

Ethnic Diversity: Exploring the Status of Asian-American Public Relations Practitioners in the U.S.[#]

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Abstract: Using in-depth interview, this study attempted to explore the current status, concerns, barriers and roles of Asian-American public relations practitioners in the United States. The findings of the study show that while many are satisfied with their current careers in public relations, Asian-American practitioners confirmed the existence of racial and gender stereotypes that may challenge full organizational integration. In addition, unsatisfied media relationships and gender issues emerged as prevailing concerns among them. However, they perceived that those barriers are not insurmountable and can be overcome by “being more prepared,” “more educated,” “being positive,” and “more experienced.”

INTRODUCTION

The population in the United States is more diverse in race, culture, and ethnicity than ever before (U.S. Census, 2000). Following the trend of population changes, the workforce has also become more diverse. Most workers today are women and non-white (Dreyfuss, 1990; Thomas, 1990), and this trend toward increased diversity will continue. This shift can be seen in the public relations industry. In the middle of the 1980s, white men were the most dominant group in the industry. However, more diverse groups, including women, non-whites and non-Westerners, are currently working in public relations than there were twenty years ago (Hon & Brunner, 2000).

Organizations are hiring a more diverse workforce of public relations practitioners, especially minorities, for several reasons. First, in order to understand diversity in society, it is necessary that an organization represents and is informed by a diverse cross-section of employees in terms of race, gender, and culture since communication is likely to be excellent when ethnic diversity is supported (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995). Second, it has been found that there is a positive correlation between heightened diversity and an organization's bottom line effect. For example, Wright, Ferries, Hiller, and Kroll (1995) found that announcements of an organization receiving awards for high-quality voluntary affirmative action programs is positively linked to increases in the organizations stock price. Additionally, excellence theory, a normative theory guiding what public relations should do in an ideal situation, suggests that increased diversity makes organizations more effective and

affirms their social responsibility (J. Grunig, 1992). Pompper (2004) claimed that ethnic diversity should be considered a significant factor to achieving excellent public relations, because diversity and excellence are inextricably linked. Furthermore, scholars agree that ensuring ethnic diversity is a public relations responsibility (L. Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Kern-Foxworth, 1989b).

Recently, public relations scholarship has given more attention to minority issues. For example, Len-Rios (1998) investigated the status of minority public relations practitioners and recognized concerns for scholars and practitioners. Other minority studies have focused on African-American (e.g., Kern-Foxworth, Gandy, Hines, & Miller, 1994; Layton, 1980; Pompper, 2004) and Hispanic practitioners (Abeyta & Hackett, 2002). However, Asian public relations practitioners have not been a focus of any previous studies, thus making this study one of the first to examine the current status, concerns, jobs, barriers, and roles of Asian-American¹ practitioners within their organizations.

The results of this study have the potential to contribute to the field of public relations in several ways. First, the study's findings will bring attention to Asian American public relations practitioners within the field of public relations research, which has not previously been a focus. Second, the results of this study will determine how to remove barriers or concerns and better train public relations managers to recognize them. Lastly, Asian American practitioners, as well as CEOs who consider hiring Asian American practitioners, may utilize the findings from this study to their advantage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Diversity in Public Relations

Diversity is defined as “difference in ethnicity, race, gender, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, disability, veteran status, age, national origin, and cultural and personal per-

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¹ Although the term “Asian American” is used in this study, it includes Pacific Islander.

spectives" (Bhawuk & Triandis, 1996, p. 85). Diversity issues are becoming increasingly significant because the population and workforces in the United States are changing and growing more heterogeneous. It is predicted that sometime between the years of 2055 and 2060, current minorities such as Latino, Black, and Asian will likely constitute a majority of the general population (Arndorfer, 1996).

This ongoing diversity phenomenon affects the area of public relations and poses both a challenge and an opportunity in the field (Allen, 1995; Banks, 1995; Hon & Brunner, 2000; "Communicating to a Diverse Workforce," 1989). Three factors hinder efforts in recruiting a diverse workforce, including: (a) racism and prejudice acting as superficially imposed barriers, (b) limited opportunities and poor awareness of the public relations profession among minorities, and (c) limited to no access of these groups to training and preparation for public relations jobs (Kern-Foxworth, 1989b). However, the globalization of business and resulting cultural sensitivity should increase opportunities for diversification. As Brinkerhoff (1994) suggested, increased diversity offers an opportunity in that "the more different kinds of people that contribute to the team effort, the better. Different viewpoints, backgrounds and different approaches can lead to a better product" (p. E4). Thus, it would be beneficial for organizations not to overlook the issue of diversity (Bruno, 1988; Graves, 1989; Mabry *et al.*, 1990).

