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“It’s Trivial, Bitchy and Dull” – Why women leave public relations and how they renegotiate their identities

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Introduction

Fitch, James and Motion argue that “public relations scholarship ... has inadequately theorized the significance of gender” (2016, p. 280) and observe that while the growth of a body of knowledge that considers discrimination of women and the issues women face in the workplace is welcome it often takes the form of observations or theorizing of gender difference and fails to consider, for instance, societal reasons or the patriarchal structure of the workplace.

There have been many attempts in academic and professional public relations literature, largely from a liberal feminist perspective, to explain the general reasons for women’s under-representation at the top level in public relations but few attempts to understand *what* causes women to leave public relations careers and how they subsequently renegotiate their identities outside the occupation. Although globally women outnumber men in junior and mid-level public relations roles they are in the minority in leadership positions – for example in the United Kingdom (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2020; Chartered Institute of Public Relations/ComRes, 2011), the USA (Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Sha, Tindall and Dozier, 2010), Germany (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007) and Russia (Tsetsura, 2012). However, while plenty of quantitative research attention is given to the problem in terms of counting the differences, little research attention is given to the reasons *why* women leave public relations before they reach leadership positions. This may in part be due to the related lack of scholarship on women and leadership in public relations; as Place and Vardeman-Winter note that there is a “problematic lack of scholarship of women’s experiences in leadership positions in public relations [which] mirrors trends across all communications professions” (2018, p. 166).

This chapter uses a series of in-depth and conversational/anecdotal interviews with eight female former public relations practitioners to explore the reasons why they left the industry and seeks to understand and theorize their exit from the industry. The interviews exposed two main thematic areas which form the basis for this chapter’s discussion:

1. The triviality or meaninglessness of public relations work and the inability of those doing it to construct or derive positive experiences from it.
2. Not being taken seriously (by others or themselves), either as a result of gender and/or occupation as a public relations practitioner.

Literature Review

This literature review can only make a brief overview of work from a feminist perspective in the areas of public relations, work-family studies and the meaning of work. Many professional articles on women's absence from senior roles, based on secondary research or (perhaps) guesswork, start with the hypothesis that women leave public relations because of childcare issues (e.g., Hanson Research, 2012) and thus fall into an 'assumption trap' (Korabik and Rosin, 1995). Such articles fail to explore the complex and structural reasons for women's absence from the senior-level workplace and put the 'blame' or reasons for departure firmly on the women and their immediate management and not the patriarchal structure of the workplace and society. Although feminist research has for several decades highlighted the dominance of patriarchal systems that perpetuate and propagate the systemic oppression that withholds power from women in the workplace (Tench, Topić and Moreno, 2017), literature in the field of public relations instead focuses on e.g., the difference between male and female attitudes to work, promotion, expertise and salary (e.g., Aldoory and Toth, 2002; Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2020); Cline, Toth, Turk, Walters, Johnson and Smith, 1986; Toth and Grunig, 1993; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench & Verčič, 2020).

Leaving public relations

Studies into female exit from other career occupations frequently fall into the category of work-family studies where writing focusses on the constraints on women's career choices such as scarcity and cost of childcare arrangements, availability and security of jobs, workplace cultures, access to training and development and organisational policies as well as how individual preferences are both socially and culturally shaped, reproduced and constrained (e.g., Blomme, Van Rhee and Tromp, 2010; Lyness and Judiesch, 2001; Place, and Vardeman-Winter, 2018).

Work in this area from a feminist perspective stresses that the dominance of patriarchal systems and traditional structures of modern workplaces do not align with the domestic responsibilities of women who, for instance, are often unable to join in with evening working or social events where visibility and promotion can go hand in hand and withholds power from women in the workplace (Topić, 2021).

The 'reality' of why women leave career occupations is a complex area, as studies from other career paths has demonstrated (Bridgen, 2013). Many writers in the field of public relations (e.g. Fitch and Third, 2010; Fröhlich, 2004 and Mitrook, Wilkes and Cameron, 1998) acknowledge the complexity of the issue of women's absence from senior roles and over the last decade this issue has started to get more (albeit erratic) attention from professional sources. For example, the United Kingdom trade association the Chartered Institute of Public Relations regularly discusses women's issues (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2014; Chartered Institute of Public Relations 2020) and UK trade magazine *PR Week* (2013) noted that the reasons for women's departure from public relations was complex and related more to issues of gender than of childcare.

