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SEX, SEXUALITY, AND SEXISM: A GENERATIONAL COMPARISON OF WOMEN'S FREELANCE CAREER EXPERIENCES IN THE UK PUBLIC RELATIONS INDUSTRY
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Abstract

This chapter studies women's freelance career experiences in PR from the 1990s to present. It employs a collaborative Café Delphi approach blending two interactive and iterative data collection methods: World Café and Delphi. A 'desire for freedom' is identified from communication clusters involving female freelance PR practitioners (across a generational age range). Learnings from collective discoveries include a paradox of freedom and pressure, and a conundrum in helping clients to think strategically. This harvest resembles a community of practice discussing professional identities and gendered experiences. Across age groupings similarities are evident and an intergenerational view of society and PR practice is proposed. Variance from a theme of sexism in an earlier study underlines significance of freedom and empowerment (aligned with a theme of sexuality) in women's freelance careers. The researchers' original Delphi reflections present gathering/ungathering commentaries in an outro. These surface opportunities and connections for spinstorying, manifestations of freedom, intergenerational 'co-existence', unexpected discoveries, researcher positionality, and 'talking back' as revealing what truly matters.

KEYWORDS

1. Gender
2. Freelancing
3. Careers
4. Talking Back
5. World Café

Introduction

This chapter studies women's freelance career experiences in public relations (PR) from the 1990s to the present through an oral tradition of conversation. Themes of sex, sexuality, and sexism are employed in a collaborative historical Café Delphi method and aligned with equality, empowerment, and attitudes in society and the workplace (Yaxley & Bowman, 2024). A sociology of generations (Mannheim, 1952) is applied to make sense of change and continuity across age groupings within the expanding and increasingly powerful field of PR in the UK (Bowman & Yaxley, 2023).

Women's ability to undertake freelance PR work at different life stages shows how "professionals are never fully made but continue to *become* throughout their careers, necessitating pro/re-active and ironical thinking" (Bowman & Yaxley, 2021, n.p.). PR became increasingly feminised in the 1990s, a decade that also stimulated opportunities for freelance work (Yaxley, 2017). However, there is limited visibility of women's freelance experiences and how career patterns have been replicated or fractured over the past three decades – "the duration of a generation" (Mannheim, 1952, p.278).

Studies by Bridgen (2023) and others suggest women often are pushed into freelance work when corporate cultures make combining work with caring responsibilities untenable. Bridgen (2023) also reports women leave PR either because they found the work dull and trivial, or time constraints caused by caring responsibilities forced them into roles that were unfulfilling.

Mannheim's generational theory (Pilcher, 1994) supports exploration of intersections between gender and age (Ford, Atkinson, Harding & Collinson, 2020). Criticism by female PR practitioners of the next generation has been noted, for instance by Green (2024), L'Etang (2015), Yaxley (2013) and Yeomans (2019). However, these studies do not relate inter-generational conflict to self-employment or the move towards freelance careers. Indeed, more generally, there has been little academic analysis of the perspectives and everyday experiences of female freelance PR practitioners.

Careers in PR are conceived mainly as a hierarchy of technical and managerial roles (Broom & Dozier, 1986), supporting the discipline's ideal position as a "strategic management function" (Grunig, 2006, p.151). This favours linear male mobility (Payne & Abbott, 2005) within a bureaucratic career that has questionable relevance beyond large organisations in the mid-twentieth century (Kantar, 1989). Indeed, Daugherty (2014) observes a male-orientated perspective in career progression research focussed on corporate hierarchies, income, and wealth accumulation. In PR, men were traditionally viewed as more suitable for management roles often due to their dominant presence (Creedon, 1991; Wrigley, 2002). This rigid view of success commonly leaves women to progress their careers elsewhere (Bridgen, 2023).

Despite women accounting for two-thirds of those working in PR today, industry research still finds a "discrepancy between gender and seniority" (CIPR 2022, p.8) alongside gendered pay differentials. Although 13% of respondents in this study were independent practitioners, it lacks data on their

gender or career pathways. A similar omission is evident in a 2021 CIPR report on impact of the pandemic, which suggests 7% of practitioners forced to change jobs became self-employed.

