Caring about public relations and the gendered cultural intermediary role

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This chapter explores the interaction between the occupation of public relations and the daily lives of those working in the field. How do men and women working in public relations negotiate the responsibilities and demands of their work and home commitments? And why do so many women practitioners feel a sense of guilt about their competing obligations? This study is based on interviews with women and men working in the thriving resource-boom economy of Western Australia. We enquire how public relations practitioners, whom we define as cultural intermediaries, articulate their gendered engagements with work- and home-life. Public relations, as cultural intermediary work that involves the promotion and extension of a neo-liberal agenda, affects the lives and wellbeing of its practitioners. In effect, public relations practitioners engage with, resist and adapt to social and organizational discourses in diverse ways according to their gendered professional and personal orientations and attachments. Drawing on a feminist ethics of care, we suggest that a critical reappraisal of public relations approaches and practices is now both urgent and timely. As a socially significant type of cultural intermediary work, public relations – as scholarship and as practice -- is well placed to contribute to the reshaping of dominant discourses and to demonstrate the centrality of caring relationships in private and public life.
How best to deal with the interrelationship between work and home lives is an ongoing challenge faced by individuals and organizations in most industrialized societies, as illustrated in a range of studies of the UK and Europe (Crompton and Lyonnette 2006), Hong Kong and Singapore (Thein et al 2010), India (Rajadhyaksha 2012), North America (Kreiner et al 2009) and Australia (Pocock 2012). Highly-skilled, professional women and men face acute pressures of time and competition from the globalizing forces of neo-liberalism. Those involved in professional roles are subject to workplace cultures and commercially-oriented discourses that value very long hours, even during family formative years (Brooks 2011) and many are ‘wilfully blind’ (Hefferman 2011) to the toll on their emotional, physical and psychological health, as well as on the effectiveness of work itself. Public relations practitioners, as professional communicators, are not immune from these pressures and their consequences. Practitioners’ immersion in globalizing flows, particularly those enabled by a range of advanced communication and media technologies on which they depend for their daily work, makes it much harder for them to resist work as an all-encompassing activity, as we found in an earlier study of women working in public relations (Daymon and Surma 2012). Despite this, we found that some women do achieve a satisfactory relationship between the professional and the private, by segmenting, blurring or overlapping the different spheres of their lives in order to achieve a meaningful self-identity.
It is the interplay between a satisfying and meaningful life and the discourses of globalization underpinned by a neo-liberal agenda that interest us in this chapter. We posit that in their role as cultural intermediaries, public relations practitioners necessarily engage with and are influenced by such discourses and may also reinforce or resist them, with implications not only for their own lives but for society as a whole. Thus, our research questions are:

- In what ways do public relations practitioners’ interpretations of and responses to the confluence of work and home represent and/or challenge dominant neo-liberal discourses, and how do these influence (a) public relations as cultural intermediary work, and (b) practitioners’ own lives and identities?
- Are there differences in the above interpretations and responses between men and women? If so, how is gender implicated in the privileging of certain discourses that serve to enable or inhibit the capacity for enjoying a sense of well being, in terms of people’s work and home lives and the diverse relationships that sustain them?
- Can a gender-based critique suggest alternative approaches to and practices of public relations that would facilitate a more authentic appreciation of the caring relationships which develop and sustain both professional and personal lives?

We address these questions through interviews with women and men in public relations based in Western Australia. This is a region undergoing rapid economic transformation and which therefore offers an interesting cultural site for
investigation of how dominant social discourses play out in the daily lives of those who do public relations and how gendered identities are implicated in the privileging of certain discourses over others.

We pause for a moment in our narrative to define gender. We take both sex and gender to be contingent, provisional, discursive positions, and the relationship between them as uneven and discontinuous. In this view, gender is not the ‘natural’ expression of sex or the social manifestation of a biological given; and sex is not the prediscursive ‘cause’ of gender (Butler 1990). Understanding sex and gender in this way is not to suggest that binary categories of sex and gender, of men and women, can or should be done away with. After all, these ways of identifying are for some people meaningful, empowering and reassuring ways to engage with, and represent themselves to, others and the world they inhabit. However, understanding sex and gender as discursively produced and institutionally as well as individually and collectively regulated helps us reflect on and critically evaluate the socially constituted and constituting nature of gendered attitudes and behaviours. It also encourages us to scrutinize how particular ways of being and behaving in the world are recognized, validated and even rewarded, while others are occluded, denigrated and perhaps even punished or prohibited. It also helps us consider the ways in which certain practices and attitudes might be challenged and transformed.

