# Working girls: Revisiting the gendering of public relations

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### Abstract

*Women make up the majority of public relations practitioners, suggesting that the liberal-feminist battle for workplace equality has been won. Analysing scholarship on the gendering of public relations, which began to emerge in the 1980s, this paper examines how the dual processes of feminisation and professionalisation mutually reinscribe one another in ways that reproduce the patriarchal gender relations underpinning the public relations industry. Recent Australian examples demonstrate the impact of the gendering of public relations and the need for greater attention to, and reflexivity about, gender issues in public relations by both the industry and by scholars.*

### Introduction

Over the last 30 years, the public relations industry has undergone a process of 'feminisation' whereby women have come to numerically dominate the industry. In the US, the number of female public relations practitioners first surpassed the number of male practitioners in the 1980s. A parallel process of feminisation has marked the development of the industry in Australia. In many respects, this process of feminisation reflects large-scale transformations in the gendering of work in the Western world, partly attributable to the rise of second wave feminism and the consequent entry of increasing numbers of women into the workforce. This paper analyses the impact of the 'feminisation' of public relations by situating the public relations industry and scholarship within the broader social and cultural shifts around the gendered nature of work in the US and Australia. We argue that feminisation has had profound implications for both the industry's professional status and workplace cultures.

Since the 1980s, a significant body of feminist research has emerged to address both the status of women within the industry and the impact of women's entry into public relations on the industry's professional status. We argue that, despite nearly three decades of scholarship, and despite women making up the majority of practitioners in the industry, the gendering of public relations remains problematic and under-theorised. Importantly, whilst women constitute a majority within the industry today, this feminisation of public relations does not equate to a dismantling of the gendered structures of power in the industry. Rather, in 'postfeminist' times, gender inequalities persist, often in a form that is difficult to pinpoint and therefore difficult to challenge. Given this, the gendering of public relations demands further research and critical attention. This article thus takes up Aldoory's challenge to "reinvigorate gender scholarship and increase the validity of feminist research for public relations" (2007, p. 407).

To make our argument, we first consider the feminisation of public relations alongside broader social trends around women and work. Second, we examine the historical coincidence between the push for professional status and the increasing number of women entering the public relations workforce in the US in the 1980s, through the analysis of a landmark industry report, *The Velvet Ghetto* (Cline, et al., 1986). Third, we review the literature on feminised occupations and professional projects to investigate the ways that the dual processes of feminisation and professionalisation reinscribe patriarchal gender relations within the public relations industry. We argue that an increase in female employment does not mean that gender is no longer an issue for concern. Finally, we consider recent examples from the Australian public relations industry and

1

academy to demonstrate how the inclusion of women in the public relations industry has occurred along gendered fault lines.

## The feminisation of public relations

In the US, the number of women working in public relations increased dramatically in the 1980s, when more women than men worked as public relations practitioners for the first time. Between 1970 and 1982, the number of public relations jobs performed by women doubled from 25 percent to 50 percent (Horsley, 2009). A similar but more pronounced trend was seen in Australia, where the proportion of women working in public relations increased from 10 percent in the early 1970s to approximately 50 percent in the early 1980s (Zawawi, 2009). This 'feminisation' of public relations was charged with lowering the reputation of the profession, bringing about a decline in both salaries and status, and excluding public relations from primary decision-making in organisations (Aldoory, 2005; Grunig, Hon & Toth, 2001; Papinchak, 2005). For example, an editorial in a trade journal offers a typical comment from this period: "If women become a majority in public relations, the practice will be typecast as 'women's work'. It will lose what clout it now has as a management function and become a second-class occupation" (Bates, 1983, as cited in Grunig, Hon & Toth, 2001, p. 9). It is therefore useful to consider the increase in the number of women working in public relations within the broader historical and social trends around the employment of women.

World War II offered unprecedented employment opportunities for women. However, as numerous feminist scholars have documented, when the war ended and men returned home, the majority of women were re-socialised out of the paid workforce and back into the private sphere to re-assume the 'properly feminine' mantle of motherhood and domestic labour (see, for example, Adam-Smith, 1984; Anderson, 2001; Dabakis, 1993; Gluck, 1987; Hartmann, 1982; Lake, 1999). Employment trends in the public relations industry at this time replicated these broader patterns of gendered employment (Horsley, 2009). One historical study found that, whilst post-World War II women experienced fewer barriers to entry in new professions such as public relations, barriers increased as the profession matured (Gower, 2001).