Minorities in Public Relations

Minorities are known as "people of color" or "AHANA," an acronym for African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American (Kern-Foxworth, 1989a). Prior to the 1960s, the field of public relations gave little or no attention to people of color, because they were almost invisible in the industry and were not given job opportunities with major public relations companies. In the middle of the 1980s, however, people of color were becoming more visible in the field. In 1986, out of the 157,000 practitioners in the field, approximately 10,000 were minorities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1986). African Americans and Hispanics hold about 6 % and 2 % of jobs, respectively, and these percentages have remained constant since 1984 (Wynter, 1994).

Organizations have recruited more minority practitioners for several reasons. First, due to a growing and more attractive minority market than in previous decades, organizations need more minority practitioners to understand the needs and desires of minority customers. For example, the disposable income of African Americans increased from \$42 billion to \$214 billion between 1973 and 1984 (Blake, 1985). Moreover, the hiring of minority public relations professionals was further necessitated when important clients of non-minority-owned agencies recognized increases of as much as 40 % based on profits from the black community during the early 70's (Stein, 1972). However, Kern-Foxworth (1989b) pointed out that many organizations only hired minority public relations practitioners to deal with minority publics or to fill quota requirements.

Following the trend toward increased diversity in the industry, public relations scholarship currently pays more active attention to the status and roles of minorities than ever before and agrees with the importance of ethnic diversity.

Kern-Foxworth (1989b) examined the status and roles of minority public relations practitioners and revealed that a majority of the minority respondents identified themselves as being in middle level management positions, such as problem solvers. However, their salaries were not comparable with their white counterparts. Zerbinos and Clanton (1993) surveyed 140 minority public relations practitioners and found that while most of the respondents were satisfied with their jobs, a substantial number felt their careers were hindered due to their ethnicity. Len-Rios (1998) explored the status of minority PR practitioners through in-depth interviews and determined that there had been progress made toward including minorities in upper-level management positions in the field, but their personal experiences indicated that barriers still existed. However, it is important to note that each of these studies treated minorities as a homogenous group.

Some research has focused on specific ethnicities in the field, such as African-American or Hispanic public relations practitioners. For example, Kern-Foxworth *et al.* (1994) examined managerial roles of black female public relations practitioners in Washington D.C. and showed that black women at the managerial level in the industry identified themselves as occupying "meaningful roles within the profession and interface quite frequently within management" (p. 431). More recently, Pompper (2004) focused on ethnic diversity using excellence theory and revealed four unique roles that female African American practitioners fulfill: pioneer, educator, mentor, and agenda-builder. In addition, Abeyta and Hackett (2002) studied Hispanic public relations practitioners' role in their organizations and determined that the roles of Hispanic practitioners are similar to those of other minority practitioners. Until now, there have not been any studies that focus primarily on Asian-American public relations practitioners. Thus, this study attempts to explore the roles, current status, barriers, and concerns of Asian-Americans working within the public relations industry. Before exploring these issues regarding Asian-American public relations practitioners, it is necessary to address public relations roles in general as specified in the following section.

Roles in Public Relations

For more than two decades, scholars have attempted to describe the different roles that public relations practitioners play. Two role typologies have been discovered: managerial versus technician roles. Practitioners in managerial roles are involved in the organizational decision-making environment (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992). Thus, professionals in managerial roles influence policymaking and are responsible for a program's success or failure. Conversely, those occupying technician roles are primarily located in peripheral departments within an organization. According to Dozier (1984), practitioners in technician roles rarely participate in the management decision-making process, but they do make program decisions necessary for the effective internal functioning of their departments. They also conduct low-level communication techniques, which are implemented through decisions others made. Technicians usually offer such services as writing, editing, photography, media contracts, and production of publications. These two-role typologies have consistently been displayed over time and in different practi-

ner samples of several studies (e.g., Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999; Dozier, 1992; J. Grunig, & L. Grunig, 1992; Lauzen, 1994). Socialization, public relations education, work experience (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999) and gender (Dozier & Broom, 1995) are other factors on which scholars have focused further examination.

