

THE PREDOMINANCE OF WOMEN IN PUBLIC RELATIONS: REALIZING
FEMINIST VALUES, SOCIETAL INFLUENCES, AND MEDIA PORTRAYAL

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Abstract

After World War II, American society, experienced a great deal of job market expansions. For the public relations industry this expansion brought an increased need for specialization, which in turn created a technical and managerial divide within the industry. With many new jobs and niche markets being introduced, the profession began to attract women. In 1950 the percentage of women working in PR was 10 percent (Reskin, Roos 1990) since then the percentage has grown to 63 percent in 2015 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). With these percentages continuing to grow, the predominance of women in public relations has surfaced a valid research question: What has sustained this trend of women in PR for over 50 years? This thesis examines how societal influences, such as gender roles that render women as better communicators, began this trend and have continued to reinforce it. This study will also discuss how media has engraved misconceptions of what public relations is along with misrepresentations of the type of people that work in the industry and how these misconceptions and misrepresentations have progressed this trend for invalid reasons. In conclusion, this thesis will hypothesize how the realization of feminist values in public relations can potentially disseminate stereotypes and misconceptions that are encouraging this trend for the wrong reasons and how they can highlight the truth behind the benefits that women in PR are creating. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, women currently make up 63% of public relations specialists and 59% of public relations managers in the United States, making public relations one of the most female-driven professions in the country. With 90% of undergraduate public relations students being female, the trend is only gaining momentum. As public relations becomes increasingly recognized as a pertinent

managerial function, it is only fair that the abundance of women in PR is recognized for the positive influence they've had and continue to have on the industry.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1983, Don Bates published a study in the Public Relations Journal titled, “A Concern: Will Women Inherit the Profession?” He illustrated the fact that male practitioners were concerned that the feminization of public relations could lead to the dilution of PR as a management function and eventually would result in the occupation becoming a second-class profession. He denied this concern when he expressed:

“A more profitable perspective is to see the infusion of women positively. Their entry and growing success may suggest a profound reorientation of public relations to take advantage of their unique experience in dealing with human and institutional problems outside the limits of the traditional male power structure.”

(Bates, pg.7)

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the enduring influence women have had on the development of the public relations through analysis of how feminist values contribute to practice, how societal influences have propelled this predominance, and the media portrayals that may be funneling females into the public relations profession. The need for research surrounding this topic has intensified since it was brought up in the 1970s, and with the current shift in media relations being brought upon by social media, the topic requires tailored attention that can provide more answers to where public relations is headed in the future.

Methodology

While this thesis relies heavily on the previous research conducted starting in the 1980s, it contains opinions and facts that were attained through interviews of female and male public relations practitioners from the Austin, Texas area. They were conducted to provide insightful information and evidence to enhance the discussion of previously written research.

Chapter 2: The Parents of Public Relations

Public Relations is an old practice but also one that is still developing and adjusting to its audience and society. While it is rooted in the earliest social interactions of civilization, it has kept its underlying label of an emerging industry. Public relations encompass the basic goals of socialization: the exchange of facts and opinions, persuasive rhetoric, finding commonality, and establishing relationships.

The concept of public relations can be drawn back to the days of Plato when men studied the discipline of being a rhetorician. As a rhetorician they were expected to enrich their persuasive skills to influence public opinion. During the 17th century, the creation of the Congregatio de Propaganda by the Roman Catholic church was considered to be a fundamental event in the evolution of the public relations because it introduced the concept of propaganda – to propagate the Church’s message - which is generally considered the start of public relations. (Gordon, 2011)

Influencing public opinion can be traced back to colonial America. As researchers Reskin and Roos explained in their book, *Job Queues, Gender Queues: Explaining Women's Inroads into Male Occupations*, that during the 18th century American colonists

communicated complaints and opinions to the British through free newspapers and pamphlets. As the demand for print newspapers grew, so did the demand for advertising. With the growth of advertising the need for employees to seek out free publicity intensified. Into the 19th century, large corporations became more aware of their responsibility to their publics and began to hire publicists that would convey all corporate relations in a positive light. By the 1930s, the public relations industry began to take shape.

