

**“Difference” in public relations research: A case for introducing**

**Critical Race Theory**

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## **Introduction**

Current paper refers to the study of Pompper (2005) entitled “Difference” in Public Relations Research: A Case for Introducing Critical Race Theory. The author has tried to investigate the role of a series of factors in the development of public relations research. In this context, it is assumed by Pompper that race and culture can influence the format of the public relations research perhaps more than other ‘tools’ of research that are usually considered as having a crucial role in the development of public relations research. Moreover, the author introduces the concept of ‘critical race theory’ trying to justify her assumptions regarding the role of race in the public relations research. She also highlights the benefits of this theory, which, in accordance with the author, can identify all factors that can possibly affect the public relations research even if their influence on the above research had not been evaluated in the past. The work of Pompper can be considered as really significant as she presents a different aspect of the public relations research giving to the reader the chance to locate new aspects of this research. In this paper, the work of Pompper will be analyzed gradually, starting from the project rational and the literature review while at a next level a more analytic view of the author’s work will be made through the evaluation of the paradigm and design, the methods used and a discussion over the results. The personal assumption on the above author’s work will be included in the Conclusion section where some issues for consideration are also going to be presented.

### **Project Rationale**

The study of Pommper refers to the importance of race and ethnicity for the public relations research. In this context, the above two elements, as indicators of ‘difference’, are considered to have the power to lead to the formulation of specific assumptions in the field of the public relations research. The use of these elements by the author should be regarded as an ‘innovative’ scheme especially if taking into account that most of the researchers in the area of public relations research tend to use more ‘common social characteristics’ when conducting a public relations research, like gender and class. In this context, race and ethnicity were not particularly considered in the past as crucial elements of public relations research perhaps because the conduction of public relations research among people belonging in different races/ ethnicity were regarded as too ‘risky’ due to the existence of many cultural and social differences between people of different origin. However, in the particular case Pommper managed to ‘overcome’ this constraint by combining race and ethnicity with culture. In this way a greater ‘group’ of social characteristics has been gathered towards the evaluation of specific data related with the public relations. As a result the assumptions produced through the above research had to be considered as valid and credible referring to an extremely broad sample of population.

In accordance with the specific author her study aims to “(a) analyze attention given to “difference,” which includes difference by race, ethnicity, and culture in public relationsresearch; (b) build theory around how such parameters can be explicated; and (c)increase awareness of *being conscious of* difference and race, ethnicity, and culture” (p. 140). In doing so, the author highlights the significance of difference in

the field of public relations research avoiding however to justify with accuracy the reason of her choice, i.e. why she chose these three ‘social characteristics’: race, ethnicity and culture, as a basis for her study. Of course their role in the area of public relations research is analyzed thoroughly however there is no particular justification for the specific choice instead of other social characteristics like class, gender or educational level.

### **Literature Review**

The field of public relations research has been extensively examined by researchers throughout the years in order to identify the elements that could influence the format and the quality of the assumptions produced through the relevant procedure. In this context, it has been stated by Holdgate et al. (2006, 310) that “the field of industrial relations could benefit from a greater engagement with feminist-influenced methodologies; three methodological approaches that can assist in understanding the lives of workers could be the following ones: a framework that recognises intersectionality; an account that accommodates both material and cultural explanations; and a research process that is reflexive and recognises positionality; these are identified as intrinsic to a gender-sensitive analysis, and through a comparison of key texts it is possible to highlight why their absence leads to much research in this field remaining 'gender blind'” (Holdgate et al., 2006, 310). The criteria used by the above researchers for the evaluation of the quality and the credibility of industrial relations research (the greater ‘family’ of public relations research) could be considered as extremely important. The preference of these researchers for gender and culture are being justified because of the ‘functionality’

