The Journey into an Unfamiliar and Uncomfortable Territory: Exploring the Role and Approaches of Race in PR Education

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Abstract:

Race has been, and continues to be, one of those topics that is timely, current, and highly relevant in contemporary society; however, discussion and problematizing of race in public relations (PR) scholarship has been mostly absent (Edwards, Citation2010; Pompper, Citation2005). This study continues to address this void by exploring how some faculty perceive the role of race in PR, as well as how they approach race in their curriculum. This article, using a mixed-method design of the e-mail interview method (Hunt & McHale, Citation2007) and an autoethnographic analysis (Ellis & Bochner, Citation2000) of the first author's PR experiences, demonstrates the challenges that some faculty members face, as well as the opportunities that they have undertaken to integrate race into the PR curriculum in meaningful ways.

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Article:

A decade ago, I was a Black male graduate student working on my graduate degree in public relations (PR) at a large land grant US. research university in the Midwest. I was interested in studying matters of race in PR. No classes offered in my department focused on race and/or difference. And in my graduate PR Theory class, 1 week of readings was dedicated to "minority issues" in PR. On this week, we were to discuss gender and race and challenges facing practitioners. I waited all semester just to lead discussion on this week! Yes! I could write my final paper for the seminar on this topic because our research papers had to be based on at least one of the areas covered in the course. Much to my dismay, this was my only exposure to race in PR. It bothered me that race and gender issues in PR had to be covered in 1 week's worth of readings. I also noticed that research being conducted on race focused almost exclusively on minority practitioner challenges of underrepresentation in the field. I felt I could make contributions to the discipline in this area of research. So I approached my advisor. My thesis advisor, a well-respected White male PR theorist, told me:

Sounds interesting, but you might not want to do that. You don't want to be pigeonholed as "the race guy." It's easy to be dismissed that way by our colleagues. Hell, you're bright enough to study PR broadly and make large contributions to the general field of PR. I'm not discouraging you from pursuing race and those matters, but if you want to be respected broadly in the field, my advice is to steer clear of the race stuff, and study strategic communication, management issues, business related issues because that's where the money is, and make a name for yourself as a general PR theorist. You can never go wrong with that!

Ohhh! What a blow to the gut. I left his presence frustrated. What does he know? In reality, the true question was what did I really know about PR? I was new to the discipline. My advisor has had years of experience as both a practitioner and an academic. I trusted my advisor, and I believed my advisor had a strong read on the field.

So, maybe my advisor was correct. "E-race" race and leave race alone. In some ways, I believe my advisor had my best interests at heart. But what did/does his advice to me say about this discipline? Are other advisors offering the same advice a decade later? At first, I put up some resistance because race really mattered to me, but I saw that he had no interest in directing a thesis on such a topic. Moreover, I had a tough time justifying to him how my interests were PR focused. Eventually, I acquiesced to the suggestions of my advisor. I did a safe thesis project looking at organizational attractiveness and employee recruitment strategies. And on that day, a part of me—as a result of denying what I wanted to study, as well as denying a very important part of my identity—was lost.

Ten years later, I have reclaimed that which was lost to me. I have renewed my commitment to address issues of diversity, broadly, and race, specifically, via my research—thus filling the aforementioned void. Even as I have worked to close that void in me, I recognize that another void still exists—in the PR literature, that is. Although scholars in PR are engaging matters of race in their research, discussion and problematizing of race in PR scholarship has been mostly absent (Edwards, Citation2010; Pompper, Citation2005). This void in the literature is disconcerting because PR, as a discipline, is well-suited to problematize race, as well as contribute to the larger theoretical discussion of race (across academic disciplines) in meaningful ways (Waymer, Citation2010). Simply put, PR as an academic discipline cannot continue to ignore major currents and trends that are clearly relevant to the research questions it seeks to address.

In terms of PR pedagogy, students of PR must truly understand the intertwined triad of history, culture, and race if they are going to be able to foster mutually beneficial relationships with minority publics. If PR is believed to be the vehicle by which community can be achieved and society can be more fully functioning (Heath, Citation2006), then the students of PR—who will eventually be the practitioners of PR—must have an in-depth exposure to, thorough understanding of, and critical reflection on one of the most divisive social constructs of our day: race.

This study, in part, begins to answer this call, as well as to address this void by unearthing some reasons why there is limited inclusion and scarce critical discussion of race in PR curriculum. This study continues to address this void by exploring how some faculty members perceive the role of race in PR, as well as how they approach race in their curriculum. This article, using a mixed-method design of the e-mail interview method (Hunt & McHale, Citation2007) and an autoethnographic analysis (Ellis & Bochner, Citation2000) of the first author's PR experiences, demonstrates the challenges that some faculty members face, as well as the opportunities that they have undertaken to integrate race into the PR curriculum in meaningful ways.

