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Researching emotional labour among Public Relations consultants in the UK: a social phenomenological approach

Abstract

'Social phenomenology' (Schütz, 1970; 1978) and its concept of the 'lifeworld' has received limited attention in the research methods literature. Few contemporary researchers, with the exception of Aspers (2006a; 2006b; 2009) and Svensson (2007) have developed procedures for undertaking social phenomenological research in occupational settings.

I developed a social phenomenological approach to explore, from an emotional labour perspective, how public relations (PR) consultants experienced, practised and understood their everyday interactions with clients, colleagues and journalists (Hochschild, 1983). If emotion is understood as a relational practice, the analysis of socially-constructed discourse is essential to access emotional meaning structures within occupational cultures such as public relations.

I adopted an iterative analytical process whereby I interviewed, twice, a sample of six participants. From transcript analysis I produced a 'description of practice' document for participants to check (Aspers, 2006a; 2009). 'Bracketing' (Husserl, 1963/1913) involved writing self-memos throughout the research process, and finally, a self-reflexive account. Thematic analysis of findings resulted in a rich understanding of emotion management and identity work in public relations.

This paper demonstrates that an iterative and reflexive analytical process that involves participants in co-creating social reality, is a compelling approach to understand the 'lifeworld' of social actors in occupational settings.

Key words: social phenomenology; emotional labour; public relations (PR).

Phenomenological research, stemming from the philosophy of Husserl (1963/1913), Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) has followed several distinctive paths, many of which are linked to *psychological* and *psychoanalytical* studies. Moreover, the research methods for pursuing phenomenological psychology are well-developed and documented (e.g. Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 2009) and applied in a range of settings. Much phenomenological literature is found in clinical, and particularly nursing settings where relationships between nurses and patients are investigated with reference to a central phenomenon, for example, the experiences of *nursing handover* in a hospital (Hopkinson, 2002); and *caring* (Staden, 1998). These studies focus on the 'essences' of lived experiences, 'essences' being one of the most common terms used in phenomenological research to describe the commonalities of shared experience (Patton, 1990).

Phenomenological approaches, however, may also be used to investigate social and cultural phenomena. Bentz and Shapiro (1998, p. 100) classify Alfred Schütz's 'social phenom-

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enology' as belonging to cultural-social phenomenology in that it is "an analysis of the essential structures of any lifeworld". Schütz (1970; 1978) gave prime focus to the concepts of the *lifeworld* (from Husserl's phenomenology); *understanding* (Weber's *verstehen*); and the taken-for-granted *natural attitude* in the everyday life experienced by social actors. Within the lifeworld, meanings are *intersubjectively* shared. The lifeworld has a practical orientation whereby social actors make sense of their own actions and others through a common *stock of knowledge* that is learned through different socialising sources – through teachers, parents and others. Socially-derived knowledge, is, moreover, unquestionably accepted and divided into spheres of 'knowledge about' (the what and how) and 'knowledge of acquaintance' (the 'what' scaling down to mere ignorance).

The lifeworld is structured by experienced *typifications* that form a common-sense, taken-for-granted understanding of objects, people, events, and acts which have a particular 'thematic relevancy' to the individual. This allows for the same object or thing to be interpreted differently within the lifeworld. Such typifications are bounded by time and space so that the lifeworld is stratified into "zones of actual, restorable and obtainable reach" – 'reach' referring to direct experience and perception (Schütz, 1978, p. 259). The social world therefore comprises people with whom we share experiences as well as those who, while co-existing in time, are outside spatial reach while still holding an influence over us (e.g. in a work setting this could be predecessors or former colleagues or managers).

Within much of the literature on interpretative research methodology, social phenomenology as articulated by Schütz receives limited attention, although Hughes and Sharrock (1997) and Holstein and Gubrium (1994) credit Schütz's influence in the development of the more empirically-driven ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967). As Holstein and Gubrium (1994) observe, while ethnomethodology shares similar characteristics with social phenomenology, it is not a mere extension of it. Ethnomethodology espoused by Garfinkel (1967), investigates the accomplishment of 'social order' (i.e. norms, rules and values) through "members' practical, everyday procedures" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994, p. 264).

In terms of analysis, the focus of ethnomethodology shifts away from Schütz' 'shared meanings' and definitions in the lifeworld to a "locally visible sense of order" or how accepted norms, rules and values are adhered to, or not (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994, p. 265). However, both social phenomenology and ethnomethodology emphasise the importance of meaning, language and discourse in social actors' everyday practice (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Therefore, in examining emotional labour among public relations (PR) consultants, my study took an interpretive philosophical stance and a social phenomenological approach specifically because my interest was in the lifeworld of PR consultants, including nuanced and contradictory accounts of experience in managing professional relationships.

A social phenomenological research procedure is explicated by Aspers (2006a; 2006b; 2009) and this was the primary procedure that I adopted. However, I necessarily drew on a range of sources to develop my approach. For example, both feminist (e.g. Hertz, 1997) and phenomenological interviewing share an interest in reciprocal, or collaborative relationships between the interviewer and participant so that reality is co-created to provide a coherent account of everyday life. Achieving a spirit of collaboration with my participants was of key concern in this study to establish a deep understanding of their experiences and knowledge of professional interactions.

