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**A STRATEGY OF POWER RELATIONS FOR RACIALLY DIVERSE PUBLIC  
RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS**

A Thesis in

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The public relations industry, an industry comprised of mostly Caucasian practitioners, is suffering from a clear lack of racial and ethnic diversification. Many racially diverse practitioners have a hard time being recruited and flourishing at their positions within an organization, let alone entering top management. This issue is indicative of PR's reputation of being a *lily-white* profession and can be attributed to the power dynamics within an organization. Using a theoretical framework of power relations, this study explored whether power can be used by racially diverse practitioners in the minority group through the strategic formation of power relations given their agency's power dynamics. The 21 interviews suggest power relations are employed by diverse practitioners and are heavily based on dissimilarities. Interviewees claim power relations prove to be beneficial in advancing their careers and helping them avoid instances of pigeonholing, micro inequalities, tokenism and termination.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	v
Chapter 1. Introduction .....	1
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	4
The Element of Power in Power Relations Theoretical Framework .....	5
Organizational Dynamics of Power .....	8
The Effects of Organizational Dynamics of Power in PR .....	12
The Formation of Power Relations .....	19
Diversity and the use of Power in American Businesses.....	23
Diversity and the use of Power in Public Relations.....	29
Chapter 3. Method.....	35
Sample .....	37
Procedures .....	39
Chapter 4. Results .....	42
Chapter 5. Discussion.....	68
Implications.....	74
Limitations .....	78
Future Research.....	79
References.....	80

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1-1. Organizational Power Dynamics Diagram..... 14

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Many industries are plagued with the controversial issue of failing to diversify their workforce to resemble a more succinct representation of all races and ethnicities specifically one that parallels the nation's ever growing population (Chavez, 2012). Among those industries is public relations, a promotional industry comprised of more than 60,000 professionals, yet one that primarily suffers from an overwhelming lack of diversity; Edwards (2013) and Bardhan (2016) for example argue that 10 percent or less of the industry is racially diverse. Through the perception of this latter issue, the field is stigmatized and heavily criticized for its failure to resolve this perpetual controversy (L'Etang, Hodges & Pieczka, 2012). Diversity can be perceived as an overarching concept often confusing people when it is used in a broad context. Diversity encompasses many key components stemming from the lesbian gay bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) community, culture, religion, age, race and gender. Bhawuk and Triandis (1996) have one of the more comprehensive and explicit conceptualizations of diversity defining it as a "difference in ethnicity, race, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, age, national origin, and cultural and personal perspectives" (p. 85). However, the industry's lack of racial diversity is easily visible and apparent, thus arguably making it one of the industry's most alarming concerns (Waters, 2015). Furthermore, much of the criticism stems from a macro perspective in which scholars and even PR practitioners themselves place blame on the industry as a whole for not having a greater call to action.

However, recent research has focused on analyzing certain factors and elements that inherently produce high disproportions in employee demographics. Instead of looking at the industry as a whole, research has transitioned toward examining the specific nature of public

relations organizations and those employees whom inhabit that work space (Gallicano, 2013). Edwards (2013) and Bardhan (2016) claim 10 percent or less of the industry is racially diverse and so it is salient to continue investigating why some organizations are succeeding in terms of diversification and others are not. Scholars (Gallicano, 2013; Guinier & Torres, 2002) have delineated that the diversity issue can be attributed to each organization's power dynamics, meaning their use of power and the specific players who hold power given a specific agency.

Their research further outlines some practitioners who are part of the minority group can overcome some of the hurdles associated with the lack of diversity by strategically forging alliances with those who hold power, or as these scholars refer to them, *power relations* (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Gallicano (2013) states racially diverse practitioners who form part of the minority group of an agency could greatly benefit from forming power relations with dominant group members, both with those who are also racially diverse or those who identify as Caucasian. However, there have not been studies dedicated to uncovering whether or not such a strategy is truly prevalent in agencies, let alone one that examines its potential benefits. Due to the enigmatic absence of racial minorities in the field, power relations are analyzed through a racial lens in order to identify if such power relations between diverse practitioners in the minority group and practitioners in the dominant group are prevalent in PR agencies. Furthermore, drawing on Gallicano's (2013) views, it is useful to identify if such relations are sufficient and, basically, powerful enough to change a work culture and its dynamics. Therefore, identifying if the alternative, power relations not based on a "similarity-attraction" foundation, are found in PR agencies would be of benefit. Regardless of the nature of each power relation, this study's purpose was to determine whether or not the formation of power relations is

beneficial for racially diverse practitioners and successful enough to be used as a future strategy for better diversification.

The agency used as the research site is located in New York City and is one of the top renowned agencies in the nation. The participants interviewed are all employed at the agency's NYC office location and are public relations practitioners or part of the agency's leadership. Semi-structured interviewees were used to gauge each employee's own perceptions and experiences regarding diversity and their use of power relations. Interviewees claim to employ power relations but most importantly base their power relations on dissimilarities; in other words, the participants look for someone who does not resemble their own identity markers. For example, if an employee is African American, they would pursue a power relation with a Caucasian leader. Furthermore, the diverse interviewees claim power relations have improved their work environments and helped them grow as professionals. Among those benefits are job security, not being tokens, avoiding being pigeonholed, reducing favoritism and micro inequalities as well as receiving promotions, pay raises and being selected for various account work. Power relations were analyzed through interview transcripts in which employees would mention mentors who advocate on their behalf and push for their success. When interviewing those leaders who were referred to as mentors, they would corroborate the employees' claims by stating they would in fact mentor those employees. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the formation of power relations come to fruition when employees seek out mentors to fulfill these positions. Because these mentors are found in the dominant group, they can help the diverse employees by influencing policy change and bringing about favorable changes.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

The lack of diversity in the public relations industry has garnered much attention and thus produced extensive recurring research all aimed at ameliorating the issue (Ford, Long, Ballard & Jiang 2016). The diversity component of race has been greatly unsatisfied for decades and while there have been signs of improvement, it is nowhere near the magnitude needed to resolve the crisis. Cecilia Young (2007) said it best when she states, “Logically, if we spent 40 years filling the lower ranks of the organization with diverse people, shouldn't we have diversity at every level?” (p. 26). In other words, organizations and their leadership may claim to be addressing the problem, however having only a few racially diverse practitioners should not be seen as an *accomplishment* or a suitable supplement towards change.

The pronounced lack of racial diversity has been prevalent for decades, and therefore the issue carries more weight and pressure as time passes without any real visible improvement occurring (Hon & Brunner, 2000). For example, in 1990 only eight percent of the PR industry identified as African American (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995). Scholars are not necessarily focusing on only African Americans, but also on all other racially diverse groups who do not fit the majority description of Caucasian; this study focuses on Hispanic/Latino and African Americans. With that being said, the next closest minority racial group represented in the industry was Hispanics with a mere three percent (Diggs-Brown & Zaharna, 1995). The next decade did not see much improvement even though growth predictions for these minority groups in the US population were estimated to be at least nine million. In fact, recent reports paint a very similar picture indicating approximately 90 percent of PR practitioners are considered to be Caucasian, consequently showing the lack of representation for racially diverse practitioners

(Bardhan, 2016). While this may be an improvement from 2011, in which Edwards (2011) states only 8 percent of practitioners were diverse, it still does not signify a change in the status quo given that African Americans (13.3%) and Hispanics (17.6%) currently make up about 31 percent of the total US population (US Census Bureau).

Agencies must do more than recruit diverse practitioners. They need to make it their mission to allow them to succeed and enable them to work without the restrictions and limitations of the unspoken biases against practitioners who do not fit or resemble the dominant identity markers. In fact, two of the most commonly recognized identity markers contributing to the formation of dominant and minority groups are that of race and ethnicity (Ghosh, 2014). Considering so much time has passed, primarily since the early 1990s when diversity became a prevalent issue, and promotional and retention gaps have not seen much resolution, racially diverse practitioners are in need of help. However, partnering with powerful colleagues, as offered by Gallicano (2013) and other scholars, can pose as a sound solution. A PLANK report offers up Gallicano's (2013) views as suggestions for agencies to use, stating agencies should encourage their employees to "build alliances across identity groups in the work place" and create mentorship programs to "advance the careers of diverse practitioners" (Bardhan, 2016, p. 6).

### **The Element of Power in Power Relations Theoretical Framework**

Scholars such as Guinier and Torres (2002) introduced a power relations framework to investigate organizational power dynamics. This early research was later developed by other noted scholars such as Gallicano (2013), Zemblyas (2006), and Young (2007) to further gauge how the formation of power relations can help to solve diversity issues within certain organizations given their own, unique dynamics of power conducive of their organizational

culture, structure, and hierarchy. Gallicano (2013) elaborated on such research and applied it to the field of public relations to examine why minority group practitioners do not hold as much power as dominant group practitioners and offered the solution of a power relations strategy. While power can be an enigma encompassing many elements and sub elements that give life to this sometimes widely used term, some basic building blocks to this term are essential when exploring its causes and effects, one of which is power relations. Ultimately, there are sources of power, types of power, and much more that goes into operationalizing such a grand concept. In regards to power relations and the dynamics of those relations in an organization, it is salient to first define "power" as it is applied in this study. Just as diversity is a term widely used to cover many variables, scholars have many definitions and conceptualizations of power given their intended areas of research. Thus, definitions of power are common but many are nonetheless parallel at the core.

Jaap Boonstra and Kilian Gravenhorst (1998) define power as being "a dynamical social process affecting opinions, emotions, and behavior of interest groups in which inequalities are involved with respect to the realization of wishes and interests" (p. 99). Through this lens, one can easily see power can be favorable or unfavorable depending on which side of the spectrum one falls. This is evident through the definition's incorporation of inequalities; however, through the formulation of certain relations, such inequalities can be ameliorated or at the very least, weakened. Boonstra et. al (1998) further explain power can ultimately be used to influence others into accepting and adopting one's own ideologies and plans. Russell (1938) conceptualizes power as "the production of intended effects," meaning one exercises its power to bring about a desired effect or change (as cited in Zemblyas, 2006, p. 294). Power might be an intangible element of an organization but it is not invisible, thus benefitting those who have it or

are associated with it, versus simultaneously hurting those who do not have access to power itself, or even agents of power. Katie Place (2012) urges practitioners to be mindful and observant of those who hold power and how their organization's leaders are using power.

There is however a distinct difference between power and authority, where power can be used more to influence and change behaviors, and whereas authority may grant someone power but not necessarily the ability to personally influence; instead it dictates in a manner that is formally legitimized (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Those with power are not always as high up on the corporate ladder as those with authority, but their influence on others in the organization can have a lot of merit and credibility, thus going further in bringing about change. In other words, authority is built on obligations and rules, where power is propelled more on influence. This notion should not be confused to further imply that influence *equals* power; on the contrary, influence can simply be seen as a strong determinant for holding power (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Consequently, power relations between those in *need* and those who have power is more appropriate than the relations formed between those in need and those with authority; the former can produce significant change (Boulton, 2012).

Before progressing into the outcomes of these relationships, the different types of power should be analyzed since they affect and determine the forging of power relations. The different types of power are referred to as legitimate power, coercive power, reward power, expert power, and referent power. While many of the five types of power can apply to this particular industry context, the two most applicable ones to this study are *legitimate power* and *referent power*. Legitimate power, as previously touched upon above, is power that is rightfully appointed due to a person's position of authority (Boonstra & Gravenhorst, 1998). In other words, legitimate power comes with managerial positions and having a hierarchy in place which allows one to

govern over subordinates. Alternatively, referent power comes from characteristics of a person which has *earned* them the *privilege* of having power and, in this case, influence as well. This type of power and influence can be held over various people, not necessarily just their subordinates but also their peers. Such power stems from their personality characteristics and the inherent fact that the person is well liked and admired by their peers, thus giving them unwritten, informal power and ultimately the privilege of influencing others (Boonstra & Gravenhorst, 1998).

### **Organizational Dynamics of Power**

Place (2012) further states that organizational culture affects power and in turn causes certain power relations to form, especially when there is not “equal opportunities for practitioners of diverse ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds” (p. 327). Such inequalities negatively affect a racially diverse practitioner’s power. Place’s (2012) perspective is reminiscent of the work of Foucault who frames power as highly contextual where “investigations of the mechanics and effects of power be limited to particular settings” (Ahonen & Tienari, 2009, p. 660). In other words, each agency is specific to its own dynamics of power which ultimately leads to its established power relations, and thus the possible formation of new ones implemented by diverse practitioners. Some agencies might be better at handling their power dynamics and balancing the power through integrated relations; however, the industry has led many to believe there is room for improvement based on the lackluster statistics regarding diversity among the employee makeup as well as top management (Bardhan, 2016).

The examination of how power molds and structures organizations’ power dynamics inherently leads to the examination of power relations because power is seen as the crux behind the formation of an organization’s structure *and* behind every association that it leads employees

to have (Bierstedt, 1950). Many of the established power relations normalize certain work practices regarding the adoption or rejection of diversification, and thus further drives ideologies of associating certain groups with competency qualities while dismissing other groups as incompetent. To combat each agency's unique power dynamics, power relations can be formed by the underrepresented as a mechanism to further achieve work success (Ahonen & Tienari, 2009). In other words, racially diverse practitioners found in the minority group could potentially be affiliating themselves with practitioners possessing higher levels of power, or those found in the dominant group. Because agencies have normalized these identity markers based on race and ethnicity, that leads to the ascription of varying power levels, it ultimately forms a divide between a dominant group and a less dominant group, known as the minority. In fact, Holck (2016) states, "the stereotypical distinction between majority and minority employees in terms of skills and competencies" only emphasizes the dominant group's biased views of what their organization's makeup should look like and who should be responsible for holding power (p. 297). The dominant group within an organization theoretically has power and therefore, minority group practitioners must work harder to achieve high power.

Another issue is not simply whether racially diverse practitioners exist, but rather why they are not recruited and as successful as their Caucasian counterparts. According to Brown, White and Waymer (2011), despite seeing a small increase in diversity, "minority practitioners are limited in career advancement" and are often overlooked because of their identity markers (p. 524). Irizarry (2012) mentions many of these diverse practitioners are indeed interested in building a career in the field of PR, however, they are disappointed by the profession's flawed commitment and passive action toward better diversifying their staff. This is problematic for obvious reasons and gives the impression that the industry has agencies which favor a certain

type of practitioner on factors that are out of people's control. In fact, a study conducted by Ford, Long, Ballard, and Jiang (2016) uncovered that less than three quarters of PR professionals felt satisfied with their organization's inclusion levels and diversity efforts.

