
1 Introduction

In his introduction to the book, *The Gender Challenge to Media*, Nathaniel Clory (2001, p.6) wrote quite passionately about an “awakening”. Clory was taken aback by a “seemingly worldwide conspiracy that devalued women”. In a roundabout way, Clory came to realise that what the media says may affect thousands of people, including those who want to study PR. The definition of media also extends to the Internet; both business and personal sites and forums. My work will not delve into conspiracy theories, nor ponder on how to change the world. It analyses why the communications (public relations) industry is increasingly attracting higher proportions of women (or conversely, why there are so few men).

This thesis does not target academia as its primary readership. As Eaton (2001, p.177) points out: “Much of the scholarship in the discipline ends up as journal articles that are read by some professors and fewer students.” My supervisor, Prof. Alan Knight, said: “At the end of the day someone will take this home one weekend, read it, and then it will end up gathering dust on a shelf.” I would hope it has some impact. For that reason, the work is aimed at practitioners in the “field”. In that regard, the writing style sometimes uses first person and second person accounts to explain my findings. It has been influenced by my use, in part, of a mixed methodology, which is discussed in chapter 3.

For the most part, most of the resource material – literature, survey and focus groups – is sociological. It should also be noted that while this thesis does not serve to give feminists a voice, it briefly considers the way in which a male-managed industry presides over an ever-growing female workforce – an interesting combination. While my study focuses on the reasons for the predominance of women in PR, conversely it would probably be just as apt to focus on why there are so few men. However, taking that path proved to be difficult, as there are so few men entering the profession. Rush and Grubb-Swetnam’s (1996) call to communication students to become aware

of the absences in their lives and profession is apt. They suggested we ask ourselves: “What is missing here? Why is this picture incomplete or distorted?” (np). The answer is simple: men are missing. They are missing, however, only in non-management levels. That situation certainly may change in the future.

Background to the research

If we’re called in by a client to influence behavior, our input should come from a group of people balanced by gender (Harold Burson, founder and chairman of Burson-Marsteller, in Hampson, as cited by Folmar, 2005).

Primarily, this thesis is about the feminisation of public relations. Conversely, it could be about the dearth (or is that death?) of males in the industry. ‘Feminisation’ of the industry means that women have numerically become the dominant force. It does not intend to specifically include women at any particular level: just all women in the industry. The title arose because of the number of women doing communications courses. How could it not, when I was severely outnumbered?

The project has its origins as a result of my 22-year professional career in the media and public relations (PR) professions. While studying for my Masters Degree in Perth, I was surprised by the high number of women undertaking communication courses at Edith Cowan University. This sparked initial interest. Unconsciously, I had observed and analysed the trend of what appeared to be increasing numbers of women in the media. There is also growing professional anecdotal evidence of this trend. To date there has been no attempt to explain the growing drift of women (and decline of men) into public relations – a profession that is male-managed.

The issue of women in public relations, or the ‘feminisation of public relations’ was first raised in 1989 when, according to Grunig, Toth and Hon (2001), the *Public Relations Journal* published one of the first articles to note the growing prevalence of female practitioners. They were probably referring to an article by Karlene Lukovitz (1989) *Women practitioners, how*

far, how fast?, which recorded that women had grown from 27 per cent of the United States industry in 1970, to 56.6 per cent in 1987. Lukovitz also noted a salaries gap between men and women “as a result of past discrimination and the recent heavy influx of young women into the lower-salaried entry-levels of the profession” and raised concerns that this could flow on to “a decrease in status and salaries for the profession as a whole” (1989, p. 14). It is interesting to note that, in the same volume of *Public Relations Journal*, Philip Lesly also published an article suggesting public relations was “losing stature and respect” (1989, p. 40), although he attributed the status loss to increasingly technical practice, rather than to gender reasons. Lukovitz quoted the then president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), John Paluszek, as saying he was not aware of any problems relating to women in public relations, and there was no need for an industry-wide examination of women’s issues. However, Paluszek later acted on the many replies his comments drew, and established a Task Force on Women in PR, which later became the Committee on Work, Life and Gender Issues.

Grunig, Toth and Hon (2001) wrote one of the main texts on females in public relations. The book, *Women in public relations: how gender influences practice*, deals mainly with status, salary, equity, gender, gender bias and sexual discrimination. The book’s aim, as the authors note, is: “to make an issue out of sex discrimination in our field” (Grunig, Toth and Hon, 2001, p. 30). That’s appropriate, as it was written by three women for women, addressing important issues of imbalance. On the other hand, this study is more concerned with the reasons why there are so many women (and, perhaps more apt, why so few men) in PR. The issues Grunig et al. raised certainly have a role to play in some areas of this study, but the book really deals with women’s role/s in PR, at a time when little was being done to address the imbalances and issues that women faced within the industry. One could argue that with the predominance of women now entering PR, it is time for a study on male issues, and this thesis may become the catalyst for that future work.

