

Chapter 2

Public Relations Power in the 1990s: Sex, Sexuality and Sexism – A UK Perspective

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Abstract

Women working in public relations (PR) in the 1990s developed the power of metamodern pragmatism to avoid being constrained in this decade of contradictions.

This was a time of promise for female empowerment and careers. The PR industry in Britain had quadrupled in size, yet increased feminisation and professionalisation did not resolve gender inequity. Indeed, alongside the existence of ‘old boys clubs’ and hedonistic macho agencies in the industry, the 1990s offered a lad’s mag culture and an AbFab image of PR.

An original collaborative historical ‘Café Delphi’ method was developed using three themes (sex, sexuality and sexism) to explore women’s careers and contributions in the expanding and increasingly powerful field of PR in the United Kingdom during the 1990s. It built on feminist critique of the industry and paradoxical portrayals of women resulting from significant changes in media, popular culture and a pluralistic marketplace.

Individual and collective experiences of women working in PR at the time reveal the power of attitudes to affect their ability to achieve equality and empowerment. Women navigated tensions between the benefits of accelerated pluralism and the patriarchal resistance in the workplace through performative choices and a deep sense of pragmatism.

Keywords: Equality; empowerment; sexuality; sexism; metamodernism; pragmatism

Introduction

This chapter takes an innovative approach to explore women's careers and contributions in the expanding and increasingly powerful field of public relations (PR) in the United Kingdom during the 1990s. Conventions are challenged in this work by adopting 'the idea that writing is thinking' (St Pierre, 2007, p. 5304) to develop original methods of research and data analysis. Likewise, its style and format of feminist authorship is a 'practice of love' (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018, p. 269) inspired simply by 'women talking about their experience' (Richardson, 2000, p. 927).

Indeed, our intention is to amplify women's forgotten, quiet voices rather than examine in detail the original Café Delphi historical method developed to research their experiences of working in PR in 1990s Britain. The context of this chapter extends prior studies of women working in PR in Britain during the post-War period (L'Etang, 2015) and between 1970 and 1989 (Yaxley, 2013).

In the first of five parts, we provide a perspective building on feminist critique of PR, the failed promise of gender equality and the disjointed nature of feminism in the 1990s. In part two, we discuss literature that reveals paradox in portrayals of women apparent in 1990s media, popular culture and the socio-economic marketplace. The third part explains development of a research paradigm based on three themes (sex, sexuality and sexism) to inform an original collaborative 'Café Delphi' method. A thematic historical approach allows for understanding of a complex topic, involving similarity and difference. The fourth part presents a set of premises encompassing the individual and collective experiences of women working in PR at the time. Finally, in part five, we use the shape of a triquetra to interrogate intersections of power inherent in women's work in PR and show how these were navigated through performative choices. Consequently, a deep sense of feminine pragmatism was revealed as PR's power in the 1990s.

Part 1. Perspective: Feminine, Historical, Metamodern

This chapter is informed by experiences, interests and sensibilities of the authors: two women who began their PR careers in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. As feminists, researchers and scholars, we favour interpretive 'qualitative and reflexive methods' (Chodorow, 1996, p. 22) and we also embed traces of autoethnography; a 'fusion of both observation and first-hand participation' (Scarles & Sanderson, 2016, p. 254).

Our feminine perspective adopts the non-gendered position of Nel Noddings (1984, p. 2) in being 'feminine in the deep classical sense – rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness'. It builds on feminist critique of PR that question gendered norms (Aldoory, 2009), power hierarchies (Daymon & Demetrious, 2014) and discriminatory practices (Aldoory & Toth, 2021).

Our historical perspective extends prior studies (L'Etang, 2015; Yaxley, 2013) and work that shows increased feminisation and professionalisation in the PR industry (Yaxley, 2018) did not resolve gender inequity (Fitch & Third, 2010; Fröhlich, 2004).

Our metamodern perspective recognises how tension between attaining professional power and celebrating personal empowerment reflects the fractured and polarised feminist movement of the 1990s (Kroløkke & Sørensen, 2006). As Lene Andersen (2019, p. 7) explains, ‘metamodernity provides us with a framework for understanding ourselves and our societies in a much more complex way’.