1. Phenomenological Studies in Public Relations

Daymon and Holloway assert that the phenomenological approach is "almost never" (2002, p.146), used in public relations research, although in their second edition (Daymon & Holloway, 2010) they cite Yeomans' (2008) phenomenological study of employees' experience of organisational communication and learning in a healthcare setting. Health workers, as an occupational group, were found to attach their own, socially-situated meanings to the healthcare organisation's aspirations to become a 'learning organisation'.

Krider and Ross's 1997 feminist study is also an exception. The findings of this study, involving seven women participants within a public relations firm, exposed the conflicts between the ascribed and achieved roles of women public relations practitioners. This study was based on a broad aim which was to "gain a greater understanding of the daily work experiences of female public relations practitioners" (1997, p. 438). Participants' key concerns centred around the 'negotiation between roles' of being a woman, being a daughter and being a woman in public relations. Insofar as this study is approached from a feminist PR perspective, and uses the phenomenological approach to provide a detailed account of the 'essence' of women practitioners' experiences within a PR firm, it has some relevance to my own inquiry.

However, while Krider and Ross's article provides a coherent rationale for a phenomenological research perspective within the public relations literature, there is no attempt to interpret the findings within the broader context of feminist or gender studies. In other words, there is no theory against which these findings can be judged. This could be regarded as both a strength and weakness in the phenomenological method in that, in its purest form, phenomenology does not seek to explain phenomena but create understanding of the lived experience: the researcher does not seek to impose an objective analytical framework because this potentially separates analysis from the lived experience (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Although small-scale phenomenological studies do not seek to generalise beyond the experiences of those taking part, it would seem to be a missed opportunity to overlook other studies that illuminate human experience in similar ways and place these experiences within a broader realm of ideas related to social structure. Indeed Aspers (2009, p. 6), while acknowledging that 'first order constructs' (an account of actors' shared meaning structures of a phenomenon) can never be omitted and are important for grounding the study, the researcher's 'second-order constructs' (theoretical reference points) "must communicate in two directions", first, to the actors in the field, and second to the 'scientific community'. This was the approach I took in this study.

Svensson (2007) offers a useful social phenomenological explication of the intersubjective (shared) meanings in marketing work revealed through narrative analysis. The question "what is marketing work?" was pursued with the aim of "de-reifying" the textbook marketing management approach which Svensson critiques for constructing marketing work "beyond human life and social practice" (p. 272) and as a "set of neutral (in terms of ideologies and values) tools" (p. 273). Svensson argues that a "social phenomenological gaze" (p. 272) enables marketing work to be constructed as a social and discursive activity. To arrive at a social definition of marketing work, he used a case study approach. Interviews with agency and client teams and observations of their interactions during meetings enabled the accomplishment of marketing work to be examined during the development of a lawnmower campaign. The micro-level themes were then examined to identify the social structure "wherein and in relation to which micro practices take place" (p. 283), or as Svensson puts it "marketing work

is entangled within the tensions of different narratives within society" (p. 284). Thus, marketing work was interpreted as bounded within a "narrative archipelago" (p. 284) where the narratives of postmodernity, instrumental reason and neo-liberalism were navigated by marketing practitioners. Svensson's work readily demonstrates the use and value of social phenomenological research in that it not only reveals marketing work as social and discursive practices but it then enables these everyday micro practices to be "interdiscursively" (p. 283) re-examined for references to their socio-cultural context as an explanatory framework.

In his critique of social phenomenological approaches, Porter (2002) would appear to support Svensson's (and Aspers') approach in linking the "individual interactions and interpretations" of social actors to structure. Porter argues that subjectivist accounts alone are not enough and lead to "analytic superficiality". Subjective understandings must therefore be linked to the "structural positions within which those individuals are located" (Porter, 2002, p. 57).

My study, which examined emotional labour in the everyday experience of public relations consultants, drew on a social phenomenological approach that placed the 'lifeworld' at its centre by exploring the meaning structures or "web of meanings" (Aspers, 2009, p. 3) shared by actors in the lifeworld (Aspers, 2006a; Aspers, 2009; Svensson, 2007). Aspers' (2009) empirical phenomenology was used as a guide. His approach starts with a research question, follows up with a preliminary study and then identifies a theory as a scheme of reference.

The theory in my study is emotional labour theory (explained below) while drawing on the micro-level occupational context of public relations. Porter's (2002) point of integrating *structure* with the analysis of *subjective accounts* was addressed by relating my findings to macro-level discussions of the rise of the service sector in the UK, the role of public relations in promotional culture (see Miller & Dinan, 2000) and the processes of 'feminisation' and 'professionalisation' in public relations (see Fitch & Third, 2010).

2. Emotional Labour

Yeomans (2013) cites the work of Mann (2004), Mastracci, Newman and Guy (2006) and Smith and Gray (2000) whose studies suggest that those occupying semi-professional and professional occupations, such as public relations, fulfil the tenets of Hochschild's 'emotional labour'. Emotional labour requires face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public; workers managing their own emotions and displays of feelings to elicit a desired emotional response in other people; and finally, they allow the employer, through 'training and supervision to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 147).