Much public relations research focuses on professional norms where the 'masculine' and 'senior' side of public relations takes precedence in discussing public relations (e.g., in the value given to strategic thinking, management models and leadership). As Fitch, James and Motion observe (2016) the masculine is seen as powerful and workplace norms are constructed around it. Discussing the cognate study of journalism, Topić and Bruegmann (2020) observe (citing North, 2009) that "men in journalism do not join the newsroom culture, but rather, they constitute it" (p. 7).

Bridgen (2013) in a phase analysis covering disciplines such as computer science/IT (e.g., McKinney, Wilson, Brooks, O'Leary-Kelly and Hardgrave, 2008; Stephan and Levin, 2005) engineering (e.g., Hunt, 2010) and management roles in general (e.g., Lyness and Judiesch, 2001; Korabik and Rosin, 1995) suggested that women leave professional occupations because of a number of clear but interrelated reasons – namely (1) because of a lack of mentors/role models and (2) because women are sidelined, ignored, or underappreciated in the workplace (and are thus pushed rather than pulled into leaving).

Public relations careers

While research has been carried out on what *attracts* women and men into public relations roles (e.g., Reskin & Roos, 1995; Selnow & Wilson, 1985; Tsetura, 2012; Yaxley, 2017), this research is not always linked to their career patterns or longevity in the occupation, with focus tending to be on those who remain (e.g., Daugherty, 2014; Yaxley, 2013). In part, this is due to the problem of traceability of those who have left any career, which results in studies in other career occupations focussing on *intention to leave*. (e.g., Blomme *et al*, 2010; Cooper and Mackenzie Davey, 2011;

Farquharson, Allan, Johnston, Johnston, Choudhary and Jones, 2012; Kivimäki, Vanhala, Pentti, Lämsä, Virtanen, Elovainio and Vahtera, 2007).

Wrigley (2002) and Creedon (1991) posit that the achievement of management roles should not be correlated with career success. This view is supported by Daugherty (2014) who suggested that career progression research carries a male-orientated perspective, with outcomes focussing on position in the corporate, hierarchy, income, and wealth accumulation and thus, men are seen as more suitable for management positions – leading the omission of women from these roles.

Daugherty hypothesised that women tended to be team players and alliance-builders and were often motivated to create their own businesses and bypass the glass ceiling to achieve fulfilment and life balance. This supports the views of Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, and Sha (2008) who found that public relations practitioners felt satisfaction and empowerment when they left current work situations and began freelancing or working from home. However, work by Patterson and Mavin (2009) suggests that the physical and mental time and effort that women spent building their businesses frequently led to women spending longer away from family than before.

Triviality and Meaning

Many writers have discussed the feminisation of public relations and its implications for the industry (e.g., Cline *et al.*, 1986; Mitrook, Wilkes and Cameron (1998), Fröhlich (2004). Writing by Fröhlich and Peters (2007) and Topić (2021) established that the discussions and biases have changed little over 20 years – public relations is still seen as ‘fluffy’ and trivial. Tsetsura (2010) suggested that such perceptions often devalue the work of public relations practitioners making it appear to be a ‘semiprofession’ - suitable for women but not men.

Bourdieu (2007) argued that cultural masculinity is embedded into society through social norms and (gendered) socialisation. Subsequently individuals do not challenge it because the oppression and injustice are deeply incorporated into everyday social practices. Thus, it becomes ‘natural’ for the discourse around public relations to trivialise women’s work in public relations. However, it is still possible for women to derive meaning from what society labels as trivial. An area not always linked to departure is one of the meanings that women attach to a role and how this relates to their identity as a public relations practitioner. Grossman and Chester (2013) observe that to understand the meaning that women attach to work we have to understand that women see work as being connected to family and personal life and furthermore are concerned with the relational aspects of

their work and the meaning of work cannot be detached from these factors. Research on meaning (or fulfilment) is scant in public relations scholarship but a fertile topic in organisational studies where meaning is viewed from both a psychological and sociological perspectives to be not just to be in the actual work but the relationship to the work (Wrzesniewski, 2003). From a psychological perspective, meaning is “rooted in individuals’ subjective interpretations of work experiences and interactions” but “presumes that individuals ascribe meaning to things or come to see certain aspects of their lives as more or less meaningful in ways that reflect socially or culturally influenced worldviews and value systems” when viewed from a sociological perspective (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010 p.94).

