

---

## Re-encountering the PR man

---

Paul Elmer, Leeds Metropolitan University

---

### Introduction

I was in my late thirties, and had enjoyed several years of success, doing interesting and challenging work in roles that made this prospective job a logical step. My résumé and application form were impressive enough to get me through the first round of selection and I had prepared well for the interview, rehearsing the likely line of questions and researching the organisation and reflecting on my experiences in relation to the job in prospect. I also undertook the ritual dressing-up that accompanies job interviews, so as I left my hotel room and walked the short distance to the office headquarters, I was wearing a well-cut business suit, freshly pressed, hand-made English leather shoes, a silk tie in a Windsor knot, a fine cotton shirt, and silver cufflinks. I sported a restrained style of watch from a reputable brand, wore no other jewellery, and had nothing in my pockets that would spoil the line of my suit. I walked calmly, held myself erect.

Unconsciously, I had mastered other techniques, too, so that I knew how to generate a slight smile on my lips and in my eyes when talking or presenting, knew how to talk in a measured but lively timbre, making my voice rise and fall, speed up and slow down, in an accent modulated to remove almost all traces of regional origin in favour of a generic metropolitan type of British English. These dispositions, learned but not consciously affected, had previously served me well enough as I performed the role of the confident and competent public relations man.

Yet I knew, immediately and with certainty, as I stepped across the threshold and into the room, that the job would not be mine. As I calmly walked the five or six

paces towards the interview panel, I saw in the faces of the three panel members, first surprise, and then disappointment. They looked up to greet me with a smile, then suddenly looked down at their papers, then at each other, frowning and slightly confused. Despite my preparations, I had failed.

At the time, I appeared about a decade older than my years. Over the course of my life I have seldom been judged physically attractive; I was, and remain, pale skinned, with a stocky stature, a broad face, a double chin and a paunch. I was virtually bald, and what little hair remained was prematurely grey. My potential employers had seen an application that spoke of almost precocious success, early responsibility and a dynamic career trajectory, and had imagined what such a candidate might look like. Had we been able to ask this group about their expectations and understandings of the person they would appoint to a high status public relations job, they may not at first have been able to describe an appearance, a way of walking, or talking. The expectation that those are the not the selection criteria that are to be applied in formal selection processes is so ingrained in formal organisational understandings that they may not have been able to agree, or admit, beforehand the precise formulation of gender, sexual orientation, body shape, hairstyle, racial background, accent, education or social class that they had in mind, even though it is most likely that all these would have fallen within a fairly narrow range of possibilities. Yet they knew what their future employee did not look like. He did not look like me. They knew it, and I knew it, and in the short walk from door to interview chair, we all understood it. Nothing I said, or could have said, could erase the tacit agreement that had been reached in those first few seconds.

As sometimes happens at these events, after my interview I encountered the man who, it

transpired, they were looking for. As candidates, we met briefly in one of the anonymous corporate anterooms reserved for brief lulls in the selection process. This successful man was handsome and square-jawed, a youthful-looking forty-something years old, far taller than me, with a full head of dark hair, his face tanned and lean. The crisp lines of his suit hang gracefully over a body that appeared trim and well-proportioned. I hated him immediately and instinctively, and continued to hate him throughout the brief period of downheartedness that accompanied the receipt of my inevitable job rejection letter.

Thus my interest in some of the less well-documented aspects of the public relations labour market was born. Over subsequent years I found myself examining the working lives of public relations workers, men and women alike, and interrogating the personal dispositions that accompany those who succeed, particularly those who gain and maintain high occupational status. By exploring the connections between the type of work that we do, and the type of people we become, my aim is to develop an understanding of occupational self-hood. In that task, it becomes impossible to avoid an encounter with labour in terms that are embodied, gendered, and which engage with routines and practices of the occupational self that involve forms of sexualised and emotional labour, too. Reflecting on my job interview offers a way to introduce the importance of these dispositions in the construction of the occupational self, and their importance in the labour market. The job interview engages the salient features of the discussion in a brief experience; it is an attempt by the practitioner to secure a license to practice, which involves gaining the client's favour, and it brings together the disposition of a person in a labour market in ways that highlight the insecurity of tenure, uncertain standards, and competition, that characterise the market for this type of work (Bourdieu, 1984).