Although the "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 57), or the social and cultural demands and expectations, of professionals are not as highly 'routinised' or 'scripted' (Leidner, 1993) as service workers in low-pay areas of the economy, there is nonetheless a pressure for professionals to adhere to the implicit feeling rules embedded in the professional ethics, norms and expectations of their own sphere of public interaction, including direct clients (Anleu & Mack, 2005; Bolton, 2005). Yeomans (2013) argues that such expectations may place demands on the professional to perform differential emotional tasks according to ascribed gender roles (Hochschild, 1983) while aligning their performances with the gendered (i.e. masculine) notion of 'a profession' (Bolton & Muzio, 2008). Thus, there is a tacit requirement for PR consultants to work on their own identities in performing relational work with clients, journalists,

colleagues and agency managers within the contexts of a 'professional project' and a 'feminised' profession (Fitch & Third, 2010) where women occupy the lower ranks and men the top of agency structures (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010; 2013).

Emotion in public relations is a neglected area of scholarship (Yeomans, 2007; 2010; 2013). Using emotional labour theory as a frame of reference (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 1983) my study paid attention to the relational work of PR practitioners who worked for regionally-based UK consulting firms, with the aim of exploring how PR consultants experienced and understood their everyday practices in managing professional relationships.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sampling

The research setting. The setting for the research was the PR consultancy environment, which is part of the professional services industry. It is a service "sold in a competitive market to clients who need to be convinced about its effectiveness…" (Pieczka, 2006, p. 304). Focusing on the experiences of PR consultants, as opposed to in-house practitioners (i.e. those employed in public, private or voluntary sector organisations), brings clarity to the study because winning and keeping clients is a key focus of PR consultants' work. Therefore an individual's capacity for fostering relationships takes on a different significance within consultancy work than perhaps it does in a corporate communications environment.

Consultancies, agencies and freelancers comprise an estimated 8,600 practitioners in the UK, of which 59% are women (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2005). PR consultants provide services to a wide range of businesses and public sector organisations. PR consultants operate both as strategic advisers to organisations and as 'technicians' (Dozier, 1992) who implement public relations plans. Eighty-eight per cent of PR consultants' activity is media relations (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010), securing maximum, appropriately-timed and targeted editorial coverage for a product, event, idea, or issue.

The sample for the study comprised public relations consultants working in two major cities for public relations services in the north of England.

Sample size and sample criteria. A total of six participants took part in the study, following the discussion in Creswell (2007, p. 126) in which samples ranging from three to 10 participants are recommended for phenomenological research. A range of sampling strategies is available in qualitative research; however in phenomenology, it is important to investigate a phenomenon among those who have experienced it. To arrive at a suitable sample for study, providing rich insights, sampling was based on key criteria and stratification. Participants were recruited on the basis of the following criteria:

– reflective of the largest age grouping of workers in the PR agency sector. According to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, this is 25-34 (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010). My participants were aged between 23 and 32.

– worked as PR consultants in a PR firm;

– provided services to clients and journalists in an account handling role; and

– were willing to participate in the research project during two phases of fieldwork, including diary-keeping during the first phase.

The sample was *stratified purposeful* to enable comparisons to be made between male and female participants. Four female and two male PR consultants were recruited. This sample only roughly reflected the gender division in the PR agency population (59% female; 41% male). As discussed below, identifying male participants who met the other criteria was a difficult task, due to the position of many male practitioners at senior levels in agencies.

Within an established PR consultancy, a client account team may comprise junior account executives (entry level), account executives, account managers, and account directors. Account directors are usually the 'team leaders', have the main responsibility for client contact, and generally have more seniority in the job.

Table 1: Attributes of participants in the study

Role	Male/female	Highest educational qualification	Location	Type of PR firm	Length of PR experience at the time of interview
Account director	M	MA degree	City A	Independent	10
Senior account manager	F	BA degree	City A	Independent	4
Senior account manager*	F	BA degree	City B	International network, part of World PR	5
Account manager	F	MA degree	City A	Independent	5
Senior account executive*	F	MA degree	City B	International network, part of World PR	2
Account manager	M	BA degree	City B	Independent	1

* these participants were part of the preliminary study

Table 1 demonstrates participants' attributes, including agency role, sex, highest educational qualification, location, type of PR firm and length of experience in PR at the time of the first interview. I have excluded parents' occupations from this table to protect anonymity; however parental occupations were examined as an indicator of social class.

As anticipated from previous experience, identifying suitable male participants became a challenge as many 'traditional' PR firms that I contacted were wholly populated by female PR consultants. 'Traditional' here refers to PR firms that have relationships with print and broadcast media. The issue of gender segregation in PR, where men occupy the top of agencies while the majority of those working in account handling roles are female, had been highlighted in surveys over several years (e.g. Chartered Institute of Public Relations, 2010; 2013). Interestingly, however, within the latter period of this study (2011), the newer agencies specialising in 'social media campaigns' were found to attract more male employees, and to some extent were regarded as male domains of PR expertise. After several months of unfruitful searching, I recruited a second male participant who worked for a social media PR consultancy.

3.2. Preliminary Study

Aspers' (2009) framework for social phenomenology research suggests conducting a preliminary study. My preliminary study involved two participants and this took place within a locally-based consultancy to test the interview and diary-keeping methods. The preliminary

study participants were sought through a contact who occupied a senior management role within his consultancy. Two female participants were recruited, 'Gill' and 'Alison' (these are pseudonyms). In-depth interviews were conducted with these participants to test both the interview schedule and the online diary completion. Follow-up interviews were then arranged to further explore some of the topics in the first interview transcripts as well as topics arising from the online diary entries. During my second visit, feedback was sought from the participants to ensure that the timing of the online diary was appropriate to their working day, and that the online format was relatively easy to respond to.

