
Soft sell? Gendered experience of emotional labour in UK public relations firms

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Abstract

Few studies have examined the construction of gender identity in public relations consultancies or agencies, and fewer still from a critical perspective. Using emotional labour theory as an analytic framework (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 1983), this paper explores how public relations consultants negotiate professional relationships with clients, journalists and colleagues. Emotional labour is defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 7). Emotional labour theory is relevant to all occupations that a) require a high level of emotion management b) are gendered occupations and c) are part of a service industry, including professional services. Public relations agencies or firms meet these three criteria. Ten interviews with five UK public relations consultants were analysed, together with participants’ online diaries and CVs. Using phenomenological research principles, the aim of the study was to learn how participants experienced and understood their everyday practices in managing professional relationships. While most participants ascribed to a gender-neutral professional identity, in keeping with the professional discourse of ‘masculinity’ (Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Marsh, 2009), it is argued that feminine relational approaches are deployed as organisational and professional resources to win and keep clients and serve to reinforce participants’ identities as public relations professionals.

Introduction

The book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* and its concept of ‘emotional labour’, coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild in the 1980s, is widely regarded as influential within the social sciences, and specifically in sociology (e.g. Bolton, 2005; Greco & Stenner, 2008; Reskin & Padavic, 1994; Turner & Stets, 2005; Wulff, 2007). It contributes to the so-called ‘emotion turn’ in the social sciences in which previous theory-building and knowledge development had been characterised by cognitive approaches (Greco & Stenner, 2008; Putnam & Mumby, 1993).

Emotional labour is defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 7). In drawing attention to emotion in the workplace, Hochschild also drew attention to the changing nature of work exemplified by the rise in service economies; gendered occupations within service industries; and the idea of self in relation to occupation and work environment.

Emotional labour theory has continued to develop through the examination of various occupations and industries, among the most widely studied being airlines and call centres (e.g. Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Korczynski, 2003) and nursing (Smith & Gray, 2000; Smith, 1992). While recent theorists have questioned Hochschild’s pessimism concerning the harmful consequences of emotional labour, there remains a continued interest in how identities and emotions are negotiated in service environments.

This exploratory paper is one of the first to focus on the concept of emotional labour and public relations, drawing on Hochschild's interest in gender and emotion in the workplace; an interest that fundamentally questions the exploitation of feminine emotion as a resource within service organisations. The empirical bases for this paper are the experiences and understandings of five UK public relations consultants, who, it is argued, are at the sharp end of the public relations industry in servicing clients and journalists.

Within the UK, the firms that provide public relations services are known as consultancies or agencies. These are often small businesses, employing fewer than 25 people. Together with freelancers (sole traders) they comprise an estimated workforce of 8,600 (CIPR/CEBR, 2005). Public relations firms provide services to a wide range of business sector clients as well as the public sector, health and charities.

In most public relations firms, account managers, who liaise with clients and the media, do much of the day-to-day work. While there may be subtle differences in grade and status according to experience and level of responsibility, most public relations firms employ account executives, account managers and account directors in an ascending hierarchy. Directors or owners of public relations firms will spend much of their time looking for and winning business for the account handlers to work on.

The percentage of women working in agencies in the UK is 60 percent compared to 65 percent of the public relations industry as a whole, and 46 percent of the whole economy. Within the agency sector, the most common age group among both male and female employees is 25-34 (34 percent) (CIPR, 2009). In common with other countries, there has been a rise in the number of women entering the public relations profession in the UK in recent years.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the concept of gender and contemporary gender theory. It then goes on to examine Hochschild's interest in gender and emotion

within the workplace as well as more recent developments in emotional labour theory (e.g. Bolton, 2005) and studies on gender in the professions (e.g. Bolton & Muzio, 2008; Marsh, 2009). The feminist public relations literature is briefly discussed, including more recent social constructionist studies, on which this paper builds. The experiences and understandings of five public relations consultants are presented using the concepts from Bolton's typology of workplace emotion (2005, p. 93). These concepts – 'feeling rules'; 'associated motivations for feeling rules'; 'performance'; 'identity'; and 'consequences' – are used as a framework for analysis and discussion.