I subsequently embarked on a study of public relations work and workers in the UK,

in order to explore some of these issues further. In doing so, I relied on an explanatory framework drawn from the sociology of work and the sociology of the person, and used an auto-ethnographic approach to text, bringing into play my own experience as an interpretive tool. I had worked in public relations. I also, over the years, worked as a butcher, a soldier, a musician, a benefits clerk, a wine salesman, a journalist and a university lecturer. Each of these occupations resulted in my performing 'being me' in different ways. Beyond the apparently mundane observation that the working routines necessary to prepare and deliver animal carcasses for consumption are quite different from the ones used to prepare and deliver undergraduate lectures for consumption, there were other factors involved that brought these various roles to life as distinctive social performances. My social relationships with others, the way I enacted my emotional responses and my social class, the way I dressed, moved and spoke, were all performed differently according to the work I was doing. I experienced movement not so much from job to job, but from one world of techniques to another; each occupation prompted different repertoires of behaviour in ways connected with, but not limited to, the job. I could not avoid noticing this, and questioning it. Subsequently, I was able to recognise my own labour in sociological terms, as embodied, emotional, sexualised, classed and gendered, and to frame the work of others in a similar way.

I was not alone in looking at work, or at the performance of the occupational self, in these ways, and such approaches are already well established as distinctive strands of enquiry (for example in Shilling, 2003, 2007; Crossley, 2007; Nixon, 2003; Pettinger, Parry, Taylor & Glucksmann, 2005). This paper re-introduces the gendered quality of public relations labour by focusing on the experiences of a public relations man, in ways that complement and contrast with work on the experiences of female public relations workers. It illustrates how gendered styles of labour affect public relations men, and offers to balance accounts of gendered labour that marginalise male

experiences in favour of female accounts. It provides an impetus for scholarly enquiry into the forms that masculinity acquires in public relations labour, with regard to work that is embodied, emotional or sexualised.

While previous accounts of male working practices and culture include studies of managers (Roper, 1994) and advertising workers (Nixon, 2003; Mort, 1996), the male experience in public relations has remained under-explored. Accounts of gender in public relations studies have tended to adopt feminised perspectives, with the result that while we have learned more about the experiences of female workers, their male counterparts have not been subjected to the same scrutiny (Grunig, 1993; Grunig, Toth and Hon, 2001; Toth and Cline, 1989). Women's' experiences continue to frame the debate and have exposed the ways that public relations labour involves performances of gender within a form of labour that is at once economic and cultural (Tsetsura, 2004; Lash and Urry, 1994). However, it is important to remind ourselves that men and women alike enact public relations labour, and that our understanding may be advanced by re-encountering the public relations man on new terms.

### **Embodied labour**

Discussion of embodied labour has enjoyed a modest boom, supported by increasing interest in the sociology of the body, so that it is no longer unusual to consider that achieving position within an occupation might require us to master certain ways of dressing, standing, sitting, eating, talking, and so on. This has come to light particularly in studies of workers where the person is treated as integral to the service that is being provided, as it is in public relations work (Tsetsura, 2004; Bourdieu, 1984). My own anxieties over my body shape reflect not just social norms, but the increasingly well-documented idea that achieving a certain shape or style of face or body forms part of the selection process for some workers (Shilling, 2003, 2007). My own interview memory also reflects my own culturally-

rooted views about the style of embodiment that would be preferred in a public relations man in England, but by no means all the subjects in my own recent study depended on embodied labour that required them to be 'tall, dark and handsome enough' for the job. Instead, what emerged was a range of embodied dispositions, which in turn evidenced a complex performance of self in a relational labour market.

### **Emotional Labour**

Hochschild's (1983) landmark study of airline stewards and the techniques they adopt in presenting the occupational self to customers, allows us to reflect on the ways that learned techniques of the self are sometimes adopted in ways that may appear unconscious, and sometimes adopted consciously and in conflict with other emotion rules. The terms emotion work and emotional labour have subsequently been developed, mainly but not exclusively in the context of feminised labour. When I began to examine public relations men under the same light, it seemed that their experiences also followed a similar pattern.