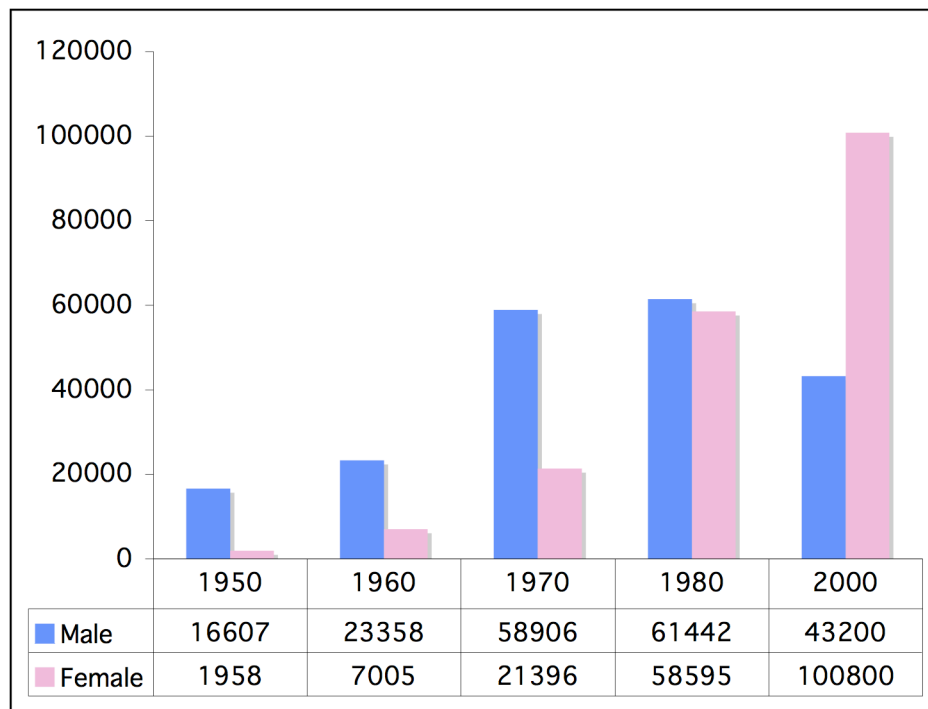
There is one thing on which all communications scholars agree: women outnumber men, insofar as comprising the bulk of the PR workforce. As mentioned, this situation does not apply to management within PR. This is an important distinction, showing the difference between management and technician roles in PR, with technician roles being best described as those roles which do not contribute in any significant form to the higher-level planning roles, such as budgeting and key strategy.

Writing in the *PR Reporter*, DeRosa and Wilcox (1989) questioned the influx of women into public relations. They attempted to discover why women were entering the field in increasing numbers. Their survey of the public relations field showed almost 80 per cent of the respondents were female. A similar trend was seen in colleges and universities. DeRosa and Wilcox found that in 1970, about 75 per cent of the students majoring in PR were men. By 1980, women were predominant at 67 per cent. The research was quantitative, and did not consider the views of PR professionals, who have the wisdom of years of industry observation. Similarly, Toth and Aldoory (2000, np) reported in a year 2000 gender study of the US industry (the most recent study) that “the current demographic in the profession is 70 per cent women and 30 per cent men. This reflects a steady increase of women entering public relations over the past 20 years”. The study’s figures are strikingly similar to the current male/female participation in the Australian PR industry and at university. Grunig et al. (2001, np) also recognised the paradigm shift in the US, when in “1989, public relations shifted from a male to female majority”.

In Singapore, female preferences for ‘soft’ subjects like the social sciences in lieu of technical courses like engineering also determine the kinds of occupations they are likely to undertake. A study on the social progress of Singapore women by the Singapore Ministry of Manpower suggests that female tertiary students tend to concentrate in non-technical subjects. “In 1997, 75% of the female undergraduates in local universities were in the Arts and Social Sciences, Business and Accountancy and Sciences courses

compared with 38% of the males” (Singapore Manpower Research and Statistics Department 2000).

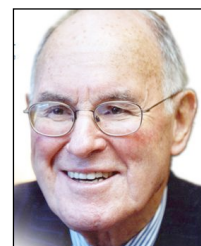
The mention of “soft” subjects applies particularly to PR. In the course of this study, several interview and survey subjects made mention of PR fitting this description.



*Figure 1: The rise of women in PR in the US, from 1950–2000
(US Dept of Labor, 1980, and Toth 2001).*

The Public Relations Society of America’s 2000 world conference, which drew more than 3500 public relations professionals, students, vendors, and trade journalists, addressed the issue. Industry heavyweights Harold Burson and Dan Edelman expressed concern during the conference that “the vast majority of people entering the PR field are women” (Miller 2002).

At the time, Jack O'Dwyer's Newsletter noted that women comprised 70 per cent of Burson-Marsteller's staff. Edelman briefly answered a question about the predominance of women entering PR by stating: “We need balance.” Edelman (pictured) was not alone. Burson, continued: “Unless more men are attracted to public relations, it runs the risk



of being regarded as a ‘woman’s job’ ... “we’ll lose a lot of good men” (Burson, as cited by Folmar, 2005). These sentiments were echoed in the PRSA’s Year 2000 gender report. “One male participant said: ‘I think the glass ceiling will naturally go away and the bigger question is what are they left with? An entire female-dominating industry. Then there will be some other kind of ceiling’” (Toth, 2000).

My study will attempt to examine the reasons for the growing predominance of women in public relations (and conversely, the diminishing number of men), which is reflected in Australian university enrolments (particularly in Perth) and overseas, and in the workplace (both government and private enterprise). It will do this by a rigorous analysis through comprehensive on-line and paper surveys, focus groups and interviews.