Problems and modifications arising from the preliminary study.

Interview setting. The setting for the preliminary study was the office premises of the agency. Interviews took place in the boardroom which, although quiet, served as a reminder to participants that other issues demanded their attention. Neither participant was particularly relaxed and indeed at times Gill showed concern that she was not giving me the 'right answer'. Despite reassurances that there were no 'right answers' and that the interview was exploratory and part of a preliminary study, Gill remained a little defensive and seemed uncomfortable with the wording of some of the questions. On reflection, Gill's preoccupation with being promoted, which became clear towards the end of the first interview and during the second interview, may well have caused her to think that one of her senior managers would see her interview transcripts.

Access to participants. In light of the comments above, my route to both participants, via their senior manager, could be regarded as unconducive to building trust. Therefore I decided to recruit further participants through academic colleagues, not through agency managers. While this approach constrained future sampling to Public Relations University programmes alumni, it did ensure that I was seen as an independent researcher and not a researcher 'sponsored' by management.

Preliminary interviews and diary keeping methods. While access to participants was one of the key issues identified in my preliminary study, there were also problems concerning the interview schedule and the online diary keeping. The interview schedule used in the preliminary study was generally found to be productive in engaging participants in discussing their journalist and client relations, although some questions required further explanation, such as those relating to 'culture' and 'management style'.

Additionally, questions concerning relationships with colleagues were not included in the initial schedule. For Gill, the absence of a question about colleagues was a critical omission: her preoccupation with promotion and internal relations meant that she was particularly concerned with how she presented herself to her bosses, peers and (junior) account teams. The interview schedule was subsequently modified to include a question on 'managing relations with colleagues'. On reflection this was an important modification, given that all participants were within the 23-32 age group, aspiring to higher levels in their career and regarded their bosses as significant players in their lifeworlds.

The online diaries, which were set up through the online survey tool SurveyMonkey, were successful in that they were submitted daily by both participants over a period of five days. However, the diary method was not very successful at eliciting emotional responses to the events described on each day. Both participants completed their diaries at the end of the day when they were filling out agency time-sheets. Agency time-sheets require the consultant to

account for time spent on their clients' work by describing the PR activity (e.g. 'phone call to journalist') and how long it took to complete. Consequently, the diaries were seen by participants as much the same activity: descriptive rather than reflective, to be completed in 10 minutes. Thus, the diary entries were more useful as a means of gaining emotional responses in the follow-up interview when participants were asked to reflect on their diary notes. Further to this experience, I simplified the wording of the online survey and reduced the number of questions to three key questions in preparation for further fieldwork.

Presenting myself and the project. Fontana and Frey (1994) raise the question of introducing yourself appropriately to the participants and others in the research setting. The potential problem here was not so much explaining myself as a researcher and academic (and perhaps, reassuringly to participants, as a former PR practitioner) but explaining the study in such a way that participants might see a beneficial outcome. 'Emotional labour' is an unfamiliar term and may carry negative associations: I had concerns that the use of the term 'emotion' within a professional setting could also be regarded negatively and produce defensive responses. Additionally, there is a great deal of popular discussion in PR practice around the concept of 'emotional intelligence' and I did not want my study to be confused with this concept. My focus was therefore on 'managing professional relationships in a PR consultancy'. This title still retained the relational focus, however emotions and feelings were not foregrounded and were instead embedded in the questioning on relational practice, especially in follow-up questions, for example: "How did it feel to sell-in a story to a journalist for the first time?"

3.3. Main Study: Data Collection

Phenomenological study primarily includes the collection of information through in-depth, long interviews of up to two hours (Creswell, 1998); although as shown in the work of Svensson (2007), other data sources might include non-participant observation and other qualitative methods. Interviews, however, were the primary information source for this study.

Interviews. The purpose of interviewing is to build up a trusting relationship with the participant in order to gain understanding (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The phenomenological interviewing approach highlights the need for a reciprocal, or collaborative relationship between the interviewer and the participant, so that the interview itself is viewed as a "social encounter" (Dingwall, 1997 cited in Fontana, 2003): here, the interview takes a dramaturgical turn in that impression management and role-playing take places on both sides. Reality is co-created to provide a coherent and cohesive account of everyday life. If the relationship between interviewer and participant is particularly successful, then it moves from "I-thou" to "we" (Seidman, 1991).

Semi-structured, face-to-face long interviews were held with six participants aged between 23 and 32 working as account handlers in PR agencies based in two major cities in the north of England. Initial interviews were undertaken between August 2008 and May 2011. A second, follow-up interview was also conducted with each participant. Follow-up interviews with three participants took place one year after the first interview had taken place; this was not ideal in continuing a spirit of collaboration but on the other hand it allowed for reflection given that all three participants had been promoted, moved jobs, or both.

The first long interview within this study was used to establish initial face-to-face contact, build rapport and to elicit descriptions of the 'lifeworld' from participants own perspec-

tives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). (See Interview schedule, Appendix B.) The setting for the interview varied between participants. Further to the preliminary study, which took place within an agency setting, participants were invited to choose a suitable place to be interviewed. Two chose a café in which to meet, a third chose her agency boardroom and a fourth chose a meeting room at my university.