The approach taken in this chapter to investigate women's freelance PR career experiences has three parts. First, we detail a collaborative historical Café Delphi method that blends two interactive and iterative data collection techniques. Part two provides analysis of women's conversations that matter (Brown, 2005), captured in a virtual World Café as topic threads and collective learnings. In part three, our expert reflection in the spirit of a Delphi study is gathered and ungathered in a series of asynchronous threaded commentaries. Finally, we offer a concluding perspective.

Part 1: Approaches to Research and Analysis

Our approach to research freelance careers sought to capture women's experiences through an oral tradition of conversation. We applied a sociology of generations (Mannheim, 1952; Pilcher, 1994) to study freelance work in PR from the 1990s to present, and to use this approach to make sense of possible change and continuity across age groupings.

The research draws on a collaborative historical Café Delphi method developed to explore women's careers and contributions in the expanding and increasingly powerful field of PR in the UK during the 1990s (Bowman & Yaxley, 2023). It adopts that study's themes of sex, sexuality, and sexism, three aligned gender focus concepts, and nine sense-making indicator words (Table 1) within the analysis.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

A collaborative approach has ethical relevance as power and authority are shared with participants rather than being the preserve of researchers. Equitable relationships help to unearth deeper and less predictable insights through "creative remixing of memories" (Brockmeier, 2015, p.35) that occurs in "informal conversational encounters" (Yaxley, 2024, p.215).

Café Delphi blends two interactive and iterative data collection techniques: World Café and Delphi.

1. *World Café*. Completion of the World Café Hosting Fundamentals Learning Program by one of the researchers allowed full exploration of this technique as an "unmethod" of improvisational, co-produced qualitative research (Monforte, Netherway & Smith, 2023, p.398). The World Café session was hosted online using Blackboard Class Collaborate (virtual classroom) and Google Jamboard (cloud-based whiteboard). Table 2 presents details of the World Café research process.
2. *Delphi*. Subsequently as researchers we engaged in expert reflection in the spirit of a Delphi study to harvest insights from the *World Café*. Microsoft OneDrive was used to create a series of asynchronous threaded commentaries. Together these serve as an outro in this chapter (Part 3), with gatherings of key thoughts and responses relating to our World Café experiences alongside similar ungatherings that provide critical appraisals and replies to explore limitations.

Research participants are women with experience of working as freelance PR practitioners drawn from our personal and professional networks. Twelve women were recruited across an age range that mirrors a 30-year biological generational timeline (Costanza, Rudolph & Zacher, 2023).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Analysis of the World Café data gathering involved two approaches:

1. Groupings into topics from content of 'sticky' notes made in the virtual breakout rooms.
2. Learnings taken from listening to the recording and reading transcripts of the final harvest.

This analysis of women's conversations that matter (Brown, 2005) provides a platform to discover spinstorying (Langellier & Peterson, 1992) and recognises bell hooks' notion of talking back (1989) a point raised in the researcher outro discussions that occurred from the Delphi. These ways in which women represent and reveal themselves are useful as "making and unmaking sense-making processes so that transformational possibilities may emerge" (Fitch, James & Motion, 2016, p.280).

Part 2: World Café Harvest – Conversations that Matter

Topic threads from conversation clusters

Three groups of four women were formed into conversation clusters for three rounds of questions. Between each round clusters were reformed with one woman staying on each 'table' and the others moved around to blend and develop thinking. Individual and collective comments were made on virtual 'tablecloths' using 'sticky' notes. Movement across the rounds created collaborative threads of conversation that tie together meaning, resonance, and expectations.

One overarching topic emerged in analysis of notes from the discursive and independently driven conversation clusters. The 'desire for freedom' appears in threads about taking control of work and life balance. It is illustrated in example sentences constructed from comments in separate sticky notes.

