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**Ex-journos and promo girls: Feminization and professionalization in the Australian public relations industry**

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This chapter examines the experiences of female public relations practitioners in Australia in order to understand the impact of professionalization and feminization on both the identities of individual female practitioners and the industry's professional identity and status. We focus on these experiences during the 1980s because this decade represented a pivotal period for the Australian public relations industry, in which women entered public relations practice in greater numbers, and first came to dominate the industry numerically (Rea 2002; Zawawi 2009). Reflective of large-scale transformations in the gendering of work in the Western world, this 'feminization' of public relations is partly attributable to the rise of second wave feminism, and the consequent entry of increasing numbers of women into the paid workforce (Fitch & Third 2010). At the same time, the status and role of public relations as an occupational practice was rapidly transforming. It gained increasing recognition in the corporate sector, and its domain expanded beyond media relations to include other areas such as government relations, investor relations, and corporate communication. This period also witnessed, as part of broader attempts to improve the professional standing of the industry, the increasing introduction of public relations to universities as a program of study, and the implementation of practitioner examinations by the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA). These twin processes of feminization and professionalization have framed professional discourses around public relations, and the gendering of the field continues to have a significant impact on its professional identity.

Considering the personal experiences of women practitioners during this decade allows us to understand how the gendered tensions shaping the public relations industry intersected with its

increasing professionalization. We draw on interviews with women who were involved in the public relations industry in Australia during this time. We asked participants to reflect upon their everyday experiences as practitioners and their perceptions of the impact of gender on their careers. This approach enabled us to reflect upon the ways that feminization and professionalization have impacted on individual female public relations practitioners' identities. Further, the analysis of this data provides a window on how those same processes have impacted upon the identity of the public relations profession.

## Investigating Australian female practitioner perspectives in the 1980s: Research design

Between August and October 2011 we interviewed six female practitioners who worked in public relations in Australia in the 1980s, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to elicit the perceptions and insights of participants. Interviewees were recruited by a snowball sampling technique, yielding a small sample of high-profile women in the field. Their insights must be understood through the lens of these women's success. That is, the way that these women understood both their own identities as professional women and the identity of the public relations profession may differ significantly from women who either left the industry before they established a reputation or enjoyed less professional success.

The participants had diverse experiences and backgrounds. Collectively, they worked in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia although some of their campaigns, clients and activity were national or interstate. Two participants had international experience in the U.K. and the U.S. prior to, or during, the 1980s. Although it was not a requirement for this study, all participants were members of the professional association, the PRIA, in the 1980s. All but one served on state or national councils, and some as state or national presidents (although some held these positions after the 1980s). We conducted in-depth, face-to-face interviews with two participants and telephone interviews with four participants. Interviews, lasting on average one-and-a-half hours, were recorded and transcribed. Participants had the opportunity to review, and if necessary, amend their transcripts, allowing a member check (Lincoln & Guba 1985). We invited participants to talk about their attitudes, perceptions and experiences regarding events

that occurred three and even four decades prior to the interviews. It is not surprising, then, that some participants struggled to remember precise dates and timelines. We sought to clarify dates in the interview, and later through email, and to cross-check dates and information to validate the information provided by participants.

Drawing upon our different disciplinary backgrounds in public relations and feminist cultural studies, we used the participants' perspectives to inform our understanding of how the professional identity of public relations was constructed in the 1980s, and to identify themes and patterns in how female practitioners negotiated their professional identity. We then compared and discussed our initial identification of themes emerging from analysis of the data, and re-analysed the data. We adopted a critical approach, avoiding the assumption that an interview provides an accurate insight into participants' innermost thoughts (Atkinson & Silverman 1997; Daymon & Holloway 2011). Rather, we approached oral history as useful for understanding 'the lived experience of …women's…history' (Thomson 2007: 52), which we believe is ill-documented in standard evolutionary histories of public relations in Australia (see, for example, Morath 2008; Zawawi 2009). While we acknowledge that asking participants about their experiences and perceptions in the 1980s relies on memory, which has almost certainly been influenced by their continuing and long-term participation in the public relations industry (all but one still work in, or recently retired from, public relations), we draw on Thomson to argue interviews encourage 'active remembering and meaning-making' (2011: 88). Therefore, the stated experiences of the participants, even interpreted through the lens of their later experiences in public relations, offer valuable insights into the construction of personal and professional identity.

## The gendering of work in Australia in the 1980s

To understand the links between feminization and professionalization, and the shifts in the professional identity of Australian public relations immediately before and during the 1980s, it is important to situate them within broader societal shifts around women and work in the same era.

