



Talking back: Reflecting on feminism, public relations and research



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores feminism and public relations through the diverse perspectives of three public relations scholars seeking to understand what a critical-feminist research agenda might offer. It acknowledges that feminist public relations scholarship – at least until recently – is underdeveloped. Drawing on bell hooks' (1989) notion of talking back, this paper offers a conversation to explore tensions and debates around a feminist agenda for public relations. The discussion is structured around three broad themes: provocations, transgressions and resistance, and points to how feminist intelligences and modalities, in challenging gendered hegemonies, may open public relations scholarship and practices to new understandings.

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1. Introduction

In 2014, we were invited to present a panel session on feminist intelligence at the International Public Relations Conference: Barcelona PR Meeting #4, where scholars were asked to consider the idea of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006). Opening up public relations scholarship to hybrid, generative understandings (Haraway, 1991) of how gender relations play out in everyday interactions, formal organizational processes and governance structures is a radical political act. Feminist challenges to traditional public relations scholarship require “a practical politics of change and transformation whilst avoiding the problems of universalism, essentialism and privilege” (Thomas & Davies, 2005 p. 711). This paper explores our efforts to define “feminist intelligences” or modalities for public relations and, indeed, to grapple with what a feminist public relations research agenda might entail.

We have individual and diverse understandings of feminism and feminist theory, although we agree feminism is concerned primarily with two objectives: “The first is descriptive: to reveal obvious and subtle gender inequalities. The second is change-oriented: to reduce or eradicate those inequalities” (Martin, 2003, p. 66). We approached the topic differently and in ways that built on our existing understandings, research expertise and interests. Kate Fitch, drawing on her historical research into the Australian public relations industry (Fitch and Third, 2010, 2014) as well as contemporary public relations discourse, examined processes of professionalization in order to understand the construction of gendered occupational identities. Melanie James considered the application of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; James, 2014a), focusing on the gendered social force of public relations positioning acts and how the assignment and taking up of rights and

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duties inherent in positions is undertaken. Judy Motion drew upon her background as a critical scholar to problematize how power relations and discursive struggles play out in popular culture. As a starting point for our conversation we applied bell hooks' notions of "back talk" and "talking back" which "meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure, daring to disagree and sometimes just having an opinion ... it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (hooks, 1989, pp. 5, 8).

These notions of resistance offer a useful metaphor for our joint endeavor as we perceive feminist theory "offers a contingent politics of constant vigilance within power relations" (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 711) and that feminist methodology offers "a field of inquiry... bound together... by shared commitments to questions" (DeVault, 1996, p. 30). We therefore present this paper as a talking back to public relations scholarship that we argue has inadequately theorized the significance of gender. In recent years this has begun to change but, as Hon noted in 1995, "discrimination against women in public relations cannot be separated from the organizational and societal systems that produce gender biases" (1995, p. 65), and this remains the situation: "most public relations researchers who study gender have focused exclusively on a female/male dichotomy in salary and job satisfaction without considering other defining human relations factors" (Pompper, 2012, p. 89). Since the conference, we have had an ongoing discussion around these ideas. This paper represents a continuation of the conversation.

We have structured the paper in five sections. In the first section, we review feminist public relations scholarship and identify the paucity – at least until very recently – of critical perspectives. We also consider the use of creative methodologies in transformative work. We then present our individual contributions around three overarching themes: provocations, transgressions and resistance. In the final section, we discuss how we may back talk and talk back in order to participate effectively in power relations and claim space to work in feminist methods. As such, emerging from our disparate contributions is the beginnings of, and groundwork for, a feminist methodology for public relations.

2. Feminist perspectives and methodologies

There is no single or unified feminist movement or theory, which poses challenges in developing a feminist research agenda for public relations. The questions we raise in this paper are contingent on a critical research perspective that considers how power is manifest in society, in organizational structures, in institutional processes, and in occupational identities. The majority of feminist public relations scholarship from the 1980s onwards embraces liberal-feminist and, to a lesser extent, radical-feminist approaches (Fitch, 2015). With a few exceptions (see, for instance, Daymon & Demetrious, 2014 and Tindall & Waters, 2013), there is little research that adopts a truly critical perspective in terms of challenging the hegemonic assumptions around gender in public relations. Different research is needed, then, to explore precisely how gender, as a socially constructed identity (Butler, 1999), informs conceptualizations of public relations and its role in, and impact on, society. The failure to embrace a feminist methodology has "universalize[d] the experiences of men (and relatively privileged women)" (DeVault, 1996, p. 30). A critical feminist lens can challenge existing assumptions in public relations and investigate power and power relations, along with the structural processes that produce gendered discourse and practice. This approach may encourage better understandings of, for instance, the professionalizing structures embedded within masculine values that frame understandings of public relations expertise and knowledge; the need to apply a feminist agenda to positioning theory and its focus on rights and duties; and a critical feminist research agenda.

In line with our exploration of feminist intelligences, we adopt hybrid, critical methodologies to reconfigure ways of "ordering and valuing" (Lury & Wakeford, 2012, p. 1). We choose an anecdotal, conversational structure in this paper, recognizing anecdotes are both representative and constitutive (Michael, 2012). This method aligns with the approaches advocated by hooks (1989) who considered that revealing the personal, particularly in relation to attempts to silence debates, is fundamental to talking back. Considerations of configuration, an assemblage technique, enabled particular relations to be interrogated and rearranged as a mode of making and unmaking sense-making processes so that transformational possibilities may emerge (Suchman, 2012). Collectively, anecdotes and configuration offer a conversational research method for the interrogation of problems, incidents and experiences, and a creative starting point for political conversations about feminist intelligences.

3. Provocations: positioning and problematizing

In this section, we problematize a range of provocations in relation to feminist issues in, and for, public relations and critique personal experiences to highlight the urgent need for intensified feminist endeavors in public relations research.

MOTION I presented my first feminist paper at an international Corporate Reputation conference in 1998. The co-authored paper analyzed insurance advertisements targeted at women consumers and focused on the discursive framing of the advertisements and gendered assumptions about women's incomes. At the end of our presentation, a male academic, who was unknown to us, asked the following question: "Have you heard about divorce Barbie? She comes with all of Ken's things." We were stunned. As relatively inexperienced academics, we were puzzled by the anecdote and wondered how we could/should have responded. Was this someone who was going through a bitter divorce—were we expected to sympathize? Was it an extremely offensive joke – a cunning trap – in which if we laughed we undermined feminist principles and if we failed to laugh we were clearly humorless feminists? Or was it simply an attempt to police academic boundaries and marginalize our fledgling feminist work? For too long, this experience influenced the development of my own feminist

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