Talking back: Reflecting on feminism, public relations and research

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A B S T R A C T

This paper explores feminism and public relations through the diverse perspectives of three public relations scholars seeking to understand what a critical-feminist research agenda might offer. It acknowledges that feminist public relations scholarship – at least until recently – is underdeveloped. Drawing on bell hooks' (1989) notion of talking back, this paper offers a conversation to explore tensions and debates around a feminist agenda for public relations. The discussion is structured around three broad themes: provocations, transgressions and resistance, and points to how feminist intelligences and modalities, in challenging gendered hegemonies, may open public relations scholarship and practices to new understandings.

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1. Introduction

In 2014, we were invited to present a panel session on feminist intelligence at the International Public Relations Conference: Barcelona PR Meeting #4, where scholars were asked to consider the idea of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006). Opening up public relations scholarship to hybrid, generative understandings (Haraway, 1991) of how gender relations play out in everyday interactions, formal organizational processes and governance structures is a radical political act. Feminist challenges to traditional public relations scholarship require "a practical politics of change and transformation whilst avoiding the problems of universalism, essentialism and privilege" (Thomas & Davies, 2005 p. 711). This paper explores our efforts to define "feminist intelligences" or modalities for public relations and, indeed, to grapple with what a feminist public relations research agenda might entail.

We have individual and diverse understandings of feminism and feminist theory, although we agree feminism is concerned primarily with two objectives: "The first is descriptive: to reveal obvious and subtle gender inequalities. The second is change-oriented: to reduce or eradicate those inequalities" (Martin, 2003, p. 66). We approached the topic differently and in ways that built on our existing understandings, research expertise and interests. Kate Fitch, drawing on her historical research into the Australian public relations industry (Fitch and Third, 2010, 2014) as well as contemporary public relations discourse, examined processes of professionalization in order to understand the construction of gendered occupational identities. Melanie James considered the application of positioning theory (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; James, 2014a), focusing on the gendered social force of public relations positioning acts and how the assignment and taking up of rights and

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duties inherent in positions is undertaken. Judy Motion drew upon her background as a critical scholar to problematize how power relations and discursive struggles play out in popular culture. As a starting point for our conversation we applied bell hooks' notions of "back talk" and "talking back" which "meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure, daring to disagree and sometimes just having an opinion ... it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (hooks, 1989, pp. 5, 8).

These notions of resistance offer a useful metaphor for our joint endeavor as we perceive feminist theory "offers a contingent politics of constant vigilance within power relations" (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 711) and that feminist methodology offers "a field of inquiry... bound together... by shared commitments to questions" (DeVault, 1996, p. 30). We therefore present this paper as a talking back to public relations scholarship that we argue has inadequately theorized the significance of gender. In recent years this has begun to change but, as Hon noted in 1995, "discrimination against women in public relations cannot be separated from the organizational and societal systems that produce gender biases" (1995, p. 65), and this remains the situation: "most public relations researchers who study gender have focused exclusively on a female/male dichotomy in salary and job satisfaction without considering other defining human relations factors" (Pompper, 2012, p. 89). Since the conference, we have had an ongoing discussion around these ideas. This paper represents a continuation of the conversation.

We have structured the paper in five sections. In the first section, we review feminist public relations scholarship and identify the paucity – at least until very recently – of critical perspectives. We also consider the use of creative methodologies in transformative work. We then present our individual contributions around three overarching themes: provocations, transgressions and resistance. In the final section, we discuss how we may back talk and talk back in order to participate effectively in power relations and claim space to work in feminist methods. As such, emerging from our disparate contributions is the beginnings of, and groundwork for, a feminist methodology for public relations.