My study has its origins in my 22-year professional career in the media and in public relations. The high number of women undertaking communications courses at Edith Cowan University sparked my initial interest. However, to date in Australia there has been no attempt to explain the growing drift of women (and decline of men) into the public relations profession. Some related research has been done by American academics, most notably Brenda Wrigley, Elizabeth Toth, Linda Aldoory, Larissa Grunig, Carolyn Cline and Linda Hon. However, there are only eight major published texts on the subject. These mostly concentrate on the inequalities regarding salary and responsibility in decision-making. This also was the major content of the now unobtainable 1986 *Velvet Ghetto* report. There are few journal articles that deal directly with the subject. Consequently, a need for current, original research is required.

My study is well positioned by reference to Larissa Grunig, who, in a 1998 interview with *Salon* magazine said: “public relations is NOT female-dominated. It is female-intensive” (Brown 1998). By this, she meant that while numerically females dominate the industry, they do not control it through the management function. There is an important differentiation to be made here.

This study is only concerned with the fact that females are taking to the profession in increasing numbers; hence the emphasis is on the “female-intensive” nature of the profession. The predominance of males in management could easily be the subject of another study. In fact; the point was raised in an e-mail and subsequent phone conversation I had with a female practitioner at one of the WA mining companies. She was puzzled as to why female PR practitioners in the mining industry never reached management level. In part, some of the reasons for that are addressed further in my study in interviews with two senior male professionals.

Research objectives

The objective was to examine:

- The numerical growth of women, and decline of men, in the public relations profession in Perth, Western Australia.

The research objective is addressed by presenting a picture of the past, and the current state of public relations practice, primarily in Perth, but drawing on material from Australia and overseas; notably the US and, to a lesser extent, the UK. Essentially, I argue that the industry is in danger of becoming “over-feminised”, and that this trend is not healthy for the profession – a stance taken by several scholars and professionals.

There are clear boundaries (limitations) associated with this research, mostly imposed by the limited availability of prior related material. In fact, with the exception of some US statistical information and material used in the literature review, most information contained in this thesis is original. This is the first time any research into gender in PR has been conducted in Australia. The only data the National and State PR organisations had (at the time this study commenced) was for the current year (2004-05). There is also a limitation associated with the number of PR professionals (63) and students (295) surveyed. This was the maximum number possible, due to privacy limitations imposed by the PRIA, companies and government departments, which made it difficult to access the entire sub-group. With regard to

universities, many students seemed unwilling to participate, particularly in focus groups and interviews.

My history as a PR practitioner and student over 10 years has brought me to this point, where I have seen and questioned the puzzle of a female-intensive industry. By combining my personal and professional experience within a framework developed by my academic training, I have formulated my principal research question to be:

Why has there been a rapid and continuing growth of women (and decline of men) in public relations?

The question needs to be addressed, as it may have long-term implications for the industry; particularly as to how PR is practiced and taught. When discussing the topic as a likely study, most, if not all professional and academics were interested in the outcome – and this proved to be the case throughout the study. The significance of such a trend may not be apparent now. However, if such trends are identified early, industry bodies and universities may at least be aware of the change and be prepared for any eventualities which may arise.

Summary of Learning Outcomes

This section presents the synthesis of my action research and learning.

Different lessons are learned depending on the perspective of the learner (figure 2).

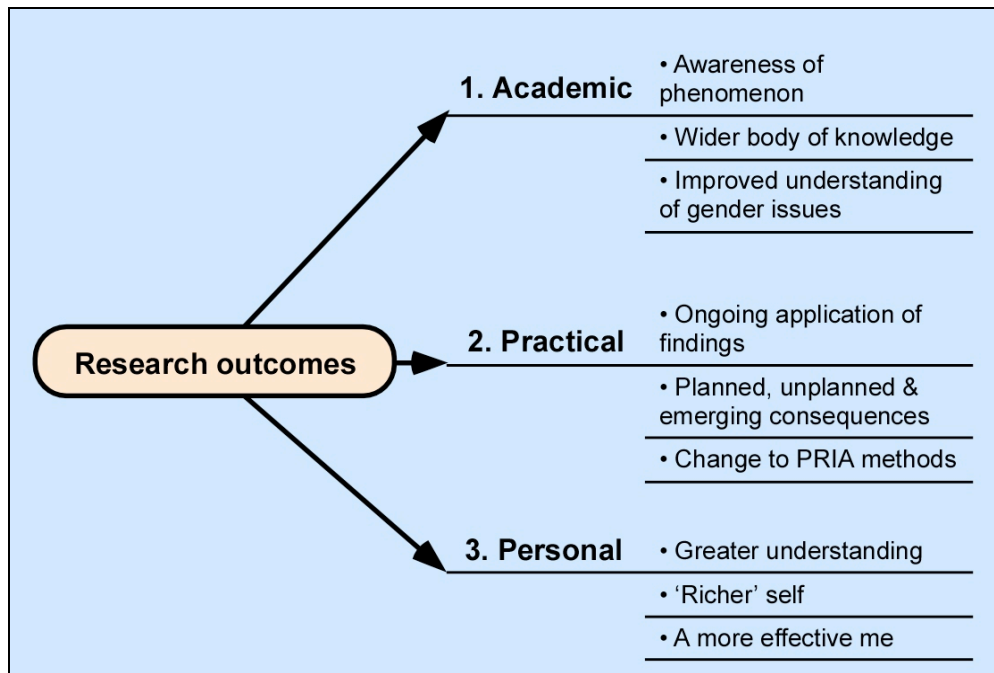


Figure 2: Summary of research learning outcomes.