The origins of the public relations profession are not exact, in the same way, PR does not have a solidified founder. There are many people whose influences developed the many theories and branches of the industry however; Edward Bernays is considered to be the most prominent and influential figure in the public relations profession. Edward Bernays was heavily influenced by his uncle, the infamous Sigmund Freud, and his psychoanalytic theory about the unconscious mind. Bernays believed in democracy, and the power of the public opinion. As he described it,

“Public Relations embraces what I call the engineering of consent based on Thomas Jefferson’s principle that, in a democratic society, everything depends on the consent of the public.” (Gordon, pg.15)

According to *Public Relations* by Averill Gordo, Bernays began his PR career as a press agent for the Committee on Public Information, where he had the duty of presenting the First World War as a fight for democracy. After this experience, Bernays realized he could blend psychology and persuasion to abide by the needs of corporations and political organizations and in 1911, he began his first consultancy (Gordon, 2011). With this new tactic in mind Bernays composed stunning PR campaigns that altered public

opinion for even some of the most taboo beliefs of the time. For example, his Torches of Freedom campaign, which invited women to engage in the new trend of smoking cigarettes, ultimately equated the act of smoking with female liberation. With his fine-tuned psychological background and communication skills, Bernays taught American corporations how to influence their consumers' desires by associating their mass-produced goods to the consumer's unconscious desires, a strategy still heavily enforced today. As he expressed in his book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*,

“The charitable society which depends up voluntary contributions for its support has a clear and direct interest in being favorably represented before the public. In the same way, the great corporation which is in danger of having its profits taxed away or its sales fall of or its freedom impeded by legislative action must have recourse to the public to combat successfully these menaces.”

(pg.35)

This ground-breaking revelation sky-rocketed Bernays' career and enabled him to outlive many of his competitors in the field. For this reason, he is known as one of the fathers of public relations. Bernays' influence on corporate management became a long-lasting ideal that introduced public relations as a vital department for managerial success.

In a like manner, Ivy Ledbetter Lee is regarded as one of the first practitioners of public relations and a great defender of the practice. As a public relations pioneer, Ivy Lee fought to establish the legitimacy of PR in the communications world. As Alison Theaker explained in *The Public Relations Handbook*, Ivy Lee was a business journalist who tried to obtain information about the highly secretive U.S. industrial

conglomerations that dominated the economy of the time. Lee felt that business secrecy was a poor policy and in 1904 he set up an agency. In order to solidify his views, he wrote the Declaration of Principles:

- "This is not a secret press bureau. All our work is done in the open. We aim to supply news.
- "This is not an advertising agency. If you think any of our matter ought properly to go to your business office, do not use it.
- "Our matter is accurate. Further details on any subject treated will be supplied promptly, and any editor will be assisted most carefully in verifying directly any statement of fact."
- "In brief, our plan is frankly, and openly, on behalf of business concerns and public institutions, to supply the press and public of the United States prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which it is of value and interest to the public to know about."

Lee established that one of the main goals of public relations was to ensure that clients were surpassing their expectations for public acceptance by illustrating their actions to the public as clearly as possible. During the World War I era, Ivy Lee applied his ideals to help the American Red Cross. During this time the American Red Cross was considered for its contributions to war but was not recognized as the name brand it is today. Lee's contribution brought the Red Cross in to the public eye and uplifted its status to becoming the strongest force in disaster relief during the war. In 1906, when the Atlantic City train wreck occurred, Ivy Lee wrote what is considered to be the first-ever press release on the incident. This press release was published word for word in the *New York Times* on October 30, 1906. Because of these specific contributions to crisis communication and public relations writing, Ivy Lee is also considered the father of public relations.

Both men emphasized that public relations strives for companies to accept their social responsibility to provide truthful and accurate facts in order to allow for public

relations to act as a managerial function and influence decision making. Their contributions continue to shape the practice in our contemporary world. While these men serve as popular faces for the history of the profession, there were many women who also served a strong purpose in the development of public relations.

Doris Fleischmann, the wife and business partner of Edward Bernays, was a major part of the work that he produced during his consultancy as a PR practitioner. J. Suzanne Horsley noted in her essay, *Women's Contributions to American Public Relations* (2009), that Fleischmann wrote a book titled, *Careers for Women: A Practical Guide to Opportunity for Women in American Business*. In this book she discussed the many professions that women were successfully taking part in during the early 19th century. Horsley described the way Fleischmann wrote passionately about how confident she was that the contributions women were making to public relations were going to make significant advancements in the industry:

“The profession of counsel on public relations is so new that all who are engaged in it, men as well as women, are pioneers. No traditions have grown against women's participation in it, and women will share the responsibility of developing and shaping this new profession.” (pg. 103)

Karen Miller Russell, a public relations historian, expressed that having an understanding of the impact that women who worked in early mainstream public relations made can help create a blueprint for women who are currently seeking to make a similar impact in the profession. Russell also states that having this understanding reconstructs the history of the role of women in public relations. (Lamme, 2007) Therefore, studying

the role of Fleishmann in the Bernays firm not only reveals her impact on their work but also sheds lights on the overarching impact that women had on the emerging history of public relations. (Lamme, 2007) This is a vital concept to investigate, now that women make up more than half of the PR practitioners in the United States.

