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Delicate interactions: Relational skills in public relations consulting

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ABSTRACT

Public relations consultants rely primarily on relationships to sustain their work. However, existing scholarship has largely overlooked the use of interpersonal strategies for public relations, and even more significantly, there has been insufficient exploration of public relations consultants' professional practices. This study, which is part of wider research exploring consultancies in New Zealand, aims to fill this gap. Utilizing video ethnography, ethnographic communication analysis (ECA) and participant observation, this paper presents findings from a routine interaction between a consultant and her client. The analysis shows that consultants strategically use empathy, politeness, humor, and purposeful linguistic choices to manage relational harmony while asserting their professional expertise. The study highlights the importance of sophisticated interpersonal skills for public relations consultants. It also highlights the need for further research into public relations practices using a wider range of methodological approaches to better understand relational labor and power dynamics within consulting work.

1. Introduction

Public relations scholarship has largely focused on examining various facets of the practice within organizational departments with little attention being given to consultants or agencies (Pieczka, 2008). Thus, while the consulting industry continues to grow globally (PRWeek Staff, 2024; Wright, 2020), the understanding about its people and practices does not (Hoffjann et al., 2021; Röttger & Preusse, 2013; Ziegele & Zerfass, 2024). Moreover, the existing research tends to focus on the gendered perceptions of consultants and the flawed reputation of consulting (Fröhlich & Peters, 2007; Logan & Cizcek, 2021; Tsetsura, 2011; Yeomans, 2019; Grandien, 2017; von Platen, 2016).

Although a harmonious client-consultant relationship is perceived as an increasingly important marker for the quality and sustenance of communication consulting (Hoffjann et al., 2021; Ziegele & Zerfass, 2024), very few studies have explored this key interpersonal relationship and even fewer have explored it through the lens of ethnographic methodologies (Bhargava, 2024; Sissons, 2014; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Williams, 2018). Consequently, little is known about the challenges public relations consultants face when building and maintaining professional relationships with clients (Bhargava, 2024; Sissons, 2014; Williams, 2018; Yeomans, 2019).

For public relations consultants working in agencies, amicable interpersonal relationships with clients are considered the lifeblood of their professional practice (Hoffjann et al., 2021; Bhargava, 2024; Yeomans, 2019), offering work opportunities and financial remuneration. It is through these relationships that they sustain and expand their consulting practice. Yet client-consultant relationships are fraught with issues, such as imbalances in power and knowledge (Hoffjann et al., 2021; Röttger & Preusse, 2013; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018) and when clients become friends (as often happens), the client-consultant relationship becomes even more complex to navigate, requiring advanced interpersonal and professional skills to maintain that relationship.

To rebalance interpersonal relationships, consultants often aim to gain the client's trust by using their skills to demonstrate empathy for the client's situation and signal their own expertise (Bhargava, 2024). Such skills are central in cases where consultants must manage delicate interactions, such as where they need to offer critique or disagree with the client's perspective on how problems must be solved or decision are made (Bhargava, 2024; Sissons, 2015). Although global frameworks advocate for public relations practitioners to be capable of facilitating relationships and providing trusted advice (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019), not enough is known in public relations scholarship about the practical interpersonal strategies that consultants employ to achieve these outcomes (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018).

The current research addresses this gap in scholarship by exploring

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the complex terrain where public relations consultants must give expert advice to clients while maintaining relational harmony. It draws on, and extends, the work of Bhargava (2024) who explored the occupational culture of consultants in New Zealand by examining their interactions and relationships with clients and colleagues through a multimodal lens. It analyses a typical client-consultant interaction using ethnographic communication analysis (ECA) (Bhargava, 2024; Sissons, 2014; Middleton, 2020). In this interaction, Karen, the public relations consultant, must offer critical advice during a phone call with her client, demonstrating the complexity of maintaining cordial relationships while asserting their own expertise.

We begin by offering an interdisciplinary overview of the complexity of client-consultant relationships, identifying gaps in the current understanding of the skills needed to build and sustain these interpersonal connections. We then outline video ethnography as the methodological approach adopted for this study, thereby responding to calls for the use of anthropological methods in public relations (L'Etang, 2013). Ethnographic communication analysis (ECA) is subsequently applied to examine a typical client-consultant interaction, demonstrating the range of multimodal devices used and highlighting the interpersonal nuances involved in navigating delicate conversations with clients. We conclude that public relations consultants leverage their interpersonal skills to assert their expertise while preserving harmony in the relationships with the client, with the aim of ensuring the longevity of their consulting work. Drawing on Baym's (2015) concept, we conclude that public relations practitioners undertake relational labor as a core aspect of their work.

2. Literature review

2.1. Complexity of client-consultant relationships

Public relations agencies are part of the broader ecosystem of neo-professional service firms (neo-PSFs), characterized by a higher dependence on their consultants' knowledge when compared to other tangible or intangible assets (von Nordenflycht, 2010). Thus, consulting is also termed as *knowledge work* (Alvesson & Karreman, 2006).

