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1 Surface effects

Public relations and the politics of gender

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Gender conformity embedded unquestioningly as ‘common sense’ is a powerful but often unseen force within social structure that has played a central role in shaping the politics, direction and practice of public relations. Despite this, public relations scholarship and education pay limited attention to questions of gender and power, where they intersect and how the effects are expressed. This chapter uses a socio-cultural lens to understand both the dominant as well as divergent and emergent ways in which public relations as a discourse – that is, as a specific formation of language articulated to history, institutional authority and normative practices – culturally configures ‘gender’. It focuses on how socially constituted gendered identities are performed within contemporary public relations workplaces and how this anticipates cultural possibility (Butler 2008: xv). In particular, it focuses on how gender, power and sexual hierarchy are intertwined, and the ways in which fashion – as social practice – authorizes behaviour, rules and conventions to construct a set of dispositions that both imitates and promotes these cultures. These lines of inquiry engage theoretically with a view of gender, not just as a socially constructed category, but as a socially sexualized form of inequality.

According to Judith Butler: ‘sexual hierarchy produces and consolidates gender’ (2008: xii). For Catharine MacKinnon, an exploration of gender without this ‘obscures and legitimizes the way gender is imposed by force’ (MacKinnon 1987: 3). This nexus of the ‘social’ and ‘sexuality’ frames the discussion in two ways: first, in terms of the binding particularities of ‘difference’ between men and women in and through the construction of gender; and second, in terms of a wide cultural field of social processes articulated to this construction. Therefore, the ideals of gender promoted in public relations, and dynamic social processes and practices that create the ideals, will be explored as an imposition on subjects engaging with the politics of repression as a means of legitimizing and silencing discussion about sexual dominance and inequality. By questioning the configuration of women, men, bodies, representation and politics within public relations, gender is thus defined as a ‘set of free-floating attributes … performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence’
(Butler 2008: 34). Discarding fixed (essentialist) notions of ‘men’ and ‘women’, the research engages with ideas of subjects as individual ‘agents’ who interact within fluid and moving cultural fields of concealed relations of power linked to ideology and control. This trajectory allows for movement of, and the unlocking of, new understandings of public relations and its relationship to gender and the performance of social sexuality.

Contemporary workplaces appear normatively different from the male-dominated strongholds of the 1950s and 1960s: before the contraceptive pill became widely accepted, and before rights such as equal pay and equal opportunity were extensively progressed by second-wave feminists who mobilized in the 1970s to advocate ‘more nuanced and marginalised forms of disadvantage’ (Daymon and Demetriou 2010: 2). Indeed, MacKinnon argues that since the 1970s feminists have made visible a socially embedded pattern of abuse of women by men. She says, ‘In fact, it is the woman who has not been sexually abused who deviates’ (1987: 5). In accordance, MacKinnon discusses that ‘The pervasiveness of male sexual violence against women is therefore not denied, minimized, trivialized, eroticized, or excepted as marginal or episodic or placed to one side while more important matters discussed’ (1987: 5–6). Paradigmatically, and over time, views like these led to the challenging of long-held assumptions about women and men. They led to the creation of different meanings and knowledge bases and of shared understandings in society, some of which had significant and long-term legal, political, social and cultural implications. Based on this, these questions – how public relations discourse culturally constructs gendered identities, and how these are performed within diverse workplace settings – are contextually characterized by a general view that feminists have already done the ‘main work’ in relation to gender and inequality, and, as a result, today’s workplaces are qualitatively different. This view is further buttressed because social relations within them appear to be more relaxed and informal than in the past. For this reason, the chapter explores if and in what ways the constitution of gender in today’s public relations workplaces affects relations of power, and in particular if this produces and reinforces a sexualized relationship of inequality while at the same time discouraging diversity. Thus, the chapter will use an interdisciplinary lens to consider if, in recent times, gendered categories have been reconstituted by cultural conditions and what this means for hidden relations of power.

While not the only way of enforcing gender inequality, sexual harassment is a significant site for the production of meaning. According to Judith Butler, ‘sexual harassment is the paradigmatic allegory for the production of gender. Not all discrimination can be understood as harassment. The act of harassment may be one in which a person is “made” into a certain gender’ (2008: xiii).

Investigating gender, power and public relations, the study considers the public records and reporting of two cases of sexual harassment brought by public relations staff in Australia. The first occurred in 2010 when a female
publicist for a major department store chain, David Jones, began civil action against its chief executive officer; the second took place in 2012 when a male parliamentary staffer in media relations made allegations against the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The testimony and the public reporting of these two cases contain descriptions of females and males and public relations workplaces that provide an opportunity to identify indicative patterns of gender construction for analysis. Hence the rights or wrongs of cases will not be analysed, but rather the media representation of them: what is signified, what absences occur and the public understandings of gender and public relations that might result from this. The powerful assumptions around gender in and towards ‘PR’ seen through these cases suggest ways sexual hierarchies are produced and reproduced that work against equality and diversity in public relations workplaces. In particular, these investigations open up the possibilities that, far from unbinding women from repressive regimes of the past, the normative boundaries in contemporary workplaces have been redrawn around gender and this category of inequality now includes gay men.

**PR and the clothes–body complex**

A little black dress, pencil skirt, blazer with patterned shirts, revealing cleavage, striped tie, tailored shirt, classic suit, luxury brand-name watch, accessorizing with technology, spray tan, manicured nails, teeth whitening, hair colour: what are the accepted norms of appearance for women and men in public relations workplaces? Interrelationships between the sexual harassment cases and the production of knowledge through the clothes–body complex or ‘fashion’ in public relations will also be investigated. The sexual harassment thesis is also understood through fashion as a culturally specific social practice in a ‘complex’ where sites of gender construction link to ideology, agency and rules of discourse. Jennifer Craik argues:

> Fashion constitutes the arrangement of clothes and the adornment of the body to display certain body techniques and to highlight relations between the body and its social habitus. The body is not a given, but actively constructed through how it is used and projected. Clothes are an index of codes of display, restraint, self-control, and affect-transformation.

