Different Lenses: Women's Feminist and Postfeminist Perspectives in Public Relations

Diferentes Lentes sobre Perspectivas Feministas e Pós-feministas das Mulheres em Relações Públicas

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Abstract

Gender inequalities in public relations (PR) persist. Industry research within the UK reveals a gender pay-gap, which shows significant disparities in pay between men and women (CIPR, 2015; PRCA, 2016). Feminist research, mostly undertaken in the US over the past twenty years and adopting a liberal feminist perspective, has identified some of the factors that influence inequality for women, such as balancing career and family; while other studies examine the social processes that perpetuate inequalities, such as gender stereotyping, the 'glass ceiling' effect and the 'friendliness trap'. Liberal feminism is critiqued for not recognizing gender regimes. This has led to calls for critical research to examine the underlying social processes in the PR field that influence position opportunities, roles, the pay-gap, and discrimination. Three theoretical positions – liberal feminist, radical feminist and postfeminist - were selected to address the following research questions, 'How does gender influence everyday practice in public relations?' 'Which feminist perspective(s) are suggested by practitioner narratives?' Postfeminism, used as a critical lens, potentially enables 'multiple feminisms and femininities' (Lewis, 2014) to be expressed. For this paper, an exploratory, qualitative pilot study involved semi-structured interviews with four female PR practitioners in northern England. Transcripts were analysed using narrative analysis and reflexivity. The narratives revealed complex and sometimes contradictory interpretations.

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Therefore, while three out of the four narratives showed strong liberal feminist inclinations, including a belief that women are able to compete alongside men, two also expressed radical feminist orientations; although in line with previous research, not a desire to change the system, except on an individual level. A fourth narrative expressed ideas consistent with postfeminism, demonstrating an apparent acceptance of gender role segregation in PR, and therefore no inclination to change the status quo. Finally, we offer further ways of advancing critical feminist studies in public relations, through research and education.

Keywords: gender-gap; feminist theoretical positions; postfeminism; radical feminism; liberal feminism; practitioner narratives.

Resumo

As desigualdades de gênero nas relações públicas (RP) persistem. A pesquisa da indústria no Reino Unido revela um *pay-gap*, que mostra significantes disparidades de remuneração entre homens e mulheres (CIPR, 2015; PRCA, 2016). Pesquisas sobre feminismo, em sua maioria realizadas nos Estados Unidos da América nos últimos vinte anos, adotando uma perspectiva feminista liberal, identificou alguns dos fatores que influenciam a desigualdade perante as mulheres, como o equilíbrio entre carreira e família; enquanto outros estudos examinaram os processos sociais que perpetuam as desigualdades, como os estereótipos de gêneros, o efeito *'glass ceiling'* e a *'friendliness trap'*. O feminismo liberal é criticado por não reconhecer convenções de gênero. Sendo assim, fez-se necessários estudos críticos para analisar os processos sociais subjacentes no campo RP que influenciam as oportunidades de promoções, em termos de cargos, funções, diferença salarial e discriminação. Três posições teóricas - feminista liberal, feminista radical e pós-feministas - foram selecionados para abordar as seguintes questões deste artigo, 'Como o gênero influencia a prática cotidiana em relações públicas?' e 'Qual ou quais perspectiva(s) feministas são sugeridas nas narrativas das profissionais?'. Pós-feminismo, o qual é usado como uma lente crítica, potencialmente permite 'múltiplos feminismos e feminidades' (Lewis, 2014) serem expressos. Para este estudo-piloto, de caráter exploratório com abordagem qualitativa, foram adotadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas com quatro profissionais de relações públicas do sexo feminino no norte da Inglaterra. As transcrições foram analisadas utilizando a análise de narrativa e reflexividade. As narrativas revelaram interpretações complexas e, às vezes, contraditórias. No entanto, enquanto três das quatro narrativas mostraram-se fortes inclinações feministas liberais - incluindo uma crença de que as mulheres são capazes de competir ao lado dos homens, duas delas também expressaram orientações feministas radicais; embora, como em pesquisas anteriores, não foi identificado um desejo de mudar o sistema social, exceto em nível individual. Uma quarta narrativa expressa idéias consistentes com o pós-feminismo, demonstrando uma aparente aceitação do papel da segregação de gêneros em RP. Portanto, nenhuma inclinação para mudanças do *status quo*. Finalmente, sugerimos futuras pesquisas para avançar em estudos feministas críticos em relações públicas, através de pesquisas empíricas e da educação acadêmica.

