Centrality of the experiential knowledge. An important tenet of CRT is the voice. The element of the voice refers to how African American students use their experiences as factual knowledge and a shared thread to challenge stories of Whiteness. Pompper (2005a) suggested that in order to work toward adopting a CRT perspective in public relations research, scholars must take great care and precaution in how stories of participants are analyzed, shared, and presented to audiences. Students use their personal testaments as a vehicle to speak out about racial privilege and the unbalanced social order in society. For example, students discussed feelings of isolation and being an unwanted presence at their internships. Students expressed feeling that they are not prepared to address multiculturalism and diversity in their public relations careers based on their training inside and outside the classroom. Students felt that the media influences peoples' perception of ethnic minorities and felt depictions of ethnic minorities in the media are rarely positive. Students' experiences demonstrate that without their experiences, scholars and practitioners are unable to understand the unfair treatment or masked inequalities that exist in education and society. Their stories and experiences provide a platform to expose oppression and marginalization in public relations in order for the field to be reconstructed and reformed to include diversity efforts and attention.

Diversity in Public Relations Training

The study findings suggest that the link between public relations education and diversity pedagogy needs further research and discussion. The history of multicultural or diversity education in the United States shows the difficulty to incorporate such topics and students' comments in this study reflect that continued difficulty and lack of inclusion. Overall, findings signaled that there is a lack of diversity etiquette in public relations education. Diversity etiquette was defined as teaching students how to respect cultural differences, how to design effective cultural campaigns, and how to best communicate with an organization's internal and external diverse publics. Although I expected to find that diversity pedagogy was minimally addressed, I did not expect the gap of discussion to be as wide as it currently is in public relations curriculum. With ACEJMC requiring that all accredited universities incorporate diversity discussion into their lesson plan, universities and colleges should be bridging the gap between lack of diversity discussion and conventional educational practices in public relations programs.

Additionally, after further review of the ACEJMC (2012) website, I learned that of 109 accredited programs, the University of Houston is not one of them. This does not mean that the university does not offer students a quality educational experience because it is not accredited but instead findings may explain minimal diversity pedagogy and discussion due to the lack of a rigorous self-assessment required by ACEJMC to expose and correct diversity disparities in its public relations program.

Moreover, the literature reviewed for this paper showed that several studies in public relations have examined the extent of diversity inclusion in organizational cultures and management levels (Brunner, 2008); among public relations faculty (Tindall, 2009b); from public relations students' viewpoints (Bardhan, 2003); from non-minority and

minority practitioners' perceptions (Hon & Brunner, 2000; Len-Rios, 1998; Pompper, 2004; Tindall, 2009a); and various other topics such as gender, power, and industry publications (Austin, 2009; Hon, 1995). Redundantly, each study produced results and findings about the lack of diversity, minimal attention or awareness, and an undefined position in the public relations discipline. For example, students perceived that when discussions of diversity took place it was brief, rarely included readings or assignments in the lesson plan, and ethnic minorities were discussed as one big group or homogenously. This current state of diversity in public relations can be argued to be a direct correlation to the absence of discussing White privilege in the industry and academia, and how White privilege serves as a barrier to embracing pluralism and its continuously expanding presence in the field. Thus, communicators and public relations researchers could use this study as a baseline to address some of the challenges to incorporating diversity in the curriculum.

During the interviews, I talked about the history of African American practitioners and some of the challenges that currently persist in the field. Students were unaware of such challenges and felt that this information should have been shared in their courses. Students also mentioned that the discourse was discouraging (i.e., African American women are rarely seen in executive management positions). The findings revealed that the extent of students' knowledge of diversity went only as far as instructors' ability to relate to students' racial reality, perspectives, and experiences, which could be reasoned to be limited due to the majority of instructors being Caucasian.

Moreover, it can be argued that discussion of diversity in public relations courses is a direct reflection of instructors' area of interest or research concentration. For example, an

instructor that specifically conducts research surrounding diversity or feminist studies would be more prone to incorporate course content surrounding these topics. On the contrary, an instructor that may conduct research surrounding crisis communication or issues management topics would discuss diversity less often or possibly not at all. Yet, because of the broadness of diversity, instructors should be able to relate or tie diversity to their area of interest.