Before moving on to discuss our primary data, we give some consideration to the geographical, commercial and cultural context of our research, and then to the role of the cultural intermediary.
The research context: Western Australia—a transforming economy

Taking our cue from feminist scholars, our research is grounded in the everyday experiences and understandings of the social world of individuals. This enables us then to ‘study up’ in order to critically reveal the domination and marginalisation inherent in broader discourses which are often evident at the level of gender. In the words of Dorothy Smith (1990:51), this approach enables us to ‘identify the “conceptual practices of power”’. Harriet Jacobs (1987/1861) demonstrated that the concrete lived experience is the core on which to build knowledge and foment social change. To this end, we interviewed 46 men and women involved at various levels of seniority in public relations consultancies and in-house in private, government and not-for-profit organisations operating in Western Australia (see Appendix for full methodological details).

Western Australia, with its transforming economy, provides a context which usefully brings into relief the pressures experienced by public relations practitioners in the face of the colonizing spread of neo-liberalism, with its normalizing of the distinction between the professional and the private, and its promotion of competition and consumerism. Asia’s surging demand in 2000 for commodities such as iron ore and coal led to rapid economic growth over the following decade in Western Australia where most of Australia’s natural resources are situated. Major resource companies such as BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, Argyle Diamonds, and Alcoa are based in Western Australia’s capital, Perth, which by 2012 had become the fastest growing Australian city with a regular influx of immigrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012), attracted by
good living conditions and a strong labour market (BREE 2012). The opening of new luxury stores by international brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton and Tiffany’s attested to the increasing affluence and materialistic tastes of Western Australia’s professional and skilled classes. When economies such as Western Australia’s transform in accordance with the globalizing forces of neo-liberalism, then a restructuring takes place in the traditional patterns and rhythms of work with consequences for how professionals, such as public relations practitioners, position themselves in the market and in relation to the various public and private spheres of their lives (e.g. Brooks 2011).

Public relations practitioners in Perth, where women practitioners outnumber men by 4 to 1 (De Bussy and Wolf 2009), live in a city whose citizens wrestle with an identity that, on the one hand, embraces traditional notions of ‘mateship’, family values (Dixson 1999), and a relaxed, often outdoors lifestyle and, on the other, is in the thrall of the increasingly hegemonic and globalizing forces of neo-liberalism. Yet research has shown that neo-liberalism can be toxic; for example, the compulsion to acquire more goods drives consumers to a more frantic pace of life where ‘people work harder and longer to purchase, maintain, replaced, insure and constantly manage goods’ (Lawrence 2011). This expends the energy necessary for living a fully satisfying life. Economies focused on consumption foster conditions that heighten psychological insecurities and in effect they end up fuelling themselves. To acquire the buying power to obtain more goods that a neo-liberal discourse has convinced them they and their families need, people work
longer hours outside the home. Attention to children, intimate time with partners and friends, and other satisfactions such as having time for fun and enjoyment that cannot be bought are pushed to the periphery. Ryan and Dziurawiec (2001) have argued that such patterns of consumption now define Australia and a study by Rindfleisch et al (1997) has pointed out that this is a gendered phenomenon with men valuing such consumption and its associated self-centred behaviour more than women. Public relations practitioners who are citizens of Western Australia are not invulnerable to these global and neo-liberal influences in their own lives and in their practice as cultural intermediaries; indeed, we argue that the neo-liberal agenda is often perpetuated through the public relations role of cultural intermediary.

**Cultural intermediaries**

To date, there has been no consideration of gender in discussions of the cultural intermediary role in public relations, nor investigation of the influence of cultural intermediary work on the lives of those who engage in public relations. This is an area demanding scrutiny, given the capacity of public relations to both constitute and be constituted by broader societal discourses. The ideological practices, values and attitudes promulgated by the neo-liberal agenda, in whose promotion and extension public relations is (to a greater or lesser extent) inevitably involved as an active participant circulating mainstream cultural, commercial and political discourses, will likely affect the lives and wellbeing of its practitioners as well as its publics (whether or not they choose to accept, resist or subvert its prescriptions).
To understand the concept of the cultural intermediary, we turn to the work of Pierre Bourdieu who drew attention to the rise of ‘the new petite bourgeoisie’, a social class evident in mid-twentieth-century France (and other western countries) which manifests itself ‘in all the occupations involving presentation and representation (sales, marketing, advertising, public relations, fashion, decoration and so forth) and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services’ (1984: 359). Recently, scholars have tended to conflate cultural intermediaries with the new petite bourgeoisie as a whole in order to direct attention to questions of how production and consumption are made (Hesmondhalgh 2006). We follow this line, in claiming that the role of cultural intermediaries, granted a certain cultural and commercial authority, is to contribute to the shaping of the attitudes, opinions and consumption patterns of the public to whom they promote symbolic goods and services, such as cultural products, ideas and knowledge.