PR EDUCATION

PR education has been a debated topic of inquiry by scholars for more than 2 decades. For example, in the late 1980s, the 1987 Commission on Public Relations Education took place, and shortly thereafter a special issue in Public Relations Review was dedicated to the subject in 1989. Scholars around this time period presented arguments about where PR programs should be housed (Grunig, Citation1989), as well as what should be taught in the curriculum (Grunig, Citation1989; Heath, Citation1991; VanLeuven, Citation1989). Although these works laid a solid base for discussing and articulating what PR education should look like, much more work was needed to define the fledgling discipline. Nearly a decade later, another summit of sorts—the 1998 National Communication Association (NCA) Summer Conference centering on PR education—was held. Following this summit, another issue of Public Relations Review was dedicated to education, and one noted article in that issue, published by Coombs and Rybacki (Citation1999), synthesized the discussion of the Pedagogy Task Team from the NCA Summer Conference. Major findings from our research were: PR, as a field, had not given enough attention to pedagogy; teacher training and preparation was minimal; pedagogical tools were weak; and research on PR pedagogy was scant. Recently, Todd and Hudson (Citation2009) argued that not much progress had been made in PR pedagogy regarding scholarly attention devoted to the issue. There remains a need by scholars to continue to refine and define the PR pedagogy.

The teaching that takes place currently in PR education in the United States has been based primarily on the Public Relation Society of America (PRSA) five-course standard sequence of classes: principles of PR, research methods, PR writing, internship credit, and an additional class in campaigns or case studies. Several scholars have asserted that PR educators and executives agree on their perception of the PR curriculum in the United States—which is believed to prepare students adequately for the practice (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, Citation2009; Stacks, Botan, & VanSlyke Turk, Citation1999); however, other scholars have suggested that PRSSA professional advisors are not convinced that faculty members are teaching the skills students need in industry; these professional advisors tend to value practical experience more than faculty advisors, and they tend to suggest that professionals should be involved in the assessment of applied student projects such as portfolios and final projects in capstone campaigns classes (Todd, Citation2009). From this discussion, it is clear that preparing students for the world of work is an important part of PR education.

From an applied standpoint, we recognize the desire for educators to prepare students for the world of work; however, from a philosophical standpoint we believe that education cannot be limited to skills-based learning, regardless of what rigorous scholarly surveys of professionals and academics might suggest. True problem solving involves critical thought. Other scholars agree: "It is not enough to be technically proficient without being able to make informed contributions to debates about contemporary society and its future development" (McKie & Munshi, Citation2009, p. 61).

PR, as a discipline, in recent years has been criticized for its insular nature, Western slant, and extreme functionalism (McKie & Munshi, Citation2007). In this vein, Mckie and Munshi (Citation2009) further lamented PR's dominant research and teaching foci by articulating that there are already enough "how to books and textbooks"; yet, "there is far, far more in this world than is dreamt of in public relations" (p. 62). Sadly, students are not exposed to this multicultural, global, outside world of possibilities that surrounds them in any meaningful way (Bardhan, Citation2003).

In short, students must be prepared to engage in critical, reflective discussion and argument about the most pressing issues of contemporary society, and one such debate that has been dominant in societal discourse for years, but has been largely absent in the PR literature is the topic of race. Although one of the guiding bodies for PR curriculum certification, the PRSA Educational Affairs Committee, has set matters of diversity (which should include race) as one of its nine standards, we argue that, on the day-to-day teaching and application of PR, these issues are not addressed in any systematic way. Part of our aim is to discover why this is the case.

From a pedagogical standpoint, scholars have argued that it is virtually impossible to understand curriculum without truly understanding "the centrality of race in the construction of the American identity" (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, Citation2004, p. 317). Thus, at the core of this study is an interrogation of race and why it should be studied and taught in PR curriculum, especially in the United States, to a much greater extent.

RACE, STANDPOINT THEORY, AND PR EDUCATION

Race is a powerful and divisive social construct based on perceived biological differences; however, the majority of research conducted in the natural and social sciences asserts that the genetic, physical, and/or biological markers that define races do not exist (Allen, Citation2007; Ashcraft & Allen, Citation2003; Simpson, Causey, & Williams, Citation2007). Although race cannot be defined by genetic markers, its effects are quite powerful: Individuals and institutions struggle continuously with how to articulate race, how to co-exist in a seemingly postracial society, and how to make sense of racial differences that are socially constructed and socially meaningful (Simpson et. al, Citation2007).