Other scholars such as Broom and Smith (1979) and Dozier (1992) have applied greater sophistication to the dichotomy of roles and proposed the existence of four roles: (a) the *expert prescriber*², (b) the *problem-solving process facilitator*³, (c) the *communication facilitator*⁴, and (d) the *communication technician*⁵. In a broad perspective, however, this four-role typology could be categorized into the typical dichotomous roles of the manager and the technician, because the expert prescriber, the communication facilitator, and the problem-solving process facilitator roles are all representative of the managerial role (Dozier, 1992). Leichty and Springston (1996) also challenged the two-role typology by pointing out that both roles are not mutually exclusive, and the communication manager/communication technician dichotomy does not support a coherent theoretical justification. They suggested a structure of public relations roles that identifies four main practitioner roles: (a) internals, (b) generalists, (c) traditional managers, and (d) externals. However, it remains unclear as to whether public relations practitioners conduct these four roles separately.

Asian-Americans in Public Relations

Asian people are defined as “those having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine islands, Thailand, and Vietnam” (Reeves & Bennett, 2003). In March 2002, 12.5 million Asians lived in the United States, representing about four percent of the American population. More than six million Asian-Americans were employed in the United States, and a higher portion was concentrated in managerial and professional specialty occupations (Reeves & Bennett, 2003).

Thanks to a cultural emphasis on higher education and job achievement, Asian-Americans have made significant steps in both education and employment. Forty-four percent of the Asian-American population earn a bachelor’s degrees, and 86% have at least a high school diploma (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Even though Asian-Americans make up only 4% of the population in the United States, they comprise approximately 10% of scientists and engineers in the country, which is a higher percentage than the three minority groups (African-Americans, Hispanic, and Native Americans) combined (National Science Foundation, 2000). This achievement has contributed to the image of Asian-Americans shifting from that of “yellow and brown hordes” to a “model minority.”

² The expert prescriber “operates as the authority on both public relations problems and their solutions” (Broom, 1982, p. 18)

³ Problem-solving facilitator collaborates with other managers to define and solve problems (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994)

⁴ The communication facilitator works closely with top managers to deal with public relations problems in a systematic and process-oriented manner.

⁵ The communication technician provides technical services, such as writing news releases, event planning, and graphic design.

As a group, Asian-Americans are younger and more suburban than the American averages (Le, 2005). Approximately a third of the Asian population is under 18, and only 7% of Asian Americans are older than 65 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Approximately half of the Asian populations in the United States is concentrated in three states—California (4.8 million, 12% of the state population), New York (1.2 million, 6.2% of its population), and Hawaii (0.7 million, 58% of its population) (www.demographics.com).

According to the Los Angeles firm of Muse, Cord & Chen, the Asian consumer market is one of fastest growing in the United States and is approaching \$35 billion annually. Moreover, when compared with other minority groups, Asian-Americans display that fastest growing participation in the workforce. From 1980 to 1990, Asian work participation surged 106% while African-American and Hispanic participation increased by 23% and 67%, respectively (Bovee, 1993). This trend of higher levels of Asian-American participation in the workforce continues currently.

Despite the increase and importance of Asian Americans in the U.S., they have been underrepresented in the academic field of public relations. Thus, this study attempts to explore their status, roles, barriers or concerns, and contributions in public relations field. Five research questions adapted from Pompper’s 2004 study have been selected for examination:

RQ1: What factors affect an Asian-American’s decision to pursue a public relations career?

RQ2: How do Asian-Americans characterize their role in public relations?

RQ3: What are the primary career concerns of Asian-Americans working in public relations?

RQ4: How do Asian-Americans working in public relations characterize these concerns?

RQ5: How do Asian-Americans working in public relations address these concerns?

METHODOLOGY

In-depth telephone interviews were used to ascertain information pertaining to the following five research points: (1) factors affecting an Asian-American’s decision to pursue a public relations career, (2) characteristics affecting Asian-Americans’ roles in public relations, (3) the primary career concerns of Asian-Americans working in public relations, (4) how they characterize these concerns, and (5) their approaches to addressing these concerns.

A qualitative research method is often used for exploratory research, allowing for discovery and understanding of the deeper complexity of any little-known phenomena by transmitting the interaction of context, setting, and the participants’ frames of reference (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Given the fact that there has not been previous research done regarding Asian-American public relations practitioners and that this study utilizes research questions that are exploratory in nature, a qualitative approach and interviewing techniques were determined to be appropriate and were used in this study.