Offermann, Matos and DeGraaf (2014) states employees tend to heavily compare themselves with others in their organization on the basis of race and ethnicity. For example, practitioners tend to gravitate to members of their own racial group before making connections with members of other racial groups. The similarities prove to be more appealing than the mystery of the differences among the groups. These comparisons often lead to the formation of attitudes and behaviors in regards to those similar to oneself and in retrospect, to those who are dissimilar (Offermann et al., 2014). For example, African American practitioners express that for the most part they are generally welcomed and greeted by their racial peers first including if those peers are from either an "in-group" or "out-group" in the organization. This then produces a trickle-down effect to being welcomed by their Caucasian counterparts (Dyson & Waymer, 2011).

These notions expressed by Dyson and Waymer (2011) support organizational power dynamics literature where such components are essentially the blueprint for the formation of in-groups and out-groups, or dominant and minority groups (Offermann et al., 2014). Thus, those found in the minority group feel inadequate and powerless. Offermann et al. (2014) state strategic-relationship building with members of other racial groups found in the dominant group can help improve work life for diverse employees. This perspective prompts the question of whether power relations formed by a diverse practitioner found in the minority group with another diverse practitioner found in the dominant group (e.g., leadership position) is actually helpful or not. In addition, Dumas, Phillips and Rothbard (2013) claim dissimilarities act as a

moderator for integration among dominant and minority groups. Therefore, research dedicated toward exploring power relations, both based on similarities and dissimilarities, is necessary to gauge if such relationships commonly exist in agencies and whether or not they are actually beneficial.

By virtue of power, hierarchies within organizations including top management and their subordinates are ultimately built; these hierarchies can be inherent of identity markers, and not just authority status. Thus, the formation of minority and dominant groups becomes rampant in such organizations. Generally, those who are racially diverse tend to be in the minority group and thus have to align themselves with those who hold power in order to bring about change (Young, 2007). But dominant groups in PR are primarily made up of Caucasians, who because of similar culture norms gravitate towards other Caucasians to further their organization. From the stagnant demographic statistics offered by Diggs-Brown and Zaharna (1995) all the way to recent reports from Bardhan (2016), one can easily see the industry has had a problematic history with racial integration. Irizarry (2012) claims Caucasians still comprise most of the dominant group with Asians being the only racial group seeing improvement in the field. The real issue lies within how the workforce does not reflect society's population, or at the very least, accurately represent it. Consequentially, scholars have called for a substantial increase in minority representation considering the fact African-American and Hispanics make up only 10 percent of the PR industry (Irizarry, 2012). Irizarry's (2012) findings in addition to Bardhan's (2016) and Edward's (2011) findings proves this to be a dramatic underrepresentation considering these two minority groups make up 30 percent of America's population.

### **The Effects of Organizational Dynamics of Power in PR**

These organizational dynamics of power can lead to the white leader prototype, essentially a concept that conveys the level of acceptance and comfort PR agencies have with selecting Caucasian leaders in comparison to appointing racially diverse leaders (Logan, 2011). The main difference between the two is that those who are or *look* “white” are assumed to be better suited to lead, thus skin color equates to having more credentials for being a successful leader (Logan, 2011). Logan (2011) states, “The White leader prototype, literally embodied by Whites, is a manifestation of the difference race makes on the physical bodies of employees in public relations. The preference for White leaders exemplifies the difference race makes on their minds” (p. 453). Additionally, Bardhan (2016) reports that because of their identity markers, white males dominate top management and more importantly, feel as if their efforts regarding diversity and inclusions are effective, even though statistics prove otherwise.

It is evident that the industry has unspoken preferences and agencies are accustomed to envisioning their leaders looking a distinct way (Hon & Brunner, 2000). In fact, Christopher Boulton (2012) points out that agency leaders must confront their own biases in order to be able to better assess potential employees. Studies show agencies tend to hire similar people to those found in their staff; however, they are not intentionally hiring non-diverse practitioners, but rather are just attracted to and thus show favoritism toward Caucasians (Boulton, 2012). Thus racially diverse practitioners could have the same resume as Caucasian practitioners but the likelihood of promotion would favor the Caucasian practitioner due to their automatic advantage (Logan, 2011). Edwards (2013) claims that equally qualified yet racially diverse practitioners “must provide reassuring demonstrations of skill and cultural similarity, working harder to demonstrate merit and belonging” (p. 246). This is due in part because Whites and non-whites

are unconsciously being evaluated based on their skin color and thus their racial background. In fact, Edwards (2013) claims that race and Caucasian-like identity markers, “becomes the benchmark by which *others* are measured” (p. 245). Therefore, in order to be a leader, being white suddenly becomes a preferred prerequisite as it somehow conveys one will be more successful in leading a firm (Logan, 2011).

This should not be the case, which is why such power relations are formed in hopes of positioning diverse employees higher up in the hierarchy to contribute to decision making through the access of power relations. Ultimately, as mentioned above, this dilemma is referred to as having high power or low power. A prominent factor toward the building of power relations can be described as the existence of having both a challenge and a solution (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Challenges can include pay gaps, unbalanced work distribution, marginalization of racially diverse practitioners, and underrepresentation in top management. These divisions in challenges delineate who has the power and who is the one in need of a solution. Essentially, these relationships are contingent of a level of dependency, specifically from a minority group member to a dominant group member.

These organizational dynamics of power-producing hierarchies and racial preferences pave the way for even bigger disproportions in demographics among agencies. For example, Young (2007) illustrates the industry’s approach perfectly by employing her *organizational power dynamics diagram* (Figure 1-1) to showcase the imbalance among employee groups, specifically between racial minorities and Caucasians. Young (2007) metaphorically poses her diagram consisting of various colored dots in order to illustrate an agency’s employee makeup. Each different-colored dot hypothetically represents a different race of people, with the red dots representing the Caucasian population. Therefore, with a cluster of primarily red dots, the red

dots are inherently the dominant group. Similar to Logan (2011), she then uses this symbolism to paint the picture of how organizations will in turn evaluate everyone else through a “red lens” because of the red dots’, or Caucasian’s, dominant presence. Essentially, Caucasians become the dominant culture within an agency and the racially minority groups end up being compared to them (Young, 2007). In the diagram, there are clearly more red dots and their positions are higher up in the ranks. Therefore, when other “colored dots”, or racial minority groups, do not match the physical standard set by the dominant group, those individuals are deemed inadequate to be hired or lead.

**Diagram — Organizational Power Dynamics**

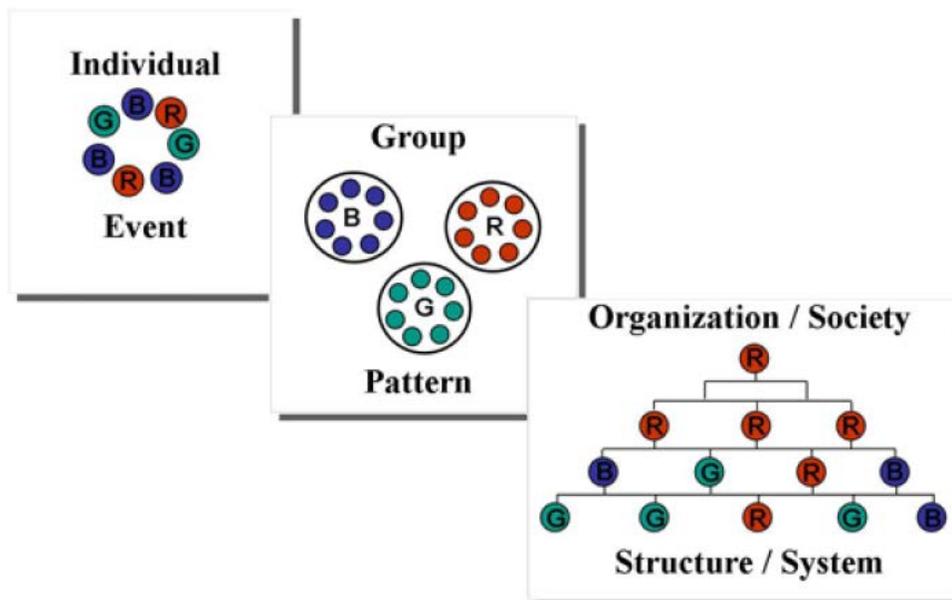


Figure 1-1: Organizational Power Dynamics Diagram

This distorted way of evaluating potential candidates has set the standard for the current state of the industry, and is further highlighted in Logan’s (2011) study which claims that as of 2011, the top 25 firms all had a white leader or at least a leader who resembled the white prototype. In addition, research showed organizations are attracted to candidates who possess

similarities with their existing workforce, thus placing racially diverse practitioners at a disadvantage in selection procedures (Hofhuis, Van der Zee & Otten, 2014). It supports Boulton's (2012) study that delineated a preference for hiring candidates who exhibit the same identity markers therefore establishing diversity to be more of a barrier than a facilitator during the recruitment and promotion processes (2012). Because there is great power in numbers, this further strengthens the dominant group's power; the larger the dominant group gets, the smaller the underrepresented groups get and the less power that is made available to them (Hofhuis et al., 2014). Furthermore, as of 2014, Caucasians held 87 percent of PR management positions, leaving a meager 13 percent of managerial positions for racial minority groups (Toth, 2009). Additionally, to emphasize Hofhuis et al. (2014), and Boulton's (2012) claims regarding physical similarities being more appealing than diverse identity markers, Guinier and Torres (2002) discuss that race is simply deconstructed to skin color; in other words, race is not seen as a biological genotype but more so a physical attribute of pigmentation. Through this perspective, anything other than a White, or Caucasian resemblance, is not deemed as adequate in organizations. Ironically, those who might be of mixed racial descent, but happen to be light-skinned may not go through the same challenges that their darker skinned relatives would endure. These findings are parallel to Logan's (2011) white leader prototype research and how people of color are at a disadvantage going into the industry.

Furthermore, such favoritism stemming from the racial imbalance of an agency's power dynamics can lead to pigeon-holing and tokenism (Tindall, 2009). Pigeon-holing generally refers to the assigned type of work that restricts workers from branching off into other areas of work (Tindall, 2009). With public relations' diversity issue, pigeon-holing refers to practitioners being hired in order to work on racial accounts that relate to their ethnic community (Gallicano, 2013).

For example, Waymer et al. (2011) found some agencies hire minority practitioners for the sole purpose of representing requisite variety or with the preconceived notion of pigeon holing them into diversity related accounts, which is the exact opposite of what diversity initiatives stand for. In fact, according to Bardhan (2016), diversity reflects an open-minded approach in which leadership welcomes the many types of differences brought upon by their employees. It should be seen as a vital part of an organization, valued, and embraced by all within the agency.

Therefore, “diversity is difference in action,” where one can easily witness the diversity across all accounts and across all levels (Bardhan, 2016). Thus, such limited diversity efforts do not suggest agencies should stress the language and cultural skills of certain minority groups because it instead heightens their marginalization and siloes them into working in one area of the agency (Holck, 2016). Ethnic and racially diverse practitioners are often hired or selected to join teams because of their insider knowledge, not necessarily being appointed because of their overall merit (Munshi & Edwards, 2011). For example, an interviewee from a study by Diggs-Brown and Zaharna (1995) elaborates her pigeon-holing experience stating, "It's wonderful for the ego, but it also sends the subtle message that you're not valued for your skills and knowledge, but for your color" (p. 117). This false sense of inclusion does not equate to a diverse workforce, especially when racially diverse practitioners found in the minority group do not have access to mainstream work.

Holck (2016) describes mainstream work as being high-prestige work which is reserved for in-group employees who are favored by members of the dominant group. By contrast, low-prestige work is that which is intended to highlight organizations' diversification efforts and is typically not considered to be mainstream work. Those who find themselves doing low-prestige work are considered subordinates and have limited access to power in comparisons to those

working on high-prestige. The distinction between both organizational groups lead to differences in power and feelings of under appreciation (Dyson & Waymer, 2011). Munshi and Edwards (2011) elaborate on this notion stating those practitioners being pigeonholed have limited power in the agency, making it difficult for them to question or reject the type of work they get assigned. This is the case for many minority-based diverse practitioners, including the participants from Edward's (2013) study, who expressed feeling unwelcomed and ultimately recognized that their marginalization was putting their careers at risk, yet did not have any other options.

Such work environments can ultimately lead to tokenism, which essentially highlights certain individuals from an under-represented group to serve as *success stories* (Gallicano, 2013). Tokenism uses practitioners as more of a representation tool to showcase how ethnic practitioners are indeed able to prosper at their work and hold positions of authority, even if it is for low-prestige work (Holck, 2016). Munshi and Edwards (2011) conclude that diverse practitioners are given employment because of the skillset they possess that is directly related to mainstream beliefs about their race. For example, Hispanic/Latino practitioners' justification for being hired can be attributed to the fact that they may be bilingual and can benefit campaigns geared toward Spanish-speaking publics, but not necessarily because of their overall credentials as a PR professional. Furthermore, the idea of tokenism profiles certain practitioners to show the industry the agency is integrating their leadership when in reality it is just a superficial front to silence the critics. Within these tokenistic positions, one is given the title but not necessarily the access or power to make decisions.

Young (2007) reinforces these views by stating agency leaders engage in such methods as an attempt to fill their quota numbers, not because they actually value the placement of

diverse practitioners in leadership. In other words, agencies believe that by having a minority group representative “having a seat” at the table, it fulfills diversification. Ortlieb and Sieben (2013) state, “employing ethnic minorities contributes to the positive image of being an employer that obeys fairness and dictates discrimination prohibitions” (p. 493). Ultimately, tokenism is based on the practitioner’s differences benefiting the agency’s image, not on benefiting the practitioner’s career development or the career advancement of the minority community. An African American interviewee from Water’s (2015) study claims she often feels utilized in derogatory ways stating, “there are times I feel like I’m only in the room to give the Black perspective” (p. 21). In fact, many other interviewees had parallel sentiments expressing they frequently felt they were recruited just to be token members of the agency and therefore did not foresee any chance for professional development (Waters, 2015). Specifically, being assigned to work outside of the mainstream accounts propels these practitioners to be overlooked when it comes to promotional opportunities. Waters (2015) believes agencies’ attempts to diversify their staff is actually tokenistic because it does not promote inclusion, but on the contrary emphasizes the differences among employees that is further highlighted through their line of work, a line of work that encourages exclusion rather than inclusion.