Method

Qualitative study lends itself well to feminist research (Grunig, 2006) and is typically associated with the feminist paradigm (O’Neil, 2003). (Daugherty 2014 p. 178)

hooks discusses the taboos around discussing the ‘private’ and the need to talk about the private to “expose the false reality” (1989 p. 3) of patriarchal views on a subject. We can only understand why women are under-represented at higher levels in public relations if they are comfortable to ‘talk back’ and explain the real reasons why they left a public relations career.

The project set out to interview the missing women. Finding women who are ‘not there’ is problematic as women who leave public relations tend not to keep up memberships of professional associations or identify with their past role.

The interviews took place over a two-year period as potential interviewees were identified and interviewed through the author’s social, business and academic networks. To prevent potential biases in such a small sample of women belonging to similar networks (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009) care was taken not to interview women who worked for the same company or had strong friendships with others interviewed.

In-depth semi-structured interviews are ideal for small, purposive samples in public relations (Broom & Dozier, 1990) and the relaxed nature of the questioning allowed women to ‘talk back’ (hooks, 1989) by being able to discuss the personal in previously silenced or unexplored debates.

The conversational and at times anecdotal nature of the interviews (for instance, one continued into the evening in a bar, another in the interviewee’s kitchen) allowed interviewees to relax and talk about how they felt about the end of their careers allowing for the “uninvited topics, unexpected insights, and untoward issues” to emerge (Lury and Wakeford, 2014). A phenomenological approach was taken in that each interview provided knowledge and context which could be used in future interviews and when analysing interviews.

The women interviewed have been anonymised due to the highly personal nature of the discussions.

Table 1: Interviewees

Name (pseudonym)	Age at time of interview	Highest position reached in PR	Number of years post PR career	Current role
Melissa	30-40	Senior Account Manager, London PR agency	0-5	Travel blogger and writer.
Christine	40-50	Agency owner	5-10	Academic researcher (sciences)
Julie	50-60	PR executive	5-10	Florist
Amanda	30-40	PR executive	0-5	Full-time mother/seeking work as a journalist
Debbie	30-40	PR Account Director	5-10	Professional photographer
Lucinda	20-30	Senior Account Manager	0-5	Undecided/traveling/Considering film production
Nadia	20-30	Account Manager	0-5	Consultant in an IT firm
Sarah	30-40	PR Manager	10-15	Teacher

Discussion

Each woman interviewed had a different story and a different route into and out of public relations. Interestingly, only one of the women (Lucinda) intended to have a career in public relations (she studied public relations at university). This is partly due to the age of some of the candidates – public relations degrees didn't exist when many were at university and the first public relations degrees only recorded in the UK in 1989 (Kitchen, 1997).

Two main themes emerged from the research. Firstly, many of the interviewees discussed the triviality or meaninglessness of public relations work. This was described in several different ways but centred on a lack of meaning in the work and the inability of those doing it to construct or derive positive meaning from it. (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2010) observe that when meaning is discussed it usually implies a *positive* meaning). This was sometimes, but not always, due to structural inequalities related to the woman's relegated position in the workplace after having children (Patterson and Mavin, 2009), a position not occupied through choice but because of the lack of options in their domestic and work life.

Secondly, the desire (and failure) to be taken seriously was voiced by several interviewees, something they felt was denied because of (1) their gender and/or (2) their occupation. Many interviewees did not feel that their views or position were seen as important (by management, clients, society or even by themselves) and this had a bearing on their commitment to a public relations career. Their occupation of a 'feminised' role in public relations and the associated lack of status and power impacted on their commitment to a public relations career.

Motivations for a career in public relations

Four of the women interviewed felt that they moved into public relations almost by accident – they had not intended as young graduates or school leavers to have a career in public relations. This mirrors research by Yaxley who found that the practitioners she interviewed moved into public relations careers by "accident, chance [or] opportunity" (2017:113). None of the women previously had a clear idea of what public relations involved, but each one felt a positive fit, although retrospectively rather than because of any career planning. Interestingly, the only woman (Lucinda) with a public relations degree seemed to suffer from more disillusionment than the others when her career did not work out.