However, unlike more traditional PSFs—such as law and accounting firms—that enjoy a privileged status as professional experts, neo-PSFs, which include management, advertising and public relations consultants, must continuously negotiate their position and legitimacy as knowledge workers (Deelman, 2019; Nikolova, 2007/2019). Across all neo-PSFs, a consultant's ability to procure, retain and grow client relationships is viewed as essential for their success (Broschak, 2015; Maister, 2005).

Unfortunately, the client-consultant relationship is not without its issues, which may be caused by knowledge asymmetry and role ambiguity, dissatisfaction with a consultant's service, a lack of shared consensus on project goals, conflicting client expectations, turnover of the client representative(s) or the consulting account manager, or disagreement about the advice given (Bhargava, 2024; Broschak, 2015; Nikolova, 2007/2019). During such situations, client-public relations consultant interactions can be delicate to manage and may lead to unfavorable outcomes (Broschak, 2015), such as a loss of trust, confidence and even client work (i.e., income).

In particular, public relations consultants often feel the need to justify their value vis-à-vis others in the business and prove their expertise to their clients, especially during critical problem-solving situations (Sterne, 2008; von Platen, 2016). While it may be common for public relations consultants to be hired for their creative solutions and objective insights into complex client situations (Darnell, 2022; Luttrell & Capizzo, 2019; Pritchard & Smith, 2015), there is no guarantee that their input is received positively or that their advice will be readily accepted (Bhargava, 2024; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Sissons, 2014; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Wood, 2002). At times, consultants are treated more like service providers who are hired for capacity expansion (Hoffjann et al., 2021) and paid for a time-bound and task-oriented service (i.e., as technicians) rather than being sought out for critical counselling and advice-seeking activities (Bhargava, 2024; Röttger & Preusse, 2013), which effectively diminishes their value as strategic counselors and contributes to the existing confusion whether public relations is a promotional practice or strategic counselling (Fawkes, 2021).

The organizational rank of the client representatives grants them positional power (Scott, 2001) over the consultants—a power exercised in choosing consultants, setting goals and timelines, sharing or withholding crucial information, accepting or ignoring advice, and even retaining or firing consultants (Nikolova, 2007/2019). Unsurprisingly, while clients may "wish for more critical, independent and courageous advice" (Hoffjann et al., 2021, p.13), evidence from public relations consultants suggests that clients tend to be risk-averse, do not always follow through on verbal commitments to change, and often ignore advice or implement a "watered down version" (Bhargava, 2024, p. 113).

In the light of this, and given that public relations consultants depend on their clients for financial sustenance, it is imperative that they skillfully navigate client relationships without jeopardizing current harmony and future work (Bhargava, 2024; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Williams, 2018; Yeomans, 2019).

Interestingly, even though consultants—at least in New Zealand—express that they would terminate relationships with any clients who repeatedly did not seek or address their advice (Bhargava, 2024), there seems to be an understanding that an empathetic and relational approach is needed to ensure the client-consultant relationship can be maintained even during periods of conflict.

This indicates that, in addition to their knowledge, expertise and experience (Bhargava, 2024; Gallessich, 1982; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Kubr, 2002; Pieczka, 2006), consultants require artful interpersonal skills to navigate the complexities of client relationships. Such communicative skills are especially critical during delicate interactions where the consultant's input might not be positively received or readily accepted (Bhargava, 2024; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Yeomans, 2019).

2.2. Relational labor—maintaining harmony for future work

Interpersonal skills are not only critical for problem-solving and decision-making (Gregory & Willis, 2013; Berger & Reber, 2005) but they help signal emotional connection and benevolence, which are key to establishing likeability and trust between clients and their consultants (Nikolova et al., 2015).

Bhargava (2024) found that consultants emphasized the importance of balancing interpersonal aspects such as empathy, politeness, and diplomacy with directness and confidence. This has previously been described as relational enactment (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018) that public relations consultants need to perform in order to maintain balanced client-consultant relationships. Yet, although proficiency in client interaction is widely expected from public relations practitioners (Hoffjann et al., 2021; Röttger & Preusse, 2013), scholarship offers little guidance on the nature and execution of the relational work that is required in these interactions (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018).

The concept of *relational work* originates from sociologist Viviana Zelizer (2007), who defined it as "the establishment of social ties, their maintenance, their reshaping from other relations, and sometimes their termination" (p. 35). Here, relational work is understood to encompass the full range of practices and obligations between individuals, who are constantly negotiating their economic transactions and relational boundaries through interactions and exchange of various forms of media (Zelizer, 2007, 2012; Bandelj, 2020). Often, relational work is visible in institutional settings, such as in public relations agencies, where a degree of amiability is needed for sustaining relationships and "facilitating future transactions" (Bandelj, 2020, p. 262).

