

Research Report

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Elizabeth Toth, associate dean for academic affairs and professor of public relations at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, has devoted 18 years to the study of the increasing number of women in public relations.

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—Elizabeth Toth

Tracking the gender switch in public relations

In the mid-seventies more than 70 percent of the public relations field was male. Today that ratio has reversed itself, with conservative estimates saying 60 percent of the field is female. Elizabeth Toth thinks the number is much higher, “especially if you look in our classrooms, where 80 percent of those studying public relations are women.”

While the gender switch isn’t unique to public relations, the change is more dramatic than in other occupations, says Toth, associate dean for academic affairs and professor of public relations at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. She’s trying to find out why and determine how the switch has affected the field.

Toth has studied the increasing number of women in public relations since she began teaching 18 years ago. She worked in the field for seven years, serving as an administrative officer for the city of Charlotte, North Carolina, and an information and communications specialist for North Carolina’s Department of Natural Resources. “When I started teaching, my classes were 50/50 male/female, and then they started to change dramatically,” she says. “The textbooks and literature never seemed to reflect this demographic change, which I thought didn’t serve our students well. I was interested in how the change would impact public relations and how we should educate young women to prepare for an industry in transition.”

Toth sees several reasons why public relations became more attractive to women. “One is that the men left,” she says with a smile. “They had many more fields to choose from and public relations was not as lucrative, so they went where the money was.” Also, public relations doesn’t put up the barriers to women found in many occupations, she says. “It’s a very flexible field in which women can balance family and marriage. Organizations seem to prefer women in public relations roles because they think they are better communicators, more nurturing and willing to listen and collaborate. I think organizations began to face pressure from affirmative action programs to hire women and train them for management positions, and public relations seemed like a safe place to put women managers. There’s a lot of good news in that, but organizational sociologists say it’s another way of oppressing women. You offer them a little bit and then they won’t want more.”

Toth has written a number of books and articles on the subject, including co-authoring the 1986 book *The Velvet Ghetto: The Increasing Percentage of Women in Public Relations and Business Communication*. The Institute of Public Relations Research and Education recently recognized her work with the Pathfinder Award, its most prestigious honor.

She and other researchers have done three major audits of members of the Public Relations Society of America and the National

Association of Business Communicators. These professional organizations observed the gender change in their membership and wanted to assess the impact on the field, Toth says. "I've participated in those studies and published the results as a way of charting these changes, seeing how they are similar to or different from occupational changes in general."

Toth is also trying to determine whether the transition has affected public relations. "There are theories that when women become dominant in a field, the field loses status and value," she says. "One of the strategies organizations seem to use is paying women less across the board. Women still seem to make less money on average, but also on the basis of age and type of organization. Some argue that women will catch up when they have the same amount of experience as men, but many women don't get that on-the-job experience. They're more likely to be pigeonholed into technical jobs."

Twenty years ago, Toth says, women thought they were successful if they got a foot in the door, no matter how poorly they were paid. "Getting a foot in the door is now a given for women," she says. "But today they have much higher expectations."

—GARY PALLASSINO

Making a difference with research in action

Above one of many overflowing bookshelves in Professor Bobbie Jean Perdue's College of Nursing office is a colorful poster displaying the Maya Angelou poem "And Still I Rise." Perdue is an eloquent, soft-spoken woman who conveys an air of passion when she discusses her work. The Angelou poem—about strength in the face of overwhelming odds—fits as perfectly in her office as the piles of paperwork, an ever-ringing phone, and a door that receives frequent knocks.

She shares her enthusiasm for helping others with classes and as a faculty advisor to the ALHANA (African, Latino, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American) Student Nurses Association. Perdue, who has been with the College of Nursing since 1993, likes to do what she calls "research in action," connecting her interests to making a difference in people's lives. She is currently on the second phase of a project involving chronically ill mothers and how they and their families cope with illness and the changes it causes in their lives. At this point, she is focused on providing resources for these families. "I'm trying to discover what keeps chronically ill people from parenting as well as if they were healthy," she says. "I'm looking in terms of intervention, trying to find what community organizations can and cannot do to help them."

Perdue's research with the chronically ill began with a six-year examination of women with diabetes, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, and asthma. In the study, completed in 1993, she looked at the women's psycho-social adjustment in dealing with these diseases. She also considered how their children, who ranged in age from 6 to 14, adjusted to the mothers' illnesses.

Perdue's interest in this area began with her own mother's chronic illness. Growing up in a household with two parents and seven siblings, Perdue knew the pressures of having a chronically ill parent and how a family deals with it. There was a significant urgency to family life, a lot of learning to care for each other, and considerable parenting, both directly and indirectly. "That was primarily how I became interested in what keeps other people from parenting as well," she says. "That's where you get into single-parent families, the income. My family didn't have a lot of money, but I grew up in a community in rural Kentucky where we took care of each other."



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College of Nursing professor Bobbie Jean Perdue helps people improve their lives by connecting them with resources available in their communities.

Perdue's original hypothesis turned out to be correct—chronically ill women who adjust well to the illness will have highly competent children. Now she is refining the data to consider race, single-parent and double-parent families, and types of illness. Over the long term she wants to determine the best methods of intervention and the role that community organizations can play.

As part of a postdoctoral research project at the University of Pennsylvania last year, Perdue studied single mothers who had troubled relationships with their sons. And for five years, Perdue has worked with more than 35 African American mothers who have adult children with AIDS. These mothers not only have to deal with caring for children, but also with a loss of status, and a sense of victimization. Perdue's research looks at the community support networks available to these people to see what's working and what needs improving. Taking an active role, she works with African American churches, challenges people to embrace these families, and tries to strengthen families by strengthening their communities. "When I first started working with the mothers, they were very angry," she says. "Now they're not as inclined to see themselves as victims."

Perdue hopes her work with the AIDS project and chronically ill mothers will serve as a model for future research with vulnerable families. "We need to know what the positive resources are in a community," she says, "what they can do for populations at risk, and how we can get the resources in touch with the people who need them most."

—MELISSA SPERL