Palavras-chaves: disparidade entre gêneros; posições teóricas feministas; pós-feminismo; feminismo radical; feminismo liberal; narrativas de profissionais.

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Women are overrepresented in public relations (PR) (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007; Grunig et al., 2001; Lewis, 2014; L'Etang, 2015; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009; Tsetsura, 2014; Wrigley, 2002; Yeomans, 2014), yet wage gaps persist and women are underrepresented at the profession's highest levels. Gender, according to the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), is the "third biggest influence on salary" (CIPR, 2015a) with a greater effect on pay than full- or part-time status, education level or sector.

Due to the complexity and historicity of these inequalities, this paper considers whether a postfeminist analysis, previously neglected in PR literature, could provide a more nuanced, sociocultural explanation of the situation for women in PR. Drawing on a critical analysis of public relations feminist literature, and an exploratory pilot study of White women practitioners (n = 4), we pose the following research questions: 'How does gender influence everyday practice in public relations?' and 'Which feminist perspective(s) are suggested by practitioner narratives?'

The paper begins by examining gender inequalities in PR in the UK, then introduces the first two selected 'lenses' for this study: liberal and radical feminist theories. Feminist social theory provides a classification scheme for analysing and interpreting women's professionals' roles and positions in the PR field. Radical feminism explicitly emphasizes the difference between women and men, promoting the basis for many of the ideas of

feminism. Usually, radical feminists want to free both men and women from the rigid gender roles that societal norms encourage and reinforce. Liberal feminism, on the other hand, "supports the doctrine of individualism, which advocates that all men and women are rational individuals who are capable of competing for jobs on an equal footing, assuming that the correct adjustments are made to social structures and gender roles" (Yeomans 2014a). Moreover, some literature suggests that female practitioners in public relations, if adopting a feminist stance at all, adopt the liberal feminist stance and its belief in individual merit (Wrigley, 2002).

The third 'lens' for this study, postfeminism, while not considered part of feminist theorising, is nevertheless based on "women's lived experiences of organizations" and offers the potential to contribute critical insights into gender in the workplace (Lewis, 2014: 1860). Given our interest in the influence of gender on women's career experiences, we then discuss our methodology, which adopts a qualitative approach, using narrative analysis to enable an interpretation through different lenses. The paper concludes that a postfeminist reading of women's experiences in PR is a missing but highly relevant way of thinking about women's career experiences in public relations in assessing whether progress has been made in achieving gender equality. Finally, we offer further ways of advancing critical feminist studies in public relations, through research and education.

2.   THEORETICAL FRAME

2.1.   Public Relations and Gender Inequalities: The Current Situation

Several researchers' and organizations' statistics reveal the current situation of female professionals in PR. The European Communication Monitor (ECM) has consistently indicated pay discrepancies between men and women in PR in recent years (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno & Tench, 2014, 2015). For instance, the results of the ECM 2015 (Zerfass et al., 2015) reported that at top positions:

> "There are nearly twice more male heads of communication who make more than €150,000 than female practitioners, 20.6 per cent of men against 7.1 per cent of women in these top roles. In contrast, there are nearly twice as many female heads of communications, who make less than €30,000e (20.7 per cent) when compared with their male counterparts as heads of communication earning the lower level (10.5 per cent)" (Zerfass et al., 2015: 97).

Concerning other positions, the gender differences are smaller, but still significant. Overall, in every position in PR, men are revealed to be better paid than women. This statistical evidence suggests that pay inequalities in the field exist and persist across Europe; therefore research is required to better understand the situation and improve it.