Topic summary: Freedom

- Freelancing allowed "greater control over the schedule", making life "easier to juggle" so women can "pursue new ambitions".
- Freelancing enabled "control of life, career, and choices" offering an "escape from arbitrary job titles/salary boxes".
- Freelancing provided "more variety" and a "chance to be more strategic/pro-active" with the "freedom to try different things, on your own terms".
- Freelancing "gave the freedom and flexibility to build a life and take on projects that you wouldn't be able to in the workplace, making use of complementary skills".

Again, freedom is revealed in the attraction of greater flexibility and diversity of work:

Topic summary: Flexibility and diversity

- Freelancing allowed "grasping of varied opportunities" reflecting the "hybrid nature of the work" that offered "flexibility in working arrangements".
- Freelancing enabled women to become "critical friends to companies" as well as "building a life in the shape you like" with "flexibility especially for childcare" that meant better "juggling of family and career".
- Freelancing provided the opportunity to contribute "to big picture thinking" and "being a sounding board and testing ideas".

Yet, other comments show recognition that freedom and the reality of freelancing has its challenges:

Topic summary: Challenges

- Freelancing meant "peaks and troughs of work" that created "cash flow concerns" and "the need for trust" when at times it felt "isolating".
- Freelancing brought "concerns about staying relevant in a changing industry" and "being ahead of game" as well as the "challenges of differentiation from other freelancers and

personal branding”.

- Freelancing reflected “mixed feelings but excitement about future opportunities” and a “sense of contentment eventually”.

Although recording some downsides of freelance work in PR, notes from the conversation clusters indicate overall that their career choice empowered these women with a sense of agency. This was reflected in both a pull towards opportunities a freelance career might offer and a push away from work that was experienced as unsatisfactory, unfulfilling, sometimes trivial, and often uninspiring. As the main topic thread, a desire for freedom appears to support the observation of Grossman and Chester (2013) that women pay greater attention than men to the interpersonal side of work so potentially are more affected in employed roles by poor treatment from managers.

Learnings from the final harvest

Contributions from all participants and the researchers unfolded in a final harvest of discoveries through conversation and listening together. This fruitful discussion facilitated emergence of deeper perspectives and insights, allowing for further analysis.

I would say the word freedom strongly resonates with some of the conversations that I was in...and so freedom in terms of having agency over what you decide to do for a career, freedom from potentially a difficult corporate culture in some circumstances.

Daugherty (2014) hypothesised that women tend to be team players and alliance-builders, often motivated to create their own businesses, and bypass the glass ceiling to achieve fulfilment and life balance. Indeed, Aldoory, Jiang, Toth, and Sha (2008) found PR practitioners feel satisfaction and empowerment when they leave work situations and begin freelancing or working from home. However, Patterson and Mavin (2009) suggest the time and effort that women put into building a business frequently results in them spending longer away from their families. This paradox of freedom and pressure arose in the harvest discussion about working as a freelance practitioner.

So, it's a really difficult situation. We all do it for the freedom, but there are all the other sides of that and the worry that goes with it and how we are going to survive it. But I still wouldn't look back on that and say, I don't want that freedom.

Other cognitive pressures were evident in talk about keeping competencies up to date:

I think there is a lot of pressure on you as a freelancer to sort of know everything.

We all know as a freelancer, we put clients first, or family first, so development slips.

Nevertheless, a collective view emerged that freelancers need to make time – and allocate budget – to invest in professional development, another form of freedom:

Rather than going 'cap in hand to somebody else' freelancing means 'I don't need to get anyone else to sign off on my training and development [...] that's part of that freedom and liberation.'

An additional conundrum played out when discussing the contributions of female freelance PR practitioners. This concerns the ability to help clients take a strategic perspective:

We were saying that one of the big challenges we have is often we'll work on technical projects when someone says can you whip up a press release and get me some coverage. Or

can you do a newsletter or some posts. But one of our roles is to help them see the bigger picture. It's about their long-term reputation, getting in touch with their bigger goals.