The concept of gender

As Scott observes, "in popular conversation, the terms *sex* and *gender* are as often used synonymously as oppositionally; indeed sometimes it seems that gender is simply a polite euphemism for *sex*" (Scott, 1999, p. 71). While the term 'gender' may be widely understood as relating to the biological categories of male and female, it has taken on a particular meaning in sociology. Evans (2003, p. 7) notes that feminists "used the word as the starting point for the study of women and their social subordination". The 1990s, however, saw a re-conceptualisation of gender, which now recognises "the impact of the social world on constructions of both masculinity and femininity" (p. 8).

Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble* (1990) conceived gender as an aspect of identity which is repeatedly performed and embodied; gender is what people *do*, not *have*. Butler stretched the concept of gender to a post-modern notion of identity, something that is fluid, unstable and dependent upon social and cultural contexts. According to Butler (2004), gender has 'no single author': it is dependent upon social interaction and is collaboratively or socially accomplished through discourses of the culture. The concept of gender as a product of social and cultural processes is applied in this paper.

Gender in emotional labour theory

Hochschild argues that ‘emotion work’ is gendered and *in general* is more important for women than it is for men (Hochschild, 1983). Further, gender differentially influences the emotional tasks required in managing interactions with others, so that women manage other people’s anger and aggressive behaviour through ‘being nice’ whereas men are expected to aggress against rule-breakers (which in turn creates a need to master their private fear and vulnerability).

Hochschild likens emotion work to the processes of acting, so that ‘being nice’ often involves “evocative emotion work” (Hochschild, 2008, p.122) which requires “deep acting” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 36) for an individual to frame their feelings in accordance with the “feeling rules” (pp. 57-59) or expectations set by a particular social context or work setting. “Surface acting” (p. 37) is more easy for the individual to accomplish and involves cynical performances that involve merely playing out a role to satisfy what a customer wants to hear.

Subsequent emotional labour studies have critiqued Hochschild’s pessimism surrounding the consequences of ‘deep acting’ for the individual, arguing, for example, that actors seek out occupations that express their self-identities (Cahill, 1999; Korczynski, 2003; Schweingruber & Berns, 2005). Studies of masculinity argue that Hochschild’s work ignores the self-presentations by men that include behaviour more often associated with both masculinity and femininity (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994, as cited in Roper, 1996). All this may be true of public relations as an attractive profession for both men and women.

Significantly, Bolton (2005) asserts that professionals willingly submit to professional and organisational feeling rules for reasons of material gain and status. Her ‘typology of workplace emotion’ places emotion work on a continuum:

1. ‘pecuniary’ where emotion work is carried out for material and commercial gain (this, according to Bolton, is where true

‘emotional labour’ belongs as it may be experienced negatively by service workers)

2. ‘prescriptive’ where emotion work is carried out according to professional or organisational feeling rules

3. ‘presentational’ where emotion work is carried out according to social feeling rules, and

4. ‘philanthropic’, where emotion work is performed as a sincere ‘gift’ to others.

Although Bolton (2009) responded to the criticisms that her term ‘emotion management’ de-politicised the concept of ‘emotional labour’ (Brook, 2009) and that the typology of workplace emotion failed to address gender performance in emotional labour (Lewis, 2005), it is useful to turn briefly to studies where gender is foregrounded. It can be argued that studies of gender in the professions highlight the political dimension of emotion work by focusing on the structures and discourses that shape the social and cultural processes that create professional feeling rules.

Bolton and Muzio (2008) in their study of the legal, management and teaching professions in the UK observe that in these professions, a ‘masculine cultural project’ dominates. For example, women managers, in order to progress within a male-dominated profession, ‘do gender’ to the extent that they “exceed the cultural norms of managing like a man” (2008, p.291).

Marsh (2009) identifies two competing discourses in the management consulting profession: ‘the objective professional’ which relates to masculine discourse; and the ‘trusted adviser’ which relates to feminine discourse, where relational practices, processes, social purposes and emotions are valued.