In 2016, the United Kingdom PR industry contributed between 7.5 billion pounds and 9.62 billion pounds to the economy. Approximately 83,000 were employed in the PR sector (PRCA, 2016). A key issue is the majority of women working in public relations roles: as highlighted by Yeomans (2014a), public relations is a female-intensive profession, with up to 70 per cent of the profession reported as female in some European countries and 64 per cent in the UK (CIPR, 2015b; PRCA, 2016). Although the *State of the Profession* survey (CIPR, 2015b) found that the percentage of women at senior level in the PR industry is 48% (board level representation was not provided), it also found that a clear pay gap of £8,483 exists in favour of men, which cannot be explained by any other factor such as length of service, seniority, parenthood, or a higher prevalence of part-time work amongst women.

One of the theories put forward to explain inequalities in PR is gender stereotyping. While the concept of gender in social theory is conceptualized as non-binary male/female, socially constructed and performed (Butler, 1990), the functional use of 'gender' is still widely synonymous with 'sex' and when referring to women. For Fröhlich and Peters (2007: 232), gender stereotyping is core to the debate on the feminization of public relations since gender differences can be decisive in recruitment (presumed stereotypes) and influence a woman's beliefs about her skills (self-stereotyping). Tsetsura (2014: 99) underlined that for entry-level and mid-level positions female practitioners are seen as "cheap labour". Furthermore, public relations is often labelled as women's work (Tsetsura, 2014) while stereotyping women as natural communicators (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007; L'Etang, 2015). While the 'natural-born communicator' stereotype may help women at entry-level stage, it becomes a negative characteristic for women seeking managerial status (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007). Stereotypes and individual experiences may vary due to many influences, such as type of organization (agency vs. corporation), size of organization, hierarchical position and job tasks, preferences of job tasks and work processes, and organizational culture preferences (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007). Fröhlich's (2004) model of the 'friendliness trap' suggests that there is a vicious circle between the importance of 'feminist values' and the

phenomenon of the glass ceiling: "At entry level, female attributes like orientation toward dialogue and consensus really can be advantageous" (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007: 233). However, in promotion situations, Fröhlich & Peters (2007: 233) point out that "the female characterization becomes an own goal and functions as the justification for the discrimination toward women because female attributes (like sensitivity, warmth, honesty, fairness, or morality) are then recoded as a lack of management skills (viz., lack of assertiveness, poor conflict management, and weak leadership skills)".

L'Etang (2015) discusses the historical discourses of gender in PR among individual practitioners from the UK's main professional body, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR). Some self-stereotypes of women's work in PR during the 1950s and 1960s, she asserts, were "remarkably persistent, such as the idea that women had special intrinsic personal qualities that suited them for PR work (at least at the lower levels) generally presented as innate, for example, domesticity, hospitality, empathy, intuition, listening skills, time management, attention to detail" (L'Etang, 2015: 361). Prevailing stereotypes were "understood as innate qualities rather than as acquired expertise" (L'Etang 2015: 362). PR expertise was: "hierarchically gendered with the female roles of interpersonal and communication skills, administrative and organisational skills underpinning the men who were "fronting" the occupation" (L'Etang, 2015: 365). Furthermore, during the post-war era, while opportunities were opening up for PR as a career for women, these opportunities were limited to the fields of fashion and beauty. We argue that such a hierarchy of professional expertise, based on gender stereotypes, continues to structure the field today, thereby perpetuating inequalities. How this hierarchy comes about is therefore worth exploring through the analysis of women practitioners' narratives of everyday career experiences.

Other factors may influence gender inequalities in PR. Dozier, Sha & Shen (2012: 12) argue that women are more likely to have income-suppressing career interruptions which affect seniority and pay. Other studies have examined how women in PR negotiate life-career conflicts (Daymon & Surma, 2012; Krider & Ross, 1997). The concepts of blurred and merged identities lend support to the idea that some women's identities are formed by fuzzy or dissolved boundaries between professional and non-work spheres, sometimes reluctantly (Daymon & Surma, 2012).

The concepts of blurred and merged identities were compatibly demonstrated in Russia in Tsetsura's analysis (2014: 85), "similar to many other countries, public relations is often seen as a profession that is better suited for women than men due to historical, socio-economic, and societal factors as well as due to pre-conceived notions about public relations". This leads to calls for further research in order to understand the underlying gender issues in the PR field that influence position opportunities, roles, the pay-gap and discrimination (Fitch, 2015).