If we fast-forward to the 1970s, the gendering of the labour force in the US and elsewhere in the Western world once again transformed, only this time in response to a different kind of war, a symbolic 'war' over the meanings and practices of gender being called into question by the resurgence of women's liberation movements. As the 1970s progressed, liberal feminism's calls for equal opportunity proved to be a powerful mechanism for widespread social change. One of the effects was a rapid rise in the number of women entering the paid workforce. In the public relations profession, the number of female practitioners increased throughout the 1970s, and came to outnumber male practitioners in both the US and Australia in the 1980s (Horsley, 2009; Zawawi, 2009). We might read the increase in the number of women assuming public relations roles as an effect of feminism's opening up of employment opportunities to women. However, women's entry into the workforce operated according to a series of limits that turned upon a hegemonic definition of the kind of work deemed culturally appropriate for women. Arguably, women looking to a career in professional paid employment in the 1970s and 1980s were both attracted to and more readily permitted entry to public relations roles. This was, in part, due to a perception that public relations' communicative function marked it as an appropriate place for women within workplace hierarchies. At one level – acknowledging the enormous achievements of those who forged a place for women in the gendered domain of paid employment – the dominance of women in public relations roles testifies to the coding of public relations as 'feminine'. Thus, rather than producing substantive changes in the gender relations underpinning 1980s work cultures, women were incorporated into the public relations workforce in ways that contained the feminist challenge to patriarchal order. Typically, research into gender in public relations in the 1980s and even the 1990s focused on the status of women in the industry, particularly in terms of gender inequity in

salaries, status, and roles (see for example, Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Cline et al., 1986; Serini, Toth, Wright & Emig, 1997; Toth & Cline, 1989; Toth & Grunig, 1993; Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron & Sweep, 1994). Some studies attempted to rearticulate the debate in terms of a systematic devaluation of women's work (Hon, 1995; Rakow, 1989). However, the majority of quantitative research that offered sound evidence of the impact of gender on women's employment in public relations simultaneously failed to address the broader context that produced and negotiated such inequality.

While not writing specifically about public relations, Faludi (1992) draws parallels between the 1950s and the 1980s in relation to women and employment in the US. She argues that, in a way that mirrored the post-war socialisation of women out of the workforce, the 1980s witnessed the rise of a widespread anti-feminist 'backlash' that worked to systematically undermine women's entry into the workforce. For Faludi, backlash is "a powerful counterassault on women's rights… an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women" (1992, p. 12). One characteristic of this backlash was that where women were successful in finding work in what were traditionally "'male' jobs in the USA…women succeeded only because the pay and status of these jobs had fallen dramatically and men were bailing out" (Faludi, 1992, p. 400). It is thus not entirely coincidental that, alongside other feminised industries such as nursing and teaching, the entry of significant numbers of women into public relations since the 1980s has renewed concerns about the professional status of the industry.

**Public relations and professionalisation**

Pieczka and L'Etang claim that professionalisation constitutes "a conscious occupational strategy" and "a loudly articulated group goal for public relations practitioners" (2006, pp. 270, 271). The push for professionalisation occupies a significant place in the agendas of professional organisations and is a prominent concern within public relations scholarship (see Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1985;

Grunig & Hunt, 1984; and for some recent examples Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008; Bartlett, Twyoniak & Hatcher, 2007; de Bussy & Wolf, 2009; Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003; van Ruler, 2005). Much public relations research and theory has sought to claim professional status for public relations by defining it as an ethical and strategic practice, demonstrating its social responsibility, and asserting it as a management discipline (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006). Arguing that public relations will only gain in status when it is recognised as a management discipline suggests that when public relations is indeed a profession, the salaries and status will increase. This approach serves as the foundation for a body of scholarship within the "dominant paradigm" which positions public relations as a functionalist, management practice and draws heavily on US practice-led studies (L'Etang, 2008, p. 251). This approach has profoundly influenced much feminist research in public relations. This scholarship has frequently sought to value women's contributions to the industry by focusing, for example, on "how women in public relations in the US contributed to excellence and symmetrical communication" (L'Etang, 2008, p. 254).