In some regards, I found that working in public relations was little different from many other jobs. I mastered the conventions of social and business politeness; I bit my tongue, smiled and acquiesced to my client, boss or minister when I was overruled, but then promptly denigrated them to other public relations workers, occasionally cruelly, when their back was turned. Such labour, immature though it seems on reflection, forms part of the routines of practice that public relations men enact. Like me, they claimed a close working relationship with the client on the one hand, but also infantilised them. For example, in one job I would direct staff to simplify complex advice to some directors, saying: 'Never give a child a choice'. I saw how other men, like me, occasionally reframed their own career paths as independent of the very clients that sustained them, a blank denial of the power that patronage exerts and the variety and range of labour required to sustain it. None of these is unique to public relations, and nor is the list

exhaustive, yet these behaviours remain under-observed.

### **Sexualised labour**

While sexualised labour has only begun to emerge into the margins of feminised discussions of public relations labour, it may be a mistake to restrict interest to the female experience. Men, too, may engage their sexuality to perform an occupational role, and within the labour process. Adopting techniques of the self that lead to the worker being judged as sexually attractive, and hinting at sexual availability, are not uniquely female concerns, especially within a labour contract that engages with the self as part of the service offered. Flirtatious behavior, for example, emerged as one of the routines of practice enacted by male and female public relations workers alike. This does not imply that public relations is sex work, only that the sexual aspects of the self that it engages could be acknowledged more fully and accounted for with more attention than at present.

Looking back, I think I understood some of the expectations of the labour market long before I had access to tools that theorise them. In the UK Government I habitually rode a powerful motorcycle and would arrive at meetings clad head to toe in black leather. Initially this was due to transport problems, but I realised that when I attended meetings in this way they tended to go well. My advice was favoured; I was more successful in claiming my licence to practice, protected to a greater extent from competing views and encroachment from other occupations. Reflecting on that experience now, I would suggest that colleagues were responding to the peculiar norms of a very specific labour market, within which public relations men who performed the role of 'tough guy' were able to secure and sustain favourable positions. I did not analyse it at the time, but I understood it by experiencing its effects. Had I understood it more completely I may perhaps have exploited it – and numerous other instances – to better advantage in my career.

However, before such knowledge can be turned to useful account, academic research is needed to develop an understanding of the specific styles of masculinity that attend public relations labour, and the highly situated, relational nature of the labour market within which it is performed. In doing so, debates about male and female experiences can complement as well as challenge each other to provide a more adequate account of practices, in a labour market that is both situational and performative.

### **References**

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Crossley, N. (2007). Researching embodiment by way of 'body techniques'. In C. Shilling (Ed.), *Embodying sociology: Retrospect progress and prospects*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Grunig, L. A. (1993). The 'glass ceiling' effect on mass communication students. In P. J. Creedon (Ed.), *Women in mass communication* (pp. 276-300). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Grunig, L. A., Toth, E. L., & Hon, L. (2001). *Women in public relations: How gender influences practice*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lash, S., & Urry, J. (1987). *Economics of sign and space*. London: Sage.
- Mort, F. (1996). *Cultures of consumption*. London: Routledge.
- Nixon, S. (2003). *Advertising cultures*. London: Sage.
- Pettinger, Parry, J., Taylor, R. F., & Glucksmann, M. (2005). *A new sociology of work?* Oxford: Blackwell.

Roper, M. (1994). *Masculinity and the British organisation man since 1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shilling, C. (2003). *The body and social theory* (2 ed.). London: Sage.

Shilling, C. (Ed.). (2007). *Embodying sociology: Retrospect progress and prospects*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Toth, E. L., & Cline, C. G. (Eds.). (1989). *Beyond the velvet ghetto*. San Francisco: IABC Research Foundation.

Tsetsura, E. (2004). *Social construction of identity by female Russian public relations practitioners*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New Orleans Sheraton, New Orleans, LA. Retrieved 26.5.2009 from [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p112701\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p112701_index.html)

#### **Author contact details:**

Paul Elmer  
Principal Lecturer in Public Relations and  
National Teaching Fellow  
Leeds Metropolitan University  
p.elmer@leedsmet.ac.uk

#### **Copyright statement:**

The author of this article has elected, in the interests of open dissemination of scholarly work, to provide this article to you in open access format. This means that, in accordance with the principles of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>), you may freely copy and redistribute this article provided you correctly acknowledge its author and source, and do not alter its contents.