Ultimately, Bierstedt (1950) mentions that without power in place, there is no order and thus no organization. Therefore, power is necessary and deemed vital for a successful organization or agency. However, the nature of the power relations and the benefits from them are the items explored to investigate how instrumental their power truly is. As Bierstedt (1950) states, power is one of the basic elements for an organization and should be exercised. It is power that contributes to the organizational dynamics and thus determines how things will operate within the employee makeup and affect its practitioners.

### **The Formation of Power Relations**

Given these variations in how one receives power can shed light on the power relations that may occur in the industry. A diverse practitioner can seek to form a relation with someone who has power; such strategic moves can occur especially when one needs help or mentoring. Gallicano (2013) claims a prominent strategy diverse practitioners employ is that of having or securing a mentor, which becomes “essential to the empowerment of minority public relations practitioners” (p. 42). Because they do not feel included, largely in part due to their diverse identity markers, they seek out someone who has some power or influence to alleviate some of the stresses and effects of being on the outskirts of their organization. This potential ally might have access to certain resources and outlets allowing them to bring about change. Gallicano (2013) states these relationships do not normally arise, but are chosen strategically.

In most cases, diverse employees seek out other diverse practitioners for power relations, mostly based on racial similarities. In the hopes of being helped and improving work life, it makes sense for them to align themselves with someone who understands them, and to those to whom they can relate (Gallicano, 2013). This ties directly to the fundamental component of power itself, which is the degree of *dependency* (Boonstra & Gravenhorst, 1998). In agencies, this could mirror a practitioner seeking a similar practitioner who has some form of power in order to build a connection and an allegiance that benefits them. The benefits therefore are considered consequences of power; with power comes outcomes and consequences due to a person’s power to influence or make vital organization decisions. If this person from the dominant group has the ability to make such decisions or influence those in charge of making such decisions, then ideally, the *lower-power* practitioner can use his/her relation with the *high*

*power* practitioner to help bring about a favorable change. Essentially this becomes the joining of forces to achieve mutual goals and produce a desired change (Ragins, 1997). In other words, the person one chooses to form such a power relation will ideally have the same mutual goals in mind; without their support for the diverse practitioner's goals and desire for the same changes, there is no point to the relationship.

On the other hand, according to a Foucauldian perspective, power relations' complexity gives way for both transformative *and* limiting effects of power. Those relations opposing an affirmative change will limit the efforts of other power relations consisting of a minority group member striving toward improving diversity-related issues (Zemblyas, 2006). The limiting effects of power are in essence the unbalanced distribution of power mostly held by Caucasians (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley, 2009). This may be caused by uses of colorblindness, a concept used to explain racial inequality in the workplace, referred to as a disregard for racial characteristics, and the negative affect such a disregard may trigger. Scholars such as Stevens, Plaut and Sanchez-Burks (2008) argue colorblindness attempts to avoid any conflict and stop inequalities based on race, but by doing so, people end up ignoring minorities when they in fact are struggling. In other words, pretending those racial differences do not exist does not automatically eliminate those inequalities that are already present in the work place prior to implementing a colorblind approach toward diversity issues. Therefore, those racially diverse practitioners found in the minority group are not allowed to fully challenge the system. Colorblindness diminishes the problem but does not fix it on a deeper level (Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Due to existing organizational power dynamics, coworkers can be influential in breaking down these barriers and getting others to fully integrate or they can be detrimental to such change by employing colorblindness and maintaining the status quo (Place, 2012). These negative types of

power relations, according to Gallicano (2013), have negative consequences because as previously mentioned, parties do not have the same mutual goals in mind.

Ahonen and Tienari (2009) express criticism toward diversity issue solutions because organizations fail to look at the established power relations of an organization and take them into account when implementing resolution efforts. In fact, Uysal (2013), a critical race theorist, shares the same perspective stating diversity initiatives often fail because most of them fall under a diversity management approach. This approach is referred to as “a managerial metaphor that implies power” and lacks the substance to truly achieve diversity because it is concerned with achieving a competitive advantage rather than developing careers (Uysal, 2013). Therefore, CRT claims that because diversity efforts often fail to meet their goals, marginalized workers employ a double consciousness (Edwards, 2013). Through this mentality, racially diverse practitioners become aware of how the dominant group members will react to them in certain situations, and can specifically foresee instances in which their race will be a barrier. Therefore, with this double consciousness in play, racially diverse practitioners feel the need to find a resolution for the issue (Edwards, 2013). That resolution should be the inception of their own power relations to counteract the established, yet unspoken, power relations that keep benefiting Caucasians.

These unspoken power relations affect the status quo, especially those which are embedded within the hierarchy of the organization. It is thus imperative for minority group practitioners to create their own version of power relations to combat the ones formed through an agency’s unique dynamics. These power relations as Holck (2016) mentions should ultimately serve the purpose of being these minority group members’ “primary contacts in the organization, sheltering them from social isolation and serving as back-up and support in periods of work overload and stress” (p. 303). By strategically aligning themselves with someone who has access

to power and influence, it increases practitioners' chances of producing change and bettering their work environment. In accordance with Gallicano (2013), Holck (2016) further claims that such tension among the groups results in bringing members of the minority group closer to other dominant group members who they feel are similar to them and is specifically referred to as a "similarity-attraction." Ultimately, Ahonen and Tienari (2009) state, "there is a call for the particular configuration of power relations in the specific institutional setting that needs to be analyzed in detail" (p. 673). Reber et al. (2008) expand on this notion by claiming diverse practitioners express using power relations would be a great tool to get ahead in the industry.

These power relations should be seen as a mentor and mentee relationship where the practitioner with higher power can help the one with lower power (Ghosh, 2014). This is parallel to what other aforementioned scholars have expressed and thus if employed properly should be beneficial to further explore if such relations satiate diverse practitioner's intentions. It is important to note that while some of these power relations are formed off the bases of trust and friendship, most are formed through strategic and calculative approaches (Place, 2012). Both types of relations desire and expect some form of reward. Ideally, diverse practitioners want to have a seat at the table and unfortunately, their race sometimes hinders them from such corporate success; however, through power relationships, they can better achieve that desired end result.

Gallicano (2013) even calls for an urgent attempt in fine-tuning power relations in order to embrace collaboration among *dominant* and *minority* groups to produce better diversification. This implies that the lack of success of racially diverse practitioners suffering from the effects of organizational dynamics of power lies within the disintegration of already established power relations among Caucasian practitioners. This research supports that of Ahonen and Tienari's (2009) which focuses on power relations and their intended effects. Most importantly, through

Gallicano's perspective, the argument of integrating racially diverse practitioners with dissimilar dominant group practitioners to form new power relations should amplify results. Therefore, she raises the element of diverse minority group members *not only* pursuing power relations with someone from the dominant group but also ensuring they *stray away* from simply gravitating toward someone with whom they share "similarities" (Gallicano, 2013).

Someone from the dominant group showing acceptance of change by joining forces with someone from the minority group will have an effect. However, if the power relation between the two practitioners does not involve similarities at all, then it speaks more volumes for furthering integration at all organizational levels. Additionally, even if racially diverse leaders are in power, they do not always go out of their way to help other racially diverse practitioners. Guinier and Torres' (2002) found those who become part of the dominant coalition may eventually blend in with their new peers and, in a way, refuse to share their power as they feel it might be detrimental to their new status or position. In other words, those diverse practitioners in power become the same as the other members of their new coalition and they assimilate, thus being less open-minded about forming relationships with their similar subordinates.

### **Diversity and the use of Power in American Businesses**

According to Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley (1990) the white leader prototype can be found across many American businesses, not just in public relations. In fact, their study involving three organizations from the communications, banking, and electronics industries found that Black managers were perceived differently than White managers. These perceptions led to distorted evaluations and ultimately hindered Black managers from reaching higher success. Greenhaus et al. (1990) claim that Black managers hit a glass ceiling within their organizations preventing them from advancing into senior leadership positions and this plateau

stems from their race. This occurs because of the lack of racially diverse leaders found in organizations; the unfamiliarity with a Black manager produces insecurities regarding their competencies (Carton & Rosette, 2011).

Furthermore, Black and other racially diverse managers expressed receiving lower performance rates from supervisors than White managers and even being excluded from promotions (Carton & Rosette, 2011). Additionally, Carton and Rosette (2011) found that the sports industry, one of the largest US industries in terms of revenue, also employed biased evaluations of their Black leaders. Similar to Guinier and Torres's (2002) interpretation of dominant and minority groups within organizations, Greenhaus et al. (1990) claim that members of minority groups are subject to treatment discrimination; this type of discrimination does not restrict these members to enter or apply to job positions, however upon being recruited they are ultimately given less resources or rewards than they actually deserve. Because of this treatment discrimination, minority members as well as token employees "have low access to opportunity and power within organizations" (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990, p. 68). Such treatment discrimination results in low job satisfaction and thus low retention rates for racially diverse employees (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990).

In fact, studies have proven that black employees statistically receive less favorable job performance evaluations than do White employees, especially when those conducting the evaluations are White themselves (Gunby & DeCuir-Gunby, 2016). This parallels Young's (2007) interpretation of how a dominant culture often comprised of Caucasians favor those who resemble dominant identity markers and in turn negatively affect those who do not look like the dominant group. Furthermore, because these dominant group members are White, racially diverse employees get evaluated through their lens, ultimately producing biased evaluations.

Being that the dominant group members are typically positioned high up on the organizational hierarchy, it becomes hard for minority group members to reach such status.

This unfair treatment of diverse employees includes micro inequalities, or micro insults and micro invalidations, as Gunby and DeCuir-Gunby (2016) refer to them. Similar to micro inequalities literature in public relations which will be discussed in the next section, micro insults and micro invalidations are said to be “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Gunby & DeCuir-Gunby, 2016, p. 393). These tend to be indirect snipes or backhanded compliments. These remarks also lead to job dissatisfaction and thus high turnover rates for racially diverse employees across all industries, even in academia, despite these professionals being well educated on diversity issues (Gunby & DeCuir-Gunby, 2016). Ultimately, “power differentials are one aspect of the presence of institutional racism” and therefore when diverse employees hit a glass ceiling, so does their power levels (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990, p. 67). Greenhaus et al. (1990) support Gunby and DeCuir-Gunby (2016) by claiming micro inequalities, micro insults, and micro invalidations are present in American businesses and negatively affect racially diverse employees because they typically find themselves in the minority group.

In fact, Foldy, Rivard and Buckley (2009) argue that power differences are found in many organizations from various industries and that they are produced by differences stemming from group membership. In other words, the existence of dominant and minority groups propels power imbalances not only for public relations but for other industries as well. According to Ragins (1997) it is because of this that diverse employees have mentoring relationships with dominant group members. Additionally, Greenhaus et al. (1990) claim that because most dominant group members are White, racially diverse employees have a hard time securing

mentors because these mentors tend to choose protégés who are similar to them and with whom they can identify with. On the other hand, more recent literature such as Ragins (1997), argues these relationships are not homogenous but in fact are centered around being cross-racial.

Contrary to Greenhaus et al. (1990), Ragin's (1997) ideology mirrors that of Gallicano's (2013) where she stresses the importance of dissimilarities when formulating power relations with a mentor from the dominant group.

Ragins (1997) claims past mentoring programs have been effective in most organizations but only because these relationships sought to advance the careers of White males who were either already in the dominant group or close to entering the dominant group. Therefore, new mentoring programs, or the use of power relations directed toward minority group members, should be based on dissimilarities. Nonetheless, Foldy et al. (2009) clarifies that these relationships happen because a minority group member does not have enough power to stand alone within the organization, concluding these minority members are often women and racially diverse employees. Thus power in American industries is predominantly held by Caucasian males and is often distributed only to benefit dominant group members, an extremely similar scenario to that of public relations. Furthermore, these relationships are based on both parties seeking similar outcomes, or mutual goals, and that is typically the upward mobility of the minority group member (Foldy, Rivard & Buckley, 2009). Essentially, mentors are individuals with professional experience, knowledge and resources committed to helping advance the careers of low-powered employees (Ragins, 1997). Mentors provide career development roles, meaning they advise and recommend their mentees on what they believe they should do to better their careers and they also provide psychological support, meaning someone to talk to and be their friend.

However, a distinction between mentoring relationships and power relations is that employees in the former do not have to be employed at the same organization as their protégés. Therefore, it is salient to note that with power relations, the dominant group member can potentially be a mentor but should be employed at the same organization in order to effectively be able to use their individual influence and power to bring about change for the minority group member (Ragins, 1997). This is extremely important given the fact that Ragins (1997) claims many organizations view “power as asymmetrical where one group dominates another group and has more resources” (Ragins, 1997, p. 485). She furthers this notion stating because power is fluid in nature, a group’s power can increase or decrease depending on the various power relations formed within and between groups. Lastly, Ragins (1997) eloquently summarizes diversity and power by stating power relations are implemented *because* minorities are differentiated within organizations from the very beginning, but power relations will keep existing in order to ensure that unfair treatment does not continue to take place. Essentially, if those who hold power are willing to share their resources to help those whom are dependent on them due to diversity related restrictions, then minority group members should no longer fall victim to unfair biases and treatment discrimination within the workplace. The distribution of power would not only benefit racially diverse employees but it would also benefit the organizations.

Diversity in the workplace is not only ethically necessary but it is also necessary for organizations to diversify their employee makeup as it proves to be immensely beneficial for business. According to Ortlieb and Sieben (2013), diverse agencies are positively affected in terms of reputation and financial stability. In fact, the benefits of having a diverse organization include but are not limited to increasing creativity, overall productivity, and the quality of work

(Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). This competitive advantage fosters a reputation among an organization's respective industry as being open to welcoming employees from all walks of life and as previously outlined, drives profits to increase because of the inclusion of diverse perspectives (Ortlieb & Sieben, 2013). Additionally, Stevens et al. (2008), support this notion claiming that enhancing organizational image is a direct benefit of attracting and retaining diverse employees, especially for public relations agencies.