In the 1970s, second wave liberal feminism's calls for equal opportunity led to widespread social change with a rapid rise in numbers of women pursuing higher education and entering the paid workforce. As Currie notes, 'the overall participation rate of women in work increased from 40 percent in 1970 to 45 percent in 1980 to 52 percent in 1990' (1990: 1). However, despite the overall increase in women entering the Australian labour market, women 'still worked in a strongly sex-segregated market and under job conditions men would have rejected' (Currie 1990: 2). A longitudinal study of 1984 graduates' incomes and careers in Australia between 1986 and 1990 found that not only was the labour market sex-segregated in that 'women were relegated to subordinate positions' but that women working in the same kinds of jobs in the same fields as men earned less and received fewer fringe benefits (Currie 1990: 20). Similarly, Curthoys (1987) found that gender played a significant role in job segregation across occupations and industries. She notes in the public service, 'men tended to enter the administrative positions with good avenues for advancement, women continued to enter the clerical jobs which had few avenues for promotion' (Curthoys 1987: 11). However, while women found new professions such as public relations offered fewer barriers to entry (for example, a U.S. publication, *Careers for Women in the 70's*, identified public relations as offering significant opportunities for women with a college education [U.S. Department of Labor: 1973]), institutional barriers to career progression for women increased as these professions matured (Gower 2001).

Research investigating the impact of feminization on professional identity suggests complex responses in a range of fields. Feminized occupations such as teaching (Acker 1989) and nursing (Witz 1992; Rafferty 1996) struggled to gain professional recognition and experienced declining salaries in the 1980s and 1990s. In a more recent example, the ways in which female journalists are accommodated in Australian newsrooms is arguably gendered (North 2009) with male journalists linked with higher status stories and hard news (Cann & Mohr 2001) and acknowledged more through the use of by-lines and better represented at senior levels (Strong & Hannis 2007).

Greater numbers of women assuming public relations roles in the 1980s did not produce substantive changes in the gender relations underpinning work cultures. Rather, the incorporation of women contained the feminist challenge to patriarchal order. Research into gender in public

relations highlighted gender inequities, particularly in terms of salaries, status, and roles (see for example, Broom 1982; Broom & Dozier 1986; Cline et al. 1986; Serini et al. 1997; Toth & Cline 1989; Toth & Grunig 1993; Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron & Sweep 1994). More recent research explores how this gendering continues to influence the professional identity of public relations. For example, Tsetsura (2011) investigated how female practitioner discourses around 'women's work' and a 'real job' shape perceptions of public relations in Russia. In Germany, Fröhlich and Peters (2007) found many practitioners reproduce stereotypical discourses, concluding the feminization of agency work results in its lower status.

With the feminization of public relations in the 1980s in Australia, there was renewed interest in professionalization (Fitch & Third 2010), with attempts to define it as a strategic practice and management discipline (Hatherell & Bartlett 2006). The processes of professionalization resulted in an industry whose labour is stratified along gendered axes. An increase in the number of women employed, and indeed the over-representation of women in highly feminized fields, such as public relations, does not mean that gender is no longer an issue. Rather, feminization masks 'the continuing reality of gender inequality' (Rea 2002: 2).

One way of framing the feminization of public relations is to interpret it through the theoretical lens of gendered readings of professionalization. Drawing on sociological approaches allows us to recognize occupational attempts to gain professional status (Pieczka & L'Etang 2006), by 'defin[ing] and control[ling] their work' (Macdonald 1995: 5). As feminist scholars have noted, processes of industry professionalization frequently operate to marginalize women and their work (Witz 1992; Davies 1996). The concept of profession is embedded in 'a specific historical and cultural construction of masculinity and a masculinist vision of professional work…repressing…those qualities culturally assigned to femininity' (Davies 1996: 661, 669). It is therefore important to recognize professions as processes of occupational closure that marshal exclusionary and demarcatory strategies to control access to and regulate professional practice, reinforcing gender boundaries (Witz 1992).

As one example, the masculinity of the professions has played out in the demarcation of 'the professional' from 'the technical,' resulting in 'an occupational division of labour' (Witz 1992: 47), and is visible in feminized occupations. As Davies writes:

> A central issue for an understanding of gender and profession in the contemporary era turns not so much on the *exclusion* of women, but on a particular form of their *inclusion*, and on the way in which this inclusion is masked in a discourse of gender that lies at the heart of professional practice itself. (1996: 663)

In public relations, the demarcation is evident in the split between management and technical functions, and between professional and technical tasks, first outlined in Grunig and Hunt's (1984) models of public relations and later refined in the research by Broom (1982) and Broom and Dozier (1986) into public relations 'roles'.