Debbie, who studied photography at university, noted that she “never imagined I’d do it [public relations] while I was at university but photography jobs were in short supply.” Similarly Amanda, when her job at a national news agency was under threat, moved into public relations with its promise of a nine-to-five lifestyle when her husband’s work took him abroad a lot: “I felt that one of us needed to be the grown up because we weren’t seeing each other so PR seemed to be the obvious transition to go into with my skills.” Meanwhile, Christine started out carrying “drips and drabs” of public relations work alongside freelance journalism. Younger interviewees received a taste of public relations at university and decided to follow it up with Nadia adding that she “started a marketing course [during her business degree and] discovered my passion for communications and it was PR that really interested me so I started learning a lot about that and that’s kind of how I got into the industry.”

However, once in the public relations industry the women were committed to their careers with Lucinda moving jobs frequently to climb the career ladder, Nadia relocating to a different country and Melissa moving from provincial England to London to further her career.

Trivial, meaningless and dull

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations claims that public relations is an “exciting and fast-moving profession” where a “PR job could see you organising events, participating in conversations on Twitter, writing press releases, placing stories in newspapers and magazines and promoting some of the world’s most exciting charities and brands” (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2013:online).

In contrast, Christine observed, the job was “rather superficial”, a point that was echoed in different ways by all the interviewees. Julie, having carried out what she felt were “worthy” public relations jobs in the past, felt that one of the main parts of her final public relations role was “selling in” stories to journalists (and, increasingly to bloggers) which she saw as a “step down” from what she wanted to do or felt had meaning to her. Amada was equally dismissive of the public relations industry, claiming “product PR is essentially a free advert” and mentioned the trivial (to her) press releases she received as a journalist from a homewares company. The experience of these women demonstrates an expectation gap between the industry view of public relations careers (that it can be strategic and/or creative and/or glamorous) and the everyday lived experience of women working in public relations. The interviewees were accidentally perpetuating the masculine or dominant view of what is ‘important’ in public relations and seeing their more technical roles (writing, networking, social media management, managing clients, etc.) as unimportant and trivial.

Although the habitus of public relations could potentially change over time due to the increased diversity of those entering the occupation, this equally may not happen because these new entrants “may not be interested in changing the status quo; as professionals they have been brought into the professional game and will be focused, at least in part, on developing their own career based on established ‘rules’” (Edwards, 2012 p. 146). Thus, the ‘trivial’ work remains unmentioned and dismissed because the public relations profession wishes to present a unified identity of exciting and worthwhile work to the outside world.

While it could be argued that these women were discussing junior level public relations work which can be repetitive and simple, this banality was also seen by interviewees who had worked at a senior level:

At the beginning it was all very interesting, all very challenging, all very new. We were a fairly big agency, part of [large international public relations agency] ... And after about a year it came to a point where I was a bit stuck. I didn't really see anywhere I could move forward with my career. I had learned more or less everything there was to learn at that stage and there wasn't anything on the horizon for me. (Nadia)

This demonstrates that the doxa of public relations (that it is an exciting and challenging career) is not always shared by those carrying out the work. While Yaxley (2017) in her study of public relations careers found that practitioners thought the role exciting, this view is not shared by Bowen (2003) in her study of public relations students.

Coupled with the meaningless of the occupation was the lack of power or prestige. Debbie, despite working at a senior level, felt that she was at the beck and call of her clients:

I always used to end a conversation with a client with “anything else?” – feeling that you're constantly at the beck and call of a client but then family priorities changed all that. ... It gets totally ingrained in you. (Debbie)

The feeling of servitude to a client and a lack of autonomy was echoed by Melissa:

You're not paid much for what you do – you're paid peanuts. You never go home on time, and people were responding to clients at the weekend - there needs to be a shift in pushing back on clients and letting creativity come through. (Melissa)

This subservience and lack of control was seen to get in the way of the idealised or mediated view of a public relations role (something exciting and creative). Often, the interviewees voiced that work carried out was what clients wanted rather than what was the correct public relations approach (a complaint about clients common in practitioner literature e.g., Leigh, 2017) giving the women a double bind of carrying out unfulfilling work that they did not want to do anyway. Thus, the 'offer' of a public relations career failed to meet the reality, leading to disillusionment and ultimately departure from the public relations role.