(Craik 1994: 10).

This view builds on Butler’s thesis that:

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through
a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.

(Butler 2008: 191; italics in the original)

To explore the notion of gender as a sexualized relationship to inequality in public relations, an empirical component to the study will consider fashion as grammar or rules which direct the development of professional identities. ‘Mundane’ textual samples sourced from internet blogs and other sites will be analysed as part of the process of investigating gender in public relations; in particular, those providing fashion and style advice for potential public relations practitioners about what to wear at interviews and within the job. As texts, these samples provide valuable insights into the assumptions underpinning the gendered boundaries in public relations workplaces that link to sexual harassment. They not only reveal the way relations are being constructed, but whether these relations are marked by uneven power relations and forms of subordination, as well as ways these relations may be imposed.

In summary, these lines of investigation reveal normative understandings in public relations, what happens when transgressions occur, and how public discussion of these can become woven into a broader understanding of occupational practice and workplaces. Significantly it is argued that in public relations a self-contradictory reality exists, paradoxically both obvious and obscured: on the one hand, the career pleasure promoted in public relations links to a controlling sexual hierarchy but, on the other, these very practices contribute to the loss of career opportunity and the delegitimization of the occupation. For public relations, resolving this self-contradictory stance on gender and its flow-on effects such as anxiety and confusion about body and appearance is an important dynamic in occupational reform. The conclusion considers the implications of this for ethics and public relations practice.

**Fashioning gender in modernity**

Historically, public relations, like other manifestations of capitalism and modernity, was profoundly anchored to culturally constructed understandings of gender as heteronormativity and linked to a discourse which privileged masculinist positions to the exclusion of others. In relation to earlier periods of modernity Robert Nelson observes that:

It was necessary … for men to appear standardised, mechanical, predictable, rational, and regular: they are the responsible organisers of society. Women meanwhile would be encouraged to retain all the aspirations to frivolous hedonism, leggy fancies, extravagant and
irrationality, because these indulgences became signs of inferiority and powerlessness.

(Nelson 2011: 15)

Butler reveals other meanings in the complex power dynamic between men and women in modernity. The following quotation shows how ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ can be understood in two distinct ways: first, in a ‘sexist’ mode where an act of sexual submission, in effect, fulfils a woman; and second, in a ‘feminist’ mode where it is evidence of subordination.

There is thus a difference between sexist and feminist views on the relation between gender and sexuality: the sexist claims that a woman only exhibits her womanness in the act of heterosexual coitus in which her subordination becomes her pleasure (an essence emanates and is confirmed in the sexualized subordination of women); a feminist view argues that gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination of women. The latter accepts the power of the former’s orthodox description, accepts that the former’s description already operates as powerful ideology, but seeks to oppose it.

(Butler 2008: xiv)

The views of Nelson and Butler suggest that the politics of repression, as social sexuality, manifests through a limited selection of options linked to powerful orthodoxies and gender conformity.

Is sexual submission essentialized and embedded within ideology in public relations thinking and practice? Edward Bernays’ book Propaganda (originally published in 1928) is to an extent a justification of the commodification of the ‘public’ and the rise of public relations counsel within the “unworkable fiction” of democracy (Lippmann 2010: 22), but it is also embedded within the ideology of heteronormativity. In some ways his works could be interpreted as progressive in respect to the status of women, as he anticipated a shift in gendered power relations. However, his thinking was limited in its scope, which extended only to legitimizing women enhancing men’s roles:

Just as women supplement men in private life, so they will supplement men in public life by concentrating their organized efforts on those objects which men are likely to ignore. There is a tremendous field for women as active protagonists of new ideas and new methods of political and social housekeeping.

(Bernays 2005: 133)

More broadly, Bernay’s work is of interest for its gendered depiction of the ‘crowd’ as female while the propagandist’s, or public relations counsel’s,
power was ‘cool and manly’ (Miller 2005: 21). Constructing a gendered metaphorical representation of the “public” as essentially female within a masculinist discourse provided public relations counsel with the means by which their domination and subordination of the public could be naturalized as common sense. This suggests that power relations of gender were hegemonically concealed and performed so that ‘an expectation ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates’ (Butler 2008: xv). Arguably, these gendered interpretations continued to underpin and shape public relations thinking and practice over the twentieth century.

Hegemony takes many subtle and seemingly contradictory forms. In explicating this, Geoffrey Boucher (2006: 112–13) shows how two congruent strands of ideological domination may become intricately entwined, making it harder to detect, interpret and break its grip, a situation that can be applied to public relations. Drawing on Butler’s conception of performativity, he argues that when personal and social identity fuse to produce culturally scripted subjects there is a particular (non-)response to the subversion of power. The sliding between the personal and social identity creates a level of ambiguity about individual agency that obscures the controlling hegemonic aspects. When this happens, Boucher argues that ‘social identities are the permanently divided result of the ritualistic repetition of conventions, the possibility for subversion of the reigning social norms remains an ineradicable potential of all social relations’ (p. 113). Therefore, contributing to hegemony in public relations is the embedded belief in individual rather than collective power. Accordingly, this may position public relations practitioners not to have an overt sense of actually being oppressed, even if they are, because they perceive that they have personal power and agency. In turn, public relations practitioners are less challenging than other occupational groups of the power relations that are oppressing them. As a result, workplace norms and controlling hegemonic aspects become almost impossible to remove.

Women and men in public relations workplaces may also ritualize and perform complex cultural structures of domination and subordination in other ways that reveal how meanings are naturalized as common sense. In particular, fashion, as a social ritual within public relations, shows how gendered understandings are performed, repeated and embedded. For Butler: ‘This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experience of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation’ (Butler 2008: 191). Craik’s ideas shed light on how this repetition, re-enactment, re-experience and ritualization can take place. She suggests that an individual subject enters into an acculturation process through fashion or the clothes–body complex:

Fashion is a technology of civility, that is, sanctioned codes of conduct in the practise of self-formation and self-presentation. The body is
trained to perform in socially acceptable ways by harnessing movement, gesture and demeanour until they become 'second nature'.