From an **academic perspective**, the learning outcomes indicate that at present the reasons for the phenomenon of an increasing female PR workforce are difficult to capture. While it is shown that awareness is high, there is little impetus to addressing the situation. It will be also demonstrated that the research contributes to knowledge and raises the issue at a national and international level for the first time in a detailed study.

Throughout this thesis, it will be shown that:

- ❑ The enquiry was carried out systematically,
- ❑ The values used to distinguish the claim to knowledge are clearly shown and justified.
- ❑ The assertions are clearly warranted; and evidence is presented throughout of an enquiring and critical approach to a work-related problem.

From a **practical perspective** I believe there can now be more research undertaken in this field, with the material and findings being of use to the profession, if it so chooses. Certainly the practical nature of the project is

reflected in changes the Public Relations Institute of Australia has indicated it will make with regard to changing the way it records membership data.

From a personal perspective, I have endeavoured, for the past five years, to align academic and work-related pursuits. I have no doubts this research thesis has added to this quest by providing me with a more balanced view of work, career and family.

Justification for the research

Look around any public relations department or college classroom and you're likely to find a majority of women. For reasons still unknown, women have flocked to public relations, and the trend is likely to continue (Childers-Hon, 2003).

Having been fascinated by the high numbers of women in communications courses at university, I fulfilled a primary prerequisite, according to Merriam, 1998, for undertaking such a study, and that is the premise of “questioning something that perplexes and challenges the mind”. Certainly, the introductory quote for this section from American PR academic Linda Childers-Hon posed the question as recently as two years ago.

On commencing readings for the project, it soon became obvious that little work had been done academically on the gender composition of the industry, either by scholars or professional bodies. That such a gap should exist is, in itself, cause for concern. Those scholars who have delved into the field have all made similar comments.

“Historical studies of women in public relations . . . have been rare,” notes Gower (2001). Others, like Rea (2002) echo these sentiments, citing “little sustained and formal interest in gender equity matters in our professional organisations or in the agendas of industry or academic conferences . . . not because gender discrimination is not an issue for the Australian industry, but rather that it has not been addressed.” One of the most recent articles on the topic appeared in the March 2005 issue of *Public Relations Review*. “Future professionals’ perceptions of work, life, and gender issues in public

relations”, written by Bey-Ling Sha and Elizabeth Toth, once again focused on salary and management issues only. The other most recent reference was from 2003 – an article which simply revisited the 1986 *Velvet Ghetto* report. The lack of subject-specific research applies to student perceptions of gender issues within PR. There has been only one US survey (Farmer, B and Waugh 1999). There has only been one Australian survey of students, which indicates that original research is severely lacking. As of August 2005 I became aware of work being done by Griffith University Honours student Fiona McCurdy, who was “looking at the work completed by Grunig, Toth and Hon, as well as Farmer and Waugh in the US. McCurdy wanted to ascertain whether the problems they found in regards to females in PR [both in the university system and the professional community] occur in the ‘South East Queensland context’.

McCurdy, 2005, surveyed 169 third-year PR students at four south-east Queensland Universities (Bond Griffith, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland) and local practitioners. This was 66 per cent of all enrolled students. It was found that 141 (83.43%) were female and 28 (16.56%) were male. The results collated from the practitioners survey could not be called conclusive, as only 12 were surveyed. However, they returned almost equal findings as the student survey, with 83.33 per cent of participants being female and 16.66 per cent of participants being male.

The issue of women in PR, or the feminisation of PR, was identified in 1989, when the (US) *Public Relations Journal* published an article about female practitioners. The then president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) was quoted as saying he was not aware of any problems relating to women in PR. However, he acted on the many replies his comments drew, and established a Task Force on women in PR, which is now called the Committee on Work, Life and Gender Issues.

Grunig et al’s. 2001 book, *Women in public relations: how gender influences practice*, is probably the main text on female issues in public relations. “It is

the only significant and comprehensive research on gender in public relations . . . their findings provide a useful comparative starting point for Australian investigations” (Rea, 2002, np). However, it deals mainly with status, salary, equity, gender, gender bias and sexual discrimination. Primarily, Grunig et al. aimed to: “[make] an issue out of sex discrimination in our field,” (p. 30). That is understandable, as it was written by three women, for women, addressing important issues of imbalance. As a text it has received criticism, particularly with regard to its definitions of gender and sex, which form a large part of this thesis. “They equate the term gender with biology, and the term ‘sex’ with characteristics that have been associated with men and women, such as assertiveness and submissiveness. They later seem to contradict themselves by arguing that gender is socially constructed,” (Scrimger 2001).

However, this study is more concerned with why there are so many women (and, perhaps more apt, why so few men) in PR. The issues raised by Grunig et al. certainly have a role to play in some areas of this study, but the book really deals with women’s role/s in PR, at a time little was being done to address the imbalances and issues that women faced within the industry. One could argue that with the predominance of women now entering PR, it is time for a study on male issues. This thesis may become the catalyst for that future work. One of the leading US PR academics, Denis Wilcox, certainly believes now is the time to undertake research in this area.

In e-mail correspondence of 19 April 2005 between myself and Prof. Wilcox, who is head of PR at the University of San Jose, Wilcox said:

There have been many articles about gender differences in public relations but most of it has been about differences in the workplace (salary, title, years of experience, etc.). I can't recall any recent replication of a study that explores the perceptions of current public relations majors (male and female) about gender differences in the public relations field.

This research will provide an excellent starting point for continued research into gender issues in the PR “industry” (that is, tertiary institutions, private

and government sectors). It should also provide an insight into future industry trends.