The 'lack of meaning' sentiment was stronger among women who had had children and returned to the workplace. Of the women interviewed four had childcare responsibilities and either returned to the workplace full-time (but without the ability to work outside their normal hours at short notice) or worked flexibly or part-time. This pattern was demonstrated by Sarah who described her post-maternity leave work as "bitty projects." Wrzesniewski (2003) observed that meaning in work was made up of internal and external factors and that there are many perspectives on what constitutes meaning; Kanungo and Hartwick (1987) pointed to interesting work, creativity and fulfilment as providing meaning and this was clearly lacking in the case of the women interviewed.

Past studies have suggested that flexible working, often cited as a panacea to women's working problems, does not always allow women to re-enter the workplace on equal terms with men. For many women, being able to work flexibly or on reduced hours was to work invisibly and away from the centres of power – and thus not be considered for exciting roles or promotions. Essentially, women working flexibly were usually absent at key times – for after-work drinks, breakfast meetings or lunch breaks – when key conversations took place. Topić noted that networking in PR "seems to be a job requirement [and included], having to network after work ... attending lifestyle events, going to drinks with clients after work, participating in conferences and social events, networking with journalists, travelling in the UK and abroad for trade shows, and so on" (2021:online). Topić also adds that this networking was seen as important for career development and thus internalised masculine habitus in public relations work.

This was made clear in the interview with Christine, who set up a public relations agency with a male colleague:

I had two children and the work that fitted round it was at a lower level and not inspiring ... the practicalities were that I couldn't be away from home longer than I had childcare. Also, the level of 'brain space' that was needed wasn't there. I ended up picking up the bits and pieces that I felt I could do. It was self-selection. (Christine)

Amanda left work on having a baby although always expected to return to work. However, these hopes were unrealised at the time of the interview. She had hoped to return to work part-time but found that the part-time roles in public relations were "admin-based and quite dull" - something which was noted in *PR Week* news report (Griggs, 2015) which claimed that only 6.2% of jobs which offered flexible working were 'quality' roles.

It was clear from the interviewees that the women with children had been struck a double blow – not only were they working in public relations - an area which they felt was characterised by trivial work, but the 'interesting' jobs were simply not available to them. It is ultimately this dissatisfaction with the type of work available which caused women to leave public relations and seek a meaningful role elsewhere – in other words one which was "significant, challenging, and complete" (Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010 p. 96). As Hunt observed in the field of engineering, although family reasons were cited as a reason for women leaving the occupation, it was dissatisfaction over pay and promotion, partly as a result of a "lack of mentoring and networks, or discrimination by managers" (Hunt, 2010 p. 3) that was seen as more significant by those who resigned, as will be discussed in the next section.

Will someone take me seriously? Discrimination, role models and self-belief

The issue of the role of role models and mentors has been actively discussed in career literature (e.g. Cropsey, Masho, Shiang, Sikka, Kornstein and Hampton, 2008; Monument, 2003); Levinson, Kaufman, Clark and Tolle, 1997) with Cropsey *et al* noting that "mentoring was found to have important influence on personal growth, career development, and research productivity." (2008 p. 116)

However, several of the women interviewed had problems with role models, feeling that they did not illuminate an appropriate pathway.

There weren't really any role models. I didn't want to aspire to a position where you had to shit on people to get the work offered. (Melissa)

Interestingly, none of the interviewees mentioned mentors or any mentoring schemes, which are still rare in public relations, despite efforts by the public relations industry to set them up (e.g., Whenman, 2018). This is confirmed by writers such as Zerfass *et al* (2020) who note that European communication leaders observe a lack of networks and programmes for women and too few inspiring female role models.

Thus, women who strive for senior positions in organisations often have a double penalty – there is a lack of role models or mentors and where they exist, they do not always illuminate an appropriate pathway or, as Levinson *et al* (1991) point out, they give purely professional guidance and are unable to give women advice on managing the mix of personal and professional.