From a gender perspective, it is significant the professionalization of public relations gained momentum in the 1980s. At this time, the increase in women working in public relations threatened the industry's claim to be a legitimate profession and the role and influence of public relations in organisational and corporate settings (Fitch & Third 2010). Drawing on Davies (1996) and Witz (1992), we investigate the ways in which women practitioners negotiated their professional identities in the decade the industry was rapidly feminizing. We also consider the impact of feminization on the professional status of public relations, and the particular ways in which women were included.

**The experience of gendered public relations work environments in the 1980s**

Three participants - hereafter referred to by number - commenced their careers in public relations in the 1970s. Although the focus of this chapter is primarily the 1980s, it was difficult for participants to discuss their experiences in public relations in that decade without a discussion of their career prior to that time. They entered the field from diverse backgrounds: stenography/secretarial work (1); university education and marketing (2); and university education and diplomacy (3). In the 1970s, public relations was primarily perceived as publicity and promotion: 'And how you got experience was on the job, I didn't have any journalistic skills, and a lot of people…came out of jobs like secretarial roles into publicity' (1).

The other participants, all university educated, began working in public relations in the 1980s, with backgrounds in journalism (4); academic research (5); and publishing (6). Despite the

diverse backgrounds of study participants, the most common route into public relations was journalism, and this was perceived to skew the gender composition of the industry:

> When I started in the early '80s, I came from a journalistic career, which was more commonly the way people came into the profession. Not surprisingly, most of the people who came into the profession were men, there weren't that many women coming into the profession from journalism. (4)

Women also entered public relations via marketing, as they could build on their understanding of 'customer relationships' and 'consumer behaviour' (5). Two participants described their move into public relations as 'accidental', expressing surprise at their ability to get public relations work, without formal training or experience, and attributing their success to personality or common sense:

> Then I took a job which was a more serious job now, but keep in mind I've had no formal training during all of this, it's all pure instinct, intuition, common sense, and learning from the journalists in the early days. (1)

> I'm a natural, I'm quite outward going, I'm an extrovert, I've got lots of energy, I enthuse people, without even thinking about it …it's not something I've had to work at at all… I love communicating with people. (6)

These comments confirm research findings which show practitioners' understandings of professionalism focus on personality and their ability to serve clients (van Ruler 2005) and perceptions that women as 'natural born communicators' are suited for public relations (Fröhlich & Peters 2007). These interviewees framed their capacities in terms of 'feminine' abilities such as 'intuition' and 'instinct', constructing their employability in terms of gendered, personal characteristics.

Nearly all participants found in their early careers, professional women were a minority:

> I was absolutely unique…to have a woman there at that time who wasn't a secretary. The librarian was a woman too, but other than that I really don't think there was anybody else. (2)

> I was the only woman [in agency] and the office manager, she was of course a woman. She did the accounts, that was a woman's job. She did the books; she made sure that all the correspondence was done. She also made the cups of tea. (5)

Our participants reported a range of experiences which we can identify as strategies of demarcation and exclusion in operation (Witz 1992), sometimes in highly subtle ways. For example, one participant hinted at the way her work was aligned with secretarial duties through physical proximity:

> It was a very male corporate workplace and there was one other woman who worked quite closely to me who was…the PA to the Managing Director and she and I had offices quite close. (6)

Strategies of exclusion were often explicit, with several participants citing examples, especially from early in their careers. The following comment, which relates to the 1970s, is a compelling one:

> The brewing industry was very male dominated, the business was literally conducted over a glass of beer, the company had a bar where everybody would go…but of course, women weren't allowed there. (2)

This exclusion continued into the mid- to late 1980s, although more subtly: 'So I was the only woman, yet again, on a board of five blokes, who told ribald jokes at the board table' (4).

Not surprisingly, few participants had female role models. One notable exception was a participant, who worked with a highly regarded female public relations practitioner from overseas:

> They brought out a woman from New York…who was a public relations specialist, she was about 40 years of age and had worked for many different companies and really was just amazing to have in Australia and I was employed to be her graduate assistant… she was incredibly professional…she was also very strategic and very creative and was highly regarded by the men in the centre and was called in for all sorts of problems, not

> just the promotional aspects but right through to the regulatory and corporate affairs side. (2)

In contrast to the corporate world, the public sector offered significant employment and management opportunities. One participant described her work in a 'predominantly female' government department after several corporate roles in the 1970s:

> Now that was a very different environment in that they had a marketing services department and it was run by a woman…I went there as a marketing projects officer looking at special projects and really writing strategy for them and managing a variety of campaigns …I think it probably took less than a year [before] I was…in a managerial role managing 20 people. (2)

However, the same participant described a stratified and gendered working environment in the public sector with a separate 'public affairs section which was run by a gentleman…because our work was very public education/promotional' (2). Thus, this participant suggests even government had two kinds of public relations work: public affairs - 'they were really the ones who were dealing with the company's CEO and the ones that were working on the big issues' (2) - and marketing communications, which was predominantly run by women. This observation evidences the strategies of demarcation shaping public relations roles that were emerging in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and supports the thesis that gender had a significant impact on the status of different kinds of public relations activity. Understanding the ways our participants experienced their work as gendered, we now consider the ways that gendering shaped the identity of the public relations profession more broadly.