2. Feminist perspectives and methodologies

There is no single or unified feminist movement or theory, which poses challenges in developing a feminist research agenda for public relations. The questions we raise in this paper are contingent on a critical research perspective that considers how power is manifest in society, in organizational structures, in institutional processes, and in occupational identities. The majority of feminist public relations scholarship from the 1980s onwards embraces liberal-feminist and, to a lesser extent, radical-feminist approaches (Fitch, 2015). With a few exceptions (see, for instance, Daymon & Demetrious, 2014 and Tindall & Waters, 2013), there is little research that adopts a truly critical perspective in terms of challenging the hegemonic assumptions around gender in public relations. Different research is needed, then, to explore precisely how gender, as a socially constructed identity (Butler, 1999), informs conceptualizations of public relations and its role in, and impact on, society. The failure to embrace a feminist methodology has "universalize[d] the experiences of men (and relatively privileged women)" (DeVault, 1996, p. 30). A critical feminist lens can challenge existing assumptions in public relations and investigate power and power relations, along with the structural processes that produce gendered discourse and practice. This approach may encourage better understandings of, for instance, the professionalizing structures embedded within masculine values that frame understandings of public relations expertise and knowledge; the need to apply a feminist agenda to positioning theory and its focus on rights and duties; and a critical feminist research agenda.

In line with our exploration of feminist intelligences, we adopt hybrid, critical methodologies to reconfigure ways of "ordering and valuing" (Lury & Wakeford, 2012, p. 1). We choose an anecdotal, conversational structure in this paper, recognizing anecdotes are both representative and constitutive (Michael, 2012). This method aligns with the approaches advocated by hooks (1989) who considered that revealing the personal, particularly in relation to attempts to silence debates, is fundamental to talking back. Considerations of configuration, an assemblage technique, enabled particular relations to be interrogated and rearranged as a mode of making and unmaking sense-making processes so that transformational possibilities may emerge (Suchman, 2012). Collectively, anecdotes and configuration offer a conversational research method for the interrogation of problems, incidents and experiences, and a creative starting point for political conversations about feminist intelligences.

3. Provocations: positioning and problematizing

In this section, we problematize a range of provocations in relation to feminist issues in, and for, public relations and critique personal experiences to highlight the urgent need for intensified feminist endeavors in public relations research.

MOTION I presented my first feminist paper at an international Corporate Reputation conference in 1998. The co-authored paper analyzed insurance advertisements targeted at women consumers and focused on the discursive framing of the advertisements and gendered assumptions about women's incomes. At the end of our presentation, a male academic, who was unknown to us, asked the following question: "Have you heard about divorce Barbie? She comes with all of Ken's things." We were stunned. As relatively inexperienced academics, we were puzzled by the anecdote and wondered how we could/should have responded. Was this someone who was going through a bitter divorce—were we expected to sympathize? Was it an extremely offensive joke – a cunning trap – in which if we laughed we undermined feminist principles and if we failed to laugh we were clearly humorless feminists? Or was it simply an attempt to police academic boundaries and marginalize our fledgling feminist work? For too long, this experience influenced the development of my own feminist

intelligence—I avoided writing anything that could be construed as a feminist position. Attempts to analyze the experience focused on notions of transgression and questioned whether, by stepping outside of our home discipline we had in some way crossed an unspoken boundary. The telling of this "joke" was most definitely an act of power—although the precise purpose remains unclear. Feminist scholars who trespass into emergent disciplines and attempt to problematize gender unwittingly interrupt academic struggles for power and dominance. Non-observation of unspoken rules and hierarchies may be interpreted as an infringement and subject to disciplinary measures. In this instance, the joke served to influence how I defined and positioned myself; feminist was a label I determinedly avoided. Unwittingly, I was complicit in my own docility and conformity by confining my research to public relations and eschewing feminist scholarship. As hooks said: "I was always saying the wrong thing, asking the wrong questions" (1989, p. 6). I have often wondered how I could have responded and, as a consequence, work collaboratively in this paper to explore a politics of provocation, transgression and resistance.