Although Bourdieu did not, after his introduction of the term in *Distinction* (1984), develop it in any great detail (Negus 2002), others, such as Sean Nixon (2003) and Anne Cronin have done this for the fields of advertising, Keith Negus for music (1992); and Patricia Curtin and Ken Gaither (2007), Lee Edwards (2012) and Caroline Hodges (2006) have taken on the idea for public relations. Negus argues that the concept of the cultural intermediary is important for the way it encourages us to think about ‘the reciprocal interrelationship of what are often thought of as discrete ‘cultural’ and ‘economic’ practices. Hence, Bourdieu’s work is pivotal in the resurrection of or return to a ‘cultural economy’ of social life’ (2002, 504). The cultural intermediary is charged with articulating
for publics and consumers the use value of, or what they might do with, a given product or service as well as its exchange value, or its worth on the market (Negus 2002, 504). The resonances of this mission with the work of public relations are strong, and it is therefore apposite that Edwards, in her 2012 paper, highlights how the ascendant contemporary role of public relations enables practitioners to ‘lead rather than merely respond to the media agenda’ (2012, 2); and how public relations work represents a specific form of cultural intermediary, ‘because it is grounded in discursive struggle and misrecognition … public relations constitutes a form of symbolically violent cultural intermediation, ultimately designed to generate symbolic power for vested interests’ (2012, 2).

Edwards’ comments relating to public relations as cultural intermediary work are salutary, and we aim to draw on them below in order to highlight the cultural intermediary’s embeddedness in a globalized environment. In particular, we take into specific account the complex relational and subjective processes involved in cultural intermediary work. In doing so, what becomes evident is the gendered inflection of the cultural intermediary role, an issue not taken up by Bourdieu nor (to date) by other public relations scholars. However, as Nancy Fraser points out, in discussing Bourdieu’s distinctive culture of the petit bourgeoisie from whose ranks the cultural intermediary emerges:
This process of distinction … helps explain the exacerbation of the sexism characteristic of the [Habermasian] liberal public sphere; new gender norms enjoining feminine domesticity and a sharp separation of public and private spheres functioned as key signifiers of bourgeois difference from both higher and lower social strata. It is a measure of the eventual success of this bourgeois project that these norms later became hegemonic, sometimes imposed on, sometimes embraced by, broader segments of society (1990, 60).

1. Even though the exclusionary limits of the public sphere and the segregation of public and private domains have, in some respects, been progressively eroded in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, there is no doubt that their relationship with traditional and entrenched gendered attitudes and practices in professional/public and domestic/private lives still lingers.³ For example, Ann Brooks notes that Australia has one of the lowest maternal employment rates, which is consistent with the country’s ‘more traditional family models’ (2011: 75). In the UK, although attitudes have shifted with a minority of parents (29%) no longer believing that childcare is the primary responsibility of the mother or that fathers are responsible for providing for the family (38 per cent), it appears that the arrangements families put in place for work and childcare continue to be constrained along traditional lines (Ellison et
al 2009). We thus examine closely the significance of cultural intermediary work as a gendered practice in the discussion that follows.

The sections below unfold by integrating key findings from the rich and varied data drawn from discussions with public relations practitioners in Perth, Western Australia during 2010-2012. The following sub-headings relate to ideas and categories which emerged directly from the data, thus emphasizing the inductive strength of our analysis. We situate the personal and professional lives of these PR practitioners as cultural intermediaries in their local and global, cultural and economic contexts. The gendered nature of the neo-liberal discourses that shape the globalized landscape suggests the different positioning of women and men within and in relation to them. We begin our analysis by examining in the first section how the engagements of cultural intermediaries with their work- and home-life commitments replicate and reinforce the dominant discourse. We follow this section with an alternative reading of the data whereby we draw on feminist theories of care to highlight how notions of care, attachment and relationship are regarded as pivotal to both men and women though in quite different ways and with quite different implications.

**Individualism and the ‘Respectable Addiction’**

On Australia Day [a public holiday] recently I got a call from the General Manager. I had to go and write something … when I was meant to be doing something else [with the family] and you just do
it ... I’ve never said ‘no I won’t do it because I’ve got a child’. I mean I just accept that I’ve got to go and do it. I’ve done lots of work travel, it’s just part of the job so I just sort of get on and do it.

