Objectivity and Gender in Consumer Research: a Feminist Deconstructionist Critique

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Objectivity and Gender in Consumer Research: 
A Feminist Deconstructionist Critique 

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Objectivity in consumer research is affected by the fact that it is a gendered enterprise reflecting a distinctly male perspective on male problems. The origins of this bias can be traced to the traditional positivist model of science which incorporates asymmetric assumptions about gender. As a result, the scientific enterprise is closely associated with masculine traits and distanced from feminine traits. This paper explores specific ways in which biases are manifest in consumer research, and briefly suggests ways in which feminist scholars are attempting to eliminate these biases.

INTRODUCTION

Objectivity has long been considered a hallmark of science. In the last decade however, consumer researchers have raised important questions concerning objectivity (c.f., Anderson 1986; Hunt 1990; Peter and Olson 1983). One aspect of this discussion has involved the role of values in research, and whether a value-free enterprise is possible. Even conservative researchers have conceded that research is likely to be value-laden (Hunt 1990). However, the discussion has not been very specific about the sorts of values that might be brought to the research workbench or whether some sorts of values are more/less appropriate than others. In this paper, we argue that values associated with gender, the set of socially constructed characteristics associated with the feminine--masculine dichotomy that provide a fundamental aspect of life through which humans think about and organize their social activity have a significant and constraining effect on the practice of consumer research (Harding 1986). Specifically, we use a feminist deconstructionist approach to explore ways in which a male or androcentric perspective has informed consumer research and led to gender biases in areas such as problem definition, methodology and resultant knowledge.

As a starting point, we wish to be extremely clear on four points. First, that we are not presuming intentionality or conscious sexist motivations on the part of specific individuals. To the contrary, we contend that it is precisely because gender biases are a subtle, unexamined part of our cultural and institutional world view, and research tradition, that they are difficult to identify and problematic to correct. However, as was Jessie Bernard (1973), we are "concerned, as any fair minded person must be, with the effects of sexism in the position of women in our profession and in our society; but [we are] also concerned, as any dedicated [consumer researcher] must be, with its affects on our discipline as well." (pg. 776). Second, post-positivists generally argue that obtaining objectivity in practice is impossible, if not undesirable (cf. Anderson 1986; Lincoln and Guba 1985). However, the concept of objectivity is complex and multidimensional. Few would suggest that systematic biases that lead to incomplete and distorted forms of knowledge are acceptable, especially when that knowledge is presented as gender inclusive forms of knowledge are desirable. Here, we only argue that gender biases represent a correctable and undesirable lapse of objectivity. Third, gender biases can occur in both directions; however instances of biases against women are far more pervasive than biases against men (Eichler 1988). Finally, space limitations prevent us from examining the important issue of how gender biases are intertwined with race, class and cultural biases.

The paper is organized as follows. We first trace the source of much gender bias to the history of the development of consumer behavior as a social science. Second, we provide some specific illustrations of gender biases in consumer research. Finally, we draw on the feminist philosophy of science literature for suggestions as to how such problems could be eliminated in consumer research.
Relatively speaking, consumer research is a young discipline in the social sciences; the first Association for Consumer Research conference was held in 1969 and the Journal of Consumer Research was founded in 1974. Like most other social science disciplines, philosophy of science issues have provoked substantial and often heated debate. Unlike the closely related field of marketing, it has been consumed less by the question of whether it is a science or not and more with issues concerning "good" and "bad" science. This is because from its inception, consumer research has achieved scientific credibility by emulating the theories and methods of psychology. Although much older, more credible and accorded greater scientific stature within the hierarchy of the social sciences, psychology has also had its share of internal philosophical and methodological debates (Taylor 1973). Sherif (1987) characterized the field as a scientific hierarchy consisting of experimentalists at the top, then tester/statisticians, then developmentalists, then social psychologists and finally clinicians at the bottom. Since the route to scientific respectability has been rigorous scientific methods, each field within this hierarchy has sought to improve its status by adopting perspectives, theories and methods as high on the hierarchy as possible. For the top of the hierarchy, the natural sciences provided the needed exemplar. There, empiricism was well established, and asymmetric gender assumptions dating back to Aristotle were deeply entrenched (Lange 1983; Spelman 1983). Since much social phenomenon is not directly observable, the requirement for direct observation via the senses inhibited the development of the modern social sciences until the 17th century when René Descartes resolved the mind-body problem. The mind-body problem asks whether the human mind is separate or connected to the body. Descartes’ conclusion that they were separate enabled social scientists to dismiss the mind as either inaccessible or non-existent (Rubenstein 1981). Among it many effects, this enabled social scientists to use the scientific method, complete with a mechanistic, stimulus-response view of causality, and methods through which human behavior could be manipulated and studied as though they were any other inert, passive object. Until quite recently, most consumer research inquiry has been implicitly founded on this model.