Relational work, often interchangeably referred to as *relational labor* (Alacovska, 2018), is apparent in the creative industries, where interpersonal skills such as managing emotions, performing and saving face, telling stories and using discourse strategies is commonplace among colleagues, and with clients and audiences, to "remain employed and sustain a creative career" (Alacovska, 2018. p. 1569). While relational labor can be seen as an extension of emotional labor, it goes beyond merely managing the other party's feelings during an interaction to "creating and maintaining ongoing connections" (Baym, 2015, p. 16).

According to Denegri-Knott et al. (2023), although every person who maintains interpersonal relationships is likely to be involved in some form of emotional labor, such efforts typically do not yield monetary rewards. Relational labor, however, extends this notion by monetizing the relationship (Denegri-Knott et al., 2023). In other words, without these relationships and connections, individuals lose access to paid work—as is often the case of public relations agency work.

While emotional labor has been studied in various disciplines, including public relations (e.g., Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2020; Yeomans, 2013), relational labor has been less frequently studied and has been mainly associated with platform studies (e.g., Denegri-Knott et al., 2023; Glatt, 2024; Ye et al., 2023). More broadly, interpersonal concepts (such as relational labor) have received scant attention in mainstream public relations scholarship (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018). The discipline has tended to focus on understanding relationships between organization and their publics, rather than the intricate interpersonal dynamics practitioners navigate daily with their clients, colleagues and journalists (Bhargava, 2024). Yet, as Zaharna (2016) noted, "'relations' is literally the latter half of its [public relations] name" (p. 190). This gap in scholarship is paradoxical given the occupational expectation that practitioners must build trust through facilitating relationships (Global Alliance, 2016).

Although there is no unilateral approach that public relations consultants can apply across all relational challenges, much of the scholarship emphasizes the importance of demonstrating empathy for client concerns while exercising humility and politeness in their interactions (Bhargava, 2024; Place & Flamme, 2023; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Sissons, 2015; Yeomans, 2016, 2018). In New Zealand, for instance, empathy and politeness have been identified as key to managing what Bhargava (2024, p. 179) described as "delicate interactions" between clients and consultants.

Despite the limited scholarly focus on interpersonal relationships, empathy has been widely acknowledged as an essential behavioral attribute for practitioners, enabling them to listen without judgement, understand another person's context and behavior, relate to and reflect on emotional states, and communicate with care (Bhargava, 2024; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Yeomans, 2016, 2019). Similarly, politeness devices such as hedges, requests, small talk and humor (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015) have been found to maintain collegiality in public relations consultants' relationships with clients and colleagues, especially in New Zealand (Bhargava, 2024; Theunissen, 2019; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018). These findings reinforce the seminal work of social theorists who argue that paying attention to the other person's "face" needs and avoiding face-threatening acts (FTAs) that could offend or embarrass that person, are critical in maintaining relational harmony (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1959, 1967).

Recent research has further emphasized that politeness and empathy are not signs of subservience, but are relational strategies that public relations practitioners (in-house and agencies) use to influence decision-making, direct colleagues, persuade clients, and navigate delicate interactions without harming the relationship (Bhargava, 2024; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Sissons, 2014, 2015). While this interconnectedness of empathy, politeness, persuasion and power may not neatly align with normative views of public relations, there is no denying that such relationships are neither symmetric nor devoid of persuasion (Berger & Reber, 2005; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Weaver, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite the abundance of studies about organizations' relationships with their publics, there is limited research that advances our understanding of practitioners' interpersonal and professional relationships (Bhargava, 2024; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018; Williams, 2018) and their importance for public relations practice. This study addresses the gap by advancing understanding of how relational labor is enacted during client-consultant interactions.

3. Methodology

Although there has been a growing call to address the sociocultural aspects of public relations practice (cf., Curtin, 2021; Macnamara & Crawford, 2013; Somerville et al., 2017; Sriramesh, 2020), studies answering the call are still few and far between (cf., Bhargava, 2024; Hodges, 2005, 2011; Sissons, 2014; Williams, 2018). Consequently, the complexities of practitioners' interpersonal relationships, the nuances of their interactions, and the interplay of existing conflicts and relational work remain largely unexplored (Ihlen et al., 2018; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018)—particularly in the context of consulting or agency work.

Practitioners' routine working lives offer unique insights into their interactional and interpersonal skills (Sissons, 2015). However, to capture such rich and nuanced insights, researchers must engage more fully with anthropological research approaches (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; L'Etang, 2013) and apply a sociological lens to their analysis (Edwards & Ihlen, 2023). Following this approach, the current study adopts an anthropological perspective, using participant observation (Bernard, 2017; Manolchev & Foley, 2021) and video ethnography (Erickson, 2018; Pink, 2021) as primary data collection methods. These were complemented by field notes, audio recordings, photos, interviews, and casual conversations (Jorgensen, 2020), which, together, generated rich and nuanced data into the everyday practices of two practitioners.

