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# Power and gender at the crossroads: A qualitative examination of the nexus of power and gender in public relations

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## Abstract

*This qualitative study of 45 women public relations practitioners in the United States of America examined how gender and power intersect in the public relations industry. One research question was posed: What are the intersections of gender and power in public relations for women practitioners? Results suggest that gender and power intersect through gendered appearances, management style, women's bonding together for power, expectations and stereotypes, and women's self realisation and choices. This study contributes to the body of public relations and gender scholarship by illustrating that gender and power are inherently intersectional and forged through discourse, socialization and resulting solidified stereotypes, expectations and workplace standards. Ultimately, gender and power exist in a push-pull system of simultaneous empowerment and oppression.*

## Introduction

Female public relations practitioners experience unique gender- and power-related phenomena including stereotypes (Frölich & Peters, 2007), expectations such as the 'Queen Bee' syndrome (Wrigley, 2005), and work-versus-family constraints (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2001). Although women comprise nearly 70 percent of the public relations workforce, they receive lower salaries, achieve fewer promotions to management positions, and are favoured less than men during the hiring process (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, p. 103). Scholars suggest, therefore, that women may lack power in public relations due to gender-based discrimination and expectations.

Because of its female-majority status and unique gender norms, the public relations

industry offers an ideal site of study for the analysis of gender and power in order to further advance gender theories of communication. Previous communication scholarship has championed such use of site- and case-specific inquiry of gender and power in the workplace (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005).

The limited understanding of power in public relations necessitates further analysis. Power has often been studied separately from gender, as a capacity or individual possession. van Zoonen (1994) explained, however, that "power is not a monolithic 'thing' that some groups (men, capitalists, whites) have and others (women, working class, blacks) have not" (p. 4). Gender research offers one way to deconstruct, analyse and critique the individual, cultural and embedded relations of power that exist in public relations practice. By studying the concepts of gender and power together, we further advance gender theories of communication and better understanding of the complex and layered intersections of gender and power. Failure to address gender/power issues in public relations may perpetuate gender discrimination and slow women's professional advancement and equality.

Whereas previous public relations scholarship has examined the concepts of gender and power separately, this qualitative study examines these phenomena together in order to develop a more holistic understanding of how gender and power function in the profession.

## Literature review

### *Gender and public relations*

Gender scholarship of public relations assumes that all individuals possess a 'gender' and that gender, in turn, affects individuals' social, work

and power relations. It focuses on how gender and power define, construct and guide social settings and social meanings and structures our material and symbolic worlds (Aldoory, 2005, p. 670). Gender research has found that female practitioners, in particular, experience gender role socialisation, stereotypes and expectations, encounter discrimination due to these expectations and stereotypes, and as a result, face negative workplace experiences and low job satisfaction.

Gender role socialisation explains why public relations practitioners possess or perform certain masculine or feminine traits. Grunig et al. (2001) referred to these roles as “sex roles” and defined them as the positions that women and men occupy, and the masculine and feminine characteristics they display. Hon (1995) found that female practitioners attributed role socialisation to gender discrimination in the workplace and that women’s socialised traits, such as caring for children, are devalued. Likewise, Aldoory and Toth (2002), in their study regarding gender discrepancies in public relations, found that individuals perceived that women are socialised to be less aggressive and felt that men who had wives at home expected them to do the same, whereas male employees are taught to feel a sense of entitlement to move up in an organisation’s hierarchy and ‘act’ like managers early.

Gender socialisation, in turn, results in discrimination, stereotypes and harassment. Often, masculine standards and organisational policies formulated by men ignore or discriminate women in the workplace (Hon, 1995). Aldoory and Toth (2002) cited sex segregation as a leading cause for discrimination. They argued employers permit women to enter fields that are no longer of interest to men, because women are assumed to have specific characteristics that make them better at certain tasks (p. 107). Sexual harassment is a gender-specific form of discrimination. Serini, Toth, Wright and Emig (1997) found that sexual harassment practices in the public relations workplace included men’s ignorance of the sole woman in a meeting, questioning of women about

their plans for marriage and children, or the making of jokes about women in the workplace.