Notably the final harvest offered an opportunity for the women to engage as a community of practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) or professional support network (Mathews, 1998). For example, there was a lively conversation around the term freelancer, rather than consultant or associate:

That is one of my biggest bugbears, being known as a freelancer. I like the term independent practitioner, as behind me I have a raft of other small business people I can call on.

Experiences were shared about freelance contract work for organisations that require the appearance of being an employee (such as using a bespoke email address). Similar 'dual identity' freelance work involves interim and fractional employment. Other practice-based conversations focused on how freelancers acquire work. A thread including the comment "*I certainly feel unless I can do 95% of what is asked, then I wouldn't go for the work*" debated whether only women feel this level of anxiety and lack of confidence.

The possibility of gendered differences in freelance experiences emerged several times. For example, it was queried whether freelance was a gendered term, with suggestions that men are more likely to identify as independent consultants. Likewise, an engaging exchange considered whether female freelancers should establish a business brand or whether their name constitutes the brand. Most favoured the personal choice. As one woman said: "*we are honest, we go by who we are, I don't know if it is a female thing as male colleagues seem to want to use an agency style name or have aspirations to establish an agency*". We sensed the women preferred being a sole practitioner working collaboratively with others, summarised as "*for me growth is sort of me and my practice*".

Two comments underline the community learning nature of the final harvest:

It's so inspiring to see so many amazing women doing what I do throughout the stages of their career and still loving it and expanding and doing different things and making sure it works for them.

No matter what, I will adapt to the challenges; freelancing opens so many doors to build a unique life for yourself and I think that's great.

Learnings from the final harvest confirm resonance of the 'desire for freedom' identified as the overarching topic in conversation cluster notes. However, deeper discussion surfaced a paradox of freedom and pressure, alongside a conundrum in helping clients to think strategically whilst also undertaking tactical work. Interestingly, the harvest evolved to resemble a community of practice or professional support network. This was when the women talked about professional identity, confidence and branding and where gendered differences between female and male freelancer practitioners were proposed.

Exploring the intersection between gender and age, similarity rather than difference in perspectives was evident across age groupings and career length. Therefore, we suggest aspects of change and continuity of experience reflect an intergenerational view of society – and PR itself as a maturing field – from the 1990s to present.

Contrasting this research with an exploration of women's careers in PR during the 1990s (Bowman & Yaxley, 2023; Yaxley & Bowman, 2024) shows clear variance. The previous study found a prominent theme of sexism with workplace and societal attitudes exerting power over female choices

(neutralising or liberating them). The new research emphasises the significant meaning of freedom for women undertaking freelance careers in PR.

In the 3S framework (Table 2) freedom is the core sense-making indicator word associated with empowerment and aligned with the theme of sexuality (including identity). Our observation that female freelance PR practitioners are empowered with a sense of agency is seen in two positive indicator words: self-efficacy (intersection of sex and sexuality) and liberated (intersection of sexism and sexuality). Indeed, this study supports related premises, a mechanism used by Yaxley and Bowman (2024) to understand individual and collective experiences:

- Women are free to be empowered [Empowerment]
- Equal treatment requires self-efficacy [Equality/Empowerment]
- Women are liberated by positive attitudes [Attitudes/Empowerment]

In the initial study, these “starting information statements” (Trillas, D’Onofrio & Portmann, 2019, p.8) were moderated by “paradoxical tensions from misaligned intersections of power” (Yaxley & Bowman, 2024, p.24). Conversely, what was salient in this study was the women’s enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit, their emphasis of credentials, education and professional development, and expectation of being able to achieve success and a successful career in a way that mattered to them.

Part 3: Delphi Reflections – Gathering and Ungathering Outro

This outro is written reflexively in the spirit of a Delphi study to harvest our researcher insights about the World Café. It is presented as a series of asynchronous threaded commentaries gathering key thoughts and responses, before ungathering with critical appraisal and replies to explore limitations. Inspired by Fitch, James and Motion (2016) we use “an anecdotal, conversational structure” (p.280) that extends the work of Michael (2012). We amplify the feminist relevancy of anecdotes in sense-making by using the full names of those whose work we discuss. This recognises bell hooks’ notion of talking back (1989), speaking as named equals in reflecting on our joint endeavour.