Methodology

Primarily, my research uses a mixed method drawing on phenomenism and positivism, undertaken primarily in the context of an action research approach, which McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003) defined as “practitioner-based [and] conducted by any practitioners who regard themselves as researchers” (p. 12).

I felt that an action research study (Reason 2001) was best suited to my situation and offered the best opportunity to address my research question. One reason for this was that because of my experience in PR I was sensitive to the topic under study, which is a distinct advantage in eliciting information and understanding the subtlety of individuals within the industry (Fernandez, Lehman and Underwood, 2002). The emphasis of an action research study is that researchers are actively involved with the situation or phenomenon being studied; ensuring that any knowledge developed in the investigation process is directly relevant to the issues (Robson, 2002). Dick (1993) also suggests that it is reasonable that there can be choices between action research and other paradigms, and, within action research, a choice of approaches. “When practitioners use action research it has the potential to increase the amount they learn consciously from their experience. The action research cycle can also be regarded as a learning cycle, with the educator Schön (1983, 1987, as cited in Dick, 1993) arguing strongly that systematic reflection is an effective way for practitioners to learn”. The reflection was carried out at all stages of the process. However, it occurred mostly during the research and interview phases, when interaction with subjects was a constant occurrence. Reflection involved several processes. Overall, it could also be described as personal evaluation. It included obtaining feedback on methodology, subject matter, and project structure from (local) industry associates, notably Dr Vince Hughes. Primarily, the

technique involved a constant referral back to material and obtaining industry feedback. On a wider scale this involved the use of regular e-mail and web-site updates to 63 practitioners who participated in the initial surveys. At all times, participants were encouraged to provide feedback.

The mixed methodology research approach is part phenomenalist, in that it has “taken place in natural ‘everyday’ settings. The leaning towards phenomenism is reflected in my roles as an observer of the phenomenon being studied (the increase of women in PR) and that I have clearly chosen what was being observed (student and practitioner numbers) as the subject. There is also an element of positivism, in that initial consistencies in patterns of female employment and university enrolment were noted through the use of quantitative data. There are also elements of positivism, in that it was “preceded by research questions, as in positivistic research,” Allison, et al. (1996). However, I have not ventured far down that track, as it is now generally accepted that positivist research criteria are not always appropriate in achieving social research outcomes (Klein and Myers, 1999).

The methodologies used, therefore are a mix of qualitative and quantitative, with the emphasis heavily on qualitative (focus groups and interviews), using a combination of:

- Historical (retrospective) – university enrolment data,
- Descriptive – surveys, case studies and trend studies,
- Phenomenological (qualitative) – focus groups and interviews, with myself as observer).

It has been suggested that qualitative research methods, specifically action research, can begin by being free from predetermined theories, with the theory developed in conjunction with or after the findings. I agree with this approach, as it facilitates enhanced creativity (so much a part of PR) and discovery of new insights (Dick, 1997; Jacob, 1988). Previously, qualitative approaches to research, including case studies, have been criticised for a lack of rigour and validity, especially in relation to the validation of data and

conclusions (Benbasat and Zmud 1999; Lee, 1994; Sarantakos, 1993). However, such criticisms are waning, mainly because contemporary researchers now accept that since all research methods are never completely flawless, no single method, quantitative or qualitative, is better or worse than the other (Balnaves and Caputi, 2001).

The learning journey

I have endeavoured, for the past several years, to align academic and work-related pursuits. I have no doubts that this research thesis, through the action research process, has added to this quest. Figure 3 (below) represents the various stages of what can best be described as my learning journey over the past five years. The academic process began as far back as 1984, when I enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts at the University of NSW. Due to work and family commitments, I never completed it. It wasn't until 2001, after returning from Army service in East Timor that I enrolled in a graduate certificate of communications. From there, the learning process developed to this stage.

Figure 3 (below) represents the various stages of what can best be described as my learning journey over (primarily) the past 22 years. It began in 1973 when I started work as a newspaper copy boy, then cadet journalist. The immediate 10 years certainly taught me many of the skills I have employed in this thesis (discipline, research, working to deadline, writing and editing) However, I do not consider the true academic journey began until 1984. Though interrupted by a young family, I have finally arrived at my destination.