Myths or stereotypes, and the lack of access created by them, perpetuate discrimination. Frölich and Peters (2007), who conducted a study of women practitioners in Germany, found that industry stereotypes included women’s lack of “management competence”, and “chattiness”. Common terms used to describe this stereotype included “PR Bunny,” “PR Clone,” “Agency Snipe,” and “PR Slut” (p. 241). The authors explained that stereotypes such as these can contribute to female practitioner’s isolation, devaluation and “ghettoisation”.

Gender discrimination contributes to negative consequences for female public relations practitioners, such as the ‘glass ceiling’, unrealistic work expectations and low job satisfaction. The glass ceiling is an invisible or unspoken organisational barrier that prevents women from excelling and achieving equality in the workplace (Wrigley, 2002). Results found that a “Good Ole Boy” network still exists in organisations and that the glass ceiling occurs as a result of socialisation and historical precedence (p. 38).

Research has found that socialisation and discrimination have caused women to work harder and longer to achieve success (Grunig, 2006; Grunig et al., 2001; Hon, 1995). Female practitioners are socialised to and feel pressured to balance several work- and family-based roles (Hon, 1995; Grunig, 2006). Sha and Toth (2005), for example, found that young women respondents, in comparison to male counterparts, perceived public relations to be a profession significantly more difficult for women to receive job promotions and juggle work and family responsibilities.

In turn, the dynamics of the public relations profession affect women’s job satisfaction. Aldoory and Toth (2004) found that female research participants cited feeling a lack of control and job satisfaction when family-related obligations affected their work (as cited in Toth & Cline, 2007). Moreover, male and female participants framed work-family responsibilities as a women’s issue. Krider and

Ross (1997) found that women experienced sexism, identified with multiple roles such as mother and professional, and felt that job stress, long work hours and conflict resulted in feeling “burned out”. To cope with conflicting identities, women reported creating new terminology to express their feelings or experiences and wanting to return to a simpler form of life.

#### *Power, gender and public relations*

Public relations scholarship has traditionally defined power as an individual's or a group's capacity for influence (i.e. Berger & Reber, 2006). Power often refers to the perception others hold of power, one's multiple resources, relationships and characteristics, and one's expertise in strategic management (Grunig et al., 2001). Public relations practitioners wield power by using rational arguments, coalitions of fellow individuals, lessons learned from past experiences, and assertive behaviours (Berger & Reber, 2005). Additionally, research has argued that practitioners exert power and influence when they function together in a group, rather than individually. Grunig (1992) defined this group of powerful individuals in an organisation as a “coalition” (p. 487). Public relations professionals can empower themselves when they form coalitions themselves or join other coalitions of prominent decision makers.

Gender differences, socialisation and expectations create power dynamics in society and the public relations workplace. Wrigley (2005), for example, explained that female practitioners, in particular, contribute to their own lack of power in the public relations workforce. She used the term ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome to describe the expectation or stereotype regarding women who discriminate against their female colleagues and seek control of power and authority, instead of favouring ethical or relationship-building practices. Similarly, Hon (1995) hypothesised that the ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome is the result of an organisational environment in which only the meanest women can be promoted.

In addition to ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome practices, gendered stereotypes may cause additional power expectations and aggressiveness. Litwin and O'Brien Hallstein (2007) found that women communicators wield power by engaging in indirect and direct aggression, idealised gender role and friendship expectations and self-constrained behaviour, which is self-silencing to preserve a relationship or to avoid conflict. The authors suggested that such behaviour reflects historical power relations in which “oppressed groups internalize the negative stereotypes about their own group and turn on each other” and “survival mechanisms in the context of patriarchal systems” (p. 127).