Lucinda had never “worked anywhere that hasn’t had a bullying or bitchy culture” which did not leave her with any desire to stay in the industry. The lack of support from colleagues often led to incidents of bullying or a lack of self-belief. Indeed, most of the interviewees presented public relations offices as being a bitchy and unpleasant place to work. Many framed the ‘bitchiness’ issue as being part of a predominantly female workplace – when men were mentioned it was centred around issues such as sexism, denigrating work and refusing to acknowledge a woman’s skills with comments such as “[Agency life] attracts bitchy people” (Melissa); “[There was] a complete lack of respect for each other” (Lucinda) and “I don’t like people telling me what I’m doing when I’m actually doing it” (Julie).

While none of the women left directly because of bullying or bitchiness it was another factor which contributed to their dissatisfaction with the occupation. While there is little research on bullying specifically in the public relations workplace, Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper and Einarsen (2011) point to the effects of bullying in the workplace in general; those bullied are less able to cope with daily tasks and have reduced satisfaction and a lack of commitment to an organisation. It is therefore not surprising that most of the interviewees moved to occupations where they had few work colleagues. Sarah was the exception – she got on well with her colleagues and was moving into teaching where she would be working with many others.

We are seeing a picture emerging of women who feel unfulfilled and unsupported in the workplace and have jobs that they view as trivial. Connected with this is the issue of self-esteem; the research suggested that some of the interviewees did not feel that they or their work was important. For others (such as Christine and Amanda) this was not the case – they believed their skills were of value (yet unrecognised) and simply took them elsewhere. But for others this was more difficult and the mix of being in a feminised position with little meaning (and a semiprofession!) led to a lack of self-belief and status:

Some people have the right personality to carry them through a boardroom – I'm not that sort of person or whether it was that as a woman I felt intimidated. I felt that what I was telling them about wasn't important – I felt I wanted to get away from telling people how amazing things are – I felt it was all contrived and plastic – it didn't feel real. (Debbie)

I always kind of felt, oh, yeah I never felt PR was a proper profession. Sorry. (Sarah)

Or alternatively, they believed they were not valued at all:

They were just like, get press coverage, get coverage, the same coverage every month, every client all the time and when there was a month when it would drop off, which we know happens, they were like, "What have you done? You haven't done it properly, you need to find your way around it, you need to get coverage, I don't care how you do it, just get coverage." No strategy so all my skills set for that side of things were just completely worthless. (Lucinda)

There is a possibility that this lack of self-worth could be linked to the lack of progression (or the perceived lack of opportunity) in public relations. Dickerson and Taylor (2000) suggested that because women avoid tasks that need abilities they think they lack they do not experience the successful completion of more complex tasks which would then raise their confidence (but added that in a supportive environment, negative beliefs about competence can be changed). However, this view may over-simplify the situation or blame women for their own failures. As we have seen above, women are also actively denied the interesting, complex or riskier roles once they start a family or work flexibly and as a result are unable to prove their worth or be recognised (Topić, 2021).

The exit from public relations and the renegotiation of identities

The interviewees had a somewhat nihilistic view of their future in public relations and either did not see senior positions open to them or did not feel that senior roles were attractive. Debbie said she became “bored” with “being nice to journalists” while Christine felt that the reliance on social media did not suit her.

Meanwhile others had stronger views:

If you want to do well then it is dog eat dog and then maybe when you get to your thirties you think, I have been fighting now since I was 18 years old and I just want to be respected for what I do and do my job. But I suppose the thing is what is next afterwards ... If you stay in PR do you become an MD of your own company or start your own? I just don't see me wanting to do that. (Lucinda)

“[If I take another PR job] I know that I'm going to be asked to write things I don't want to smudge over. A friend of mine went to work for the local council [in PR] and had to ... make things look a lot better than they did. (Amanda)

The interviewees believed that the only route to a more meaningful life was through a different career. In a way, their view of the future (where bullying and triviality was not mentioned) may have been idealistic but those who were established in their new careers (such as Melissa, Christine, Julie, Nadia and Lucinda) were enthusiastic about their new lives.

‘Work’ can be viewed in many different ways and often cannot be separated from domestic life (Grossman and Chester, 2013). Thus, the ‘meaning’ of work does not just relate to the paid employment but the women’s experience of a raft of interrelated experiences. Grossman and Chester also note that women pay more attention to the interpretational side of work – which could explain why the women interviewed were so affected by poor treatment by superiors. Clayton, Beckett Davis, Netschay Davis, and Babunga explored the struggle women face to validate PR as an industry in the eyes of colleagues, observing that “co-workers ‘who are competing for power in communication studies and/or marketing/finance/business management ...display reticence to accept ... value in her role” (2021:24).