To bring gender into the analysis of emotional labour, it is important to be aware of the gendered discourse of the public relations ‘professionalisation project’ within the discourses of public relations consultants; while the competing discourses found in management consulting – ‘the objective professional’ and the ‘trusted adviser’ – may serve to explain the discourses of public relations consultants working with clients and journalists as part of a service industry.

The ‘feminisation’ of public relations: A cause for concern

The feminisation of public relations has been a cause for concern in the United States since the 1980s when more women began to enter the profession (e.g. International Association of Business Communications (IABC) study, 1986; Cline, 1989; Creedon, 1989; Donato, 1990; Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2001). Feminisation results from a “disproportionate recruitment or retention of women workers” (Reskin & Roos, 1990, p. 29). In discussing gender ideology as a factor leading to the feminisation of public relations in the United States, Donato argued that employers preferred to recruit women to public relations because it “increasingly involves emotional labour” and emotion work was seen as ‘women’s work’ (Donato, 1990, p. 139). While Donato’s observations may have implicitly influenced feminist studies in public relations during the 1990s, it would appear that her emotional labour thesis was not taken up until relatively recently (e.g. Yeomans, 2007).

Though not directly concerned with emotional labour, recent studies raise questions relating to the complexity of women’s identity construction within public relations firms. Fröhlich and Peters (2007) found that while female agency practitioners stereotyped some agency practitioners as ‘PR slut’, ‘PR bunny’ or ‘PR girly’, they distanced their own identities from such a stereotype. In a similar vein, the ‘female PR professional’ identity was minimised by women agency practitioners as a defence against sexual stereotyping in Russian public relations agencies (Tsetsura, 2007).

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was taken in this study to examine how public relations consultants experienced, practised and understood professional relationship management with clients, journalists and colleagues. Key concepts of social phenomenology (Schutz, 1970) are that society and social life are seen as ‘intersubjective’ phenomena that comprise

the ‘lifeworld’ (Husserl, 1983; 1913). Within occupations such as public relations, shared knowledge and procedures of the ‘lifeworld’ of public relations practitioners may differ from everyday ‘commonsense knowledge’ (Layder, 1994).

Phenomenological research is characterised by small samples between five and 25 (Creswell, 2007, p.61). Five participants were interviewed. Semi-structured, face-to-face hour-long interviews were held with each participant in order to elicit descriptions of their ‘lifeworld’ as public relations consultants from their own perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Participants represented different levels within the agency hierarchy, from a female senior account executive at the lower end through to a male account director at the top end. Two consultants were from the same public relations agency while the three other participants worked in different agencies. All worked at agencies within the northern region of England and were aged between 25 and 34. All were educated to degree level, with four out of the five possessing a first degree or masters in public relations.

Follow-up interviews with each participant took place either face-to-face or by telephone, lasting between 20 and 45 minutes. The second interview helped to develop a deeper understanding of the participant’s perspective, using the first interview transcript as well as the participant’s online diary entries as the basis for further discussion. Online diaries were kept by participants for between one and five days. Participants provided CVs for biographical information, including educational background and career history.

Phenomenological interview method requires the researcher to ‘bracket’ or suspend judgement during the process of research and analysis (e.g. Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Although my experience and knowledge of public relations work enabled me to quickly establish a rapport with participants, I had to check my own ‘taken-for-grantedness’ in relation to jargon and terms used by public relations consultants to ensure that I really understood what they meant, and not *thought* I knew what they meant. I also had to be aware,

as an educator, that I was someone on whom participants may have wanted to impress their knowledge of 'textbook' good practice and professional behaviour. Aspers (2009) drawing on Schutz, suggests that the researcher should also 'bracket' the theory that drives the questioning. For example, my questions concerning gender were generally met with defensive responses. In view of this resistance, I did not feel I could probe further; and yet gendered assumptions, as actors' "unintended consequences" (Aspers, 2009, p. 7), were revealed through descriptions of everyday practice and the professional role.

A limitation arises from the small sample and the involvement of just one male participant; however relatively few male account handlers are employed by regional agencies and were generally found occupying jobs towards the top end of public relations firms, at director and owner level.