Essentially, the employee differences that potentially cause hesitation and conflict are the same factors that can potentially bring novel perspectives and ideas to the business. Therefore, apart from diversity meeting equal employment opportunity and requisite variety standards, employing racially diverse people helps the business avoid group-think (Heath, 1994). Heath (1994) claims a diverse staff is vital to an organization's success because more "points of view are incorporated into the culture," which would otherwise be nonexistent (p. 43). Some campaigns or products catering to multicultural audiences for example, would be better communicated and tailored with the inclusion of diverse perspectives who may be more knowledgeable on the topics. Hon and Brunner (2000) mention that because of the growing nature of businesses, most end up becoming international companies that deal with overseas agents; public relations is no stranger to such business and thus having native employees, or employees who relate to such cultures would prove to be of tremendous help. Furthermore, Uysal (2013) claims that among the aforementioned benefits of an organization being diverse, diversity is economically beneficial because it strengthens customer satisfaction. Clients are calling for more diverse teams because they acknowledge the benefits of diverse perspectives (Stevens, Plaut & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Differences in opinion and way of thinking enriches an organization's work, ultimately meeting the client's needs to effectively reach their target

audiences. The stakes are high for the inclusion of diversity because of the contributions that diverse employees can offer. Their differences facilitate them to brainstorm differently and bring a set of backgrounds and ideas that non-diverse employees cannot.

### **Diversity and the use of Power in Public Relations**

Clearly, the sentiments regarding racial diversity felt decades ago is still a lingering issue in today's state of the industry (L'Etang, Hodges & Pieczka, 2012.) By the millennium, many agencies including Edelman, Fleishman Hillard and Porter Novelli had taken notice and implemented plans towards achieving a more diverse employee makeup (Gallicano, 2013). Such course of actions taken by select organizations in juxtaposition with their own power dynamics is why some diversity studies would benefit by transitioning from a macro perspective to a micro perspective focusing on individual agencies (Ghosh, 2014). However, according to Bardhan (2016), many Hispanic practitioners appreciate the efforts, yet do not see it as being sufficient enough and that they feel culturally unwelcomed at their agencies. Additionally, racial minorities' perception toward the industry reveal that they feel disconnected from the industry and often times discriminated against because of the favoritism showed toward Caucasians (Waters, 2015).

The sub-par treatment toward racially diverse practitioners extends to character reductions known as *micro inequalities* (Gallicano, 2013). A micro inequality is some form of insult or snub, which makes someone feel like an outsider as opposed to feeling included. These snubs come in many forms and unless affected by it, can seem harmless to third parties. For example, micro inequalities affecting culturally diverse practitioners might include being excluded from important meetings, being subjected to stereotypical judgments, having their name mispronounced or even being left out of company socials (Gallicano, 2013). Tindall (2009)

elaborates on micro inequality research stating culturally diverse practitioners endure forms of racism not always intentional, yet extremely detrimental to the confidence and growth of diverse practitioners. She describes these instances of racism as being “subtle and less visible and obvious than blatant racist acts” (Tindall, 2009, p. 444).

However, micro-inequalities are not trivial, on the contrary Edwards (2015) states these can go as far as being labeled “everyday racism.” Their instinctive and innocent nature does not trump their detrimental and undermining effects. For example, being ignored at meetings or not introduced at work socials can seem like an oversight, however, when coupled with the constant mispronunciation of one’s name or the blatant shock when learning these diverse practitioners attended college, it can lead to feelings of inferiority. An African American practitioner recalls instances in which her white colleagues made comments such as, “oh you *did* go to university,” or even expressed shock when learning they had broken the glass ceiling and actually held positions of authority (Edwards, 2013). Because of a pervasive disbelief in thinking a racially diverse practitioner could be a boss, interviewees of Edward’s study also claimed to being mistaken for their subordinates while their Caucasian colleagues would be greeted as the one in charge (Edwards, 2013). As one can see, these micro-inequalities can happen at all levels, but it is especially prevalent for those diverse practitioners found in the minority group of an agency. These micro-inequalities as outlined in Edwards’ (2013) study further heighten feelings of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Public relations has tried ameliorating the diversity issue by implementing affirmative action plans. These plans sought to help a number of practitioners falling into the category of “diverse”; however, such policies may only perpetuate the marginalization of these practitioners, especially those who are racially diverse (Toth, 2009). In fact, Business Week labeled PR as

being affirmative action's *velvet ghetto*, because from the outside looking in, it looked as if the industry was progressing when in reality it was simply masking the problem (Toth, 2009). In other words, these programs tended to segregate qualified professionals into jobs that lacked power, decision making and importance toward meeting organization objectives. Additionally, these programs were not successful in bringing about diversity because diversity will not be fully embraced if such actions are intended to only meet legal obligations (Hon & Brunner, 2000). Affirmative action plans need to be implemented to solve the problem that caused its inception in the first place, not to adhere to damage control measures. Meeting requisites of surface-level resolution does not provide a sound foundation for future remedy of the real issue; on the contrary, at best it provides a temporary fix to a problem that has been prevalent for decades.

America (1983) also criticized these programs by stating that PR professionals should first define the problem and its effects, most importantly accepting any wrong doing in contributing to the problem before establishing affirmative action plans. He states because the issue was never explicitly attributed to the favoritism towards Caucasians and the lack of diversity towards racial minorities, the programs did not do much than just fulfill requisites and justify diversity reports (America, 1983). In addition, Toth (2009) specifically criticizes programs like equal employment or affirmative action plans because they serve to benefit the organizations and not the practitioners. Boulton (2012) adds that an agency's power dynamics and the nature of its respective hierarchy parallel the old-school mentality of affirmative action plans because both methods are instrumental in *appearing* diverse yet maintain diverse practitioners at a level of power that is comfortable for the dominant group. Ultimately, there is no point in attempting to advance the careers of diverse practitioners if they are given trivial tasks or work that is not contributing to the agency's overall mission and goals.

Edwards (2013) shares Uysal's (2013) claims that critical race theory can explain why diversity issues and power dynamics heavily influence the way an agency operates. According to Edwards (2013), critical race theory is "a radical critique of the perpetuation of race as a socially constructed criterion for division and discrimination that interacts with other aspects of identity to create different forms of disadvantage" (p. 244). Essentially, Edwards (2013) argues that CRT highlights the element of race within society and the tumultuous history race and fundamental discrimination has played in the world. Such history descends into the work place as an institutionalized part of the work environment. Thus, programs and initiatives originally set in place to benefit those of a diverse racial background tend to somehow alleviate work life for those who it is not intended: Caucasians. This occurs because the implementation of programs intended to provide an equal playing field for everyone usually comes to the fruition by a board room of dominant group members, often being Caucasian (Edwards, 2013). These dominant group members therefore assess the agency's situation with diversity through their perspective and to the best of their ability, even though they are not always made aware of, or have not personally experienced, some issues that minority group members endure. Through this lens, these initiatives are not always as suitable as they should be. In other words, most of these programs strive to eradicate discrimination from the work place, but if one does not fully understand discrimination, or micro inequalities, then one cannot lead such efforts to success (Uysal, 2013).

Ultimately, scholars such as L'Etang et al. (2012), Hon and Brunner (2000), and Bhawuk and Triandis (1996) have denounced the industry for its lack of minority representation. Furthermore, according to Boulton (2012) anxiety about the unfamiliar is what makes some organizations, or individuals, hesitant to adopt diversity, claiming agencies like to recruit

“similar” or “alike” people, thus maintaining current organizational dynamics of power. Edwards (2013) even states that the hesitation behind diverting from the status quo in juxtaposition with the appeal of hiring and promoting Caucasian applicants "reveals the importance of White privilege as a lubricant for workplace interactions and an easy option for employers and colleagues to orient towards" (p. 245). In addition, scholars such as Gallicano (2013), Guinier and Torres (2002), Ragins (1997), and Zemblyas (2006) propose racially diverse employers can resolve issues stemming from a lack of diversity and respond to unfavorable organizational power dynamics by establishing their own power relations. Thus, once again the question of whether power relations between similar practitioners is enough to induce change remains. Must practitioners not only seek to form such relations, but should they target someone exhibiting differences in order to truly bring about a change? Firstly, it would be salient to identify what causes diverse employees to stay or leave an organization and how power, or access to it through power relations, can enhance work environments. Furthermore, drawing on Gallicano's views, it may be salient to take matters a step further and identify if such power relations are sufficient and, basically, powerful enough to change a work culture and its dynamics. Therefore, identifying if the alternative power relations not based on a “similarity-attraction” foundation are found in PR agencies would further fulfill the study.

Regardless of the nature of each power relation, the study seeks to shed light on whether or not the formation of power relations proves to be beneficial for the diverse practitioners and successful enough to be used as a future strategy for better diversification. Therefore, the researcher poses these four research questions:

**R.Q 1:** What are public relations agency employees' perceptions regarding diversity and what level of importance do they place upon diversity in the agency?

**R.Q. 2:** How do diverse public relations practitioners employ the strategy of forming “power relations” with a dominant group member to alleviate their agency related hurdles stemming from their out-group identity markers?

**R.Q. 3:** Under what circumstances do diverse practitioners use “similarity attraction” in their formation of power relations vs. pursuing dominant group members who visibly resemble dominant identity markers?

**R.Q. 4:** How are these power relations proving to be beneficial and helpful?

## Chapter 3

### Method

Because this study sought to answer exploratory research questions pertaining to the happenings of a specific agency and explore the professional lives of participants, qualitative interviews were used as the method of choice. According to Lindloff and Taylor (2011), interviewees shed light on certain topics by playing a witness-like role and recounting through their own perspectives on what happens in their particular setting. Additionally, this method is used to “gather information about things or processes that cannot be observed effectively by other means” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2001, p. 175). Thus, one of the ways to avoid the issue is to conduct one-on-one interviews and gather *multiple* perceptions from *various* outlooks.

The goal for the interviews was to explore the existence of power relations and their nature within the agency; consequently, public relations practitioners as well as their leaders were both best suited to meet those goals. Through qualitative interviews the researcher can provide a basis for dialogue in which the goal is to engage the interviewee through an open-ended narrative (Patton, 1987). Because each participant has his/her own experience driving their own, unique perception, interview guides were used to facilitate the interviews. This style of interviewing allows for a semi-structured approach to further probe participants when needed. Interview guides work well with individuals “whose experience and expertise may vary widely,” as was the case with the study’s sample due to the interviewees’ different positions, race and time working at the agency (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 189). This requires a tailored interview guide to be used as opposed to a strict interview schedule which leaves little to no room for additional on-the-spot inquiries that may arise in one interview but not in another.

For example, in looking at research applied to public relations, Hon and Brunner (2000) used qualitative interviews to gauge how practitioners evaluated their organization's diversity. In addition, Maria E. Len-Rios (1998) used interviews to explore the experiences of minority PR practitioners and identify what their disadvantages were. David Radonovich (2014) used interviews to assess how Hispanics felt regarding their own under-representation in the PR industry. He claimed semi structured interviews was the best method for his study because this style of interviewing would "allow unanticipated ideas to surface during the conversation" and subsequently produce questions that he did not initially think of (p. 836). Similarly, because this study's interviews were informal and unconstrained, it paved the way for participants to disseminate information without explicitly having to ask them. In fact, Lindloff and Taylor (2011) refer to these types of interviews as being "conversations with a purpose" and allows the interviewer to be on the "lookout for subtle, fleeting meanings as they emerge" (p. 172). Thus, the inclusion of follow-up questions becomes a necessary part of the method. Therefore, interview guides were used in order to permit flexibility with the order of questions and the improvisation of adding questions when necessary.

Ultimately, the interview guides consisted mostly of what Patton (1987) labels "grand tour" questions and corresponding follow-ups, or "mini-tour" questions, which are used to further investigate a larger point by going into greater detail. For example, interviewees were asked to describe their overall experiences at the agency, any disrespect or mistreatment they may have encountered, their experiences with the process of promotions, their interactions with co-workers and more.

It is important to note that the role of interviewer also encompasses sub-roles; for example, this study's researcher sub role is that of being racially diverse himself. As Chavez

(2014) claims, being similar to a study's participants can be both beneficial and disadvantageous. However, Chavez (2014) overcame some of these hurdles by including practitioners with varying work experience, including experiences different from his, as part of the sample. He states that "in an attempt to capture different subject positions," he included practitioners from general market agencies and specialized agencies (Chavez, 2014, p. 30). Similar to his study of interviewing advertising professionals regarding Hispanic advertising, this study employs a range of perspectives by not limiting the sample to only racially diverse employees.

The researcher's appearance can play a factor in the way interviewees respond and should be acknowledged as a possible limitation. Furthermore, the researcher's previous experience working at the agency, even though for a very short time, may also pose as an influential factor when conducting interviews with those of which he previously worked alongside. However, following in Chavez's (2014) footsteps, the researcher analyzed the transcripts with the literature's concepts about such limitations and influences in mind, in order to avoid immersing his own experiences into the analyses.

### **Sample**

The sample consists of both racially diverse public relations employees as well as Caucasian employees. This was done to better assess the differences in power and therefore highlight the racially diverse practitioners' need to form power relations. The practitioners were selected from a public relations agency located in New York City. There were a total of 21 employees interviewed, five of which were part of upper management.

The sampling method used was *purposive sampling* since participants specifically needed to work in public relations and be working full time under one of the aforementioned positions at that specific NYC office location. This coincides with Oliveira's (2013) sampling method where

she identified participants whom she found to be insightful on the topic of discussion based on their profession, demographics, and place of employment and thus had the relevant qualifications to answer adequately. From there, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants for interviews; these subjects were recruited based on their repetitive mentions found in early interviews as well as suggestions from the participants. Overall, there were 16 females and five males all over the age of 18. Out of the 21 participants, eight were racially diverse consisting of five African Americans, one Asian, one Hispanic, and one mixed practitioner being half Asian and half Caucasian. The rest of the participants identified as Caucasian/White. One interviewee from upper management is a Vice President (VP), two of them have positions of Senior Vice President (SVP), one is a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) and the other is an Executive Vice President (EVP). Out of the remaining 16 employees, two were Account Coordinators (AC), one was an Assistant Account Executive (AAE), three were Account Executives (AE), two were Senior Account Executives (SAE), one was an Account Supervisor (AS), five were Account Managers (AM), and two were Digital Program Managers (DPM).