The women who had established new careers enjoyed their work and found it worthwhile. Interestingly, despite dismissing much of their past public relations life as meaningless, they often referred to the value of their past public relations skills where it helped them in their new career with Debbie noting that her new career as a photographer was “similar to public relations as very diverse ... You have to put your mind to lots of different things and the deadlines and expectation [of agency life] have been really useful to me” and Christine explaining that the skills in public relations were very transferable defining them as “general business skills.”

However, this was in contrast to Sarah who felt that her entire public relations career had been based on 'winging it' and did not feel her skills were transferable between jobs. This may have been due to her claim that public relations was not a 'real profession' - and thus it lacked any value in her eyes.

Conclusion

The interviews revealed that in a relaxed environment women were happy to 'talk back' and be open, raw and honest about their experiences in the workplace. The discussions revealed a number of themes previously little addressed in public relations scholarship with the result that the findings of this study could only be partially mapped or compared with past research.

A number of interviewees discussed bullying, bitchiness and other negative workplace practices (such as dress codes, sexism and excessive working hours). There is a lack of research on all these themes in public relations practice however the associated themes of public relations workplace cultures and the lived experience of public relations practitioners is becoming a more fertile area of research (e.g., Guo and Anderson, 2018; Lemon and Palenchar, 2018); Topić 2021; Willis, 2017) and it is hoped that these areas – which affect the daily lives of so many practitioners – receive further attention.

What was clear from previous research was that women were often sidelined into unchallenging roles because childcare or other commitments made it impossible to do (or they were not given) the 'exciting' or meaningful tasks (Grossman and Chester, 2013; Korabik and Rosin, 1995). Thus, exploring meaning in public relations work would be a fruitful area of research. Public relations tends not to be a “calling” (a beckoning toward activities that are morally, socially, and personally significant” as described by Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, 2009) and as a result there may be less willingness by public relations practitioners to carry out mundane work. Nonetheless it was apparent

from the conversations that the interviewees saw their work as being trivial, unchallenging or meaningless *while they were still early in their careers* - thus, this shift in how they saw their work happened *before* they had children or other caring responsibilities. For instance, Nadia, the youngest interviewee, mentioned the unfulfilling nature of her role despite her inexperience in public relations.

Ultimately, women left public relations for a range of interconnected 'surface' reasons – that it was trivial, superficial or bitchy or because they were not given interesting roles – but the underlying reason was that it lacked meaning and they simply didn't want to do it any more and wanted to move to a more 'meaningful' career.

The research suggested that the interviewees were unable to identify with the work that they were permitted to carry out and felt that the work that the creative, strategic or management roles they wanted to do in public relations (if, indeed they wanted to stay in public relations) were closed to them for a number of reasons – for instance, because they felt that their views were not valued or they would not be considered for such a role. This was not a result of a lack of their own ambition or abilities but because they were denied entry, either directly or indirectly, by senior management to the roles which would provide fulfilment. Alternatively, the interviewees knew that although the roles were open to them, they were not prepared to make the required sacrifices to get there. These sacrifices were not related to childcare but to the behaviours the women felt that they would have to adopt (bullying or bitchiness).

Sometimes, however, the senior role did not actually exist - some of the women became disillusioned by public relations when they discovered that the creative or interesting roles were something that only existed in books and industry websites, and not in real life.

We should also note here that the interviewees often denigrated the feminised public relations tasks (identified by e.g., Cline *et al.*, 1986; Fröhlich, 2004; Fröhlich and Peters, 2007; Mitrook, Wilkes and Cameron, 1998; Tsetsura, 2010; Topić, 2021) that they found unfulfilling although whether this was because they genuinely felt they were tedious or had been conditioned by the 'masculine' side of public relations to believe that they were was not explored in the interviews.

This study demonstrates that women leave public relations for a number of interconnected reasons but we can see that a lack of meaning in work is often central to the decision to leave. This can be

driven by surface reasons (such as only being able to work limited hours due to childcare and not being able to carry out meaningful tasks) but underlying these factors are patriarchal structures in and beyond the workplace. Such structures devalue women's work and put the emphasis on caring and domestic tasks into a women's domain and it is these which are really behind the exodus of women from public relations practice.

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