The anxiety around the professional status of public relations requires further consideration in relation to gender. Given the persistence of gendered attitudes within mainstream Western culture, the high percentage of women working in the field has implications for the status of public relations as both a profession and as a management discipline. While the push for professionalisation in public relations is not only due to the increase in women working in the industry, nonetheless it is important to recognise how the discourses of feminisation and professionalisation run parallel to and reinscribe one another. We argue that analysing the ways this mutual reinscription occurs is significant to understanding and addressing the structural gendering of the public relations industry.

Cline et al.'s (1986) *The Velvet Ghetto: The impact of the increasing percentage of women in public relations and business communication* is a landmark report into women and public relations. Commissioned by the International

Association of Business Communicators, it is a response to concerns about the increase in the number of women working in public relations and the apparent gendered segregation of the industry into management and non-management roles. The problem, according to Cline et al., was the perception that the shift to a "female-dominated" industry would lead "to reduced status and salary" (1986, I-2), impacting on its professional status. The report's authors maintained that the problem is "a complex socializing process" rather than "a conscious bias or discrimination operating on women in the field" (Cline et al., 1986, X-5). In response to this socialisation process, the authors concluded that women were ill-equipped to proceed into management roles in public relations. For example, they argued that women might prefer "an undemanding job," "lack…ambition" and therefore, might "avoid the kind of competition necessary for advancement" (Cline et al., 1986, I-7). In addition, the authors claimed "low self-esteem" and a "lack of confidence" caused women to choose "safe jobs" rather than those which will allow them to seek promotion (Cline et al., 1986, I-8). The pathologising that characterises this interpretation individualises the lack of career opportunities for women, constructing this lack as a problem that women can perhaps overcome with "hard work." This understanding conflates the issue of gender with the issue of 'women,' reducing gender to a problem for individual women to address rather than a problem requiring systemic solutions.

*The Velvet Ghetto* highlighted that an increasingly female-intensive industry did not equate to an industry that valued and promoted women's work to the same extent as men's. However, the report focused on improving the status of public relations by demonstrating its value for management and business, rather than explicitly addressing the impact of feminisation on the industry. Largely because it adopted a liberal-feminist framework (primarily concerned with equality), *The Velvet Ghetto* was unable to address the structural nature of women's marginalisation. In delineating the problems women faced, including lower wages and sex role segregation, the report emphasised the stereotypical feminine qualities (including

women's lack of ambition, avoidance of competition, lack of assertiveness, and desire for job flexibility that allowed them to transition between work and motherhood), which were perceived to impede women's promotion within the industry. By constructing gender in essentialist terms and foregrounding it as an issue pertaining to women, the report could not account for gender as a structure of power that interpellates both men and women alike. Consequently, the report, whilst drawing attention to the inequities underpinning 'the profession' and firmly placing 'gender on the agenda,' did not comprehensively critique the structural gendering of the public relations industry. This in turn meant that the report elided the emerging tension between on the one hand, feminisation, and on the other, professionalisation. In order to demonstrate this point, the following section explores the gendering of 'professional projects'.

### Professional projects and feminised occupations

As feminist scholars of the sociology of work have noted, processes of industry professionalisation frequently operate to marginalise women and their work (Davies, 1996; Witz, 1992). A number of studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s argued that feminised occupations such as teaching (Acker, 1989) and nursing (Rafferty, 1996; Witz, 1992) struggled to gain full professional status and experienced declining salaries. Recent research suggests that the tension between professionalisation and feminisation continues to structure the ways in which both feminised occupations and recognised-but-feminising professions respond to the increase in the number of women in the workforce. Whilst a US study found a significant relationship between the number of women with college degrees and the number of women working in senior management, concluding that education was closing the gender gap (Yasin & Helms, 2007), Walby (2002) argues that the impact of higher levels of education and employment of women on professionalisation is less clear.