It is important to note that the NYC office has a Diversity Alliance in place which meets every two weeks. This alliance was created to bring awareness about diversity in the workplace, educate its employees regarding diversity and implement diversity related initiatives to ultimately better diversify the agency. The alliance is led by someone from leadership employed at the NYC office. Every two weeks, the alliance meets to go over their agenda for the next few weeks and anyone is welcome to attend these meetings. In fact, weekly reminders are sent out to everyone at the NYC office. The alliance is made up of approximately 12-15 employees who regularly attend, being that everyone is welcome, some meetings may have more or less attendees. Furthermore, interns are encouraged to prioritize these meetings on their calendars and

try their best to attend. The Diversity Alliance has been operating for almost three years and has its own budget for expenses.

### **Procedures**

Before any interviews were conducted, the researcher secured approval from the agency to interview their employees on agency premises. Furthermore, a week before the researcher's arrival, he emailed the NYC office employees introducing himself and giving a brief synopsis of what he was studying; the email was short in length and revealed that the researcher would be interviewing them regarding diversity in PR. Attached to the email was an IRB-approved implied consent form which they were all encouraged to carefully read and ask any questions that may arise.

All interviews were then conducted in person at the agency's NYC office location. Specifically, all interviews were held independently of one another and conducted in one of the office's conference rooms that was remote enough where the participants could talk openly about their experiences. Each interview began with the researcher introducing himself to the interviewee and informing the subject that he/she was free to answer or decline any question(s). The researcher also let the subjects know they could stop the interview at any moment without any consequences. Lastly, the researcher made it clear that no devices would be used to record the interviews. Instead of recording the interviews, the researcher employed the note-taking process as outlined in Lindloff & Taylor (2011) by typing up responses on his laptop. The interview guide questions were typed up prior to each interview, allowing the researcher to simply read off the questions and type up the responses. Follow-up questions were the only questions that needed to be typed up during the actual interviews. Interview transcriptions were cleaned up immediately after the conclusion of the interview for grammar and spelling purposes.

The researcher transcribed the interviews as they unfolded for a few reasons. One of them being that the presence of recording devices often negates the desired casual setting of an interview and therefore incentivizes interviewees to censor themselves or filter their responses (Patton, 1987). In fact, Lindloff and Taylor (2011) state some interviewees are uneasy with being recorded claiming they “exhibit a different comfort level” when they are aware their responses are being taped, “thus a certain formality may creep into their speech” (p. 193). Another main reason for choosing this transcription method was because it was the agency’s representative’s request that the researcher not audio record their employees. Given the sensitive questions inherently required further discussion or detail, this transcription method inadvertently proved to be beneficial because it “forces the researcher to concentrate on the real time task of listening to what the interviewee is saying” and thus produce rich, probing questions for complementary topics (p. Lindloff & Taylor, 192). Furthermore, the names of all interviewees were changed to pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. Ultimately, interviews ranged from 28 minutes for the shortest interview to 1 hour and 37 minutes for the longest. All participants answered all the questions posed to them and delineated their own unique experiences.

The interview transcripts were analyzed thematically, thus employing Hon and Brunner’s (2000) strategy of reviewing transcripts multiple times to find common categories as well as comparing responses that may produce emergent themes. This qualitative textual analysis was also used by Oliveira (2013) when she interviewed communications professionals. Oliveira claims researchers can analyze interview data best when they “look for major themes and concepts that can be the object of future cross-case comparisons (Oliveira, 2013, p. 259). An inductive approach was thus used to examine all 21 qualitative interviews, allowing research findings to emerge based on significant themes found across all transcripts. The researcher read

the interviews until the similarities and common themes between all responses became saturated through repeated occurrences. The process required six rounds of reviewing, analyzing and comparing transcripts until no new information was found. This textual analysis is supported by Rubin and Rubin (1995) where they claim the analysis ends when the final review of transcripts does not produce any new information to be used and when all research questions have been answered.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The interviewees communicated invaluable information about their experiences of diversity in the public relations workplace. Through analyzing the interviews, six themes, with one sub-theme, emerged. The six themes and one sub-theme shed light on the four research questions of this study. These themes include the existence of power relations and its sub-theme of racially diverse practitioners employ power relations based on dissimilarities, lack of diversity leads to loss of diverse employees, micro inequalities lead to alienation among diverse employees, diverse employees perceive minimal but apparent tokenism & pigeonholing, both Caucasian and diverse employees believe heavy favoritism is shown toward Caucasian practitioners, and definitions of diversity and perceptions of diversity efforts range widely. The results support many emerging trends that delineate the benefits for racially diverse practitioners to hold power relations.

#### **The Existence of Power Relations**

It is salient to first recognize that 10 participants, both diverse and Caucasian, indicated in their interviews that they employed the use of power relations. Furthermore, out of the eight racially diverse practitioners, seven of them indicated having formed power relations with someone from the dominant group. When comparing those racially diverse practitioners who express having power relations with those who do not, the benefits of those relations are apparent. In fact, the racially diverse practitioners' responses indicated that they realized there are rewards to be reaped if these relations come to fruition, and therefore the strategy is a prominent one among the diverse sample.

One respondent, Abby, attributes her high levels of inclusion to the power relation she has established over time stating:

Yes, in the last 6 months or so, I have picked things up, I mean it's come a long way from the Discover & Development Program days. I have a great position and I feel included but in reality if I didn't have this position or close-knit ties to those who have my back so to speak, then no I would probably have been booted out like Corrine and Macy [two diverse mentions who left the agency, discussed below] were.

Gisselle, another racially diverse practitioner, talks about her power relation with Delilah, a VP from the dominant group. She says that success is "about the relationships and friendships you build" and highlights her relations with Delilah and even Trevor, a practitioner not in leadership yet but "an up-and-coming golden boy," as being "an added bonus" because through them she is able to voice her issues. Many of the practitioners stated that promotions and raises are direct benefits of forming power relations with dominant group members. A diverse interviewee named Mariah states Dylan, one of the agency's partners, is someone who she can vent to and turn to for some constructive criticism that has resulted in furthering her career. Mariah claims Dylan, a SVP not from the sample, has been instrumental in ensuring she does not stay stagnant for too long stating,

Dylan would mention my name too and he would come back and tell me to be on the lookout for something. Him, yeah...he has gone out of his way to recommend me and make sure I'm getting fair evaluations, not being kept at the same level for too long.

The same can be said for Carrie who held a power relation with the agency's previous CEO, a Caucasian woman named Kristen. Carrie, who is racially diverse, recalls Kristen overriding a manager's decision in favor of Carrie and because of that, Carrie got promoted to an AS.

Furthermore, even the security of one's position at the agency was seen as being a benefit to having power relations with those in charge, and thus, losing them or not having any power relations at all could have detrimental effects for one's career. An interviewee candidly admits she feels included in the agency and empowered but it is only because of her power relations with her mentors:

If they leave, like my last did, then I might be fucked, unless the Diversity Alliance kicks into gear. I've done well for myself, and I still do but much of it is [because] I have a chess piece in play that allows me to be where I'm at...but I don't want to have to feel like I have that chess piece if that makes sense. I shouldn't need it just because I'm Black, but it is what it is I guess, if it isn't broken, why fix it.

She refers to her power relations with dominant group members as chess pieces on her side of the board, and if these powerful chess pieces were to leave the agency, then she feels her success and work would be in jeopardy. Connor, a dominant group member and member of the Diversity Alliance, supports Abby's notions that power relations are important to a diverse practitioner's job security, especially for someone who is diverse.

Many power relations were identified through the participants' responses in which they would repeatedly mention someone or a few people in particular who they said have helped them succeed in one way or another. The employees mentioned in the responses were all part of the dominant group and were reported as having leadership positions, as having influence within the agency, or both. These repeated mentions were always followed by specific examples of how the dominant group member helped further their career, helped resolve a problem, or the perks and benefits that they bring to the table. In addition, many of these power relations were identified or introduced as "mentors" which also reflects the power relations literature and reinforces the idea

that power relations should be based on a mentor-mentee relationship. Lastly, practitioner's responses regarding their mentors and power relations were matched with the few dominant group members, or leaders, who were also available to be interviewed; Connor, Brian, Emily, and Delilah were among the most mentioned mentors and when asked who they mentored or when they helped others, their responses correlated with that of their minority group mentees. Lastly, through this theme it was revealed that diverse employees use power relations based on dissimilarities as discussed in the sub-theme below.

### ***Diverse Employees use Power Relations based on Dissimilarities***

Even though power relations existed within the organization, an interesting finding was that racially diverse practitioners reported forming their power relations without incorporating the use of Holck's (2016) similarity attraction; on the contrary, their power relations resembled power relations specifically based on dissimilarities. While that can be attributed to the fact that there are almost no racially diverse leaders in top management, it is simultaneously attributed to the fact that these diverse practitioners recognize the value in purposely seeking a dominant member who does not look like them.

For example, when asked who helps him succeed at the agency, one of the diverse employees named Gerard stated that his managers do as well as Brian, an agency leader, because Brian understands him and "let's be real, it also helps that he's a White guy in charge, basically." When asked to explain how Brian, being Caucasian positively affects Gerard, he bluntly asserted, "Well he gets more respect, he's noticed, if he says something, people will hear, pay attention. So if he suggests me for a promotion, that goes a long way because it's him." Gerard's ideology was further supported when he compared Brian to a hypothetical African American male being his mentor ultimately claiming the White male would be more beneficial because, "it

has more of an impact, it's like a White guy talks, people pay more attention. It is what it is."

Another diverse practitioner explains having sought out dominant group members who she knew could help guide her so she "wasn't warped into work politics and the game of the agency" despite her "different background." Her diversity hurdles were ameliorated because, as she puts it, she was persistent in pursuing this power relation stating she "sort of, kind of, kept poking at [him], getting a meeting with him is insane but when I got it I just introduced myself, basically made myself known. They can't help you if they don't know you."

Connor supports Abby's previous argument about Corrine and Macy (discussed in more detail in the next section), two diverse practitioners who controversially left the agency not long before the study, and uses them as examples of how the lack of power relations can exacerbate one's termination:

No one in leadership to help Corrine or Macy out, no one Black or ethnic, it could very well possibly be Whites that help and they do, we do, but that's not always the case with this agency culture. We see that go smoothly sometimes and when it does work out, it's beautiful to see, not just the integration of status but also the beauty of seeing someone help out someone else who they normally wouldn't, or people normally wouldn't think would happen.

In addition to supporting Abby's ideology, Connor specifically acknowledges the existence of power relations based on dissimilarities and the immense impact it can have.

### **Lack of Diversity Leads to Loss of Diverse Employees**

As indicated in the above theme, the participants revealed some intriguing information regarding the high volume of turnover at the agency. In fact, it was discovered early in the study that two racially diverse practitioners had interestingly left the agency within a week of one another.

Furthermore, their departure was fresh in the participants' minds considering the two practitioners had left a month before the study began. Corrine and Macy, the two African American practitioners who left, were the topic of many responses and often used as a reference to highlight the agency's peculiar lack of diversity.

Abby, one of the more vocal participants regarding the subject, emphasized how the agency's makeup was a key factor for them wanting to leave saying, "They left because of that [no diversity] - just look around the office and you can see why she and Macy left." Valerie, a Caucasian practitioner, even realizes the severity of these occurrences despite her race and questions the agency's commitment to diversity concluding, "I think they value it in theory, but I mean we had two African American employees who left back to back, that's kind of ridiculous to think about." In fact, a few Caucasians emphasized the clear lack of diversification as potentially contributing to their swift exits because "there might have been a feeling like the odd one out sometimes, which I can see, well anyone could easily see as soon as you walk in the office." A Caucasian female interviewee, elaborated on this notion claiming "our office is really un-diverse, like it would make you feel not a part of it," and understands how Macy and Corrine may have ended up feeling the "magnitude" of those effects. Many others, including Sally, a Caucasian coworker who worked closely with Macy on an account, alluded to knowing why she and Corrine left saying, "people do leave because there is a lack of diversity, like with Corrine and Macy. Contributed to it, not the main reason but highly contributed to some people."

Unfortunately, Macy and Corrine were obviously unavailable to be interviewed. However, some participants expressed being close with them and offered insight on some of their personal conversations, thus revealing a more concrete perspective on how Corrine and

Macy may have felt. Carrie, an account manager and one of Corrine's friends at the agency, reflected on when she used to talk to her:

You know, I loved Corrine and I dealt with her a lot at work. She was a great girl but she didn't find the right mix here I don't think. You could tell she was not 100% here and I do think a lot of that has to do with her surroundings. Her teams were primarily White and everyone is super kind but you get this feeling of loneliness especially when you're new and a familiar face would help. We would chat and let's just say she wasn't the happiest with the agency's "look."

Carrie went on to express that Macy shared Corrine's unhappiness with the agency's *look*. Lucy, another racially diverse employee, could attest to Macy's unhappiness as well, and even giving an update to her current situation:

She had mentioned it in passing that this agency doesn't have any diversity like no other Black girls or Black people in general and it was clearly bothering her. I actually know that the new agency she went to has a very diverse staff.

Clearly, diversity was a deal breaker for the two women and as one can see through Lucy's response, Macy sought a different employment opportunity that was better suited for her diversity related needs. Lucy concluded Corrine's exit was also heavily attributed to the lack of diversity because her new agency "has a much more diverse staff as well, so I mean it doesn't take a rocket scientist." Regarding their departures, Gerard was genuine in sharing that he knew both Macy and Corrine were interviewing at other agencies and before they left, they both confided in Gerard having "conversations about diversity being a problem."

Surprisingly, Caucasian and racially diverse practitioners shared the same thought regarding both of the practitioner's departures: it could have been prevented. Many point the

finger at the agency's leadership for not trying their hardest in retaining the practitioners, especially Macy. Macy's departure had a lot to do with the lack of diversity as well as her main account, a consumer tech account, leaving the agency. Once the account took their work elsewhere, more than one respondent stated that she was almost "forgotten" about and left with no work going as far as claiming "her main account was terminated and no one was fighting for her to stay either." Another interviewee sympathizes with Macy and exposes the agency for not offering the same treatment to Macy as they offered to her Caucasian peers who were also part of the consumer tech account:

I mean the girl had no work to do for the last two months, I mean please do I have to say it? What if it was Kelly or Stephanie [Caucasian co-workers], she is her direct peer yet she was getting pulled into random meetings and she didn't have any special experience that Macy didn't possess. It was ludicrous. I didn't personally speak with her about diversity but it says something when they both leave, that's all.

