Obstacles for Women's Future and Career in Public Relations: Feminine and Feminist Values as a "Friendliness Trap"?

Paper submitted for presentation at the ANZAC conference 2004 in Sydney, Australia.

(Stream: Organisational and Management Communication/Public Relations or Communication Education and Teaching)

by

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ABSTRACT:

At any rate, international studies have provided convincing evidence to support the feminization of public relations. However, the very high percentage of women who graduate from PR programs and the stable gender-switch which has taken place in the last two or three decades in employment has had no significant impact on the number of women actively employed in senior and leading positions in PR. In the majority of first world industrialized nations, the management positions in PR clearly continue to be male-dominated. The paper elaborates on the question which these facts provoke: Why are the stable numbers of women in PR training and employment not reflected in a clearly increasing share of women in leading positions? This theoretical contribution argues that theories like Aldoory’s (1998) ‘feminist model of leadership’ in public relations, Grunig, Toth and Hon’s (2000) concept of the ‘revolution of the heart’ and the hypothesis about “women as better/ideal communicators” link gender to strict, culturally determined stereotypes. They could force female PR practitioners into a fixed corset which will more than likely determine their behavior and their career. I argue that the image of woman in PR as “the better communicators” is a questionable and dangerous myth and I will explain why and how exactly it hinders women’s career in PR. Part of the story is that it imports the “mothering” role from home into the work place and thus creates a “friendliness trap” for female PR professionals which forces them to perform the “emotional labour”. The latter one however is associated with a lack of assertiveness, weak leadership skills and low status/prestige. Female PR practitioners who are constantly praised because of their particular skills and feminine expertise would perhaps not consider that these same skills could prove to be a disadvantage at some later point in their career. They fall into the ‘friendliness trap’ without even realizing it.
Obstacles for Women's Future and Career in Public Relations: Feminine and Feminist Values as a "Friendliness Trap"?

Since the mid-1980s, the communications sector has expanded at an amazing rate in virtually all industrialized nations, which have made the transition from an industrial to an information and communication society relatively rapidly. This process shows no signs of stopping and with it comes the demand for competent, trained communications and information experts. Women have particularly benefited from this development. In the face of increasingly high demand, they have been able to secure positions especially in public relations — until recently, traditionally a “men's profession”. Almost everywhere in the so called first world, the number of female PR practitioners has increased substantially in the last few decades, although, for the most part, the trend across countries shows striking differences. But at any rate, international studies have provided convincing evidence to support the ‘feminization’ of public relations (see for example Creedon; 1989, 1993; Fröhlich, 2001; Rea, 2002; Zowack, 2000).

The clearest example of this feminization trend can be seen in the USA. 90% of the members of the Public Relations Student Society of America are women (Wright et al, 1991). In Australia and Germany there is a similar trend of growing female PR students but at different rates. Depending on the country and its training system, the changing proportion of female versus male trainees is estimated anywhere from 68% in Germany (Fröhlich, 2001) to 80% in Australia (Rea, 2002). In the United States about 70% of all PR professionals are women (Aldoory & Toth, 2002). In Germany the female “boom” in the German Public Relations Society (Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft) has remained steady at 43per cent since the mid 1990s (cf. Fröhlich, 2001).1 The most important question is whether women really have made the successful quantitative strides in public relations as the figures from the educational sector would lead us to expect. The answer is ”No”. The very high percentage of women who graduate from PR programs as well as the very high number of female employees in the field has had no significant impact on the number of women actively employed in senior/management positions in PR. Despite the stable gender-switch which has taken place in the last two or three decades in PR education and employment, the management positions in
PR clearly continue to be male-dominated in the majority of first world industrialized nations.\textsuperscript{2} Aldoory and Toth (2002) write:

\begin{quote}
‘Over the past 10 years, gender discrepancies in hiring, salaries, and promotion have been found in quantitative and qualitative studies in public relations. Although there have been a few critics of these studies, surveys and focus groups continue to offer valid and reliable statistics and experiences attesting to the fact that, although the public relations profession is almost 70% women today, men are often favoured for hiring, higher salaries, and promotions to management positions’. (p. 103)
\end{quote}

The question which these facts provoke is: Why are the stable numbers of women in employment (and PR training!) not reflected in a clearly increasing share of women in leading management positions?