(Female manager, in-house)

The notion that home, family and personal needs should be subservient to the interests of business is evident in this quotation from a single mother working in internal communications in the mining industry. Such a view is not uncommon among highly skilled, affluent professionals, such as public relations practitioners, whom Rhacel Salazar Parreñas has called the high-end ‘servants of globalization’ (2001). For these individuals, the forces of globalization have motivated a fundamental restructuring of the rhythms and patterns of work, as well as encouraged professionals to articulate their identities in relation to the free market, while relating instrumentally to the various public and private spheres of their lives. For example, a participant working in-house spoke about her life’s ambition:

I guess I really wanted just to be independent and self-sufficient: so that means financially independent and self-sufficient and not having to rely on people. (Female manager, in-house)

It was not uncommon for our participants to equate self-reliance and the achievement of materialistic goals with hard work at the cost of personal
relationships. A consultant, voiced his experience of working and living in a ‘flexible’, though predominantly work-oriented, market-driven environment as:

I would say that I’m pretty much thinking about work most of the time and I respond to emails and those kinds of things when I’m not asleep pretty much, so any time from 6.00 in the morning ’til 10.30 at night. (Male consultant)

His experience was echoed by others including a female participant in one of our focus groups who said:

Clients want and value availability. There is always in the back of your mind that you want to be available … With what we do in PR, it is very difficult to switch off. We are always sort of thinking about whatever project. (Female consultant)

The ‘economic capture of the social’, as Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee (2007: 146) has described it, highlights the extent to which individualistic, instrumental and free market principles, as spread through globalizing flows, have become normalised and even normative in regulating and evaluating the quality of individual and social lives. For example, when success is based on an economic model of having ‘it all including dogs and children, whether or not [professionals] have time to care for them’ (Sassen cited by Brooks 2011: 74), then the family or
non-work sphere becomes commercialized and characterized by outsourced social and domestic arrangements (such as childcare, aged care, domestic chores), which enable both men and women to benefit financially from participation in lucrative, demanding jobs that may involve extended working hours. A consultant whose wife works full-time as a lawyer manages family responsibilities through ‘a combination of my mum and day care … If [my daughter] is sick and can’t go to day care or has a doctor’s appointment or an activity, we always just find a way to make it happen.’ He does this by trading time, in other words, making up for any absence from the office by ‘returning the favour’ and working at home at night – ‘I still always check my emails and I’ll talk to clients’ – or going into the office on weekends. A female communications manager for a multinational mining company who has moved her family to three international locations in the course of her career stated that her extended hours were only possible because of paid childcare arrangements and a supportive husband with a less demanding job:

Work has been my consuming focus for years and the sorts of roles I have had have been lots of after hours work, lots of travel.

(Female manager, in-house)

Other women delegated childcare responsibilities to parents or friends in order to enable them to achieve their career goals:
If I go away for work, I’ll organize for my kids to be dropped off and taken to day care or school by other school parents and that’s who will support me. (Female consultant)

I’m fortunate that my parents are here, so I rely on them very heavily and that enables me to travel for work. I can say ‘Yes, I’ll go’ and they will always have [my daughter]. (Female manager, in-house)

In extreme cases, the professional may be so enthralled by this ‘respectable addiction’ that, as Aldoory, Jiang, Toth and Sha (2008) has pointed out they might opt out entirely from family obligations.

**Gender inflections**

Although the depersonalized discourse of globalization may claim a gender-neutral stance, as various theorists have noted (Connell 1998; Connell and Wood 2005; Elias 2008; and Elias and Beasley 2009, for example), it is heavily gender-inflected. Elias demonstrates that ‘the global sphere cannot be regarded as a gender-neutral arena, but rather should be seen as a site for the production of gender identity’ (2008: 409). For example, a female practitioner in her twenties, working in the mining sector, stated that ‘there is a level of having to prove yourself as a young woman’ if she was to be seen as credible as a public relations professional. The stereotype of the exemplary worker – the autonomous, rational,
competitive, goal-driven and invulnerable individual, who demonstrates self-
sufficiency and self-containment as well as an attitude that embraces flexibility,
 mobility and change – may well reside in the aspirational rather than the real
world. However, the positive masculinist associations in discourses that define
‘successful’ workers in the globalized economy are multiple and widespread in
the popular cultural imagination. Indeed, several participants talked about their
embrace of the ‘flexibility’ offered by their role, their enjoyment of being ‘in
control’, their relishing of ‘a challenge’, their drive to ‘hit the big goals’ and ‘to
win’, and their pleasure in work as ‘an addictive thing of doing something really
well and achieving something’.