A passionate feminist, wife, and business woman, Fleischmann was characterized by her independent personality and strong will. When Fleischmann married Edward Bernays in 1922, she was one of the few women of her time to keep her birth name after marriage. She was also the first woman to be issued a passport with her maiden name printed on it in 1925. Shortly after her marriage, she became an equal partner with her husband in one of the first public relations firms in the United States (Henry, 1998). Studies that have been conducted of the Bernays Fleischmann partnership seem to speak of her as a sidekick to Bernays, yet the evidence of their equal partnership reveals the exact opposite.

Doris Fleischmann exhibited many valuable characteristics that created a balance between her skill set and her husband's. In 1920, a year after she began working under Bernays, she accepted what is considered to be her first publicity job for a fund-raising pageant play. Fleischmann promised to publicize the pageant fiercely and wrote a series of new releases for the event to entice various publics. "Fleischmann's media savvy is evident in the ways she positioned the story to meet the needs and interests of key publications and their respective editors." (Lamme, pg.89) As a former reporter, she demonstrated a clear understanding of how to tailor messages to specific publics. As stated by Lamme,

"Fleischmann would have been sensitive to the importance of providing

editors with material appropriate to their sections. But as a public relations counselor in progress, Fleischmann was employing a strategic concept now considered fundamental to effective public relations: targeting publics.” (pg.89)

Another unique asset that Fleischmann possessed was valuing collaboration with other working women and men of her time, a gesture that Bernays did not practice regularly. “Bernays was a loner who would not cooperate with other public relations professionals and tended to alienate them” (Henry, pg.9). Fleischmann drew inspiration from women who lived similar lives to hers. Women who were working mothers like herself, “including lawyers, psychologists, business executives, and journalists whom she saw often and from whom she gained sustenance” (Henry, pg.7). Fleischmann’s appreciation for relationships and collaboration established a fine line between Bernays passion for mass communication and Fleischmann passion for interpersonal communication.

Chapter 3: Past and Present Societal Influence on the Predominance of Women in PR

Post World War II America experienced many job market expansions that created more specialized jobs. Within the public relations industry these expansions brought new publics and markets that required a more technical approach. The introduction of the technical role in public relations “shaped both the types of workers available for these occupations and the types of worker’s employers preferred” (Reskin, Roos pg.134).

Edward Bernay’s stressed that women were the only ones who “reach the female

public and interpret female views to manufacturers, distributors, and retail merchandisers” (Reskin, Roos pg. 135). As women grew to become more than half of the population and consumer and voting power, it was clear that their points of view had value in public relations work (Reskin Roos, 1990). As American society transformed into commercialism, the power to shape public opinion became a desired skill set amongst women. Corporations sought women who could attract consumers with their “graciousness and charm, persuasive powers of speech, unaggressive inquisitiveness, and ability to meet with a ‘soft voice’ the ‘big stick requirements of business’” (Reskin, Roos pg. 136). These ideas were the beginning of stereotypes of women in public relations that remain prevalent in today’s society.

In addition to new markets and publics revealing the necessity for women in PR, affirmative action pressures also enforced this trend and served as an early influencer of the gender imbalance in public relations. “Reports from women lobbyists provide evidence that one reason for women’s influx into public relations in the 1970s was mounting federal pressure on employers to hire more women for responsible positions” (Reskin, Roos pg. 138). Affirmative action required corporations to place women in more visible work positions and required them to send in statistical proof that they were doing as ordered. “Thus, to compensate for women’s underrepresentation in professional and managerial positions, employers recruited women for public relations, [at the time] considered a staff function, to fulfill affirmative action guidelines (Reskin, Roos pg. 138). We see the influence of affirmative action in play today because women continue to overpopulate the technical and visible position in public relations and do not exemplify a high percentage as public relations managers.

With more and more women filling technical roles in public relations, the reputation of the industry began to gain more attention. The overrepresentation of women public relations technicians inspired one of the most prominent studies of the feminization of PR conducted in 1986, *The Velvet Ghetto: A Report of the Increasing Percentage of Women in Public Relations and Business Communication* by Carolyn Cline. The Velvet Ghetto compiled research by conducting in-depth interviews with senior-level practitioners from the United States and Canada. The Velvet Ghetto means the clustering of women into specific industries, especially public relations. The Velvet Ghetto illustrated the fact that while women are accepted into high-profile industries they tend to be constrained to the low-profile, technical positions.