3.1. Video ethnography

Ethnographic researchers aim to witness, understand, and explain naturally occurring cultural phenomena by immersing themselves in the field of observation (Gold, 1958; Erickson, 2018; Shrum & Scott, 2017). These phenomena can include professional cultures, such as public relations agency work or consulting. Geertz (1973) described this methodological approach as providing *thick descriptions* or nuanced explanations of commonly occurring or routine aspects of culture that illuminate their complexity and importance in ways that quantitative methods cannot. Such thick descriptions are largely missing from public relations scholarship (Madden & Levenshus, 2021), limiting understanding of the complexity of practitioners' day-to-day interactions and relationships (Sissons, 2014, 2015).

The analysis presented here formed part of a larger ethnographic study of the occupational culture of public relations consultants in New Zealand (cf., Bhargava, 2024). The video ethnographic study (Erickson, 2018; Pink, 2021) involved the observation of two public relations consultants, Karen and John (pseudonyms), as they went about their daily work. Karen was observed for four days while working as an independent consultant from her home office, and John for ten days at his agency where he employed two other consultants. In total, the study included 14 days of observation.

The main researcher's prior experience as a public relations practitioner and educator meant she had tacit knowledge of the field. In line with ethnographic methodology (Bernard, 2017; Gold, 1958; Manolchev & Foley, 2021) and similar studies in public relations (Sissons, 2014, 2015), a 14-day observation period was deemed sufficient to meet the study's aims. While the consultants occasionally sought the researcher's input in the activities observed, her primary role was that of observer. Specifically, she adopted the role of *observer-as-participant* (Gold, 1958), a position in which the researcher has prior knowledge of the field but only participates moderately in the observed activities. This approach negated the need for long-term immersion, which can risk over-identification with the participants and a loss of objectivity (Bernard, 2017; Gold, 1958).

The main researcher's use of an unobtrusive self-held video camera allowed events to be recorded without attracting attention to the observation, avoiding sole reliance on memory or field notes. Video data can be replayed and analyzed frame-by-frame for a more precise interpretation of the phenomenon being studied (Heath et al., 2010; Komarova & McKnight, 2014; Pink, 2021; Shrum & Scott, 2017). The small camera also helped keep participants comfortable, ensuring high-quality footage (Shrum & Scott, 2017).

In addition to the video ethnography, the study incorporated in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen consultants (including Karen) to enrich the data set. Combining interviews with video observation and field notes is standard practice in ethnographic research, facilitates data triangulation and enhances the validity and reliability of interpretations (Bernard, 2017; Herrington, 2014; Jorgensen, 2020).

Purposive and convenience sampling, both commonplace in ethnographic research (Bernard, 2017; Miles et al., 2020), were used to recruit the participants. The sample comprised consultants based in and around Auckland where the majority public relations practitioners are located, reflecting the profession's distribution in New Zealand (Bhargava & Theunissen, 2023). The project received institutional ethics approval, and all participants provided informed consent. Privacy was protected by using pseudonyms and blurring any identifiable features (e.g., faces and organization logos) in screenshots. All information was cross-checked with the participants to ensure accuracy.

3.2. Critical incident technique

Using the critical incident technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954; Keatinge, 2002; Watkins et al., 2022), the total dataset was scanned for interactions that were typical representations (Gumperz, 1982) of everyday or routine occurrences (Keatinge, 2002). In other words, the interactions selected for analysis were those normally encountered by practitioners in their daily work, as was the case in the interaction analyzed here. To be suitable for analysis, a critical incident had to be both a typical occurrence and a complete interaction capable of demonstrating a particular theme extracted from the overall data (Watkins et al., 2022).

The pivotal interaction analyzed here reflects a routine occurrence within the larger data set and can be best described as a "delicate" interaction (e.g., Bhargava, 2024). In this interaction, Karen was observed having a telephone conversation with a client about a sensitive matter (giving negative feedback). This required her to draw on a range of interpersonal skills to assert her expert authority while maintaining a friendly relationship. The interaction was analyzed using ethnographic communication analysis (ECA).

3.3. Ethnographic communication analysis

ECA is an applied methodology used to examine interactions that take place within work settings, where participants can be observed using their occupational identities (Middleton, 2020; Sissons, 2014). It was first applied by Sissons (2014) in her video ethnographic study of power relations between public relations practitioners and journalists.

This analytical framework involves the examination of video-recorded interactions, drawing on conversation analysis to study speech, pauses, use of discourse markers, and turn-taking (Jefferson, 2004b; Liddicoat, 2022; Schegloff, 2007), multimodal analysis to investigate gaze, gesture and posture (Rossano, 2013; McNeill, 2005; Matsumoto et al., 2016), dramaturgical analysis to understand face-saving and impression management (Goffman, 1967), and interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis to identify assertions of power (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). In ECA, as conceptualized and practiced by Sissons (2014), these analytical approaches are adapted to the specific context of the study rather than applied in their pure form.