FITCH A recent article, "Is "feminism" a dirty word in PR?" (Parker, 2013), points to the uncomfortable relationship between feminism and public relations. It is common to see mainstream and trade media stories express concern about "the gangs of women" that dominate the industry and refer to public relations as a "pink ghetto" and "too feminized" (Salzman, 2013; Shepherd, 2012). In response to Australia's success at Cannes, Salzman wrote "the best Australian work exudes a great masculine energy, something we're sadly missing over here. The American PR industry has become so feminized and so politically correct that I worry about where the edge has gone." This example highlights anxiety about the coding of public relations as feminine, suggesting fundamentally gendered assumptions around public relations activity. In contrast, Salzman described the Australian industry as "ballsy." Ironically, the directors of a recruitment firm that published *Trends and Issues in Australian Corporate Affairs* lamented "girls and gay blokes gravitate to PR . . . because PR and corporate affairs is seen as a softer skillset" (Shein, cited in McIntyre, 2012) and the "gender imbalance" in the industry, that is the "pink ghetto," led to the failure for public relations to be taken seriously (Salt, cited in Shepherd, 2012). Nick Turner, the then-Public Relations Institute of Australia [PRIA] president rightly asserted in response that the idea women might not be taken seriously in the industry was highly offensive to both men and women (cited in Shepherd, 2012).

A brochure, *Careers for women in the 70's*, identified public relations as offering great career prospects for women with a college degree (US Department of Labor, 1973). More than four decades later, public relations and associated roles are still considered most suitable for women. A recent article in *Forbes* identified the 12 best jobs fo r women, based on annual salaries and projected hiring and drawing on US Bureau of Labor statistics (Shavin, 2014). The list included public relations manager, advertising and promotions manager, market research analyst, and event planner. It also included dental hygienist. While this list appears somewhat odd, the criteria for inclusion were: "stress, physical demands, and the percentage of women working in the field," suggesting the existing numerical dominance of women in these areas led to the assumption that these occupations were therefore "good" for women.

In the world of Pinterest, public relations is irrevocably associated with fashion and young, attractive, white women. In contrast, if you search using the term strategic communication, the most prominent images are chessboards and white, older men sitting around a boardroom table. So there is a curious split between the young career women trying to get through job interviews (and presumably establish their careers) and the older male strategic thinkers who have made it. The point is industries "where professional norms were constructed with reference to the experiences of the white, middle-class man, closure regimes inevitably tended to have gender, class, and ethnic dimensions" (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012, p. 459). It is no coincidence that in popular culture female public relations practitioners tend to do publicity and event management while male practitioners are more closely aligned with strategic and management activity (Johnston, 2010; Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008).

JAMES In 2014, following our Barcelona panel presentation, I wrote an opinion piece for my city's newspaper, *The Newcastle Herald* (James, 2014b). I did not refer to "feminist intelligence" as such but wrote for a non-academic audience. I explored what would happen if professional communicators switched on their "inner feminist" and became more conscious of their work in terms of the impact on women. Two commenters took issue with my views and attempted to position me, rather than wider society, as having "the problem." This experience was aligned to my current research (James, 2014a, 2015), which applies Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory to public relations. Positioning theory focuses on the phenomenon of one's position in terms of "what it is relative to others, who constructs it, and whether or not it is accepted" (Dennen, 2011, p. 529). The theory has implications for both opening up and shutting down dialogue, relationships, engagement and communication generally. In my opinion piece I was positioning the organization that overlooked exercising feminist intelligence as not only disadvantaging women but also itself. I was positioning myself as someone who had the right to write the piece. The commissioning editor obviously agreed that I had such a right but certain readers disagreed with my position and my right to take such a position. In positioning theory, the rights and duties that are associated with taking up or assigning a position are imposed by what is known as the local moral order, that is, the understood framework of rights, duties and obligations in any interaction (Moghaddam, Hanley, & Harré, 2003). It was clear in the interaction that occurred in response to my writing that my right to suggest that businesses might benefit from implementing the most basic feminist agenda was questioned by some people. From a positioning theoretical perspective, I had authority and academic credentials to take the position, and some might say that in my role I have a duty to promote a progressive social agenda. However it was clear that the local moral order that operated among the readership of the newspaper was a contested space and not all members agreed with the position that I took.