\textbf{Explanations}

That women appear to abandon their journey to the top of the corporate ladder is a process which has been witnessed in other professions. The reasons behind women’s “disappearing act” in professional careers are sufficiently well-known and are also true for women’s “disappearing act” in public relations: starting a family; the associated responsibilities of raising children; “double shifts” in career and home (cf. Rakow, 1989a); lack of support from home and from employers; discrimination through sex-role stereotyping; male-female interaction and/or social norms (Grunig, 1989); as well as greater control from management\textsuperscript{3}. However, I believe that these well-known reasons are not the only ones behind women’s “disappearing act” in public relations and I would like to direct attention to other possible causes. To answer the question of what reasons hinder women in PR to make progress and to get promoted up to the top, we first have to take a closer look at possible reasons which could account for the sudden increase of women in communication professions in general. A comparison of employment figures of women in European communication professions with the overall employment figures of women in the European labor force shows that the increasing number of women who have obtained high educational qualifications and who are

\textsuperscript{1} No statistics available for Australia. Rea (2002) estimates a share of at least 33% (p. 5).
\textsuperscript{2} For example: For the USA see Grunig, Toth & Hon (2001) for Germany Merten (1997) for Austria Zowack.
working in the media and communications sector is strikingly above average in terms of relevance of qualification to employment.\(^4\) I suppose, this is true also for other countries. The question therefore remains: what makes the field of communications so appealing to women?

One reason could be that having good communication skills is a particular, socially dependent and/or biologically determined trait that women possess (cf. Aries, 1976; Capek, 1989; Foss, Foss & Griffin, 1999; Hall, 1978, 1984; Reif, Newstrom, & Monczka, 1978; Sargent, 1981; Stier & Hall, 1984) and which makes them especially suited for a communication profession such as public relations. With these ideal qualities, it is said, women can rise to challenges typically found in these professions. Obviously, these qualities cannot simply be *learned* during academic education or training on the job like writing skills or special PR-techniques. Lana Rakow (1989a, b) supports the argument that it is exactly those positive qualities which are attributed to women in western culture and society, such as being able to establish and maintain intra-as well as interpersonal relationships at all levels (in both public and private situations), which comprise important pre-requisites for a successful career in the field of professions like journalism or public relations. Further, Larissa Grunig, Elizabeth Toth and Linda Childers Hon (2000) even juxtapose values supposedly associated with the feminine gender, for example, cooperation, honesty or fairness and morality, with the norms of public relations practice. Supposedly female characteristics in the fields of PR such as empathy, thoughtfulness, the need to reach consensus, a talent for dealing with people, and the ability to work in a team-oriented atmosphere, are all considered to be qualifications which could be used as career advantages in contrast to supposedly typical male characteristics such as cool rationality, competitiveness, aggression and individualism (cf. Aldoory & Toth, 2001).

In the case of public relations for example, it has been argued, that women’s “natural” intuition and profound sense of ethical responsibility, can potentially serve as catalysts for shaping the image of public relations as responsible, more efficient and more reputable (Bates, 1983; Rakow, 1989b; Wakefield, 1993; Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000). Within this context, Aldoory (1998) outlines her ‘feminist model of leadership’ in public relations and Grunig, Toth and Hon (2000: 63) even refer to a ‘revolution of the heart’.\(^5\)

\(^3\) See especially Löfgren Nilsson’s (1993) research on female journalists.

\(^4\) Own calculations with help of statistics from the EU (see [http://europa.eu.int/index_de.htm#](http://europa.eu.int/index_de.htm#)) and figures
The emphasis placed on gender-differences between men and women has traditionally functioned as a justification for the theory of male “superiority”, especially in the job market. In attempting to explain the “female boom” in the communications sector, the rationale looks different for the first time. The new emphasis is that (presumed) gender differences between men and women are used to argue that women seem better suited to working in the sector than men. But, as popular and apparently plausible as this explanation seems, communications researchers have never scientifically examined such a claim. The question then is to find out what really lies behind the presumption that women are better communicators.