In applying ECA, Karen's interaction with her client Tiffany was first transcribed line by line, using Jefferson's (2004a) symbols (cf., Appendix A). This process captured meaningful aspects of her speech, such as pauses (e.g., 1.5-second pause in line 7), emphasis (emphasis on the word <u>agree</u> in line 23), and a rise in intonation (e.g., ↑<u>big</u> uttered with a rising intonation in line 8). The transcript was then aligned with corresponding visuals from the interaction to record non-verbal cues, such as touch, gaze, and gesture (e.g., face-touching, nodding, raising eyebrows, and rolling eyes). The resulting multimodal transcript (Fig. 1) was subsequently analyzed to identify elements of impression management and power relations, such as the use of discourse strategies and laughter.

Finally, the findings were triangulated with the field notes and with the semi-structured and informal interviews conducted with Karen before, during, and after the video observation, to ensure an accurate interpretation of the events.

The aim of this triangulated ethnographic approach was not to achieve generalization, but rather to allow for a degree of transferability, or *moderatum generalizations*, which can be confirmed or contested through future studies (Williams, 2000; Jorgensen, 2020). Thus, this study offers novel "behind-the-stage" access to the niche context of client-consultant interactions in New Zealand, with the resulting moderatum generalizations offering a strong foundation for future researchers to test their hypotheses (Jorgensen, 2020). It also offers cross-country comparisons—as urged by various scholars of the field (Hoffjann et al., 2021; Ziegele & Zerfass, 2024; Williams, 2018; Yeomans, 2019)—to "add more flesh" (Bhargava, 2024, p. 42) to our understanding of public relations consulting practice.

4. Analysis and findings

During the observation period, Karen, an independent consultant working from home, was preparing a sponsorship letter for Tiffany, a client and friend. Tiffany had written an initial draft and emailed it to Karen for review. The letter was meant to be sent to the owner of an organization who was (also) a friend of Tiffany's and an acquaintance of Karen's.

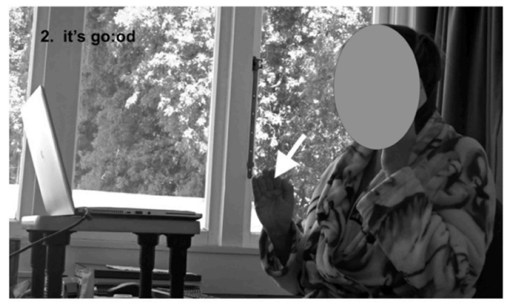
When she first read the draft, Karen did not seem pleased. In the pre-observation interview, she remarked that "it's going to need some edits." She also reflected that one of Tiffany's close friends had recently passed away and that it was likely that Tiffany's emotional state was affecting her work. As Karen put it, "I kind of get that but it's…uhm…it's just not a good letter." A few minutes later, Tiffany called for feedback. The following interaction is taken from their phone conversation.

Karen begins her response by uttering "uhm" (line 1) and rubbing her forehead with her palm (Fig. 1, image 1). A discourse marker such as "uhm" typically signals that the speaker is about to say something important but is searching for the right words to convey it (Jefferson, 1988; Schiffrin, 1987). Karen's attempt to avoid giving a direct opinion, referred to as "hedging," combined with her touching her forehead, indicates that she was feeling uncomfortable (Harrigan et al., 1991) about giving unfavorable feedback to Tiffany.

She opens the conversation by stating that the letter was good, placing emphasis on the word "go:od" (line 1). Starting with a positive acknowledgment is often a way of seeking or projecting affiliation while maintaining a persuasive intent (Harrigan & Rosenthal, 1983). This suggests that Karen uses appreciation as an entry point to ease Tiffany into the forthcoming disagreement. She then utters another elongated "u::hm" followed by a pause (line 2), signaling that she is carefully considering how to begin her actual feedback, searching for the right words to express her opinion (Schiffrin, 1987). This reflects the way that public relations practitioners plan conversations with their clients, weighing both the content of their message and how it is delivered (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018).

Following the pause, Karen explains why the letter cannot start with

1. uhm I think it's go:od but I think it's it (.3)
2. it just needs to be u::hm (1.7) I actually
3. don't think that we should say Marvin
4. Centre for Excellence in this letter. I
5. think that's something we need to ease
6. him into
7. (1.5)
8. ye::ah (1.1) like that's ↑big like Marvin
9. Centre for Excellence is like 2 million
10. dollars (.6) and <because we haven't
11. ↑se:en him: (.3) in ↑ye:ars> .hhh to say
12. that in the first ↑letter (0.7) is ah::m
13. (3.7) (rolls eyes)
14. .hhh huhhuhhuhhuhha::
15. (2.5)
16. ye:ah hehhehehhuhhuhha
17. and >and we want 2 million for your
18. naming rights <
19. (4.5)
20. .hh. hehhehhaha
21. I kno:::w .hhhh (nods)
22. (3.3)
23. I uh I agree with you >I absolutely
24. agree< with THAT (nods)
25. (.5)



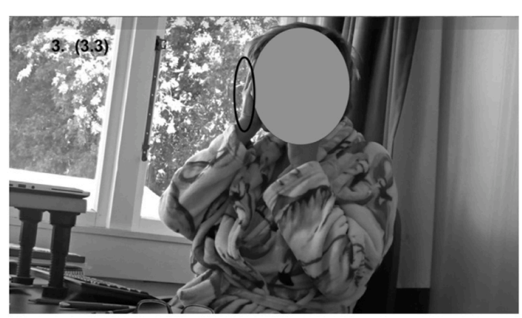


Fig. 1. Interaction between Karen and her client, Tiffany. (Note: See Appendix A for transcription key).

