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Victoria Geyer

Hofstra University, victoria.geyer@hofstra.edu

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Public Relations: A Role for Women?

Victoria Geyer
Affiliation University

In an effort to seek coherence, continuity and connection in the communication discipline, this paper explores the issue of gender disparity prevalent in the discipline of public relations—specifically, issues arising from the pedagogy of the discipline, to the professional practice of public relations. Secondary research that has emerged over the last 25 years is analyzed by discussing the feminization and perspectives of gender's influence on the discipline of public relations. Future opportunities for both universities and the industry are explored in order to help bridge the gender gap of detachment of public relations to that of similar communication disciplines.

Both the public relations industry and the public relations major in universities across the United States have consistently experienced an increase and growth of women entering the field. According to a recent Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) report, approximately 70% of its members are women (Ruiz, Edelman, Ford, & MacAfee, 2008). Comparatively, sister industries such as advertising and marketing have a more even split across gender lines. According to the department of labor, in the advertising industry 48% of the population is male, and in the marketing industry 52 % is male (Ruiz, et al., 2008). More drastically, a recent report from the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) reveals its membership comprised of 90% women (Ruiz et al., 2008). The public relations major population is approximately 70% women while some public relations classes do not even have one male in the classroom (Martin, 2008).

Reviewing these figures, it becomes apparent that there is an alluring impression about public relations for women. The public relations major and the public relations industry can presently be likened to the nursing career—a feminized career. Validation of the career and the undergraduate major are being threatened. With the influx of women practicing public relations the practice is often times disregarded as a “fluff” career choice by journalists and media critics. Yet, it is a discipline studied in schools of communication and journalism, and an industry that practices the skills of journalism and media competence.

Are existing stereotypes and gender roles attached to the discipline of public relations aiding in this gender disparity at both the undergraduate and profession levels? Pedagogical changes in the undergraduate major of public relations can begin to address the issues of gender disparity we are witnessing today. With

change at the undergraduate level, there is hope for rebalance of equal gender distribution for female practitioners at all professional levels, as well the capacity to provide more comprehensive and accurate images of the discipline.

Literature Review: Feminization of the Industry

The literature reviewed examines the feminization and disparity of the public relations discipline through the lens of feminist perspectives, organizational communication theory, and gender theory. Three distinct characteristics can be observed within these inter-related perspectives: leadership, image, and the relationship of culture and power.

Leadership

Although women are the majority in the public relations profession, they continue to be the minority in holding executive or management positions. Thus, herein lies the first characteristic of one's gender affecting their leadership style, creating a disconnect in the public relations discipline.

Broom and Dozier (1986) established an alternative to the popular glass ceiling theory. Broom and Dozier (1986) concluded the difference in pay and power between men and women in public relations exists because of the role women play between technician and managerial positions. Women did not aspire to possess managerial roles and were more content in the role of a public relations technician (Broom & Dozier, 1986). According to their study, one can reason that women are content in the tasks they perform in the public relations field and lack interest in the tasks of more managerial roles.

The International Association of Business Communicators Research Foundation commissioned two professional research reports in 1986 and 1989 to assess the impact of feminization of communication. The first report released, *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline et al., 1986) focused on why women were not in managerial roles in public relations. The results of *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline et al., 1986) reiterated Broom and Dozier's (1986) study. Women were relegated to the role of technicians; yet, women were relegated to this role, because of the social expectations that women were poor managers (Cline et al., 1986). *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline et al., 1986) contended women self-select themselves into a technician role.

In the second report, *Beyond the Velvet Ghetto* (1989) results repeated similar results from the initial report, but also gave recommendations for future public relations practitioners; the latter report suggested women accept the reality of the velvet ghetto and adjust to its existence, in order to succeed (Toth & Cline, 1989).

Toth and Aldoory (2004) later probed the conclusions of these popular studies through an examination of socialization and structuralism theories. Aldoory and Toth concluded socialization skills dictate one's leadership style—a gender

differential exists. Aldoory and Toth reported that women in public relations lacked the negotiation skills and knowledge necessary, to request higher salaries. Aldoory and Toth's review of socialization and structuralism theories, specifically their analysis of transformation and transactional leadership styles found that women communicate in leadership positions in a more transformational manner. In addition, this transformational leadership style hinders women from effectively moving up the corporate ladder, thus remaining in the technician role that Dozier (1995) also concluded. Moreover, women were found to be more effective at two-way communication. The two-way symmetrical communication model, put forth by public relations scholar, James Grunig (2000) is a widely accepted communication model in the field of public relations. Therefore, women are a "better" fit for the technical role, rather than a managerial role, which requires a transactional leadership style.