(Craik 1994: 5)

This suggests that performing sexualized social rituals in this way may not only naturalize but produce individual subjects that hegemonically perpetuate gender as inequality in changing social conditions. However, if gender is naturalized through the grammar of fashion, 'then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given' (Butler 2008: xx). For this reason, in public relations, the clothes-body complex is a powerful textual site which is inscribed by multiple, congruent hegemonies and readable in terms of its significance in maintaining, reinforcing and disrupting power relations in gender and shifting gendered boundaries.

The significance of clothes and accessories in workplaces can also be understood in relation to 'habitus', a concept of social space in which 'a set of dispositions ... incline agents to act and react in certain ways' (Bourdieu 1991: 248). For Craik, individuals and their self-presentation also reflect and relate to habitus: 'the clothes–body complex operates in ways appropriate to a particular habitus or milieu' (1994: 10). The concept of habitus provides context for understanding fashion on two levels: first, in terms of individual self-presentation and the projection of constructed meaning; and second, in terms of the social space in which the gendered self performs rituals of subordination. Applied to public relations practitioners and their workplaces, these ideas show how the individual subject and their workplace/space intersect. Practitioners are surrounded by other practitioners who dress, walk and speak and relate to each other, and in doing so produce a set of dispositions and project the values of the wider social context. Therefore, fashion systems and codes – that is, combinations of styles, accessories, repertoires of design and use of colour – can help identify the dominant codes in self-presentation constructing hegemony within workplace contexts. Orthodoxy in the clothes–body complex and the way norms in workplaces are enforced and policed provide a lens that contextualizes wider cultural milieux of public relations. It focuses attention on assumptions in workplaces that may not be obvious, but work to normalize sexual domination and hierarchy, while at the same time giving insight into lived experiences, the daily tensions, dilemmas and conflicts of real-life public relations practitioners. Therefore, it is argued that a highly gendered and socially sexualized role draws on and emphasizes a field of socially constructed and culturally scripted performances; for example, personal performances of sexual display such as the touching of hair, giggling, short skirts, a show of cleavage and flirtation. However, what happens when women themselves reinforce and construct these realities in the belief that they will progress their careers?
Working in public relations: BACI – boy am I confused

Katerina Tsutsura (2010) explores how public relations through gender can be used as a prism in which to understand social relations and the character of a society, especially in developing countries like those of Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Her article discusses the notion of 'a real job' and 'a woman's job' to help explain how socio-economic, professional and gender-defined contexts influence practitioners' perceptions of public relations. She argues: 'Work in public relations, according to interviewees, is often seen by outsiders as easy'. This is a job for 'young, pretty, stupid girls representing a company, showing up in rich places' and 'circulating at the parties' (p. 11). Tsutsura also maintains that men and women fit into different modes of public relations:

Corporate public relations could be defined as a woman's job because it is the most accessible area for women entering the profession, whereas political public relations is perceived as a man's job, a male-dominated area, because of both the number of men working in public relations and power these men have.

(Tsutsura 2010: 15).

She found that young female practitioners were also asked to undertake ethically dubious work in technical roles: 'For instance, some employees of the political consulting agencies were once required to write blackmail reports about other candidates and supervise tabloids that are sponsored and published by a single candidate during elections' (p. 7).

The work of Tsutsura suggests that the extent to which public relations is sexualized could be an indicator of ethical behaviour in organizational cultures. Romy Fröhlich and Sonja Peters (2007: 242) discuss women in German public relations and a belief among female public relations practitioners that the 'PR bunny' stereotype is highly prevalent and associated with the agency sector. However, they argue that not all women see this as a disadvantage:

There is also the opinion that the behaviour of a typical 'PR bunny', the use of 'women's natural weapons' as participants term it, might well be a legitimate and subtle strategy to outwit male dominance. One participant argues that image and show in public relations are quite simply part of professionalism itself: 'PR sluts! (laughs) We call ourselves that! And I don't have a problem with it. We are service-people. And you just have to play the game of service, don't you?'

(Fröhlich and Peters 2007: 242)

Gender counts in public relations and so does sexuality. Unspoken fashion codes are culturally shared and interpreted. In turn, public relations
workplaces, and the expectations set about what to wear or what people think they should wear, enforce and shape identity. This is apparent in early writings and in reflections on earlier periods of public relations workplaces. Forty-five years ago, an experienced Australian communications practitioner, R.R. Walker, wrote a book about public relations practice, but on the whole this is characterized by an absence of statements about women. One of the few references is to ‘a week’s work [which] can range from hiring girls in fish-net stockings to preparing a report on the economic implications of Japanese deep-sea fishing’ (Walker 1967: 346). Susan O’Byrne recalls that when she ‘first started working professionally in the early 1990s, the senior women in journalism and public relations had lived through the golden era of the shoulder pad in the 1980s and had survived in some tough, male-dominated environments’ (O’Byrne 2010: 1). However, she writes that more recently younger women are ‘dressing in a style that emphasises their body and leaves the overwhelming first impression of women as sexual beings’ (p. 2). For Paul Elmer, the sexualization of labour is evident for both women and men:

While sexualized labour has only begun to emerge into the margins of feminised discussions of public relations labour, it may be a mistake to restrict interest to the female experience. Men, too, may engage their sexuality to perform an occupational role, and within the labour process.

(Elmer 2010: 4)

Elmer says sexual performances in occupational workplaces were also evident:

Adopting techniques of the self that lead to the worker being judged as sexually attractive, and hinting at sexual availability, are not uniquely female concerns, especially within a labour contract that engages with the self as part of the service offered. Flirtatious behaviour, for example, emerged as one of the routines of practice enacted by male and female public relations workers alike. This does not imply public relations is sex work, only that the sexual aspects of the self that it engages could be acknowledged more fully and accounted for with more attention than at present.