The prevalence of women eventually changed the reputation of public relations to being “emotional work” that women had a more natural inclination to do. The reputation of women in public relations grew to be that they were most successful because they worked with emotional intuition and were always nice to everyone. Therefore, “to the extent that public relations work increasingly involves emotional labor, employers prefer women” (Reskin, Roos pg.139). This preference can be attributed to the employer’s belief that women have the values and skills deemed necessary for public relations work and to gender-role socialization that present women as more proficient than men at emotional work (Reskin, Roos 1990).

The validity behind public relations being interpreted as emotional work comes from the fact that practitioners are at times required to defend their client’s risky behavior. “Public relations specialists must defend such employer’s, convincing others that the organization is dependable, responsive to community needs, and operating in the

public's best interest" (Reskin, Roos pg.139). As Mary Mickel, Founder of Resplendent Hospitality in Austin, Texas, stated in her interview,

"We strive to grow [our client's] business in a thoughtful, yet strategic way, while still remaining completely true to their mission and to ensure we are defending our client's image and overall reputation."

It is clear that any predisposition to hire a woman due to increasing job specialization or affirmative action is strengthened by the stereotype of women being more likely to persuade their audiences that their corporation is one that functions honorably and decently (Reskin, Roos 1990).

Chapter 4: Media Portrayal of Female Public Relations Practitioners

While society tends to socialize men to be strong leaders, it socializes women to be beautiful, sociable, and agreeable, amongst other characteristics. Even though our society grows increasingly progressive every day, these implications remain extremely prevalent and influential. In addition to the consideration of gender roles, the way media portrays female public relations practitioners further solidifies how society boosts a certain image that specifically exemplifies PR as a woman's job. The industry is deeply rooted in the glamorous, party-planner image and that has not changed for many years. Hollywood media has exaggerated this image and has forced people to think a certain way about the profession. Because this stereotype has been perpetuated in the media for quite some time now, it has become engraved in people's minds, in turn making a lot of women believe their personality is a perfect fit for this so-called glamorous profession. As Riane Cretney, Account Executive at Prime PR in Austin, Texas, expressed in her

interview:

“I think that [PR] looks social and like it comes naturally to these women. And that they are successful at it, they are excelling in it, and they’re supporting themselves. I think it makes young girls consider they might be good at it as well.”

Female public relations practitioners are repeatedly represented as having social lives that revolve around entertaining their guests by planning special events. One of the greatest examples of this representation is Samantha Jones from the HBO series, *Sex and the City*. Samantha Jones is a public relations specialist that uses her alluring sexuality to secure clients and success. Her work life exemplifies her obsession with fashion, sex, men and parties as she is always pictured in her fancy, high tower office overlooking New York City or in an over-packed nightclub hosting A-list celebrities. Mary Mickel of Resplendent Hospitality rejected this PR stereotype when she said, “That is certainly not the case. I spend half of my time in front of a computer researching and sending out a million emails.”

This stereotype is further perpetuated in several TV series, one of the most recent being the Netflix satirical comedy show, *Arrested Development*. This show follows a wealthy family that has lost their money and their good reputation. In an episode titled “Public Relations,” the family hires a publicist named Jessie to attempt to restore their reputation. Instead of making any progress on their image, she makes sleeping with the eldest brother her priority and ends up tainting her own reputation. The TV series *Ab Fab*, starring Jennifer Saunders, depicts the life of Edina, an alcohol and drug-addicted public relations agent who works hard to stay on top of the evolving fashion industry in

London in hopes of remaining a sought-after publicist. Edina's behavior is self-destructive and keeps her personal and professional lives in a tense state throughout the series. In 2008, MTV aired a series called *Power Girls*, in which a group of aspiring publicists competed for employment and respect from Lizzie Grubman. Grubman is an A-list celebrity publicist, who is known to be the real life Samantha Jones. The women competing in the show were inspired by the "real life Samantha Jones" label that Grubman has achieved. The aspiring group of publicists expressed a strong desire to achieve a similar label through their competitive efforts in the series.