Administration and Operationalization

A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit interview participants: Asian-Americans practitioners working in public relations with at least three years experience in the industry. Although the technique has limitations that could possibly result in the selection of respondents known to one another who would likely have similar points of view regarding certain issues, the researchers relied on this sampling technique because no master list existed to identify potential participants in the manner suggested by Poindexter and McCombs (2000), and the population of Asian-American PR professionals is quite small. For the current study, Asian-Americans were invited via e-mail to participate in in-depth interviews over the phone and were asked to recommend other Asian American PR professionals at the conclusion of their individual interviews.

The 2004 *Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Blue Book Directory* served as a starting point for the first three e-mail attempts that requested participation in the phone interview. Only one respondent declined participation when invited via e-mail. Efforts were made to assemble respondents diversified by age, organization type (agency, corporate, not-for-profit organizations), job-level (entry level to top management level), and years of experience.

A total of thirteen Asian-American professionals participated in phone interviews that ranged in length from 40 to 50 minutes during a period of time from November 7th to December 30th of 2004. According to McCracken (1988), a sufficient number of participants for qualitative interviews is eight, thus making this study sample acceptable. Interviews were conducted at a time and date recommended by each of the participants. The researcher had no prior relationship with any of these participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality and that the research report would not specifically identify them by name or company affiliation.

Additionally, the researchers told all participants that they would be informed and updated about research presentations and publications containing findings. Respondents were also told in advance that the interview would be recorded. After all interviews were completed, Thank-You cards were sent to each participant.

During the interviews, two primary questions were asked. First, participants were briefly questioned regarding their demographic variables. The interviewers then asked respondents to describe how they came to have a career in public relations and encouraged participants to share their thoughts on their roles, to identify career concerns and solutions, and to explain their contributions to the field of public relations.

Data for analysis was derived from 98 single-spaced pages of transcribed verbatim audiotape recordings. The unit of analysis for the current study was Asian-Americans' voices—experiences as described in their own words that were categorized and analyzed as data (Harding, 1986; Hon, 1995).

RESULTS

Participants Profiles

As summarized in Table (1), the racial profile for the thirteen participants was consisted of two Korean-

Americans, three Japanese-Americans, two Taiwanese-Americans, three Chinese-Americans, and one Filipino-American. The remaining two participants had mixed heritage, Japanese-Chinese American and Japanese-Filipino American. All participants identified themselves as Asian-American regardless of their heritage. One respondent who works as a director of marketing and public relations in Florida explained this self-identification as Asian-Americans by saying, "We recognize the difference in the cultures, in our cultural identities." Therefore, culture must be an important criterion of their identification.

Eight of the thirteen participants were female and five were male, ranging in age from 21 to 62 with a mean age of 34.7. The participants' number of years of public relations experience ranged between three and 28 years, resulting in a mean of 11.1 years. All participants possessed a bachelor's degree in public relations or other fields of communications, and one had an MBA degree, while another had a music degree. Six participants had achieved Accredited Public Relations (APR) status, and three had earned graduate degrees, while one was currently in the process of earning a graduate degree. Among the thirteen respondents, four were employed in PR agencies, seven were employed by not-for-profit organizations, and two were working for corporations. Among the thirteen participants, six described their positions as being at the senior level, another five respondents identified their positions as middle level, and the remaining two participants identified their positions as entry level. Six of the thirteen participants lived in Hawaii because of the high Asian-American population in the state. Two participants were from New York, and another two were from Colorado. The remaining three were from Washington, California, and Florida.

RQ1. What factors affect an Asian-American's decision to pursue a public relations career?

Factors affecting participants' decisions to pursue public relations fall into five general areas, including educational background, preference of a PR job because of due to the fun and challenging characteristics of the field, the inflexibility of journalism jobs, affinity for writing and the similarities between journalism jobs and public relations, and favorability of dealing with people. The job of public relations was an initial choice for a majority of the respondents because their educational background involved public relations. Additionally, they had internship experiences in public relations during college.

Another factor in pursuing a career in public relations was the field's fun and challenging characteristics. A California agency PR professional explained, "PR is fun... I don't have to sit in the office all day, and I get to work on different things like different clients...it is challenging because I need to depend on which client I have... I might have to work and change my entire image..."