The study topic, which concerns the presentation of the self in different contexts, raises a further limitation concerning the research participant in relation to the researcher, calling into question the validity of findings. To validate the interviews, transcripts were sent to all participants to invite further comment. However, based on the small sample size and the specific experiences of UK regional public relations consultants, claims for transferability beyond this study are necessarily restricted to comparisons with the existing literature and tentative propositions arising from those comparisons.

Analysis involved thoroughly exploring participants' individual understandings of relationship management with clients, journalists and colleagues. Phenomenological analysis "explicates the actors' meaning structure" (Asper, 2009, p. 6) as 'first-order constructs'. 'Second-order constructs' must be "understandable to the actors in the field" (p. 6), connected with existing theory, while remaining flexible to new theoretical developments. Bolton's emotion management concepts provide a broad theoretical framework, while allowing gender to be brought into the analysis. These concepts are:

feeling rules; associated motivations; performance; identity; and consequences (Bolton, 2005). Where the discourses of participants overlapped, it was possible to identify shared understandings while identifying contrasts or contradictions between participants' perspectives. All the names of participants have been changed to protect anonymity.

Feeling rules in public relations firms

A professional actively engages in 'prescriptive' emotion management by willingly internalising professional feeling rules in order to meet the "expectations of their colleagues and the public concerning the 'right' image of a professional" (Bolton, 2005, p. 122). Bolton distinguishes between professional and organisational feeling rules, associating the latter with what is more usually termed 'corporate culture'. Professional feeling rules, on the other hand, are associated with codes of conduct set by the profession and are more concerned with upholding the status of that profession.

Within public relations, it could be argued that professional codes of conduct have a limited impact on professional behaviour owing to the small proportion of public relations professionals who are members of a professional body – out of the 48,000 estimated public relations and communication professionals in the UK (CIPR/CEBR, 2005), only 9,500 are members of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR, 2010). However, both the CIPR and PRCA (Public Relations Consultants Association) provide training and guidelines available to members and non-members. Guidelines on managing client relationships provide some clues as to the gendered 'feeling rules' encouraged in client handling:

Go the extra mile to prove that you understand their business. Work them out as individuals too – what kind of people are they? What gets them excited? Flirt with them before the pitch by offering them some opportunities. Above all else, be enthusiastic and passionate. (CIPR, 2009)

If you are passionate about your clients and the campaigns you are working on, these campaigns will become the success stories that are revered and remembered by the rest of the industry. (PRCA, 2009, p. 5)

Three participants, Emma, Pamela and John, worked for regional, independent public relations businesses, while Gill and Alison worked for an international agency. Within the independent agencies, owner managers/directors' personal styles and feeling rules as entrepreneurs appeared to influence how the business was run:

She set up on her own, she's not had any kind of... business training or HR training...she lets people do what they want really, trusts you to make your own decisions and...there's very little rule from the top in that way. She kind of trusts us to get on with it.

Emma, account director – interview 2

John, with 10 years' experience at the same agency, referred to his working environment as: "quite masculine, quite ladsy kind of culture..." and "...totally open plan, run almost like a newsroom, people shouting upstairs and downstairs..." (interview 1). While personally benefiting from the "empowering" style of his managing director, John had different expectations of his own team: "... my management style personally is perhaps a little bit more... and I've heard it described fairly recently... as a bit sergeant-major like." (interview 1)

A picture emerged of the smaller agencies encouraging a relaxed and informal, though professional, atmosphere where people were trusted, even "empowered" to get on with the job, although Pamela, a senior account manager, expressed some frustration that her directors were not open enough about the financial performance of the business: "we know how we are doing by the *mood* of the directors." (Pamela, interview 1), yet she was expected to maintain an attitude of optimism and enthusiasm for her work with junior colleagues and clients.

