Gender, Sex Roles and Sexuality: Some Personal and Theoretical Observations on the Pervasiveness of Sexuality in Gendered Consumer Behavior

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An emerging theme in consumer research is that sexuality has been a wrongfully neglected variable. This is certainly true when we consider the effects of gender and sex roles on consumer behavior. Based on my experience both as a researcher and introspective male consumer (which I discuss), I seek to address this problem by first exploring a new more sexual approach to gender issues in consumer research and then by offering some related new perspectives to consider, including those of: (1) erotophilia-erotophobia, (2) gender salience and the working self-concept, (3) sex related activities, and (4) a holistic view on gender, sex roles and sexuality. I conclude by discussing the evolving and dynamic tension involved in the ever changing social construction of sex roles and sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

"What sustains our eagerness to speak of sex in terms of repression is doubtless this opportunity to speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights" (Foucault 1990a, p. 7).

Doubtless Foucault had ‘me in mind’ when he wrote these words. Moreover, they represent the stance I will take in this paper. In my experience as a sex role consumer researcher, I have become disillusioned with gender research as it now stands partly because empirical results using the predominant Bem paradigm were weak (e.g. Gould and Stern 1989; Schmitt, Leclerc and Dube-Rioux 1988; Stern 1988) and partly because I felt that I had tacitly accepted all along what I characterize as our "self-deception" about such research. That deception was that somehow the sex role construct was separate from sexuality and that somehow the two did not go together. This may stem in part from our general inability as researchers to integrate the things that "matter" in life, such as our lived experience as an embodied somatic entity (Berman 1989). It is almost as if to raise sexuality as an issue was to dirty and sully the discussion.

My own personal experience seems to belie these rigid categories and I have become disconcerted and disenchanted. Thus I feel it is very important that if I explain consumer behavior with some abstract construct, such as sex roles, it should also explain my own behavior (unless of course the behavior relates to some obvious demographic or lifestyle group to which I do not belong). Nonetheless, we (and I include myself) seem to have adopted the dogma behind this little deception perhaps in keeping with the androgyny revolution of the seventies in which maleness and femaleness seemed to be evils in a brave new world which was moving toward unisex. However, that does not seem to be quite how things are working out although there have been tremendous changes in the way men and women have socially constructed their roles. But they remain men and women, not unisexual, and our research needs to reflect this fact. Thus, with a new found interest in sexuality in consumer research both from a male and female point of view (Gould 1991a; Stern 1991), it seems to time to challenge what in any case is a severely traumatized if not dying paradigm and offer a new one in its stead. In order to explore these issues, I will first look at gender and then add in the combined effects of sex roles and sexuality. Next, I will consider three aspects of sex, sex roles and related sexuality which consumer researchers should also explore: (1) erotophilia-erotophobia, (2) gender salience and (3) sex related activities. Finally, a holistic view of sex roles and conclusions will be discussed.

Does One’s Sex Count?

Of course it does. One's sex is a very powerful predictor of consumer behavior (e.g. Gould 1987). However, the nature of its role as a
predictor variable has been scrutinized by those interested in forming a feminist psychology. For example, McHugh, Koeske and Frieze (1986) as part of a longstanding debate in psychology have suggested that the reporting of sex differences should be limited to circumstances where theory predicts them and that serendipitous differences should not be reported. Their concern is that such findings might become inscribed as science and reinforce mistaken notions about gender in a world already rife with such falsities. On the other hand, others, such as Eagly (1987) believe that sex is so important that results concerning sex differences should be reported in every psychological study, even where there is no prior theoretical hypothesis concerning it. Deux and Major (1987) suggest that one's sex is such an important variable because it is linked to a broader range of situations than are other variables, perhaps due to its apparent visibility. Although I am conscious of the pitfalls suggested by McHugh et al., I nonetheless feel compelled to conclude that one's biological sex is far too important not to study in consumer research though I am a bit more ambivalent as to whether such research results need to be reported in every study. I do believe that it can not hurt, at least from a 'scientific' point of view, in obtaining as much knowledge as possible.