**Identity of PR: Tensions around professional standing of PR and its changing role**

On the one hand, the diversity of entry points into public relations allowed women to make careers in public relations and was a significant factor in the feminization of the industry. On the other hand, given that professions are defined in part precisely through the regulation of education and membership, the lack of a credentialing process undermined the professional standing public relations sought. As we discuss later in this chapter, the public relations industry responded by successfully lobbying for tertiary qualifications in public relations and regulating practitioner accreditation via the professional body, the PRIA. However, the perception that public relations was 'not quite a profession' endured, offering a sense of the complex ways in which feminization and professionalization resonated together in the 1980s.

Our participants noted the dominance of (mostly male) former journalists had a profound effect on the ways in which public relations was understood and practised:

> In the 70s [public relations] was almost all done by ex- or failed journos who thought it was about media relations and about mates that they knew who'd write up the story for them if they could get them to have lunch and flog the line to them and so it was seen as a bit of graft. (5)

> The majority of public relations people in [Australian city] in the 80s were ex-journalists. That was one of the things that [male boss] I think didn't like about me is that I hadn't been a journalist, I didn't have that background of media, because a lot of the PR consultants had come from journalism and they thought PR was media. (6)

These observations suggest media relations was coded as masculine and, along with corporate affairs, was a significant and high status area of public relations activity. Given the dominance of male ex-journalists in the early and mid-1980s, the gender of one participant who applied for a role in corporate affairs was considered a problem by the prospective employer:

> 'One of the things that you're going to have to do is every night after work or a couple of times a week you'd have to go down to the Exbar opposite the *Herald and Weekly Times Newspaper* and drink with the journos' - so he obviously saw that as a weakness in that I

was a woman and that I wouldn't be able to do that part of the job as well as the other parts which with my degrees I was eminently suited. (2)

Further, participants unanimously described public relations in the corporate sector as 'a very male-dominated environment' (3), 'a very blokey, macho environment' (4) and 'totally blokey' (5). Participants, who worked in both public and corporate sectors, found the public sector '1000%' (5) more positive in terms of opportunities for women.

In the 1980s, a broader range of work expanded the understanding of what constituted public relations activity. Participants described engaging in community relations and internal communication (6); research and report writing (2); project managing and writing annual reports and newsletters; and investor relations (3). However, participants identified a discrepancy in status related directly to the kind of public relations work they performed:

> I guess I had more of a back room role…you're not really taken to the important meetings or allowed to input, or be a part of a lot of the more strategic discussions, you really are just a technician and I was just a technician there. (2)

> I was…writing their newsletter…We were also doing media for [corporation], but [male boss] wouldn't let me touch it because it was his bag. So I got the menial tasks to do, like go and take photographs of the staff and write the newsletter. (6)

One participant worked independently in a corporation in the 1980s, before a male manager was appointed to oversee her work:

> They employed him…as the Public Relations Manager, so he then became my boss. They needed someone, I think to be quite honest, they needed someone with more journalistic skills and he was an ex-journo and I wasn't, although I could write corporate material, I wasn't writing media or journalist material. (6)

Another participant, who in the 1980s worked in a consultancy, returned from leave to find a male consultant had been appointed:

> I thought to myself what's he doing here and [boss] said well I've decided to do all of this political stuff and government stuff more directly and so I'm going to get him to run that side of the business. (5)

When the researcher queried whether that participant - who had been politically active throughout her career - might have been considered for that role, the participant replied in the negative: 'Well I was a mum and blokes did … the "blokes' work"' (5) of public affairs and government relations. This division of labour draws upon and reproduces a longstanding gendered split between the public (the realms of politics and commerce) and the private or domestic realm (as 'mums' in the words of our interviewee) in Western culture (Pateman 1988; Lloyd 1993). An identical strategy of exclusion is at play in the same participant's description of the ways that 'the upfront presentation of material' to clients was deemed something appropriate only for male consultants: 'I don't think in all those years I ever went to a pitch' (5). Her exclusion constitutes a spatial demarcation that relies on a notion of the public space of business as inherently masculine. When asked what kind of work women did, the participant replied:

> Fast moving consumer goods, FMCG…Because it was about soap and makeup and clothing and festivals and race meetings and all the stuff you would see in the women's magazines. [5]

The utility of female practitioners was seen to lie in their capacity to offer insights into the 'peculiarly feminine' experience of domestic consumption and other 'feminine' consumption activities.