(Elmer 2010: 4)

Therefore, while fashion might seem like a surface effect of gender, in one sense it reveals political fault lines and social fractures that have flow-on effects for ethical behaviour and transparency as well as the tenor of the public communications produced. However, this is not a set of fixed relations. Shifting social conditions affect constraints and relations of power for women and men which intersect and are subject to change within different social contexts.
Twenty-first-century office: ideas, choice, fun and screens

Social spaces, while structured to protect and reinforce power relations, are subject to wider social change. In particular, the sexual aspect of gender performance in contemporary workplaces is very different from earlier forms; however, this is a shift rather than a substantive change. Late modernity is distinctive for the plethora of choices it offers individuals, such as the ability to adopt different identities, greater choice of gender in participation, and the ability to work flexible hours, increased mobility, and access to technology. In particular, information and digital technologies have transformed practices and concepts of work, especially in relation to time and space. New styles connote freedom and self-determination: for example, accessorizing with technology such as the latest laptop or mobile phone that links to other social spaces, culture jamming through vintage and retro styles, jeans, and tee-shirts bearing self-reflexive political slogans. However, these developments have not undermined authority, as might be implied; rather they have reorganized ways in which it is exercised. According to Zygmunt Bauman, the modality of authority has changed; it is less about ‘command and control’, and more about offering a suite of choices around identity that permeates through and fuses with public and private worlds.

‘Heavy’, Fordist-style capitalism was a world of legislators and supervisors. The world of goals fixed-by-others. For this reason it was also the world of authorities: of leaders who knew better and of teachers who told you how to be better. But ‘light’, postmodern and consumer friendly capitalism has not put paid to authorities. It has simply given birth to too many authorities for any one of them to stay in authority: ‘numerous authorities’ is a contradiction in terms. When there are many authorities, they tend to cancel each other; hence the authority remaining in the field is the one who has to choose between them. It is courtesy of the chooser that a would-be authority becomes an authority. Authorities no more command; they tempt and seduce.

(Bauman 2000: 204)

Therefore, contemporary workplaces appear categorically different from those of the past in that they are more fluid and accepting of difference. But, while functionalism has changed its grammar, the grammar has not fundamentally changed functionalism. Rather, central tenets of functionalism underpin the colonization of authority by private discourses. The imperative to be non-conformist promotes the appearance of change, rather than creating deeper transformations. Public relations in its contemporary setting looks different from the past. In part this is because, to a greater degree than other industries, public relations must be forward looking, and must generate an appetite for consumerism as its core business is the promotion
and positioning of new thinking and new products. Innovations in technology and changes in social milieus must be embodied by workers and performed in their workplaces. This suggests that, in public relations, privileged masculinist discourses have merely been re-fashioned within the frameworks of neo-liberalism, rather than fundamentally overturned their thinking. Difference, paradoxically, can be conformism.

Method(s) of data collection and analysis

To investigate the experiences of females and males in public relations workplaces, and the cultural conditions that produce gendered categories, I collected two interrelated sets of data. The first was the public records and reporting of two court cases of sexual harassment brought by public relations staff against their employers in Australia. First, the applicants’, or text producers’, statements of claims to the Court were analysed and then the public reporting of these claims. In particular, I analysed the public reporting and reception of the text producers’ claims by the dominant Australian media stables NewsCorp (Herald Sun) and Fairfax (The Age and Sydney Morning Herald), as well as various independent online sources such as the critical left Crikey. The online editions of these news sources often had blogs for readers to make comment over a defined period. I also analysed these. The data was first used to develop a list of key actors and their roles: for example, the key individuals, businesses and other sectors involved. Second, a set of criteria or major categories was utilized to organize and categorize all the data forms into a logical structure. These categories include gender representations, sexuality, power relations and social influence, ideology, values and beliefs, persuasive arguments and perceptions of rationality. In particular, this allowed understanding of how journalists positioned readers and how meanings were created. I used the analysis to explore absences and the process of selection and signification by the text producer in order to understand what has been omitted and why (Threadgold 1993).

For Babbie (2001: 326), to achieve accuracy in researching events, ‘where possible, obtain data from a variety of sources representing different points of view’. Therefore, as a corollary – and to provide an understanding of the specific subjectivity of the journalists and their readers – general websites and blog conversations about fashion and public relations were surveyed. In particular, I appraised internet advice about how to get a job in public relations. Predominantly this involved internet searches using the phrases ‘What should I wear to a public relations interview?’ and ‘Advice about public relations workplaces’. In terms of the clothes–body complex, the selection and signification process in dressing for a job interview was used to analyse an underlying logic. I regarded these unmediated documents or artefacts of discourse that were produced in situ within the period of the cases of sexual harassment studied as valuable, authentic representations of
subjective responses to the social and political conditions of the time. As such, they assisted in my understanding of what statements were being made by clothes, colours, combinations of fashion; and their relationship to ideology, performance and habitus. In all, ten different internet sites were analysed from Australia, the UK and the US.

Intertextuality hybridizes and transforms textual meanings and in the investigation provided a theoretical bridge between both sets of data. For Fairclough (1999), intertextuality is a subtle effect where various discourses are often absorbed unconsciously by the reader. He argues that it comes in two forms: manifest intertextuality, where specific texts occur in a text such as a quote; and interdiscursivity, where orders of discourse are drawn on to constitute the text from discourse and text types or conventions such as genres, discourses and narratives. By studying the manifest and interdiscursive intertextuality in the public reporting — that is, looking for tropes and tracking their movement through the discourse as well as analysing the orders of discourse — I gauged and located hegemonic and gendered understandings in and towards public relations. This two-pronged approach to reception analysis provided me with insight into not just how readers are positioned by the text producers, but how meanings are created and circulated about gendered roles and relationships in public relations workplaces.

**Behind the face of PR**

Prepare the night before. It’s not just the outfit. It’s the whole package.
Start with your body. Dress for Success.

*(Chique St. 2009)*

An analysis of internet sites (visual and textual) offering advice about working in public relations revealed intricate codes and meanings around male and females. In all of the sources, the central consuming subject was assumed to be female, although there was one instance where additional commentary was offered for males. Although overlap is to be expected, three key themes emerged from the data that locate different normative relations in public relations workplaces: classic, sexualized, and lifestyle.