So what happens in a public relations positioning sense when the local moral order subjugates women, either overtly or else in subtle, indirect discriminatory structures or practices? This public relations sense refers to factors such as the overall mission of the client/organization; the public relations team and to what degree they are able or willing to interpret the local moral order in operation; and the public relations strategy itself in terms of whether its aims consider implications for women as practitioners, or as publics. Choi and Hon concluded that:

> the challenge that seems to remain, then, is transforming the institutional ethos that continues to privilege masculinist values and power relations and thus limit some organizations' ability to capitalize on the full range of human potential and effectively respond to internal and external demands. (2002, p. 259)

Positioning theory could assist in addressing this challenge and in the development of a public relations feminist intelligence.

4. Transgressions: interrogating and unsettling

Transgressive acts may unsettle, destabilize or undo dominant power relations. We are interested in this section in sharing transgressions: how attempts to consider feminist perspectives are considered irrelevant to the field and how popular understandings of public relations promote highly gendered conceptualizations, yet might be problematized through, for instance, popular culture.

FITCH There is a curious resistance to feminist scholarship in public relations. In response to my first paper on gender, co-authored with a feminist cultural studies scholar and published in an open access journal, I received an email calling the paper "a load of selective rubbish" and "lopsided, academic claptrap." But not paying attention to gender is problematic. In her exploration of narrative accounts of public relations expertise, Pieczka (2007) found genderless accounts of public relations practice that failed to consider how discourses of masculinity and professionalism influenced those accounts.

MOTION Inspiration for claiming a feminist position and adopting back talk circulate within popular culture. Although popular culture has been largely neglected within public relations scholarship, we need to recognize that popular culture is a critical product of, and resource for, public relations practitioners. The relationship between public relations and popular culture may be characterized as interdependent and generative—they both form part of the promotional cultures that shape our everyday and professional lives (Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2002). Popular culture is also an important site for transgression and resistance in which social meanings may be insinuated to reverse relationships of power (De Certeau, 1984). Thus, from a feminist researcher's perspective, popular culture offers insights into collective, participatory and egalitarian values of social cultures and documents emergent socio-cultural trends (Duncombe, 2002). Tracking critical incidents within popular culture that destabilize disadvantageous power relations opens up transgressive possibilities for responding to, or resisting entrenched, calculated mechanisms that objectify and subjectify women. At the 2014 Screen Actors Guild [SAG] Awards, Cate Blanchett asked a cameraman who had just zoomed down her body in an objectifying close up, "Do you do that to the guys?" Transgression worked in two ways here: the cameraman transgressed the boundaries of acceptable red carpet protocols and Blanchett transgressed the media expectation that she would silently submit to the camera technique which dissects every aspect of a female celebrity's appearance. Questioning and resisting red carpet sexism is a mode of "constant vigilance" (Thomas & Davies, 2005) and acts by talking back to sexism and reclaiming agency. Increasingly, women celebrities are resisting being positioned solely on the basis of appearance and treated differently from their male colleagues. At the 2015 SAG awards both Jennifer Aniston and Julianne Moore refused to submit to the stating "No, no, I can't do that" and "No, I won't do that" respectively (Clarke, 2015). Refusing restricted identity positions and objectifying practices that undermine the equity possibilities are an effective way of talking back.

JAMES If being transgressive is undertaking acts that go against some law, rule, or code, it is disturbing that suggesting business communicators "switched on their inner feminist" was viewed as transgressive. I had included what I considered to be good business practice rather than what could be interpreted as pushing a radical agenda. That such practices could be viewed as transgressive by sections of the reading audience is concerning. I see this as pointing to the need for education about and promotion of the feminist agenda to continue at full throttle, a view that some, including young woman, see as itself transgressive (see, for example, Ortner, 2014).