One's Biological Sex and Sex Roles

Many studies which have looked at both sex roles as assessed by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) or other related measures have found that one's biological sex is generally a better predictor of consumer behavior than any of the various standard sex role measures which serve as indicators of gender construction (Gould and Stern 1989; Gould and Weil 1991; Schmitt, Leclerc and Dube-Rioux 1988). Moreover, we were warned early on in this line of research that sex-roles as assessed by the BSRI might be measuring something else other than sex-role behavior, namely instrumentality and expressiveness although they were at first still defined in terms of masculinity and femininity, respectively (Spence and Helmreich 1980). Moreover, many have called for new ways to define, assess and broaden the sex role concept (Gould and Stern 1989; Gould and Weil 1991; Payne, Connor and Colletti 1987).

Enter Sexuality

From a more practical point of view in terms of arriving at workable hypotheses concerning consumer behavior, we might investigate sexuality as a determinant of how one acts and how one self-presents and self-fashions one's own sex role(s) - an individual clearly may play many different sex roles. A sex role in this perspective is something quite different than has been defined before. Here, I would define one's sex role as largely if not wholly reflective of one's lovemap (Gould 1991a), i.e. the approach an individual takes to love and sexuality, including the scripts and schemas etc. which are involved. A sex role, or perhaps more properly a sexual role as an aspect of sex roles, encompasses the playing out of sexual scripts in everyday life in many different forms but always as embodied either in the male or female form.

Am I saying everything is sex as Freud is often alleged to have done? Yes and no. One's libido or sexual energy may be viewed as a manifestation of all one's vital energy which is projected, cathected and invested in many different activities, only some of which involve the direct act of lovemaking. But all behavior as a manifestation of that energy is connected to one's sexuality. We move that energy around through our bodies and express it through different body parts (e.g. head, chest, genitals). It all depends on what our focus is on at the moment with various parts reflecting different feelings (Gould 1991b).

In another frame of reference, everything in the life-world of the individual may be categorized as either being or not being sexual - i.e. sex-not sex, although this dichotomy may also be viewed as a continuum. Not sex is a role defined by the person who is expressing his or her energy in some way which s/he regards as non-sexual. Even acts of consumption which involve objects may be seen as forms of sex or not-sex (cf. Shimp and Madden (1988) who defined object relations in terms of a model of love). I should note that others looking at object relations theory place less emphasis on sexual response than the Freudians, for instance (cf. Rochberg-Halton 1984).

Well then is everything defined by the average person this way as sexual or not? Surely, consumers don't commonly eat an ice-cream cone and think, "this is sex" or "this is not sex." That's
often true on a conscious level but may or may not be true on an unconscious level. In fact they may be reenacting and revisiting the same polymorphous perverse, orgasmic sexual delight that they enjoyed at the breast seemingly 'eons' before. Moreover, when interacting with people, the sexuality may become explicit and they may at some point think, "this person is not for me" or "this is not the time for sex but I sure wish it was." It's an empirical question about how often sex enters people's minds. But if my own mind is any indication, then it enters a lot. I myself often think in terms of "sex-not sex" and some might argue that in this respect, I am no different from most males who seem to sexualize situations more than females (cf. Abbey 1982). Sexuality as thus expressed is a pervasive, ubiquitous and omnipresent category, focus of thought and activity in my life.