Follow-up interviews of between 20 and 50 minutes with each participant enabled me to clarify and develop my understanding of the participant's perspective, as well as negotiate meanings, using the interview transcript and the online diary entries as the basis for subsequent conversations. Follow-up interviews were undoubtedly more successful where there was the opportunity for face-to-face discussion: out of the six follow-up interviews, three took place over the telephone, with one phone conversation lasting 50 minutes.

Approach to interviewing. In discussing feminist approaches to interviewing, Creswell suggests that sequential interviews entail "self-disclosure on the part of the researcher [which] fosters a sense of collaboration" (1998, p. 83). Within my study, self-disclosure became imperative, particularly over the telephone in order to maintain a friendly, conversational style, keep the momentum going and avoid awkward silences. I reported on the progress of my study, 'complained' about the problems of fitting it around my other work (this was an effort to explain the long gap between interviews in some cases), and talked about university and PR matters. Rapport was maintained by congratulating participants on their promotions and other achievements. I also reminded them of the importance of my topic and that interpersonal relations in PR were not discussed in the textbooks, which they would be familiar with as PR graduates. In the second face-to-face interview with Gill, my self-disclosure regarding my role as a manager meant that Gill appeared more able to reveal her own difficulties in displaying her frustrations in front of her team. I increasingly became aware, as the interviewing progressed over time, of performing relational practice that might be termed as 'emotional labour'. This theme was extended in my reflexive account. Writing from a feminist perspective, Hertz (1997) questions whether the distinction between the researcher and participant can be maintained where such a collaborative relationship is sought. To overcome this, the interviewer needs to be reflexive: "acknowledge who she is in the interview, what she brings it, and how the interview gets negotiated and constructed in the process" (Fontana, 2003, p. 58).

Self-reflective and reflexive account. Following Polkinghorne (1989), a self-reflective account was used both as preparation for the interviewing (see below) and in the analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Within phenomenology, this process is known as 'bracketing', or 'epoché'; terms derived from Husserl (1963/1913) that involve setting aside preconceptions and prejudices. Bracketing involves setting aside common-sense judgements and looking at a situation as if for the first time.

'Bracketing' in preparation for interviewing. As Moustakas (1994) acknowledges, this suspending of belief can prove a difficult task. For example, although I had never worked within a public relations agency, I worked in public relations for eight years and had been a public relations lecturer for 13 years. It was therefore inevitable that I had acquired some of the language, attitudes and tacit knowledge found within a PR agency environment. While this experience may be useful in gaining access to and building rapport with participants, assumptions are easily made if interactions and interpretations are not reflected upon and perhaps, valuable information overlooked. For example, my study participants referred to 'selling-in' stories to journalists. Although I knew what this process involved, I had not experienced it

myself (at least not on an everyday basis) and in terms of understanding emotional labour during social interactions, I felt this process needed further exploration. Questioning the process of 'selling-in' led to interesting revelations of the interactional 'games' used by PR consultants and journalists as well as the emotional demands of this process on the PR consultant where there was potentially a 'non-story' while at the same time an imperative to 'gain coverage' for the client.

My attitude towards PR consultancies was something I had to be aware of too: my experiences as a placement tutor (a 'placement' is a 48 week period of internship in the UK) had not always been positive. PR consultancy staff sometimes have different views about what constitutes a 'good experience' for a student, and viewed from an educator's perspective the relationship can seem exploitative of the student. The particular issue of unpaid internships, especially in public relations firms, has become a controversial topic in the national and trade press (e.g. Malik & Syal, 2011; Eleftheriou-Smith, 2013). Indeed, the exploitation of a (largely female) workforce in the public relations industry was the concern that initially drove me to research the topic of emotional labour. Therefore, consciously writing about these preconceptions and prejudices enables reflexivity in analysing and interpreting field notes and interview transcripts.

Participants' CVs and online diaries. Other research methods were considered that suited the phenomenological approach. Therefore as well as interviews, CVs (curricula vitae) were collected for this study to gain details of participants' educational backgrounds. This understanding of participants' biographies (or versions of biographies) relates to Schütz's emphasis on the lifeworld and how an individual finds him/herself in a particular situation at a given point in time (Wagner, 1970, p.15). In terms of participant socialisation, for example, I observed from the CVs that participants were graduates in the humanities, PR, media or psychology and some had undertaken postgraduate studies. By examining parents' occupations I observed that all were from middle-class backgrounds; therefore participants shared common cultural and social capitals (Edwards, 2008) which they were able to bring to their professional roles.

The benefits of the participant diary to a qualitative study are that detailed accounts of events and feelings as they are happening can be gathered; also "the charting of events over time allows the identification of patterns and changes in diarists' accounts of [organisational] processes" (Symon, 1998, p.114). What is clear from Symon's discussion on participant diaries, is that diaries need to be carefully designed and introduced to participants to be accepted. There also has to be a de-briefing session for the researcher to understand the process of keeping the diary from the diarist's viewpoint and for the diarist to feel that their diary-keeping is recognised as important. Diaries can be seen as too time-consuming and if the benefits are not made apparent, can easily be abandoned within the first week of diary completion. However, the commitment required from participants in keeping diaries and in being interviewed suggests that a deeper relationship between the researcher and participant could potentially be built leading to a fuller, more mutual understanding of the participant's 'lifeworld'.