FITCH Drawing on my historical research in the Australian industry, I argue that how public relations is widely understood and the ideas around what constitutes professional public relations were, and still are, informed by anxiety around the number of women entering the industry. The issues of an ongoing gender pay gap and seniority remain topical in public relations and are by no means unique to Australia (see for example, recent UK and US industry reports [CIPR, 2014, 2015; Sha, 2011]). My concern is the discourses around women and public relations have changed little over several decades. Further, my research suggests professionalization processes were in part a response to the feminization of the public relations industry. Given "professions are born in contrast" to menial work (Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam, & Sullivan, 2012, p. 471), a process of "othering" occurred that delineated professional and non-professional public relations activity along gendered lines. That is, certain kinds of public relations activity are marginalized by an exclusive occupational identity that hinges on a narrow conceptualization of (professional) public relations. As I have noted elsewhere, the increase in the number of women working in public relations resulted in a gendered stratification of public relations work, between professional and strategic management activity and non-professional, technical activity such as publicity and promotion (Fitch & Third, 2010). In addition, certain sectors – in particular corporate communication and public affairs – were more conducive to the

development of the careers of male practitioners (Fitch & Third, 2014). The numerical dominance of women in the industry informed the ways in which public relations was conceptualized as professional work (Fitch & Third, 2014). Thus, a feminist perspective challenges widely held conceptualizations of public relations as a profession.

5. Resistance: challenging and transforming

Acts of resistance can be transformative in that they challenge subjectivities and discursive meanings (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Thomas and Davies argue for a broad view of resistance, suggesting resistance is not only oppositional and negative but also a critical and ultimately generative reflexive process (2005, p. 727). In this section, therefore, we explore responses to the concerns and examples in the previous two sections, offer examples of talking back, and begin to work through the conceptual implications for public relations.

MOTION As part of a transformative feminist politics, objectifying and subjectifying practices may be resisted and countered through the use of ridicule. The aim is to render such practices visible and absurd. This type of back talk offers social criticism by drawing attention to issues and attempting to force change. Increasingly, actors and musicians are popularizing feminist resistance via social media. Gabourey Sidibe (2014) made fun of criticism for her choice of dress (and, implicitly, her body shape) in a tweet: "To people making mean comments about my GG pics, I mos def cried about it on that private jet on my way to my dream job last night. #JK." Sidibe successfully satirizes the personal nature of the comments by claiming the position of successful actress. In another example, Amanda Palmer lead singer of The Dresden Dolls and solo artist, stripped on stage while performing a song in response to a newspaper article. In 2013, the Daily Mail wrote about Palmer's Glastonbury Festival show without reference to her music or performance, concentrating on an accidental exposure of Palmer's breast and featuring large pictures of the singer, including the unintentional nudity. Palmer noted: "there kind of is no other response that you can give to something like that article outside of humor" (cited in Giuffre, 2013). Talking back, as seen in these two popular culture examples, is a rhetorical device for resisting oppressive, subjectifying practices. Sidibe and Palmer define their own identity positions and offer alternative models, not only for personal experiences, but also for broader political change. That is not to say that these are necessarily exemplary approaches; judgments about how to respond to restrictive discourses and actions are contextual and conditional. Instances of resistance within popular culture have significant implications for public relations. Talking back and back talk are increasingly part of feminist intelligence modalities that directly confront promotional cultures and restrictive power relations. For public relations, the challenge is to open up multiple agentic possibilities for women in popular culture and, more generally, our professional and everyday lives.

FITCH Evident in the gendered public relations discourses and in responses to our attempts to explore links between feminism and public relations is a kind of anti-feminism as if the numerical dominance of women in the industry suggests that the battle for equality has been won and public relations offers unique opportunities for the advancement of women. Such postfeminist understandings can be understood as a rejection of feminism, or of the need for feminism (Mendes, 2011) and as an extension of the backlash against feminism, widely attributed to the 1980s (Faludi, 1992). Feminist scholars identify "the death of feminism" as a persistent theme (Lumby, 2011; Mendes, 2011). Far from being obsolete, the evidence we present points to an urgent need for more feminist public relations research.