Using this as a backdrop, there are two main arguments on which claims about in-principle genderedness of science turn. The first argument is that the natural sciences have been gendered and gender biased from their inception. Numerous feminist deconstructions have shown that the model of science is imbued with sexual metaphors, including rape and violation, and socially constructed gender dichotomies that are assigned on the basis of biological sex, and are differentially value-laden (Harding 1986; Keller 1990). Things masculine, and thus men, are accorded power, dominance and a higher worth than things feminine, and thus women. For example, Jordanova’s (1980) study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French and British biomedical scientists which reveals how gender symbolism has been used to reconceptualize nature as female. "Science and medicine as activities were associated with sexual metaphors which were clearly expressed in designating nature as a woman to be unveiled, unclothed and penetrated by masculine science," (Jordanova 1980, pg. 45). One example of the confounding of biology with social constructions of gender and gender roles is seen in the wax models of humans used in anatomical drawings and educational displays at museums:

"The female figures are recumbent, frequently adorned with pearl necklaces. They have long hair, and occasionally they have hair in the pubic area also. These "Venuses"as they were significantly called lie on velvet or silk cushions, in a passive, almost sexually inviting pose. Comparable male figures are usually upright, and often in a position of motion," (Jordanova 1980, pg. 54).

Thus, since the social sciences are modeled directly on the natural sciences, and since the natural sciences have incorporated such gender constructions, it follows that the social sciences have as well.

The second argument for in-principle genderedness involves showing that the paradigmatic status of physics as the model of science, is inappropriate because it is actually a special case of the social sciences. This position (cf., Harding 1986; Nielsen 1990) is advanced on the grounds its subject matter is relatively simple
compared with the social sciences. Further, while physicists need not employ interpretive skills to grasp the meaning and purpose of their subject matter, "doing" physics, (e.g., developing constructs, theorizing), like any other human enterprise, involves social interpretation and perception (cf., Zukav 1979). On these such grounds it is argued that physics is really a special case of the social sciences. Thus, if it can be shown that gender biases exist in the social sciences, it follows that the natural sciences contain them as well. In the last decade, numerous feminist deconstructions have explored the effects of using a masculine model in the social sciences. In the next section, we add to this tradition by exploring some of the gender biases in consumer research.

GENDER BIAS IN CONSUMER RESEARCH

Although thus far we have been speaking of gender bias as though it there was one type, it actually occurs in numerous forms. While Eichler (1988) has done an excellent and comprehensive job of categorizing gender biases, the goal of this section is much more modest. Having argued that the positivist model of science itself is biased, we provide illustrations and examples of how gender biases are manifest in five general areas of relevance to consumer research.

The first area relates to views of consumer research as a scientific enterprise which implicitly incorporate socially constructed dichotomies involving gender. These dichotomies, which are considered to be isomorphic with biological sex, carry differential value whereby masculine traits are associated with science and assigned a much higher value, while so-called feminine traits symbolize the opposite of what is considered to be scientific and are devalued (Keller 1990). As examples, consider the following dichotomies: subject (knower) vs. object (known); active vs. passive; authority/questioner vs. answerer of questions; objective vs. subjective; mind vs. body; scientific vs. artistic; rational vs. emotional; thinking vs. feeling; hard vs. soft; quantitative vs. qualitative. In each case, the former is associated with the masculine, the later with the feminine. Further, implicit in the model of science is the notion that there is a need to maintain the separation, domination and control over the later, lest life be overwhelmed by irrationally alien forces (Harding 1986). This view has significant implications for consumer research. One implication is that gender, which is a social construction, is assumed to be equivalent, or "hardwired" to biological sex. In other words, men are viewed as "naturally" more objective, quantitative, and rational and thus well suited to be scientists (Keller 1990). On the other hand, women are viewed as "naturally" more emotional, expressive, and nurturing and thus well suited to be wives and mothers. Although few now believe this to be the case, and more women are receiving their PhDs, encouraging larger numbers women to enter the sciences is still a serious problem. Further, judgments about a woman's likely role in an academic setting may be informed by views about what constitutes "natural" roles for men and women (Aisenberg and Harrington 1988). Thus, women consumer researchers in academic settings may be automatically assumed to be a secretary or student by colleagues and students with whom they are not personally acquainted (Aisenberg and Harrington 1988; Simeone 1987). Even when this assumption is corrected, women often have difficulty being taken seriously as a professor and researcher. Another implication is that the implicit themes of domination and control can have serious consequences for how the concerns of women as consumers are viewed. For example, Betty Friedan (1969) analyzed the marketing of household products in the 1950's and 1960's. She argues that marketers were afraid that if women were too progressive and turned their focus outside the home (e.g., career), they would reduce their purchases of marketers' products. Thus, in order to prevent this from happening, marketers needed to create outlets for women's creative energies and create the illusion that their consumption choices were important ones. To do so, they perpetuated the "feminine mystique" or the idea that a woman's ultimate fulfillment and expression of her femininity came from her role as a wife and mother (Friedan 1969).