In developing an original Café Delphi historical research method, we reflect Donna Haraway’s intention to get at ‘how worlds are made and unmade’ (1994, p. 62). Such echoes register political and sociological identities that resonate with contemporary movements, such as MeToo (Dadas, 2020, n.p.). For instance, alongside existence of a male-dominated culture evident in ‘old boys clubs’ and ‘hedonistic macho agencies’ in the PR industry (Yaxley, 2017), the 1990s offered a perspective of women’s ability to ‘use their bodies for profit as a means to power’ reflected in a ‘lad’s mag’ culture (Coy & Horvath, 2011, p. 144) and an ‘AbFab’ image of PR as ‘all cocaine, champagne and shagging’ (Adache, 2014, p. 121).

This feminine, historical, metamodern perspective juxtaposes women’s potential to pursue a professional career with negative perceptions of PR (Moloney, 2000; Spicer, 2009) and ‘the fallacy of increasing equality in the workplace’ (Grunig et al., 2001, p. 50). Such competing narratives operated alongside divergent public portrayals of women. To explore this context, we embrace the sentiment of Søren Kierkegaard (2007, p. 35) that ‘paradox is the source of the thinker’s passion’.

Part 2. Paradox: Media, Popular Culture, Marketplace

Jacque L’Etang (2014, p. xiii) writes that PR history is ‘bound to socio-political and economic contexts that require a broad scope’, which applies to changes affecting opportunities for – and perceptions about – women in the workplace in the 1990s. Work was being reshaped (Handy, 1989) with periods of oscillation between recession and recovery reducing prospects for life-long, organisationally managed careers with a single employer. Yet, women’s career expectations benefited from changes in preceding decades prompted by employment legislation (Morris & Nott, 1991, p. 69). Likewise, growth of a knowledge-based economy (Foray & Lundvall, 1998) stimulated an evolution of career opportunities (Baruch, 2003).

However, achieving equality exposes ‘inherent contradictions’ and ‘intricate paradoxes’ (Freinacht, 2019, p. 119), including those based on social recognition. Indeed, Nick Couldry (2001, p. 171) calls for consideration of ‘forces that structure the mediated symbolic landscape’ and legitimise impacts of inequalities. Moreover, Couldry hints at a metamodern paradox in how ‘the media’ and its authoritative power is distinguished from and contrasted with ‘the ordinary’ (2001, p. 159), that is, people’s non-mediated everyday social experiences. We see this argument in (mis)representation of women in media, popular culture and the marketplace.

Media (mis)representation

Underrepresentation of women in mass media (including depictions of outdated housewife stereotypes or denigration of working women's abilities) symbolised their 'real lack of power' (Tuchman, 1979, p. 533). Drawing on observations by George Gerbner (1978, p. 48) of media resistance to 'the changing status of women', Gaye Tuchman noted 'just as representation in the media signifies social existence, so too under representation and (by extension) trivialisation and condemnation indicate symbolic annihilation' (Gerbner, 1978).

Resonance of this 'systematic gendering' was found in 1990s media by Susan Fountaine and Judy McGregor (2002, p. 6) who critiqued the 'quality of media representation' (p. 6). Ginny Dougary likewise highlights the contrary media position:

New stereotypes were invented for successful woman, in a sort of pre-emptive put-down before women, in any significant numbers, had managed to gain a power base. And, on the odd occasion when a woman did reach the pinnacle of her profession – the first female head of MI5, the first woman Director of Public Prosecutions – reporters seemed to multiply their achievement, seeing serried ranks of prominent women wherever they looked – a picture which is hardly borne out by the facts.

(Dougary, 1994, p. xii)

Cynthia Carter and co-authors (1998) linked media commentary to economic developments. For example, The *Sunday Times Magazine* (1990) declared 'The 1990s: The Decade of Women'. A year later, *Opportunity 2000*, secured high profile commitments to champion gender equality, although narrative around the initiative represented employer interests over those of women (Garnsey & Rees, 1996). Moreover, arguments for recruiting and promoting women changed in tone as the economy entered recession. Media were 'ambivalent or hostile' towards women in senior positions who often were the first to lose their jobs due to downsizing (Carter et al., 1998, p. 2) and/or were trivialised as an 'Executive Tart' or 'Killer Bimbo' (Dougary, 1994, p. xiii).

Popular Culture (mis)representation

Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer (2012, p. 1) observe 'gender and popular culture are connected in inextricable, pervasive and complex ways'. Popular culture has been described as 'an area of contest' (McCullagh, 1993, p. 79), depicting the 'domestic as the most suitable for women and the portrayal of ambition and independence in single women as a danger to society and to the women themselves' (p. 85). Ciaran McCullagh notes the strength of narrative in

popular culture makes it 'likely to be more influential on audience attitudes and understandings' (p. 86). This was evident in Britain's 'media-saturated' society (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998, p. 113) where fact and fiction were increasingly blurred.