The writing of David Harvey (2005) serves to highlight the ways in which most
women’s emotional, interpersonal and social connections with and dynamic
interdependent positioning in the domestic and public spheres are likely to be
occluded by the forces of globalization, underpinned by a neoliberalist
framework. For example, the sense of blameworthiness often experienced by
professional women in their neo-liberal role of ‘new entrepreneurs’ is rarely
publicly articulated (at least directly). Yet in outsourcing their traditional family
and care arrangements in order to participate in demanding professional work,
these women are then cast by a conservative rhetoric as ‘selfish and irresponsible
if they do not fulfil their mothering roles’ (Marchand and Runyan cited by Brooks
2011: 74). Further, and as one female participant admitted, ‘I would never
mention children when I was working for an organisation’. Such acquiescence to
the perceived expectations of employers and clients is in sharp contrast to the way in which every man we interviewed expressed confidence about his ability to make autonomous choices, revealing a sense of control over his work environment and a separation of that from the home and personal life. For example, when we asked a communications director who works in-house how his family would view the relationship between his work and home endeavours, he said:

They would probably say he works too hard. They would probably say he works long hours whereas in fact I work the hours I choose to. So I have no-one to blame. If I don’t get to my child’s concert, I have no-one to blame except for myself. There are occasionally diary clashes but look, I live my life according to the fact that you choose everything, every choice is yours. … there is nothing that anyone can make you do. So I don’t feel constrained by my job or by my family even, or by anything. So I choose to live my life and my career the way I want to. (Male director, in-house)

This self-assured ability to distance himself at will from work or home contrasts with the experiences of most women for whom the different spheres of their lives were intrinsically interrelated. As well, women’s intimate investment in and privileging of non-economic modes of production and reproduction (through the ‘free’ labour of care-giving, bearing and raising children, for example), risk making them marginal to or invisible within a discourse of globalization. Such a
perspective creates the mainstream ‘fiction’ (Harvey 2005) that individuals are not embedded in networks of social relations, are not bound by emotional and ethical ties of responsibility with others, and do not need these relational attachments to make their lives rich, meaningful and valuable. However, and as the comments indicate, while public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries are regularly involved in perpetuating the circulation of globalization discourses in their professional lives, they represent the gendered, emotional and relational aspects of their experiences as being in dialectical tension with the individualist tenor of those mainstream public discourses. In other words, in a commercially driven environment, the aspects that make the lives of professional men and women valuable as shared, interdependent endeavours are sidelined. They can be made to seem trivial or irrelevant or out of step or ‘unrealistic’, or insufficiently focused on the imperatives of competition, individualism, acquisition, self-reliance, self-interest, independence, freedom and, of course, profit.

Care and interdependence: a critique of the neo-liberal model

Having argued that many public relations practitioners both embody and replicate the gender-inflected discourse of globalization through their cultural intermediary role, we turn now to critically interrogate the hegemonic neo-liberal motivations for such practices. We draw on the feminist ethics of care to illustrate how public relations practitioners might counter and modify the individualist, rationalist and competitive thrust of broader organisational and social discourses in their own lives, with consequences for how they do public relations. Despite their supposed
allegiance to the hegemonic practices and processes that embody the neo-liberal logic (including their financial dependence on the strong neoliberal economy that characterises the resource-industry juggernaut driving the state of Western Australia), women public relations professionals, and some but not all men, revealed in interviews that they perceive and/or identify themselves as fundamentally relational beings (in their professional and private lives). They also revealed that they are motivated by connections of care for, service to, and obligations towards others, whether clients, colleagues, family or friends: ‘we actually care about what we do’; ‘[there’s] the satisfaction of making a difference to my clients’ work’, and ‘we’re a service, we’re a service sector. So we’re always putting someone else ahead of ourselves.’

In going about their daily lives at work and in the home, contemporary professional women in particular, as well as some men are habituated to straddling and juggling the often conflicting (practical, temporal, emotional) demands of the domestic and professional spheres, even if the mainstream discourse treats and validates these spheres as separate or separable. A feminist ethics of care highlights both the dissonance and tension between work and non-work commitments and draws attention to their necessary interdependence. This is highlighted in the following account by a senior public relations consultant.

I remember standing in a queue in the Channel Seven canteen one day with Tom and for some reason we got onto talking about his kids… and Tom said “Yeah, I’ve got two daughters and one of
them I know really, really well, the other I hardly know at all because I was never around.” It was amazing. He actually turned to me in this queue with all these people around, looked me in the eye, and - this is Tom, he’s the most calm, the most non-aggressive person - basically put his fingers in my chest and said: “Don’t let that happen to you”. It’s funny how you have those moments; it’s really stuck in my head. (Male consultancy owner)

Following this episode which caused this consultancy managing director to reflect on his lack of attention to his family responsibilities, he revised his career goals, and subsequently accepted a less pressured, less high profile role in another company in order to spend more time with his children and nurture his family relationships. The activity of caring, as this man’s actions exemplify, is not only central to human survival and flourishing, but, as feminist theories of care argue, is inextricable from the relations of obligation and responsibility that bind human beings to one another, not only in intimate and familial relationships but in social and political ones as well. The work of feminist scholars such as Fiona Robinson (1999) and Virginia Held (2006) amongst others compels us to interrogate the merit of neoliberal values, and enables us to understand how this mainstream ‘fiction’, as described by Harvey (2005) in an earlier section of this chapter, misses so much in its account of ‘the good life’. Feminist researchers also offer us an insight into the ways in which neoliberal values are gendered, in that they favour a masculinist way of relating. For example, with a view endorsed by many
of our male participants, a communications director for an international company articulated how he positioned the different (relational) facets of his identity:

I think when you describe yourself, if you’re writing a profile on Twitter or something and you describe yourself: “PR professional, father, cyclist”, you know that kind of thing, the PR part’s always going to be first. (Male director, in-house)

A masculinist way of relating historically and typically positions the roles and identities of the professional and home spheres hierarchically, while obscuring the fundamental, nourishing roles of emotional labour and care, despite their connections to broader questions of power and the social and institutional networks that structure individual lives. For public relations practice, such privileging of public and objective over personal and subjective concerns and connections risks overlooking the pivotal role of relationships as those are understood in ethical and interdependent -- and not simply in functionalist or instrumentalist -- terms.

In contrast to the view in the previous quotation, another participant alluded to the importance of the personal and emotional as intrinsic to caring relationships, highlighting the inextricability of the private and the public, and the personal and professional:
I have a small team and so it matters to me now a lot how they’re going, how their career is tracking, how happy they are, how well they’re progressing. The first thing I heard this morning was that one of my three people who work with me is resigning. She was tearful which was lovely, so I was delighted for her. It’s going to cause a huge hassle but it makes me feel very good that she’s found a job which is better paid, more advanced and yes, to be honest, those are the things that matter to me at the moment. (Male manager, in-house)

That individuals exist in a web of relationships, where people are always and everywhere ‘relational and interdependent’ (Held 2006: 156) necessitates great care in human interactions. Held argues that an ethics of care helps highlight the connections between people as emotionally rich and mutually sustaining relations of interdependence, not as exclusively rationally based or as centred on the lone individual (or autonomous person or private organisation or single society). It is the emotions, Held argues—such as empathy, sensitivity and responsiveness—that are better guides to what we should or should not do, in moral terms (2006: 157).

Guilt, stress and the emotional struggle

The validation of the emotional in a feminist ethic of care draws our attention to the way in which the emotions act as an indicator of what individuals perceive to
be right or wrong. It also highlights the particular struggles of public relations practitioners as they reconcile or resist the different obligations of the workplace and the home. At the same time as public relations practitioners derive significant satisfaction from their professional identities, their valorising of and/or commitment to their identities as parents, partners, friends, and as industry and community members is also salient. For many of the women whom we interviewed, the effort to straddle these sometimes competing roles and identities regularly brings about feelings of guilt, stress and frustration that neither role or identity is being properly fulfilled, or that one is being privileged over the other.

I always suffered awful guilt at times when I felt I should be home with my daughter, particularly as she got older around 11 and 12 and of course at that age kids are saying ‘I’m alright Mum, I can do this Mum, I can do that Mum’. So you go off to work thinking, ‘Yes, that’s ok’. And then you get to work and you just feel horrendously guilty. And then, of course, you’re home and not so much feeling guilty about the work that needs to be done, but the pressure of it. I don’t think I ever actually when I was with my daughter felt guilty about that time with her, but I always worried about how I was going to catch up with what needed to be done work-wise. (Female PR manager)
I stressed during meetings that everything was ok with [the child]. So, I’d be in the meeting but all these other thoughts were going through my head. I once had no choice, I had to take her to a meeting, and breastfed whilst taking notes, and the client was very family-friendly and said no [to rescheduling the meeting]. They were fine with it, but I felt very uncomfortable, because I couldn’t focus. (Female consultant)

Whether or not women had parental or other family obligations, were childless, solo or married, the majority expressed a sense of guilt and/or stress about their endeavours to resolve harmoniously their competing obligations. The notion of ‘guilt’ was commonly raised by women in interviews, but, by contrast, not once when we spoke with men. Indeed, the men whom we interviewed (to a man) said that while they experienced the tension between their different identities, they did not feel guilt about the pull between their roles as PR practitioners and as partners or parents or friends. Indeed, most chose consciously and autonomously to privilege one sphere of their lives over another, thus living the different aspects of their identities in sequence rather than concurrently. Even when working from home, a single father explained how he could distance himself psychologically and physically from his children by ‘locking myself in my car at home so that I could give radio interviews’.
Only the minority of women were able or wished to privilege the personal, the family and the home over the professional. In doing so, they experienced relatively little conflict (although simultaneously greater disconnectedness) between the demands and different temporalities of the public and private spheres. The majority found it difficult to resist work as an all-encompassing activity, or indeed consciously chose to prioritize work over other life spheres and identities. The interdependence of their various relationships extended beyond the specific place of work into their dealings with clients and publics, as highlighted in this description of the ubiquity of emotional connections in cultural intermediary work:

In community relations, meeting with wonderful people doing amazing things, every now and again I do feel like you just get quite emotional with some of the situations you find yourself in, whereas previously when I was lobbying government, I would just get angry. Now you actually do feel a bit heartbroken with a lot of what you are engaging in and also the inability to help everyone.