The two participants who worked for the same international agency, Gill and Alison,

were not just subject to the feeling rules of the directors at their own regional office base, but were regularly exposed to training events and roadshows that were designed to draw each regional office into both a national and international corporate culture. This had the effect of creating a highly competitive environment where personal visibility became the key to promotion. "... the two-day course which is [for] all other managers at my level, you had senior directors taking some of the courses, so you'd want to impress.... (Gill, interview 1)

The feeling rule that guides the performance of public relations consultants in managing client relationships is that of 'making the client happy' by being positive and getting results. 'Results' for the client are media coverage that will lead to an enquiry, or a new business lead. The feeling rules that govern journalist relations are also focused on 'making the client happy' while not upsetting or alienating the journalist in the process by wasting their time, or sending them irrelevant press releases. In practice, this was sometimes a difficult situation to manage: much depended on the public relations consultant 'managing the client's expectations': knowing when to be upbeat about the possibility of media coverage and when to be low key, while remembering that the client was paying a monthly retainer fee for 'results' that could never be guaranteed:

Even literally the day before when they [tv show] could still pull out, I was still saying [to the client] "It's all looking good, but, you know, just bear with us because they could still pull out, which is totally beyond our control".

Pamela – account director, interview 2

Motivations associated with feeling rules in public relations firms

Bolton (2005) identifies 'associated motivations' as a central feature of her typology because 'it recognises the motivations of organisational actors to enact the feeling rules in distinct ways' (p. 93). According to Bolton, professionals adhere to feeling rules for instrumental, or material, gain, for reasons of status and sometimes for altruistic reasons. The

study participants were motivated to adhere to the agency's feeling rules to gain recognition and promotion to the next level as well as raised status within the agency:

...other people in the office...will do something great or they'll get a good response and will be screaming about it and cheering. And that's just not me but you've got to kind of get into the habit of making a note of things and quietly telling somebody and sending it on, you know.

Gill, account manager – interview 2

To earn trust and respect as professionals, public relations consultants had to adapt to the feeling rules of their different clients, as well as the media industry, which meant continuously adapting themselves to different social and cultural contexts, as illustrated here:

I think the clients we deal with they're all very serious – engineering, professional – so they do expect you to be professional as well and look smart and not be kind of, you know... we still have that PR image, doing champagne and things. You tend to steer away from that – they do see it as a serious service and they want you to be that way.

Emma, senior account manager – interview 1

Performance

For Bolton (2005), the 'prescriptive' performances associated with the emotion management of professionals, include performances that demonstrate a cynical/sincere attitude to feeling rules, or a consent/commitment attitude.

Cynical discourse centred around clients, especially new clients, who did not understand how the media operated, and therefore misunderstood the true value of what they were getting from a public relations firm's services: "a really good client understands the media, understands that their ridiculous story about... an opening of an envelope isn't going to get them anywhere"

(Pamela, interview 1). Cynical discourse also centred around male journalists whose egos had to be "pandered to" (Alison, interview 1), not only in terms of providing them with useful stories, but also in terms of maintaining an attitude of friendliness and openness, to ensure future co-operation.

The opening gambit to many a journalist phone call was a friendly-sounding "Hi, it's..." including times when the journalist in question had found out something potentially damaging to a client's reputation. The important thing, however, was to "keep that relationship open" (Pamela, interview 1).

Participants' attitudes also demonstrated consent and commitment to feeling rules: they spoke of their love for the job and "passion" for particular client accounts and projects. 'Making the client happy' involved knowing when to adapt your dress, tone, manner and level of information detail required by the client. It also meant understanding what the client wanted from the relationship; this will differ according to client but it is important to empathise with the client and understand each client's priorities and pressures so that you can help them to manage their own relationships and workload:

So I just researched that; wrote the whole thing. I didn't even speak to him cos I know he's really busy this week. And also being aware of [...] timings and things, getting a whole new computer system, so I didn't want to disturb them, you know, the MD. So I just wrote it all and sent it in. And he just sent it back and said "That's fine, send it out". [to the media] So he knows that he's always, like, on our minds and always doing things, and er...making it easier for him.

Emma, senior account manager – interview 1

'Making the client happy' could mean taking on tasks that seemed menial or pointless, or taking on work that participants sometimes felt the client should be doing: "You used to kind of think 'why doesn't she just do it? Why is she getting us to do that?' But she's paid for our time so if that's what she wants us to spend our time doing, that's fine." (Gill, interview 2). It

was important to find a way of building a better relationship with a client so that they did not blame the public relations consultant when things had not gone well. A 'good' client will "trust" or "empower" you to get things done and will come to you for advice when they need it.

