

Public Relations: How a Female-dominated Field is Full of Gender Discrepancies

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze gender discrepancies in the public relations field while also seeking explanations for the gender discrepancies against women in this female-dominated field. First, I give an overview of three specific gender issues infecting PR: A lack of women in leadership, gendered expectations and a pay gap. Then, I offer research-based explanations for the gender issues while connecting these explanations to feminist theory and referencing *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*. Finally, I explain its importance for the field of women and gender studies.

I. Background: The Gender Discrepancies Women Face in the PR Field

The public relations field is mostly made up of women. Specifically, in 2015 women made up 70% of the public relations workforce in the U.S. (Neill & Meng, 2021). However, women still hold far fewer leadership positions than men, face gendered expectations that limit success and experience a pay gap in salary (Neill & Meng, 2021) (Meng & Neill, 2021).

Emilia Armstead, a public relations student from Syracuse University, stated in her honors thesis how important it is specifically in PR for practitioners to understand and represent diversity (Armstead, 2015). This means that not only is it shocking that the female-dominated field of PR contains gender discrepancies against women, but these discrepancies are also a limitation to the function of PR itself.

The Leadership Gap

First, although women made up 70% of the PR field in 2015, they only held 30% of the top-level positions (Neill & Meng, 2021). More specifically, The Holmes Report, a global source for PR data on trends and issues, found that in 2015 nine of the 10 largest PR agencies had leadership teams of which less than 50% of the members were women (Shah, 2017). Two of the firms had no women on their leadership teams, and most had less than 30% of members who were women. (Shah, 2017). By 2017, six of these same top 10 agencies still had 36% or less women on leadership teams (Shah, 2017). More recently, in 2021, researchers conducted 51 interviews of women in mid-management and senior level PR positions and found that, “young women who aspire to leadership positions have a steeper hill to climb to achieve their goals than their male colleagues” (Neill & Meng, 2021). Neill and Ming’s findings alongside the Holmes Report data suggest a deep history of a leadership and a slow move toward change.

Gendered Expectations

Next, related to the lack in female leadership is gendered expectations. Neill and Meng also discovered that women faced biased leadership expectations and concluded:

So, while these women have been successful at advancing into leadership positions, they had to develop political astuteness (Berger & Reber, 2006) and adopt more acceptable feminine characteristics such as being polite, courteous, agreeable and respectful in order to be influential. At the time, they also have to know which traditional masculine characteristics to adopt as a leader such as being confident and assertive based on a desired identity ascribed to them by others in the organization (Collier, 1994; Sha, 2001). (Neill & Meng, 2021, Discussion).

Thus, not only is it more challenging for women to reach leadership positions in PR but when they do obtain leadership roles, certain characteristics are expected that force women to adapt and ultimately make the leadership role itself more challenging.

The Pay Gap

Women in public relations have also historically struggled to earn as much pay as men. In 1995 a survey comparing the salaries of women and men in the Public Relations Society of America found that the average salary for men was 45% higher than the average woman's salary (Aldoory & Tooth, 2002). And in 1999 the average male salary was 38% higher than the average female salary (Aldoory & Tooth, 2002). In 2017, the average male PR income was \$6,072 more than the average female income when tenure, job, type, education, field of study, location and ethnicity were held constant (Shah, 2017).

II. Literature Review: Explanations and Feminist Theory Implications

Upon researching scholarly explanations for the gender discrepancies in PR, I found a few main explanations/theories: the Velvet Ghetto, biological determinism and gendered expectations, homosocial reproduction and the “mommy track.”

The Velvet Ghetto/Pink Collar Ghetto: PR’s Sexist Roots

The Velvet Ghetto is the first feminist scholarship to develop in public relations as an explanation for the overwhelming number of women in the field and for the inequality women face (Golombisky, 2015). The Velvet Ghetto explanation began in the 1970s when people noticed the disproportionate number of women entering the public relations field over any other field (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). In the late 1970s, *Business Week* called public relations “the Velvet Ghetto” of affirmative action, saying, “When is affirmative action not so affirmative? When companies load their public relations departments with women to compensate for their scarcity in other professional or managerial capacities, that usually lead more directly to top management” (“PR: The Velvet Ghetto of Affirmative Action,” 1987, as cited in Aldoory & Toth, 2002, Hiring). Thus, the influx of women into the PR field in its early days shows an underlying root in sexism.

Golombisky explains that this phenomenon is not unique to PR in what is called pink-collar ghettos where “prestige drops and wages stagnate wherever women become the majority in fields such as education, clerical/administrative support and allied health” (Golombisky, 2015, *Origins of Feminist Scholarship in Public Relations: Velvet Ghetto*). Velvet ghetto is simply the name for a pink-collar ghetto in the PR field (Golombisky, 2015).