The portrayal of females in PR in the 21st century have several reoccurring patterns, and obvious implications. As Emily Ehmer, public relations professor at Texas State University, expressed, "What I do hear and may be part of the "Samantha Jones effect" are young women telling me they want to be wedding planners. While events are an important part of public relations, listing wedding planning as a career goal seems "soft" to me." It is evident that the entertainment industry is spreading misleading and false definitions of public relations and in turn creating misconceptions of what this industry actually entails. As Mary Mickel, of Resplendent Hospitality stated, "There is a certain level of professionalism and business acumen that gets left out of the media's portrayal of women in PR." With 90% of undergraduate public relations majors being female it is vital to not rule these portrayals off as incidental or simply misinformed, instead we must take focus on the effect that they are having on the industry as a whole.

Chapter 5: Parallels Between Feminist Values and Powerful Public Relations

To assess this topic of feminist values in public relations, it is essential to

understand the meaning of a feminist. In his research titled, *Public Relations: Critical Concepts in Media and Culture*, editor Robert Heath cited the definition of a feminist proposed in the book *The Wise Woman*,

“A person, female or male, whose worldview places the female in the center of life and society, and/or who is not prejudiced based on gender or sexual preference. Also, anyone in a male dominated or patriarchal society who works toward the political, economic, spiritual, sexual, and social equality of women.”

(pg. 272)

The correlation is between feminist values, and not simply, feminine values because stating that they are feminist values makes them equally applicable to all genders. Similarly, the word value should be understood due to its note-worthy implications in this topic. A value is simply an assessment of worth.

When correlating feminist values to public relations practice it is critical to note that I do not wish to “perpetuate an alpha bias..that treats members of any minority group as more homogenous than members of a dominant group” (Grunig, Cloth, Hon pg. 58). By making this correlation, I intend to hypothesize that these feminist values enhance public relations practice when applied by any gender. The values I will apply are relevant to the managerial world and serve to progress the reputation of public relations practitioners and their strategies. The values that best exemplify this are: relationship building, nurturance, altruism, justice, loyalty, emotional intuition, and tolerance (Grunig, Cloth, Hon pg. 58).

In a study titled *Feminist Values in Public Relations*, scholars proposed that the

incorporation of these values in professional public relations settings would enhance the practice and therefore enhance management and organizational success. The emphasized values that were repeatedly mentioned in public relations literature were regarded as the most beneficial, “For example, cooperation figures predominantly as a feminist value in much of the literature of communication and management” (Grunig, Toth and Hon pg. 58). In connection to cooperation, corporate executives deemed sensitivity and perceptiveness as a valuable asset to public relations practice. These qualities are not simply attained from education or job training. Grunig, Cloth, and Hon referenced a public relations journal written in 1968 to support this point,

“Public relations is a highly intuitive business. The ability to recognize what sort of behavior brings about what kind of response is a talent inborn in little girls and developed to a high degree of sensitivity by the time they are through their teens. It’s an invaluable asset in public relations.”

In addition, public relations that is practiced as proportional, two-way communication between a corporation and stakeholder groups, and overall publics, have the most positive influence on organizational effectiveness. This kind of practice is regarded as “the most effective public relations practice that arises from a feminine world view” (Grunig, Toth and Hon pg. 59). In contrast to this form of practice, scholars have noted that “management practiced in a more persuasive, domineering and unbalanced way is rooted in masculinity” (Grunig, Toth and Hon pg. 59).

Another feminist value correlated with organizational effectiveness in public relations is relationship building. This value comes with the strongest evidence rooted in biology, psychology, social psychology, and sociology that claim that women have a

greater concern for relationships. This value is beneficial in public relations, as well as other female-intensive professions, such as nursing and education. “Public relations is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain good-will and understanding between an organization and its publics” (Theaker pg.4). The key words in this definition are establish and maintain as they make clear that these relationships are expected to be created and nurtured by the PR practitioner to ensure longevity. As a concluding point, incorporating these values can transform the work culture within the public relations industry. “Organization then need to communicate these values in several ways: through the socialization process symbolic communication, linking values to specific behaviors and using financial resources” (Grunig, Toth and Hon pg.343).

Conclusion

With the advancement of social media expanding the power that public relations has on the development of public opinions, it is obvious that it is time for this profession to rise beyond its stereotypes. Bringing the three topics discussed in this thesis together only scratches the surface of a matter that can be detrimental to the formation of public opinion in the United States. As discussed in Chapter 3, realizing the potential that feminist values have on PR practice, whether they are applied by a man or a woman, can begin to equate the working population in public relations. If men and women work together to incorporate these values into their PR practice, the gender divide can begin to disseminate, the reputation of the industry will shift into a more honorable light, and, most importantly, PR will be on its way to being revered as a strategic department within corporate management. This idea of implementing feminist values to eradicate

misconceptions works as “PR for PR,” because it serves for the overall betterment of the public relations profession.

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