Two respondents had different initial jobs and they became interested in public relations after growing disenchanted with news writing. One of them had an undergraduate degree in journalism and initially worked as news writer but moved to public relations because of the inflexibility of

Table 1. Participants Profile

#	Ethnic Background	Gender	Education			Workplace			Age	Years in PR	State
			BA	MA	APR	C	A	NFP			
1	Korean	Female	x				X		24	3	Washington
2	Taiwanese	Female	x	x			x		25	3	Colorado
3	Taiwanese	Female	x				x		21	3	New York
4	Korean	Male	MBA					x	30	5	Hawaii
5	Japanese	Female	x	Δ	x	x			44	15	Florida
6	Chinese	Female	x	x	x			x	35	8	California
7	Japanese & Filipino	Female	x		x			x	41	19	Hawaii
8	Japanese	Male	x		x			x	62	28	Colorado
9	Japanese	Male	x		x			x	23	6	Hawaii
10	Japanese/Chinese	Female	x				x		24	3	Hawaii
11	Chinese	Male	x		x			x	47	24	Hawaii
12	Filipino	Male	x	x		x			50	23	New York
13	Chinese	Female	x					x	25	4	Hawaii

Note: C: corporate, A: agency, NFP: not-for-profit, Δ-in process.

news writing. She described the reason for moving to PR as follows:

- “Working in news, I wanted a job that would allow me to work basically Monday through Friday, 8 to 5. When you work in news, you tend to work in the evening, weekends, or holidays. I wanted more structure.” (Director of Marketing and PR in FL)

Additionally, the similarities between the work done by journalists and public relations practitioners in terms of writing and deadline emphasis are other reasons that participants noted for joining the public relations field. One interviewee mentioned that she chose public relations as a major because she anticipated a barrier to her becoming a media personality due to her being Asian-American. The Colorado PR practitioner explained, “At that time [when she decided her major], I thought that journalism was even more culturally embedded than PR. I don’t see myself being an anchor on CNN, or I don’t see myself writing for the New York Times.”

In summary, Asian American PR practitioners who participated in the telephone interview identified five factors that most affected their decisions to pursue public relations: educational background in public relations or related fields, dissatisfaction with journalism, similarities between public relations and journalism, the characteristics of public relations being a fun and challenging occupation, an affinity for writing and dealing with people, and the perceived barriers to an Asian-American becoming a media personality.

RQ 2. How do Asian Americans characterize their role in public relations?

Three primary roles were found among the interview discussions: managerial roles, mixed roles of managerial and entry level, and entry level. Five respondents were working in management level positions and took their responsibilities

of managerial roles because they were involved in the organizational decision-making process. One of PR professionals in New York described his role as “an advisor or counselor to the senior executives, senior CEO corporate executive on public relations.” Another respondent, the Florida Director of Marketing and Public Relations described her role as dealing with “planning or organizing events,” “talking to the media,” and being “involv(ed) in the employee communication side.” These participants have worked in the public relations industry for more than ten years and were highly satisfied with their achievement in the industry.

Five of the thirteen participants worked mixed level positions between managerial and entry level. An interviewee working in California said, “it is kind of between because I’ve done a lot of entry level jobs ... But at the same time, I decide what we are going to get and what would be best for the organization of the company.” Most of these people who fell into this category were working at small or mid-size organizations.

The remaining two respondents worked in public relations for about three years, including internship experience, and were in entry levels positions. Their everyday work consisted mainly of communications projects, such as writing press releases, sending e-mails, drafting news releases, etc.

RQ 3: What are the primary career concerns of Asian-Americans working in public relations?

RQ 4: How do Asian-Americans working in public relations characterize these concerns?

Nearly all of the respondents reported high satisfaction with their public relations careers with just one exception. However, participants admitted several barriers that challenge full organizational integration. The Asian-American public relations practitioners interviewed were most highly

concerned about stereotypes linked to race and gender, followed by the issues of fewer networking opportunities, low salaries, inflexible work hours, and dissatisfaction with relationships with the media or media people. However, the respondents agreed that such barriers were not substantial and could be easily overcome.