It was anticipated in this study that participants might welcome diary-keeping as an opportunity to reflect on their professional careers and may even use the diary-keeping to contribute evidence of self-reflection for Chartered Practitioner status with the Chartered Institute of Public Relations[1]. However, not all members were CIPR members and professional status and recognition may have been sought by participants through other means.

So, while a modest commitment to diary keeping was displayed by the two preliminary study participants, this commitment appeared to be abandoned after the first day by three out of the four other participants. The abandonment of the diary took place despite my careful face-to-face briefing explaining the purpose of diary-keeping to the project as well as daily email reminders and prompts to complete the online form during the agreed research period. The following table demonstrates the frequency of online diary-keeping among the study participants:

Table 2: Frequency of participants' online diary completion

Participant	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5
1 = Gill	x	X	x	x	x
2 = Alison	x	X	x	x	x
3 = Emma	x				
4 = Pamela	x				
5 = John	x				
6 = Graham	x	X	x	x	x

Beyond the daily email reminders, I felt unable to further pursue the three participants who did not keep their diaries maintained. Pamela's diary entry referred to her return to work after a bout of swine flu' and "going through my 900 emails" on her first day back in the office. John's diary entry reflected on a crisis with a client, and Emma's diary entry reflected on a difficult situation whereby an account executive (who worked as her assistant) had resigned, which created problems for Emma in client handling. All three were feeling under pressure in their work and it seemed unreasonable to pursue them.

On reflection, the main problem I identified in gathering diary data was my lack of physical proximity. I was based in City B and my three non-completing participants were based in City A. Even though the diary-completion was due to take place online immediately after the first interview, I had not arranged a return visit soon enough to prompt my participants into action. Neither was I on the doorstep ready to drop by at any time as a casual visitor, which Symon (1998) observes can be an important factor in diary completion. Interestingly, the three City B participants all completed their five diary entries, albeit briefly. However, as discussed earlier, the diary entries should be regarded within the context of this study as enabling further discussion and reflection at the second interview, rather than being artefacts requiring discrete textual analysis.

3.4. Analysis of Interview Transcripts

The purpose of phenomenological research is to understand the lifeworld of participants in their own terms. Aspers (2009, p. 6), following a social phenomenological approach, recommends that in analysing transcripts, researchers should be looking for actors' meaning structures (what people mean when they use certain kinds of words); their own theories; what 'ideal types' they construct among themselves and "in what kind of practices they are involved". These 'first order constructs' should result in a detailed description of the lifeworld that it recognisable by the participants in the study (Aspers 2006a; 2009). 'Second order constructs' combine these descriptions with explanatory theory.

I analysed 12 interview transcripts in total: first, to identify the meaning structures for each participant to produce an individual account of practice; and second, to produce a collective, or intersubjective, account of managing professional relationships. As each participant's construction of practice could be regarded as a 'case study' in its own right it was important to safeguard this individual account. In examining the 'meaning of learning' among university students, Greasley and Ashworth (2007), for example, demonstrated how each student embodied a distinctive approach to learning. In my study, distinctiveness could be examined particularly in relation to how each participant constructed their identity as a PR professional.

The coding of transcripts was carried out using NVivo 9 software. This enables the researcher to code, categorise and thematise all texts, in this case interview transcripts and self-memos that were made during the analysis stage.

'First-order' themes. A total of 117 categories were identified from just under 400 coded items in total across 12 transcripts using NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software. Some categories were labelled by topic according to the subject matter and others analytically, meaning that I placed my own interpretation on a word or statement (Richards, 2005, p. 87-88). Other category labels arose *in vivo* directly from the texts analysed (e.g. "family atmosphere") to create a category using the words of participants. For ease of discussion, the first order concepts were clustered under more prosaic topic headings or themes, numbered from 1-5 below.
    1. Agency working culture
    2. Client relationships
    3. Journalist relationships
    4. PR selves
    5. Gender and relationships

4. Research Quality and Ethical Considerations in the Study

In qualitative research, positivist notions of validity and reliability are exchanged for interpretive concerns with validity or 'authenticity' of accounts or descriptions of a phenomenon; and reliability or 'trustworthiness' of the research process. Creswell (2007) recommends that two out of a possible eight validation strategies should be used for establishing 'accuracy'. Two validation or authenticity strategies were employed for this study: member checking and clarifying researcher bias.

4.1. Authenticity: Member Checking

'Authenticity', becomes an ethical issue, especially in feminist research, which seeks to equalise the balance of power between the researcher and the participant. For this reason alone, it is important that participants are able to share, comment on and negotiate the researcher's explanation of a phenomenon to enable an authentic picture to emerge. This process is known as 'member checking' which Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314) regard as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility".

Within this study, full, verbatim transcripts from the first interview were sent to each participant, together with a list of themes for further exploration in the second interview. Only

two participants (Participants 3 and 6) read the transcript. Participant 3 declared that the themes I had picked out from her interview transcript were "true" from her own reading. Participant 6 did not comment on the themes I had picked out for further questioning, although did reveal surprise at his own, halting conversational style. Other participants declared they did not have the time to read the transcripts.

Descriptions of themes or 'first order constructs' (Aspers, 2009) of the intersubjective (shared) understandings of managing professional relationships in PR were then sent back to interviewees for further checking. This second process is the most critical, since, at this point, participants can reflect on the accuracy of the account and choose to challenge it if, for them, it does not portray an accurate picture.