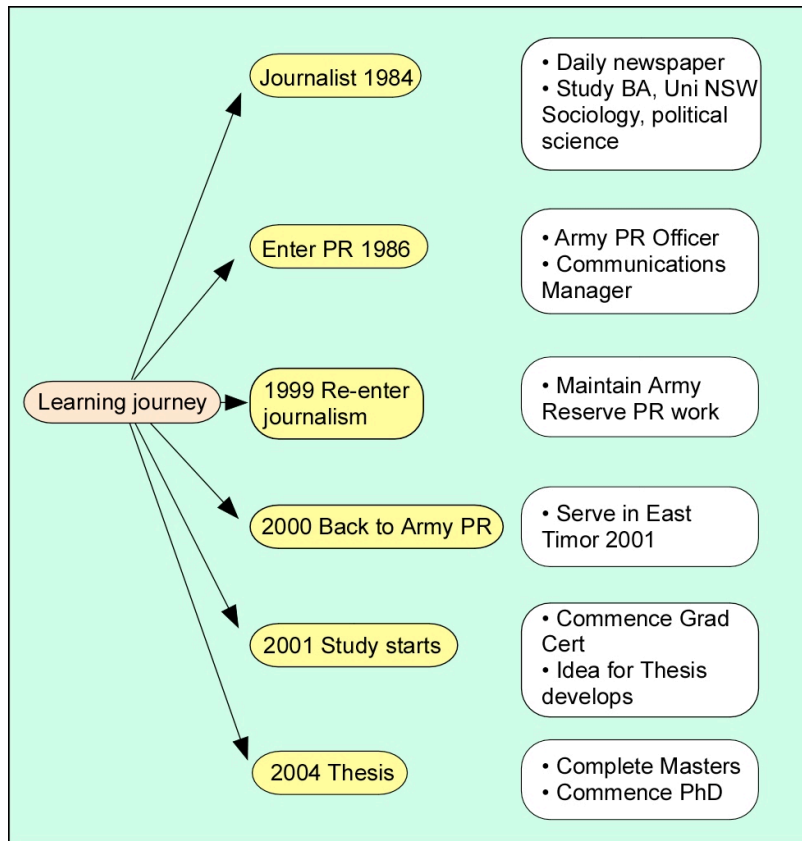


Figure 3: My learning journey.

A definite process occurred. From the initial realisation that there was a phenomenon came the question of what I wanted to achieve and development of the question (Figure 4). This in turn led to the three stages of research (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Process for developing the central question.

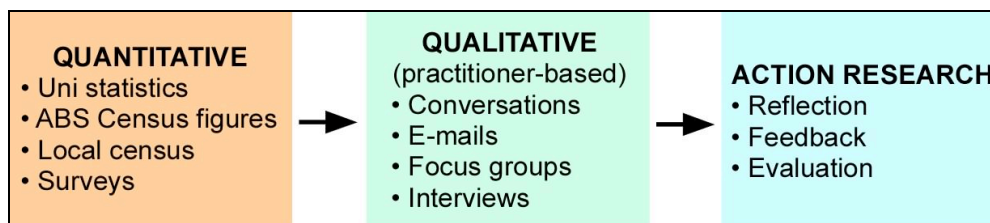


Figure 5: The second part of the learning journey and the process involved.

The initial quantitative approach was highly structured and led me to develop a qualitative (unstructured) approach involving interviews, e-mails, phone conversations, focus groups and ad-hoc conversations. The qualitative phase was unstructured insofar as free thought in interviews and focus groups was encouraged. The process itself was highly structured, particularly with regard to selecting subjects. For example, I approached mostly male PR practitioners and students, as I believe their opinions on gender imbalance affected them more than females, simply because they are the ones who are in short supply. In effect there have been two learning journeys: one in developing my question, and the second in developing the methodologies.

Initial data was obtained by undertaking a census of the population (the Perth PR industry). The population was initially stratified into two industry groups (university students/academics and practitioners). The university students were further stratified into second- and third-year students. First-year students were not selected, as it was considered they had not decided on PR as a Major. These groups were surveyed using non-probability quota sampling, which are of “considerable value in the early exploratory research ... before launching a major study” (Broom and Dozier, 1990).

Survey techniques used included: a census, interviews, questionnaires and observation (focus groups). Media used included the use of the World Wide

Web, e-mail, PDF surveys, paper surveys, telephone and in-person interviews and focus groups for all key groups identified, including academics, students and industry professionals.

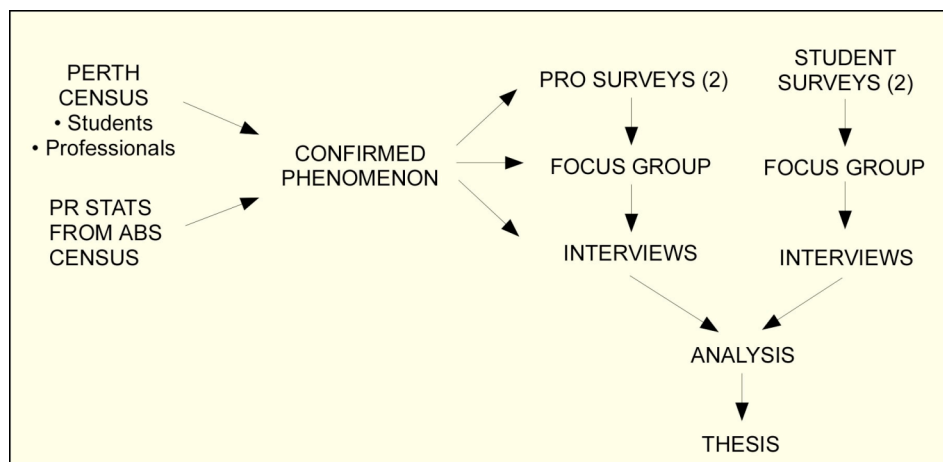


Figure 6: Investigative process of information-gathering.

In order to help gauge the views of professionals, and to compare those with students, two surveys were conducted among this group. The methodology for surveying PR Professionals is discussed in Section 3. The first survey was sent in August 2005. It contained a total of 26 questions. These were broken into two visibly indistinguishable sections. The first 14 questions were a combination of three categorical questions (gender and education), with the remainder mostly ordinal. They covered various aspects of PR work and general career aspirations. The second set of 12 questions was mostly ordinal and more gender-specific. The second part of the first survey, consisting of 12 questions, was structured to obtain basic information on practitioners' views, with a view to providing information for interviews and focus groups. In effect, this is a pilot study, as no research of this nature has been done before.