While the Velvet Ghetto explains PR’s roots in sexism and early feminist thought, Golombisky argues that these roots limit feminist thought in PR to liberal feminist strategy

(Golombisky, 2015). “Liberal feminism explains the oppression of women in terms of unequal access to political, economic and social institutions” (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013, Chapter 1). Liberal feminism is often criticized because it accepts the systems that oppress women seeking to find access for women within, instead of changing the systems (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013, Chapter 1). Golombisky suggests that public relations research should expand beyond the liberal feminist roots toward perspectives that consider standpoint theory and intersectionality, among others (Golombisky, 2015). Standpoint theory argues that we can explain our situated knowledge to one another to reach social change, and intersectionality is a perspective that integrates gender with other systems of inequality like race (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013, Chapter 1 &2).

Biological Determinism and Gendered Expectations

In 2002 public relations researchers Aldoory and Toth published findings about why PR practitioners themselves thought gender discrepancies exist in the field. One explanation that several male respondents gave was biological determinism, or the idea that men and women have distinguishable traits that either hinder or help them reach managerial positions (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Aldoory and Toth give an example of one male’s response,

“A man’s ability to make a concise decision right away is more prevalent than a woman’s. A woman has to look it over, different angles, blah, blah, blah. Just like she’s buying furniture. Men have been empowered because of our ability to do that quickly.” (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, Biological Determinism)

Aldoory and Toth explain that this biological determinist thinking contributes

“To the ideology that the public relations profession will be hurt—in terms of salary levels, reputation, and respect—if it becomes all women. Therefore, as the number of men decreases throughout the profession, attempts to recruit and retain them become

stronger. These stronger attempts lead to favoritism toward males in terms of salaries, promotions, and benefits.” (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, Discussion/Conclusion)

Therefore, the belief in biological determinism limits female success. Different but related to biological determinism is gendered expectations.

As previously discussed, gendered expectations is a discrepancy women face in PR. However, gendered expectations are also a reason for lack of female leadership. Based on the findings of Neill and Meng, women are expected to have a “softer touch,” be less expressive of their emotions and be less direct (Neill & Meng, 2021). Additionally, as one respondent stated, “From a male perspective, I think the thought leadership is assumed. And from a female perspective, it’s earned” (Neill & Meng, 2021, Gendered expectations in leadership). Thus, because of gendered expectations, women must work harder to earn leadership, and when they do earn leadership roles, they face the challenge of adapting their leadership style to gendered expectations (Neill & Meng, 2021). Connecting this idea to feminist theory beyond the PR field, these gendered expectations relate to the general gendered division of labor in which gender expectations lead to women in certain roles and men in others (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2013, Chapter 7).

Homosocial Reproduction

Homosocial reproduction is the idea that “most superiors, regardless of their race or sex, tend to fill power positions they oversee with ‘scriptively similar others,’ or people who look like them” (Armstead, 2015, Significance of Studying Women and Women of Color). In her own research, upon analyzing seven female PR authors’ blogs, Armstead found that the three most frequently discussed topics were personal branding, control and physical appearance (Armstead, 2015). She argues that the emphasis on personal branding, especially for women of color, may be

a result of homosocial reproduction, as there is more pressure on women to create an image of professionalism (Armstead, 2015).

Similarly, in their findings, Aldoory and Toth explain that the “good ol’ boys network” is perpetuated and “handed down to a younger generation of males, who continue traditional practices that help groom males for management positions” (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, *Sex Discrimination and Sexism*).

The Mommy Track

Another internal bias that can explain gender discrepancies like lack of pay and lack of leadership in PR is the bias against mothers (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Several participants in Aldoory and Toth’s research said the perception that women will leave work for the “mommy track” still exists (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). Shah explained how in her research she found that many people use the “mommy track” to explain the pay gap in PR (Shah, 2017). However, she said the mommy tax does not cover the entire picture, as her research controlled for hours worked and title (Shah, 2017).

The misconception that the mommy track is a legitimate explanation for the pay gap in PR reflects a similar yet broader concept across fields: the “mommy tax.” In *The Mommy Tax*, Anna Crittenden explains the cost of being a mother in the workforce, “...working mothers not only earn less than men, but also less per hour than childless women, even after such differences as education and experience are factored out” (Crittenden, 2001, p. 345).

III. Conclusion: The Importance for Women and Gender Studies

In conclusion, the gender discrepancies women face in the PR field—a leadership gap, gendered expectations and pay gap—have their roots in the Velvet Ghetto that developed from

affirmative action and are perpetuated by a belief in biological determinism, homosocial reproduction and the mommy track. This topic is important because it shows how women can face gender discrepancies even in a field in which they dominate. Additionally, feminist theories help explain PR, but research applying more modern feminist theory to PR is needed.

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