The back cover of *90s Bitch* by Allison Yarrow (2018) promotes the book as telling 'the real story of women and girls in the 1990s, exploring how they were maligned by the media, vilified by popular culture, and objectified in the marketplace'. While focused largely on the United States, examples of real and fictional women (from Hillary Clinton, Marcia Clark and Monica Lewinsky to television characters in *Ally McBeal*, *Friends* and *Sex and the City*) were known globally. The underlying message was women 'couldn't be both feminine (read: sexual) and competent' (Yarrow, 2018, p. 111).

Discourse that 'blamed and shamed' sexually active women (Yarrow, 2018, p. 31) contrasted with 'an increasingly pornographic mass culture' (McNair, 1996, p. 23) that included 'erotically charged' music by artists such as Prince and Madonna (Turner, 2013, p. 48). Alwyn Turner claims a 'crisis of masculinity' in the United Kingdom at the start of the 1990s led to an irreverent 'new lad' culture (p. 49). This was driven by 'consumption of lads' mags – lifestyle magazines aimed at young men that feature young women in sexualised poses' (Coy & Horvath, 2011, p. 144).

Appearing in UK media in 1995, the derivative term 'ladette' initially referred to hedonistic young women, with the rise of 'ladette culture' associated with celebrities including 'DJs Sara Cox and Zoe Ball, and television presenter Denise Van Outen' (Jackson & Tinkler, 2007, p. 253). Their public consumption of alcohol at same levels as men was positioned as feminising 'drinking culture' and also problematised as adversely affecting women's looks, health, fertility and femininity (Day et al., 2004, p. 172).

Marketplace (mis)representation

By the 1990s, deregulation, privatisation and a 'tilt to the market' (Miller & Dinan, 2000, p. 5) had caused disruption in media, popular culture and the marketplace. Kevin Moloney related 'significant change in UK society' (2000, p. 34) to 'accelerated pluralism' (Bimber, 1998, p. 133). This affected personal and collective values and behaviours, connected developments in communication, civic engagement and consumerism, and encouraged a 'promotional mindset' (Moloney, 2000, p. 35), contributing to the growth of PR.

Women working in PR built their careers in this environment and contributed towards it. Attention has been given to 'popular marketing efforts' (primarily advertising) that 'emphasised certain patriarchal images' of women, and 'constructed negative messages' about their work and personal lives (de Waal Malefyt & McCabe, 2020, p. 2). Although this has been a neglected area within PR scholarship, 'popular culture is a critical product of, and resource for, public relations practitioners' (Fitch et al., 2016, p. 282).

Daniel [Lair et al. \(2005, p. 308\)](#) consider ‘self-commodification’ as a promotional process for career enhancement (named ‘personal branding’ by Tom Peters in [1997](#)). This has particular significance for women:

Personal branding has the potential to objectify all workers; however, for women, the concept of personal branding may be even more problematic than for their male counterparts. In particular, personal branding promotes a feminine surface identity and a masculine internal identity, all the while perpetuating the work/home dualism. Personal branding encourages women to get ahead at work, work as hard or harder than their male counterparts, and reach for the top but also to look womanly, take care of their external appearance, be there for their children and husbands (if a woman has them – but recognise that if she does, she may not be viewed as a 100% company woman), and routinely act in the caretaker role at work. ([Lair et al., 2005, p. 328](#))

In considering (mis)representation through the public sphere of the 1990s, we’ve observed resistance facing working women seeking to realise opportunities notionally available to them.

Part 3. Paradigm: Legal, Individual, Patriarchal

The paradoxical public sphere presented discourse that trivialised, sexualised and ridiculed women. Translated to the workplace, ‘mediated versions of the ordinary’ ([Couldry, 2001, p. 11](#)) influenced development of our research paradigm to investigate relationships between three themes (sex, sexuality and sexism) as shown in the 3S framework ([Table 2.1](#)). Within this matrix structure, each theme informed a model comprising five components: gender focus, public sphere (mediated discourse), system (autopoietic), feminism and topics.

Following Luhmann, we use ‘the notion of systems as a methodology device’ ([Baecker, 2001, p. 71](#)) to filter the complexity of everyday society through three autopoietic systems: legal, individual and patriarchal. Gender issues in a legal system tend to reflect a narrative of progress towards equality between the sexes ([Conaghan, 2013](#)). By the 1990s, legislation decreed women’s rights in UK workplaces to be largely indistinguishable from men’s in terms of pay, career opportunities and job-based roles. Women’s success was grounded in ‘female individualisation’ and freedom to compete in a ‘new meritocracy’ ([McRobbie, 2009, p. 16](#)). However, it is debatable such empowerment translated into autonomous expressions of personal sexuality, which involves identity as well as sexual behaviour ([Burrell & Hearn, 1989](#)).