Do women communicate better?

The field of psychology has released a preponderance of studies which have attempted to explain in general – without focusing on a specific profession – if there actually exist significant gender-related differences in behavior between women and men in the workplace and between them in general. Overt gender-specific differences in verbal and non-verbal communication skills between men and women seem to have diminished over the last two decades (Collaer & Hines, 1995). However, substantial evidence can be found to support the claim that women are well “equipped” with a series of socially determined skills that are precisely relevant for jobs in the communications field which is why they appear to be better suited to those professions than men. For example, it has been shown that during verbal interactions, women read non-verbal signals better and more accurately than men but they express non-verbal communication differently as well. Gender-specific differences expressed through non-verbal behavior allow women to appear to be more understanding, friendlier, kinder as well as generally more sensitive in social situations than men. Women’s non-verbal behavior also expresses more warmth and social approachability. They tend to send more non-verbal signals during verbal interaction, generally express more emotion and are less distant and territorial than men. (cf. Hall, 1978, 1984; Stier and Hall, 1984)

There are also differences in verbal behavior between men and women. Men tend to interact in more task-oriented, direct, dominant and hierarchical ways than women. Women tend to behave more cooperatively and are more supportive than men: they tend to be more concerned about the social climate in social situations, strive for consensus more often than
compliments and positive assessments than men (cf. Aries, 1976, 1987). During verbal interaction, women tend to be more dialogue-oriented, more honest, sensitive, fair, loyal, tolerant, co-operative and treat others on a more equal basis, than men (cf. Reif, Newstrom & Monczka, 1978; Sargent, 1981; Berryman-Fink, 1985).

It is undoubtedly true that worse things could happen to women working in public relations than to be casually regarded as being able to communicate better simply because of their friendly, polite, consensus-oriented behavior. However, gender-specific behavior is a result of gender-specific socialization as “girls” and “boys” and the different behavior patterns of men and women (in the workplace, for example) is also related to the fact that men and women have different social positions in society and their personal interactive and communicative behavior reflects their socially prescribed status. Alfermann (1996) suggests that:

‘Women, the group having the lower social status, are expected to be more socially sensitive in comparison to people with a higher social status, because these are the tools that would enable them to survive and function in society. Thus, being able to read important non-verbal signals would be an important requirement enabling them to function in the world. People with a higher social status, on the other hand, can afford to misinterpret information without running the risk of being rejected.’

(p. 139)

It can be speculated, then, that this “reading” strategy becomes more prevalent, the more clearly defined are the differences in social positioning. Symbolic as well as actual characteristics (such as power or higher income for example) associated with different positions also play an important factor. The corporate world, with its own fixed hierarchical system and elitist practices, is one such context, as is the communications profession public relations. I suggest that women’s “exceptional” communication skills are nothing more than the learned (if not always fully conscious) use of particular behaviors and strategies, acquired during childhood socialization which positioned them as less important than boys/men. In adulthood, then, this learned behavior principally serves the purpose of maintaining a harmonious atmosphere during the communication process in order to achieve personal goals and to prosper within the given system. Research conducted by behavioral scientists refers to such behavior as ‘conciliatory gestures’ (cf. Alfermann, 1996: 140).
How a career head-start turns into a "friendliness trap"

As a result of the thesis that women are better communicators, more importance will be attached to gender as a social category. Thus, gender will once again be linked to strict, culturally determined stereotypes. Theories like Aldoory’s (1998) ‘feminist model of leadership’ in public relations or Grunig, Toth and Hon’s (2000) ‘revolution of the heart’ could force female PR practitioners into a fixed corset – in this case the corset takes the form of the “ideal communicator” – which will more than likely determine their behavior. On the basis of the claim that women communicate better, PR women are expected to fulfill particular behavioral patterns and roles. This expectation is independent or even in contradiction to their personal skills which poses a problem. This could manifest as, for example, women PR practitioners being assigned to subjects which are “appropriate” for their gender and will be expected to remain within the confines of these prescribed roles. Any attempt to deviate from those roles will, in all probability, be prohibited.

