Differential gender orientation in public relations: Implications for career choices

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Abstract

Women have entered public relations at a much faster rate than men over the last two decades. Studies of the field show some gender segregation in PR, so it may not be accurate to generalize about the profession as a whole. This study surveyed PR students to determine whether specialty areas are perceived as gendered and the characteristics associated with male- and female-oriented areas. Findings indicated clear differences between “female” and “male” specialties, with their associated characteristics supporting values delineated in the feminist theory of public relations. Further, the study found that students consider gender orientation in selecting career paths.

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1. Introduction

For the past two decades, women have been entering the public relations profession at unprecedented rates (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000). By early 2002, 69% of the practitioners surveyed were female (PR Week Opinion Survey, 2002). Seventy to eighty percent of students in U.S. college public relations classes are women (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000). The purpose of this study is to determine whether gender affects future PR practitioners’ attitudes and career choices.

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Much research has attempted to discern how gender shifts in public relations affect the profession. Salary has long been a concern (Cline et al., 1986). Nearly half of respondents in Toth and Grunig’s (1993) survey worried that the increasing number of women in public relations would drive down salaries of all practitioners. In this case, perception is somewhat based in reality. Although salaries overall have not declined (Taff, 2003), women’s earnings remain below men’s (PR Week Opinion Survey, 2002).

Although female practitioners outnumber males, their distribution in the field is uneven and clearly defined by gender. In nonprofit organizations, women outnumber men by 3%, but men outnumber women 5% in higher-paying public relations jobs such as financial, industrial, or retail services (PR Week Opinion Survey, 2002). Corporations are considered to be the best-paid jobs; nonprofit organizations are the lowest paid area. Toth and Grunig (1993) found women were more involved in health care/hospital and social agency sectors than men. These findings suggest that it may be misleading to generalize public relations as a whole as a female-gendered field.

Public relations may have shifted from a male- to female-oriented profession in the last two decades, but it is far from the only occupation in which one gender outnumbers the other. Men have long dominated areas such as medicine, law, engineering, and finance, while women have been clustered in teaching, nursing, secretarial, and other “caring” professions. Grunig et al. (2000) concluded that "Directly or indirectly, many women are funneled away from the most high-status and lucrative fields to the less prestigious, poorer paying specialties" (p. 84).

1.1. Feminist theory of public relations

Scholars have developed a feminist perspective of public relations (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Hon, 1995). This theoretical research primarily focuses on how women and feminist values can benefit the industry, positing that feminist values are intrinsic to the public relations profession. Grunig, Toth, and Hon argue that public relations is an industry founded on feminist values, such as honesty, justice, and sensitivity, which will enhance the symmetrical communication patterns of public relations.

Furthermore, the two-way symmetrical model of public relations requires resolving conflict and building relationships, which are intrinsically feminist values (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000). Indeed, participants in other studies have reported differences between men and women practitioners’ approaches to, for example, negotiating abilities and the ability to get things done (Cline & Toth, 1993; Toth & Cline, 1991).

To add to the feminist theory of public relations (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2000; Hon, 1995), this study will attempt to determine what characteristics are associated with the male- and female-oriented specialty areas, including traits that would reflect feminist values. Specifically, we wondered what attributes are ascribed to male- and female-oriented specialties, and whether gender orientation is salient in determining students’ career aspirations.

2. Method

We conducted a survey of 113 PR students enrolled in public relations courses at Washington State University in fall 2001. Students had both male and female public relations instructors for their courses. Feminist PR theory was not a component of any of the courses. Like the national PR career surveys, 70% of the sample was female (n=79). Seventy-six percent said they intended to pursue a career in public relations.
The survey consisted of three sections. First, to determine what PR students consider when planning their careers, they evaluated 12 potential attributes of public relations specialty areas (See Table 1). A series of sets of 11 items describing 11 specialty areas comprised the second section of the survey. Specialty areas were derived from the categories indexed in the PRSA Blue Book and the monthly topics of O’Dwyer’s PR Services Report. Respondents evaluated each PR specialty area using seven-point semantic differential items that included their attitudes on the area’s economic outlook; its social values; its organizational characteristics; and the extent to which they perceived it was female-oriented or male-oriented. Using the same list of specialty areas, they were also asked to select their “ideal future position” in PR if they intended a public relations career.

3. Results

To better discern the degree of gender orientation of PR specialty areas, the “female-/male-oriented” item was coded with 0 as the neutral point and negative numbers representing greater femininity orientation (−1 to −3) and positive numbers greater male orientation (1–3). Beauty/fashion was the most female-oriented specialty, and sports was the most male-oriented. Six of the 11 specialties were rated female-oriented. Only international PR was gender-neutral. Subsequent t-tests indicated no difference in perceived orientation between male and female students, between junior and senior students, nor between students who had completed an internship and those who had not. Means of gender orientation for each specialty area are displayed in Table 1.