Table 2.1. The 3S Framework (Yaxley & Bowman, 2022).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Theme	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>Sexism</i>
Gender focus	Equality	Empowerment	Attitudes
Public sphere (mediated discourse)	Trivialised	Sexualised	Ridiculed
System (autopoietic)	Legal (rights)	Individual (freedom)	Patriarchal (power)
Feminism	Indistinguishable	Expressive	Oppressive
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay • Career • Roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identity • Representation • Sexual behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotions • Socialisation • Needs

In contrast, Joyce Fernandes (1991, p. 38) proposed a need to represent ‘an unfettered female sexuality’ to counter women’s disempowerment in a ‘male-dominated culture’. Similarly, Sylvia Walby (1990, p. 20) highlights the power of patriarchal work-based ‘social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women’. This indicates sexism as ‘overt, hostile behaviour that is insidious and harmful to women’ (Jones et al., 2014, p. 171). However, sexism may be ‘marked by a deep ambivalence, rather than a uniform antipathy, toward women’, comprising benevolent as well as hostile attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491). Sexist expectations may affect women’s ability to display emotion, socialise and have their needs accommodated at work.

The terms indistinguishable, expressive and oppressive reflect feminism’s fractured nature in the 1990s – including an ‘anti-feminist sentiment’ (McRobbie, 2009, p. 1). This allows greater nuance than formal theoretical positions (e.g. prevailing ‘wave’ typologies), the problematic construct of ‘male feminists’ (Whelehan, 1995, p. 186) and the complex entanglement of other feminist thinking, such as ecofeminism (originated by d’Eaubonne, 1974) and intersectional feminism (conceived by Crenshaw, 1989).

The 3S framework informed adaptation of a ‘Café Delphi’ approach (Jolly et al., 2021) into an original historical method to understand what Bernhard Peters (2005, p. 84) calls ‘a community of memory, of experience, and of communication’. Fig. 2.1 illustrates the project’s three phases. Individual and collective experiences were sought from an initial survey (phase 1), with respondents ($n = 63$) invited to participate online in a World Café (phase 2) and subsequent discursive Delphi method (phase 3).

Phase 1. The survey employed a simple Likert agreement scale to address topics indicated in the 3S framework (Table 2.1). The question structure covered

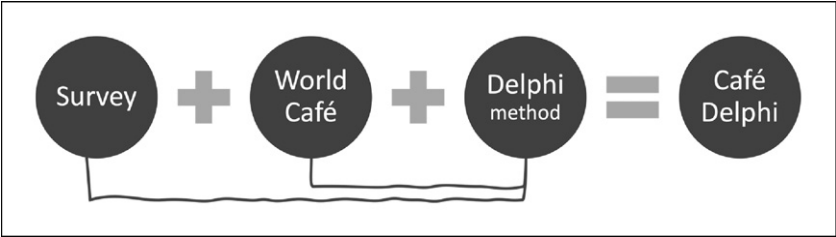


Fig. 2.1. Original Café Delphi Historical Research Method (Yaxley & Bowman, 2022).

core areas of gender focus (equality, empowerment and attitudes), as well as the intersections of these (Table 2.2).

Phase 2. The online World Café comprised two groups of participants ($n = 8$) and involved three discursive rounds to *harvest* recollections. As a *purposeful gathering*, World Café reflects an oral tradition employing conversational techniques (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). It encourages sharing of memories and

Table 2.2. Survey Question Structure (Yaxley & Bowman, 2022).

	Equality	Empowerment	Attitudes
<i>Equality:</i>	<i>Core area</i>	<i>Intersection</i>	<i>Intersection</i>
Pay	Parity	Opportunity for parity	Parity not necessary
Career	Same opportunities	Behave like men	Not taken seriously
Roles	Same	Opportunity for same	Suited to roles
<i>Empowerment:</i>	<i>Intersection</i>	<i>Core area</i>	<i>Intersection</i>
Identity	Behave like men	Able to be self	Stereotyped
Representation	Conservative	Free to choose	Feminine
Sexual behaviour	Conform to norms	Sexually liberated	Expected to use
<i>Attitudes:</i>	<i>Intersection</i>	<i>Intersection</i>	<i>Core area</i>
Emotions	Discrimination	Express	Unable to control
Socialisation	Same opportunities	Free to choose	Excluded
Needs	Same	Accommodated	Subservient

experiences in a relaxed, hospitable space welcoming contributions and connecting diverse perspectives.