A study by Mitrook (2004) sustained the conclusion of Aldoory and Toth's (2004) research. Mitrook (2004) concluded that women feel that technician level jobs suit their level of commitment to their work. Technical level positions permitted low enough involvement for women to allow for a leave of absence from their position. This behavior lends itself to the corporate cultural ideology that women are not capable of committing to the demands required of managerial or leadership positions.

Image

The second prevalent characteristic that aids in the continued growth of the gender gap in public relations is the image or stereotypes associated with the public relations discipline. The increase of women entering the public relations profession and the academic major continues to exemplify the growing disparity in the discipline. Young women in college are interested in the discipline of public relations, while lacking awareness of what public relations truly encompasses as a profession.

The gendered stereotype of women as better communicators, serves a woman well, but also diminishes the need for other skills required to succeed in public relations, such as management skills and critical thinking. According to Gillian Rankin, a business psychologist, "this theory [women being better communicators] may sound biased and come across as politically incorrect, but is commonly accepted" (Martin, 2008). An example of this accepted theory being employed was recently demonstrated at a college recruitment program; where a leading public relations agency in New York informed undergraduate students that women are many times simply better at doing the work, because of the way women communicate.¹

¹ Hofstra University visit for Ruder Finn Executive Training program. New York: March 2, 2008.

According to Sorto (1990) students are likely to choose public relations as a major because they enjoyed working with people. Bowen (2003) also found that students thought of the public relations career as an easy major, perhaps, because of its stereotype as a female dominated major. Young women are basing their choice for an academic major on the few stereotypes that do exist; such as a career for those that like to communicate and excel at communicating.

Mitrook (2005) suggests that men may be majoring in marketing or management because of the various downfalls with public relations because so many women have entered the field. Mitrook contends that students perceive public relations as a good job for people who like to work with people and that the job does not require math skills, for advancement. When students do not have accurate information about different careers, they are forced to rely on the stereotypes.

For many, the public relations profession is viewed as a 'soft' career option. These stereotypes ill serve the industry's reputation. In an online post on the *Valley Wag* blog, there was a discussion about a *Business Week* reporter being mistaken for a public relations professional at a Tech Crunch blog party. A male attendee at the party commented to the reporter, "she was lovely and she must work in PR" (Miller, 2008). This example exemplifies a common stereotype about the field of public relations; the stereotype that public relations consists of a workforce of young, attractive females; a workforce comprised of and practiced by women.

Another popular theory suggested for the feminization of public relations field is simply, the industry is perceived as being feminine. Likewise, people are attracted to people like them. According to MacAfee, "People gravitate to areas that are more like them. For men public relations is not as attractive, because is not as respected like marketing or finance is." (Ruiz et al, 2008).

Culture and Power

The relationship between an organization's culture and one's ability to attain power is a third common characteristic, which only fuels established inaccurate stereotypes and perceived leadership qualities for women in public relations. This discourse commonly researched is also likened to the glass-ceiling theory.

Brenda Wrigley (2005) contends that the public relations industry suffers from the Queen Bee Syndrome. Wrigley contends because of increased competition, and the reality that most women do not advance, Queen Bees do not want other women to have it easier. Queen Bees gain special privileges such as high visibility, male favor, and authority—which other female employees detest. Queen Bees get along with male executives because they practice the same behavior—they too discriminate against women.

Queen Bees are afraid to mentor other women, because should those they mentor succeed, those very women could change the rules for the organization and then the Queen Bees would lose their special privileges. Therefore, Queen Bees

maintain the status quo, which means adjusting to the glass ceiling model and sustaining the status quo.