The Asian-American PR professionals cited several stereotypes applied to them, including those focused on physical appearance, such as looking younger or shorter, as well as perceived characteristics of Asians, such as introverted personalities or not looking like they speak English. One PR professional working in Hawaii expressed his experience with the appearing younger stereotype, saying, "Asians tend to look younger than their true age and some people tend to treat them accordingly...I was actually involved in a situation once before when I visited a client for the first time and they jokingly commented, 'Jesus I didn't know they [the agency] were sending someone who's 16 over here.'" Another PR professional working in California commented that people have stereotypes regarding Asians because they tend to be introverted, and non-opinionated, which is not generally a personality type conducive to public relations. She also expressed another stereotype as follows:

- "People really assume that one person from one Asian background can communicate with all Asians, which isn't true. Somebody who is Chinese American will not always be able to communicate with Korean Americans and Japanese Americans and Filipino Americans."

Similarly, a respondent from Hawaii described her experience working in another state:

- "Even though I was born in Hawaii, I only speak English. I don't speak any other language. People would take one look and assume that I was from Japan or didn't speak English. So I would imagine that people would have stereotypes and preconceptions in their minds."

While most of the respondents admitted the existence of gender or racial stereotypes, a few female respondents noted that gender issues are bigger than racial issues. The Washington PR agency practitioner summarized, "I think being Asian American is not the barrier, but being a woman is." Two of the female respondents indicated that these two barriers come together to compound the problem. The California PR agency professional said:

- "You have to be able to take a criticism because there are a lot of people who are going to criticize you and who are going to put you down not only because of your race but also because of your gender... the higher you go [in the corporate ladder], the more male dominance."

Regarding the existence of ethnic bias, one male respondent, a Marketing and Communication manager in Hawaii, indicated that only a few Asian-Americans are working in the industry, saying that, "It is a little more difficult [to get a job in PR] because Asian-Americans are not abundant in that profession. An industry with very low volume of representation from a specific ethnic group, I assume, would have inherent bias there or some type of possibly unseen, unaddressed barrier."

A couple respondents expressed age as a concern when working in the public relations industry. Additionally, Asian last names, which are hard to pronounce, were also identified as a factor affecting success of Asian-American public relations professionals. A Hawaiian PR professional described the concern as follows: "They [clients, or media people] can't pronounce my last name. It's hard to send out press releases and that sort of thing when they can't even pronounce my name."

Some participants, especially males, expressed concern about unsatisfactory relationships with media personnel and undesirable news reporting. A Hawaiian participant expressed the concern as follows: "I feel like I am really trying to kiss their [media people's] asses too much to try and get a story to run, and they really treat me like dirt. I didn't really like that." He further described it in detail:

- "I would e-mail them, and I would fax them like a press release and then would follow-up with them via phone. They would only tell me that they didn't get it and ask if I would do it again. Then I would follow-up with them again, and then they would say, 'Oh no, I didn't get it.' So then I would try to set up a meeting where I could personally give it to them, but of course, they don't have the time...they just try to avoid you. But the ironic thing is when a big story hatches, then they [media personnel] would start to call me up and demand that I give them this information. There is no respect displayed by them."

Another concern indicated by participants was that they had less networking opportunities than their Caucasian-American counterparts. This was addressed by a respondent who moved to America at the age of 12: "A barrier for Asian-Americans in the PR field...is the lack of connection that American counterparts have because [we] were born and raised in different countries...Networking is so important in PR." On the whole, the interviewees expressed diverse career concerns focused primarily on ethnic stereotypes, unsatisfactory media relationships, and gender issues.

RQ 5. How do Asian-Americans working in public relations address these concerns?

When asked how they deal with such career concerns and barriers, the respondents demonstrated optimistic positions. They all agreed that the barriers are not huge and that they can break down the barriers by "being more prepared," "more educated," "working harder," "changing their images," "being very positive," and "being more experienced." A Hawaii PR manager said "education and experience are keys to overcoming the concerns...repetitiveness, you just need to keep working in the industry and people will get used to you, especially if you start to make a name for yourself."

The California PR manager emphasized that Asian women need to change their traditional image in order to survive in the industry, saying that, "Asian women are looked at as whole material. [Men] are going to marry someone who would be a good mother and good wife and stay home and not talk back to [them]." She explained that in order to change their image, Asian women need to be more

aggressive, like “warrior women.” Most of the female respondents stated that Asian American PR professionals represent the most successful group among minority women.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Using in-depth telephone interviews, this study attempted to explore factors affecting Asian-Americans’ decisions to pursue public relations careers, the characteristics of Asian-Americans’ roles in public relations, the primary career concerns of Asian-Americans working in public relations, and their methods of characterizing and addressing these concerns.