The second area that gender biases are manifest is in the language of consumer research and its concepts, images and metaphors. On the language issue, one sign of progress on this issue is that the journals and conference proceedings are generally employing gender-inclusive language, although it seems that verbal discourse is still too often gendered. Feminist analyses have repeatedly pointed out that: gendered terms such as "he" and "man" are never gender neutral; it is
insufficient and inadequate to intend a term to be
gender inclusive because the reader's/listener's
interpretation may differ; and even when the term
is unambiguously inclusive, the result may be odd,
amusing or insulting (e.g., "Some men are
female") (Moulton 1977). Gender biased
language can be especially problematic during
data collection and can seriously affect
interpretation (Eichler 1988). As an illustration,
and not an attempt to single anyone out, Wilson
and Peterson (1989) presented respondents with
the following scenario in a word of mouth study in
which the use of "he" might be problematic:
"Suppose you found out your neighbor had
purchased Brand [A or B] (of a digital tape
recorder) and that he had to take it back..." It is
unclear as to whether "he" was intended to mean
male, or any human. Yet responses are likely to
have varied depending on how this was
interpreted, as well as by respondents' sex. We
suggest that because of the product involved, it is
more likely that respondents would have
interpreted the neighbor as male. This is
theoretically problematic however because no
where in the paper is it suggested that the
research question is about the evaluation of
positive vs. negative word of mouth information
from male sources.

While language is generally becoming more
gender inclusive, many concepts are gendered.
For example, the marketing concept is
underwritten by an implicit theory of the
consumer as female (although clearly no one
thinks all consumers are female) (Fischer and
Bristol, forthcoming). Although the concept is
typically expressed as determining the needs and
wants of consumers while meeting organizational
goals (c.f., Kotler 1984), marketing activities such
as "targeting,""segmenting," and "penetrating"
suggest a view of the marketer-consumer relation
that parallels traditional stereotypes concerning
male-female relationships. In such stereotypes, a
man uses gifts of flattery to court a woman (meets
her "needs") in order to achieve sexual
gratification (his "goal"). These marketer-
consumer relations are suggestive of dichotomies
mentioned in the previous paragraph, e.g., mind
vs. body and active vs. passive. Further, it also
reveals a mechanistic, stimulus-response model of
causality where the marketer "does" something to
the consumer to produce a response that clearly
opposes the more interactive relationship implied
by the marketing concept. Interestingly, this
consumer research example provides striking
contrast to organizational buying behavior where
marketers, consumers and researchers have
usually been male. For over a decade,
researchers have protested the use of the
stimulus-response model (cf. Bonoma, Bagozzi
and Zaltman 1978). Further, industrial marketing
is the source of the currently popular notion of
developing long term customer relationships (c.f.,
Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987).

The third area that gender biases are manifest is
in research problem identification and definition.
Under positivism, these biases become virtually
invisible because of the sharp distinction that is
drawn between the contexts of discovery and
justification (c.f., Deshpande 1983; Hunt 1990).
On the positivist view, the methods and activities
discovery and justification are irrelevant because adherence to
positivism's scientific prescriptions during
justification will ensure objectivity, thus there need
be no "logic" of discovery. On the view that
following the scientific method results in
objectivity, it becomes quite inappropriate to
suggest that the formulation of a research
problem is gender biased. However, post-
positivist analyses (c.f., Suppe 1973) have pointed
out that discovery and justification are not
separate activities, and that problem formulation
is not value neutral (Garfinkle 1981). Further,
feminist analyses suggest that the unquestioning
acceptance of white bourgeois experience as the
norm means that the problematics in many fields
reflect a distinctly male perspective on male
concerns (Harding 1986; Millman and Kanter
1975). While not likely to provide an exception,
consumer research does provide an ironic
contrast. Since the marketing concept is implicitly
informed by a "consumer as female" notion,
women are central to consumer research and not
routinely ignored and rendered invisible as in
other fields. Yet, following on our metaphor of
traditional male-female relations suggests that
problematics may be dominated by the male's
(marketer's, researcher's) viewpoint and concerns,
not the female's (consumer's) (c.f. Firat and Lewis
1985). Indeed, the suggestion that the marketer's
viewpoint dominates consumer research is not
new (Holbrook 1987).