(Female manager, in-house)

Through this quotation, and others presented in this section, we see that an ethics of care treats human beings ‘not as autonomous subjects, but as [...] embedded in networks and relationships of care’ (Robinson 2009) which determinedly situates discussions about relations between self and other at the centre of what might be imagined as valuable, thus sustaining the home lives, work lives and, by
extension, civic, professional and political lives of women and men working in public relations.

The implications for public relations

Our investigation into the role of the PR practitioner as a cultural intermediary in the transforming economy of Western Australia has revealed how gendered practices expose and highlight the pervasiveness and significance of caring practices across private and public domains. In our study, women and men articulated, and responded differently to, relations of care at home and at work, but for them all, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, the quality of relationships are the foundation for and the basis of their personal and professional lives.

Thus, relational ties and responsibilities appear to be central to experiencing, nurturing, and helping to shape mutually enriching personal and professional lives. This might be alternatively understood as caring, or an ethics of care. In turn, this has spurred us to reconsider the artificial and forced -- even if unspoken or taken-for-granted -- distinction between caring both as a private, domestic endeavour and as a public / professional practice, and to reflect on what it might mean to evaluate and revise public relations approaches and practices through a care perspective. Recognizing the value of care calls into question the structure of values in a globalized society. Care is not a parochial concern of women, a type of secondary moral question, or the work of the least well off in society. Care is a
central concern of human life and feminists such as Virginia Held urge us that it is time to change our political and social institutions to reflect this truth (2006). For public relations this has significant implications for helping us reconsider an ethical orientation to the profession and the potential for its critique and transformation. Critical approaches to public relations have already alerted us to the need to interrogate public relations’ pivotal role in serving powerful interests and, accordingly, in developing and negotiating relationships by means of specific discursive practices that aim to influence publics’ attitudes and behaviours. An ethics of care can extend the critical agenda by making visible the relational dynamics integral to public relations practice and by facilitating a questioning of approaches that merely serve to bolster existing power inequities, particularly through marginalizing the significance of caring/relational responsibilities, which necessarily affect the subjective, emotional and gendered identities of individuals and communities in all areas of their lives.

Given the neo-liberal environment in which much public relations work is practised today and through which it is legitimized, we think it is timely – indeed urgent – that a care perspective be brought to bear on developing, reviewing and potentially transforming public relations practices. The public relations practitioner’s role as cultural intermediary, given its often ready access to diverse local and global communicative platforms and the capacity to contribute to the discursive and material shaping of culture, is presented with specific opportunities and obligations. Not least of the latter, we believe, is first, the responsibility to
probe and reflect on the patterns and relations of care and interdependence -- both personal and professional, domestic and professional -- that obtain in any issue, crisis, campaign, or strategy, and in any discursive account of or response to those which we might make as public relations professionals.

Second is the cultural intermediary’s responsibility to admit or make visible, rather than to obscure or marginalise, the existence of other, alternative, subjective ways of being in the world beyond the instrumental, the economically expedient. As soon as we accept this responsibility, we accept others as full relational beings whose lives and experiences are meaningful and important apart from our commercial or strategic interest in or use for them. This could work to temper the risks of doing symbolic violence or of misrepresenting the ‘reality’ and the ‘real value’ of contemporary existence in a context of globalization, too often ruthlessly rationalized and justified by neo-liberal measures. In other words, public relations practitioners might thus consider using their the status as cultural intermediaries not to distort or inhibit (including by means of entrenched gendered practices) but to enhance the possibility of less powerful others engaging and contributing actively in shaping the personal, social and professional lives they (wish to) lead.

Our hope is that a future research agenda that advances an ethics of care will begin with the assumption that the everyday lived experiences of practitioners and publics - as they engage with, modify or resist public relations discourses - are in need of articulation. Such research will focus on public relations not for its strategic or economic effectiveness, and not necessarily to demonize its role as a promulgator of discourses that bolster the powerful. Instead, it will have a care for
the practices and consequences of public relations on personal, professional and community relationships in their temporal and material contexts. And it will use the same care in the process of research itself, with researchers paying heed to the potential implications of their own research methodologies and outputs.

Researchers investigating public relations practices or issues and crises, for example, will widen their research horizons to document the relational, emotional and interdependent dimensions of professional and personal lives as they intersect with public relations-related activity. In so doing, researchers will seek to enhance the intellectual and political awareness of their readers, providing them with new frameworks for making sense of and challenging the public relations-influenced realities they encounter in their own lives.