One participant described a similar gendered division of labour in an agricultural company:

> I did internal relations, they had some staffing issues, motivational problems…I did a staff survey…I had to organise a big staff party. I wrote a regular newsletter, I organised their corporate functions, but then the sort of more serious stuff i.e. the media management…[male name] did. As the manager, he started writing a magazine…he did more of the farmer liaison…they didn't send me out to talk to the customers. (6)

In this example, the participant performed emotional labour - the emotive work such as negotiation and smoothing of relations thought natural for women, and often found but rarely

acknowledged in jobs segregated by gender (Guy & Newman 2004) and consequently devalued (Gilligan 1982). Again, we can see a gendered public/private dichotomy at play. In this way, women were not merely excluded from performing particular tasks coded as masculine, but also actively assigned tasks coded as feminine.

An analysis of the participants' perceptions and experiences reveals a clear demarcation in the roles and status of different kinds of public relations activity, as public relations expanded its domain from promotion and media relations to corporate and strategic work such as government relations and public affairs. The public relations industry offered many opportunities for women in the 1980s. However, in the experiences of participants, these opportunities occurred along 'gendered fault lines' (Fitch & Third 2010: 2). Whereas men did the so-called 'serious' work of corporate affairs, strategy development, media management and dealing with external stakeholders, women tended to perform internal and community relations, marketing, promotion and public education roles and, only later in the 1980s, media relations. Women did have more opportunities in the public sector to move into management positions, albeit - as in the experience of one participant (2) - in public education and community relations rather than corporate affairs. Given the gendering of public relations roles in both corporate and public sectors, it is not surprising that women from the mid- to late-1980s increasingly moved into or established consultancies where there was potentially a broader range of work. However, even then, women tended to work with particular kinds of campaigns such as fast moving consumer goods, suggesting women's public relations roles were closely associated with marketing and promotion, that is, arguably lower-status public relations activity, peripheral to strategic and professional public relations practices. In contrast, corporate affairs and government relations - the 'blokey' stuff, as several participants described it - was recognized in public relations scholarship, and in industry through the professional association, as professional and strategic public relations, and therefore more deserving of full recognition as a management discipline. The ways in which women were included in public relations work in the 1980s suggests a demarcation along gender lines, in that women and men tended to be assigned different roles and different kinds of public relations work. As we have already noted, such demarcatory strategies are typically found in professional projects in rapidly feminizing occupations (Witz 1992; Davies 1996).

**Women negotiating professional identities: Dynamics, contradictions and ambiguities**

Participants experienced and responded to the gendered constraints of working in public relations in the 1980s in diverse ways. The success of their strategies shaped the ways they actively remembered the impact of gender on their experiences as professional women. Several participants maintained they never faced blatant discrimination. Other participants described how their professional life unfolded against a backdrop of persistent sexism. For example, one participant described how she operated within a context of 'totally 1950s behaviour, where people drank too much and behaved unacceptably, where some men…believed that women were inferior' (4).

Whether or not our participants noted explicit gendered obstacles to their professional success, their comments revealed wide-ranging but subtle strategies of gendered demarcation and exclusion at play. For example, despite the increasing work opportunities for women, women's prospects for promotion remained limited. One participant claimed that, whilst women today are advancing further in government and agency contexts, a 'glass ceiling' persisted - and still persists - within the corporate sector:

> [It is] very easy to advance in agency and easy to advance in government, but I think in the corporate sector it is still very hard when you look at the number of women who are the top corporate affairs directors, there are very few. (2)

Participants reported mixed experiences in terms of negotiating their professional identity. Drawing on our interview material, we identify six key strategies that female practitioners mobilized - either in isolation or in combination - to successfully navigate, and sometimes subvert, the gendered practices underpinning public relations work cultures in the 1970s and 1980s. Remembering our participants' success at negotiating gendered workplace cultures, it is in the context of these same strategies that these women constructed professional identities for themselves as women.

