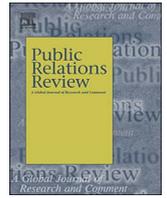


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Public Relations Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pubrev

Full Length Article

Where are the women? An examination of research on women and leadership in public relations

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Leadership
Public Relations
Gender
Roles
Power

ABSTRACT

Despite evidence that there are no significant differences in leadership ability among women and men in public relations, women are still largely absent from leadership and senior management positions. Furthermore, very few studies about leadership in public relations have considered the affect gender has on leadership enactment and success. Therefore, this secondary analysis examined the state of women and gender scholarship about leadership in public relations as part of a larger study about the state of women in the communication discipline. Specifically, our research found that the majority of the research about leadership and gender highlights women's lackluster leadership presence, factors contributing to women's lack of presence, leadership styles and preferences, and leadership and management roles of women. This manuscript provides recommendations for improving women's presence in leadership roles, particularly in providing a roadmap for future research opportunities. These include considerations for methodological approaches, leadership approaches and roles research, types of leadership, cultural change, and education.

1. Introduction

1.1. Concepts of leadership in public relations

Leadership is defined as “a dynamic process that encompasses a complex mix of individual skills and personal attributes, values, and behaviors that consistently produce ethical and effective communication practice” (Meng & Berger, 2013, p. 143). It is conceived of as a process, individual characteristics, power relations, or influence on attitudes and behaviors (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2007, as cited in Patwardhan, 2015) which vary in concept or approach depending on environmental factors (Waters, 2013). In the public relations industry, definitions of leadership are continually shaped by environmental factors such as dissemination and reception of information, the evolution of social media-based communication, fast-moving crises, and changing gender and generational dynamics (Plank Center, 2014).

1.2. Gender gap among leaders in public relations

Although increasing value is placed on “feminine” leadership styles (Cartwright, 2014) and women comprise nearly 75% of the jobs in the public relations industry, women still only occupy approximately 20% of the senior leadership positions (FitzPatrick,

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Received 1 August 2017; Received in revised form 30 October 2017; Accepted 31 October 2017

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2013). Moreover, women comprise less than half of the executive committee positions in large public relations firms, and only four women lead public relations agencies making more than \$100 million in global revenue (Lee, 2011).

Despite women's lack of leadership presence, recent public relations scholarship has found no significant differences between men and women in terms of their leadership qualities, leadership effectiveness, or leadership preferences (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Jin, 2010; Meng, Berger, Gower, & Heyman, 2012). Such findings beg the question: Why do women occupy fewer leadership and senior management roles in public relations when scholarship finds no significant evidence of any gendered differences in terms of leadership ability, effectiveness, or cognitive ability?

Exacerbating the problem, scholarship about women leaders in public relations is negligible. For example, this study found only four published scholarly articles from the past 12 years that explicitly addressed gender when researching leadership in public relations (Aldoory, 2007; Algren & Eichhorn, 2007; Geyer-Semple, 2011; Wu, 2006). A lack of support and prestige associated with scholarship on "diversity issues" in public relations (compared to broader business or management issues) (Waymer & Dyson, 2011) may explain the continued dearth of scholarship regarding women in the public relations industry. To this point, some scholars who have embarked on such research cite facing stigma or pigeonholing (Waymer & Dyson, 2011). However, the problematic lack of scholarship of women's experiences in leadership positions in public relations mirrors trends across all communications professions. Fine (2009), for example, opined that women's perspectives are absent from academic discourse regarding leadership, and that such an absence has held detrimental effects to the theorizing about leadership on the whole.

As part of a larger study regarding the status of research involving women in various communication fields,¹ Commissioned by the Lillian Lodge Kopenhaver Center for the Advancement of Women in Communication, the authors analyzed extant research from the past decade. The guiding research question of this particular study asked, "what are the dynamics of leadership and gender in the field of public relations?" The purpose of this paper was to explore scholarship regarding leadership and public relations in order to identify the current research streams regarding women, leadership, and public relations. After revealing the major trends in research, the authors propose a roadmap for future research on this topic.

2. Method of analysis

The authors conducted a secondary analysis of research on the status of women in public relations that had been published or disseminated between 2005 and 2016. They were tasked with finding all research on public relations' workforce gender composition, salary data of women versus men, the extent to which women supervise others, the number of years of experience in the field women have, women's managerial/leadership roles in public relations, and the dynamics of diversity in the field. All article content was read line-by-line for themes. Passages pertaining to each theme were discussed by the authors and recorded in a shared file.

Under the parameters of the study, the authors found approximately 30 academic and trade articles across public relations and strategic communication journals/trade publications that report findings from empirical data collections of practitioners' experiences. Although there were many articles published during this period about gender, some were excluded from this analysis because they did not focus on practitioners' reported experiences in public relations. Rather, they focused on how gender is represented in public relations texts or how publics of public relations programs perform or perceive gender. The sources publishing the most gender work between 2005 and 2016 were the *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Review*, and *Public Relations Tactics*.

3. The scope of research on leadership and women in public relations

From the analysis of articles regarding leadership and public relations, several themes emerged to illustrate the current state of research on the topic. They are *women's lackluster leadership presence in the field*; *factors contributing to the lack of women in leadership roles*; *women's leadership styles and preferences*; and *leadership and management roles of women in public relations*.

3.1. Women's lackluster leadership presence

Despite achieving majority status in the public relations industry, women occupy a small portion of leadership roles and upper level administrative positions. Specifically, women hold between 70% (Shah, 2015) and 75% (FitzPatrick, 2013) of the jobs in public relations, but are represented in less than 30% of the senior level leadership positions (Shah, 2015). This lack of leadership representation in public relations is congruent with women's presence in the top 500 corporations in the United States. Women make five percent of the top earnings, nine women hold CEO positions, 16% work in corporate officer positions, and 14.6% serve in board member positions (Brady, 2005, Mar. 25a, as cited in Fine, 2010). Similarly, the leading public relations agencies earning more than \$100 million in global revenue were found to have only four women CEOs at the helm (Lee, 2011). Between 2014 and 2017, *PR Week's* prominent "Power List," ranking of powerful public relations leaders, has consistently featured approximately 32 men and only 18 women. Although slightly more than half of the leaders listed are women, this is discrepant when understanding that women make up more than 70% of the public relations workforce (Becker, 2014). Some research has investigated the factors that contribute to these discrepancies, which largely point to unequal gender assumptions about role enactment as well as commonly-held social and

¹ This analysis is part of a larger study conducted about the state of women in various communication disciplines. The group commissioning the work was concealed in this manuscript for purposes of blind review. The results of this analysis will help the commissioning group and its research associates prepare for a survey that will serve as the second phase of research into the status of women in communication professions.

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