With most of the second set of questions, a definite response was deemed necessary. This is why many of the questions do not offer a neutral choice (for example, "don't know" or "neither"). This was meant to prevent respondents from being "fence-sitters". However, in line with the "rich" nature of the research, there was an option for an open-ended response in all

but two of the questions, giving practitioners a chance to express themselves. Generally, most respondents did not avail themselves of this opportunity.

Following the first professional survey, I deemed it necessary to conduct an on-line supplementary survey in order to cross-analyse results with themes developed in the student surveys – (a) areas of interest and (b) motivation to work in PR. These questions were not originally included in the first survey. They were:

- What aspects of PR interest you most?
- Name the types of industry that interest you most
- Reasons for working in PR vary. What was the main factor that motivated you to choose a PR career?
- If you had the chance to start your working life again, would you choose PR?

The quantitative analysis of the main survey was done through SPSS and Excel, with the qualitative aspects through a Mac-based program, HyperResearch. All responses were edited and imported as plain text files into the program, where a series of common themes, or concepts were developed through observation. Each respondent's answers were read again, and coding was applied, according to the recurring themes in answers. Once all responses were coded, the program was activated to produce a series of reports, which enabled the themes/concepts to be grouped for further analysis. The method I chose was to analyse each answer in the first group (questions 1–14), then each question in the second group, but also expand the process to include analysis of the main recurring themes, of which 30 were identified.

As no survey has been done of Australian PR students' attitudes toward their careers, and because mass communications students represent a female majority, it is important to know more about gender perceptions in the classroom, as these views may continue to influence students after they enter

the workforce. While it would have sufficed to only survey professionals, the future of the industry lies with today's students.

The first student survey was conducted in the second semester of 2005 (July–September) among students majoring in public relations at two WA universities offering a sequence or a degree in public relations. The four institutions participating were Edith Cowan University [ECU] (Perth), Curtin University (Perth), Murdoch (Perth) and Notre Dame (Fremantle).

The PR programs at the four universities are comprehensive, with all institutions offering PR Majors and specialist Degrees in PR. However, Edith Cowan, Curtin and Murdoch's programs are the most comprehensive. ECU's courses are part of the School of Creative Industries, and Curtin's and Murdoch's are part of the School of Business. PR at Murdoch and Notre Dame is offered as units as part of business, communications or marketing degrees, although some students do major in PR. Although this study was exploratory, using only Perth students, the results with regard to the predominance (statistically) of women in PR confirm my findings in surveys of private practice, both nationally and in Perth: that women outnumber men by more than three to one.

The student questionnaires were administered in public relations lectures and tutorials at the four selected universities, with the cooperation of faculty staff, over a period of four weeks, from 27 July to 30 August. A purposive sample produced 105 usable questionnaires. There were 34 unusable returns from Murdoch, due to students studying non-PR Majors.

The focus groups were largely aimed towards eliciting response from students, as I believed they would be more forthcoming with their opinions in a group situation. Professionals indicated that they were reluctant (in general) to participate in focus groups. In fact, of the 63 professionals who took part in the survey, only six indicated they could participate in a focus group, which was held in December 2005. For this reason, most professionals were interviewed. Organising focus groups was the most

difficult aspect of this study, largely because it depended on voluntary participation of (mostly) students. Originally intended to start in the first few weeks of the second semester of 2005, it became increasingly difficult to get at least four to five students from any university in the one place at the same time. Consequently (after dozens of e-mails) only one focus group could be arranged in semester 2 (at ECU on 19 October). The focus group was held at a university for practical reasons, allowing students to gather in a familiar location, and one they are used to accessing.

All focus groups were videotaped. I acted as moderator. Ethics approval was gained in the survey phase, by students and professionals earlier indicating on their return of their intention to participate. They were informed before the session that the focus group would be videotaped, that their involvement was voluntary and that no person (or venue) would be identified. Course coordinators were advised of the focus groups and, in some cases, attended. Interviews were stored on my personal computer at home and later transcribed. Files were converted to QuickTime movies and are included on disc at Annex S. As with the interviews, all focus group data was entered and coded in HyperResearch, Transcripts were analysed line-by-line and word-by-word to conceptualise the data in code. A coding paradigm emerged from the data that included core categories such as 'career choice', 'expressed Gender Role Stereotypes,' 'Career Plans,' and 'Family Influences'.

Being highly exploratory, the main purpose of these activities was to understand current thinking towards the phenomenon, to expand on people's reasons for undertaking PR and to see if this differed between males and females. In reality it produced many streams of thought, with opinions overall finding a high degree of common ground.

Students were mostly left to discuss various aspects and results of the survey, with an emphasis on the reasons for studying PR, and what attracted them to it. In reality this proved to be difficult. All groups took a while to "warm

up”. In interviews, professionals were, as one would expect, more expansive, and delved into their industry experience to prove the first insight into what makes PR practitioners “tick”.

All focus groups and interviews were transcribed into MS Word, edited, then imported into HyperResearch for analysis of common themes/concepts. This technique is known as content analysis, which is defined as “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages (Simpson, 2005). From these interviews, data was imported into Excel for graphing.

Interviews were conducted at a location of the subject’s choosing. This was either their workplace or a coffee shop. The relaxed setting was to help contribute to subjects providing as much information as possible. Subjects were asked whether the interview could be recorded, and informed that their identities would remain anonymous. Questions were worded to allow participants to determine what they would talk about within broad parameters. I used informal and familiar language, so that the interview appeared more as a friendly conversation than a formal interview. This is consistent with qualitative methodology. If the initial general questions did not elicit a full elaboration, I used additional (ad-libbed) questions. For instance, under the general question: what has PR at university been like for you as a guy? I could also ask: what percentage of the class is male? Or: do you socialise with female students? I was the only interviewer. This ensured consistency of questioning.