References


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Our study is based on a purposive sample of 46 West Australian public relations practitioners aged from early twenties to sixties: unmarried, married, with and without children, in junior and senior roles, working in consultancy, as freelancers, and in-house for government, corporations, not-for-profits, and small businesses. We collected and analysed the data iteratively, beginning with an exploratory phase of interviews with women working in-house that sensitised us to provisional themes. These eventually led to a working hypothesis about the way in which gendered practices, as manifestations of broader discourses, reinforced the tensions between the personal and the professional.

We approached participants through our own professional contact lists, from information about members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia in Perth, via the professional contact list of the PR events manager whom we employed to schedule the first rounds of interviews and focus groups, and through the lists of names provided to us by other participants. In the first phases of the study, we concentrated on female practitioners because of women’s propensity to shoulder
the majority of child caring and domestic responsibilities while also having an increasing presence in the paid workforce. We considered that the ways in which women deal with the competing demands of different cultural spheres such as home and profession would offer us an entry into understanding how public relations practitioners embody the cultural intermediary role. Following interviews, focus groups and feedback presentations with 35 women (see Daymon and Surma 2012 for more detail), we then interviewed male public relations practitioners, comparing and contrasting their views and experiences with those of women. During interviews, it was apparent that men did not engage as wholeheartedly with our questions as women who, in the main, were more proficient at reflecting on their lives and more able to articulate their emotions. However, the responses of all our participants showed us that all public relations practitioners experience some degree of pressure at the point where work and home lives intersect, although strategies to deal with that depend on gender. After 11 interviews, we stopped collecting data, as we found no further new information of relevance and therefore our data had reached saturation (Daymon and Holloway 2011).

Through presentations firstly of our nascent findings to a group of participants and then of our completed research to a wider industry forum, we were able to validate our findings and gain further new insights.
We recorded all interviews and focus groups, transcribing and analyzing immediately. That we conducted interviews jointly enabled us to discuss our reflections immediately after interviewing, and then in more detail after we had read the transcriptions. Working iteratively, we modified our interview questions in the light of these discussions, the themes emerging from our analysis of the data and our ongoing reading. This also helped us to make informed choices about the selection of participants for the following stages of data collection.

We analyzed our data both inductively and deductively, coding according to themes in the literature and also from the words of participants themselves. On completion of the final phase of interviews with men, we re-analyzed the full data set in order to focus specifically on what had now emerged as key ideas associated with ‘care’, ‘service’, ‘guilt’ and ‘addiction’. Each quotation introduced in this chapter represents multiple, similar statements and views around these themes.

Elsewhere, we have reflected on how our personal subjectivities as teachers, researchers and former PR executives influenced our engagement with the research (Daymon and Surma 2012). We have already noted our emotional attachment to the project through hearing the many personal accounts of lives and careers that were told to us, and how we were saddened or uplifted when learning about the choices that public relations practitioners made or were forced to make which had affected their families or careers. However, after each interview and also when interpreting the data, we conversed reflectively with each other and
other academic colleagues in order to maintain a critical subjectivity that would ensure our account is an honest (and therefore authentic) illustration of the experiences and perceptions of women and men working in public relations.

- ENDS -

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1 Bourdieu’s notion of ‘symbolic violence’, for Edwards, describes the ways in which PR harnesses language – a key source of symbolic violence: ‘it expresses the space of possibles available to individuals through field-specific connotations that create the limits of legitimate discussion’ (2012, 441). Edwards also talks about way in which public relations’ use of language intends to create ‘misrecognition’. These notions – symbolic violence, misrecognition, manipulation, etc -- all (misguidedly in our view) assume, as Judith Butler points out (1997), a deterministic role for language and the speech act, and significantly underestimate the role of language as constitutive and contingent, as well as the agency of interlocutors to intervene and resist particular symbolic versions of the world. They thus also ignore the ways in which ‘dominant norms may be appropriated and subverted by marginal groups’ (McNay 2008, 205).

2 Further, we would argue that the work of public relations practitioners as cultural intermediaries is complex, interactive and contested, particularly in a contemporary new media environment in which the opportunities for the direct intervention of diverse interlocutors into the communication process are significantly enhanced.

3 In writing about public relations in the 1980s, Lana Rakow (1989) likened the notion of a dominant public sphere and a less powerful private sphere to the distinction between the values traditionally assigned to masculinity (rationality, competition and individualism) and femininity (emotionality, cooperation and community). Public relations, she posited, may have coopted a feminine discourse (such as corporate social responsibility) in order to make the masculine more palatable, thus solidifying an organisation’s vested interests.
In her book on workaholism, Killinger (1997) described this as the ‘respectable addiction’ where individuals take a perverse pride in toiling for long hours and sleeping for too few.