Recent research examining the impact of feminisation on the professional project suggests complex and subtle responses across a

4

variety of fields. The increase in women working in news organisations in Australia and New Zealand in the last two decades has served to highlight the ways in which the media industry tends to accommodate women (North, 2009). While women's participation in Australian journalism increased, male journalists were still linked with higher status stories and hard news (Cann & Mohr, 2001) and women, despite making up 50 percent of the industry in terms of numbers, were not represented in that proportion at senior levels and had lower visibility in terms of by-lines (Strong & Hannis, 2007). A gender-sensitive study of professional projects in Finnish healthcare concluded that certain occupational groups are increasingly marginalised as they feminise (Henriksson, Wrede & Burau, 2006); another healthcare study found that midwifery, as a highly feminised field within a feminised occupation, appears to have lost its autonomy and has become instead a specialisation as nursing gains more professional recognition (Sandall, 2007). A further study investigated the feminising profession of accounting and found women are less likely to be in senior management in market-driven professions (Crompton & Lyonette, 2010). The point is that an increase in the number of women employed, and indeed the over-representation of women in highly feminised fields such as nursing, teaching and public relations, does not mean that gender is no longer an issue. As Rea argues, feminisation masks "the continuing reality of gender inequality" (2002, p. 2).

It is useful at this point to reflect briefly upon the gendering of 'the profession' as a discursive construct. The modern sense of the profession emerged from Anglo-American modern industrial societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Freidson, 1983; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006; Torstendahl, 1990) and can be understood as one of the effects of the transition to modernity, which itself is a deeply gendered phenomenon (Felski, 1995). The effect of this history has been to embed the professions in "a specific historical and cultural construction of masculinity and a masculinist vision of professional work", at best sidelining or, at worst, excluding women's work from the domain of the professional by

"repressing…those qualities culturally assigned to femininity" (Davies, 1996, pp. 669, 672). While many of the explicit prohibitions on women's entry into the professions have been dismantled, the gendering of professions continues to shape workplace cultures and practices, albeit in more subtle – and sometimes imperceptible – ways.

Witz (1992) provides a useful framework for making sense of the persistence of the profession as a gendered construct. She describes developments in the tradition of the sociology of work that have argued the need to regard professions as processes or projects of occupational closure that marshal exclusionary and demarcatory strategies, such as accreditation and membership criteria, in the service of controlling access to and regulating professional practice. In doing so, professional projects "establish a monopoly over the provision of skills and competencies in a market for services" (Witz, 1992, p. 64). Building upon this framework, she argues that exclusionary and demarcatory strategies have enforced both class and gender boundaries of the professions.

The masculinisation of the professions has played out in myriad ways but has manifested perhaps most obviously in the demarcation of 'the professional' from 'the technical,' which "turn[s] upon…the encirclement of women within a related but distinct sphere of competence in an occupational division of labour" (Witz, 1992, p. 47). This demarcation is visible in occupations where women make up the majority of the practitioners. 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, p. 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'. The separation of these public relations functions is typical of the gendered processes implicit in professionalisation, whereby women are assigned certain roles within professions precisely by the "distinction between technical and objective skills and socially constructed skills where historical processes of sex typing have become crystallized" (Davies, 1996, p. 662).

From a gender perspective, it is significant that the drive towards the professionalisation of public relations gained momentum in the 1980s, because it coincides with the entry of large numbers of women into the public relations workforce. That is, for the public relations industry, professionalisation and feminisation were co-emergent and therefore mutually constitutive phenomena. Indeed, we argue that the industry's promotion of itself as a profession, primarily through professional associations but also through its inclusion in university curricula and scholarship, is in part a response generated by a concern about the feminisation of the public relations industry. In the 1980s, if the perception of public relations' status as a profession was already – despite Grunig and Hunt's optimism that public relations was "a young profession … approaching true professional status" (1984, p. 4) – tenuous, this was only exacerbated by the rapid feminisation of the industry in the same era. The increase in women mapped onto and amplified pre-existing anxieties about both public relations' claim to be a legitimate profession and the role and influence of public relations in organisational settings and corporate structures.