The same interviewee offers a glimpse into how Macy's aftermath of the account's termination differed from her Caucasian peers. Another Caucasian interviewee takes into consideration the fact that Macy's main account left the agency and as expected she would not have as much work for a period of time, but still does not believe it should be an excuse to leave the practitioner with no substantial work. She claims because the agency did not put in the effort to intervene earlier on in the process, like they did with her Caucasian co-workers, it made everything harder for her at the agency "except for the decision to leave." She delineates the difference in Macy's treatment saying she

had no work at the end and I get it, I understand the account left the agency and all of that but still...was she supposed to come to work and just sit there all day? Put her on

something, give her busy work even, until things pick up again. Kelly and Megan were right on other accounts and they were busy so all they needed to do was figure out Macy but it was taking forever.

It appears that the rest of the account team members were on the receiving end of better treatment which consisted of quickly incorporating them back into the agency mix. Respondents noted that Kelly, Megan, and Stephanie, Macy's peers who were also left in limbo after the client left, were assigned to other work faster than Macy was. Many practitioners who observed this and reflected on it stated disapproval of the way the agency handled one of their only African American's transition into other work, or lack thereof. One of the more powerful testimonials reveals an outlook from the dominant group with someone from leadership adamantly condemning the agency's HR department:

Macy did not have a manager for the last few months of her employment, there was no one to advocate for her in the monthly manpower meetings, so when senior staff walked through the man-power list, they skipped her. She had no voice. Another fail on the HR part.

Additionally, this participant expresses that Corrine's departure could have been avoided as well if only she was given the same opportunities as her Caucasian peers. The interviewee further claims that while Corrine was not necessarily pigeonholed, she was constrained to work on specific accounts and was not offered the chance to expand her expertise and grow as a professional. Connor says that Corrine had expressed she wanted to work in healthcare well before deciding to leave the agency but was never given that chance. This is ironic given that many of the Caucasian sample interviewed stated that they liked how the agency allows them to dip into other accounts and learn the ropes to other practice areas. For example, a Caucasian

female, who holds a lower position than Corrine did, said that one of her favorite things about the agency is that “there’s a lot of opportunity for growth and opportunity for you to have your hand in a lot of different spaces and not restricted to your own expertise.” Additionally, Kelly said what makes her feel most included in the agency is the “the accessibility to integrate with other teams for account work.” The difference in perspectives and thus in treatment is something that Connor and Gerard believe could have been avoided had Macy and Corrine formed power relations. Connor explicitly states “multicultural staff members needing mentors” is something leadership has discussed especially because diverse practitioners are at a disadvantage. Gerard also believes this strategy could have helped them, specifically Corrine because he noticed “she wanted a helping hand, something to get ahead” but recognizes he was unable to fully be that lifeline given his limited influence.

### **Micro Inequalities Lead to Alienation Among Diverse Employees**

Among the diverse practitioners interviewed, six out of the eight expressed they experienced some form of micro inequality during their time at the agency. In fact, because of these snubs, or subliminal disrespect, racially diverse practitioners find power relations to be especially important. One of the participants claims “you have to make yourself known to the right people,” because respect and success won’t be handed to you. He furthers that sentiment by explicitly mentioning the benefits of getting closer with those in leadership, or as the interviewee puts it, “the right people,” claiming once you establish these relations and possibly even a mentor, “then you see the difference, work gets easier, you get more perks, even more recognition.” Another participant explained how she was mistreated by her former manager at the agency and expressed the manager’s disdain towards her was because she was either a woman, Asian, or the

combination of both. Nonetheless, a significant thread between the six employees was that they all attributed or connected the micro inequalities to be conducive of their race/ethnicity.

They stated race to be a contributing factor of the mistreatment or offered it as a potential contributor. For example, some racially diverse employees stated they would sometimes get questioned about why they were attending important meetings. Furthermore, they expressed their Caucasian peers rarely ever get questioned. One of the African American employees, recalls an incident with her previous manager in which she had to essentially confirm her presence at a meeting was required and necessary stating,

For example, my manager has questioned me on basically why I am there [meeting] or why I am being pulled into important conversations. For example, I remember my old manager asked me to step in for our SVP, which I have done before for the record, but my other manager who is a jerk still gave me this look of, “why are you here?” or “what are you doing?” So when I’m getting checked and have to confirm I am here for a reason, that’s a problem I think.

She strengthens her point by claiming the manager should not have acted that way towards her because even if he does not like it, clients “actually *do* want a Black person here, an Asian person there, [or] a Latino here.” Another Hispanic interviewee, Kevin, shared similar encounters where people showed signs of confusion with his presence at certain events. Kevin mentions being on the receiving end of “double-take, second glance” type of looks from his Caucasian colleagues. He describes an award ceremony that he was invited to and rightfully so, given he was part of the nominated account team, yet being welcomed with puzzled faces and later introduced by only his first name and no job title; an introduction that was different than that of his Caucasian peers.

Other practitioners recall not being acknowledged or mistaken for other people. A racially mixed practitioner recalls not being given a chance to showcase her skills or “given the time of day.” The treatment differed than her White counterparts as she says being racially diverse and not resembling a Caucasian look actually served as a disadvantage claiming she often got the feeling that others did not think she would last at the agency, thus dismissing her without a fair chance and ultimately making her feel like she did not belong.

On the other hand, Brianna, an African American employee, described having been mistaken for a “La Grant high-schooler” by one of her managers. Granted, the manager had just gotten back from a business trip and had yet to be formally introduced to Brianna; however, the micro inequality lies in the fact that the La Grant kids are considered racially diverse high school students from urban areas who receive career guidance. Additionally, Brianna, who was not much younger than the manager, received a lackluster apology with the manager referring to her as being “so cute” hence the confusion. Brianna describes feeling disrespected stating,

I’m probably only three years younger than her but she degraded me by calling me cute and making me feel like I was playing the role of a professional but not actually treating me like one, let alone thinking I was automatically from the ghetto because I’m Black.

Most of these micro inequality-related experiences were offered as a response to the question of “Has there ever been a time when you felt you were being treated differently or weren’t given the respect you deserved?” Other micro-inequality experiences were revealed sporadically as the interview unfolded. However, out of the 13 Caucasian interviewees, only three shared that they have been disrespected in the past and none of the disrespect was attributed or alluded to occurring because of their race. But, on the other hand, the Caucasian interviewees

could not recall or even offer a specific scenario where they felt personally mistreated or snubbed because they were Caucasian.

### **Diverse Employees Perceive Minimal but Apparent Tokenism and Pigeonholing**

Even though the agency appeared to seldom pigeonhole their diverse practitioners, the select times that they did was done in a brazen fashion. The occasional pattern of pigeonholing can be attributed to the agency's small number of racially diverse practitioners thus producing minimal examples. Another factor can be the small number of accounts that require or are conducive of pigeonholing. In other words, only two accounts stood out for which practitioners were pigeonholed. Pigeonholing in this context was used to evaluate what accounts participants were being kept on and for what reasons, as well as what accounts they were primarily hired for or immediately placed on after recruitment.

An eye opening finding was that four of the eight racially diverse practitioners were recruited to work on the same account: Timberland. While Timberland is technically described as being a brand for people who enjoy the outdoors, pop culture and fashion trends know Timberland for their boots which are primarily geared towards an urban demographic. Such perspective can be subjective to an extent; however, nevertheless out of the 21 interviews, only four participants responded with Timberland as being their first or one of their first accounts; those four participants were all racially diverse practitioners. In other words, no Caucasian practitioners from the sample were recruited to work on the Timberland account. When asked why they were assigned to that account, they would respond by saying the agency was looking for a "shakeup" in that account or by expressing the agency was "having trouble with that account and I just got put on that right when I started." In fact, it was later revealed through Kevin, who was recruited to work on the account, that the agency indeed was involved in

promoting the Timberland boots. It is salient to point out that none of the Caucasian practitioners interviewed were hired to work for Timberland and many of them were hired around the same time as those who were assigned to it: three to five years ago.

Furthermore, Kevin who was assigned to Timberland originally was later assigned to an account whom he refers to as *Miami Liquors* and perhaps reveals a second, more concrete example of pigeonholing. While being on this account, which primarily targets a Hispanic demographic in the city of Miami, FL., Kevin has frequently expressed his issues with the account and the desire to venture into other accounts. However, his expressed desires are met with much hesitation, stating:

I've been trying to expand some of my work load to outside of the Miami Liquors there, it's at a halt and people have left because they didn't like it, but I'm still being kept. I know I help because of Spanish but you have to put the employee first if you're going to take that precedent with others too. I can help out in other accounts too.

His frustration stems from the feelings of being restricted to work on an account that he does not enjoy, which is further provoked by the fact that others who have felt the same, were granted permission to leave the account. Most importantly, Kevin shares he is kept on the account because of his bilingual skills. He mentions the account requires someone who speaks Spanish and that "not many others can," thus being kept on by default. Most importantly, the fact that he explicitly states he does not "have that much experience in food & beverage" to begin with, further defends the conclusion of pigeonholing for Kevin.

Lastly, a few practitioners spoke of a "Multicultural SVP" that used to work at the agency and was dedicated towards helping out with Hispanic related accounts. Gisselle recalls this female was employed with the sole purpose to "specifically target Hispanic audiences and

diverse people for different campaigns.” In fact, it is highlighted that her main contribution was that she spoke Spanish and because of that “the agency loved her” but they ultimately “fired her because she simply had no more work to do.” Therefore, responses indicate that this Hispanic practitioner was pigeonholed to assignments that were similar to her background yet letting her go before giving her any additional mainstream work. Another practitioner recalls the benefits of having the SVP around claiming she was an advocate for diversity at the agency and “brought attention to the issue.” However, when she left, “the agency stopped” being concerned. Carrie, who was one of the few other practitioners working alongside the Multicultural SVP, states the agency has a history of tackling the issue of diversity from a distorted angle in which they appoint someone of an ethnic background to spearhead all of their efforts, yet do not fully integrate them into the agency. She essentially argues that pigeonholing someone, like the Multicultural SVP, is not effective:

We had this Latin woman who was hired for these purposes but after a while, she naturally wanted more. That’s what I’m saying, you can’t bring someone to use them occasionally when it looks good and even worse, have them feel trapped even after they don’t want to do that line of work or do extra stuff.

Pigeonholing and tokenism are two concepts that can sometimes act as reinforcing spirals, which can lead to one influencing the other. Therefore, elaborating on the agency’s fired Multicultural SVP, Gisselle shares that apart from being pigeonholed, the Multicultural SVP was typically “brought on to new business pitches when clients wanted, requested someone with different backgrounds.” In other words, she observed that the agency had this practitioner on reserve to use only when necessary and only to give off the impression that the agency is in fact diverse. This way of conducting business mirrors that of tokenism. According to responses, this

SVP was essentially used as a token to portray how diverse the agency falsely is. Similarly, a Caucasian leader divulges how the agency recently hired a diverse representative yet believes that the recruitment of this practitioner is a front:

We hired a global diversity lead to lead efforts agency wide in all offices, however she is half Asian half White. So I don't know what that says. Only 50%? Or is it to show off that she's diverse and maybe so are we? Either way, you stick someone in that position but wouldn't she need a team to help her?

He questions how effective this position would be given the lack of resources and thus, challenges the agency's true intentions for even hiring her. Additionally, a diverse employee also implies that tokenism occurs behind the scenes so that clients can believe the agency is diverse claiming the agency does not actually value diversity but only "want to appear to be diverse," and therefore, "they'll do that whole thing where someone just so happens to randomly get picked at the last minute to be on an account team."

Naturally, Caucasian practitioners did not express feelings of being tokens, but did however express they thought or perceived their racially diverse peers to feel like they were tokens. When asked how she defines diversity, Stacey said "it's when everyone is diverse, not like the token Black person or token Latin person." Upon further probing, Stacey mentions that it is hard to ignore the fact that the agency is primarily White and therefore concludes Corrine felt like a token stating, "yeah I mean, unfortunately, I know she did" based on the times they would go to lunch and "she would say it sometimes." Brian was less specific in his response about Corrine's departure, yet implied the same notion as Stacey stating, "the truth is I don't know but I won't pretend to ignore or be oblivious to the fact that being one out of a few probably doesn't sit well with everyone." Even through his confusion as to the exact reasons for her departure, this

dominant member was still able to acknowledge how a lack of diversity can lead to feelings of tokenism. An African-American practitioner had a similar perception of how both Corrine and Macy may have felt considering they were “two of the few Black girls” working at the agency and eventually you cannot avoid feeling like “you’re one in a million and not for the good reason either.” She finished her response with stating that she knows *that* feeling because she has felt it working at the agency as well.

Apart from this African American employee, there were two other racially diverse practitioners currently working at the agency who have previously felt like tokens. When probed about why he thought his opinion was not valued when he first started working at the agency, an interviewee offered one of two possibilities; one of which was because maybe he “was the token Black guy who randomly popped up” during meetings. The other possibility was that his advice may not have been as valuable, however he quickly receded that explanation claiming, “I don’t think I sucked so it could have been a combination of both.” The other interviewee discloses a parallel situation in which she was asked to represent the agency at ColorComm, which is a conference to showcase successful female professionals in the communications industry who are also racially diverse. However, the issue stemmed from the agency advocating and pushing her to represent them at this particular conference, yet withdrew their support when she wanted to represent the agency at a more mainstream conference. In fact, she was also denied the chance to participate in an agency program which chooses deserving practitioners to work at another agency office located anywhere in the world. She summarizes the issue by stating:

You know what really gets me, I was sent to this conference called “Women of Color” conference and basically to act as the face for the company. Great, makes sense...but so basically I was good enough for that, but not good enough to be sent to be further

developed and given the same chance as others? Basically only good when it benefits them, not necessarily for something that benefits me?

Both the rejection to further develop her career as well as the denial to represent the company at a mainstream conference suggests the agency values diverse practitioners for the appealing portrayal that these practitioners convey. If so, their use is limited to instances that support to be more beneficial for the agency rather than the practitioner. For example, through pigeonholing, practitioners are used only for their diverse skills and not overall professional skills and through tokenism, practitioners are used as a representation to better the agency's image, not to develop the practitioner's career; both cases limit the practitioners' potential yet greatly benefit the agency.