Important to note, I found that this study confirmed Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso's (2000) findings that African American students felt their stories were omitted from classroom settings and that whether inside or outside the classroom, some sort of racism or discrimination had been experienced leading to daily frustrations, self-doubt, and isolations among students. However, one additional finding from this study was that many students made the decision not to work in public relations due to their observations both inside and outside the classroom. One student explained that it was not until she majored in public relations that she began to observe Caucasians dominate the field. She explained that it is not what deterred her decision to work in public relations; it was feelings from internship and organizations such as PRSSA of non-acceptance or being an un-wanted presence. Thus, suggesting that neglecting or excluding diversity in public relations and society affects students' decisions for their lives including psychological influences.

Moreover, this study supported Bardhan's (2003) findings that current public relations programs and curriculum do not help increase students' sense of global, multicultural, or ethnic connectedness thus perpetuating a cycle of unawareness, assumptions, and false perceptions. The students in Bardhan's study also discussed lack of course assignments, textbooks or readings, and projects devoting attention to international or

multicultural/intercultural diversity. The students in my study voiced similar experiences with diversity in their courses. For example, students observed not having a course solely devoted to diversity and the lack of topic content. Similar to Bardhan's findings, students in this study discussed wanting experience that is more practical and more contact with the industry inside and outside the classroom (i.e., speakers and agency tours). However, interesting to mention is a key pattern between the studies. Students from both studies discussed a strong interest in learning about diversity yet that desire to learn weakened as the topic was minutely discussed in their public relations courses. Therefore, it is imperative that scholars and instructors understand that failure to highlight the relevance of diversity pedagogy diminishes students' desires to learn about its scope and significances to their professional careers as future generations of public relations practitioners. In summary, failure to address diversity issues manifests continued conventional Eurocentric learning systems that overwhelm multicultural education.

Additionally this study confirmed Kern-Foxworth's (1990) findings that textbooks scarcely represent ethnic minorities, their stories, and their experiences. Kern-Foxworth found that of 21,841 pages examined for ethnic or multicultural inclusion or representation, only 152 pages (0.7%) included any reference to the topic. Similarly, when students were asked whether they felt public relations textbooks were useful in teaching them about diversity, students perceived them as not helpful.

Hidden curriculum. According to Horn (2003), hidden curriculum can be defined as a "broad category that includes all of the unrecognized and sometimes unintended knowledge values, and beliefs that are part of the learning process in schools and classrooms" (p. 298). It is the "unspoken set of rules" that teaches students what they can do based on who they are.

For this study, I focused on the hidden curriculum of White hegemony in multicultural education and in the media. Students recalled several accounts or examples that fit into the category of hidden curriculum. Hidden curriculum prevents progression in public relations education and industry by appearing to break barriers of exclusion but instead upholds Eurocentric positions and order. Students, for example, discussed the media and how it depicts ethnic minorities. Students discussed feeling that the media rarely portrays ethnic minorities in position of power and instead often show images of unprofessionalism and being “ghetto”. The findings suggest that the media has a hidden curriculum of societal order while also sending messages about power and identity. The data revealed that theories such as the critical race theory are needed to unmask inequalities and barriers of acculturation that dominate society. Hidden curriculum both in educational systems and America will remain dominate unless scholars and practitioners become that voice of change through teaching diversity pedagogy and creating diversity initiatives in the workforce.

Learning theory. Social learning theory emphasizes the importance of learning through observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others (Bandura, 1977). Students talked about how the media perceived them, how they are invisible in textbooks, and how there is a lack of diversity discussion in public relations education overall. The findings demonstrate that students’ observations influence their perceptions and behaviors. When students – not only ethnic minorities – observe the absence of diversity discourse in public relations education, it sets the tone of their modeled behavior, cognitive attitudes, and beliefs of how or what to think of ethnic minorities. Students discussed that diversity initiatives were not visible in the workforce. Thus, what students learn about ethnic minorities in the classroom sets the tone for their modeling behavior outside the classroom.

In a study, focusing on how female African American public relations practitioners viewed multiculturalism in public relations curriculum, Pompper (2005b) found that multiculturalism is not being addressed at the college level. Participants talked about their workforce experiences and the often marginalized and underrepresented position of ethnic minority practitioners in the field. Here again, participants reported neglect of multicultural diversity in lectures, projects, assignments, textbooks, and discussions.