Differences in verbal and non-verbal communication between men and women cannot be explained simply as the employment of different abilities. Women’s cooperative behavior often is the result of their limited social power, while the hierarchical and direct behavior of men is a result of their greater dominance and status (cf. Henley, 1977). However, if the status and hierarchy positions of women and men change, interactive and communicative behaviors can also change, independent of any supposedly fixed gender-specific skills. But this type of “metamorphosis” is usually judged negatively and even condemned as deviant. In extreme cases, it can turn out to be a “career killer” for men as well as women, if they try and become more like members of the opposite sex.

Thus, it becomes clear that a vicious circle emerges. That public relations require communication skills especially oriented towards consensus and dialogue allows women more access to communication professions at the entry level because of the very skills they possess. It also could be argued that women have been deliberately targeted by the industry over the past few years because of the particular communication skills they possess (Berryman-Fink, 1985; Christmas, 1997). However and surprisingly enough, these skills do not have a significant influence on how long women remain in the profession or how far they will be able
come? One answer could be that the very attributes which get women into the communications sector – sensitivity, caring, honesty, fairness or morality – often are also associated with a lack of assertiveness and weak leadership skills (see for example Cline, 1989, pp. 268–269). The result is that women fall into the “friendliness trap” without even realizing it. People who are constantly praised because of their particular skills would perhaps not consider that these same skills could prove to be a disadvantage at some later point in their career.

Another fact further diminishes the credibility of the “women are better communicators” argument: Data from the USA and Europe for example indicate that the majority of women who work in the creative PR industry carry out technical duties such as writing and editing, producing material for electronic media, composing speeches, conceptualizing advertising campaigns and so on (Creedon, 1991; Toth & Grunig, 1993; Merten, 1997, Gründl, 1996; Zowack, 1993, 2000). These positions are often isolated with relatively limited client contact, where the likelihood of team working is reduced, and where contact with the general public is also limited. Thus, the majority of public relations women do not even work in those spheres where their supposedly exceptional communicative skills could be fully utilized (for example in strategic management roles requiring a lot of personal contact or team building). In contrast to this, men tend to be active in public relations management where the so-called “feminine” skills discussed above are most obviously required, with a lot of client contact and need to maintain good working relationships with clients and staff.

**Backstage: Behind the facade the myth loses its luster**

It is evident that the percentage of women employed in the public relations sector has steadily and significantly increased within a relatively short time. Because of gender-role expectations (in our case the expectation that women communicate better) young women frequently and increasingly choose this profession which is deemed appropriate for their sex. The same gender-based expectations may trigger a corresponding demand by employers, which in turn reinforces supposed gender-specific expectations. PR professionals and researchers may take this as evidence that women can now routinely and without discrimination pursue a
have often turned out to be as short-lived as in other professions. Despite the fact that women since long are the “new majority” in PR, they fail to reach high and leading positions. This shows that women don’t have the same chances as men in public relations. Their presumed career head-start as the better communicators obviously doesn’t help. Instead, in the professional labor market, a re-codification takes place, whereby the higher value placed on men compensates for their supposed entry-level disadvantage (of being poorer communicators than women) and makes it easier for them to advance in a field in which they are “naturally” less qualified. In contrast, women’s “exceptional” skills are utilized less because of the gender-based, vertical segregation which routinely takes place once they are working in the sector. Thus, the image of woman as “the better communicators” is a questionable stereotype and a dangerous myth. Together with PR theories like the ‘feminist model of leadership’ in public relations (Aldoory, 1998) and the ‘revolution of the heart’ (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000) it imports the “mothering” role from home into the work place (see also Robinson, in press) and thus creates a “friendliness trap” for female PR professionals. We should prepare our female students for this new corset, this new restricted gender stereotype, this “trap”.

References


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