The response to this dilemma of claiming professional status for an increasingly feminised industry was paradoxical. On the one hand, recognising that public relations' communicative function signified within business cultures as 'feminine' (as opposed to other business functions, such as management, that signified as 'masculine' or 'men's work'), scholars sought to promote 'feminine' values as integral to the success of business. Simultaneously, given that the achievement of professional status requires demonstrable

capacity to serve the public interest, scholars upheld supposedly 'feminine' values such as 'ethics', 'responsibility', and 'symmetrical communication' as strengths that would guarantee the industry's recognition as a profession. For example, L. Grunig et al. claimed "feminist values may provide the necessary foundation for learning about public relations ethics" and include "the values of diversity, sensitivity and nurturing" (2000, p. 64). Public relations scholars thus sought to appropriate feminine values in support of their quest for full professional status, and in doing so, operated to ascribe positive value to an increasingly feminised industry (see, for example, Grunig. Toth & Hon, 2000; Sha, 2001). However, these essentialist approaches elide the ways the reproduction of these gendered discourses reinforces existing power relations.

On the other hand, the push to professionalise resulted in a highly gendered division of labour within the industry. A key component of Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations lay in distinguishing the 'technical' functions from specialist 'managerial' or 'strategic' functions, which would accord the industry professional and management status. These models underpinned the development and theorisation of public relations roles, and quickly gained widespread acceptance both within the industry and scholarship. Industry surveys conducted in 1979, 1985, and 1991 in the US confirm that women were more likely than men to work in the technician role (Broom, 1982; Broom & Dozier, 1986; Dozier & Broom, 1995). In response to the 1991 survey, Grunig, Grunig and Dozier concluded that over-representation of women in technical roles "had more to do with years of professional experience and length of time with an employer, than gender" (2002, p. 203). However, in doing so, they make the assumption that 'gender' can be separated neatly from levels of professional experience and employer loyalty and proffer an explanation that rationalises the problem in terms of women's individual employment histories. In doing so, they downplay the gendered basis of the industry. Given the gender biases structuring work cultures in the

6

1980s, the adoption of the role dichotomy in public relations unfolded along gendered fault lines.

### Inside the postfeminist ghetto: Australian public relations today

Research in feminised occupations suggests that professional status and recognition in those occupations remains elusive. In one of the few studies investigating feminisation in Australian public relations, Rea found cause for optimism, concluding that "feminisation of public relations probably has few disadvantages for women and is overall advantageous" (Rea, 2002, p. 6). She suggests that it is "one area where gender equity has become a reality", although more evidence is needed to determine if feminisation has had an adverse impact on the industry (Rea, 2002, p. 1). However, focusing on increased employment opportunities and some high profile positions for women within the public relations industry in Australia does not fully consider the implications of a highly gendered industry. The following examples demonstrate that, just as in the US, the inclusion of women in numbers in the industry does not equate to 'gender equity'. Rather, these examples suggest that a certain 'gender blindness' remains within Australian public relations.

Although women make up the majority (73 percent) of members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia [PRIA] (J. Kenny, personal communication, September 14, 2010), they are under-represented in the most senior membership category, the fellows. Admission to this category is by invitation only and recognises outstanding service to the public relations profession (PRIA, 2010). The proportion of female fellows is only 39.5 percent, just over half of the proportion of female members (J. Kenny, personal communication, September 14, 2010). This discrepancy highlights that although women are well-represented in associate and general membership categories, the inclusion of women in greater numbers in the industry has not resulted in a similar representation in the most senior, prestigious membership category. Industry surveys suggest similar trends in that despite the fact that three-quarters of public relations practitioners in Australia are women, men tend to dominate in senior positions and are paid more than women in equivalent roles ("An industry of equals", 2009; Mercer Human Resource Consulting, 2004).