This industry focus group took place in the boardroom of Scarborough Surf Life Saving Club on Monday 5 December, 2005, from 5.30pm to 6.45pm. Participants were informed the session would be videotaped and voice-recorded. Identities would be anonymous. Originally six practitioners indicated they would attend. However, one had to withdraw for family reasons, and the other (a male) got the days mixed up. Four were senior female practitioners. HF is currently undertaking a PhD, lectures at university and has managed the communications section of WA Government

Departments; RW is a media relations specialist for a government agency; HL has worked for several government departments and was working in an international promotions role at the time; HM has several years' PR experience and is working for a quasi-government research/charitable organisation with a staff of 300. (A copy of the session – in .MOV and MP3 format – is included at Annex P on CD).

In both the focus groups and interviews, certain themes or concepts emerged. These were analysed for the number of times they were mentioned, but also for what people said about them. The transcripts were analysed two ways – quantitatively by counting the number of keywords and phrases, and qualitatively through the transcribing and editing process.

Following the first survey, interviews and focus groups, it was decided that more information was required on the thought processes and characteristics of students, to more fully consider if there are common personality characteristics among those who choose to study a PR career. In mid-March 2006, a second survey, also on second- and third-year students, was conducted, using items from the Bern Sex Role Inventory. This measures personality traits. I used it as a measure of gender-type personality traits, and not as a general measure of “masculinity” and/or “femininity”. These personality traits are most strongly associated with gender-stereotypes of men and women, and therefore well suited to the limited role I assigned it – measuring personality traits clusters of male and female PR students. The survey consisted of 12 questions (Annex E) and was distributed in lectures at the two major Perth universities which teach PR – Edith Cowan and Curtin. It was also made available on the Internet (via Web Monkey) to the 55 students who indicated their willingness to continue participation in my study. Of these, 30 responded.

Definitions

I would like to make three important definitions for the purpose of this Study.

1. Gender. I have settled on Aalito and Mills' (2002) definition of the term gender, being:

Sex is a biological classification of humans into women and men, whereas gender is a cultured knowledge that differentiates them. Thus, feminine and masculine genders consist of values and ideals that originate from culture. (p. 4)

I have used this definition because it considers that [Western] culture shapes our values and ideals. In the context of PR, a profession that shapes images and messages, this is particularly relevant. It is also in keeping with Kimmel (2004) who said:

Sex refers to our biological apparatus; gender refers to those meanings that are attached to those differences within a culture. Sex is male and female; gender is what it means to be a man or women. Or cultural and attitudinal characteristics distinctive to the sexes. (p. 3)

2. Imbalance. As noted in Hopkins, 2004 the Department of Employment, Education and Training (1990) suggested that equity in a university student population should be interpreted as meaning that the balance of the student population should reflect the composition of society as a whole. As this Study shows, the proportion of female to male PR students in Australia (and Perth) is more than 7:1. This clearly does not reflect the balance of society.

3. The PR industry. For the purposes of this study the "industry" is defined as any people practising PR at a either a scholarly or professional level. Specifically, this includes PR students (second-, third- and fourth-year), academics that teach PR, people who work as PR practitioners in any of the following areas: government, in-house, consultancies and non-profit organisations. I further narrowed down the definition of people working in PR to include only those who were directly involved in writing, editing, strategic planning. The term "industry" does not apply to people working for PR departments in "peripheral" areas such as video production and graphic design. The latter were excluded from my own Census, university statistics and interviews.

Delimitations of scope and key assumptions

There are clear boundaries associated with this research, mostly brought about by the limited availability of previous material. In fact, with the exception of some US statistical information and material used in the literature review, the overwhelming amount of information in this thesis is original. This is the first time detailed research into gender in the PR industry has been conducted in Australia. The National and State PR organisations had no membership data. As original research, there is nothing with which to compare it to, so it must be considered a benchmark study of the industry.

While I recognise that the ratio of women to men in the industry is quite different from women to men in industry management, I am primarily interested for the purpose of this Study in why people take up PR as a profession. For this reasons I am focusing on a broad approach.

Summary

The introduction outlines background to the thesis (that is, why it was undertaken). The thesis examines a topic that has not been directly studied and may have long-term implications for the profession, both in practice and at university.

It includes a brief history of the limited research undertaken on the subject. It demonstrates a gap in research, which itself provides a primary justification for the thesis, and provides a brief explanation of how it was undertaken, outlines the research questions, justification and methodology and limitations of the thesis.

Primarily, the thesis seeks to explain why there has been a steady increase in the number of women entering PR and why this male-managed industry is failing to attract males. This research was undertaken after continual observation of the phenomenon, and based on my experience within communications (journalism and PR) and at university, both as a student and tutor.

To achieve its objectives, the thesis takes a mixed methodology approach, which includes predominantly a qualitative, action-based style of research to examine the PR industry in Perth, Australia and internationally.

The research involved a census and surveys of the Perth PR industry (students and professionals), with 53 practitioners and almost 200 students participating. The questionnaires included a wide range of questions in a variety of formats, including multiple choice, Likert-style and open-ended. Surveys were followed by two focus groups and interviews with students and professionals.

Definitions of key terms and delimitations were also outlined.