of the gender in the research procedure. The research in the area of public relations can present several forms in accordance with the participants, the aims set and the tools used. In this context, the study of Karlberg (1996, 264) showed that “a historical analysis of public relations research first must distinguish between academic and practitioner research; this distinction is necessary because a strong tradition of applied research has developed within the practice, and it explicitly is wed to the self-interests of its sponsoring clients; in contrast, academic research, at least in principle, is publicly sponsored and is assumed to serve the broadest public interest”. At a next level, it has been proved that academic research in the public relations sector can be also divided in further categories in accordance with the research methods used throughout the relevant procedure. More specifically, in accordance with Karlberg (1996, 265) the academic ‘type’ of the public relations research can be divided in the instrumental and the critical research. Instrumental research “is concerned with the micro-level questions and techniques: the "how-to" of public relations; in contrast, critical research is concerned with theorizing, or critiquing, the broader social, political, and economic implications of public relations practices’. The above scheme could be similar with that of Pompper who uses the feminist theory in order to justify her choice regarding the criteria of the public relations research. More specifically, Pompper has based the literature review of her paper on the following four fields of knowledge: “methodology and difference in social science, feminist theory, critical race theory and public relations theory and difference” (p. 141). The author chose to divide the literature review of her paper into these categories because as she admitted the research over multiple domains of knowledge could help to identify “important clues to discovering how

social researchers account for difference based on race, ethnicity, and culture” (p. 140).

### **Paradigm and Design**

In the paper of Pommper the main issue under examination as always mentioned above is the influence of race, ethnicity and culture in the public relations research. In order to approach the above issue more effectively the author used the positivist paradigm which is “best illustrated by an infusion of feminist theory to explain and predict gender-power dynamics in practice and research” (p. 145). Through this paradigm the above researcher managed to avoid the limitations that other research practices could possibly cause. In this context, it is mentioned by the author that “beyond paradigm limitations, a number of other factors may account for failure to investigate race, ethnicity, and culture in public relations theory building since publication of our first academic journal in 1975; First, data sets have underrepresented minorities; Second, ethnicity variables have been homogenized and ethnic identities obscured—as in studies of minorities; Finally, given traditional researcher-researched matched pairings logic, numbers of minorities (as compared to Whites) among the particular public relations divisions could explain comparatively lesser attention to race, ethnicity, and culture in published research” (p. 146, 147). Through the above statements the author explains her preference for specific type of paradigms regarding the issue under examination despite the fact that changes in the social framework are constant and therefore the relevant samples may be easily differentiated through the time.

## Methods

In order to present the differences among parts of the population on the basis of race and ethnicity, the author used “a critical analysis of scholarship published in *Public Relations Review* from 1975 through part of 2003—Volume 1 through Volume 29(2)—revealing 679 articles, and in *Journal of Public Relations Research* (including its precursor, *Public Relations Research Annual*, Volumes 1 through 3, 1989–1991) from 1988 through part of 2003—Volume 1 through Volume 15(3)—revealing 180 articles; the total population of articles was 859; excluded were book reviews, research in brief, and letters to the editor” (p. 148). The amount of data used has to be considered as significant. In accordance the results produced by the above research should be credible and valid – as they have been proved to have these qualities.

In order to proceed to a more analytic evaluation of the issue under examination the author also employed “a sample of 112 articles in *Public Relations Review* and 26 articles in *Journal of Public Relations Research* for depth analysis based on presence of keywords (15.8% of the total articles); Next, texts were critically examined by me and the graduate student until there were no new insights” (p. 148). All the material used above led to the same conclusion: the role of culture and ethnicity in the development of particular assumptions during the public relations research cannot be denied.

However, the methods used in the relevant research presented also certain negative aspects. In fact, it was proved that “many researchers failed to consider race,

ethnicity, or difference in conducting focus groups, interviews, and compiling case studies; of course, authors may be slow to accept qualitative methods or edit their works in anticipation of journals' page limitations by considering self-identification and other details unimportant" (p. 156). In other words, the use by the author of studies of other researchers could possibly help her to gather an extensive range of data in relation with the specific subject. However, during the procedure these studies led to significant delays mostly because the data involved had to be reviewed as of their appropriateness for the particular research. Many of them proved to be irrelevant.