Participant responses to first-order constructs as 'a description of practice'. A 2,500 word 'description of practice' document, which was itself a product of 'typifications' as 'first-order constructs' was mailed in hard copy to five out of the six participants in this study, together with a return envelope. (The sixth participant could not be traced.) The 'description of practice' described how practitioners typically handled professional relationships. Three out of the five participants responded by email with brief, supportive comments agreeing with the description as being an accurate picture of agency life. One commented that in hindsight he would stress that agency culture and processes played an important role in shaping how relationships were managed, including whether clients were 'challenged' or not.

A fourth participant returned the hard copy of the document with hand-written annotations that indicated her drive to emphasise specific aspects of the job. One annotation de-emphasised the description of the activities involved in 'building rapport' (i.e. getting to know and socialising with the client), placing greater emphasis on adopting the mental attitude of 'empathising with the client' – an approach which may be regarded as an aspect of PR consultants' emotional labour.

A second annotation corrected one statement to assert that agency directors also expected female, not just male practitioners to 'challenge' clients. This point about challenging clients was interesting because it touched on sensibilities concerning the notion of 'professionalism' and offering what is termed PR counsel or advice to the client – as well as who is offering it. This, in turn, raises issues about the gendered notion of providing PR as a service that complies with clients' demands, or the more assertive notion of a profession where there is an expectation of challenge, as well as more subtle variations of these two opposing ideas or images. The perceptions of consumer public relations as 'fluffy' in the 'description of practice' prompted an irritated response from this participant, even though the perceptions had arisen directly from practitioners engaged in this type of PR (as opposed to perceptions from outside the public relations industry).

4.2. Authenticity in the Researcher's Own Voice: Acknowledging Position and Bias

A further validity issue and ethical consideration is authenticity in the researcher's own voice. As Gergen and Gergen explain, self-exposure through autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 1996) creates challenges in the reflexive act: the reader is asked to accept this as a "conscientious effort to 'tell the truth' about the making of the account" (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, p. 1028). Both Adkins (2002) and Skeggs (2002) warn against the dangers of the qualitative researcher rendering her participants and the field as 'fixed', while researchers may themselves be deemed (by their peers) as 'fixed' or unreflexive. In discussing scholarship concerning the

reflexive position of the researcher, Adkins (2002) infers that there may be an "ideal self of late modernity" that is found in a "vision of the self with a mobile relation to identity" (p. 346). Such 'mobility' implies that the researcher is able to overcome aspects of self-identity such as age and sex. The politics of reflexivity is visible, as Skeggs (2002, p. 365) suggests, when reflexivity becomes the tool of "experimental individualism" whereby race, gender, class etc. are used as resources that can be both 'attached' and 'detached' by the "resourceful self". At worst, in the quest for 'authority' in research practice, research participants may be used as resources for "self-formation and self-promotion" (p. 369). As a counter to this, Skeggs (2002, p. 369) calls for "accountability and responsibility", and in particular, to the research participants themselves.

Within my reflexive account, I was conscious of my part in the co-created nature of the interviews, including biases or prejudices. I did this through acknowledging my position as researcher and academic; as a woman in relation to other women and men in the study; as someone from an older generation as my participants; as a possible future contact or colleague in the professional sphere of PR; and as someone who was aware of the presence of 'others' who might judge me occupying both the academic and professional spheres. Kleinman (2002), citing her own research practice in the sociology of emotions, argues that Hochschild (1983) legitimised emotions in social research. Such 'legitimisation' has enabled researchers to reflexively access their feelings and attitudes throughout the research process to inform greater understanding of themselves and others. Throughout the research journey I discussed my feelings to enable me to reflect on and analyse the positions outlined above as well as reflect on my self-identity in the process of co-creation.

To assess the quality of a phenomenological study, Creswell (2007) lists several questions that might be used in evaluation. These are concerned with: demonstration of the author's understanding of the philosophical tenets of phenomenology; whether there is a clearly articulated phenomenon to study; whether the author uses recommended data analysis procedures for phenomenology; whether the overall essence of experience of the participants is conveyed (including the context in which it occurred); and whether the author is reflexive throughout the study. These questions were addressed in the study.

4.3. Reliability or 'Trustworthiness' in the Research Process

Reliability relates to faithful transcriptions of interview recordings, including "the trivial, but often crucial, pauses and overlaps" (Creswell, 2007, p. 209) and the use of multiple coders (using a codebook) to analyse transcript data to arrive at mutually-agreed codes which can then be collapsed into broader themes which are also subject to mutual agreement. While verbatim transcripts, including pauses and participants' hesitations and 're-edits' were achieved in this study, I had to rely on my own coding, interpretation and thematic development as sole author. In such circumstances, there needs to be a demonstrable 'audit trail' so that any internal and external assessor is able to view the data analysis process. This process is perhaps more "transparent and accountable" (Fielding, 2002, p. 162) using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software such as NVivo than using a manual approach. For reasons of space, the full set of tables showing the coding and 'first order' categories and themes are not included here. However, the table presented at Appendix C shows 40 'first order' categories or concepts (narrowed from 117) which are organised under three 'second order' themes to guide analysis and discussion.

4.4. Participants' Consent, Confidentiality and Anonymity

Ethical considerations of gaining participants' informed consent, while providing assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were part of the research process. At the beginning, a letter inviting participation outlined the central research focus (i.e. 'managing professional relationships in a PR consultancy'), the research process and possible implications/benefits of research findings (i.e. implications for PR education). The letter also provided assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Similar assurances were provided in a consent form and this provided the opportunity for participants to withdraw from the research process.