Phase 3. The Delphi method combined the groups to *gather* discoveries from the World Café and preliminary survey findings. Delphi studies involve iteration and expert insights to seek consensus (Wakefield & Watson, 2014). This deeply reflective and rich process enabled ‘constructive dialogue around critical questions’ (Fouché & Light, 2010, p. 28).

Part 4. Premises: Equality, Empowerment, Attitudes

Prior to examining research data, we developed a set of premises as a mechanism to understand participants’ individual and collective experiences. However, it was not our intent to prove (or disprove) these ‘starting information statements’ (Trillas et al., 2019, p. 8):

Equality premises:

- Women had legal rights to be treated equally [Equality].
- Equal treatment required self-efficacy [Equality/Empowerment].
- Equality is diminished by work/societal attitudes [Equality/Attitudes].

Empowerment premises:

- Women were free to be empowered [Empowerment].
- Empowerment required self-control [Empowerment/Equality].
- Objectification tempered empowerment [Empowerment/Attitudes].

Attitudes premises:

- Work/societal attitudes exerted power [Attitudes].
- Attitudes neutralised equal rights [Attitudes/Equality].
- Women were liberated by positive attitudes [Attitudes/Empowerment].

To capture the essence of our thinking, we assigned an indicator word to each premise, illustrated as a segmented ring around three conjoined circles representing the core areas of gender focus in the 3S framework (Fig. 2.2).

Examining the research data from phase 1, survey findings for the core areas point towards collective experiences in respect of the following indicator words:



Fig. 2.2. Sense-Making Indicator Words (Yaxley & Bowman, 2022).

- *Rights:* [Equality]
Women’s job roles were same as men but pay and career opportunities were not.
- *Freedom:* [Empowerment]
Women couldn’t be themselves at work, choose how to dress or be sexually liberated.
- *Power:* [Attitudes]
Women were seen as unable to control their emotions, excluded from socialising and network opportunities and their needs in the workplace were treated as subservient.

Looking at where core areas overlap in Fig. 2.2 (shown as intersections in Table 2.2), each pair of layered circles reveals ‘the form of a mandorla’ (Bowman

& Yaxley, 2022, p. 43). These shapes were of particular interest to us as reflective spaces to refine our understanding of the relationships between the three themes (sex, sexuality and sexism) in survey data:

Mandorla A. [Equality + Empowerment]

- *Self-efficacy:*

Women had opportunities to work in the same job roles, but not to earn the same salary and they needed to behave like men to have equal career opportunities.

- *Self-control:*

Women had to act like men in the workplace, dress conservatively and faced discrimination if they didn't conform to sexual norms.

Mandorla B. [Empowerment + Attitudes]

- *Objectified:*

Women were stereotyped, expected to dress in a feminine way and use their sexuality in the workplace.

- *Liberated:*

Women were free to choose to socialise and network but couldn't express their true feelings about a work situation and didn't have their personal needs accommodated.

Mandorla C. [Attitudes + Equality]

- *Neutralised:*

Women didn't have the same personal needs as men, were excluded from socialising and networking opportunities and faced discrimination if they displayed their emotions.

- *Diminished:*

Women needed to earn the same as men but were viewed as best suited to specific roles and their careers weren't taken seriously.

This synopsis hints at shared experiences of sex, sexuality and sexism, whereby the power of attitudes affected women's ability to achieve equality and empowerment.

Part 5. Power: Sex, Sexuality, Sexism

A principle of metamodernism is that ‘after deconstruction must follow reconstruction’ (Freinacht, 2017, p. 347). Our research paradigm and set of premises dissected the paradoxical nature of women’s careers and contributions in PR in the 1990s. The mandorla forms refined understanding of collective experiences, hinting at (but not reconstructing) a complete or universal narrative. Indeed, formal deduction is ‘unable to reach anything that is not implicit or hidden in the premises’ (Trillas et al., 2019, p. 86).

To illuminate the uniqueness of women’s individual stories, we undertook interpretive examination of narrative comments from the survey, alongside rich discourse in the online World Café (phase 2) and Delphi method (phase 3). Our focus was the intersections of power inherent in women’s work, signified in the shape of a triquetra revealed by the outline of the three mandorla forms (Fig. 2.3).