### **Results and Presentation**

As the author states the results of her research were based on the study of 138 articles related with the particular area of knowledge. Moreover, the author notices that her research as a total was based on five main themes which were all relevant with race, ethnicity and culture. These were: "(a) Difference Defined in Study Topic, Thesis, or Focus; (b) Difference Methodologically or Epistemologically Illustrated; (c) Difference in Sample Only; (d) Difference in Author(s)' Philosophy, Approach, and Worldview; (e) Difference as Public Relations Effectiveness Antecedent or Antidote" (p. 149). The above themes have helped the author to better focus on the specific social elements (mentioned above) offering more accurate results. At a next level, it is noticed by the above researcher that "great care must be taken in respecting and developing relationships with research participants; more important, labels (e.g., Hispanic) must be used with caution—in the absence of "more

enlightened terminology” (p. 157). The above assumption is related with the presentation of data. In the same context, it is noticed that “because we coproduce the narratives we presume to collect, we must anticipate how audiences will “receive, distort, and misread our data” and adjust reports accordingly” (p. 157). The reasons for these explanations could be found in the need of the particular research to be more objective and independent from influences of all kinds.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of the above study is proved through many issues. Towards this direction it has been stated by Lopez (2003, 68) that “Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the legal arena, its influence has proliferated throughout the social sciences literature; Yet CRT has not spread significantly into the field of educational leadership, where the discourse on diversity has failed to penetrate the salience of racism in schooling”. The above view is mentioned in order to justify the importance of the study of Pompper for the development of public relations research in all social frameworks. The need for restructuring of parts of her methodology when addressing the relevant issue cannot limit the value of her work in the specific field. The work of Pompper over the appropriate form of research in the area of public relations can be justified by the importance of public relations for the international business activity. In fact, the study of Coombs (1995, 1) showed that “public relations has been caught up in the drive to internationalize business; organizations are now dealing with global constituencies on a more frequent basis, which increases the demand for international public relations; one concern raised by this development is whether or not theory and research are keeping pace with the

international needs of the practitioners however the survey of public relations articles demonstrates a very slow pace for the internationalizing of public relations research". On the other hand, it has been supported by Macnamara (1995, 1) that "while debate continues over whether public relations fits within marketing or corporate management, or both, there is broad agreement that modern public relations practice needs to function as a management discipline within an organisation's total management team". In other words, the interest of the international academic community for the development of appropriate methods of research in the public relations area can be justified by the fact that the particular sector is vital for the success of any organization within its market. Particularly for the international marketplace the development of appropriate public relations techniques is not feasible unless using advanced 'tools' of research as the one presented in current paper by Pompper. For this reason it has been stated by Hon (1998, 103) that "evaluating the effectiveness of public relations continues to be a topic of critical importance to practitioners and scholars; as pressures for accountability mount, practitioners increasingly must demonstrate that public relations activities help achieve meaningful goals for their organization or clients". The problem related with the development of the appropriate research methods in the area of public relations is the fact that the specific sector presents severe turbulences mainly due to the constant changes in social and cultural framework of countries around the world. In this context, public relations have to be adapted in the newly created social environment trying to promote the interests of specific firms trying to follow the ethics and principles of the relevant market. It should be noticed here that the use of research tools in the particular field without primarily examine

their appropriateness for the achievement of the particular target, can lead to opposite results when the increase of profit has been the only motive for the design and the development of these tools. The work of Pompper is differentiated by this of the other theorist's mostly because the ethical evaluation of the data involved has been set as a priority for the implementation of the relevant research schemes. The improvement of the firm's performance can be assumed as a logical consequence if all appropriate measures are taken by its managers.

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## **Case study**

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