We then categorized the specialty areas into gender orientation (male, female, or neutral) by conducting pair-wise comparisons on the specialties with means nearest the neutral point. Nonprofit PR was significantly more female-oriented than entertainment—and thus the rest of the specialties, t(110) = 1.99, p = .049. High-tech PR was significantly more male-oriented than international PR, t(110) = 4.93, p < .001. Therefore, the specialty areas considered female-oriented were beauty/fashion, travel/tourism, and nonprofit PR. The male-oriented areas were sports, industrial, financial, and high-tech, with the re-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty/fashion</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>−1.68</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel/tourism</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>−.71</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>−.62</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>−.38</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health/medical/pharmaceutical</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>−.27</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverage</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>−.20</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-tech</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>1.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial/manufacturing</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>1.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Negative numbers indicate female orientation, positive numbers indicate male orientation.

* Specialty areas are significantly more female-oriented than the rest, p < .05.

** Specialty areas are significantly more male-oriented than the rest, p < .001.
Table 2
Mean characteristics by specialty areas’ gender orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Growing area</td>
<td>4.74 b</td>
<td>5.08 c</td>
<td>5.45 b,c</td>
<td>5.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for personal growth</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>4.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lots of competition for entry-level jobs</td>
<td>4.29 a,b</td>
<td>5.15 a,c</td>
<td>4.88 b,c</td>
<td>4.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prestigious</td>
<td>4.35 a,b</td>
<td>4.96 a</td>
<td>5.02 b</td>
<td>4.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research-oriented</td>
<td>4.49 a</td>
<td>5.01 a</td>
<td>4.75 b,c</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares about people</td>
<td>5.07 a</td>
<td>4.22 a,c</td>
<td>4.81 c</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse</td>
<td>4.94 a</td>
<td>4.34 a,c</td>
<td>4.75 c</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High salaries</td>
<td>3.65 a,b</td>
<td>5.25 a,c</td>
<td>4.94 b,c</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical management</td>
<td>4.28 a,b</td>
<td>4.84 a</td>
<td>4.69 b</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>4.80 a,b</td>
<td>4.43 a</td>
<td>4.44 b</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matching (a, b, c) letters on same row indicate significant difference between means, $p < .001$.

* Pairs are significantly different, $p < .05$.

** Pairs are significantly different, $p < .01$.

The means for the first three of the neutral items were negative (female), significance testing indicates those means may have occurred by chance.

Table 2 displays the means for each characteristic by gender orientation of the specialty areas, based on summed and standardized specialties. Nine of the 10 characteristics were significantly different when describing the female-oriented specialties than the male-oriented areas. High salaries produced the greatest difference, with male-oriented specialties’ average higher than female-oriented areas, $t(105) = 15.20$, $p < .001$. Male-oriented specialties were also rated significantly higher on prestigious, hierarchical management, research oriented, growing area, and lots of competition for entry-level jobs. Female-oriented specialty areas were perceived as significantly more ethical, diverse, and caring about people. Only opportunity for personal growth was rated the same regardless of gender orientation.

When female-oriented specialties were compared to gender-neutral areas, they were again significantly more ethical, diverse, and caring about people. Neutral areas were rated significantly higher than female-oriented areas on all remaining characteristics except personal growth. Gender-neutral specialties were significantly more caring, diverse, and as more of a growing area than male-oriented areas. Male specialty areas had significantly higher salaries, more hierarchical management, more competition for entry-level jobs, and were more research oriented. Neutral and male areas were nearly equally ethical, prestigious, and in opportunities for personal growth.

To understand criteria students used in evaluating specialty areas, we examined responses to the importance of 12 job attributes in considering a future position (operationalized on an 11-point scale). The mean scores of the items indicated that gender orientation was of comparatively low importance ($M = 5.19$, ranking 11th). Women ($M = 5.61$) were significantly more likely than men ($M = 4.21$) to consider gender orientation important, $t(111) = 2.92$, $p = .004$. The top-ranked attributes were opportunity for personal growth ($M = 8.68$), potential growth of the specialty ($M = 8.36$), and salary ($M = 8.23$).

Students indicated which of the specialties best described their ideal future position. Those responses were coded into male-oriented, female-oriented, or gender-neutral areas shown in Table 1. Neutral areas maintaining four specialties comparatively gender neutral. Though the means for the first three of the neutral items were negative (female), significance testing indicates those means may have occurred by chance.
were the most popular choices (38%), followed by male-oriented areas (25%), female-oriented specialties (23%), and other (unspecified; 13%). Chosen specialty areas were cross-tabulated with student gender. This indicated that, although female students were slightly more likely to select female-oriented than male-oriented specialties, males were far more likely to choose a male-oriented area than a female-oriented one, $\chi^2(3, N=86) = 20.29, p < .001$. Both males and females were equally likely to prefer the gender-neutral area.