Scholarship has found that women often separate themselves from traditional organisational structures for power. Gill and Ganesh (2007), in their study of female entrepreneurs, found that women conceptualised empowerment by achieving autonomy, engaging in risk-taking, innovation, ambition, and aggressiveness, and searching for something better (p. 272). In difficult situations, women empowered themselves by reframing situations as “mental stimulation”, practicing determination in the face of discrimination, taking pride in their involvement in a particular geographic area, and utilised supportive groups (p. 283). Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, and Sha (2008) also found that public relations practitioners felt empowerment by separating from their current work settings. They found that their participants began freelancing, consulting or home offices (p. 13).

Public relations industry norms also affect women's personal career choices, which in turn, constrain their senses of self and senses of power and illustrate their “buying into the system” (Grunig et al., 2001, p. 326; Sha & Toth, 2005). Female public relations practitioners must often choose how and when they balance work and family responsibilities. Grunig et al. (2001) found that women must make sacrifices in order to succeed in their careers and that the price for success is often less time spent with children or family.

Power scholarship in public relations has yet to extend significantly beyond capacity-based

definitions to those based on systems, relations or discourse. Aldoory (2005), for example, argued that organisations often wrongly assume that power is “property” that can be given away or that individuals can possess. Instead, research must examine the multiple relations of subordination and analyse how these relations are being constituted (p. 673). Postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault conceived of power in such a way. Foucault (1980) stated: “Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in a form of a chain...” (p. 98) and argued that individuals serve as the conduits of discourse and power. As a discursive and systematic phenomenon, power produces socialised routines, beliefs, theories and self-images (McWhorter, 2004). Stereotypes such as “the nerd” are categories of human being that exist as a result of institutionalised arrangements of power (McWhorter, 2004, p. 43). Citing feminist and Foucauldian perspectives, Papa, Daniels and Spiker (2008) suggested that change of institutionalised power and discourse rests on fostering myriad competing structures that offer empowerment opportunities for all individuals and by continually creating alternative discourses that assign new meanings to texts. Examining gender as a function of the industry’s discursive and relational power equation and promoting multiple competing gender/power structures or meanings more thoroughly maps out power in public relations.

Recently, public relations scholars have begun to make strides in theorising power and gender as discursive and relational constructs (e.g. Edwards, 2009, 2011; Fitch & Third, 2010; Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010). According to Edwards (2009), practitioners utilise discourse to reinforce their own symbolic power and legitimacy in relation to others, shape understandings of the organisation’s purpose, and define organisational norms and values. Alternative discourses that challenge the status quo can change power relations (Edwards, 2011). Fitch and Third (2010), have framed gender as a specific function of discursive power constructs in public

relations. They explained that women’s entry into the workplace has resulted in hegemonic definitions of the appropriate types of women’s work, that gender has been reduced to a problem for individual women to address, and that the gendering of public relations has contributed to women’s lack of status and membership in upper organisational ranks. Men and women’s participation in separate interpretive communities within the profession can further validate and reproduce gendered discourses and expectations that contribute to women’s powerlessness (Verhoeven & Aarts, 2010).

Previous research has often examined public relations, gender and power separately and lacks analysis of the nexus of public relations, gender and power. A study seeking to understand the socialised, mutually constitutive nature of gender and power in a public relations context is overdue. In order to better understand, describe and explain how gender and power overlap and affect public relations practice, I offer the following research purpose and research question.

### **Purpose and research question**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the nexus of gender and power in public relations. Gender and power exist in the structures of organisations, within its employees and leaders, and within the relationships and dialogues that take place. Qualitative studies such as this can examine, illustrate, and clarify female professionals’ own meaning-making of gender and power and their effects on the public relations and communication practice.

RQ: What are the intersections of gender and power in public relations for female practitioners?

### **Method**

A qualitative method enables the collection of extensive amounts of ‘thick’ descriptive data, illustrates the complexities of human experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Geertz, 1973; Hodder, 2003; Potter, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005), builds theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and enables

holistic examination of a phenomenon (Patton, 1990). Because the purpose of this exploratory study was to describe and explain women's experiences more holistically, a qualitative method was chosen which helped to uncover women's rich meaning-making of gender and power in public relations.