26. no

27. (42.5)

28. >no no no< I mean >let me ↑think about

29. th:at< I mean I know that you have a

30. different relationship with him than ↑I

31. do so if yo::u (.5) beli:eve (.8) that he:

32. wi:ll (.8) it will put a SM:ILE on his face

33. .hhh and he will >just kind of chuckle

34. going< °that's what she really needs to

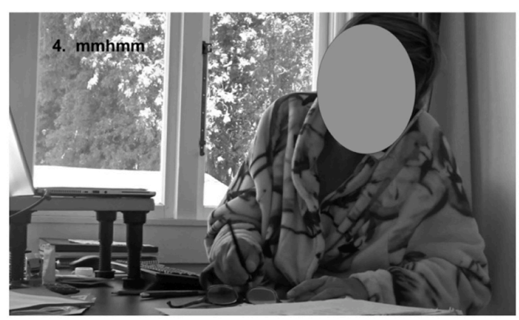
35. talk to me about° >I don't know< I just:

36. (6.9)

37. YES:: (nods)

38. (.8)

39. YES:: (nods)



40. (1.6)

41. mmhmm (nods)

42. (5.4)

43. mmm

44. (4.4) (raises eyebrows)

45. yeah

46. (8.5)

47. mmhmm

48. (.42)

49. no ↓ wh::y?

50. (16.7)

Fig. 1. (*continued*).

51. mmhmm

52. (10)

53. mmhmm

54. (2.2)

55. yeah >but I just< yeah

56. (.7)

57. >I just ↑think it needs to be edited a

58. little bit to just be a little < (.5) cle::aner

59. (9.8)

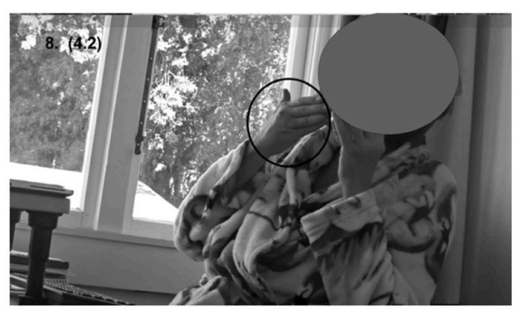
60. pe:rfect

61. (.6)

62. and then I'll d:o it > just so we can get it

63. if you want to get it to Asher< tod:ay (.5)

64. text



65. (4.2)

66. yeah (nods)

67. (.48)

68. that's fine. I don't have a problem with

69. that >yeah coz I think it should come

70. from< yo:u >again< le:ave me: out of it (closes both eyes)

71. (.5)

72. I mean not leave me out of the whole

73. ↑thing but this is a letter from yo:u to

74. hi:m, yeah got it. yeah

Fig. 1. (*continued*).

75. (12.3) 76. hmmm 77. (4.3) 78. (breathes heavily) 79. (5.2) 80. uhm I like the to::ne (.2) it just needs to 81. be ↓ perfected 82. (1.8) 83. yeah 84. (2.8) 85. you're ↑wonderful. 86. (.9) 87. thank you. bye. (raises eyebrows)	

Fig. 1. (*continued*).

a direct request for money (lines 2–12). Account-giving, as in this case, is a form of justification often used when a speaker anticipates that their response may not be well-received (Schegloff, 2007). Karen adopts a slower speech and higher pitch when she says, "<because we haven't ↑se:en him: (.3) in ↑ye:ars> " (lines 10–11) to ensure Tiffany registered and understood her reasoning (Jefferson, 1988, 2004a). The pauses (lines 8–12) further indicate that while offering her justification, she is taking time to choose her words carefully. This suggests that she is trying to be both empathetic and considerate of her ongoing relationship with the client.

However, she fleetingly rolls her eyes (line 13) while listening to Tiffany's response. Eye rolls are a sign of opposition or protest against "someone *going too far*" (Clift, 2021, p. 261, original emphasis). This implies that, although Karen is trying to be empathetic and polite, Tiffany's response is testing her patience. The eye roll is followed by laughter and more forehead touching (lines 14–22), indicating that while Karen is trying to show affiliation and understanding through laughter (Glenn, 2003), she is, in fact, disagreeing with Tiffany.

Karen continues to signal affiliation and shared connection (Schiffrin, 1987) through elongating phrases like "I kno:::w" (line 21), nodding in agreement even though Tiffany cannot see her, and explicitly expressing agreement (line 23). Such acknowledgments are polite expressions that can act as hedges and minimize face-threats (Goffman, 1967; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). However, Karen also hastens her speech as she says, ">I absolutely agree< with THAT " (line 23) and ">let me ↑think about th:at< " (lines 28–29). A quickened pace typically demonstrates the speaker's desire to move past the current topic to address what they regard as the main purpose of the interaction (Schegloff, 2007). In delicate conversations, such speech acts help keep the focus on the problem and guide the discussion towards the speaker's preferred solution (Bhargava, 2024; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). In this case, the increased tempo suggests that Karen is aiming to steer the interaction towards her own perspective and reach an amicable agreement.