Standpoint theory provides a useful framework for understanding and conceptualizing race because this theory, in its simplest form, asserts that a person's place in the social hierarchy affects the way that he or she views all issues (Allen, Citation1998; Harding, Citation1991). Although standpoint theories, historically, have been used by scholars to analyze issues of how men and women, via gendered social constructions, view the world differently (Harding, Citation1991; Wood, Citation1992, Citation2005), standpoint theories appear to offer a useful framework to explore issues of race and intercultural communication (Kinefuchi & Orbe, Citation2008).

Standpoint theories are based on several premises, and based on the arguments of standpoint theorists, people of different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds have different (and possibly oppositional) understandings of the world (Kinefuchi & Orbe, Citation2008). The first premise is that "social locations including those based on gender, race, class, and so forth shape people's lives" (p. 73); the second premise asserts that occupying a racial "location" and having a racial "standpoint" are vastly different. The former refers to the notion that "everyone has a racial location or a racialized perspective, defined primarily in terms of the racial and ethnic groups to which they belong (or are placed into)"; the latter—a racial standpoint—is achieved or "earned through critical reflections on power relations" (Kinefuchi & Orbe, Citation2008, p. 73); the third premise refers to the notion that "a person can develop multiple standpoints shaped by membership in traditionally marginalized groups" (p. 73); finally, "racial standpoints are fundamentally collective and dialogic constructions"—meaning that these standpoints are not achieved individually but, rather, "they can only be accomplished through working with other people of color" (p. 74).

As persons of color with an understanding of our racialized standpoints, we argue that race is worthy of study in PR education because of its social, political, and economic effects. Simply

put, race can account for how identities are categorized, as well as how power, material privileges, and resources are distributed (Giroux, Citation2003). Scholars in PR believe that PR theory can be strengthened by attempting to address both power and management of power resources (Heath, Motion, & Leitch, Citation2010; Smudde & Courtright, Citation2010); therefore, it makes sense that the discipline would explore in depth the strain, advantages, and disadvantages wrought by race, its effects, and its contestations.

For example, Edwards' (Citation2010) work, albeit UK based and, therefore, not generalizable to the profession globally and to the United States specifically, explored the aforementioned strain while showcasing the discrimination that minority professionals continue to face in the practice of PR:

> If the public relations profession wants to genuinely improve diversity and address the discrimination that minoritized practitioners face, it must recognize the pervasiveness of Whiteness and give up some of that privilege to make room for something new. Once the past and the present are recognized for what they are, strategies to change the future can evolve. (p. 218)

Whiteness and Education

Whiteness is present, and often uncontested, in workplaces. Whiteness must be studied because of the invisible knapsack of privilege that accompanies the construct (McIntosh, Citation1998). Although Harding (Citation1991) was not talking about race per se, her comments about power disparities are fitting:

> The social group that gets the chance to define the important problematics, concepts, assumptions, and hypotheses in a field will end up leaving its social fingerprints on the picture of the world that emerges from the results of that field's research process. (p. 192)

And via the lens of Whiteness, the script has been written one-sidedly (Edwards, Citation2010). Addressing the privilege of Whiteness and other matters of race in PR should begin in the first socialization phases: the classroom.

This study explores race, specifically, in the context of the US PR classroom; thus it is important to highlight first the purpose and functions of the US education system broadly and then explain their application in the context of US PR education. Although the US public education system in general is supposed to serve the interests of all the masses, U.S. public education has suppressed critical consciousness, replaced it with monoculturally-based curriculum and hegemonic ideologies that serve dominant groups' agenda (Baszille, Citation2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, Citation1995), and, more times than not, it functions to produce, maintain, and reproduce class and race relations (Apple, Citation1979, Citation2004; Giroux, Citation1986). As such, one reasonably can expect to find similar functions of reproduction in all classrooms including a US PR classroom.

Based on the current patterns in PR curricula, students are being trained to be practitioners for government, nonprofit, or for-profit entities. Students are being taught how to be hired agents of organizations, how to write across platforms, and how to design campaigns to achieve organizational determined goals and objectives. Students, however, are not being taught how education can be their means of becoming aware of race, recognizing the power and privileges

attached to race, and developing their sensitivity towards such issues in their future professions and in society broadly.

McKie and Munshi (2009) aimed to direct students, practitioners, and even some scholars "to ways of transformative thinking that will change the perception of public relations as a narrowly defined tool to achieve corporate goals to one of building relationships at multiple levels and in a range of contexts" (p. 72). Understanding race must be central to that aim of broadening the educational base. The question then is not "Should we teach race in PR," but, rather, "How can scholars challenge and influence the curriculum in ways that lead to the inclusion and teaching of multiple standpoints, including race?" Based on PR teachers' standpoints, some combination of the following questions is likely to arise: (a) If race is to be taught in PR, where should it be taught in the curriculum? (b) How should race be taught in the curriculum? (c) Who should be designated to teach issues of race in the PR curriculum?