### **Sample**

Forty-five in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with female public relations practitioners who have had more than five years of public relations work experience. Interviewing practitioners with more than five years of experience ensured that practitioners had a sufficient amount of professional experience on which to reflect.

Sampling methods included snowball, purposive and maximum variation sampling procedures. A list of female practitioners who participated in a previous study by the researcher served as an initial set of contacts for a snowball sample. These practitioners then recommended additional public relations practitioners to participate in the study. The researcher then used purposive and maximum variation sampling methods to select additional practitioners of geographic locations and professional backgrounds that differed from the snowball sample. The resulting sample consisted of 36 Caucasian-American, four African-American, two Asian-American and two Indian-American female public relations practitioners between the ages of 28 and 65 who served as consultants, managers or executives in independent, agency, government, not-for-profit, or corporate work environments in the East Coast and West Coast of the United States.

### **Procedure**

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at locations close to practitioners' workplace or home and by telephone. All interviews were audiotaped and ranged in length from 45 to 120 minutes. Member checks and follow-up emails were incorporated to further review

interview data or request elaboration regarding a particular response.

The interview process was guided by an interview protocol that utilised a combination of broad, open-ended and specific questions. Questions were asked in a pre-determined order based on specificity. Primary questions, such as "Tell me about your role as a public relations practitioner in your organisation" acquainted participants to the interview process. Later questions, such as "What are some ways that gender and power connect or work together in public relations?" prompted participants to describe specific experiences related to practitioner power and gender. In order to get further description and encourage continuing dialogue, the researcher asked follow-up questions and probes such as "How?" and "Why?"

### **Data analysis**

Interviews were fully transcribed, coded and analysed for themes relating to the research question of the study using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A grounded theory approach incorporated systematic, constant comparison of data by which open codes, axial codes and systematic codes were applied to phenomena. The researcher enhanced the data analysis process through the use of memos, observer comments (OCs), and scholar-to-scholar feedback.

### **Results**

Gender and power intersected in female public relations practitioners' perceptions of and experiences with public relations through gendered appearances, management style, women's bonding together for power, expectations and stereotypes, and women's self-realisation and confidence in their choices. Evidence for each of the themes regarding the overlap of gender and power in public relations is reviewed below.

#### *Gendered appearances, femininity and power*

Female public relations practitioners communicated that gendered appearances and femininity afforded individuals 'power' by getting them noticed, giving them a 'foot in the

door', and rendered them less threatening, but that femininity and attractiveness must be bolstered by hard work and results.

Participants argued that stereotypically attractive, feminine women received more attention and opportunity in the workplace, resulting in more power. Explaining how a woman's attractiveness garnishes more opportunity and access, one corporate practitioner in her sixties said:

I mean it's easier for an attractive woman... It's easier to have access to some people...you need to be attractive, poised, well dressed...I know where women have not been sent out to represent an organisation or to clients because of their appearance...

Women who convey femininity may appear less threatening to men and thus wield power, participants said. Another corporate practitioner in her sixties explained:

In some cases, [my gender] has been an advantage. Men in management find you less threatening. They may not compete as aggressively as with a male... there's a certain chemistry that comes from male/female relationship when the person you're trying to cultivate is male.

Female public relations practitioners explained, however, that appearance and femininity only affect power so far: looks must be bolstered by hard work and results. For example, one agency practitioner in her forties said:

There is nothing wrong with making sure that you are attractive. Superficial as it is, *it will help you*. There is a fine line between using attractiveness and using sexuality. It should not be a substitute for knowing your job and what you do – or having the ability to do it.