Clients were often understood to mean male clients. Typically these were chief executives or small business entrepreneurs or professional services firms, especially law firms. In larger organisations, the client contact might be a marketing director who could be male or female. For John, an account director and a senior figure with 10 years experience in his agency, some of his clients were also personal friends: "...he leans on us, big time. And I'll have almost daily conversations for an hour on the telephone, throwing ideas around, chatting about stuff, bouncing stuff around" (John, interview 1).

Participants referred to "my" clients, attaching high levels of personal accountability to their own client relationships, and a personal expectation that they would resolve issues or problems with the client. For Pamela, a senior account manager, however, her authority could be taken out of her hands by one client if there was a problem:

I have another client who prefers to deal with women in the office and actually if he has a problem he would never come to me or any of the other females working on the account... he would maybe go to one of the guys and maybe even shout at them but he would never ever shout at a woman.
Pamela, senior account manager – interview 1

Much emotional effort went into demonstrating the value of public relations to new clients to earn the 'trust' and 'respect' that participants felt were important to the relationship to enable them to do their job. Pamela (interview 1) talked of "nurturing" a new client to "win him around" to the benefits of public relations by showing him examples of successful public relations work.

While public relations consultants made considerable efforts to manage clients' feelings, or expectations, there was quite often very little recognition by the client for the work they had done:

It's rare that you get a "thank you"...we got a 5-page article in the FT [Financial Times] for one of my clients which is pretty good [...] He didn't call to say thank you or anything...I've found that really quite hard to accept over the years. It's a service industry and I think a client, when they're paying a monthly retainer as a lot of ours do ...yes, I think I still find it quite difficult if they don't say "thank you". It's sometimes hard to see their drivers.

Emma, senior account manager – interview 1

Managing journalist relationships meant overcoming feelings of frustration arising from interactions and really "putting yourself in their shoes" (Alison, interview 1) to understand journalists' own pressures and their need to feel in charge of the news agenda. Participants had learned not to take it personally if a journalist did not want their story but persist by asking the journalist for their opinion or guidance on improving the story, so that the client could be provided with a good explanation for not seeing their story in print. For John, 'empathising' with a journalist to get a story accepted was a conscious, professional act:

You've got to do the thing that I really hate about PR which is grimacing through a nice big smile and say "Oh hi it's la la la. When really you want to say "Right you're gonna listen to me!" You've just got to keep... I always say persistence pays off. And if it's a good story, persistence will pay off. John, account director – interview 1

Participants talked about "sell-ins" whereby the public relations consultant would telephone a journalist contact with a news story, quickly summarise the story, and then send through an email with the story attached. Quite often journalists did not want to talk over the phone and were "rude or short with you" (Gill,

account manager, interview 1). If a journalist did come back to the public relations consultant on a story, however, it could mean asking the client to drop everything to help that journalist meet a deadline:

I knew he [the journalist] would want to run with it, it's like: "Here's the story, I know you are going to be interested in it – what can I possibly do to make this into a big story?" And he's like: "Well I need the photography now, I need the turnover of the company, I need this and I need that... I want all the background information". So I just went away and got it. And that's about pandering to their whims in that way. Alison, senior account executive – interview 2

Journalists were understood to be male if they worked for a regional newspaper, particularly business editors, and female if they worked for the trade press, although this could vary from sector to sector. Among the women participants, however, there was a wariness of male business editors illustrated here:

So if we're phoning about a management buy-out, we know how to explain it to them, we're not just phoning them with [adopts quiet, high-pitched voice] "Can you do this story?", we know the ins and outs and know exactly what...yeah, what we're talking about basically. Pamela, senior account manager – interview 1

Emma's experiences of dealing with journalists was different; most of her trade press contacts were female, which altered the gender dynamics within the office to the extent that:

We've got a couple of men in the office that are great at ringing and flirting with female journalists and, you know, being a bit charming. And I think journalists quite like that, cos being a man in public relations is still quite rare really; a lot more women in it. I think they quite like dealing with

men. ...so probably it's easier in that sense to kind of relate to a female journalist. Emma, senior account manager – interview 1

While a picture of pleasant, flirtatious interactions emerged from Emma's account, John's own relations with one female trade journalist, who had refused to carry an exclusive story, were frustrating to the extent where he expressed doubt about her ability to do her job: "So she's missed out on an opportunity. (John, interview 1).