*1. Embracing the 'promotional girl' identity*

One way of surviving the gendered structures shaping women's engagement in public relations was to play upon stereotypical notions of femininity. That is, participants sometimes chose to mobilize what Judith Butler describes as the 'performative' dimensions of binarised gender constructions (Butler 1999). Although one participant constructed an identity that was 'quite conservative', she recognised others 'had to…be something extra, whether it was wear a mini skirt or wear lipstick' (6). Another described the way she:

> always dressed very femininely… I used to wear a fresh flower every day… I used to wear very tiny minis. I would use my femininity without realising that's what I was doing. (1)

For these women, performing classical femininity in the workplace enabled them to present themselves as non-threatening, affording certain kinds of freedom to operate as professional women. Interestingly, these participants were amongst those women who perceived little overt discrimination in their careers.

*2. Tolerating bad behaviour*

Another participant reported her determination to make a career necessitated bracketting the inappropriate behaviour of male colleagues and getting on with the job. She noted that, in the 1980s, she prioritized ambition above the desire to respond to sexist behaviour:

> I mean you've got to remember I was 26, I was in this corporation that was really starting to go places, I could see the job was really starting to open up for me. On most days it was a great day. [Then] you get cornered in a lift by somebody who has had too many glasses of beer, and you sort of think this is just disgusting. Yes it's unacceptable, he's usually a pretty okay guy that you've worked with, you know it's unacceptable. Nobody said anything in those days. So you just got on with it. And I was so ambitious I never would have said anything. (4)

In this logic, 'getting ahead' equated with tolerating sexist behaviour and working within the gendered structures of power.

*3. Playing like a boy*

Another strategy was to downplay one's femininity and adopt a more 'masculine' identity. The description of the successful, female practitioner recruited from the U.S. in the 1970s is revealing:

> She was a divorcee, she was very good looking, she would use the occasional swear word, really she did a lot, she turned off a lot of men, because she was quite different, whereas what she was then, today would be quite normal in terms of a high achieving public relations female professional, she was quite different in that she wasn't your normal promotional girl. (2)

We can detect the sexual/gender economy underpinning workplace relations in the observation that this woman 'turned off a lot of men'. This strategy, perhaps more than those we have already described, directly confronted the gendered assumptions shaping women's participation in public relations.

*4. Moving to greener pastures*

In response to a perceived lack of recognition or financial reward, women often opted for a career move. For example, one participant explained why she left a consultancy in 1987, despite the flexibility it offered:

> I went to [my boss] and said well if you can pay [male colleague] that sort of money, you can pay me a lot more and he basically said I should be so grateful. He'd been the most accommodating employer. If my children were sick he would let me go, which was true. He never expected me to be at work in the mornings on the days that I was supposed to drop the kids off to school, it was true…And so he said on the basis of all those great tolerances that he'd demonstrated that I should be grateful that I had a job. (5)

This comment suggests the employer perceived a female practitioner should expect a lower income in exchange for job flexibility. Configuring childcare primarily as a woman's responsibility, masculinity is implicitly reasserted as the precondition for workforce participation. A change in workplace was often a productive way to circumvent the lack of

opportunity: 'I just left and moved on…but back in the '80s there were a lot of jobs' (1). In part, the opportunities were linked to shifts in the kinds of activity perceived to be public relations, beyond media relations, and in the growth in the corporate sector, creating 'employment opportunities, which were almost all taken up by women' (5).

*5. Opting out: The lure of consultancy*

In response to persistent obstacles to promotion within the corporate sector, particularly from the mid- to late 1980s, women increasingly joined or set up consultancies. Consultancy work, like the public sector, appeared to offer more opportunities for women. Participants articulated a sense of being better valued for their work:

> I was pretty much running my own show from a very early age, so it must have been much harder for the women in corporate roles. But then going into the corporate [client] as somebody who was running your own PR agency, you were seen as quite different to somebody who was working in-house. (1)

> When you're going in as a consultant, because you're going in from outside and they were paying you externally as a consultant, they then listened to you. So I didn't have the problems that people in-house had. (3)

Positioned outside the formalized structures of power within corporate workplaces, a move into consultancy work was perceived by some participants to offer greater career opportunities, as well as more challenging and diverse work.

6. *Mobilising the professional body*

All participants were members of the PRIA in the 1980s, regarding their membership as an important component of their success. For the women we interviewed, membership offered a way of asserting and giving substance to their sense of professional identity, and for some participants, led to recognition via the PRIA's national awards, as winning an award brought significant professional acclaim: 'It was demonstration and recognition of your skill and clients loved it' (5).