Gatherings

Commentary 1. Making space for spinstorying in conversations

Sarah: The whole process reminded me of the work of Lynn Abrams (2019) who stressed the importance of creating an environment where women can speak for themselves, a space so women can be the heroes in their own stories – liberating feminist oral history so that it becomes feminist encounters, liberating voices and experiences free from patriarchal structures and language.

The way the conversations swayed and moved between themes with women telling, re-telling, and sharing stories I could see spinstorying – a term from Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson (1992) – reflecting ways women interact triggering memories in each other that evolve into a collective sharing of experiences. I think too it prompted more areas for us to explore with further research that we wouldn’t have picked up in other ways.

Heather: Yes, there’s an emergent, self-organising aspect of conversations within World Café that Juanita Brown (2005) says allows for “the arrival of serendipitous discoveries, new patterns of meaning’ and ‘the magic of collective understanding and insight”. For me, it offers a deeply feminine orientation in support of collaborative meaning-making with an emphasis on cross-pollination and everyone’s voice being heard – in a respectful and appreciative way.

I recognise an unfolding of narrative as typically found in informal conversation that meanders, flows, surfaces, and weaves 'knowing-with' others. Pauses for reflection and remembering nurture the sense of a lived experience. Assimilation comes through informal remixing and relating to reveal new thoughts and possibilities in a creative way. Totally agree that the process reveals and offers potential for additional research.

Liz: The beauty of a female-only forum is that women talk about what they find interesting or relevant and aren't pushed into discussing things from a male or corporate agenda. The prompts from others about moments in their freelance lives helped women remember and recount anecdotes and histories which otherwise would have been hidden.

Commentary 2. Many ways to manifest freedom

Liz: I noticed that many conversations in the gathering came back to 'freedom' - although freedom manifested itself in lots of different ways. There was freedom to work in a way that fitted in with a lifestyle which didn't lend itself to freedom (typically bringing up children) but also freedom was expressed in more abstract ways – for instance freedom in terms of having agency over what you decide to do for a career, or freedom from a difficult corporate culture. One freelancer expressed freedom as not having to have training days 'signed off.' Interestingly the women all agreed that it was the idea of freedom –in its many forms – that brought them into freelance work.

Sarah: I agree. For me the discussions connected freedom to empowerment and self-efficacy. There was a sense that women actively took a decision to change – even though a few people mentioned the move to freelance was triggered by unsatisfactory workplace experiences so some women may have felt a push rather than a pull into freelancing, but it still felt that for women it was a proactive rather than a passive decision.

Liz: Although freedom can also be something of a double-edged sword. While you do have the freedom to pursue your own destiny that itself can reduce freedom. As we've discussed above, Nicola Patterson and Sharon Mavin (2009) suggest that the physical and mental time and effort women spend building their businesses frequently led to them spending longer away from family than before. So, you may be spending more time doing what you want (freedom) but potentially other freedoms have to be temporarily stalled.

Sarah: There was that uncertainty coming through and the negativity of terminology, with 'freelancing' suggesting a stop gap when in fact 'independent practitioner' was a better call. The discussions reflected the entrepreneurial spirit despite worries about cash flow, or it being isolating. This mirrors concerns of setting up any new business.

Liz: That's right. It was noted by our freelancers that freedom also brings worry – about the future and about financial issues. But as one freelancer said: *"I still wouldn't look back and say, I don't want that freedom"*. The love and fear of freedom and the isolation of freelance work was also noted by Raluca Moise and Anca Anton who wrote of freelancers' "constant oscillation between independence and precarity, the lack of work cultures and the vital reliance on online and digital platforms" (2022, p. 40).

Sarah: Our women spent a long time talking about how to name their business. As freedom brings the ability to give your business a name. I thought that interesting as it relates to identity. How does the business relate to the personal and our women really vexed over that identity once freedom had been established?