Identity of public relations consultants

Within 'prescriptive' emotion management, performed by professionals, identity, according to Bolton (2005) is intertwined with the image of a particular profession, thus emotional effort will be put into conforming to feeling rules to live up to that image, while retaining 'discretion and autonomy in the interpretation of professional feeling rules' (p. 126).

Unlike lawyers or doctors, perhaps, public relations agency professionals have a particular challenge: on the one hand they have to live up to the idea of the 'trusted professional consultant' who offers good advice to clients and newsworthy stories to journalists; and on the other hand, disassociating themselves from the stereotypes of the public relations agency world that participants felt gave the profession a poor reputation.

For all participants, maintaining a professional identity involved distancing themselves from the stereotype of 'fluffy', 'luvvy' PRs who were characterised as socialising too much with clients and phoning journalists from a call sheet with worthless stories. Both John and Pamela, for example, used a high-pitched tone of voice to ridicule this kind of person.

While Pamela expressed distaste for the 'all female, all blonde' hiring practices of one male agency owner (Pamela, interviews 1 and 2), Emma's female MD on the other hand advised:

"Use the charm and you can get away with things if you're a woman" ...and ... it works for her. Clients really like that because she's kind of flirty and light-hearted but that doesn't really suit

my personality, so I don't play on it at all. Emma, senior account manager – interview 1

Preserving a professional identity meant that while it is important to 'be yourself', which meant being friendly, informal and approachable, it was equally important to be mindful of how you projected yourself, even with your colleagues with whom you might sometimes share jokes, offload frustrations, swear, or talk about your social life. For Gill and Alison in particular, there was an awareness that colleagues, and particularly senior management, needed to feel they could "trust you" in client or pitch meetings. For John, preserving self-respect as a professional meant not just withholding, or controlling his frustrations, but challenging clients in some situations: "Without being aggressive, I turned round to him and said 'You're wrong [...] how dare you sit here and challenge my position in such a way.'" (John, interview 2).

Discussion: Consequences of emotion management for public relations consultants

Bolton (2005) discusses the consequences of emotion management for some professionals in terms of threats or reinforcements to professional identity, as well as contradictions or conflicts that might arise from the dual demands of both professional and organisational feeling rules.

At this point, it is also important to acknowledge the gendered notion of 'the professional': this is assumed to be masculine (Lewis, 2005); driven by the masculine language of the 'objective professional' (Marsh, 2009); and subject to a masculine 'professionalisation project' (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). Contradictions and conflicts might also arise for both women and men working in public relations firms as result of gendered feeling rules, as in the case of Emma, who could not permit herself to fully embrace her MD's expressly feminine style of client management.

Within this study, professional identity was reinforced through the 'trusted adviser' discourse (Marsh, 2009) where participants

were consulted as a trusted source of information and advice on public relations matters. Marsh (2009) asserts that the discourse of the 'trusted adviser' relates to feminine discourses, where relational practices, processes, social purposes and emotions are valued. The relational practices of public relations consultants included 'being friendly', 'empathising' with clients and journalists to understand their pressures, asking journalists for their opinion, 'nurturing' clients to 'win them around', as well as listening to clients' problems.

Participants drew on their 'presentational' or social self (Bolton, 2005) to interact informally, while recognising that some clients expected a more serious demeanour. Some of these performances could be seen as examples of cynical performances or 'surface acting' (Hochschild, 1983) in their efforts to influence a desired response.