The findings displayed that Asian-American practitioners were well educated in their field, because they all had at least a related bachelor’s degree with many of them having an APR or graduate degree as well. This finding is consistent with census data indicating that Asian-Americans have attained the highest levels of academic achievement among minorities in terms of attaining a college or advanced degree (Reeves & Bennett, 2003).

Educational background was the most influential factor for Asian-American practitioners in making their career decisions, followed by similarities between journalism and public relations, the barriers for an Asian becoming a media personality, the favorable characteristics of public relations, the inflexibility of journalism, and an affinity for writing and dealing with people. These findings are similar and consistent with the factors cited by African-American women in opting for a career in public relations (Pompper, 2004).

The findings also indicated that Asian-American public relations professionals are working at higher than entry levels and that a majority of them are in managerial level positions, which allow them to influence organization policy decisions and accept responsibility for a program’s success or failure. Compared to other ethnic minorities, such as African- or Latino-Americans, the findings indicated that Asian-American public relations practitioners achieve relatively higher levels of success than other ethnic groups in the field of public relations. These findings are inconsistent with previous studies of minorities’ roles, which indicated that minorities as a whole were mainly working in technician roles with lower salaries (Len-Rios, 1998). This implies that Asian-Americans seem to fit different roles in their work organizations than those assumed by other minority groups in the U.S. This finding might be connected to the high levels of education possessed by the participants. As a study regarding roles of public relations practitioners found, roles are differentiated due to education (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999). Practitioners with higher levels of education are more likely to be involved at the decision-making process level than less education ones.

While highly satisfied with pursuing careers in public relations, Asian-American practitioners were primarily concerned about the existence of stereotypes and bias linked to race and gender, which could challenge full organizational integration. The stereotypes were mainly related to Asians’ physical appearance, such as looking younger, shorter, not looking like they speak English, or to cultural characteristics, such as having an introverted personality. The noted stereotypes were, thus, more relevant to physical appearance than

ability. As Kern-Foxworth (1989a) observed, the existence of stereotypes is one of the major contributors to lack of minority representation in the public relations field. Furthermore, people who have no opportunity to work with minorities are less likely to have their stereotypes challenged, implying that hiring more Asian or minority PR practitioners could be a viable solution for reducing stereotypes and the lack of minority representation.

While most of the respondents admitted the existence of gender or racial stereotypes, a few female Asian-American practitioners noted that gender barriers persist at an even higher incidence than racial barriers. However, this finding may appear disproportionate among samples, because a majority of the respondents in this study were female. Although cognizant of gender and racial stereotypes directed at Asian-Americans, the practitioners held optimistic perspectives on the issues, saying that the barriers are not huge and could be overcome with hard work and preparation. Furthermore, improvements can be made as the Asian-American workforce in public relations continues to grow in diversity since ethnic bias exists simply because there are not enough Asian-Americans working in the industry.

In conclusion, the findings of this study pose several implications. First, public relations practitioners should take some responsibility for creating a more ethnic minority-friendly by hiring more minorities, which is likely to decrease racial or gender stereotypes against them. As Strenski (1994) suggested, practitioners need to promote diversity through employee communication programs, effective training of managers, and training of human resources personnel.

Second, scholars and educators must consider cultural diversity in the classroom by using examples and choosing textbooks that include minority roles in the field of public relations. An educational emphasis on minorities is likely to make students aware that diversity can be a key element for improved public relations. This can be achieved by teaching the importance of reaching target audiences, by inviting successful minority practitioners to share their experiences within the classroom, or by fostering and mentoring minority public relations students.

This study has revealed several limitations, which could lead to future study within this area. First of all, some Asian-American groups, such as Indonesian-, Malaysian-, and Pakistani- American professionals were not included in the study. These Asian public relations professionals may provide different perspectives than the sampled respondents. Thus, further research should include such Asian-American PR practitioners. Second, comparative studies between Asian-American practitioners and those of other ethnicities such as Hispanic-Americans, or African-Americans would be both valuable and informative. Additionally, studies using different demographic variables are necessary. For example, there may be differences in the way Asian-American men and women perceive these issues.

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