These questions force us to reexamine the opening reflection vignette. The first author's advisor voiced concern about his advisee being thought of as the "race guy"—locked in the academic ghetto of teaching and researching in a perceived lower-tier, underappreciated area. These questions highlight the double-edged sword of racial minorities engaging in race-related research: These individuals can be discouraged by mentors from studying issues of race in PR because the mentors perceive a stigma attached to conducting such research. Conversely, racial minorities can become tokenized as they are seen solely as the faces of diversity in their academic departments.

This dialectic establishes the basis for the following research question:

> Research Question: How do some PR faculty members' perceptions of the role race in PR shape how they approach the topic via curricula?

METHODS

This study used a mixed-method approach. The two methods chosen informed each other and enabled us to fully address the research question. While the first method (e-mail interview) allowed PR faculty to share their experiences of teaching race, the second added more richness to the data by giving personalized narratives and accounts of being a racial minority student and subsequent faculty/teacher of PR.

First, we used the e-mail interview method because of its advantages over the traditional interview method; the costs of the e-mail interview are low; there is adequate time for participant reflection upon the questions; participants might be willing to share things that they would not do face-to-face (Hunt & McHale, Citation2007). The first author sent a message to the NCA PR Division listserv asking colleagues to answer a few questions about race and PR curriculum. The researchers chose this listserv because of the history of this organization in addressing PR curriculum challenges (see Coombs & Rybacki, Citation1999). According to the listserv administrator, there are 151 unique e-mail addresses affiliated with this listserv. A total of 13 persons participated in this e-mail interview. Nine participants were women; four were men. The participants were not asked to identify their race for purposes of this study, because the researchers were trying to determine how PR faculty members, generally, perceive and approach race in PR pedagogy.

The first author constructed an interview protocol and survey to obtain information about participants' thoughts on the role of race in PR in their own words. There were three parts to the

protocol: textbooks' coverage or race, approaches to teaching race, and the perceived role of race in PR. As the reading and rereading of responses occurred, we began the process of memoing, comparing, and interrogating categories using generative questions, and searching for patterns and analyzing emergent themes (Patton, Citation2002).

Additionally, we used an autoethnography as method to interrogate the first author's lived experiences as a former student now minority faculty member in PR. Autoethnography (see Ellis & Bochner, Citation2000) as a research method is becoming accepted as a viable means to address applied communication challenges (Goodall, Citation2004; Tillmann, Citation2009b). Researchers have used this method to address health issues related to body image and eating disorders (Tillmann, Citation2009a); to explore various intersecting standpoints including racialized standpoints, gendered standpoints, and social class standpoints (Waymer, Citation2008); and to explore the unintended outcomes associated with media portrayals of stereotypes and inner-city crime (Waymer, Citation2009), to name a few usages. As such, the researchers of this study chose to analyze the first author's lived experiences as a racial minority graduate student in PR and as a racial minority faculty member teaching and researching in the area of PR. This aspect of the study led the first author to start with his personal life and then "pay attention to physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions; inspect these data and develop elaborate associations through recall of context; and write the experiences as a story" (Waymer, Citation2009, p.172).

Autoethnographers, as a result of criticism of the method from empirical scientist (see Denzin & Lincoln, Citation2000; Goodall, Citation2000), must always strive for "honesty, humility, self-reflexivity, and an acknowledgement of the interdependence and reciprocal role-playing between knower and known" (Conquergood, Citation1991, p. 182). In this analysis, the first author has done just that. By closely following the criteria for validity set forth by autoethnographic researchers, the interpretations and evidence that emerged from the analysis of my lived experienced as a minority PR student and now academic—who can and has asked his peers about the role of race in PR—can be deemed credible and can be further used as means of talking about and theorizing race or the absence thereof of race in PR theory and pedagogy.

RACE IN PR: WHERE IS IT? HOW IS IT DISCUSSED? DOES IT EVEN BELONG?

As we interviewed members of the PR faculty, four themes emerged in regard to the research question: faculty perceive the role of race in PR as "largely absent," "misrepresented" when present, or "not needed" at all. And for faculty trying to teach race, the theme of "I might not know how to teach race, but I am trying my best anyhow" emerged. From the autoethnographic analysis, similar themes emerged. As such, the autoethnographic analysis of the first author's experiences serves to set the tone for and frame the interview discussion to follow.

Where is It?