‘Classic public relations’ was evident as the controlling discourse within the spectrum analysed. It was described in terms of both ‘reliability and professionalism’ and as ‘conservative and traditional’. Negative associations were that of being boring, unimaginative and overdone. However, seeking work in these settings meant showing ‘you take the job and your professional career seriously’. Tailored suits were recommended for these workplaces in solid ‘black, navy and grey’. In client presentations, it was acceptable to pair a solid black pencil skirt with ‘a patterned top, or a flattering A-line, full skirt with a pattern’. Low-key accessorizing was also acceptable: ‘Unique accessories and an unexpected shoe colour or heel
are also great ways to infuse a bit of personality into your look’. Advice about accessorizing also extended into stationery items:

I use a white binder for my portfolio filled with plastic sleeves for clippings – as long as your items are clean and organized I think that’s fine. I think carrying those in hand or having in a purse or messenger style bag works, just make sure to bring them! And something to write with!

(McKinniss 2010)

However, ‘classic’ public relations also nudged boundaries with the notion of sexy communications. This setting led to extended discussion:

Back in the day, dressing for a PR job work was easy – we all had to wear suits. Nowadays, it’s tricky getting an outfit sorted. It has to be smart, but not too smart. It has to show some flair, but not be too wacky. My boss has this near obsession with power dressing – but for her this seems to mean looking almost asexual.

(PR Moment 2011)

The overlap was also evident in a list of sartorial tips for men, which advised: ‘the look du jour is smart jeans with a jacket’ and ‘Suits and ties still have a place, but only for boring clients, such as financial institutions’.

In the ‘sexualized public relations’ category, the ‘PR girl’ trope was highly represented and connoted a young, nubile female, unmarried, with a degree of sexual power and permission to display that power. Number one on the list of fashion recommendations was a ‘well-tailored blazer’. ‘Top Five Wardrobe Essentials for PR Girls’ advises: ‘the blazer is a key component to any PR girl’s wardrobe. If you must have only one, go for black at first and work in navy and gray hues’ (Mary Ann 2011). Like the classic mode, the dress code suggests that black, navy and greys as a foundation means that you fit in to the setting (KC You There 2012). However, in addition, the little black dress (LBD) signalled where boundaries blur between work and social activity. According to one blog, the LBD is ‘versatile enough to hit the bar for drinks after a long day and not appear too stuffy’ (Mary Ann 2011). Implied is that while the practitioner’s day may be technically over, it is not really; rather, it is now time for some different type of work, entertaining and socializing. In a similar way the cross body purse is something to fuse the various modes of work, whether you’re at the bar or at the desk: ‘Work, play, day or night, cross body purses are essential for city living’ (Mary Ann 2011). The sexualized nature of PR work and its complex normative setting was revealed in this tip: ‘if legs are bare, make sure hemlines are not too short. If your boss is male he won’t know where to look and if she’s a female, despite what she says, she did notice and she doesn’t like it’ (PR Moment 2011). This theme of sexuality is
picked up in another tip, which cautions: 'Too much cleavage is not a good idea. Some contacts will love this look of course, but it does beg the question, “where is this business relationship headed?”' *(PR Moment 2011)*. Clearly there are danger zones for the uninitiated, especially when alcohol and the blurring of work and play are involved: ‘when it comes to awards dinners, brave outfits are not always the way forward. You don’t want to be the “girl in that dress”’ *(PR Moment 2011)*. The emphasis on ‘that dress’ indicates that it is a powerful text that draws attention to the wearer and her body. The suggestion is that choice of garment can advance but also brand individuals and ruin reputations well beyond the occasion. ‘And remember you’re almost bound to get drunk and then you’ll decide that you’re the best dancer in PR, so maybe veer on the side of caution’ *(PR Moment 2011)*. Along this border, the twin pillars of career respectability and sexualization sit uneasily.

‘Lifestyle public relations’ refers to an ‘open’ workplace that, *prima facie*, has relaxed the boundaries that encode status in ‘social and fun’ ways *(Selter 2012)*. Website advice is to ‘Follow the dress code. Many modern firms are moving to a more casual workplace environment. This includes permission to “dress down”’ *(eHow Contributor 2013)*. One example of this is the sanctioning of casual wear and work-appropriate jeans: ‘Many PR firms have a pretty relaxed dress code’, so if you stick with ‘darker denim in a flattering style for casual days at the office’ that should do the trick. Vintage was also deemed acceptable, ‘so long as it fits well and is free of damage’ *(Mary Ann 2011)*. However, the extent of encoding within the clothes–body complex within lifestyle was holistic. Sites of meaning were revealed in a blog where advice extended to series of actions prior to the dressing in order to develop greater overall confidence and radiance. These included relaxing, exfoliating (removing dead skin), painting nails and toenails, hydrating by drinking green tea and taking vitamins for health, bronze tanning, and teeth whitening and dieting for glow:

> Take a bath and relax. Exfoliate (If you don’t have a scrub, use a little sugar with some soap or body wash). Lotion up. Paint your nails and your toenails. (Why? It’s not like they are going to see your toenails anyway? WRONG. Feeling good from head to toe boosts our confidence levels.) *(Chique St. 2009)*

Collectively, the advice in these websites suggests that these decisions construct an identity that positions the worker in relation to the cultural norms of the workplace and the esteem of their colleagues. Making the ‘right’ clothes choices, conforming to an expected body shape and style, or practising a smile is not an insignificant or frivolous activity but anticipates a complex presentational performance linked to sexual hierarchy, authoritarianism and capitalism.
PR workers, sexual harassment and media representation

In recent years two high-profile workplace sexual harassment cases in Australia have centred on public relations. The first occurred in 2010 and involved a female in-house publicist. It resulted in an out-of-court settlement. The second involved a male media relations parliamentary staffer for the Commonwealth of Australia employed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

The Kristy Fraser-Kirk case

The sexual harassment case that Kristy Fraser-Kirk brought against the David Jones department store chain is important for its portrayal of the public relations workplaces where norms supported highly sexualized, gendered relationships linked to powerful hierarchies of power. First in this case study I report on the contents of Fraser-Kirk’s application to the Federal Court on 2 August 2010. Following this, I draw on public reporting of the case, online sources of newspaper articles, discussion and blogs to develop an understanding of the different subjectivities surrounding the case.