In the academy, public relations struggles for full recognition as a scholarly discipline (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006). It has this in common with other newer, more vocationally oriented disciplines (such as nursing, teaching, business, IT and media industries), not all of which are highly feminised (although in the case of IT and possibly business, still highly gendered). However, Meerebau (2006) found that the nursing academy (as a highly feminised occupation) had a lower status than the medical academy, particularly when it involved research quality audits where nursing journals and research outputs are lowly ranked. It is hard not to draw a parallel to the Australian public relations academy where public relations journals suffer a low ranking in the current Excellence in Research for Australia journal ranking exercise and are deemed to be a sub-discipline of marketing (Australia Research Council, 2010). This is despite the fact that the majority of public relations programmes in Australia are in communication rather than business schools[1]. Although Australian public relations courses have successfully attracted large numbers of undergraduate students, the discipline has been less successful in terms of the traditional indicators of academic prestige such as attracting competitive grants, publishing in highly ranked international journals, or developing strong postgraduate research programmes (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006). The lack of academic legitimacy for public relations is of course not wholly attributable to its highly feminised industry. Indeed, Hatherell and Bartlett (2006) point out that its problems stem partly from its perceived industry and skills focus. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore that public relations, in common with other highly feminised occupations, lacks academic legitimacy in comparison with more established professions.

Earlier in this article, we argued that the reproduction of gender hierarchies within the industry relates to public relations' professionalisation imperative. Transforming

the gendered foundations of the public relations industry and practice is not a straightforward task, particularly in light of the gender complexities shaping the contemporary cultural milieu in what McRobbie (2009) describes as the era of 'postfeminism'. McRobbie understands postfeminism as "a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined…while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (2009, p. 12). McRobbie views postfeminism as a "complexification of the backlash thesis" (2009, p. 11) in that it "suggest[s] equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that [feminism] is no longer needed" (2009, p. 12). Thornton concurs, arguing "the rhetoric of post-feminism and free choice…very effectively erases the political" (2010, p. 97).

Despite face value acceptance of women's place in and value to the industry, the following examples illustrate how public relations has proven susceptible to the workings of postfeminist positions. This postfeminist tendency often takes expression in (sometimes inadvertent) omissions in the industry's practices of self-representation, which reproduce a gendered notion of public relations. In this sense, in Witz's terms, such events and histories function as important exclusionary strategies in the process of gendered occupational closure.

The first example dates from 2005 when a marketing flyer and e-zine promoting the PRIA national conference featured 10 presenters – all men. In an email to one of the authors, the state president responsible for the conference responded by asserting that the "biggest 'names' we could attract were male" (D. Donohue, personal communication, August 22, 2005). In addition, the state president wrote:

> I can honestly say that I hadn't stopped and looked at the gender balance of the featured speakers at the conference…it's a mixture of coincidence, luck and timing that leaves us where we are – with what is a strong line-up of speakers that members have asked to hear with a gender imbalance

created by circumstances beyond our control. (D. Donohue, personal communication, August 22, 2005)

Framing the overwhelming masculinity of the conference line-up as the unintended consequence of "coincidence, luck and timing" glosses over the question of gender. Further, the lack of consideration given to the gender balance of the featured speakers typifies the postfeminist position, which assumes that explicit consideration of 'the gender question' is no longer necessary. In highlighting this example, our intention is not to single out particular individuals. Rather, we argue that this example is symptomatic of a more generalised lack of reflexivity in the industry about gender relations and about why, in this instance, the biggest names, or speakers with the most "interesting things to say" happened to be men.

Similarly, a recent book, *Pride and Prejudice: Conversations with Australia's Public Relations Legends* (Morath, 2008), includes only one female 'legend' out of the nine 'pioneers' interviewed. The author acknowledges that she did not achieve the gender balance she originally planned, citing three reasons:

> One, most of the people who worked as practitioners in the early days of public relations in Australia were men.
>
> Two, as much as I would have preferred to balance the sexes in the book a little, it would have been misrepresenting reality.
>
> Three, my attempts to do exactly that were thwarted when most of the women I approached didn't return my phone calls or meet reasonable, often extended deadlines (for the record, all men contacted returned my calls). I regret I could not include their insights. (Morath, 2008, pp. 20-21)

Morath's explanation is ambiguous; it appears that, despite the claim there were few female practitioners in the early days of public relations in Australia, the author had identified a number of women practitioners worthy of inclusion. However, the poor response of female practitioners to requests for an interview

notwithstanding, the omission of female voices from such a text raises questions about the implications of constructing gendered histories for the field. Histories, that all but exclude the work performed by women in the public relations industry in the 1970s and 1980s, reproduce for the industry a highly gendered professional history and identity.