It's Spring 2011. Sitting in a faculty meeting, trying to keep it all together. "Got to keep it together." Discussions are getting heated. We're in the process of revising our undergraduate curriculum. We've already made the decision to have our PR concentration certified. Every student will now have to take "campaigns" if this program certification process is going to work. Now, as a department, we're trying to agree on 30 common hours for our students to take. We offer three areas of concentration—PR, Multimedia Journalism, and Communication Studies—but students graduate with a Communication degree. Trying to keep it all together. Perturbed inside. Can't hold it. Meeting is adjourned.

I leave the meeting pondering, "But where in our curriculum will students be exposed to broader concerns like social class, like gender, like culture, like race?" A few hours later, I have a one-on-one conversation with a colleague about the status and future of our department: "Multicultural communication isn't even taught in our department! Where will the students learn about these issues?" It seems race never had a presence in our PR curriculum at this large southern US research institution. And it seems as if it will be a long time before it will have a space … if ever.

This autoethnographic reflection and analysis speaks to the first theme that emerged from the interview data. The discussion of race is scarce in PR and virtually nonexistent. In fact, every faculty member interviewed said that the discussion of race in PR textbooks is minimal and marginal at best. Becky said, "I'm familiar with all of the textbooks that we use and one of them is mine! I don't think we have any materials on race as part of our curriculum at the undergrad level." Although there might be some attempts at covering the subject matter, faculty members suggested that these efforts are superficial. Jamie stated,

I haven't used a PR textbook in a couple of years, but the only attention to race that I recall from them was in the use of racially diverse people in photos and illustrations. I don't recall any discussions of race as part of the text.

Anne echoes the sentiment:

I have a hard time thinking of any textbook that adequately covers the matter of race and diversity in its wider form …. It is mostly a lip-service; something mentioned in passing and something included because "it needs to be." … I believe we should reconsider the ways we talk about matters of race in the classroom in relations to public relations.

But how is race talked about in the texts and in the curriculum? How should race be talked about? PR faculty members provided thoughts on these matters as well.

(Mis)Representation: That's Not How Race Should be Covered?

Fall 2010, I decided that I want to offer, and am prepared to teach, a course on race and PR, but there is no room for it in the curriculum. "Maybe it can be taught as a capstone course, but not as a required class in the curriculum," my department head tells me. "Fat chance of that happening," I say to myself. "If I am going to teach race, I have to incorporate it into classroom discussions in Issues Management courses." Since 2006, I've taught 16 undergraduate PR related class sections; the majority (10 of those sections) was Issues Management in PR classes. I have also taught two sections each of PR Campaigns and Organizational Communication, one section of Principles of PR, and one section of Rhetorical and Critical approaches to PR. Fall 2010, I stand before my Issues Management classes, as they look puzzled about why I had them watch a 10-min step show. I say, "Let's analyze this particular matter of race from a PR perspective. Do you see that this White sorority has won this step show; judges have vowed that the results are accurate; judges said that there was no scoring discrepancy. Stepping is a traditional Black art. Blacks are upset that the Black sorority didn't win. See these blog posts? See these discussions? Why do you think the posters are outraged? Because about 2 weeks after the step show, Coca-Cola (the parent company of Sprite) didn't like the negative attention it was getting from Black consumers (the Black sorority was awarded second place by the judges at the show).

So it appears, to quell outcry, Coca-Cola simply awarded cowinners of the step show and said that they found a scoring discrepancy in the judges' assessments. "I ask you, class, what does this say about race, PR, and White privilege?" "What should Coca-Cola have done?" A student replied, "Professor, I don't get why Black people are so sensitive about these things." Another student said, "Sprite awarded the Black sorority as cowinners only out of political correctness; they didn't want to be labeled as being racists." No student verbally sympathized with the perspective of the "angry" Blacks posting to the blog. No Black students were on the roll for this class. The events of this day, during this exercise, reinforced my thoughts that if/when race is even discussed in PR, it will be talked about in the contexts of strategic management functions that have an effect on the bottom line such as crisis mitigation, crisis management, or image repair. I started classroom discussion in this vein as a means of "warming the students up" for a larger discussion of race. Few students wanted to engage in broader discussions of race. Moreover, the students had trouble accepting that historical race relations led to the outcry surrounding this event. Students displayed much difficulty embracing the terms of Whiteness and cultural theft; yet they were quick to vocalize how Sprite's actions to reach this minority demographic via a cultural event was a good idea and use of strategic targeting and management; however, unexpectedly, things simply went wrong. I'm frustrated. I recognize students are trained to think of PR in this functional way, and I have played my role in teaching in this way. I'm frustrated. I recognize that they lack the desire and/or ability to engage in a critical discussion of race. I have to be more deliberate in the ways that I teach race in PR—just broaching the topic is not enough! I'll do better next time.