The institute offered professional development opportunities, and gave women access to a professional community:

> You got involved in that kind of professional circle which was good because you didn't have your own personal network of women because there weren't that many women…it gave me a network in so much as I think people got to know who I was and that was very useful for me. (2)

Thus, the PRIA offered an alternative to the 'old boys network' of ex-journalists through opportunities to network with other practitioners and share professional knowledge: 'I did it more I guess to keep up with best practice and to expand and advance my knowledge' (2). One participant described the value of discussing public relations issues with practitioners in similar roles or industry sectors:

> 'Say we're putting together a corporate social responsibility program, how have you done yours at [corporation], it looks fantastic.' And very open, very sharing, 'oh you really want to look at this', 'don't forget to do that', or he would ring and say 'loved how you handled this crisis.' (4)

Whilst our participants credited PRIA with playing an important role in their individual careers, this did not always mean that women's relationship to the professional association was straightforward. One participant, who joined in 1985, noted the membership was divided between 'smart folks' who were progressive in their thinking about gender dynamics and had a strategic grasp of the field and 'dinosaurs' who were much more conservative in their attitudes: 'he had a very old blokey school view of how PR was done, and it was that the men meet with the men who run the company. And there weren't many women in his office, it was all blokes' (4).

**Industry responses to the feminization of public relations**

By the mid-1980s, women comprised a significant percentage of the public relations workforce. There was widespread industry concern that a feminized workforce would devalue the work of public relations and dash attempts to establish itself as a profession. Whilst the *individual* women we interviewed appeared to receive mostly strong support from their (male) colleagues within the PRIA's informal mentoring structures, the issue of women *collectively* entering the industry appears to have been a source of anxiety. This anxiety became particularly marked when new tertiary public relations degrees began producing large cohorts of female graduates. One participant was told that women 'are pouring out of the universities' into public relations (5) and a second noted 'how many more women were coming into communication public relations courses than males, because it was not seen as a high-paying career track for young males' (3). Another described how these concerns dominated discussions at the PRIA state council:

> So most of the guys were ex-journalists, and not a lot of women went down that track. But once the graduate courses became available, they were predominantly 96% women doing the courses, and no guys. And it did become an industry problem, it became a major industry problem, and one that was discussed at many numerous meetings. (1)

The number of women graduating with public relations degrees was viewed as problematic for the status of the industry although, paradoxically, the degrees had been instituted to help professionalize the industry and enhance its status by insisting upon tertiary qualifications as entry criteria. Our interviews show within the PRIA in the 1980s, the issue of the industry's feminization was an ongoing concern, with a perceived need to guard against public relations being thought of as a 'pink profession' (2). This dilemma illustrates the ways the industry's feminization and professionalization sat uncomfortably with one another. Ultimately, the industry's feminization could not be reconciled with its desire for professionalization. Or, to put it differently, precisely because professionalization signifies as masculine, it could not be an antidote to the industry's feminization.

One participant, familiar with U.S. scholarship promoting public relations as a strategic, management discipline, identified why the feminization of public relations in Australia was a concern:

> Our everyday experience was that women were really being more employed as tacticians. That women were the ones that were being employed as the publications officers…event organizers or as promoters, and weren't really being promoted to the positions that had the most influence within an organisation, or the positions where you could be very strategic and be on the same table as the other business functions, be it strategy or finance or legal…We didn't want PR to be left in that kind of situation where we were very much seen as support people rather than as professionals who really could help an organisation achieve its business objectives very strategically. (2)

One PRIA state council considered campaigns 'to attract more men into the profession so it would have more equal gender balance - what we could do to run campaigns like 'real men do work in PR' (2) and another council discussed 'how can we make PR more attractive to young men, so they would…want to study PR' (1). Such strategies assumed raising the professional standing of public relations depended upon countering its feminization. The push for professionalization, in this sense, did little to address the structural problem at the heart of public relations' identity crisis; namely, that a feminized field of practice was not valued as a profession, largely because professions are, by definition, masculinized (Fitch & Third 2010).

Nonetheless, the solution to the industry's feminization was commonly thought to lie in its professionalization. One participant linked the expansion and re-definition of public relations through the introduction of rigorous practice standards as a direct response to the feminization of public relations:

> Well because was this going to become a totally feminized industry…Well then it would devalue. So the blokes had put a lot of effort into taking it beyond media management into something much more strategic and if it was taken over by women, well then…it would be downgraded again. (5)

Some participants advocated the need to move away from the personality-driven understandings of professionalism in public relations, seeking instead to establish public relations as a theoretically grounded profession. The use of research, the development of measurable objectives and a clear communication strategy were perceived as important in repositioning public relations away from promotion, media relations and 'common sense' to a more strategic professional and indeed 'accountable' practice (5).

The industry's quest for greater professional recognition was underpinned by the establishment of university degrees as prerequisites for entry into public relations. By the mid- to late 1980s, employers increasingly sought university graduates, although not necessarily public relations majors. At the same time, several of the participants in this study were instrumental in the development of university courses in public relations, serving on university industry advisory committees and lobbying to have public relations taught at tertiary level. When asked about the significance of university education for the profession, one participant replied: 'Absolutely critical. We had no methodologies. I used to dream things up on the run' (5).