Liz: That was fascinating. We found women in our discussion didn't give their business a name, preferring to be known by their own name. There was also discussion about what they 'called' themselves. A freelance PR? A consultant? I realised that just how you describe yourself is gendered. Very few men, it appears, call themselves 'freelancers', preferring the term 'consultant.' I'd never considered that.

I remember when I worked in consultancy in the late 1990s/early 2000s and women left to go freelance they would often name their consultancies to make it sound like more people worked there. Typically, they would take their surname and another surname (often their 'maiden name') and put them together. Was there a lack of confidence there – the thought that they wouldn't be taken seriously as a female consultant and had to appear corporate? A generation later there seems to be more confidence in being seen as yourself and letting your personal reputation sell itself.

Heather: I've been thinking about the narrative we tend to hear which positions successful careers for women in PR as achieving a 'senior' role in the hierarchy of an organisation. That implies a need to appear corporate from a conformist masculine perspective. Sarah and I noted a paradoxical reality for women working in PR in the 1990s that included conformity with gendered norms of masculine behaviour, alongside expectations to wear heels and conservative dress – but not trousers.

Interesting to consider the contrast with the entrepreneurial move of working for yourself – whether as a consultant or to establish a consultancy. Does freedom extend to what you wear and how you behave for female freelancers today? It does suggest being able to pursue personal and professional growth opportunities in a flexible way rather than following a prescribed pathway. Of course, such autonomy also brings risk and vulnerability – and can be solitary. Is this why the conversations in this form of research were so rich as it provided a community experience, even if only for a few hours?

Commentary 3. Intergenerational 'co-existence' within freelance PR

Heather: I was expecting to see intergenerational findings from my knowledge of historical research of women's experiences in PR from the 1950s to 1990s, and claims made about differences in generations in the workplace. Instead, it seems women working in PR as freelancers talk about much the same things regardless of their age. Their 'co-existence' in time is observed by Karl Mannheim (1952) as a generation of contemporaries, with shared influences and possibilities of experience at a particular time. Yet we should still encounter a polyphony of voices as the conversations – and the recollections these contain – represent different life- and career-stages.

I'm wondering if the sociocultural and technological transformation of both PR and the nature of freelancing that has occurred over a 30-year generational span has profoundly shaped a metamodern contemporaneity of multiple ways of being together in a pastpresentfuture time.

Sarah: There was a real desire to evolve and stay on top of the requirements of the role. I didn't get a sense that there were significant differences in how our women thought about PR and their role. There was a desire to invest in personal development and growth and a recognition that PR itself is constantly evolving and changing.

Liz: Yes! It was interesting that issues such as age, seniority (and whether it mattered) didn't really get discussed. I expected some generational differences to be foregrounded, whether it was in terms of discussions of technology, or the invisibility of post-menopausal women as discussed by Christine Bell (2012) but it didn't seem to matter.

Ungatherings

Commentary 4. Professional development investment or expense

Sarah: One of the conversations that fascinated me was the fact our women wanted to discuss at length the issue of continuous professional development. Yet we couldn't really prompt or drill down further on this given the style of the World Café – that will be an issue for further investigation, I think.

However, as a group of academic researchers we hadn't really thought about this so what this method does reveal is the opportunity to discover areas that interest your co-researchers that you hadn't really appreciated. Our women discussed at length the importance of investing in their careers, to keep current and although there was a little concern raised about the cost of this overall it was considered as an essential investment underpinning their freedom.

Heather: I'm not surprised that professional development was talked about in the harvesting discussions. It fits with how women view education as a career development strategy and how the shift for PR to be predominantly female coincided with growth of university and professional qualifications. Although we didn't anticipate and couldn't prompt further on this topic, PR literature tends to question the value of attaining qualifications for women's career progression.