#### *Management style*

Power and gender intersected when women discussed management styles involving stereotypically masculine traits. Female

practitioners often compared their management style with a 'man's' style. For example, the agency practitioner in her forties said: "I think people who are perceived as powerful in the field tend to have male characteristics. When you look at an organisation, at that very top level there are men, but if a woman, it's a very strong woman." Another practitioner shared how she adapted her verbal and nonverbal communication to a more stereotypical masculine style in order to wield power. In turn, this discursive style labelled her as "aggressive" when her male counterparts were not labelled as such. The government practitioner in her fifties explained:

I think I did get the reputation of being aggressive. If you want to look at it in a gender way, would a male have gotten the reputation of being aggressive doing the exact same things? I don't know. All the men were doing them. I basically patterned my communications on what I was seeing around me.

Similarly, another government practitioner in her forties argued that men's management style of conveying confidence equated to power – and women's lack of confidence and deference to men results in women's powerlessness. She said:

Powerlessness – that might be a woman thing. Men don't show it... They bravado their way through it. When we look at them, we think 'oh they are confident, they know what they are doing, they are going to push their way through. They have the power'. They just have the power because we let them have it! I don't think we are any less powerful than anybody else, I think it's just we let that happen.

#### *Women bond together for power*

Female public relations professionals made meaning of the overlap of gender and power as the bonding together of women for power. Participants argued that women create their own 'old girls' network' that rivals men's 'old boys' network'. Practitioners bond together in formal and informal networks organised around

professional topics and shared experiences of childcare or work-life balance.

Professional organisations are one way that female public relations practitioners bond together for power. One independent practitioner in her thirties explained that these organisations empower by enabling women to “fit in” and interact with individuals “like you” who share their work values and identities. Similarly, another independent practitioner in her thirties cited the professional organisation *Women Unlimited* as empowering for women. She said: “It’s all about mentoring and keeping it going so that the women at all levels of organisations... Keep these women going – keep the circle so that people are working at all levels and helping each other out.”

Informal networks are created for power by women who share similar work-life balance needs and experiences. Groups of working mothers, friends or neighbours who lend each other support were especially significant because they enabled women to manage work and family responsibilities and empathise about the challenges of the workplace. One practitioner elaborated on how women forge relationships with other women in the public relations industry through their shared understandings and experiences as mothers. Women who understand the stress and challenges of balancing motherhood and work responsibilities come together to share professional opportunities and “support in numbers”. The practitioner in her thirties offered examples of times when she had received public relations work and generated work leads for other women because of their similar statuses as mothers. She added:

I always use the example of the white male on the golf course networking. Case in point. We talk. We just struck up this relationship around our kids... People understand. If they have kids – especially if they have young kids – they understand where you are going and you have that common ground. But that’s something that women have that men don’t have! There are so

many women in business – and we can leverage that.

#### *Expectations and stereotypes*

Conversely, many female public relations practitioners described the nexus of gender and power through expectations and stereotypes surrounding the way in which women do not bond together or mentor each other. Participants called to mind times when one female practitioner or a group of female practitioners acted in a way that monopolised information, avoided mentoring, or challenged other women’s competition or advancement. This practice was often discursively framed and explicitly named as the ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome by participants. Describing ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome, one independent practitioner in her forties said:

Where there have been women who have been good mentors, there are a lot of women who just will not mentor. We used to call it the ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome. What is shocking to me – It used to be people who are in my mother’s age. But you are seeing it again...Essentially by their behavior they are saying that all these people who work for them are not important.

Participants blamed the ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome on expectations surrounding generational differences and the gendered norms of the public relations workplace of the past. One corporate practitioner in her fifties explained: “In the days where there were very few women in the corporate suite, it was a much bigger deal for a woman to get there and it was a lot harder to stay there.” Therefore, women who fought for a position of power, may later feel as if they have more to lose or a need to fight in order to keep the position for which they fought so hard.