Wrigley contends that the organizational, social and psychological theories used to explain the patriarchal culture of public relations are all embodied in cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971 as cited in Wrigley, 2005). Wrigley supports Gramsci's contention that the dominant class presents its definition of reality in such a way that other accepts it as a common sense (p. 1). Wrigley contends that there is evidence of hegemony's effect on women that can be seen in the behavior of both managers and subordinates. According to Wrigley, Queen Bees accept the patriarch, partly because it is the behavior of the men with whom they are working beside. Like men, however, they also believe that these patriarchal practices will benefit them. Female managers, become victims of what Gramsci called "fake consciousness", resulting in a perpetuating discrimination. Wrigley's study further established an earlier study of Tam, Dozier, Lauzen & Real (1995) on gender and career advancement for public relations practitioners, which concluded that subordinates and superiors of the same-sex tended to have more rich mentoring relationships than mixed-sex pairings. However, male supervisors were more effective in providing subordinates career advancement. Practitioners with male mentors, regardless of gender, tended to have more opportunities to advancement and managerial positions.

Comparisons from both studies (Tam et al, 1995 and Wrigley, 2005) suggest that the use of a transformational leadership style, which is a communication style that subscribes well to a mentoring relationship, may also serve in hindering subordinate women from attaining power.

Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

To best address the issue of this gender disparity, efforts need to start at the university level, where drastic statistics of a growing gender gap are demonstrated. Educators should implement the findings from scholarly research and actively mentor students: teach students the necessary technician skills, but also teach effective critical thinking skills to develop one's aptitude for leadership and transactional communication skills.

According to a human resource director at a leading public relations agency in New York, faculty need to teach students not only the technical skills required of public relations, but also the importance of managing and resourcing a budget; a skill that is not usually taught within the walls of journalism and communication programs.² This practice can serve students two-fold: for women, they learn these skills that aid in transactional communication, in order to succeed and receive more managerial roles in the industry; and for male students, discussion about

² Personal Communication: Discussion with meeting of MS&L Human Resources team: (New York: August 6, 2008).

business practice may help facilitate interest for men into the undergraduate major.

Currently, there is a trend of outreach in universities to attract men to the practice of public relations. Howard University recently established a “Man Up” program, in an effort to bring more interest in their schools of communication for men. The PRSSA Diversity group is currently making efforts to enlist more men into their organization (Ruiz et al, 2008). It is important to have men more representative in the industry for added diverse perspectives to public relations, but the notion that men bring legitimacy to the industry can suggest, that without men the practice of public relations is devalued (Aldoory & Toth, 2002).

In today’s new media environment there are fresh opportunities for men and women entering the public relations profession. According to MacAfee (Ruiz et al, 2008) men are currently found in the industry at senior levels, (indicative of all research) and in the new media or digital, and business-to-business technology sectors of public relations. There is great opportunity in these areas to lessen the gender gap. If public relations programs at the undergraduate level implement the significance of these sectors into the curriculum, it may increase the potential of attracting more men to the major as well as eliminating the limited preconceived notions of what public relations represents.

Public relations programs at the undergraduate level that implement the significance of digital media, business management, and technology will not only attract young men (who traditionally have higher interest in these areas) but will also teach young women the technical skills necessary to compete and succeed at the industry level within these sectors. Women’s lack of interest in technology and business-to-business has the potential to marginalize their existence in these sectors, where men are growing in population.

Limitations

This paper analyzes secondary scholarly research and does not provide empirical primary research. Primary research of both professionals in the public relations industry, as well as primary research of students studying the discipline would provide more qualitative data to better understand how students perceive and employ the roles of leadership, image, and culture and power once working in the public relations industry.

Conclusion

The affect on gender within this discipline risks a continued detachment from other communication disciplines. To best address the issue of this gender disparity, efforts need to start at the university level, where we are witnessing drastic statistics of a growing gender gap. Finding and enabling diversity in the public relations discipline starts with an understanding of how various communication models (transactional and transformative) work and the mentoring

of students, commencing at the university level. In addition, through effective *public relations* of public relations programs in universities, men can become more aware of the broad and diverse practice areas that one can work in, in public relations.

In order to bring a connection to similar communication disciplines, the acceptance of the practice of public relations as a valued practice untainted by inaccurate stereotypes and biased perspectives of gender is essential. Aldoory and Toth (2002) suggest the classroom as an ideal setting for development of feminist values, which could have a great impact on the public relations practice. By having a pedagogical approach with feminist perspectives, lessons could benefit all students, by providing a significant step in understanding a practice that is truly professional, ethical, and truly effective (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000).

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