5. Conclusions and Limitations

The research project described and critically discussed in this paper is a small-scale, in-depth qualitative study which examined the lifeworld of six PR consultants working in the northern region of England. As such, the study cannot make claims beyond these boundaries except in relation to existing theory, which in this study drew on literature in emotional labour, gender studies and public relations. It is not difficult to imagine that a similar study conducted in a large agency in a major capital city may well reveal subtly different meaning structures among PR consultants, which may in turn suggest a different emphasis in the emotional labour performed within the job – for example, identity work could be revealed as much more important within a highly competitive milieu. The researcher's own influence, including their 'stocks of knowledge' (Schütz, 1970; 1978) will also have a bearing on the co-creation process and result. In terms of the research theory and methods adopted, the social phenomenological approach is relatively flexible and could well include a greater variety of methods, including focus groups, or observation, to triangulate sources of data, another one of Creswell's (2007) validity strategies. However, such possibilities for a similar type of inquiry should not invalidate the research design outlined in this paper which is deemed appropriate for an exploratory study. My use of an iterative or cyclical process of interviewing and analysis over a period of time between researcher and participant in the co-creation of meaning is a compelling feature of the social phenomenological approach developed in this study.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule for Long Interview 'Managing Professional Relationships in Public Relations'

1. Your background
Q. Tell me more about your background before you started work. [Education/family]

2. Career history
Q. Describe your career path and how you came to do the job you are doing.

3. Motivation for working in PR consultancy
Q. What drew you to public relations consultancy work?

4. Your workplace and colleagues
Q. What words would you use to describe the company you work for in terms of its culture and management style?
SQ. Can you give me an example of that?
Q. Describe the typical interactions you have with your line manager/team/colleagues
SQ. When do you know that you have done a good job as far as your manager is concerned? Why? Give me an example.
SQ. When do you know that you could have done a better job as far as your manager is concerned? Why? Give me an example.
SQ. How do you respond to your manager if there is a problem?
Q. How do you respond to your team members if there is a problem?
SQ. How does that make you feel?
Q. When does being a woman/man influence the way in which you interact with your manager/team leader?
SQ Do you think you interact differently than any of your colleagues?

5. Clients
Q. How would you characterize the clients you work with?
Q. Tell me about the kind of services you provide to your clients.
Q. Describe the typical interactions you have with your clients.
Q. Give me an example of a good client/difficult client?
SQ How do you deal with your ("good"/"difficult") clients?
SQ. How do you feel when a (difficult) client asks you to do that?
SQ. How do you feel when a (good) client asks you to do that?
SQ. What goes through your mind when a client doesn't like/likes the service you provide?
SQ. How do you handle the client if there is a problem?
SQ. How does that make you feel?
Q. When does being a woman/man influence the way in which you interact with clients?
SQ. Can you give me an example of that?

6. Journalists
Q. How would you characterize the journalists you deal with?
Q. Tell me about the types of interaction you have with journalists
Q. Tell me how you deal with ("friendly"/"difficult") journalists?
S.Q. How do you feel when (difficult) journalist talks to you like that?
S.Q. How do you feel when (friendly) journalist talks to you like that?

SQ. What goes through your mind when a journalist doesn't like the service/response you provide?

SQ. How do you handle the journalist if there is a problem?

SQ. How does that make you feel?

Q. When does being woman/man influence the way in which you interact with journalists?

7. Being professional

Q. What does it mean to you to be professional in public relations?

SQ. Tell me more about how you view this [relationship management role of the PR consultant?]

Q. What do you like about your job?

Q. What do you dislike about your job?

SQ. How do you handle what you dislike?

Q. How far does working in consultancy allow you to be 'yourself'?

SQ. When do you feel you can most express 'yourself'?

SQ. Do you think this is true for your colleagues?

8. Finally, can you think of situation where you have consciously changed your feelings or attitude towards a client, a journalist or a colleague in order to maintain a good relationship?

Appendix B: Developing second-order themes from first-order concepts

First order concepts	Second-order themes
Competitive environment "Family atmosphere" Open plan office Agency bosses' management style Typical account handling structure Traditional PR vs social media Client business sectors Client demands Good client relationship Client preference for a man or a woman Journalist demands Good journalist relationship Gender not important to journalists Image of PR industry Women's perceptions of men in agencies	1. Negotiating understandings of PR within the PR agency office environment
Managing as a male Family background Educational background Career progress Agency motivation Training and mentoring What to wear in the office Work and personal life Being a manager Being the "middle man" Being yourself "Different personalities" Being professional	2. What it means to be a PR agency professional
"Adapting yourself" Bringing in new business "Brainstorming" Empathising with the client "Managing clients' expectations" Colleague relationships Managing bosses and "managing upwards" Managing juniors – keeping it professional Selling in and pitching to journalists Enjoyment and taking pride in agency work Embarrassment, shame and hurt pride Disappointment, frustration and anger with clients and journalists	3. Performance and emotions in PR agency interactions

* The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) is the oldest member organisation for public relations practitioners in the UK. It was founded in 1948 as the Institute of Public Relations and received a Royal Charter in 2005 in recognition of its leading role as a professional body.