Now how do I express that? As a male consumer I express that within the limitations of being a man with certain hormones and physical features. However, this does not mean that I am opting for some sort of natural evolved male pose, but instead that whatever social construction and self-fashioning as facilitated by consumer behavior (e.g. by my dress) I bring to it plays itself out in my physical manifestation as a man, much as all sorts of varieties of music are played on a given set of instruments. In and of itself this differentiates me from women even if I act like a woman - I am then a man posing like a woman. A metaphor after all is not the real thing (cf. Lakoff 1987). In fact a long time ago I decided that I was androgynous, only I viewed the phenomenon as taking note of my feminine side. I never I thought I was not male. Instead I thought in my more Machiavellian moments that by flowing with this side of myself I could 'get more sex' through using my female side as part of my sex appeal. Moreover, there is some evidence that androgynous people are more erotophilic (Fisher et al. 1988) although I prefer to think of the issue in Jungian terms, i.e. I was explicitly expressing my anima. Thus a male who expresses his anima is not necessarily a sexless androgyne caught up in the artifacts of cognitive artificiality but rather a feeling sexual being who knows what he wants.

The sex and sexual roles I was playing and those I play now as a consumer and otherwise are caught up in the attempt to have sex, be sexy and enjoy the expression of my vital sexual energy in all aspects of life. For example, I dress to create a certain image, which at least partially is rooted in how I want to appear sexually, sometimes purposefully more and sometimes purposefully less sexy. I also eat foods which I perceive give me sexual power. Indeed while products are often sexualized in this way in our society, there are many individual differences in the degree to which they are sexualized (Gould 1991c). Moreover, I behave in various consumption-oriented groups (e.g. with my wife, party groups, friendship groups (some involving various sexual mixes)) in what I perceive to be sexually appropriate ways in terms of desirable degrees of intimacy, flirting, familiarity, etc. - i.e. by turning on(off) various gestures, body language and conversation. Thus, sex informs my perspective and consumer behavior and makes me feel good even in thinking about it. In this frame of mind I often ask myself how we as a field could have deconstructed sexuality out of the sex role picture. To define sex roles without sexuality is tantamount to me to a denial of very real experience and a limitation of our research imagination.

Sex Roles as Expressions of Specific Sexual and Gendered Behavioral-trait Characteristics

In this section, I will further elaborate the the sexual underpinnings of sex roles by investigating perspectives on sex roles which have not previously been considered in consumer behavior but which offer the promise of increasing our insight into 'gendered' consumption. These include: (1) erotophilia-erotophobia, (2) gender salience, and (3) sex related activities.

Erotophilia-Erotophobia

One way to recognize the sexuality inherent in sex roles is to consider the trait of erotophilia-erotophobia. This trait concerns "the disposition to respond to sexual cues along a negative-positive dimension of affect and evaluation"(Fisher et al. 1988, p. 124). The erotophilic individual has been found to be more receptive to various expressions of sexuality than the erotophobic individual, such as the wider and more informed use of contraceptives by erotophilic women as opposed to erotophobic women (Fisher et al. 1988). I would also suspect that the erotophilic consumer will see more things
(or at least admit seeing more things) and use more products (e.g. sexual toys, erotic films, etc.) in terms of sexuality - a category width concern. Moreover, over a number of studies, men have been found to be more erotophilic than women (Fisher et al. 1988).

Therefore if we want to analyze sex roles in terms of sexuality in consumer behavior we should consider two things: (1) erotophilia-erotophobia is a definite aspect of the individual's lovemap which determines many of his/her attitudes and behaviors, and (2) men and women indeed seem to be split along the lines of this dimension. Moreover, although there is a scale for assessing this trait, the Sexual Opinion Survey (Fisher et al. 1988), we need not be confined to any social group or generation's perception, any single measure or even methodology (e.g. quantitative, qualitative) to assess this construct or related phenomena. But what is important is to recognize that it is there and plays a role in consumer behavior. It in fact behavior. It in fact is only a tip of the iceberg in reflecting what I believe is the deep and pervasive ocean of sexuality present in consumers' lives and their consumption.