We now go on to discuss two feminist perspectives, liberal feminism and radical feminism, selected in this paper due to underdeveloped feminist theory in PR (Fitch, James and Motion, 2016; Golombisky, 2015). Alongside Fitch et al. (2016: 278) we argue for a critical lens, which "challenges hegemonic assumptions around gender in public relations" and enables feminist perspectives as well as non-feminist perspectives, including postfeminism, to be used as interpretive lenses for women's career narratives.

2.2.   Liberal Feminism

The most common and the most reasonably argued form of feminism, which is based on the first wave that gained the women's suffrage, is said to be liberal feminism (Chrisler & McHough, 2011; Vincent, 2009). It is based on liberal theory and uses individualism as a doctrine (Groehout, 2002). The primary goal of this theoretical perspective is to gain equality for women by increasing their social and political participation, achieving freedom for every woman, and considering them as full individuals (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009; Vincent, 2009). Moreover, liberal feminists strive to minimize the gender system (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009). Although liberal feminists are struggling for the obliteration of discrimination, they do not bring the "underlying social institutions" or restructuration of the system into question (Grunig et al., 2011: 321; Jagger & Rothenberg, 1984, cited in Chrisler & McHough, 2011: 48; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009: 254-256).

Another main idea of liberal feminism is that equal opportunities for women can be gained through "education and the elimination of prejudice and discrimination" as well as through representative democracy and the possibility of rational legal reform (Chrisler & McHough, 2011; Vincent 2009). Liberal feminists recognize male domination as "unjustified male

monopoly" which hinders women becoming equal. As solutions, they see economic and individual freedom because "free markets imply free individuals, including women, who can compete on equal terms" (Vincent, 2009: 173-174). Transferred to public relations liberal feminism advocates "for ensuring that women be able to compete with men for comparable jobs with comparable salaries" (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009: 256) Based on this, liberal feminism is tightly connected to the theory of empowerment, especially self-empowerment.

Empowerment is conceptualized as "the capacity to exert control and influence over decisions that affects one's life space for one's own benefit" (Zimmerman, 2000: 44). The transition from a passive powerlessness to an active control over one's life is closely related to the liberal feminist idea of the imperative of freedom, equality, and equal rights. "Tools" for empowering may be networking, mentoring, or role modelling other women (Grunig et al., 2001: 331). Liberal feminist strategies suggest that women should adapt "masculine" behaviour in order to gain success in a male-dominated work environment (Grunig et al., 2001). Another liberal feminist strategy is denial of the existence of discrimination (Grunig et al., 2001; Wrigley, 2002). Wrigley (2002: 27) describes this phenomenon, which she calls "negotiated resignation" as disowning of discrimination such as the glass ceiling phenomenon. She considers this a survival strategy as well as the "denial of patriarchy" (Grunig et al., 2001: 324-325).

2.3. Radical Feminism

Radical feminism, which appeared in late 1960s, is mainly in conflict with the principles of liberal feminism (Bryson, 2003; Enns, 1997). The reason for this clash between the two different feminist perspectives is that radical feminism suggests an essential change in society to diffuse patriarchy. Pointing out the difference of women from men, radical feminists construct groups without males (Chrisler & McHough, 2011). Radical feminism emphasizes the significance of personal feelings, experiences and relationships. What radical feminism opposes is *patriarchy*, the male dominated system itself, not men. The aim of radical feminism is to object, to combat and to eradicate patriarchy by countering typical gender roles and oppression of women and necessitate a radical reshaping of society. As Lorber (1997) suggests, male supremacy is visible everywhere and women are exposed to this domination. Male domination and gender inequality can be combatted "by forming non-

hierarchical, supportive, woman-only spaces where women can think and act and create free of constant sexist put-downs" (Lorber, 1997: 16-17).

In contrast to liberal feminists, who focus on solutions at the individual level, radical feminism calls for change in the 'system' itself with the main goal of a new form of organization" (Grunig et al., 2001). Despite recent studies, Fitch et al. (2016) argue that the feminist research literature in PR is underdeveloped, and from the 1980s onwards is mostly liberal-feminist, with few studies approached from a radical feminist perspective. They conclude that there is need for a critical feminist lens for focusing on women's rights and duties in everyday life in order to have a feminist theory of PR located in the literature. They advocate that research should investigate power and power relations, along with the structural processes that produce gendered discourse and practice in PR.