Grunig (1992) outlined two characteristics of the excellence theory: sensitivity to culture and actual support of diversity. However, the findings in Pompper's (2005b) study reported results that were inconsistent with Grunig's call to excellence in public relations by including diversity. Moreover, the students in my thesis perceived similar conditions in public relation education and industry, as interns. Students noted feeling challenged to succeed in corporate America due to barriers of their race and ethnicity. Students also discussed feelings of being an unwanted presence or not belonging and a lack of initiative to address diversity issues in the workforce. The conventional structures in the workforce and student organizations have been a direct reflection of conditions in public relations education. If the cycle is to be broken, instructors, staff, practitioners, and scholars alike must come together and discuss the perimeters of diversity reform.

Moreover, if the state of public relations education is to be broken attention should be placed on White privilege. Students' data revealed public relations education is reflective of a predominantly White perspective. It could be argued that White Americans do not see their own privilege and the advantages they are afforded – based on their skin color – compared to those that are ethnic or racial minorities. Thus to affect change means having these discussions more often in the classroom and in public relations scholarship. Hence “until

researchers [and public relations academia] discuss diversity and multiculturalism in terms of racism, ethnocentrism, the privileged status of White Europeans controlling the profession, and their responsibility for changes, there will be no real communication or discourse about change” (Aldoory, 2001, p. 124).

Solutions. This study confirmed previous studies’ suggestions for improving diversity pedagogy in public relations curriculum such as incorporating scholarship that is reflective of racial and ethnic minority experiences (Hon, 1995), incorporating case studies, requiring readings other than traditional textbooks, and stand-alone multicultural courses (Pompper, 2005b). Students mainly suggested creating a course about diversity in public relations. Students recommended having ethnic minorities as guest speakers in their courses to speak about their experiences. Students also recommended having real clients as projects or case studies to learn how to design messages and resolve issues for various cultural and ethnic groups. Students felt that touring agencies and having more minority speakers share their experiences in student organizations such as PRSSA and IABC would be beneficial as well. The findings revealed that shared identities empower students and enhance their overall personal and professional growth.

Lastly, another solution to improve diversity in public relations education would be systematic evaluations. In the introduction of this paper, I briefly discussed the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) and how it did not adopt or make it mandatory for diversity to be included in accrediting standards until 2003; yet higher education institutions must now have diverse and inclusive communications programs (ACEJMC, 2004). As discussed in the results section, students were unable to differentiate diversity terms such as multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity or concretely define

the term diversity. Priority must be placed on reviewing current educational practices and whether they are following guidelines and policies that have been specified.

African American Students

It is important to note that this study confirmed many of the findings from previous studies in this line of research pertaining to African Americans in public relations. As I stated in the literature review, I chose African American female students because of the unique experiences African American female public relations practitioners encounter in the workforce. Previous studies found that African American women in public relations face many challenges compared to their White female counterparts, such as: race-based assigned task, limited access to client representations and projects, job functions and advancements, racial minorities being underrepresented and overlooked, underpaid, marginalized, racial and cultural insensitivity, lack of mentorship and role models, lack of diversity support in organizations, lack of minority faculty, and exclusion (Kern-Foxworth, 1989; Kern-Foxworth et al., 1994; Len-Rios, 1998; Mallette, 1995; Pompper, 2004, 2005b; Tindall, 2009a, 2009b; Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993).

Yet decades later, it appears that these formidable roadblocks exist for African American students preparing for careers as future public relations practitioners. This study could be used as a guide of how challenges for ethnic minorities start when they are young, persist into their education, and then are continued into the workforce, creating a cycle of exclusion that is never-ending. For example, Kenya, a recent graduate discussed her experiences as a child living in the Cypress area of Houston. She recalled observing that of her entire third grade class, she was one of maybe five other African Americans students. She said it was “more of me feeling out of place, me wanting to belong”. Students talked

about feelings of isolation, ignoring, exclusion, not fitting in or being accepted, self-doubt, unfair treatment, and racial privilege. Findings suggested that both public relations education and the industry must work diligently to improve the current state of diversity pedagogy and inclusion.

African American students must cope with the realities of racial and social positions in society. Classrooms should be a safe haven to challenge stereotypical and conventional messages about ethnic minorities. It should be a place where African American students feel a sense of empowerment. Students should feel that they can share their concerns, experiences, and opinions – in addition to hearing other students' stories – in an open forum, free of acculturation and conformist practices. Yet findings demonstrated that African American students are not learning about themselves or about other minorities in general (i.e., African American men, LGBT people, Asians, or Hispanics). Lack of diversity discussion does not caution students to the climate of ethnic inclusion in the workforce. Addressing diversity issues in the classroom concerning the workforce allows students the opportunity to decide whether they want to proceed into a public relations career, instead of being unaware of racial realities until entering the industry. The findings revealed the extended need to expand literature in public relations on racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in addition to developing theory to increase the scope of diversity pedagogy in public relations education.