Gender Salience and the Working Self-Concept

Gender salience is the idea that the gendered self-concept arises situationally when a gendered cue primes one's focus or consciousness toward gendered aspects of the self (McGuire, McGuire and Winton 1979; McGuire and Padawer-Singer 1976). Such salience often arises when a member of the opposite sex becomes physically present in the environment of the individual or is inscribed into thought by some directive external cue. The presence of such gender salience in consumer behavior is likely to reflect direct sexual underpinnings (along with other factors). We only need observe as a very direct example how sexual language and conversation changes (as I often have) when a same-sex group of people becomes a mixed-sex group of people. Such salience may be seen as a boundary condition between where gender and sexuality come into play as their presence or absence are instantiated in the moment.

In related consumer research, Krishnamurthi (1983) described how spouses or live-in partners could affect joint preferences, Considine and Gould (1990) studied the changing nature and salience of gendered choices among family physicians with a trend toward male patients tending to choose male physicians and females choosing females possibly because of intimacy issues, and Gould and Wei! (1991) showed how gift giving to same versus opposite sex individuals changed consumer's working or situational self concepts in terms of instrumentality and expressiveness. The working self-concept is very important to consider in terms of sexually related consumer behavior because it reflects the idea that an individual may change sexual pose. Sometimes an individual may display a more sexual side and sometime a less sexual side. Thus for example a consumer may choose to dress to kill sexually when going out on a date and at other times that same individual may play down his/her sexuality in order to seem more of something else such as serious. An individual may similarly modulate the degree of perceived masculinity or femininity that s/he is willing to emit in any given situation, again especially facilitated in materialization by dress.

Sex Related Activities

Another way to view sex roles is to look at the behaviors and activities which individuals engage in terms of their sex. These also put a bound on the expression of gender and may also reflect sexual roots, thus representing the projection and cathexis of sexual libido. According to Orlofsky (1981) and Orlofsky, Ramsden and Cohen (1982), we may view human activities in three categories: (1) male valued, (2) female valued and (3) sex specific. The first two categories represent activities in which both sexes engage but which are valued as being either more masculine (e.g. basketball) or feminine (e.g. volleyball). The third category, sex specific, incorporates activities which only one sex or the other engages in (e.g. doing laundry for females; yardwork for males). We may note here that the examples cited are taken from the Sex Role Behavior Scale (see Orlofsky and O’Heran 1987) and their classification may be open to criticism, especially as times change.

Nonetheless, the focus here is not so much that there may be some disagreement about any particular items, but instead on the fact that we can classify consumers in relation to gendered activities, no matter which ones seem to be most
relevant and gender-distinguishing at any point in time. Thus, we can hypothesize that various acts of consumer behavior will tend to be perceived as gendered in some way (cf. Stern, Gould and Tewari (1990) for examples of the gendering of services) although the particular gender orientation of any activity may change over time. However, the sexual overtones of such valuing of behavior have largely been ignored. Thus, future research might consider the nature of underlying sexuality, sexual roles and sexual feeling inherent in or projected into the valuing and determining of sex-related behavior. The importance of sexual roles (i.e. the way a male or female sees him/herself in relation to the performance of the sex act and other directly related acts) while little studied should not be underestimated in terms of their potential impact in determining the sex roles we play in consumer behavior through projection and carry over from one role to another. Indeed, I sometimes experience my role as consumer as a form of sex and sexual role (e.g. as customer in a service setting with a woman as service provider as a sort of flirtatious simulation of the chain of events leading to the final sex act). If this happens often enough in a particular setting, I might apply a gender value to such an activity, such as nursing, because the presence of females adds an extra dimension to the service. Even gender-neutral or androgynous services may be evolving from gender-typing (i.e. male or female valued) through embodying expressions of increasing sexuality in that men or women playing novel roles add new sexual presence to consumer encounters, as well as expressing sexual projections of their own.