2.4. Postfeminism

Although postfeminism (sometimes associated with 'third-wave feminism') has not progressed as a perspective within the public relations context, it is recognized as being rooted in liberal feminism and neoliberalism (Fitch, 2015). Organizational theorist Lewis (2014: 1850) states that postfeminism "can be understood as a cultural response to feminism and the changes it has brought, which does not seek to supersede feminism, but rather to rework and co-opt it", although she highlights that there is lack of consensus surrounding interpretations of this perspective. Lewis's (2014) extensive conceptual work presents postfeminism as a critical tool that can be used to guide analysis of feminine subjectivities in organizations.

According to organizational theorists, postfeminism represents a 'gender regime' (Dean, 2010) that on the one hand incorporates taken-for-granted feminist values from liberal feminism, particularly 'individualism, choice and empowerment', while 'restabilising traditional gender relations' including the re-sexualisation of women's bodies and retreat to the home as a matter of choice (Lewis, 2014: 1850-1851). Thus, while radical, or 'excessive' forms of feminism might be rejected within the workplace, 'moderate' forms of feminism and femininity co-exist within a postfeminist regime.

The lens of postfeminism is used in this paper by theoretically linking to Place's conceptualization of gender as a complex system of socialization, or regime, which shapes the public relations profession (Place, 2015). Place's (2015) qualitative exploration of the meaning of gender among practitioners found that while different understandings of gender and 'gender scripts' were recognized in the industry, historic sexist stereotypes about gender and women were perpetuated among some women practitioners. Apparent support for the *status quo* is resonant in Wrigley's work (2002: 47) which found that denial of glass ceilings and lack of equal pay for men and women is a common strategy among female PR practitioners. Furthermore, she notes that – mainly young – women in PR feel discomfort with feminism (Wrigley, 2002: 49); all of which suggests that a postfeminist analytical lens could prove insightful.

3.   METHODOLOGY

The origins of this paper are in a summer school focusing on women in PR, hosted at Leeds Beckett University in the UK. This European Union Erasmus-funded intensive programme (IP) brought together over 20 post-graduate students from three institutions located in Leeds, UK; Munich, Germany; and Istanbul, Turkey. The programme enabled student groups to work together on research projects related to the theme of the summer school, and this paper is developed from one of the research projects.

This paper adopts a qualitative approach in order to understand the phenomenon of gender inequality using participants' narratives of career experiences viewed through the lenses of liberal feminist, radical feminist and postfeminist perspectives. Both primary and secondary data were used in this study in order to enrich the analysis and supplement the reflexivity of the topic (Creswell, 2014).

In line with previous feminist studies (Fitch & Third, 2014; Fröhlich & Peters, 2007; L'Etang, 2015; Tsetsura, 2014; Yeomans, 2014b), the research team collected primary data comprising face-to-face semi-structured interviews of up to 30 minutes with a convenience sample (Flick, 2014) of female professionals during their participation in the summer school. Therefore, the empirical findings were drawn from the experiences of four knowledgeable female British public relations professionals from different job positions and sectors based in

the north of England. Three out of the four participants occupied a leadership role and were therefore questioned on this topic in relation to gender. Prior to collecting primary data, ethical approval was obtained using a consent form and signed by each participant. To protect anonymity, the name of each participant and their specific job title has been removed.

Data analysis models described by Polkinghorne (1995), Schön (1984) and Flick (2014) were mostly chosen in this paper. Narrative interview often "assumes that 'narrative expression' reflects both conscious concerns and relatively unconscious cultural, societal and individual processes" (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 216). These processes are revealed through interpretive lenses, which, in this paper, are feminist and postfeminist perspectives. A reflexive approach to data analysis was used to appropriately code and interpret the narratives in the transcripts (Schön, 1984).

In order to understand how gender influences everyday practice in PR, and how narratives might be interpreted through the lenses of liberal feminism, radical feminism and postfeminism, participants' responses were analyzed considering their own experiences in their career journey and current positions. Moreover, by looking at the link between theoretical perspectives and the everyday career experience and perception of practice, each interview was analyzed for meaning and content as thematic pattern categories in order to filter concepts, trends, or experiences.