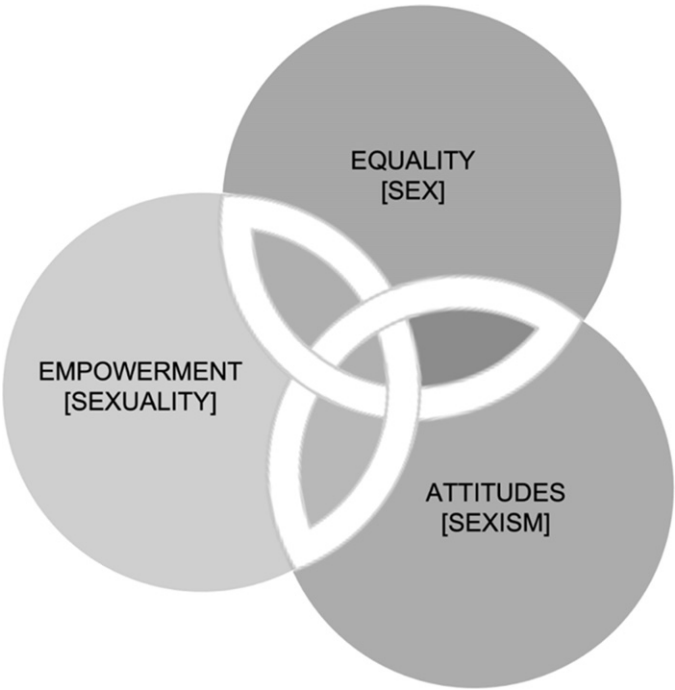


Fig. 2.3. Triquetra Signifying Intersections of Power (Yaxley & Bowman, 2022).



Fig. 2.4. Professional Performative Statements.

In sharing their experiences, the women spoke specifically about incidents and moments affecting their careers and contributions in PR. These made visible how attitudes exerted a continuum of positive or negative forces, creating tensions for women who needed to apply self-efficacy and/or self-control dependent on the circumstances they encountered.

It was our sense that to navigate these tensions, women make a performative choice. We recognise that performance, performativity and workplace identities have been explored from a variety of perspectives, for example, by sociologist, Erving Goffman (1959) and PR scholar, Johanna Fawkes (2015, 2021). However, we use 'performative' (i.e. the nature of performance) more loosely to capture how women talk about their own experiences (Figs. 2.4-2.7).

We identified four types of performative statements from the research and suggest these amplify the paradoxical reality of women working in PR in the 1990s:

- (1) *Professional performance.* Conforming to gendered norms of masculine behaviour and feminine appearance. Wear heels and conservative dress – but not trousers.
- (2) *Projected performance.* Excluded from masculine spaces and expected to use feminine sexuality. Be fluffy and flirtatious – but don't make a fuss.
- (3) *Personal performance.* Participate on masculine terms and fulfil feminine responsibilities. Be part of long hours, drinking culture – but don't mention motherhood or marriage.
- (4) *Progression performance.* Promotion favoured men and strong/competitive women. Do good work – but don't have ambitions beyond technical roles.

The positive and negative forces made visible through these performative statements act as paradoxical tensions arising from misaligned intersections of power signified in the triquetra (Fig. 2.3). This indicates the complexity of