Practitioners linked the existence of ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome to the overlap of gender and power. For example, one corporate public relations woman in her sixties shared her perceptions regarding a practitioner who embodied ‘Queen Bee’ syndrome traits: “For her it was power. She would do anything to get to the top and she didn’t care what she did to

the people down below. And I think there are men like that too, but sometimes it's women. It's power." Another agency practitioner in her thirties linked the 'Queen Bee' syndrome to power, gender and one's sex arguing:

Maybe this is just another generality of women, but I think we have a hard time sharing sometimes. And so maybe they don't want to let go of power and give it to someone else and help them grow... Even though she is a VP, and she is at the top of her game, she will not give me an inch, unfortunately. I think a lot of it has to do with she is a woman.

Blaming 'Queen Bee' syndrome practices and stereotypes on the fact that an individual is a woman – even though the practitioner herself is a woman – reveals a way in which this practitioner separates herself from her own gendered identity and the negative stereotypes associated with it. Rather than blaming the individual, the participant utilised blaming one's sex or gender as a coping mechanism for her experiences with gender socialisation and stereotypes.

On the other hand, some participants explained that negative stereotypes and expectations were not practiced by or experienced by all female public relations professionals. Participants juxtaposed stories of the 'Queen Bee' syndrome with examples of how female practitioners served as excellent colleagues or mentors. One African-American practitioner in her thirties, for example, mentioned how she has encountered industry women who engage in competition, but also those who offer to mentor. In contrast to the practitioner before her, she questioned the idea that negative behaviours such as 'Queen Bee' syndrome practices are inherent in women, sharing:

There is so much contention between women in the industry...that whole competition thing... I don't know if that is inherent in women. But, there is a nice balance. One of my first mentors was a Black mentor at the [industry] company...and she took me under her wing and took me to events

and all this lavish stuff. And she was like, 'You can have this, too'. I was like wow, I didn't even know Black people did this kind of stuff... the mentoring and the building relationships.

#### *Self-realisation and choices*

Participants confessed that in some circumstances, female practitioners have to make critical choices about how they balance family and work and define success and power. Gender and power came together through women's personal self-realisation and choices that best suited their career goals or lifestyles. In a sense, women felt empowered when they 'claimed authority' over their lives and careers.

The overlap of power and gender in public relations existed in women choosing a lifestyle that best suits their needs as both a mother or caretaker and a professional. Power and empowerment resulted from women's self-realisation of "this is who I am" and choices to change how they respond to workplace demands. One independent practitioner in her thirties said:

...All of a sudden I was a mom and I had to say, 'I can't do it, I have two young kids'. It hit a point where this is what my reality is... This is who I am. I will get the job done if you hire me, but I'm not there 24/7. I may say that this evening my son has soccer practice. It's kind of meshing those two worlds. It's empowering to be comfortable now to say those types of things.

Similarly, a corporate public relations practitioner in her sixties explained how making deliberate choices affected her career path, yet enabled her to have a more fulfilling work-life balance. She said:

And the truth is that you can't do it all...One thing I did was choose a middle route in that I did advance and became a vice president. And now, the responsibilities are greater, being close to home and choosing not to take the job helped with that balance... I think the fact is that women still become the primary caregivers...I wish I could say I could do it all, but you can't do it all.

Participants made choices to not let gender discrimination keep them from achieving work goals. One practitioner in her thirties explained her determination to find new outlets for her work stating:

I'm all about trouble-shooting and figuring a way around. If he's getting clients, how did he get clients? ...instead of crying about what men are getting that you're not getting, figure out how they got what they got. If it's not just the old boys club, but if it was talking to an editor or talking to a client or networking at a function, start doing it. And there are tons of stuff that we get that they don't get.

Participant statements such as "there are tons of stuff that we get that they don't get" represent practitioners' acknowledgement, acceptance of and complicity with gender/power differences in the workplace, but they also reveal that women are simultaneously fighting these challenges by "figuring a way around".

The findings illustrate how power and gender intersect for female public relations practitioners often discursively and relationally. The gender and power nexus existed through their experiences with gendered appearances for power, management styles, women's networking and bonding for power, expectations and stereotypes, and women's self-realisation and choices.