Public relations scholars have begun to draw on contemporary sociology of the professions literature to explore the role of social and cultural capital in relation to occupational closure (see, for instance, Edwards, 2014). There has been less work on physical capital, in terms of how masculine norms are embodied in those professional identities (Muzio & Tomlinson, 2012). We need more research to understand how representations of public relations practitioners encode gender. I have argued elsewhere the limitations of using popular culture representations as "evidence" in that I argued a more complex and nuanced understanding of representational processes is needed; however, in exploring the representation of a vampire public relations practitioner I found a playful engagement with, and critique of, stereotypical representations as vampires are always transgressive (Fitch, in press). The problem is not a "lack" of men, or that women are excluded from public relations (acknowledging their systematic exclusion from senior roles). Rather, the numerical dominance of women has contributed to particular conceptualizations of public relations expertise and a highly gendered occupational identity.

JAMES If public relations practitioners and researchers developed a feminist intelligence, they would be able start to examine the assumptions and commonsense public relations practices that may in fact be highly gendered social constructions. The concept of positioning is useful in the conceptualization of the public relations task because it focuses attention on the interaction between practice and the societies in which practices take place. It is in this social space that public relations practitioners can work to influence the way positioning takes place, from the strategic conceptualization stage right through to the evaluation points of programs and campaigns. I suggest that through experience and learning, and a commitment to a feminist agenda, the need to understand the value of field-specific types of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) may become central to developing a public relations feminist intelligence.

Those who hold the symbolic capital have the power to shape the construction of social reality to support the way they take up and assign positions (Edwards, 2011). The feminist agenda must be pushed harder if women are to build the symbolic capital they need to wield power and influence. Women, like all people and even corporate entities, are only able to position in ways in which their symbolic capital is recognized by others operating within the local moral order (Rothbart & Bartlett, 2008). Thus there are two points of resistance work in public relations positioning, building symbolic capital that

is recognized in current local moral orders/societies, or working actively to change the very nature of societies so a wider view of what is valued as symbolic capital can be taken.

I wrote in my newspaper opinion piece how in strategic communications work, the organization/client and audiences/publics involved sometimes accept each other's understanding. However, in *any* relations there are negotiations, disputes, and continuing re-formulations of meaning (Moghaddam & Kavulich, 2008). For example, what methods of negotiation or dispute resolution are being used by intended or unintended audience members, or by organizations? Are the intersections (see Vardeman-Winter, Tindall, & Jiang, 2013) with race, ethnicity, culture and sexuality consciously considered? Are we using stories that privilege certain patriarchal discourses (Ortner, 2014) or are feminist perspectives considered in designing messages, collateral, and other storytelling artifacts?

Positioning theorists suggest that examining "how the tacit rights and duties form the relatively stable moral background to ordinary acts of positioning" is central (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 16). I put forward that this might be helpful in the feminist endeavor. Bourdieu's concept of field, as suggested by public relations scholars such as Edwards (2011), Roper (2005) and Ihlen (2005), should also be considered in positioning theory generally, but especially in a feminist public relations context. What happens if the local moral order wherein a public relations episode is planned and/or implemented indicates that the "tacitly held attitudes, preferences, and embodied habits of behavior" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 54) are unfavorable to women?

Perhaps as well as traditional forms of research in public relations practice such as situational analysis or audience demographic analysis, feminist considerations may require that an analysis of "the types and amounts of capital" in regards to all who may be impacted by an organization's public relations activity might be in order. For example, Ihlen states "capital might be specific to a certain field and relatively worthless in other fields" (2005, p. 493). This can be seen to pertain to positioning theory's ideas around the consequences of trying to position in certain ways when the local moral order does not accord such rights. If a local moral order is deemed to be subjugating women, then this raises questions such as:

• What moral responsibilities this places on organizations seeking to operate in such environments?
• What moral responsibilities this places on practitioners being asked to implement public relations positioning strategies?
• What role do regulating and law-making bodies have in such a situation at a macro level?

This view on feminist intelligence is not one that would seek to reverse existing gender inequalities, but is an exercise in challenging social relations that create the need for domination over another.