While undertaken as a pilot study and from a small sample of White women working in the northern region of England, the research findings suggest that existing power relations are not disrupted, although a note of caution is due here since this was not the main focus of this article.

4.   RESULTS

In this section the participants' narratives (P1, P2, P3 and P4) are described in relation to questions concerning their career experiences of gender. In section 5. Discussion and Conclusion, which follows, the narratives are analyzed using the lenses of liberal feminism, radical feminism and postfeminism.

At Participant 1's (P1) organization, more men than women are employed in PR roles. She explains that she has recruited ex-journalists "because they know what the journalists are looking for". She typifies journalism as a field for men, while PR is populated by more women in the UK. Probed further, P1 asserts that the fundamental assignment of PR is "selling something" and people expect PR professionals to be well-dressed young women. It is "slightly frustrating" to her in that is how PR is perceived, and that "those are the people who tend to go into PR".

In her eyes, the most important point for effectiveness in a leading position in PR is making decisions very quickly. For P1, women have the best requirements to make difficult decisions and work fast, but she sees a historical cliché that people mainly accept decisions rather from a man than a woman. In P1's view working in PR is easier for women than in journalism.

> "I think it is perfectly easy for women to fulfil those expectations as decision makers. I think, historically it was said that the man is the decision maker at home and at work. But that is an out of date concept. That's not the case now. I think one of the issues is if you are a man making decisions you can seem to be strong and authoritative. As a woman you can be seen to be above your station; bitchy: different words."

Participant 2 (P2) is the least experienced participant. She believes her everyday work is not influenced by gender issues "gender does not play a role for me". In her way of thinking, she and her colleagues are judged just by the quality of their work, not by gender. Nevertheless, when describing her working situation before starting at her agency, she mentions that her supervisor put her automatically in the fashion clients section, whereas the male colleagues were responsible for business-to-business clients, but looking back "I do not feel like I was in a bad position". According to her, female PR practitioners may sometimes have a better relationship with clients, "women can be a lot friendlier than a male in the same position".

Talking about her female supervisor at the agency she is now working in, she is sure that gender issues never influenced the career of this colleague. For Participant 2, the most important point in a leading position is confidence and you "cannot have a weakness". She believes that women in leading positions don't necessarily need to be more masculine or "hard" but "more on the side of professional". Yet she has had no negative experiences with

male colleagues in her working life. Therefore, she emphasizes, everybody has the same chances in every industry to get a job.

Participant 3 (P3) talks about gender from another perspective: in the team she is leading, there is only one male and she would wish to have more balance (so more men) in the team. She likes to have different and diverse perspectives on a topic and therefore she says a diverse team is a good base. P3 asserts that she always looks at the personal characteristics of her team members, regardless of gender, as she believes it is important to focus on the individual. "For me it's all about the individual and how the individual is, and you can get excellent practitioners that are male and excellent practitioners that are female, and I personally think it's down to the individual really."

Nevertheless, she differentiates between her personal style of leading a team, "my style is quite inclusive, co-operative, described as nurturing"; and a masculine style, which she describes as "autocratic and dominant". She does not believe she will get the best out of her team if she adopts an autocratic style. "That's the way I personally like to operate. If that's a male or female thing I don't know". Participant 3 has sometimes been criticized because of her "feminine style". Asked about the expectations of good leadership in PR, Participant 3 describes these as: "You have to be quite calm, quite considered in your approach." She lists other characteristics, including the ability to "pause, reflect, not to get too bogged down with day to day delivery…to have empathy and a strategic mind as well". She also mentions empathy in relation to "strong female traits" that can enable women to progress to very senior levels in PR because they have "that ability to adapt and to consult with others".

Participant 4 related that until she became a senior PR manager, gender had not impacted on her role. Since moving to her current organisation, however, her usual style of working had been challenged, not only by perceived differences in gender styles but also by class-based differences, when she refers to "privileged backgrounds":

> "During the last year […] I think I've never been more aware of my gender. I'm on a management team with four men and one other woman and they – they are properly old school, old-fashioned men, from privileged backgrounds, from boys' clubs. So I've been really aware of it and I've felt that I've had to fight more to get what I want. And so it kind of makes me act in a way that I don't like acting in – so I have to kind of

argue and fight for things rather than work collaboratively, and I really struggle. So for the last year I've really felt it".