The interview data revealed that although discussions of race are scarce, they are not absent. As race shows up in some of the textbooks, there is a consistency to its representation: only as a strategic communication tool. According to Godfrey, there is no explicit reference to race in PR "except as a demographic category when evaluating audiences"; Nick has had similar experiences:

> There is a quick and simple discussion of diversity in our Public Relations Principles textbook by Cameron et al. We don't use a book for a case studies class, but we have some discussion of ethics with a very limited discussion of race. The primary way race is discussed is within strategic target audience research as a socioeconomic and demographic characteristic for engaging in dialogue and sending out messages.

In short, the faculty members interviewed attest that discussions of race in PR textbooks are both sparse and narrow—the discussion rarely goes beyond "the demographics" of PR practitioners (including race/ethnicity). Becky asserted that "discussions … read of publics and audiences" and "don't seem to get beneath demographic categories."

Race Should Not be Covered as a Stand Alone Topic

Two faculty members suggested that race is a subsidiary of culture, and if educators continue to teach culture in PR, then that is sufficient. When asked specifically about how they address race in their PR curriculum, Kacie shared that

> cultural background is always part of audience analysis and also stakeholder discussions [and as such the role that race should play in PR curriculum is] none; as stated [earlier], [my colleagues and I] feel race is part of culture and culture should be discussed in all of its permutations as it impacts PR.

Angie stated, "We don't really approach the topic of race through assignments. We talk about audience demographics (analysis) in general, but we don't really single out race." Furthermore, "Personally I don't feel we should single out different races in our PR education or curriculum. Aren't we trying to move to a more cohesive culture?"

It appears that some scholars and researchers of PR would not refute these faculty perspectives on culture as the appropriate means of discussing race. Natasha, however, provided more concrete and further nuanced ways to use culture to address matters of race in PR.

> Some of us have been advocating for further including international perspectives in the curriculum for a long time, but somehow we haven't paid much attention to intercultural communication issues as they pertain to PR in US contexts. This, of course, would include race. In fact, quite recently, I proposed we, in our department, include a course in intercultural communication in our range of electives for PR students. This would be an indirect way of getting them to think about the place of culture in PR, including race. … I feel the lack of racial diversity in the profession itself, as well as in academia, has, unfortunately, led to a lack of attention to matters pertaining to race and ethnicity. I am seeing some change, though. The special issue of JPRR that is in the works is devoted to race and ethnicity. This issue was spearheaded by PR scholars outside the US. We need more of that work within our borders, as well. This is a topic that needs to enter the discourse of PR scholarship and pedagogy.

It appears that a broad term of culture is how all faculty members interviewed are choosing to address issues of race (if they are addressing these issues at all). Yet, culture, as an umbrella term alone, carries with it the power for individual faculty to obscure or not critically engage, reflect, and/or challenge one of the most divisive elements of culture, which is race. The subsuming of race in culture or in diversity topics, both of which seem to be the prevailing modes of choice for delivering this content to students, reflects Whiteness and its preference for safe topics (Cooks, Citation2003). Moreover, subsuming race under culture can lead to silencing raced voices; thus, culture and diversity can be addressed without highlighting the invisible privilege of Whiteness (Cooks, Citation2003), thus masking the hegemony of Whiteness and, therefore, obscuring the standpoints that are so crucial to understanding PR practice and pedagogy. In short, the future of race in PR education hinges on the ability of faculty to rigorously theorize race and study its implications in and on the practice of PR, as well as in their ability and desire to devote time and resources to approach this topic in-depth in their classes.

Exploring Ways to Approach Race in PR Pedagogy

> There are 151 PR faculty [members] on this NCA listserv, and I only heard from 13 persons. I wonder why I did not hear from more of the PR faculty. There are several colleagues that I know personally who are on the listserv that did not respond. Was the end of the semester workload weighing down on them? Was the impending holiday season on the forefront of their minds? Do academics avoid "calls to answer questions" at a rate equal to or greater than the general population at large? What if their ignoring of my questions is due to the questions themselves? Do they think that race in PR is not important? Did my friends, specifically, simply seek to spare my feelings by not responding? Did they feel that since this is not a part of their research agenda, that they would not respond to the questions? Or did they not have anything to say because they found the topic of race to be an

uncomfortable subject to broach, an even more difficult topic to teach, and did not want to reveal to me their challenges in covering this topic. Or did they not want to reveal to me their decisions to exclude or not teach on this topic in their classes? Only they know. … But there is one thing that I know: If someone asked me the same questions I asked them, I might be reluctant to share as well. As a Black man, I still struggle as I try to figure out how to teach race in PR. I don't have the freedom to discuss such topics in depth because they don't fit neatly into our tightly packed curriculum. Will my students (almost exclusively White … I can count the persons of color that I have taught since 2007 at my current university on my hands) think that the only reason I want to teach race to them is because I am Black? Many times I have taken the path of least resistance and have avoided the discussion in undergraduate PR classes directly due to that fear. I am a Black man teaching a majority of middle-class White women. More importantly, do I want to be labeled as the race guy? Will my peers discount this work? I still hear my former advisor's voice as I prepare to teach or prepare to engage in research on the topic. Maybe there is some truth yet to his words?