Interestingly, I found the data confirmed my expectation that African American female students would report minimal knowledge of diversity in public relations or recall learning about historical experiences of African Americans in the field. However, starting this study, I did not expect to find that lack of diversity training both inside and outside the

public relations classroom has a psychological affect on students that could lead to decisions such as not wanting to work in the industry. The findings would be most useful in providing communicators insight into the day-to-day experiences of ethnic minority students. Thus, communicators genuinely interested in improving the educational experiences of students in the classroom and the workforce should start with this study's findings.

Practical Implications

Beyond the need to fill a research gap, the goal of this study was to provide both scholars and practitioners with examples of why diversity in public relations is important for all students preparing for future careers as public relations practitioners. Additionally, the goal was to provide both scholars and practitioners with insight of the experiences and perceptions of African American female public relations students. In fact, this study does provide information that may be further analyzed and used to improve diversity inclusion in both public relations programs and the workforce. More specifically, most important for both communicators to review are *lack of knowledge and discussion surrounding diversity in the classroom* and *conventional exclusive practices in the workforce*, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Lack of Knowledge and Discussion

Most important and helpful for communicators is students' discussion about the lack of diversity pedagogy in their courses. Grunig (1992) explained the components of the excellence theory and the need to include diversity in the workforce. However, before communicators can implement platforms of change in the workforce, communicators must first focus on requisite variety in the classroom. The notion that there must be as much

diversity or variety internally as there is externally (Hon & Brunner, 2000) – including textbooks – to challenge the status quo. Including racial and ethnic discourse provides students with shared identities, demonstrating that the voices of the dominant group are not the only perspective worth hearing.

This study has demonstrated that traditional hegemonic structures in public relations had both a psychological and professional affect on African American students. Scholars should use these findings to assist with corrective measures to advance diversity pedagogy in public relations education. Additionally, scholars could also conduct a meta-analysis of African Americans or ethnic minorities' experiences and perceptions of diversity in education to understand how results relate to the field of public relations. Moreover, students expressed interest in helping communicators' reform public relations education to include diversity discourse. Thus, communicators could benefit from a program or committee that allows students of all ethnicities – including Caucasians – to offer suggestions of improving cultural awareness and sensitivity. Ethnic minority educators should be consulted when creating diversity initiatives as their ideas would be beneficial to improving diversity in public relations education.

Conventional Practices

Students discussed their experiences with racism and discrimination in the workforce, feelings of isolation and not belonging, and the neglect of diversity initiatives. The findings suggest companies have not found a need to prioritize diversity on their agenda of things that require immediate attention. Findings demonstrated the privileging status of Caucasians in the public relations industry that continues to create barriers for ethnic minorities, specifically African Americans. However, Brunner (2008) explained that

in order to challenge conventional workforce practices, companies must recruit, hire, and maintain employees that are racial and ethnic minorities to challenge the status quo and bring fresh ideas to the drawing board. Through the findings in this study, I found that formidable roadblock persist for African American public relations practitioners. Ford (2005) discussed a study she conducted – along with Lynn Appelbaum – pertaining to ethnic minority public relations practitioners’ experiences in the field. Participants from their study suggested several steps to improving diversity in the workforce such as: “establish mentoring relationships at the outset of employment and continuing through an employee’s career at a company” and “educate all employees regarding fostering a positive, supportive work environment that embraces diversity and inclusion” (p.1).

Additionally, based on students feeling ignored or being an unwanted presence, multicultural and diversity training for managerial advisory boards would be beneficial. From recruiting, to hiring, to retaining employees that are ethnic minorities, students reported not seeing these sorts of initiatives taking place. Students mentioned that the majority of the company employees where they completed internships were Caucasian, as well as majority of the interns. Thus, commitment from organizational management to focus on awareness surrounding the need to incorporate diversity and how diversity initiatives benefit the client, company, and its employees, would help improve conditions of inclusion in the industry. Practitioners may also benefit from creating a diversity relations program or plan that would allow interns the opportunity to provide input that is fresh and challenges conventional organizational norms. Creating this sort of program would also allow opportunities to address concerns with unjust or concealed gestures of racism or discrimination that some students mentioned experiencing as public relations interns.