Participant 4 explains the challenge in terms of moving from a technical to a strategic role: "As long as you stay in your technical PR role, it is ok for men, but if you want to enter their world, it's a different matter and it is like 'Get back to your place!'". Similar to Participant 3, she also shows that she has to negotiate ambiguous situations in her leadership role and believes excellent judgement to be most important. "In PR you've very, very rarely got an absolute rule, so pretty much every minute of every day you're using your judgement and decision-making". Related to leadership roles, Participant 4 believes that men and women are both capable of good judgement and decision-making, but men have more confidence in their ability to exercise them, whereas, women are often lacking belief in themselves. And yet, similar to Participant 3, Participant 4 thinks that women have an advantage in working in PR: "I think empathy's a really key one, and the combination of having a PR background and being a woman is a killer combination."

5. DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Overall, these narratives suggest that there is need for comparing and discussing feminist as well as postfeminist perspectives in relation to the experiences of women in PR; as gender issues were mainly distinguished by personal situations and daily involvements being touched by their performance and roles (Fitch et al., 2016). Paying attention to women's narratives concerning the influence of gender on their career experiences sometimes reveals contradictory statements. Such contradictions may reflect both 'conscious concerns' and 'relatively unconscious' processes (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 216), including deeply-embedded gender ideologies within the PR field (L'Etang, 2015). Therefore it is unsurprising that the four narratives delivered complex gender interpretations which cannot be neatly labelled; however, we argue that a postfeminist interpretation allows multiple feminisms and femininities (Lewis, 2014) to be expressed within the same narrative. Within this section, we have chosen to examine the perspectives revealed by each participant's narrative in order to draw out common themes that respond to our research questions.

According to P1's narrative, she is aware but not sure of the reason that there are more women employed as PR professionals in the UK than men. Interestingly, while P1 has

observed the prevalence of women in PR in general, she has made a conscious effort to counter the 'PR girl' image of the industry by recruiting male ex-journalists in PR roles in her own office, suggesting a self-identification with masculine newsroom culture (de Bruin, 2000), as well as evident frustration with the PR girl stereotype (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007; L'Etang, 2015). P1's narrative may therefore be interpreted as a gendered performance of identity (Yeomans, 2014b) that ascribes to liberal feminist values in which masculine behaviour is adopted to succeed (Grunig et al, 2001).

When questioned about the characteristics of a leader in PR, P1 expresses further liberal feminist inclinations when invoking historic gender roles and contrasting them to current ones where women can compete with men on equal terms as decision-makers (Vincent, 2009). P1 does not deny gender but acknowledges a life-work conflict "as a working mum" (mother) which resonates with the work of Daymon and Surma (2012) and Krider and Ross (1997). P1's description about a man and a woman being strong and authoritative in making decisions can have different interpretations as stated by Grunig et al. (2001), because women need to use "masculine" behaviour to succeed.

Participant 2 (P2), the least experienced practitioner in the study, also inclines towards the liberal feminist perspective, for different reasons. She repeats that there is no gender issue, which can be interpreted as a denial strategy (Wrigley, 2002) and that everybody is judged by his or her performance (Vincent, 2009). Furthermore, confidence, which is one of the strategies for self-empowerment, is an important requirement for being successful from her point of view (Novek, 1991), affirming that women can be as powerful as men. Empowerment can be considered as marks of liberal (Novek, 1991; Rakow & Nastasia, 2009) and postfeminist (Lewis, 2014) perspectives. However, P2's former working experience where she was automatically placed with the fashion clients echoes an historic view of women's 'natural' PR work (L'Etang, 2015). That P2 did not realize this treatment as a special gender issue can be seen as denying of discrimination or perhaps an acceptance of 'traditional' gender roles as a feature of postfeminism (Lewis, 2014). In characterizing women as 'more friendly' she highlights scholarly concerns about feminist/feminine values including the 'friendliness trap' and its impact on women's career progression (Frohlich, 2004; Frohlich & Peters, 2007).