6. A feminist manifesto for public relations

Feminist intelligences and modalities seek to open up public relations scholarship and practices to new ways of configuring gender relations. The aim, we suggest, is not to prescribe particular configurations but to move beyond polarization to social choice, agency and participation. New inclusive frameworks and processes that are built upon democratic, social justice principles and a transparent assumption of gender equality are advocated. That means we need to recognize, if not accept, feminist modalities that are outside our own particular paradigms and frameworks. "Opening up," Stirling suggests, "poses alternative questions, focuses on neglected issues, includes marginalized perspectives, triangulates contending knowledges, tests sensitivities to different methods, considers ignored uncertainties, examines different possibilities, and highlights new options" (Stirling, 2008, p. 280). It is important to acknowledge contextual conditions, pluralism, multiplicity, ambiguities and contradictions as part of a manifesto to open up public relations for feminist modalities.

6.1. Agenda setting

A critical objective of feminist modalities is ensuring that women's rights and issues are continually placed on governance and policy agendas. Hillary Clinton (1995) highlighted the importance at the United Nations Women in the World Conference: "Let's keep telling the world over and over again that yes, women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights, once and for all." Positioning women's rights in this way reconfigures women's issues as having equal status to other rights. Helen Clark (n.d.), Prime Minister of New Zealand for nine years and the first woman to lead the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), explains why women's issues are critical: "I believe that achieving gender equality is not only morally right, but also catalytic to development as a whole, creating political, economic, and social opportunities for women which benefit individuals, communities, countries, and the world." As leader of the UNDP, Clark promotes women's issues on a global scale. The challenge for those of us who do not work at this level is to find ways to integrate feminist modalities into our professional and everyday lives.

6.2. Social justice and change

We acknowledge that there are multiple possible feminist options—and that only a few may be chosen. Our concern is not that closure is necessarily wrong but that it tends to be privileged. The issues we raise here draw on a particular

understanding of feminism as concerned with social justice and women's rights. Not all public relations scholars examining "feminisms" agree on what future directions should be taken. For example, Larissa Grunig stated:

> we need research today for the workplace of tomorrow, a workplace firmly situated in the knowledge-based economy and increasingly staffed by women in public relations. Public relations is all about relationships; we need to study new systems for the employer–employee relationship in this postmodern era. (2006, p. 137)

Such research is no doubt needed but our focus on issues of social justice and women's rights is contingent on a critical research perspective that considers how power is manifest in society, in organizational structures, in institutional processes, and indeed in occupational identities. What is feminism for? How can it constitute resistance to the dominant paradigm for public relations and interrogate existing knowledge structures, bring about real change in gendered hierarchies in the industry in terms of salaries and status, and address the heteronormative assumptions that continue to inform the public relations research agenda (Edwards & L'Etang, 2013)? These issues deserve further research.

6.3. Praxis

We suggest that as practitioners and researchers continue to examine the assumptions within public relations practices, such practices and "common sense" meanings may be revealed as highly gendered social constructions. Viewing public relations through such a critical feminist lens can provide a way of deconstructing what is taking place, and conceptualizing a "feminist intelligence" in practice. In all stages, including planning, implementing and evaluating public relations activity, an examination of the symbolic capital that individuals or organizations wield is warranted. Applying a feminist intelligence to such work might result in guiding current and future practice towards achieving the aims of a broad feminist agenda.

7. Conclusion

Feminist theory has not yet had the same impact on public relations scholarship as it has on other disciplines (Jenkins & Keane, 2014). In this paper, we begin to explore the ways in which feminist intelligences and modalities can challenge hegemonic assumptions in public relations theory and practice. Learning how to speak to and respond to power is critical, not only for feminist scholars, but, more broadly, for the role of academics as critics of society. Feminist intelligences require active politicization of issues and practices. Back talk means finding our voices and challenging those who seek to silence and close down emergent critical approaches. Through a process of talking back, drawing on individual, personal and anecdotal experiences, popular culture and our research, we begin to explore ways to disrupt the gendered discourses that dominate and inform conceptualizations of public relations in theory and in practice. Future research depends on richer heuristics and critical perspectives that open up and interrogate how public relations is constructed through power relations, gender, and difference (instead of focusing on diversity and inclusiveness) (Aldoory, 2005). Only then may we begin to understand the significance of the gendering of public relations and open up public relations scholarship and practices to new ways of configuring gender relations.

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