Whether investment in CPD translates into a financial or other advantage for freelance practitioners, is an interesting question. Or is it an investment that gives a return in confidence – particularly for women? The 'career progression paradox' identified by Siobhan O'Mahony and Beth Bechky (2006) shows contract workers are hired for their prior experience yet need experience to develop skills in new areas. Indeed, Yonghoon Lee and colleagues (2023) propose women face a 'glass wall' when expanding freelance services – and call for this to be studied in female-dominated occupations.

Commentary 5. Objectivity and 'outsider' position of researchers in World Café

Liz: This was the first time I'd been (consciously) involved in a Café Delphi session. I was pleased that the freelancers warmed to the method and that the conversation flowed freely - and that a spirit of openness and trust permeated the conversations. As a researcher though, I found that this online Café Delphi method which excluded the researcher from the 'Table' discussions and asks the members to write down their observations slightly strange.

Usually when I carry out qualitative research, I'm central to conversations and am aware of the nuances and which topics resonate. Here, however, I was involved but was only able to read notes afterwards. At first, I felt that my understanding of the topics discussed was compromised but on reflection I realised that being excluded allowed me to read the notes of the conversation as an objective outsider and understand what the group found of interest. Had I been present, I may have focussed on something of interest to me – which wouldn't necessarily have been the group's priority topic.

Sarah: The insider-outsider or as researcher occupying the in between liminal space is an interesting one. For me it is about re-thinking our own positionality as researchers – and seeing participants as co-researchers and giving up control. No matter how objective we are, we always bring ourselves to our research – sometimes rightly. In part this research follows my own interest in women working in PR as it relates to my own career prior to academia so I have positionality. This approach although challenging really does allow for other voices to be heard without those voices being constrained or corralled. Unlike other research when we see what we are getting in the moment of the research reviewing the 'jamboard' was exciting – what would the conversations reveal?

Heather: With typical focus group research or an in-person World Café session, we would be observers and could eavesdrop on whole or fragments of conversations. Here by not entering the 'rooms' where conversations were happening, we were excluded, invisible and outside. This was difficult - is that why researchers don't usually adopt this position? Of course, even with a standard Delphi study, the researcher has a position of power, in collating and distributing responses to reach more of a consensus. Here we have little power – not being present during the 'Table' discussions. It is fascinating to consider if this makes us more objective and removes the influence of our similarities, assumptions, and biases. Or at least, avoids one layer of subjectivity.

Commentary 6. Resistance in self-directed conversations

Heather: One of our intentions in the harvesting was to explore gendered experiences. I recall asking about this and finding resistance in response. This struck me as interesting. So, I mentioned it in a World Café community session as a moment when I realised that participants influence the context and content of conversations. Someone in the session said to me, 'Heather this is a great example of how people decide for themselves the questions that matter in World Café'. While this could be problematic if research is intent on addressing specific research objectives, I'm intrigued – and impressed – by the power of the interplay of the female voices and stories to not be swayed by a researcher-led interruption.

Sarah: This resistance ironically takes us back to bell hooks and speaking back to authority, in this case us as researchers. You could argue that the Café Delphi method is about democratisation of research and is less extractive. Extraction tends to reflect force and effort with something being 'done' to 'someone' or 'something'. This research method feels very different giving up control and for many researchers that may feel uncomfortable and uncertain and may take the research away from its original intention as you say it may take away from the intended research objectives – I wonder whether that matters? It makes me question my own reasons for doing research and if I have been too easily led by what 'experts' tell me is good research.

Liz: Absolutely! As researchers we take the dominant position – we decide what should be discussed, when it happens, who should be included and what is important, so it was (in hindsight) refreshing to lose our control and let the women speak about what mattered to them. I think this was a discussion you'd only get if you eavesdropped on PR freelancers 'off duty' after work (and there would be some ethical issues involved in that!) so I feel privileged to be part of it.

Conclusion

This chapter investigated women's freelance careers in three parts. In part one, a collaborative Café Delphi approach blending two interactive and iterative data collection techniques was explained. A World Café online session involved 12 women (across a generational age range) with experience of working as freelance PR practitioners. In the spirit of a Delphi study, the researchers subsequently engaged in expert reflection to harvest additional insights.