The fourth area in which gender biases are
manifest is in the theories and methods used by
consumer researchers. As one illustration,
although the "consumer as female" informs
consumer research, sex and gender are rarely explicitly incorporated as theoretically important variables, excepting the rare case when such variables are the topics of research (cf., Qualls 1987; Fischer and Arnold 1990). Yet, research results from other disciplines provide evidence that important gender differences exist in, for example, how children learn to delineate "subject" from "object" (Keller 1990), moral development (Gilligan 1982), and the interpersonal orientations and range of social experiences that boys and girls arrive with at puberty (Gilligan 1987). Such differences have important implications for consumer research, for example, in theories of consumer socialization, as well as how researchers construe, approach and interact with their subjects. To the extent that gender and sex have been considered in consumer research, they usually have been analyzed for categorical sex differences (e.g., whether there was a difference between men's and women's ratings), as opposed to how gender affects various consumer behaviors. Many scholars criticize the search for biological sex differences, as opposed to similarities (c.f., Eichler 1988). This is illustrated by quantitative analyses using hypothesis tests which traditionally take the form of:

\[ H_0: \text{No difference between sex} \]
\[ H_A: \text{Differences between sex.} \]

Because of the bias toward rejecting \( H_0 \) and publishing significant results, published research tends to emphasize differences, not similarities, a problem which is exacerbated by the sensitivity of such tests to sample size. As Hyde's (1981) meta-analysis shows, even statistically significant differences may be so small they are meaningless. Yet, they may be used as the basis of public policy and other decisions.

As another illustration of gender biases in theory and method, data collection methods may be discriminatory. The preponderance of quantitative behavioral data is problematic because it is not very effective for studying experiential aspects of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). This problem is more serious for women than men because so much social science research can be characterized by male perspectives on male experiences (Harding 1986, Millman and Kanter 1975). Further, positivism's historical preference for observable behavioral data is based on the assumption that there is a high degree of fit between consciousness and behavior. Because many women's behavior has been constrained by social norms, there may be a weak link between their behavior and how they actually think and feel (Westkott 1979). Consumer researchers have only recently begun to conduct experiential, interpretive research. Much needs to be done to investigate, for example, what it means to be a female consumer, or how women feel about stereotypical or sexual portrayals of consumers (as opposed to whether it increases sales) (cf. Firat and Lewis 1985).

The fifth area in which gender biases can be seen is in actual marketer-consumer relations. Admittedly, consumer research results do not automatically translate into managerially relevant knowledge. On the other hand, there is an important interplay, starting with the way consumer researchers frame their research questions. To some consumer researchers, the tendency to view consumers as though they are fish (Tucker 1974) is an unfortunate reflection of marketers' influence in setting consumer research agendas (c.f., Holbrook 1987). To feminists, the tendency to view consumers as manipulable objects is an unfortunate reflection of stereotypical gender constructions that are at best outmoded, and at worst reflections of desires for a continuation of white bourgeois male dominance. As one such illustration, Gloria Steinem (1990) recounts the Ms. editors' largely unsuccessful struggles to convince advertisers that their readers were demographically and psychologically suitable advertisement targets for cars, computers, cosmetics, etc. As another illustration, Parker Brothers' new game "Careers for Girls" has come under heavy criticism because while "career" options include supermom, fashion designer and college graduate, there is a noticeable absence of careers reflecting policy making or leadership (Ellerbe 1990). Finally, Mattel's Barbie dolls have been criticized repeatedly, representative of which is McKillop's (1990) editorial column. He argues that a lifesized Barbie would have a chest measuring over 44 inches and suggests that this merely represents male desires as to the average female form, and that it conditions young girls to think they are nothing more than trophies for men. Further, McKillop asks why, if Barbie is a role model and helps build girl's esteem, she lives in such a white world, and what kind of a message this sends to black children? Everything about
Barbie, including the black Barbie with a "George Hamilton cocoa butter tan" is white. Finally McKillop wonders why Ken differs from Barbie. First of all, he doesn’t have comparable proportional sexual endowment that would serve to erode boys’ self esteem. Second, whereas some Barbies are bendable--poseable, so that she can be put into any position desired, Ken only bends over.