However, the introduction of more rigorous processes around membership and accreditation by PRIA, and raising standards in industry practices, were not always popular, as a participant explained:

> It was blokes particularly all of the ex-journos who had done an apprenticeship and didn't have any qualifications feeling that they would be excluded in an accreditation process that demanded that you had qualifications and their argument to me was…how we would protect those who were already in… and that's why even when you got your degree you weren't allowed to automatically become a member. You had to do an apprenticeship before you could. (5)

Further, one participant described how her PRIA state council threatened to withhold members' fees from the national body, demanding recognition of senior members of the industry who lacked professional qualifications:

> Where you are starting up an organisation that hasn't had any formal accreditation, and you have a lot of people in the industry who have a lot of experience, you can't expect

> them to go and do accreditation exams and things, it's an insult. So I think they are called a grandfather clause, where…you're recognised in the industry as a leader in the industry, and so on that basis you get your accreditation. (1)

These examples demonstrate the ways senior practitioners were not required to meet the same standards being asked of new entrants to the field, who were predominantly women. Such strategies reproduced the gendered hierarchies of power shaping the public relations industry.

The twin processes of feminization and professionalization can be seen in concerns about the professional identity of public relations as women - partly in response to broader societal changes and expectations around women, work and education - increasingly found employment in public relations. As the industry, initially dominated by ex-journalists and focused on media relations, changed and expanded in response to the growth of the corporate sector, the different job roles were stratified along gendered fault lines, validating Davies' (1996) theory that women's marginalization within the masculine construct of the professions turns upon a particular form of their inclusion, rather than their exclusion.

The response of the professional association, the PRIA, to concerns about the feminization of public relations was to introduce strategies to regulate the field and improve the standards in, and correspondingly, the status, of the industry. Our participants identified the need for particular strategies to professionalize the industry by raising standards and regulating membership through accreditation examinations, supporting the introduction of public relations as university courses, and developing more rigorous practices based on research and evaluation. Ironically, through their involvement in the PRIA, the participants in this study were actively involved in establishing what Witz (1992) identifies as exclusionary strategies in the professionalization of public relations.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we report on the feminization and professionalization of public relations in Australia in the 1980s, drawing on the perceptions and experiences of six female practitioners. Participants described diverse experiences, particularly in terms of how they negotiated their

professional identity, in a decade when more and more women were employed in public relations.

The industry response to the rapid feminization of public relations was ambiguous. Given concerns that public relations was rapidly becoming a pink-collar occupation and would therefore devalue in terms of status and salary, the professional association worked to raise the standard of industry practices through the introduction of public relations to universities and the development of more rigorous membership criteria. At the same time, public relations broadened its range of activities, moving away from an emphasis on promotion and media relations at the start of the 1980s towards corporate communication, investor relations, government relations and public affairs. The feminization of public relations resulted in a demarcation along gender lines between ‘professional’ and ‘technical’ roles and different kinds of public relations activity, with women more likely to work in internal relations, community relations, public education and promotion or marketing - and not surprisingly these roles were considered to be more low status or technical - while men were more likely to do media relations and political and government communication, and advise senior management on corporate strategy. These roles became the higher-status, professional activities of public relations.

These findings suggest the link between feminization in the 1980s and the lived realities of women in respect to economic and cultural divisions of labour need to be understood beyond the limited remit of second wave liberal feminism. In addition, the strategies of exclusion and demarcation position public relations as a highly gendered industry, where the effects of that gendering occurred in complex and nuanced ways and continue to have ramifications for the public relations industry. The impact of feminization was ambiguous; at the same time as women were offered significant employment opportunities and, in some sectors, pathways into management, the professionalization of public relations resulted in the separation of public relations activity into professional and technical roles where certain roles tended to be marginalized and public relations activity in the corporate sector was perceived as more professional. This process of demarcation relegated what was primarily constructed as ‘women’s work’ to the function of technician or assistant, rather than strategist or manager. At the same time, the drive towards professional recognition led to the development of PRIA’s individual

accreditation examinations. However, ‘grandfather’ clauses ensured existing members were exempt while new graduates still had to serve an apprenticeship before gaining full membership. Such exclusionary strategies were common in feminizing occupations. The gendering of public relations must therefore be understood as a complex process, and one response to the feminization of the field. The impact of large numbers of women entering the industry renewed attempts to ensure professional status for public relations and to position public relations as a strategic and corporate activity. The impact of this gendering continues to shape the professional identity of public relations today, and deserves further research.


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