Trading under the same name since 1838, David Jones is Australia’s oldest department store. Known for the quality of its merchandise and service, as well as a penchant for designer fashions, the store has won accolades for setting high benchmarks in retailing and now has a strong national profile. According to her statement of claim (2010), having studied and worked previously in public relations, Kristy Fraser-Kirk applied for a job at David Jones. At her interview she was told ‘the workforce consisted of largely women’, that these women could be like a ‘clique’, but that ‘once you get your head around that’ she would be ‘a fantastic fit’ for David Jones. When employed with the retail chain, she moved between several roles in marketing and PR. However, Fraser-Kirk claims that at a function hosted by Mark McInnes, David Jones’ chief executive officer, unwelcome comments of a sexual nature were made to her, in particular that she should try a dessert because it was like ‘a fuck in the mouth’. He also made unwelcome sexual advances, groping her under her clothes, grabbing her and sending inappropriate texts suggesting that she accompany him to his home to have sex (p. 3). Significantly, she claimed that some of this behaviour took place within metres of David Jones’ general manager of public relations, Anne-Maree Kelly (p. 4). According to Fraser-Kirk, when she raised the matter, her PR manager indicated that McInnes’ behaviour was not a one-off and that she had personally dealt with other employees who had had similar experiences. Kelly told Fraser-Kirk “next time that happens, you just need to be very clear and say ’no Mark’ and he’ll back off” (p. 4). Fraser-Kirk claimed, inter alia, that as a result of her experiences at David Jones she suffered offence, humiliation, distress and anxiety, loss of opportunity for promotion and advancement in her chosen career, and damage
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to her personal and professional reputation (p. 21). A claim was made for 5 per cent of David Jones’ and McInnes’ earnings over the period 2003 to 2010, ‘during which McInnes served as Chief Executive Officer’, and that he should also pay ‘5% of the total remuneration and benefits earned by him during his regime’ (p. 22). According to Maguire (2010), this amounted to a ‘staggering’ A$37 million. She argued that ‘Fraser-Kirk’s strategy right from the beginning was to win the PR war’. Despite this, the case was settled out of court for a much lesser figure – a reported A$350,000 for Fraser-Kirk after legal and public relations representation fees were paid.

News reports of the case were mixed. Key media reports emphasized the salacious sexual conduct in the case. The descriptions of Fraser-Kirk centred on her youth, naivety and ambition: for example, it was said that she was ‘working her way up the corporate ladder’ (Fife-Yeomans 2010). The public relations workplace represented was a complex one, very busy and largely female and with a strong hierarchical element which was gender based: ‘Even before she started work at David Jones, Kristy Fraser-Kirk was warned the mostly female workplace could be quite a “clique”. But it wasn’t the women she needed to worry about’ (Kontominas and Mann 2010).

Another aspect that attracted media attention was the fact that the unwelcome behaviour of McInnes was ‘witnessed by two of her [Fraser-Kirk’s] bosses including David Jones public relations general manager Anne-Maree Kelly’ (Fife-Yeomans 2010).

The news reports pointed to a relaxed ethical culture in the public relations department where this type of behaviour was not just tolerated but expected. Reinforcing this view was reportage that despite Fraser-Kirk’s concerns, and the fact that her manager witnessed her behaviour, she was still required to attend a further work function where McInnes would be present. Gome (2010) wrote: ‘In her statement of claim she describes the workplace of my youth, a place where a woman could be groped and harassed in full view of others with no action taken.’ The media reports showed that, within her workplace, Fraser-Kirk’s claims appeared to be trivialized and to some extent viewed as her own fault, due to her youth, inexperience and misguidedness.

According to Campbell (2010), in the news reports, ‘the 27 year old was constantly, monotonously identified as a “junior publicist”, as if to underscore her general naïveté and poor judgement’. Reporting was also significantly hostile to Fraser-Kirk’s ambit claim for a large financial compensation. In particular, the reader blog commentary exploded around this point, with derogatory insults levelled at Fraser-Kirk. Particularly prominent was the term ‘gold-digger’. Similarly, a perception that she had renegotiated on a promise to give the compensation to charity also caused a furor:

Kristy Fraser Kirk [sic] is a crumb of a female. Greedy and pr hungry! She has gone back on her word about giving the money to charity.
What a pity she has done more harm for us females in the work place than good. Karma Miss Fraser Kirk

(Ang 2010)

According to public reports, Fraser-Kirk’s ‘sensational claim’ for millions of dollars backfired, leading to ‘a media campaign to discredit her’ (Hinch and Jamal 2010):

Yesterday Ms Fraser-Kirk said she had been forced to walk away from a career that she loved and a company she believed in due to the alleged sexual harassment. ‘I believed I could have gone far if my career had been able to continue,’ she said.

(Kontominas and Mann 2010)

The James Ashby case

The James Ashby case of sexual harassment was the subject of much conjecture and public discussion in Australia. In part this was because Ashby’s employer, Peter Slipper, the man accused of sexual harassment, was at the time the Speaker of the House of Representatives for the Commonwealth of Australia. Compounding interest in this case was the effect it may have had on the minority Australian Labor Party’s (ALP) tenuous grip on power.