At this point, Karen returns to her account-giving style of feedback. She adopts a witty tone to acknowledge that Tiffany has a different relationship with the sponsor and that asking for money up front, as Tiffany had in the draft letter, would "put a SM:ILE on his face" (line 32). Notably, she begins her turn with ">no no no< I mean >let me ↑think about th:at< " and ends with ">I don't know< " (line 35). This pattern indicates that, while she is attempting to build affiliation through humor (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015), she remains unconvinced by Tiffany's approach and needs more time to think about it.

Following this, Karen continues to listen to Tiffany's reasons for the content of the draft sponsorship letter, offering various weak backchannels such as "mm hmm" and "yeah" (lines 37–55). These expressions are mostly used by women to signal empathetic listening, even when they may be disagreeing with the other person (Davidson, 1984; Kjellmer, 2009). However, Karen's raised eyebrows (line 44) and face-touching (image 5) suggest that her verbal agreement does not align with her inner thoughts (Clift, 2021; Glenn, 2003; Sissons, 2014). She does not agree with the client's reasoning.

When it is her turn to speak, Karen again offers her own explanations and downplays the amount of editing the letter requires by using words such as "little bit" and "just" (lines 55–58; image 6). These discourse devices soften directives about the extent of work needed, helping to maintain collegiality (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015). She then proposes editing the letter so it can be sent to Asher, the sponsor, on the same day (lines 62–63). At this point, Karen increases the tempo of her speech again, signaling her desire to finish the discussion and get on with the task at hand. She emphasizes the word "tod:ay" to convey urgency.

Karen then agrees that it is Tiffany's letter, and that she has no issue being excluded from its writing (lines 68–74). However, as she says this, she briefly closes her eyes. This action, which effectively shuts out her visual environment, suggests a withdrawal from both the letter and the ongoing interaction (Wohltjen & Wheatley, 2021). She follows with more backchanneling to allow Tiffany to finish her turn (line 76), but her heavy breathing (line 78) indicates her disagreement with what is being said.

Reaffirming her feedback, Karen stresses that while she likes the letter, it needs to be "perfected," placing verbal emphasis on "perfected." The subtext here is that the letter is flawed and unlikely to have the desired effect of getting money from the sponsor. Again, Karen uses linguistic strategies to soften the impact of her negative feedback. She closes the exchange with a "positive assessment composite" (Schegloff, 2007), signaling that the interaction has ended and that agreement has been reached: "you're ↑wonderful" and "thank you. bye." Despite the positive tone, she raises her eyebrows at the end, revealing underlying frustration (cf., Clift, 2021; Glenn, 2003; Sissons, 2014).

Later in the day, following the interaction, Karen receives the editable Word file from Tiffany and proceeds to edit the letter. She phones Tiffany again to clarify the wording, explain her edits, and inform her that she is about to email the revised version. Once the task is completed, Karen nods in affirmation at her computer, smiles, and mumbles "this is good," indicating satisfaction with her edited version and, perhaps, at the outcome of the whole problem-solving exchange.

In the post-observation interview, Karen reflected on this client-consultant interaction, confirming that it was a delicate situation because Tiffany was both a client and a friend:

> "I have a lot of clients that have become friends or friends that have become clients. I need to maintain the friendship while being professional and vice versa."

Karen explained that although she was empathetic about Tiffany's personal circumstances, she wanted to convey that "more effort" went into writing a sponsorship letter and that, as a client, Tiffany needed to think about this. She summarized her approach in the interaction as:

> "…a nice combination of politeness and decisiveness. I was just very aware that that letter could not be sent in that way, shape or form, but then again, it's communicating that in a way that's not going to offend."

5. Discussion

Karen's phone call with Tiffany is typical of daily interactions between public relations consultants and their clients. In this case, Karen persuaded her client that the letter needed editing without offending or embarrassing her. She drew on a range of interpersonal skills, including maintaining a friendly tone, using witty comments, providing clear reasons for the changes, acknowledging that the client's personal connection to the sponsor, sharing laughter, listening empathetically through backchannels ("mm hmm", "yeah"), taking pauses to search for the right words ("uhm") and plan her next statements, and deemphasizing the extent of the required edits by using minimizing statements ("just" and "little bit"). However, while her verbal approach was friendly and professional, her body language revealed underlying thoughts and tensions.