### Discussion

This qualitative study of 45 female public relations practitioners examined how gender and power intersected in women's meaning-making of the public relations industry. A distinct and active intersection of gender and power exists in public relations, suggesting that female public relations practitioners engage gender expectations or stereotypes for power, while they also fight and create alternative solutions to them.

Stereotypically gendered appearances and masculine standards shape power relations in public relations by diminishing how women are perceived and how women perceive each

other. Practitioners' reasoning that a pretty feminine appearance will get you 'noticed' in the workplace, but your work will help you stay reveals a double-standard for women in the profession that may not exist for male counterparts. Statements suggesting that men find women who display femininity in the workplace as less threatening also expose gendered assumptions. Female practitioners may not realise that being perceived as nonthreatening may result in their being 'written off' as competent professionals.

The findings illustrate how management traits in the profession are inherently gendered and socialised – and that traits historically categorised as 'male' or 'masculine' are linked to power. Women who pattern their behaviours to mirror 'accepted' masculine traits for power may be endorsing gendered expectations and stereotypes while masking feminine traits which can benefit the industry. Feminine communication styles must be valued, too. Grunig et al. (2001) theorised that as the 21st century becomes more heterogeneous, traits associated with women will be valued more, thus increasing the empowerment of female public relations practitioners in management roles (p. 194).

The way in which women bond together for power is uniquely gendered: it is often organised around women's specific shared experiences and understandings of childcare or family responsibility. Responses reflect previous research regarding power. Grunig (1992) suggested that individuals can best wield power and influence when they function as a group or coalition, whereas Verhoeven and Aarts (2010) suggested that separate gendered interpretive communities contribute to women's powerlessness. Female practitioners' utilisation of informal, yet intentional coalitions and networks that serve to separate them from male counterparts demonstrates women's application of a masculine-based system and practice for power. Whereas these separate 'old girls' networks' do enable women to empower themselves, it may also further gender segregate the public relations industry and limit practitioner interaction.

Based on the findings, 'Queen Bee' syndrome offers a vivid example of a Foucauldian discursive, relational gender-power system at work in the public relations profession. Some female practitioners who have fought for leadership positions are perceived as employing disempowering techniques in order to maintain their positions over other women in the workplace, thus increasing their 'power' in relation to those individuals. These practices, in turn, have become named, categorised and naturalised by practitioners.

'Queen Bee' syndrome existed as the only explicitly 'named' form of gender-power stereotype among participants. As McWhorter (2004) explained, the simple act of naming something implies an institutionalised system of power. Then, individual discourse solidifies those names and stereotypes over time. Data reflect and complement previous findings by Wrigley (2005), Frölich and Peters (2007) and Litwin and O'Brien (2007). Litwin and O'Brien Hallstein's (2007) study regarding women's use of indirect and direct aggression in the workplace helps us to further deconstruct the 'Queen Bee' syndrome stereotype. These traits reflect women's internalisation of negative discourses about their own group and survival mechanisms in the context of patriarchal systems (p. 127). Furthermore, mirroring the findings of Frölich and Peters (2007), this study found that gendered stereotypes and expectations in the public relations workplace do, indeed, contribute to female practitioner's devaluation. Ultimately, when women in the workplace act on or reproduce stereotypes such as the 'Queen Bee' syndrome, it is inscribing negative stereotypical identities about public relations women into workplace knowledge, thus lessening women's self-image, lowering women's credibility and reducing women's power.

Female public relations practitioners' self-realisation and choices must also be theorised as an intersecting gender-power system. Power, for participants, equated to a woman's ability to choose a career and a lifestyle that best meet her personal values and work-life

balance needs. Interestingly, participants focused heavily on their personal, *individual* decisions. Female practitioners did not cite or realise that societal and industry-based systems of power and gender socialisation are contributing to the decisions they make to leave the public relations workplace or redefine their standards and values. This study complements Sha and Toth's (2005) and Fitch and Third's (2010) studies that found, respectively, that female practitioners experience lowered career expectations or choices and frame work-life balance struggles as individual, rather than societal or industry, problems. Gender socialisation and lowered expectations appear to be limiting female practitioners' career goals and achievement. Findings reflected previous gender scholarship: women cutting back on work in order to maximise time with family represents the "reframing" (Gill & Ganesh, 2007) of negative work-life balance situations and gender norms for personal empowerment and coping strategies. Instead, the public relations industry may benefit from a 'reframing' of how it defines such phenomena as gender roles, power and work-life balance expectations.

