Feminist Science and Consumer Research

Alladi Venkatesh, University of California, Irvine

[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15537/gender/v01/GCB-01

[copyright notice]:

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Feminist Science and Consumer Research

Alladi Venkatesh, University of California, Irvine

Ever since the publication of the influential book by Evelyn Fox Keller (1984), titled, Reflections on Gender and Science, there has emerged an ongoing debate among feminist theorists on whether there can be such a thing called female science separate from male science. This debate continues quite vigorously, as is evident from the recent work of Sandra Harding (1986, 1987), and Joyce M. Nielsen (1989) and others. In this paper, I propose to discuss the main points of the debate and draw some conclusions for consumer research. But before doing so I shall give a brief historical background to this whole issue.

The debate regarding female association with science is not new, but a few centuries old. Schiebinger (1988) gives a vivid account of how feminine icons were used to depict the spirit of science and reason at the dawn of Enlightenment. To quote her, "In the age of Enlightenment, iconology -- 'discourse' in images -- was supposed to serve as a universal language. Yet when it came to science, there were at least two distinct universal allegories vying for power of representation. Baconians championed a masculine symbol -- virile, ready to act and command. Others championed a feminine symbol, discreetly mediating between the demands of male scientists and the secrets of nature." (In Hindu philosophy the presiding deity of learning is a female even today -- she is known as "Saraswati"). As Schiebinger later argues in her article, these images of gender lasted until after the Scientific Revolution but began to erode, soon after the founding of the Royal Society in England where conscious attempts were made to exclude female icons in preference for the establishment of "Masculine Philosophy" (Sprat 1693 - as quoted in Schiebinger). By the late eighteenth century the use of feminine symbols practically disappeared and the debates were far and few between -- until of course recently. Ironically and rather amusingly, Schiebinger notes in her conclusion that the reverse of the Nobel Prize medals has two female icons engraved on it; they are called Natura and Scientia!

If the female representation in Science had not been banished, the nature of this debate might have been different -- or the same, it is hard to say. In any case the current debate as gleaned from the works of Keller, Harding, Nielsen, Harraway and several others raises some fundamental themes which are summarized below.

1. Science is not a value-neutral enterprise that Bacon's descendants dreamed of and the positivists later mythologized.

2. Scientific enterprise is in reality built on ideological foundations which Habermas calls Scientism.

3. Science is in fact intertwined with sexism, racism, classism and cultural imperialism. It is therefore possible to speak of male science, or more accurately "white"male science.

4. Behavioral and Social sciences have become mere hand maidens of so-called Sciences and have therefore abandoned any hope of doing creating human sciences.

5. Only a Kuhnian paradigm can give rise to a kind of epistemology that the feminists and other excluded groups can feel comfortable with.

It must be noted here that in this debate, as in any other, there are two sides. Harding (1987) proposes that the debate is somewhat misguided because it does not deal with the distinction between three fundamental concepts, the research method (technique of gathering evidence), methodology (a theory and analysis of how research should proceed), and epistemology (a theory of knowledge). She believes that without a proper discussion of these various concepts one might create a "victimology" and not a true science (male or female) as some people are hoping for.

With this general background, I turn my attention to consumer research. Consumer research is slowly entering the interpretive mode of inquiry. But none of this has dealt with gender based epistemology as yet. It is only a natural extension of the interpretive debate to include gender within
this discourse. In my paper, I shall use the arguments (pro and con) currently being put forward in feminist theory and address the issues of how the consumer is objectified in consumer research and how he/she is captured within the framework of Cartesian cogito, and how there has been a neglect of the historical and cultural constructions of consumer gender as a category of theoretical inquiry. I shall then argue that gender based research in Consumer Behavior occurs within the traditional epistemology and that this needs to be modified in light of the debates within the feminist inquiry.

REFERENCES