Participant 3's (P3) narrative demonstrates features of a mix of liberal and radical feminist perspectives, because she is aware of the relevance of gender in her career (Grunig et al., 2001) and emphasizes the value of specific female traits or qualities, such as empathy, because for P3, being a woman may be an advantage. While P3 strongly advocates the liberal feminist value of individual merit when discussing her team "for me it's all about the individual" (Wrigley, 2002), P3 goes one step further and considers her typical feminine leadership style "quite inclusive, co-operative, described as nurturing" as superior to the male leadership style as demarcated by Bryson (2003) and Vincent (2009) demonstrating feminist values (Grunig, 2000). Golombisky (2015: 398) cautions against the "slippery slope" of "strategic essentialism" to advance a feminist agenda. This 'feminist values' strategy, she warns, may be misread as 'inherent feminine qualities' (L'Etang, 2015), which potentially creates a women versus men culture, and may lead to self-stereotyping and stereotyping by others (Frohlich & Peters, 2007).

Similar radical feminist values are also expressed in Participant 4's (P4) narrative, in that she feels she has to fight more since she entered a higher position. This can be seen as provocation within an uncomfortable situation and resistance as a transformative approach (Fitch et al., 2016). Moreover, P4 describes her problems in establishing her female style of leading (Vincent, 2009). She recognizes that gender becomes relevant (Grunig et al., 2001) when reaching the glass ceiling (Wrigley, 2002). In addition to these interpretations, she has experienced struggles as a female manager when she has worked with a male team, not in her preferred collaborative way, but with her need to adopt an argumentative style – aligned to Lorber's (1997) suggestion that male authority is noticeable when women are in leading positions. Furthermore, it can be seen as provocations, which are uncomfortable situations in the PR role (Fitch et al., 2016).

A comparison of the theoretical perspective findings also reveals that none of the four interviewed women mentioned the term "feminism", which fits the findings of Wrigley (2002), that women try to deny this term. Also, similar to previous findings (Place, 2015), while three participants recognized that gender issues prevailed in the PR industry, none focused on changing the system as a whole. Even though two women were identified as having radical feminist predispositions, they only suggested solutions on an individual level.

In conclusion, this paper's aim was to explore women practitioners' narratives of career experiences in PR to help shed light on why inequalities persist within the profession, despite PR being a female-intensive occupation. Narratives were analyzed through the lenses of liberal feminism and radical feminism (Rakow & Nastasia, 2009) and postfeminist theory (Fitch, 2015; Lewis, 2014). Postfeminist theory has received very little attention in the public relations literature, yet a postfeminist lens may offer particular utility in interpreting the experiences of women practitioners. Postfeminist theory acknowledges the plurality of women's experiences and positions as they negotiate their careers and enact "multiple feminisms and femininities" as found in this study (Lewis, 2014: 1851). While drawing on a small sample of participants, our findings provide important insights into the sociocultural processes underlying persistent inequalities within the UK context, focusing on professionals' understandings of gendered career experiences. In addition, this paper confirms previous feminist literature which draws attention to professionals' lived experience of inequalities in the field, as well as the findings reported by UK professional associations' data.

Based on the myriad of possibilities to advance this topic, using postfeminism as a critical lens (Lewis, 2014), further research should be done to investigate gendered experience of public relations within different contexts, for example, private and public sectors and international contexts other than the UK, including the perceptions and experiences of male practitioners (Yeomans, 2014b; Place, 2015). We argue that the study of inequalities should be a part of PR education in university and this should include research about a variety of feminist perspectives (Rakow & Nastasia 2009) as well as postfeminism (Fitch, 2015; Lewis, 2014). We also acknowledge the importance of intersectional approaches to identity and power in PR, given that inequalities in everyday career experiences informed by difference (e.g. race, class, sexuality) may be equally if not more relevant than gender (Edwards, 2014; Golombisky, 2015; Pompper, 2014; Place, 2015).

Fundamentally, women´s feminist and postfeminist perspectives in public relations move forward and advance in research when looking through different lenses, and when both the theory and practice are aligned, compared, and connected.

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