Part two identified 'desire for freedom' as the overarching topic in notes the participants made in conversation clusters. Learnings from a harvest of discoveries included a paradox of freedom and pressure, alongside a conundrum in helping clients to think strategically. Notably, the harvest evolved to resemble a community of practice or professional support network, including talk about professional identities that suggested gendered experiences. No differences appeared across age groupings, instead an intergenerational view of society and PR practice was proposed. Comparison with an earlier study found clear variance away from a theme of sexism towards freedom and

empowerment (aligned with a theme of sexuality). This was evident in the women's enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit, emphasis on self-development, and expectance of achieving success in a way that mattered to them.

Part three presented Delphi reflections in a gathering/ungathering outro. A series of six reflexive commentaries made connections, prompted responses and critical appraisal, explored limitations, and surfaced new opportunities. Gatherings reflected on space for spinstorying, manifestations of freedom, and intergenerational 'co-existence'. Ungatherings attended to unexpected discoveries, positionality of researchers, and 'talking back' as revealing what truly matters.

Notes

- 1 World Café principles are to: clarify the context; create a hospitable space; explore questions that matter; explore everyone's contributions; connect diverse perspectives; listen together for insights; share collective discoveries. Online dialogue etiquette advice is to: have fun; play, draw, doodle; listen together for patterns, insight, and deeper connections; slow down so you have time to reflect; listen to understand; focus on what matters; speak with your heart and mind; contribute your thinking and experience; host yourself and others. See: <https://theworldcafe.com/>.

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SEX, SEXUALITY, AND SEXISM: FREELANCE CAREERS

Yeomans, L. (2019). Is a 'new feminist visibility' emerging in the UK PR industry? Senior women's discourse and performativity within the neoliberal PR firm. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 8(2), 127-147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X1984>

Themes:		Sex	Sexuality	Sexism
Gender focus concepts:		Equality	Empowerment	Attitudes
Sense-making indicator words:	Core	Rights	Freedom	Power
	Intersections	Self-efficacy	Objectified	Neutralised
		Diminished	Self-control	Liberated

Table 1. Condensed 3S framework with sense-making indicator words (derived from Yaxley and Bowman, 2024)

Topic	Research into female freelance experiences in PR from 1990s to present
<i>Purpose</i>	To explore female experiences in PR freelance work (also termed self-employment, independent practice, or being a sole practitioner)
<i>Ethics</i>	Approved participant guidelines were circulated (including consent form). Sensitive to the possibility of surfacing unpleasant memories, information on support services was available.
<i>Logistics</i>	The evening session on 12 December 2023 lasted 2.5 hours conducted via Northumbria University Blackboard Collaborate (online classroom).
<i>World Café principles</i>	A welcoming introduction explained the World Café premise and plan: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Format: Seven design principles and ‘netiquette’ advice¹ • Check-in: Participant introductions • Café style ‘tables’: Small conversation clusters (virtual breakout rooms) • Questions: Three rounds of 20 minutes each, conceived to build discussion from past experiences to the present and future. • Record: Write, doodle, and draw on virtual ‘tablecloths’ (whiteboard space) • Movement: Participants ‘travel’ between rounds to blend/develop thoughts • Harvest: All come together to share stories, discoveries and insights; identify patterns; and explore possibilities
<i>Round 1.</i>	Question: What did becoming a freelance PR practitioner mean to you? <i>Prompt: How was your decision to work as a freelance PR practitioner formed?</i>
<i>Round 2.</i>	Question: What’s resonating with you about working as a freelance practitioner? <i>Prompt: Are there particular stories, images, feelings, or scenarios that come to mind?</i>
<i>Round 3.</i>	Question: Given what you’ve heard, what possible contributions could freelance practitioners like yourself make to the future of PR? <i>Prompt: Why might experiences of female freelance PR practitioners be of value to the practice?</i>
<i>Harvest</i>	Final recorded conversation involving all participants and researchers unfolded individual and collective wisdom and insights.

Table 2. World Café research process (table by authors)