**CONCLUSION: FEMINIST SOLUTIONS**

By now, readers who concur with our general assessment that consumer research contains gender biases are undoubtedly wondering about viable solutions. One approach is to assume it will be self-correcting by increasing the number of women engaging in consumer behavior research, either naturally, or via affirmative action programs; and/or by adding women to consumer analyses. While well intended, these solutions would only be treating symptoms. Until the scientific model itself is corrected, receiving more women into the academy and training them in the methods of science merely perpetuates such biases. Similarly, simply grafting women onto existing theories is ineffectual because the theories themselves often reflect a male bias (Calas and Smirich forthcoming; Firat and Lewis 1985; Harding 1986).

Another approach might be to adopt a relativist stance. If feminists were merely arguing that men’s experiences provide a partial grounding for knowledge claims, then relativism would be an appropriate epistemological stance. However, sexist and non-sexist claims are never equally plausible (Harding 1986). Harding argues that we cannot just "add women" and gender to existing bodies of social belief because they do not only ignore women/gender, they also distort our understanding of all social life by ignoring the ways women and gender shape social life, and by advancing false claims about women and gender. Thus, feminists oppose relativism fairly consistently. This opposition, however, does not preclude the view that: science is not neutral, objective or value free; that categories of knowledge are human constructions; and that theories contain a consistent observational and evaluative bias (Gilligan 1987). Further, Eichler (1988, pg. 13) believes that feminists can be critical of how objectivity has been used in practice without "having to abandon the concept and sink in to the morass of complete cultural subjectivism." The need is to "separate clearly objectivity from the myth that research is value free." Thus, she finds it "useful to think of objectivity as an asymptotically approachable but unreachable goal, with the elimination of sexism in research as a station along the way," (pg. 14). Perhaps paradoxically, the motivation to produce a more objective and complete knowledge by correcting the scientific record of androcentrism and inaccuracies about women is decidedly political and informed by social values. Objectivity will be increased, not by value neutrality, but by commitments to antiauthoritarian, antielitist, participatory and emancipatory values and objectives (Harding 1986).

Instead of relativism, feminists are engaged in developing criteria to show that feminist explanations are more adequate that others, some of which may be found in various forms of realism (Nielsen 1990). Further, much feminist scholarship is devoted to developing ways in which scientific inquiry can be made more objective. One way is through feminist empiricism (Millman and Kanter 1975) which argues that gender biased research is simply "bad"science and therefore, the solution is to practice better science. Such a view challenges the practice, rather than the norms of empiricism and thus, leaves in tack principles of good science as we know it (Harding 1986). On the other hand, it takes a tough stance on the practice of science on three grounds (Harding 1987). First, it argues that the context of discovery, including problem identification and discovery, is as important as the context of justification. It also argues that traditional practice will not naturally eliminate biases. Finally it argues that in addition to more closely following research norms, alternative approaches to inquiry that challenge traditional habits and raise profound questions that are not marginalized as deviant are required.

The second way research might be made objective is with feminist standpoint epistemologies (Harding 1986). A standpoint epistemology argues that less powerful members have potential for a more complete view of reality because they can be sensitive to both the view of those that dominate and their own minority view (Nielsen 1990). Nielsen (1990) argues that the dominant view is partial and perverse because it is in the
interest of those in power to maintain, reinforce and legitimate their own dominance and particular understanding of the world. She argues that the minority view is more complete because to survive, both views must be understood. Thus feminist standpoint epistemologies suggest that women's views and understanding are more complete and should inform research.

To conclude, like other social science disciplines, consumer research incorporates subtle but asymmetric assumptions about gender. It is far easier to identify the resulting biases than to propose adequate solutions. Our brief descriptions of feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint epistemologies did not do justice to the fact that, neither they, nor feminist post-modernism which was not even discussed, raise many tough and controversial issues about which feminist scholars are not in unanimous agreement. On the other hand, there is a definite sense of optimism that by uncovering and eliminating gender biases, feminist scholarship can make significant scientific contributions to the social sciences.

Ironically enough, they made this argument repeatedly on the basis of quantitative data.

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