4. Discussion

This survey of PR students indicates that college students categorize public relations specialties, characteristics of those areas, and qualities they seek in their own careers based on gender, regardless of whether they are conscious of this tendency. Clearly, the major limitation of this study is the fact that it was conducted at only one university, which may or may not be representative of PR programs across the country.

Feminist theorizing about public relations posits that the profession is inherently feminine in nature because of its purposes, practices, and attributes (Hon, 1995). Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the students surveyed rated more than half of the specialty areas in question toward the female-oriented end of the spectrum, though only three areas emerged as distinctively feminine. Of these, beauty/fashion is likely perceived female-oriented because the word “beauty” itself tends to be used in reference to women rather than men, and it has only recently become socially acceptable for men to show interest in products from the cosmetics industry. Nonprofit PR employs more women than men, so the gender orientation may be a reflection of students’ knowledge about the current state of the profession. The finding that travel and tourism was perceived as feminine is slightly perplexing, though it was rated low in hierarchical management, research orientation, and prestige, which is true for female-oriented specialties overall.

Only four areas were significantly more male- than female-oriented, and those specialties entail areas of expertise that have traditionally been within the male purview—technology, finance, sports, and industry. These findings support comments found in previous interviews with PR practitioners regarding gender segregation in the field (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). If professionals and students alike perceive that specialties involving mathematics, science, and physical exertion are gendered male, that misconception is likely based on differential educational expectations in these areas in the United States (Lee, Fredenburg, Belcher, & Cleveland, 1999).

More importantly, however, our findings reveal that public relations students do attribute different characteristics to those sectors they deem feminine or masculine. Students agreed that male-oriented sectors were higher-paying; what is surprising is that, despite this knowledge, female students were still more likely to choose female-oriented specialties for career opportunities. Female students may be more likely to seek out public relations areas that epitomize the feminist values, according to Grunig et al. (2000). Our findings support this assertion. Students identified female-oriented specialty areas as more ethical and more caring about people. It is frustrating to note, though, that these areas were also described as having significantly lower salaries than the male-oriented areas, which did not fare well in terms of ethics and caring.

Students also identified female-oriented specialties as being more diverse. Future research should try to determine if these specialties also attract more minorities because they are viewed as more caring and
ethical, since it seems these open-minded attributes would correlate with multiculturalism. Our sample was mostly white, so we were not able to determine whether men and women of color held the same attitudes toward the value of diversity as the white students. Future research should investigate whether the perceived gender orientations hold among varying populations who have had greater experience with, and likely appreciation for, goals such as diversity.

One problem with survey data such as these, however, is that of directionality. We have no way of knowing whether the students first determine that an area is female-oriented and then evaluate the characteristics associated with it based on what they believe is feminine, or if they make estimates about the characteristics and then assign a gender orientation. Clearly, understanding the process by which certain attributes are associated with gender orientation is vital in furthering the development of the feminist theory of public relations. There is an essential need for further research in this area.

Although the students we surveyed did not rate gender orientation of a specialty area as highly as other factors they would consider in evaluating career paths, women were significantly more likely than men to say that they did consider orientation. This suggests that the female students were cognizant that their gender may matter in terms of how quickly they advance within the field, as Farmer and Waugh (1999) suggested. Because men have had little reason to expect that being male would impair their progress or present obstacles such as sex discrimination or harassment, they may not elaborate on how gender relates to their choices.

That gender orientation does matter at some level is apparent in the students’ actual career intentions. Our findings indicate that students tended to select specialty areas that matched their gender, with males more likely to do so. Both genders selected the gender-neutral areas as those they were most interested in, however. The underlying explanation is likely that women and men are still socialized into gender roles that fit society’s expectations. It is unrealistic to expect that public relations alone can change the perceived gender orientation of such sectors. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon PR educators to emphasize that students should feel free to pursue any specialty they desire.

5. Conclusion

Much of the previous research on women in public relations has treated the field as fairly uniform across sectors. This study provides evidence that, in fact, the field is perceived to be diverse and that the feminization of public relations may be occurring to a greater degree in certain sectors than in others. More important, however, is the need to conduct research that will alleviate the dichotomous relationship between salary and feminist values such as diversity, caring, and ethics. Although this stereotype does not seem to increase with public relations education as students experience upper-division courses and internships, that education does not ameliorate pre-existing ideas. Nor does it appear that today’s college students will reduce age-old notions of feminine versus masculine, as they continue to be cognizant of gender orientation in selecting their career paths.

For a more complete report of methods and results, contact the first author at julie-andsager@uiowa.edu.

References