The interaction provides empirical evidence that public relations consultants engage in relational labor when preparing for and providing expert advice. The analysis and subsequent follow-up interviews confirm that consultants do not use discourse devices, such as pauses, humor, and hedging, arbitrarily. Rather, they apply them strategically to protect the client's "face," maintain collegiality, and avoid conflict while offering negative feedback. The findings demonstrate that client-consultant interactions are not just an exchange of knowledge and expertise but are, in fact, a nuanced assertion of ambient persuasive influence through expressions of empathy, affiliation, and politeness (Bhargava, 2024; Sissons, 2015; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018).

Public relations consultants recognize that clients do not always accept their advice readily. They therefore utilize rhetorical strategies and interpersonal skills to rebalance the relational power, nudging their clients towards the preferred solution. Advice-giving is treated as a sensitive and collaborative relational process that requires nuanced and advanced interpersonal communication skills. This is particularly important in neo-PSFs, where public relations consultants must constantly demonstrate their legitimacy, navigate the blurred boundaries between friendly empathy and professional expertise (Bhargava, 2024; Nikolova, 2007/2019) and sustain their income through strong client relationships—thereby engaging in relational labor.

This analysis reinforces the centrality of interpersonal communication skills in effective and sustainable public relations consulting (Bhargava, 2024; Theunissen & Sissons, 2018). It extends our understanding of relational labor beyond platform studies by demonstrating how it is enacted in public relations consulting work. Given that relational labor is arguably essential for consultants who rely on their network for ongoing work, its limited attention in public relations is notable. The current findings allow for moderatum generalizations (Payne & Williams, 2005; Williams, 2000), meaning that they may be applied to situations that are similar to the one studied. Further qualitative research, however, is needed to examine how relational labor is enacted in other public relations settings, whether similar discourse strategies are employed, and whether these strategies influence consultants' long-term client relationships and career sustainability. It may well be that New Zealand's public relations practice is an outlier in terms of relationship-building and management.

Regardless, the findings provide an opportunity for practitioners to reflect on routine client interactions, which, as Ihlen (2018) suggested, can uncover taken-for-granted patterns of being and working. A deeper, practice-based understanding of relational labor can inform public relations scholarship and education, equipping future practitioners with essential interpersonal skills. This is particularly relevant for work-integrated learning courses (Friedman, 2023), where students apply relational labor in client-facing projects, such as those undertaken in student-led agencies.

Ultimately, while scholars have acknowledged that interpersonal skills are crucial for public relations practitioners—and especially for consultants managing complex relational demands—these skills have not received sufficient attention in public relations education or ongoing professional development.

6. Conclusion

In a discipline that often focuses on normative views of public relations or seeks to understand public relations practice through a quantitative methodological lens, this research advances our understanding of aspects of consultancy work that have been largely overlooked and undervalued. It casts light on the relational labor embedded in consultants' everyday professional lives and recognizes the role that empathy and politeness play in sustaining harmonious client-consultant relationships. When combined with micro-strategies such as hedging, affiliation, humor, and abating negative feedback, these approaches collectively help maintain relationships and future work.

The study underscores the value of employing a wider range of methodological approaches, including ethnographic methods, to investigate public relations work. This is particularly important for consultancy work, which, to date, remains significantly understudied in the field. Gaining insight into how consultants exert expert power through a variety of discourse strategies can inform the training and education of all future practitioners, equipping them with practical skills to negotiate their work with clients more effectively.

Recent ethnographic studies in public relations have been largely concentrated in New Zealand, a socio-cultural context known for its "two degrees of separation" (MacGibbon, 2009). This high level of interconnectedness increases the likelihood that clients will be connected to someone within the consultant's network, as was the case with Karen. Such interconnectedness reinforces the centrality of relationships and networks to the work of New Zealand-based consultants. This dynamic may differ across cultures and professional contexts. Future research should examine a broader range of socio-cultural settings to identify similarities and differences in relational practices, thereby deepening our understanding of consultancy work across diverse environments.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT Pro to assist with generating the abstract and key highlights. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have nothing to declare.

Appendix A. Transcription Symbols

The study used Jefferson's (2004a) transcription symbols.

(0.0)	Time elapsed between talk measured by tenths of seconds.
(.)	A period in parentheses indicates a micropause (plus or minus a tenth of a second).
= .	Latching, i.e., no gap between talk.
[]	Overlapping talk, i.e., people talking at the same time.
Word	An underline denotes speaker's emphasis.
WORD	Use of upper case indicates that the words were spoken louder than the surrounding talk.
°word°	The degree signs indicate that the words were spoken softer than surrounding talk.
↑	An upward arrow shows a rise in intonation.
↓	A downward arrow shows a fall in intonation.
?	The question mark indicates a strong rise in intonation.
,	The comma denotates an upward trend in intonation such as when reading a list of items.
.	The period denotes a fall in intonation at the end of someone's talk.
:	The colon represents stretched sound. The more the colons, the more stretched the sound.
>word<	The right/left carats indicate that the bracketed talk is speeded up, compared to surrounding talk.
<word>	The left/right carats indicate that the bracketed talk is slower, compared to surrounding talk.
((comment))	Any description in double parentheses shows researcher's commentary.
()	Any text within single parentheses shows researcher's best guess about what was said.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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