According to Ashby’s originating application (hereafter referred to as statement of claims), in 2011 Peter Slipper offered Ashby the role of media adviser after establishing that he was homosexual. The job involved work in both the electoral office in Queensland and in Canberra, the nation’s capital. After initially declining the offer, Ashby eventually accepted it. Once installed in the job, Ashby claimed that numerous sexually suggestive and/or ambiguous actions were directed at him. These included being asked to give Peter Slipper a massage, sharing accommodation with him and being pressurized to abandon modesty and shower with the door open (which Slipper himself practised). Text exchanges between the two men were also included as evidence in Ashby’s claim. In particular, the following text history was tendered as evidence that Ashby was being pressurized by his employer to consent to an inappropriate and unprofessional working relationship. In this section the ‘second respondent’ refers to Slipper.¹

10.38 32 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘If you interested we could be closer?’
10.40 25 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘?’
10.49 20 APPLICANT: ‘I think we’re good already. I’m happy seeing Tim being closest. I hate stepping on toes’
10.49 29 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘:)’
10.51 26 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘Your call if u want to keep degrees of separation. No toes’
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10.51.44 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘I told him position [sic] open’

10.54.38 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘But your call and no hard feelings in that you only want businesslike contact. In that event of the difficulty in our personal’

10.57.22 APPLICANT: ‘I don’t know what type of contact you expect Peter. Perhaps u should define that [sic] u would like and I can then be clearer on my position.’

10.58.14 SECOND RESPONDENT: ‘U want something more? U brilliannt [sic] at massages’

10.59.57 APPLICANT: ‘No I’m happy the way things are. I care for u Pete but the massage is as far as it goes. Life’s a lot more simpler when it’s business and a few drinks after work.’

By March 2012, after several other incidents of this nature, Ashby ‘had formed the view that the Second Respondent had recruited the Applicant to his personal staff for the purpose of pursing a sexual relationship’ (p. 11).

News reports of the case were complex and many involved greater focus on Slipper and the threat to the ALP’s minority government than on the details of the case (Peatling 2012; Wright 2012). In relation to this it was speculated that Ashby was not just peddling lies, but was a puppet in a political game, being used opportunistically by the Coalition (opposition) frontbencher Christopher Pyne to make political points in the hung parliament. Therefore, in order to elicit meanings, I found it important to sift through the political commentary to find implications for public relations.

In a similar way to the Fraser-Kirk case, news reports of the ‘highly salacious allegations’ pointed to a ‘languid’ and ethically relaxed workplace setting (Higgins 2012). Overall, Ashby was portrayed as a man of dubious character, both untrustworthy and unreliable. Some of the focus concerned his personal history and the fact that in 2002, when working for Newcastle radio station as a DJ, Ashby had phoned a rival drivetime host and abused him while pretending to be a genuine radio talkback caller. Ashby claimed the threatening behaviour was a practical joke, but he was fined A$2000 and given a good-behaviour bond. Ashby’s colourful past led to the media framing him as ‘no stranger to controversy’, and his relatively mature age of thirty-three at the time he made his sexual harassment claim against Mr Slipper was stressed (Simalis and Clune 2012). While the public reports generally produced a respectful commentary around homosexuality and same-sex relationships, the following reader-blog commentary (now inactive) revealed deeper animosities:

It could suggest conspiracy. Same se [sic] is not frowned upon but sex in work situations can be fraught with danger as it always has been!
perhaps the thirty three year old, of certain political persuasions
and perhaps a mincing gait, was deeply involved with the oleaginous
Pyne for a number of reasons, not all honourable.²

(Reply 91 2012)³

Social sexuality: double appearances and layers of reality

Gender, for MacKinnon (1987), is socially sexualized inequality. Butler
discussed the process of sexual harassment by which individuals are ‘made’
into a ‘certain gender’ (2008: xiii). Performance through ritual and repeti-
tion can reinforce this. Boucher (2006) discussed some of the ramifications
of performativity where the personal and social identities merge to produce
shifting, ambiguous forms of hegemony. These themes are evident in the
cases of sexual harassment examined in this chapter, which suggest that, in
some public relations workplaces, a concealed set of social practices exist
that pressure employees to display sexualized subordinance, and that these
practices are reinforced within the workplace habitus and are highly resistant
to change (Bourdieu 1991). The statements of claim by Fraser-Kirk and
Ashby depict public relations workplaces that are highly stratified and in
which status can exert enormous pressure to conform to a sexualized gender
role. Fraser-Kirk and Ashby said that they feared discrimination and loss
of opportunity when challenging these pressures. The blog advice for
aspiring public relations practitioners showed how sexualized meanings were
actively produced and proliferated through the construction of the clothes-
body complex. These lines of inquiry point to a complex element of
inequality through sexual hierarchy and gender construction.

In particular, the blog advice revealed that there is a range of competing
discourses at play in public relations, and that for aspiring and even
experienced practitioners these are difficult to navigate. Evidence of mani-
fest intertextuality was found in both the public reporting of the case
studies and the blog advice, in particular the notions of ‘sexy coms’ and
‘PR girls’ connoting servitude and blurred boundaries between work
and play and sexual hierarchy. Despite this, the overwhelming tenor of the
commentary was that aspiring young practitioners need to look sexually
attractive in a PR job and prepare themselves for the work/play mode.
Low-key accessorizing alluded to a sexual exchange both in the classic
public relations context and in the more explicit ‘sexy coms’ context. For
the subject, these discursive elements anticipate the ambiguous normative
cultures in public relations workplaces that embed gender inequality.
However, an analysis of the online advice also revealed that women who get
to be bosses understand the complex play of sexuality and how this fits
in workplaces, and are generally ‘conservative’ or ‘asexual’. This points to
a complex set of social relations in public relations workplaces that
presents serious hazards and the danger of entrapment for practitioners at
all levels.
The public response to sexual harassment cases was characterized by vehemence and strong positions on sexual relations in workplaces. On the one hand, audiences in the Fraser-Kirk case reinforced stereotypes of sexualized relations in media and communication jobs as a typical means of career advancement. For example, there was little sympathy for Fraser-Kirk in seeking redress: instead, she was accused of fanning a storm over something that ‘was just flirting’ and of being a ‘gold digger’, greedy and PR hungry, as well as manipulative. The term ‘gold digger’ draws on ideas that women will utilize sexual resources to gain unfair advantage. It is at once heteronormative and phallogocentric, and the trope reveals that there are deep forces at play that support these cultures (MacKinnon 1987; Butler 2008; Boucher 2006). A further complication and fuel for angst was Fraser-Kirk’s appointment of a PR firm to manage the publicity around the case and to use her own skills in communication to further her self-interest. Absent from the public reporting and reader-blog commentary was the duty of care her workplace should demonstrate, particularly in light of the claims that much of the behaviour took place in front of her line managers. Indeed, the blogs revealed an entrenched belief that public relations is merely ‘sexy coms’. Thus, for women, it is evident that part of the job in PR is to gauge what and how the company wants to be represented through the clothes-body complex as sexualized (Frohlich and Peters 2007). At the same time, succumbing to this pressure puts the employee in an invidious position as there is also evidence that this path limits career opportunity in the long term as women who take their careers seriously in public relations eschew these choices (Tsutsuji 2010; O’Byrne 2010). This suggests that for a long time women were viewed as the ‘face’, the visible front, of PR, but tellingly were not considered the hands or the brains. Moreover, in some workplaces women were regarded as legitimate as a sexualized embodiment to display products that in a functionalist sense could be used in tactical ways to reach an audience and achieve the organizational objective of increasing market share and positioning. However, while it is argued that predominantly young females continue to be exposed to these practices, recent events suggest that this may also now extend to males (Elmer 2010).