Ironically, and despite the highly gendered masculine industry representations of the previous examples, one consequence of the feminisation of public relations is the perception that a lack of men in the industry is a problem. In a commentary piece 'A few good men: Gender balance in the Western Australian public relations industry' published in *PRism*, Smith (2005) outlined the research direction for his doctorate. His aim was to uncover "the underlying factors as to why there are increasingly so many women (and concomitantly, so few men) in public relations" (Smith, 2005, pp. 1–2). In his thesis, *The Predominance of Women in Public Relations*, Smith resorts to essentialist explanations for women's numerical dominance when he concludes that "women are better suited to a career in public relations" on account of their superior communication skills (2006, p. 218). He argues that the perception of public relations as "soft…need[s] to be corrected among males" and calls for public relations "to be presented in a more serious light in order to attract more males" (Smith, 2006, p. 221). Smith's focus on the perception that public relations is not "serious" enough to attract men recognises neither the implicit gendering of the industry nor his own complicity in reproducing the very same gendered assumptions that underpin the problem he describes.

These three examples: the promotion of all-male key speakers at a national conference; the construction of a predominantly male history of Australian public relations; and, scholarly research calling for public relations to improve its image to attract more males, are typical of postfeminist approaches to understanding – or more precisely, failing to comprehend – the gendered nature of public relations. While women continue to make up the numerical majority in public relations, as Davies noted, "this *inclusion* [of women in professions] is masked in a discourse of gender that lies at the heart of professional practice itself" (1996, p. 663). We cannot ignore the gendering of public relations. It accounts for the relative lack of women at the most senior membership levels within the professional association. It also contributes to the lower status of public relations within the academy. The public relations industry and academy need to proceed with greater vigilance around addressing the mechanisms, institutional processes, and questions of power, which have resulted in the profound gendering of the field.

## Conclusions

This article has traced the ways that concerns with the feminisation of the public relations industry, alongside the push towards professionalisation, have operated to reinscribe patriarchal gender relations within the public relations industry and academy since the 1980s. Because the drive for professionalisation has unfolded without due attention to the broader social contexts that shape the industry's gendering – contexts that include the entry of increasing numbers of women into the workforce, changing gender roles, and the subsequent anti-feminist backlash – it has fed into and consolidated (albeit inadvertently) a bifurcated gender order within the industry that privileges masculinity.

As we have suggested, the industry's self-representations frequently unfold through the lens of postfeminism, reproducing the demarcatory and exclusionary strategies of gendered occupational closure. The result is highly gendered histories and conference line-ups, which are rarely challenged. Precisely because women constitute the majority of public relations students, practitioners and professional association members, gender has ceased to be a focus for analysis and theory[2]. Even in the academy, the lack of disciplinary status for public relations stems in part from the feminisation of the field.

The fact that public relations continues to be a female-intensive industry means that it constitutes an opportunity to reconceptualise the gendering of public relations and of professional projects more generally. However, leveraging this potential is dependent upon

9

careful thinking through of the ways that the public relations industry and academy are embedded within broader structures of gendered power and meaning. In particular, as we have suggested, it is crucial that the public relations industry and academy address the complex intersections between feminisation and professionalisation. Without strategies to target the patriarchal gender relations shaping the industry today, the effects of this gendering will continue to plague public relations' struggle for academic legitimacy and professional recognition.

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12

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[1] No public relations journal received an 'A' ranking. The only Australian public relations journal, the *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Relations*, is given a 'C' ranking and *PRism* (which is now published in New Zealand but started as an Australian journal) is ranked 'C'. Even international journals such as the *Journal of Public Relations Research* and the *Journal of Communication Management* are ranked 'C', while the *Public Relations Review* is ranked 'B'. In addition, all journals are categorised as marketing journals under the 'field of research', disadvantaging public relations researchers working in communication schools and denying public relations its own field of research.

[2] Australian feminist scholars have noted that many academic disciplines have begun to overlook gender and fail to identify with feminist concerns (Curthoys, 2000; Simic, 2010).