A HOLISTIC VIEW

A number of individuals have looked at gender related questions in a holistic mode suggesting that there are a number of levels and dimensions to both sex-typing (Huston 1983) and gender-related behavior (Deux and Major 1987; Devereux 1980) which must be accounted for. Devereux provides a cogent example of four ways of describing the consumer behavior of a man giving the girl he is courting a bouquet of flowers on Christmas Eve: (1) biologically the act may be seen as genitosexual, (2) experientially he knows she likes flowers, (3) culturally he acts within the symbolic confines of his culture which values Christmas and various types of gifts, and (4) neurotically (or unconsciously) there may be many motives not the least of which is the desire to deflower her. From this perspective, sex roles may be seen as a synergistic complex of feelings, values, beliefs and attitudes which play a part in determining their nature and expression. In psychoanalytic terms this state of affairs is referred to as overdetermined in that behavior results from a multidimensional complex of factors. Sexuality looms as a broad underlying force in this complex which may take on various shapes and guises in determining behavior. For instance, the very unconscious expression of it may seem to make it not be present at all as we repress it and/or seek to ascribe our behavior to other causes. Again to cite my personal experience, I have watched how I express or feel sexuality across many situations. For example, I may watch a sexy woman on TV in competition with another desire to turn the channel to somethings else I also desired to watch. In so watching myself, I have been surprised at how often my feelings move in the sexual direction. Yet at the same time these feelings merge with other socio-cultural norms, values etc. so that I channel, sublimate or otherwise manage and/or control my sexuality. I’m sure from talking to other people such as researchers, that we all feel these things - yet so far in our roles as researchers we have not acknowledged them.

CONCLUSION

The sex role concept as thus far applied has operated in a gender schematic mode by defining behavior in terms of a specified gender link (O’Heron and Orlofsky 1990) although the existing ways of assessing this link have been limited. Moreover sexuality itself as a socially constructed schematic concept has long been subject to both limitation and expansion as it has had a two-pronged historical evolution in which there have been those who have pushed it to its limits as opposed to those who seek to regulate or restrict its expression (e.g. the ancient Greek regulation of sexuality to optimize its expression (Foucault 1990b); the right handed (sexually constrained) versus left-handed Tantric (more sexually open) spiritual traditions of India; traditional religious groups in the U.S. versus sexual liberation forces in the U.S.; feminists who have sought constraints on sexuality versus those who have sought to remove its constraints (Schur 1988).
Thus, the arena for defining both sex roles and sexuality metaphorically may be seen as both a marketplace of ideas and also as a battleground over how they should be expressed which is likely to persist for some time to come. It has served to create a dynamic tension through which human development has occurred. However, were we to entirely reconstruct existing sex role schemata and in particular free both men and women from the restrictive traditionalism that has bound us, would this mean that sex or sexual roles would cease to exist or that we would even want them to cease to exist? How will sexual fantasies be constructed? I would argue that sexual roles and fantasies will take on new forms, rooted to a great degree in the sexuality of individuals. As has been suggested (Gould 1991a,d), the very nature of sexual expression itself is being and will continue to be altered in the face of technological and cultural change (e.g. the development and use of new aphrodisiacs; the import of new sexual techniques from Asia). Indeed, it will become more an activity of consumption than it is now as consumers can make active purchase and product/service use choices which can affect the nature and expression of their sexuality. How much sexuality is actually projected into various types of situations is a question, we may leave for future research.

Nonetheless, I can observe that socially constructed sex roles can't help but move in tandem with changes in the social construction and expression of sexuality as we experiment with various gendered or sex valued consumer activities and strike various poses of self-exploration (e.g. wearing different clothes and jewelry; playing board games which manipulate individuals' psychology, sex roles, working self-concepts and sexuality). Thus the expression of sex roles in their sexual nature is not something necessarily to be discouraged but instead represents a growth opportunity. Indeed when we get past both discourses of traditional sexism and reactive liberation that have been dominating our thinking up to now, we might embrace the notion that having the body of a man or woman is an ongoing act of self-discovery representing neither a limitation nor the extent of our being but rather the medium of our existence. It can be fun too. Our theories and research need to reflect these phenomenological dynamics and reconstruct sex role constructs to reflect the somatic sexuality of real consumers' daily felt experience.

REFERENCES


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