The James Ashby case indicates that boundaries have been redrawn around gender and inequality. So while changes may be perceived in public relations – that is, it is more fluid and open to newer ideas – this is only partly true, because structurally the boundaries have been redrawn to sexualize gay men in a similar way to that in which women have been in the past.

The two main differences between the Fraser-Kirk and Ashby cases are that Ashby risks being labelled a political stooge, rather than a gold digger, and that it is the most prominent example of a man bringing a case of sexual harassment against another man. But both highlight
the ferocity of the court of public opinion when people decide to take action in sexual harassment cases.

(Peatling 2012)

Lifestyle public relations is a mode intersecting with the social phenomena of post-Fordism and the overabundance of choices and mutability of roles as well as with the mode in which authority is exercised as an appeal rather than command (Bauman 2000). Taken together, findings show that functionalism is still the underlying, dominant perspective in public relations workplaces. Assumptions about gender, sexuality and hierarchy remain largely unquestioned. The higher level of differentiation in workplaces gives an appearance of change. But the classic, sexualized and lifestyle categories of public relations simply intersect with gender in ways that produce different subjects with similar problems and issues.

Taken together, the case studies and the analysis of internet sites about public relations workplaces indicate that while there is an emphasis on looks and clothes and an association of empowerment and status, these are deceptive and for the uninitiated have some dangerous pitfalls. Moreover, the research indicates that various sectors, both government and corporate, can be sexualized. At the heart of this is an inward focus in public relations on the promotion of ‘self’ as a sign of success or competitive advantage. This is intrinsically linked to the blurring of work and play, and an interpretation of the ambiguous behavioural and cultural norms at this level as a necessary requirement for fast job promotion and peer esteem. In the Fraser-Kirk case the disparaging blog commentary around sexualized relations in public relations contexts was particularly strong. It implied that women are not taking their careers ‘seriously’ because they are flippant, not really interested, distracted by sexual power. Bound up with this was the idea of servitude but also disdain. Therefore, this ill-defined and problematic area works against reform in the occupation, and fails to support practitioners who challenge the idea that success is linked to being sexually receptive and that a culture of sexual hierarchy and harassment must be tolerated for career longevity.

Conclusion

A powerful assumption underpinning the personal selection of clothes and accessories is that it is a creative expression of the individual with agency to make informed choices (Bourne 2009; McKinniss 2010; Mary Ann 2011). However, this study shows how the clothes–body complex can also do the opposite. It can construct a fixed identity that directs the subject and leads them towards a gendered self which is interdiscursively linked to controlling discourses that potentially disadvantage and discourage career choices. Hierarchical, sexualized and closed workplaces were evident in both the Fraser-Kirk and James Ashby case studies. If, as is argued in this
chapter, some constructed categories for females and males within public relations workplaces are opaque and mask consequences such as unequal power relations that limit career choices, then further research could explore the relation of this blurring to unethical public relations practices and campaigns. Deploying public relations campaigns is a powerful discursive force that on many occasions is designed to intervene socially in political process and public debate. Hence an ethical approach towards practice involves providing high-quality advice and making informed judgements that lead to good decisions. But a preoccupation with ‘self’ informs a world view which is narrow and less considerate of wider social consequences.

Fashion – its embellishments, blandness and conformism – reveals behaviours, rules, values and beliefs in public relations and its imagined futures. Thus the choices that women and men in public relations make about their clothes and appearance can affect or indicate their career trajectories. For public relations, resolving this self-contradictory stance on gender and power relations and the flow-on effects such as anxiety about body and appearance is an important dynamic in reform. If the theoretical directions of performativity are applied to public relations, the suggestion that a nuanced form of hegemony through which complacency and oppression can coexist is valid. This study has exposed a highly ambiguous area of practice that presents an obstacle for the serious development of the communicative role. Curricula in public relations continue to be anchored to functionalist views focused on technical aspects of the job rather than cultures and embedded ideologies. Not only are stagnant ideas perpetuated within this framework, but the absences imply that gendered relations are unimportant.

Notes

1 The first respondent in the case was the Commonwealth of Australia.
2 On 28 September 2012, and in an out-of-court settlement, the federal government agreed to pay James Ashby $50,000, ending legal action in which he claimed the commonwealth had failed to provide a safe workplace while working for Mr Slipper’ (Shanahan 2012). However, further court action by Ashby against Slipper was not upheld. On 12 December 2012 the Federal Court dismissed the sexual harassment claim against the former Speaker, deciding it was a political attack, and ordered Ashby to pay costs (Hawley 2012). As of late December 2012, as well as appealing the Federal Court decision, Ashby and his legal team were intending to lodge a sexual harassment claim against Slipper with Fair Work Australia, the independent national workplace relations tribunal (Cullen 2012).
3 Downloaded copy of this now-inactive reader blog in possession of author.

References


Websites


