



“Outnumbered yet still on top, but for how long?” Theorizing about men working in the feminized field of public relations



Donnalyn Pompper*, Taejin Jung

Temple University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 April 2013

Received in revised form 17 August 2013

Accepted 21 August 2013

Keywords:

Gender

Feminization

Masculinity

Men

Public relations

ABSTRACT

The under-researched phenomenon of men working in the feminized field of public relations is investigated using the theory of gendered organizations and feminist and masculinity studies lenses. Survey, interview, and focus group findings illuminate the field's gender paradox wherein men report negative effects of gender-minority status at entry- and mid-levels and worry about a future when women will replace them at public relations' highest management levels.

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1. Introduction: probing a puzzling gender paradox

Paradoxically, men dominate top hierarchies while women are concentrated at lower levels in public relations. Rarely is a gender lens turned toward men in public relations unless the goal is to benchmark women's ongoing struggles to overcome hiring, salary, and promotion-to-management biases. Theorizing how organizations become gendered, Acker (1990) critiqued division of labor between male/female and masculine/feminine through advantage/disadvantage and exploitation/control. Britton (2000) extended the argument to suggest that researchers should investigate implications of “occupations dominated by one sex or the other” (p. 430). In the U.S., a 70% majority of women work below a glass ceiling (PRSA/IABC Salary Survey, 2000), earning less than men who dominate upper levels (Dozier & Sha, 2010). In the UK, nearly 2/3 of CIPR's 1564 members are women while the nearly one-third of men work in the top hierarchies (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2011) out earning women (Bussey, 2011). Male practitioners also are outnumbered in Asia (Simorangkir, 2011), Australia (De Bussy & Wolf, 2009), and Europe (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2012).

Beyond numbers, labeling of the gender trend phenomenon has implications for public relations. Prior to the 1980s, U.S. men represented the universal public relations worker so that studies conducted back then may be considered research about men even when gender was not the explicit object of study (Grunig, 2006). A *Public Relations Review* special issue on “gender issues in public relations” classified gender as “. . . one of the most contentious issues facing public relations today. . .” (Grunig, 1988, p. 5), yet none of the articles' foci were men. In probing U.S. public relations' 1980s gender shift, the field was proclaimed “feminized” (Cline et al., 1986, p. I-2), and although the term was not defined, it endures as a label while other fields describe the phenomenon using *female concentrated* (Lupton, 2006), *female dominated* (Heickes, 1991), and *gender typed* (Wright, 1997).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 215 204 7894.

E-mail addresses: dpompper@temple.edu (D. Pompper), Taejin.jung@oswego.edu (T. Jung).

A prevalence of women in public relations has been considered positive and even though published critics have been few, some have critiqued cumulative effects of gender-difference emphases. The field is “healthier because of this feminist bias” (Papinchak, 2005, p. 323) and perhaps more ethical (Sha, 2001). On the other hand, prophecies include a chilling effect for young men (Lesly, 1988), credibility problems which could lead to encroachment (Lauzen, 1992), and perceptions that women are “usurping men’s roles” (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001, p. 172). Despite advice to give equal voice to experiences of women and men (Toth, Serini, Wright, & Emig, 1998) and discovery of a “separate and equal sexes” outlook (Grunig, 2006, p. 119), gender has been essentialized. The current study was designed to fill a gap in our knowledge about men’s perceptions of public relations’ feminization trend.

2. Review of literature review

2.1. Gender in public relations

Gender is a set of norms reproduced by social processes and replicated through communication. Women more often are the focus of gender research (Kimmel, 2001) and in organizational communication research, “men are erased as the genderless norm” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. xiv); an oversight, given that “men have gender, too” (Mumby & May, 2005, p. 8). Public relations research findings suggest that men advance quicker to manager roles with greater remuneration than women (Grunig et al., 2001), perhaps due to attributes of self-promotion, aggression, and networking (Choi & Hon, 2002), while those most linked to women include event organizing (Bowen, 2003), communication (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007), micro-managing (Wu, 2006), efficiency and sensitivity (Choi & Hon, 2002). However, simplistic binary dualisms make no provision for men who possess feminine attributes, women who possess masculine ones, or any variation *within* gender groups. Perhaps this tradition took root with (Kanter, 1977) germinal finding that a top corporate manager’s image “elevates the traits assumed to belong to some men to necessities for effective management” (p. 22).

2.2. Masculinities and men’s satisfaction in public relations

Masculinity studies offers a useful lens for exploring men’s minority status in what is called a feminized field. A multi-faceted concept with meanings that flow over time, across cultures, and according to intersecting social identity dimensions, masculinity in its plural form is more appropriate (Kimmel, 2001). Men have created alternative success models (Lane, 2009) in response to economic uncertainty, rising numbers of working women, and a feminist movement that altered the male-as-breadwinner rationale for power maintenance (MacKinnon, 2003). Acker (1990) critiqued ways that organizations become predisposed to valuing men over women: “[M]asculinity always seems to symbolize self-respect for men at the bottom and power for men at the top, while confirming for both their gender’s superiority” (p. 145). Because masculinity construction is context specific and fostered in relation to subordinated groups, we know that not all masculinities are equally privileged and that there is no one ideal (Connell, 1987).

Since organizational context shapes “gendered acts” (Mills & Chiaramonte, 1991, p. 381) and contributes to social identity construction (Pompper, 2012), it is useful to examine men’s intersecting social identity dimensions in public relations’ broad practice arenas. Ethnic minority practitioners across gender reported lower job satisfaction ratings at corporations (Zerbinos & Clanton, 1993). Gay men in public relations reported struggling with being “out” at work (Waters & Tindall, 2012). Millennial-aged men working in agencies reported greater incidences of competition and conflict than their women counterparts (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012) and annual surveys of U.S. journalism and mass communication graduate findings consistently have shown that women are more likely to specialize in public relations than are men (Becker, Vlad, & Kazragis, 2011) and it is estimated that 80% of all public relations majors studying in U.S. colleges are women (Grunig et al., 2001). Decades of gender-roles research have yielded limited in-depth views of men’s perceptions in public relations. It seems that men initially were happier than women (Wright, Grunig, Springston, & Toth, 1991), but subsequently “seemed somehow sadder” than women as they talked about “dealing with cynicism, rejection, and disillusionment” (Serini, Toth, Wright, & Emig, 1997, p. 116), and perceived lack of respect and internal validation (Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, & Sha, 2008).

2.3. Men working in other women-concentrated fields

Organizations value masculinity more than femininity – and conflicts erupt when gender role expectancies are violated. Work thought to require feminine traits of nurturing, caring, and empathy is considered more appropriate for women so that men displaying these characteristics are perceived as unmanly (Wingfield, 2010). Effects for men include stereotyping, marginalization, low self-esteem (Adams, 2005), and a homosexual stigma (Heickes, 1991) when they work in women-concentrated fields as nurse, dentist, pharmacist, accountant, librarian, elementary school teacher, child care worker, clerical worker, social worker, and human resources manager (Cross & Bagilhole, 2002). To bolster their masculine identities and to help maintain workplace advantage over women, some men display a competitive killer instinct consistent with hegemonic masculinity norms (Henson & Rogers, 2001). Also, some men use gender privilege to seek horizontal job segregation from women and form sub-specialties (Snyder & Green, 2009), or ride a glass escalator surpassing women to higher levels and pay (Williams, 1992) – although effects vary for men of color (Wingfield, 2009).

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