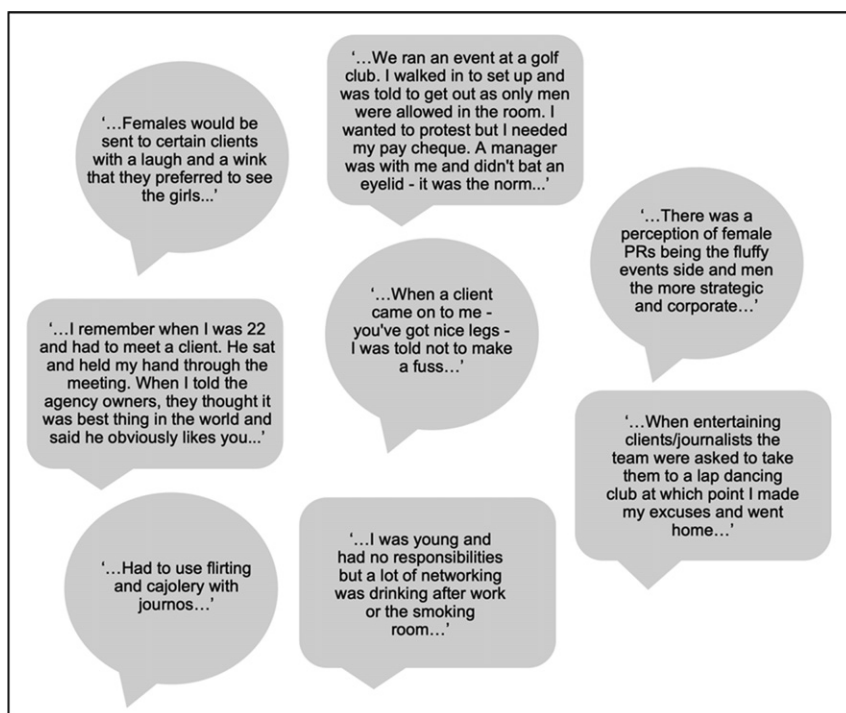


Fig. 2.5. Projected Performative Statements.

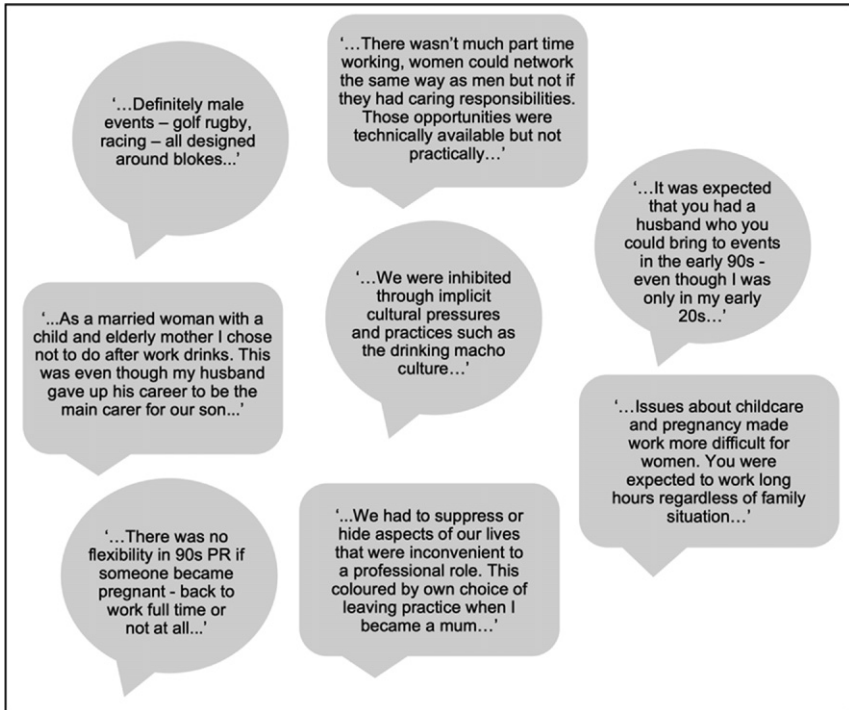


Fig. 2.6. Personal Performative Statements.

everyday society reflected in the workplace that affected the individual and collective experiences of women working in PR in the 1990s.

At the centre of the triquetra (where the three mandorla forms overlap) is the shape of a Reuleaux triangle. In the Delphi discussion (phase 3), this space was identified as the locus of each woman's unique stories and performative choices. Moreover, it is where all layers of the 3S framework (Table 2.1) are bonded together as a 'lamination' (Holland & Leander, 2004, p. 131) – a process that creates both flexibility and strength.

The Delphi discussion between ourselves and the women provided an opportunity for reflection as we listened together to each other's experiences and gained further insights. This holding, and passing on, of feminist oral history amplified traces (Moore et al., 2017) that oscillate back and forth between the past, present and future (Haraway, 1994). For example:

... I get this sense we were performing that role within a certain framework, which was inescapably sort of a masculine kind of way of seeing the world and the way we were behaving was perhaps a response to that. So even where I felt my gender was not a defining kind of identity within what I was doing, there was something going on that perhaps I hadn't really given much attention to before...

...There were things going on, I suppose, because we were women in a role. But it was quite an exciting time to be in that role...

...So, I think that's how it kind of worked – worked in and around it – and maybe that continued throughout my career.

...It was how much of the time, we were young. There was a lot of things that when you say them now – and if happened now – there would be absolute outrage and uproar, but they just seem to happen and be accepted at that time...

...We were not just challenging the status quo, but women were given the opportunity to kind of take on the unknown and, you know, like we were the risk takers...

...There was the joy, you could almost say, of being allowed to take up a professional role and being taken seriously for that...

‘...Women were being given the opportunity because PR was an undefined role, and it was possibly not seen as that important. Certainly, the men came in, but that very much reflects my own feeling about it quite a lot...