Limitations of Study

Because this study was very specific in its sample focus, it is important to discuss and recognize limitations that may have influenced both the results and lasting implications.

Thus, the following section will discuss limitations associated with the *interview procedures*, *restricted sample selection*, and *limited participant sample*.

Interview procedure. Although one-on-one interviews sufficed the data analysis phase of this study, conducting focus groups may have increased validity. In this particular instance – especially discussing an issue of race and ethnicity – having multiple students that share similar backgrounds meet as a group to discuss their perceptions and experiences with diversity in their courses would have been beneficial. Students may have felt more comfortable to share their experiences after observing that they were able to identify with the experiences and opinions of others, thus increasing the likelihood of collecting data not collected from one-on-one interviews.

Additionally, the topics of race and ethnicity tend to make people uneasy. Thus, participants may have decided to provide the most “politically correct” responses to the questions asked versus discussing their complete feelings toward certain questions. Although steps were taken to create a comfortable and safe environment to discuss such topics, in many instances, participants appeared to answer questions in a very safe and cautious mode. Considering the topic being discussed and the un-comfort the topic brings, this may be a reason some responses were carefully crafted.

Restricted sample selection. The sample population was restricted to include only the University of Houston students as participants. Including participants from outside schools would have been useful to learn about their experiences with diversity in their public

relations education. For example, interviewing students from a less diverse student population (i.e., University of Texas) would possibly produce very different data information. Additionally, findings may have been different interviewing students from a historically black university or college (HBCU) because the instructors and students are predominantly Black and the teaching methods would largely reflect that make-up.

Limited participant sample. Limiting the sample population to African American students, limited the diversity of experiences that I could have obtained from other racial and ethnic groups. Interviewing students from various backgrounds and cultures would have increased the validity of this study. Interviewing a diverse sample of participants would provide a more consistent pattern of experiences from other backgrounds thus demonstrating the research need among scholars to expand diversity theory in public relations scholarship.

Future Research

Throughout the process of conducting this study, several areas of research surfaced that could have theoretical and/or practical implications. The following section will discuss these areas in hopes that they will be pursued in a separate study. The areas that will be discussed briefly in this section include: *non-minority students' perceptions of diversity in public relations, using CRT to study other minority groups' experiences in public relations, and African American students' post-graduation experiences with diversity in the public relations industry.*

Non-minority students. Using a similar qualitative approach as the one taken for this study could be used to study non-minority students' perceptions of diversity in their public relations education. This study would be most interesting to learn how Caucasian students define diversity and related terms such as multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity to compare to

students' responses in my study. It would also be interesting to learn whether perceptions vary based on factors such as race or lack of discussion in courses. To my knowledge, no studies have investigated how non-ethnic minority (i.e., Caucasian Americans, both male and female) students feel about their public relations education or diversity training in general. As stated in the literature review, the public relations industry is dominated by White Americans, both male and female. Additionally, the lack of diversity initiatives and training in organizations could be attributed to the lack of diversity discussion in school. Consequently, to interview students currently preparing for public relations careers would help organizations' management teams implement diversity initiatives that would benefit the bottom-line.

Using CRT to study other ethnic minorities. Before this study, no studies had used CRT to study the experiences of ethnic and racial minorities. Thus, research in this area would benefit from separate studies that could investigate other racial and ethnic minority students' experiences. Hispanic students for example, are increasingly receiving degrees in public relations. It would be interesting to learn how being bi-lingual affects their experiences as public relations students and practitioners. Additionally, other minorities (i.e., LBGT people and women) should be investigated to learn about their experiences in the workforce and as students.

African American students' post-graduation experiences. Another area of research that would benefit from a separate study is examining African American students' post-graduation experiences with diversity in the public relations industry. As previously discussed throughout the literature review, the voices and experiences of African Americans have been both invisible and scarce. Since the beginning of African American public

relations history, it has been a struggle to be recognized, accepted, and equally treated in the field. Thus, public relations research could benefit from further investigation into some of the concerns and experiences African America professionals encounter as new age practitioners. Gaining this sort of insight would aid scholars in expanding diversity scholarship in public relations education in addition to expanding diversity initiatives in the workforce.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide for Interviews

First, I would like to ask you questions about being a communication/public relations student.