As I interviewed PR faculty members, a final theme emerged: "trying my best even if I do not completely know how." As a result of me asking faculty members about their "best practices" involving the teaching of race, I have been asked by three persons to share with them resources that I use or have come across over the years on how to teach race. All recognized the lack of coverage in the area of race in PR literature and pedagogy; however, nine of the 13 faculty members do not seem discouraged. Three faculty members are highlighted because they detailed programs underway at their universities to address this void in the curriculum.

Anne stated:

> For students earning our PR certificate, Organizational Diversity is one of their senior level electives. Many of our PR students take that course (which I teach), and it specifically addresses race (along with a host of other diversity characteristics). At the end of the quarter, a student group is assigned to generate a teaching/training module on race in the workplace, which they deliver to the class.

This faculty member's words are encouraging. Katherine's comments are equally compelling:

> I believe we should find creative, meaningful ways to incorporate these discussions. We should, perhaps, start with the simple fact that we need to understand the diversity within our publics, and for that we need to learn how to appreciate diversity within our profession …. Although some professionals would say they are color-blind today, I do not think many believe that. I do not think we ever critically thought about this in the classroom …. If we want to have some meaningful discussions in our PR classes about these issues, perhaps, we should take a look at what our colleagues in gender and race studies are doing in the classroom to see how we can adopt their activities to our pr-specific discussions … perhaps, even collaborative effort of some sort can be introduced, between our Division and some other Division of NCA that investigates these issues.

Nick echoed this sentiment:

> We have talked about this issue in our college quite a bit lately, since we are going under accreditation review and recently held our college's diversity week event. I don't think race

should play out as a singular distinction within the study of public relations, but what should be studied is diversity—of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious and political ideology, but just as important intellectual and cultural diversity. Discussions of race need to occur outside of ethics week in class or diversity week in college (our college's diversity week was primarily about race, and primarily about African American as opposed to Hispanic, Asian, gender, etc.). Race should be discussed within public relations courses within ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), in understanding audiences, workplace environment, message development and in every capacity of business and politics and social living.

Simply put, even without clear direction, PR faculty members are navigating the unfamiliar waters of race in PR education. The expansiveness of that waterway is yet to be determined; however, as Becky noted, "race, from the standpoint of culture, is absolutely needed in PR education because if PR people are to be cultural interpreters, they have to understand the cultural standpoints critical to their employers."

Although these three PR faculty members are highlighted for their efforts to make race an integral part of the PR curriculum and experience, it is important to note that there are times when the subtle influence of Whiteness leads even supportive academics, who advocate for the inclusion of race into PR curriculum, to confine race to specific places and domains (e.g., as intercultural communication, as cultural awareness, as a business rationale). What is more, these seemingly useful rationales and categorizations of race all soften the edge and potential effect of discussions of race whereby lessening the likelihood of contested verbal exchange, challenge, and uneasiness necessary for students to truly engage with the topic. Concomitantly, this might also be a reason why faculty members do not readily adopt Critical Race Theory and other critical pedagogy approaches to race in education, because these theories and approaches—rather than introducing race in a way that aligns itself with the overall ethos of mainstream PR— have the potential of problematizing race and disrupting the prevailing narratives of the business rationale, symmetry in cross-cultural contexts, and the boundary spanning function of PR. Even so, these faculty members have embarked on a journey that, as it appears, few others have dared to begin.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

PR theory and pedagogy have been topics of inquiry for decades; however, this manuscript adds to this discussion in a few meaningful ways. First, it highlights a gap in PR pedagogy and literature regarding matters of race by exploring some PR faculty's perceptions of the role of race in PR. All faculty members interviewed stated that they perceive the role of race in PR as virtually nonexistent. Few textbooks deal with the subject matter in any real depth.