For us, this conversation reveals a deep sense of pragmatism in women's recollections. In a nutshell, this sensibility suggests that we didn't know any difference at the time – but distance from our experiences reveals other ways of knowing and being. Our individual and collective experiences were – and were accepted as – of the time. This reflects how ‘professionals are never fully made but continue to “become” throughout their careers, necessitating pro/re-active and ironical thinking’ (Bowman & Yaxley, 2021, n.p.).

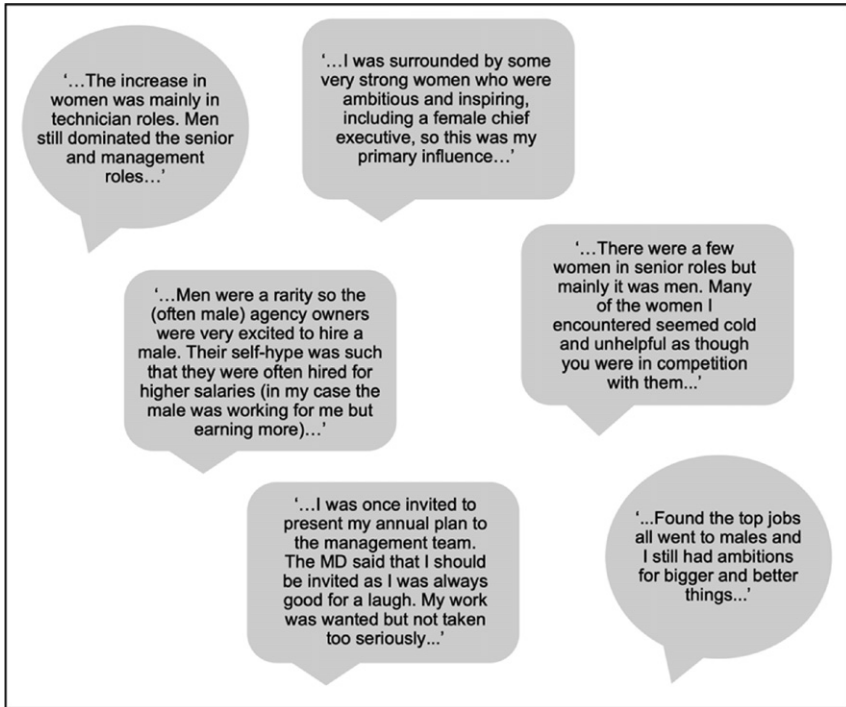


Fig. 2.7. Progression Performative Statements.

Conclusion

This innovative Café Delphi research project set out to explore women's careers and contributions in the expanding and increasingly powerful field of PR in the United Kingdom during the 1990s. While there are limitations to our interpretive method (primarily concerning its qualitative orientation), it has surfaced original ideas and opened new areas of inquiry. Most importantly, it provided an opportunity for women to talk collectively about their experiences and be heard.

Since the 1990s, issues affecting women working in PR have begun to be discussed and researched more widely. Yet, the extent to which historical, current and emerging matters concerning sex, sexism and sexuality relate specifically to PR requires greater examination. We are continuing this project with women who have become our co-researchers. Their (and our) experiences today as older women, many of whom decided to pursue careers outside PR practice, offers an insightful area of study.

Reflecting our feminine perspective, this work adds to existing critique by highlighting how oppressive sexist attitudes towards women restricted their ability to express their sexuality freely and realise legal rights that should have been indistinguishable in the workplace between the sexes. We suggest recollections in our

research offer an opportunity to pivot towards the ‘feminist pragmatic movement’ (Lake & Whipps, 2022, p. 41) and its links to both ‘feminist consciousness’ (Fischer, 2010, p. 72) and a feminine approach to ethics (Noddings, 1984).

Our Café Delphi historical research offers an innovative, co-creational perspective, contributing to development of a multi-paradigmatic and theoretically diverse knowledge base (Jelen-Sanchez, 2017) and extending methodological pluralism to PR’s historiography.

From our metamodern perspective, the 1990s was a time of paradox. Tensions between the benefits of accelerated pluralism and the patriarchal resistance evident in the lived experiences of women working in PR required them to navigate polarities evident in the 3S framework. To avoid being constrained in a decade of contradictions, we contend women’s pragmatism was PR’s power in the 1990s.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those women – our co-researchers – who gave freely of their time to complete the survey and participate in our World Café and Delphi discussion. We look forward to continuing this research project with you.

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