1. Please tell me about some of your experiences as a communication student.
Probe: How do you like the school's public relations program?
Probe: What are your plans when you graduate?
2. Please tell me about your decision to major in public relations.
Probe: What attracted you to a public relations career?
Probe: How did you seek information about the field?
3. Please tell me about your experiences as a public relations student.
Probe: What public relations courses have you taken?
Probe: Which courses did you like the least/most? Why?
Probe: What has been the racial and ethnic make-up in your classes?

Next, the following questions will ask about your experiences with diversity in your courses.

4. When I say the word "diversity" what does that mean to you?
5. Based on what you've learned in your public relations courses, what does the word "diversity" mean to you?
6. What courses have you taken that solely focused on diversity in public relations?

The following questions will ask you about your experiences with multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity in your public relations courses.

7. How has multiculturalism, race, and ethnicity been discussed in your public relations courses?
Probe: What have you learned about different cultures, races, and ethnicities?
Probe: Based on what has been discussed in your public relations courses, what do you think is missing that you would have liked to learn about various cultures, races, and ethnicities?
Probe: When racial minorities are discussed, are ethnicities discussed separately or as one big group?
Probe: How much do you feel you are able to freely express your opinions about culture, race, and ethnicity?
8. What types of teaching activities are used to increase your understanding of ethnic, cultural, and racial diversity in your courses?
Probe: How often are guest speakers of various racial and ethnic groups invited to talk about their public relations experiences?

Probe: How are case studies used to help you understand diversity? Group projects? Textbooks/readings?

Probe: Which teaching activities do you think would interest students?

9. What percentage, would you say, has discussed race, ethnicity, and culture in your public relations courses?

10. To what extent do you think that the public relations curriculum is taught from a predominately-White perspective?

Probe: Please explain or describe how this makes you feel.

11. What have you been taught about the experiences/make-up of African Americans in the field?

Probe: What have you been taught about the experiences/make-up of other ethnic minorities in the field?

Finally, the following questions will ask about your experiences with diversity outside the classroom.

12. Are you a member or active in any student public relations organizations (i.e., PRSSA or IABC)?

Probe: If so, are efforts made to incorporate diversity projects and initiatives? If yes, how?

13. What have been your experiences (if any) as an intern?

Probe: What barriers (if any) exist to being an African American intern?

Probe: Have you ever felt as an intern, that your race influences judgment of your performance? If yes, please explain.

14. Please tell me about your experiences (if any) with discrimination and racism as an African American student both inside and outside the classroom.

15. How have you seen African American female public relations professionals portrayed in the media?

Probe: To what extent do you feel that the messages about African American female public relations professionals are accurate?

Probe: How do you use the media to help understand other ethnicities and cultures?

16. In your public relations courses, to what extent have discussions taken place that address media portrayals of ethnic minority public relations professionals?

Probe: Has the media influenced your opinion of public relations? Please explain.

17. Based on your public relations training both inside and outside the classroom, do you feel that you are prepared to improve diversity initiatives in the workforce? Please explain.

18. In your opinion, what can be done to improve diversity training and discussion in public relations education?

Appendix B – Solicitation announcement/email

Solicitation announcement/email

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Hello. My name is Kynetta Moore. I am a graduate student at the University of Houston in the School of Communication. I am conducting interviews with people that identify as undergraduate African American female public relations students, who are at least 18 years old, and are juniors, seniors, or recent graduates. The participants will be asked to discuss perceptions and experiences concerning diversity in their public relations education (i.e., race and ethnicity). You must be a declared public relations major. You must have at least taken and completed the course, Principles in Public Relations. Additionally, students must have attended the University of Houston throughout their entire education (i.e., started as freshmen or sophomores). There are no right or wrong answers to the questions, and you do not need any special knowledge or information to participate. I will only be asking about your beliefs, attitudes, and opinions regarding how public relations has been taught to you. If you are interested in participating, the interview will last approximately one hour, and all information provided will remain secure and confidential.

When we meet, I will provide you with a consent form stating details of the report and whom you can contact with any questions; in addition, I will ask that you sign the consent form granting me permission to audiotape our interview. The informed consent form will detail your rights as a participant and state that participation is completely voluntary and not mandatory.

Thank you for your consideration. After the interview is over, if you request to see the final report, I will be more than happy to provide you with a copy. In the meantime, please contact me if you have any questions regarding or pertaining to this study.

This study has been reviewed by the University of Houston Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (713)-743-9204.

Thank you,

Kynetta Moore

Kynetta Moore
krjmoore@gmail.com