### **Both Caucasian and Diverse Employees Believe Heavy Favoritism is Shown Toward Caucasian Practitioners**

Results indicated that Caucasian practitioners benefited from the heavy use of favoritism found in the agency. In other words, according to interviewees, top management may have favored Caucasians over racially diverse employees for prestigious accounts, promotions, career development, account team selections or even plain help. Racially diverse practitioners express their frustrations with the issue claiming they work just as hard as their Caucasian counterparts, yet their Caucasian coworkers either reap the same benefits with minimal effort or even worse, completely reap the benefits over them. When asked if she ever felt that she was not given the respect she deserved, a diverse employee quickly answered "Yes, oh my God yes," claiming there is an unbalanced playing field for Caucasians and racial minorities because she would often "volunteer to help or try to tell others I'd help in order to move up and then I see other White workers not doing the same but they somehow move up just as quickly as I do." She proceeds to

ultimately reduce the favoritism to race, saying Caucasians are favored for many opportunities not necessarily because the agency does not believe in their diverse employees, but because they essentially prefer Caucasians and thus “it automatically hurts me in the process.”

Another diverse employee goes as far as claiming that Whites receive more accolades for doing the same amount of work as diverse employees. She mimics how leadership consoles the White employees sarcastically saying, “Oh I feel bad for this person, they’re working so hard,” yet insists that she is often “right next to them also working just as hard” but does not receive the same consolation or appreciation. She specifically spoke in detail about the agency’s aforementioned Discover & Development program and how even though she met all the qualifications, she was not chosen. Her feelings of neglect escalated because two Caucasian women got picked over her prompting her to feel that the agency chooses “to develop and cater to mostly White people.” Her argument concludes with stating that there are not many racially diverse practitioners to begin with and when you combine that with the favoritism showed towards Caucasians, it prevents diverse employees from breaking that glass ceiling. A prime example of favoritism prohibiting diverse employees from growing their careers, is transparent through one of her interpretations of how account teams are build claiming they get strategically formed

because someone likes you, I mean they try to match it up but no, I’ve been in those conversations when they’re picking teams, I’ve witnessed them, trust me. Mediocre men, White men, with mediocre skills get pulled into new business pitches all the time and it’s so irritating because I can pitch the hell out of that product but the White guy will usually always get picked first.

Through this response, the interviewee offers another dimension of the agency's favoritism which surpasses that of race and identifies gender as a factor contributing specifically to the selection process of account teams.

However, apart from connecting the agency's high levels of favoritism to be dependent on race, they also acknowledge that they do not endure the backlash of the favoritism anymore thanks to their established power relations. The previously mentioned interviewee attributes her newfound "autonomy" to Emily who allows her to try and change things as well as help move past her "Discover & Develop program days." Even though she still battles with the setbacks of gender when the agency appoints teams, she does express gratitude towards Emily because "she was definitely invested in my development," as well as for helping her relief some of the race related hurdles. She says Emily trusts and allows her to help with intern recruiting in order "to stop the cycle of people hiring their friends, or keeping the influx of Caucasian hires when there are equally qualified diverse candidates, graduates out there." Gisselle mentions that even though she still has to work harder than her White counterparts to remain successful, the favoritism against her has gotten much better. Ironically, where some diverse employees struggle with this issue, Gisselle excels and it is thanks to her power relation with Delilah because she

will stop that shit right in its tracks. I call her the *remover* because she does not play that.

She will and *has* removed undeserving people from big accounts and placed people who actually deserved to be there and yes, I have been blessed by her like that before.

Lucy also views power relations as a way to overcome the favoritism essentially comparing the agency to a "sink or swim" type game and in order to stay afloat "you just need that one ride or die who can be there for you" that can offer defense or help when needed.

Other racially diverse practitioners express witnessing favoritism play out in the agency who do not explicitly attribute it to race but still imply a possible correlation. For example, Brianna elaborated how Corrine would get bored with the monotony of her work and not landing “big accounts” because the favoritism “translates into the office and work and [determines] who gets what versus who doesn’t.” Brianna thought this was one of the reasons for why Corrine left concluding, “People have their usuals that they go to, Monica, Lisa, Trevor and well she just wasn’t one of them;” the three practitioners offered as examples of being the *usuals* that Brianna found an issue with, are all White.

Kelly, a Caucasian practitioner, has a different perception in which she thinks favoritism is a natural part of business. Kelly boldly admits she gets favored claiming the agency has “favoritism with specific people, even I think I have favorable favoritism,” and quickly justifies her answer adding, “but everyone down the road at one point or another gets chosen off of it so it equals out.” Her testimonial suggests that favoritism does not bother her because she is on the other end of the spectrum, far from her diverse counterparts, receiving the benefits. Sally offers an explanation as to why the levels of favoritism might be high saying she sees “people latching on to others who are sort of like them” which propels them to start “championing them and pushing their career more.” She refers to this phenomenon as the “sorority effect” saying that:

PR can be cliquey as we know, especially filled with a bunch of sorority-esque girls so it’s funny you often hear a newbie come in and they say where they’re from, what school they went to and then the topic of sorority life will come up. Boom, besties. Mentor mentees-but you don’t even know if they’re even good at their job so I laugh sometimes. You know like White girly girls all flock; I can say that because I’m White.

In fact, Kelly mentions having an affinity for Nicole stating, “I definitely look out for her.” This voluntary help was conducive of them getting along because “she’s also a delta so it’s like mini generations, we just click.” Subsequently, Stacey shares Kelly’s viewpoint in that favoritism is something normal and expected answering “absolutely,” to whether she sees favoritism at the agency and explains, “but I think that’s the nature of anything.”

Ironically, one of the more concrete examples of favoritism came from a Caucasian leadership interviewee. Emily shares her personal recruitment experience and how “her friend used to work here and he helped me land an interview.” Emily continues by saying she “botched” her interview yet got asked to come in for another interview regardless of her first subpar performance. On the other hand, Connor adamantly frowns upon this issue saying “favoritism plays a factor in many leaving and not retaining diverse talent,” and completing his perspective by denouncing top management’s makeup of being primarily White.

### **Definitions of Diversity and Perceptions of Diversity Efforts Range Widely**

While there were a wide range of definitions and interpretations regarding diversity, all employees understood what diversity stands for. More importantly, all employees regardless of race or status, incorporated the component of “race” within their individual conceptualizations. Some definitions were as succinct as Valerie’s which equates diversity to “ensuring that all types of people based on experiences, race, ethnicity, religion are included and welcomed in their workplace and work space.” Others were more elaborate with their ideas, like Mike who defined diversity as

gathering a group of people from any possible walk of life and as much of a concentration of different people. Having a group of people, gay, straight, every race, old or young, born here or not and making them feel like they’re not different but rather

needed and beautiful.

Furthermore, all employees were unanimous in believing the agency's Diversity Alliance was needed and beneficial. Many practitioners held the alliance in a high regard and portrayed the alliance's significance through their responses. Because of that, many participants were critical of their agency's diversity efforts which became apparent through responses to questions like, "Do you feel the agency values diversity," "Do you think the agency is seeking diverse employees," or individual follow-up questions. Considering all participants individually valued diversity, it was logical to ask the participants if they thought the *agency* valued diversity. The results show that three-fourths of the sample believes the agency values diversity. However, out of that group, only five participants were able to definitively say "yes" without any hesitation. The others claimed the agency valued diversity but either not for the right reasons or because of pressure. This prompted participants to justify their answers in a fashion similar to Valerie's where she claims, "Yes, I think they value it in theory." Other types of responses were similar in nature to Stacey's response: "I think the agency *now* values diversity, I don't think it's something organic in the thought process." These responses referred to the agency being open to more diversity but only because of the Diversity Alliance. The other one-fourth of the sample thought otherwise; for example, a diverse employee captures the essence of these responses stating, "there comes a time where we have to stop just running around in circles, circling the same talking points" in order to advance their diversity efforts.

Responses were surprisingly scattered regarding whether they thought their agency was seeking diverse people. In fact, about one-fourth of the participants claimed the agency was not actively recruiting diverse employees, with many responses being parallel to that of Annie's in which she stated, "No, not from what I can see. The hires they have made are all White, young,

college aged kids.” The other one-fourth of the sample said they were unsure if the agency was seeking diverse employees; for example, Lisa stated, “I think they might be, clearly I haven’t seen too many though.” However, the other half of the sample claimed the agency was in fact seeking diverse employees. It is salient to note that this result may be skewed because four of the nine included in this sub sample were part of leadership. In other words, without leadership’s input, the practitioners’ responses were divided more evenly reflecting a third answering yes, a third answering maybe, and a third answering no. There was only one participant from leadership who did not think the agency was seeking diverse employees. Another interesting finding was that a third of the sample attributed the “diverse seeking” to seeking diverse interns. In other words, their responses reflected initiatives to recruit interns in the hopes of using this strategy as a gateway to retain them full-time. Furthermore, out of the 10 Diversity Alliance members, seven of them answered the agency was seeking diverse talent but did so by mentioning the alliance’s efforts towards specifically targeting diverse interns.

Other practitioners voiced their opinions on the lack of diversity when given the chance to express what they did not like about the agency. For example, Delilah mentions she is not fully satisfied with the agency’s demographic makeup claiming the agency should “have more ethnicities be represented, I think we have done an OK job but we could always do better.” When asked if she thought the agency was currently diverse, she said, “I think in some ways,” but then highlighted the lack of racial diversity by questioning, “where are the African Americans or the Latinos?”

### **Research Questions**

Through these six themes, the four research questions posed were successfully answered. Specifically, RQ1 was directly answered through the last theme titled “definitions of diversity

and perceptions of diversity efforts range widely.” Regardless of the answers offered, it was clear that all employees, both diverse and Caucasian practitioners, shared the same notion of diversity being invaluable to an agency. In fact, all responses regarding participants’ definitions of diversity incorporated the idea that there cannot be diversity without a mix of races and ethnicities. Therefore, the importance they held toward diversity parallels the importance they hold toward the inclusion of other races at the agency.

The first theme along with its sub-theme details the process of how practitioners form their power relations and thus answers RQ2. When referring to their power relations with dominant group members, the practitioners would refer to them as being mentors and how because of their mentoring, they have been able to advance their careers and better their work environments. In other words, power relations involve identifying mentors and seeking them to be one’s agents of power, which will further be addressed in the discussion section. This theme also highlights that practitioner’s power relations are formed with those whom they can easily vent to in hopes of bringing change, thus showing them a glimpse of the future benefits that may come from comfortably expressing their issues. Therefore, early signs of potential benefits also play a factor in the selection of their power relations.

Additionally, the sub-theme of “racially diverse practitioners employ power relations based on dissimilarities,” offers insight into the formation of power relations and how diverse employees have a preference for dissimilar dominant group members. However, this sub-theme most importantly answers RQ3 by detailing that diverse practitioners base their power relations on dissimilarities when there is simply no one in leadership that is similar to them. Therefore, these types of power relations form by default. However, while the lack of similar leaders may drive practitioners to pursue these types of power relations, they also claim them to be more

powerful. Therefore, the potency of these types of power relations influence their formation as well, or at the very least, their longevity.

RQ4 was answered sporadically through the interview transcripts and thus can be found in many themes. Of course the first theme, along with its sub-theme directly highlights the benefits of power relations which included promotion benefits, better selection for mainstream and high prestige accounts, higher inclusion levels, more autonomy for account work, salary raises, trust and confidentiality with personal issues, job security, and overall better treatment. The benefits became apparent through the other themes as well, with the exception of the last theme since it specifically aimed to outline definitions and perceptions of diversity only. However, themes regarding tokenism, pigeonholing, and micro inequalities inadvertently shed light on more benefits of power relations. Because responses of micro inequalities or tokenism delineated *past* experiences prior to the formation of their power relations, it suggests that the elimination or reduction of this treatment is another benefit of power relations. In fact, many of the practitioners state they do not experience these treatments anymore *because* of their power relations. Furthermore, the benefit of job security can easily be identified through the theme of “lack of diversity leads to loss of diverse employees” which delineates other diverse practitioners who did not have power relations and ultimately left the agency.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This study's revelations not only answer the research questions posed but also shows the significance of power relations when there is a lack of diversity. Overall, the qualitative interviews revealed six emergent themes as well as one sub-theme: the existence of power relations and thus racially diverse practitioners employ power relations based on dissimilarities, lack of diversity leads to loss of diverse employees, micro inequalities lead to alienation among diverse employees, diverse employees perceive minimal but apparent tokenism & pigeonholing, both Caucasian and diverse employees believe heavy favoritism is shown toward Caucasian practitioners, and definitions of diversity and perceptions of diversity efforts range widely.

Specifically, through the first theme one can recognize that not only do racially diverse practitioners employ the strategy of power relations but contrary to Holck's (2016) similarity-attraction foundation, these diverse employees base their power relations off of dissimilarities. While participants like Gerard stated that having a power relation based on dissimilarities is beneficial because of its greater potency, they also candidly claim these power relations inherently form because there are no racially diverse leaders. This finding supports Greenhaus et al. (1990) and Ragins (1997) who claim leadership positions are greatly occupied by Caucasians making it difficult for diverse employees to find similar looking leaders. In other words, it is salient to highlight how the lack of ethnic leaders in top management contributed to the high proportion of power relations based on dissimilarities. Gerard points out that because "no one is Black, not even a Black or ethnic female" in leadership, he ultimately had no other choice than to form this other type of power relation. Connor also attests to this notion when he claimed Corrine and Macy had no one in leadership that they could look up to or feel comfortable asking

for help. Therefore, results may have looked different had there been a more diverse leadership at this particular agency.

Ultimately, there were a total of 14 power relations identified from the interviews. Seven of the 14 power relations were formed from Caucasian practitioners and seven were formed from racially diverse practitioners. Because there were only 8 racially diverse practitioners in the sample, almost every one of them has a power relation set in place in order to alleviate their diversity related hurdles. Among these power relations were that of Gisselle with Delilah, Lisa with Dylan (not in the sample), Amaris with Emily, Kelly with Brian and Delilah, Lucy with Joe and Marc (neither of which are in the sample), Sally with Emily and Jessica (not in the sample), Mariah with Dylan, Gerard with Brian and Delilah, Carrie with Kristina (not in the sample), and Brianna with Connor. As one can see, some of the practitioners had multiple power relations. Specifically, two racially diverse practitioners had multiple power relations and not surprisingly, they both held the top two positions before entering top management; Gerard is an AS and Lucy is an AM. This finding can imply that their success may possibly be attributed to their multiple power relations, however there was no concrete support for this notion. In addition, there were other practitioners who are AMs as well but only had one power relation, thus this may be an area for further exploration in future research.