Professional identity could also be undermined by an absence of gratitude from a client or journalist, or by being asked to carry out administrative tasks. In keeping with the discourse of the 'objective professional' (Marsh, 2009), some women participants claimed that they 'did not take it personally' when clients and journalists were difficult or rude, yet the possibility of rejection and absence of gratitude, as much as being seen as a 'trusted adviser', was always present. Thus, for the women participants, professional identity meant restating their professionalism, or their masculine attributes, by presenting themselves as well informed, serious-minded, self-aware and guarded in order to counter the 'PR girl' stereotype (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007; Tstetsura, 2007).

In the case of Pamela, her authority as a professional could be undermined if her emotion work with a male client was re-allocated to a male colleague to deal with, to allow a male client to express his anger. Hochschild (2003, p. 178) refers to the "fictional re-distribution of authority" where male flight attendants were assumed by passengers to hold more seniority (by virtue of their maleness) even though they were less likely to hold these positions in reality.

For John, the only male participant in this study, his professional identity was preserved by asserting his masculine identity during sometimes confrontational encounters with clients, claiming that this earned him the (male) client's respect. Some male clients were small business owners who encapsulated "entrepreneurial ideologies and discourses" of capital accumulation and traditional ideas of male and female roles (Mulholland, 1996, p. 149). By contrast, the professional feeling rule of being 'nice' in order to maintain a good relationship with a journalist, led to frustration verging on anger: "When really you want to say 'Right, you're gonna listen to me!'".

Leidner (1993), who studied insurance sales agents, observed that women seemed especially well suited to the interactive demands of sales work such as establishing and maintaining rapport. However, through sales training, the work was constructed as masculine by emphasising the qualities of determination, aggressiveness, toughness in the face of repeated rejection, persistence and stoicism (Leidner, 1993, pp. 201-202).

From this, it would appear that John had constructed a masculine version of public relations that both distanced his work from the 'feminised' agencies and acted as a defence to any possible perceptions of doing 'women's work'.

Conclusion

This study explored from a phenomenological perspective how public relations relationship management is experienced, practised and understood by public relations consultants.

Bolton's typology of workplace emotion, specifically 'prescriptive' emotion management, was used to analyse the empirical data in this study. To remain true to Hochschild's fundamental concern with gender in the performance of emotional labour, and my own interest, concepts from the gender and identity literature were also incorporated.

Data gathered from 10 interviews with four female public relations consultants and one male public relations consultant revealed

the complex, gendered nature of emotional labour in UK regional public relations firms. The key limitations of this research are the small sample size and issues arising from a qualitative study concerning the presentation of self for both researcher and participant. However, the emerging construction of relationship management is consistent with the existing literature.

Professional and agency feeling rules emphasise 'enthusiasm' and 'passion' to 'make the client happy'. While maintaining a positive attitude and persistence in the face of rejection or absence of gratitude may lead to feelings of frustration, even anger for public relations consultants, these frustrations are balanced by consultants' motivations to achieve 'results', thereby gaining recognition, promotion and enhanced status.

Public relations consultants, and especially women, seek out public relations work as a means of expressing their self-identities as 'friendly' or 'sociable' people. The feminine discourse of the 'trusted adviser' that relates to discourses where 'friendliness', 'adaptability' and 'empathy' are valued, serve to reinforce participants' professional identities as public relations consultants.

However, while relational practices in terms of gender performance may appear as feminine, drawing on participants' 'socialised selves' as women, these practices were framed, for the most part, within the masculine discourse of the 'objective professional'. Hence, the women participants ascribed to a gender-neutral professional identity that rejected the 'PR girl' stereotype, suggesting a shared liberal feminist belief of individual identity being recognised and rewarded within a competitive workplace.

It is argued that public relations agencies consciously and instrumentally deploy emotional labour as a resource, mostly performed by female consultants, to win and keep clients. It is further proposed that discourses of public relations may also emphasise 'toughness', 'aggression' and 'determination' for a male public relations consultant, working within a female-dominated profession, to construct the work as masculine. Additionally, an emotional 'ecology' may exist

in public relations firms, which requires differential emotional tasks being assigned to men and women in response to the demands and gender role expectations of clients. These micro-sociological findings are the basis for further research and theory development that connect gendered emotion management performances to the structures that determine emotion work in public relations relationship management.

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