Faculty members also shared that they perceive the role of race in PR as shallow and misrepresented. As scholars have demonstrated (Edwards, Citation2010), the limited discussions of race in PR have almost exclusively focused on demographics level analysis used for targeting campaigns or some other form of marketing effort. As PR educators continue to approach race from the limited perspective of highlighting case studies where race should be studied as means to avoid organizational crises that stem from discrimination, or race is only thought of as a variable to be managed for the strategic communication purposes of reaching, selling to, or cultivating minority prospects, they miss out on a ripe opportunity to enrich the quality of instruction and discussion by talking about issues that truly matter in the society in which students live (and

ultimately will work). More important, if relationship building is a focal point of PR, practitioners must be able to understand and navigate different and at times competing standpoints.

This navigation of standpoints is very different than teaching race under the umbrella of culture. Faculty members also perceived the role of race in PR as being subsumed under teachings of culture, thus not warranted to be singled out as a pedagogical focus. Others teach it under the umbrella of culture because it is a less confrontational way to approach race. Culture, indeed, must be studied in PR; however, we wanted to unpack and highlight race as an important area of study because as evidenced in the PR literature and pedagogy, race is often overlooked, brushed over, and simply avoided. Moreover, teaching culture without highlighting race can mask the hegemony of Whiteness, privilege, and potentially silence or exclude raced voices from our curriculum and areas of research.

This study also explored how some PR faculty members approach race via curriculum. Some recognized the import of teaching race and are looking for ways to integrate race more fully into PR curriculum. This addition to PR pedagogy will not be easy because although some see the need to teach race, they simply do not know where to begin in discussing it. Jamie stated:

> It [race] certainly deserves more attention than I give it. I do discuss gender inequities (in both hiring and compensation), but I should also engage race more. I guess part of my problem is not being sure quite what to talk about regarding it.

Similarly, Angela mentioned, "While I don't shy away from it [race], I do not emphasize it either." Ultimately, the largest obstacle to teaching race in PR is rooted in the potential confrontation that arises while trying to discuss matters of race in a PR classroom. As Becky shared,

> My White grad students were defensive and uncomfortable with the whole exchange, just like males are when we discuss gender in class. It is hard to get outside of one's own "skin" and I thought thinking of race, class, and gender from the lens of culture might help avoid the defensiveness. Well, at least it was a start.

It is a valiant start, and Becky's experiences are not unique. Communication researchers have found that White students generally respond intensely to explorations of racism, and many intercultural educators, often, are both not prepared for the challenges White students assert during conversations about racism and are unsure how to reply appropriately to those challenges (Johnson, Rich, & Cargile, Citation2008). Researchers, however, have provided several examples of student responses to critical race pedagogy to help teachers deal with similar obstacles in their own classrooms (Fox, Citation2001; Johnson et al., Citation2008). Specifically, Fox has written a text that provides exercises, assignments, advice, and a host of other resources that can aid teachers who are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with talking about race in the classroom. Thus, assistance is available; there is no excuse why race cannot be given a more prominent role in the PR curriculum despite the real and perceived barriers.

Simply put, to understand race is to study race. Educators in general, and PR educators specifically, cannot pretend race is not important. Not talking about race does not mean that the problems of race will magically disappear. This critical reflection is especially important in an age where many voices for populations that have been historically muted for a host of reasons are emerging as contributors to public discourses (Waymer & Heath, Citation2007). Kinefuchi and Orbe (Citation2008) asserted:

> We need to engage racial others and critically reflect on our values, ideologies, assumptions and recognize their limitations. In doing so, we must be conscious of not only our racialized locations but also how we and others are simultaneously situated within personal, racial, and societal contexts. (p. 87)

Until this dominant social construction (race) in society is exposed via curriculum and addressed in a meaningful way, PR researchers might very well be limiting the growth of their discipline. The health and future of teachers' practice will be determined in part by what they teach their students today. Educators cannot continue to gloss over, in their teaching and research, the social constructions present that divide them and that can severely impede relationship building? How can we PR teachers, as members of a reflective discipline that has relationship building at its core, do otherwise?

> Whether it is the autoethnographic accounts and analysis of my experiences as a Black male PR faculty member or it is the interview responses from other PR faculty members interested in teaching matters of race in PR, there exist commonalities among the varied lived experiences: some faculty navigate the difficulty of the lived experience of wanting to teach race in PR although not knowing exactly how to teach this topic; their efforts to teach race critically are, at times, stifled by the Whiteness of both the curriculum and the students—for Whiteness poses real challenges (yet the most promising opportunities) for teaching race in the curriculum. And more important, I, the first author, am finding that I am not alone—for others share my experiences of challenge and frustration while trying to teach race, critically, in PR. The dilemmas expressed via the autoethnographic analysis are not isolated, but rather they can be broadly applied—for all teachers concerned with race face them. The journey has begun. The journey continues. Onward.

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