Theoretically, this study demonstrated how gender and power mutually construct and reinforce one another for female public relations practitioners. Gender and power exist in a push-pull or ever-changing system of simultaneous empowerment and oppression. This double-standard of gendered empowerment and oppression was especially evident in how female participants perceived that they must possess a feminine appearance, but enact a masculine communication style in order to succeed. Some women enact a masculine communication style, yet they still face discrimination in the workplace. Why? Findings of this study suggest that female practitioners are actively employing stereotypical gendered discourses to make meaning of their workplace experiences and framing discrimination or work-life balance challenges as personal problems, rather than industry problems. In turn, these practices are further solidifying hegemonic gender/power systems.

The public relations industry seems to be lacking discourses that challenge the solidified, socialised and stereotypical perceptions of gender that both male and female practitioners utilise and reinforce. Educating practitioners about gender socialisation and discrimination will offer new ways to understand, discuss and challenge gender/power phenomena. Practitioners must understand that power in public relations need not be relational in terms of one individual's position or 'power' over another's, like the 'Queen Bee' syndrome stereotype. Mentoring and enabling women to achieve leadership or decision-making positions in the public relations workplace will not lessen individual power, but will fight socialised gender expectations and stereotypes while empowering the industry as a whole.

Ultimately, findings contribute to the body of public relations and gender scholarship by illustrating that gender and power are inherently intersectional and forged through discourse, socialisation and the solidified stereotypes, expectations and workplace standards that result. Power itself is based on systematic practices, yet individual action and discourse serve as its conduit.

### **Contributions to practice**

Results signal to practitioners that intersecting gender and power norms affect the public relations workplace. Female public relations practitioners may best navigate the challenges of the public relations industry by a) seeking out a mentor, b) joining a professional support group, c) displaying management or communication traits that work best for them, d) actively fighting gender stereotypes e) making choices that best suit their career goals and values, but also criticising organisational policy and practices that do not offer adequate work-life balance options, and f) educating others about gender discrimination. Gender education and the introduction of feminist values in the public relations classroom are especially important to the advancement of the profession.

### **Directions for future research and limitations**

Whereas this study highlighted intersections of gender and power through practitioners' use of gendered appearances, coalition building, expectations and lifestyle choices, future research must examine if other intersections do exist.

This study was delimited to women in order to illustrate the rich, diverse experiences and meaning-making of female public relations practitioners. This research did not address how practitioner sexuality affected one's meaning-making of gender and power. Future research regarding gender and power must adopt a more intersectional approach and examine the meaning-making of both male and female practitioners of diverse race, age, geography, sexuality, or economic status.

Limitations to the study include researcher bias and a sample that was less diverse racially and geographically than the researcher had intended. This research is not generalisable to the public relations profession at large and could be further enhanced by integrating interviews with practitioners outside the United States. Further comparing female practitioners' experiences worldwide would foster a better understanding of how power/gender struggles exist similarly throughout the industry – or differ depending on professional and geographic contexts.

### **Conclusion**

This exploratory study examined the nexus of gender and power in public relations and illustrated how these phenomena intersect and are sometimes influenced by discourse and socialisation. Systems of gender and power at work in public relations are affecting how women communicate and present themselves in the workplace, how women perceive stereotypes and expectations, and how women make or avoid important career-related decisions. Advancement of female public relations practitioners and professional communicators rests on mentoring, making possible the attainment of leadership and work-life balance opportunities, and offering education regarding gender and discrimination.

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