Some of the prominent benefits of having power relations were identified as promotion benefits, better selection for mainstream and high prestige accounts, to even having more power gained in individual account teams. While there were benefits of having a power relation that did not have any relation, or any indication of being connected to diversity, most of the benefits did in fact reduce some hurdles brought on by race. For example, through their established power

relations, racially diverse practitioners are able to reduce the heavy favoritism shown towards Caucasian employees. While the diverse sample expressed this is still a lingering problem, they did identify areas in which they were able to combat this issue with the help of their respective power relations. For example, Gisselle and Abby both shared anecdotes about how their respective power relations with a dominant group member provided them with being selected for certain accounts over their less deserving Caucasian peers, something that would not have happened without their help. If it were not for Delilah and Emily, Abby and Gisselle would have fallen victim to the issue of favoritism benefiting their Caucasian peers. This supports Greenhaus et al. (1990) who claim favoritism shown toward dominant group members is part of treatment discrimination and thereby contributes to low retention rates for diverse employees. In fact, the benefits of these power relations can be seen in the other themes as well, specifically those concerning tokenism, pigeonholing, micro inequalities and racially diverse practitioners leaving the agency.

Essentially, practitioners would respond with past experiences of micro inequalities or tokenism, but when probed, they would reveal that they no longer endure these snubs and would circle back to the fact that their “mentors,” or power relations, are the reasons for their improved work environments. In fact, it is because of these witnessed and experienced occurrences that they sought to form power relations. This ultimately proves Gunby and DeCuir Gunby (2016) were correct in claiming micro inequalities, including micro insults and micro invalidations, could be avoided with the help of power relations. Furthermore, one of the examples regarding tokenism was the Multicultural SVP who according to respondents had limited work as well as limited power. This coincides with Waymer et al. (2011) who claim that many racially diverse practitioners who experience tokenism are given the coveted title, in this instance being SVP, but

are not given full autonomy to make decisions. Lastly, when speaking of pigeonholing, they would also talk about previous experiences with it or talk about the pigeonholing that was happening or has happened to someone else. In fact, only one racially diverse practitioner, Kevin, expressed still being pigeonholed and he was also the only diverse practitioner without any power relations. This parallels findings from Foldy et al. (1997) proving racially diverse employees who do not have access to power or agents of power have a difficult time enhancing their careers. Furthermore, the overall lack of diversity can propel practitioners to leave the agency as in Macy's and Corrine's cases. Therefore, their departures can be interpreted as further supporting the significance of power relations considering they did not have any power relations, unlike the racially practitioners who are still at the agency. Additionally, as Connor and Abby point out, if they had someone in leadership to advocate on their behalf, they might still be employed at the agency.

Many of the employees would refer to their power relations as a "mentor-mentee" relationship, which coordinates with Gallicano's (2013) and Bardhan's (2016) viewpoints on power relations and how to employ them. Furthermore, as the literature states, there are different types of power and the most relatable to this study is that of legitimate and referent power. It became evident through the transcripts that the practitioners understood who had legitimate power versus who had referent power and thus, the ones named as most influential were very similar to the ones who were referred to as mentors and subsequently those who are part of power relations. In other words, those leaders who were sought out by the practitioners for power relations were not necessarily pursued for their positions of authority, but rather because they actually possess both legitimate power as well as referent power. It makes sense that the practitioners would choose such individuals considering Boonstra & Gravenhorst (1998)

delineate those with power alone can govern whereas those with power and influence can bring about more substantial change.

Given that the premise behind these power relations as described by Zemblyas (2007) is to have access to agents of change who can influence others, it becomes ideal for practitioners to align themselves with leaders possessing both types of power. The most influential leaders from top management were Delilah, Brian, and Emily, who fortunately were part of the sample, as well as Molly, who was not part of the sample because she works in the Human Resources department. Because Delilah, Connor, Brian, and Emily were interviewed, the researcher was able to verify through their interviews whether they mentor, and thus have power relations, with those same practitioners who named them as their mentors. Mike was the only leader who was identified as not having any power relations with the practitioners and only showed to have legitimate power as opposed to referent power.

The last theme shows all practitioners, regardless of their race, believe diversity is important to have within an agency. Most importantly, when speaking on the concept of diversity, they all mention race as being a significant element of an agency's diversity. This parallels credible definitions of diversity from scholars such as Hon, Brunner, Tindall, and Aldoory to name a few. Therefore, the sample was knowledgeable enough on the concept of diversity which made their responses credible for the rest of the analysis. As previously mentioned, their thoughts on the importance of diversity was unanimous, however their critiques on how well the agency is handling their diversity initiatives were scattered across a spectrum reflecting great reviews and extremely low reviews. Even some of the positive reviews regarding the agency's efforts to recruit diverse employees may be misleading because they were in reference to recruiting interns and not full time employees. The notion behind that is that any

diverse interns who are talented enough to stay would theoretically get offered full time positions. However, while the participants have seen diverse interns, they have not seen an influx in actual recruitment of diverse employees. For example, Stacey states, “Yes, I think the summer interns, 80% of them are being chosen from hiring organizations that are predominantly Black or Spanish or certain ethnicities, I don’t know if it’s being executed in direct hires.” Thus, because seven alliance members answered this way, the responses more so reflect the diversity alliance’s future goals and initiatives for a diverse internship program.

Furthermore, some practitioners were adamant in the fact that because the agency looks the way it does, primarily Caucasian, the agency must not value diversity as much as it should. However, others were on the fence with technically answering yes but ultimately retracting or second guessing the agency’s actual intentions. Their reasoning for whether the agency values diversity sheds light on other factors that may be contributing to their diversity initiatives. For example, practitioners mentioned that the agency values diversity but only because of the pressure placed upon them. Some of those pressures were exposed as coming from the agency’s parent company with participants like Sally and Emily claiming the parent company may be the driving force behind the agency’s diversity efforts. Emily says that “there’s pressure from many ends to be diverse,” and when asked what those pressures were, she stated the parent company as being first on the list followed by “the industry in general, our publics, clients want that too.” As Emily divulged in her response, pressure from clients was another common response regarding why the agency “values diversity.” Gerard thinks the agency values diversity but similar to Emily’s perspective, he believes “it’s because clients are requesting more diverse teams so it’s pressure from them.”

In fact, one of the agency's former consumer tech clients has been vocal that the industry should have more diverse account teams and is on record stating that the public relations agencies representing them should follow suit (Kanski, 2016). While this information was not found in the interviews, the loss of this particular account was information made available through the interviews and ironically, it was the account that led to Macy's departure. While Macy is racially diverse, it is unclear whether she was the only diverse team member assigned to this account and if this is why the client left the agency. However, the timing of the departure and possible implications make it worthy of discussion.

### **Implications**

These findings have many practical and theoretical implications that can be used to ameliorate work environments for racially diverse practitioners as well as drive further public relations research in academia. Practical implications include the notion that racially diverse practitioners can and should employ power relations as a viable strategy to alleviate some of the hurdles set forth by the lack of diversity in PR. In fact, if employed, these racially diverse practitioners should see benefits overtime that will alleviate many issues in their work environments. These practitioners should seek out a mentor who does not have the same identity markers, predominantly one possessing dominant group identity markers, such as being Caucasian, in order to propel a power relation to form. It is through these power relations and their agents of change, that they can influence policy change or at the very least, have access to those who hold referent power and can influence change.

The field can benefit from knowing how a lack of diversity is not only problematic for diverse employees but how it propels them to employ the use of power relations. This notion emphasizes the need for change but also identifies a *means* to achieve that change. Considering a

lack of diversity is the field's current state of the paradigm, agencies should use this study as a way to be pragmatic in their solutions for diversity. As Connor mentioned, his agency is aware of the lack of diversity and thus there have been talks about implementing programs that strive for diverse employees to have mentors in order to improve their work lives. Therefore, the industry should take note of these efforts and capitalize on them given that the results of this study show the beneficial impact mentors can have for all practitioners, especially diverse ones. While this particular process of forming power relations would not necessarily be organic, it may serve as a way to further drive formations of power relations down the road, or at the very least, position practitioners alongside dominant members who share mutual goals. By doing so, the industry would be promoting inclusion and integration among employees which would only benefit work-life and produce a fairer distribution of power.

Furthermore, public relations is aware of its diversity problem, however through this study the industry is now witness to how diversity is not simply an ethical problem but also a practical problem given its contribution to imbalanced power within agencies. This imbalanced power is not referring to power stemming from various levels of individual authority as one would naturally think, but rather from a homogenous employee makeup that establishes a dominant culture of Caucasians. Through this study, the field can understand how a dominant culture is powerful enough to unintentionally reign over an agency's intended culture. This ideology is offered through insider knowledge from one of the industry's top agencies, thus presenting the opportunity to change the normalization that comes from allowing a one race-based culture to dominate the field.

Diverse practitioners from a world-renowned agency have spoken and shared their truest, most genuine experiences working in the industry, offering insight into the workings of a

successful PR agency. These depictions of past and/or current treatments should be used as guidelines for moving forward with diversity initiatives. The strategy of power relations becomes a credible solution for practitioners and should be fortified by the industry as a tool for positive change. All practitioners regardless of race value diversity, suggesting resistance levels would be low if the industry encourages agencies to offer help to their diverse employees. Thus, public relations gains tremendous strides by knowing their employees care for diversity and implies they would be on board for supporting the growth of diverse employees as well. Learning this information has significant implications for diversity in the field because public relations can focus more on offering solutions for diversity as oppose to offering diversity education. Through the interviews, the industry can see that the lack of diversity is not necessarily attributed to the lack of knowledge regarding diversity; on the contrary, practitioners are well versed on the concept of diversity and therefore understand where the issue is coming from. Thus, public relations can move past educating their employees and instead transition toward providing practical strategies for resolving the issue of diversity.

In fact, power relations suggest potential benefits for everyone involved. For example, an agency that is more diverse but most importantly, empowers their diverse practitioners, will be more successful with clientele. According to Stevens et al. (2008), clients requesting more diverse account teams is becoming increasingly common, thus if such requests were granted, it would mean bigger profits and added business for agencies. As far as theory goes, scholars can use and cite this study to further test the prevalence and benefits of power relations. The theoretical framework of Gallicano (2013) can now be further used to extend the knowledge of power relations specifically found in the PR industry. This study highlights that Boonstra and Gravenhorst (1998) were correct in their assessment that these relations should be formed off a

mentor-mentee basis. Therefore, since their ideology proved to be correct in this study, scholars should emphasize this notion and build upon it. Mentors are seen as eligible prospects and focusing attention on the selection of mentors and the nature of those relationships is a direction that power relations should move toward. Overall, scholars can see that these power relations are embedded through some level of trust. This can be seen through the mutual acceptance and positive affirmation given from both the lower-powered practitioners and the higher-powered leaders within each power relation. Trust and being comfortable in sharing grievances showed to be prominent factors in fortifying power relations, therefore these factors may be among the most useful for identifying suitable agents of power. However, this further implies other factors may be just as prominent or frequently used to assess potential power relations and evaluate their strengths.

At last, this study sheds light on the growing theoretical framework of power relations and how the adoption of this strategy can benefit racially diverse practitioners to get ahead in the industry. In fact, the findings support that the use of power relations do in fact exist in public relations and they suggest to be extremely beneficial in many ways ranging from promotional benefits to landing more mainstream work. Furthermore, power relations based off dissimilarities were formed by diverse practitioners as opposed to power relations based on a similarity-attraction foundation. While Caucasian practitioners who found themselves in the minority group also employed this strategy, racially diverse practitioners were more transparent in their purposeful pursuit to form these power relations because of the race based hurdles they sought to overcome. This study supports Guinier and Torres (2002) and Gallicano (2013) proving the beneficial use of power relations by diverse employees.

### **Limitations**

A study limitation is that this research is representative of only one public relations agency. Therefore, its findings are specific to the research site and its respective employees. Furthermore, the information revealed portrays the perspectives of only those who were interviewed. As previously mentioned, the researcher is also racially diverse himself and thus, readers should be aware of that and how it could have potentially impacted the study one way or another. In addition, another potential limitation is that the researcher spent a short period of time working for this agency prior to conducting the study. Similar to Chavez (2014), who also encountered these same limitations, and assured the participants all information provided and all personal information would be confidential and they could skip any question without any consequences. Furthermore, the interviewer assured his subjects that there was no right or wrong answer, thus instilling a level of comfort and mitigating pressures when responding.

However, because of these details, it is possible the interviewees may or may not have been influenced themselves in the way they reported their answers. For example, some participants may have felt more comfortable exposing certain information or maybe even more obligated to disclose more information based upon any previous relationship they had with the researcher. As with qualitative interviews, the interviewer plays an active role in the interviewing process and thus the researcher's race could have influenced participants to share information they believed the interviewer wanted to hear. For example, Caucasian participants may have felt a need to be politically correct and alter their responses. The researcher was aware of these potential limitations from the inception of the study all the way through the analysis and was mindful as to avoid tainting the results with his own interpretations as best he can. Lastly, due to the sensitive topic of discussion, it is possible that some participants may not have felt

comfortable being completely open with their responses, especially those participants belonging to top management. They may have felt an obligation to represent their agency and convey a better portrayal of the agency's diversity. Ultimately, their perceived sense of restriction could have affected the way in which they responded.

### **Future Research**

Future research should employ a triangulation of methods in order to better corroborate the findings found in this study. A possible way of doing that is to incorporate observations and content analyses of written materials depicting any and all diversity efforts. Not only would the observations be used to observe the power relations in action, but it would also validate the interview findings. Future research should replicate the study at multiple agencies in order to generalize the findings. By doing so, one would also be able to compare and contrast the use of power relations within specific agencies, ideally other top agencies within the field. This study also shed light on exterior pressures that could be influencing the agency to pursue a more diverse workspace and therefore future research should focus on highlighting the effects of these pressures. These discoveries related to third party agency pressures is a distinct area of research that could be investigated to answer questions of diversity efforts at certain agencies and how that affects the existence of power relations. Lastly, one of the more interesting findings from this study is the idea of multiple power relations, something that is not heavily discussed in past research. In fact, the idea of multiple power relations was a concept that this study did not elaborate on but one which later became apparent. Thus, future research should elaborate on identifying if there is a correlation between the number of power relations one has and their success at an agency.

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