Gender 2000 Summary of Panel Remarks

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Earlier this year I was asked to review a paper submitted to a consumer behavior track for the Summer 1996 AMA Conference. The author(s) of that paper were studying traditional gender roles and a specific type of shopping behavior. In their literature review, the author(s) paid proper lip service to three gender-related constructs: gender, gender identity, and gender role attitudes; all are constructs previously used in our literature. But when it was time to measure these three relevant constructs, all were collapsed into a single measure more appropriately called "sex" of the subject, despite the fact that the author(s) stated that the "distinction between sex and gender identity must be maintained."

The flaws in the conceptualization and measurement of gender-related constructs led me to recommend a rejection, but also started me thinking much more about how the general marketing literature has treated gender. With the present company excluded, a quick review of our consumer behavior literature and marketing’s recent literature shows we are still all too apt to resort to the male-female dichotomy, or perhaps inform our research by examining the masculine-feminine dichotomy. Would that gender was such an easy construct to categorize!

So my comments today are on issues related to broadening our perspectives on gender in consumer behavior and in marketing in general. I would like to start with the two dichotomies I just mentioned: sex and what some call "sex role." We can posit both sex and sex role as opposing poles on continua:

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    female
    |    |    feminine
  masculine    male
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where the "female-male" dimension represents a biological or "essential" (essential in the sense of "determined") perspective on gender and the "masculine-feminine" dimension represents a socially constructed perspective (DeCecco and Elia 1993). If you add to that a set of gender attitude measures, you have pretty much covered 90 percent of the existing marketing research that deals with gender.

I would argue that both of these dimensions suffer from an extreme reductionism and smack of determinism which denies the role of the individual in gender. By broadening these two narrow and seemingly orthogonal measures, perhaps we can begin to understand
the nuances of gender-related
influences in our consumption
behavior. And maybe we can see our
way to a synthesis of these two
dimensions through becoming
informed on a number of gender-
related constructs in our research.

For your consideration, I suggest six
additional perspectives on gender,
each informing and influencing our
construction of this thing we call
gender. First, consider the
developmental and experiential
aspects of sexuality and gender.
Individual notions of sexuality and
gender evolve and change over time
as individuals gain personal
experience and are informed by the
experiences of others. I suspect our
experiential boundaries have been
significantly broadened in the
twentieth century through pervasive
depictions of sexuality and gender in
the media. How has this
"consumption" of sexuality and
gender influenced our research
subjects construction of their own
sexuality and gender? How have
marketers altered the development of
individual and collective senses of
sexuality and gender?

Second, and related to the
developmental and experiential
aspects of sexuality and gender, is a
temporal perspective on sexuality and
gender in an individual. We know
that individual's sexual identity,
behavior, and sense of sexual and
gendered self changes over the course
of a lifetime. How can the study of
such changes inform our research?
One handy theory base for
understanding this role of time is the
"coming out" process which gay men
and lesbians go through during their
lives. Raised as "essential" males (or
females) and socially constructed as
males (or females) during their early
development, gay men and lesbians
eventually confront a non-conforming

sexuality and gender identity.
Studying how they transform their
identity over time may provide us
with an analogue to study similar
(though perhaps more subtle) changes
among our subjects.

Third is the cultural perspective. In
this broad perspective I include the
historical and political perspectives
which continue to inform the research
that has come forward from this
conference group's work over the
past six years. We accept that cultural
influences on sexuality and gender are
undeniable. The challenge for us is to
spread the word on this easily grasped
perspective while at the same time
guarding against a "culturally-
constructed" reductionism in our use
of these perspectives.

Fourth is the affective perspective.
Each of us experiences a broad range
of emotions, mood states, and other
affective phenomena related to
sexuality and gender. Which
emotions and how the individual
experiences those emotions related to
sexuality and gender will also inform
our research. In research that I have
worked on over the past three years
my colleagues and I have wrestled
with how to measure the emotional
responses related to disgust,
repulsion, fascination, desire, all of
which were stimulated by exposure to
an advertising stimulus. It has
gradually dawned on us that we
cannot simply "control and measure"
as we have always done. The
individual's construction of sexuality
and gender is far more complex, and
our "control and measure" does not
do that construct justice.

The fifth perspective to take into
account is the role of hormones and
other biochemical processes in
sexuality and gender. While it is easy
for us to experience those processes as
substantive, measurement and
incorporation into marketing research is a dramatic challenge. Perhaps this is one area where cross-disciplinary research would be useful, providing a common ground between biologists, physiologists and marketers.

Sixth, and finally, are the intentional and behavioral perspectives on sexuality and gender. People are rational, emotional, yet deliberate animals. How often do we take into account the deliberate aspects of sexuality and gender? We seem to notice those only on the margins, when, for example, an extreme example comes to the fore and we have no other means of explanation than "he (or she) deliberately behaved in this way." I would argue we would all be better informed if we stopped to examine the intentions behind more subtle sexual- and gender-related behaviors.

We can begin to incorporate some of these perspectives in our research by looking at some additional constructs in sexuality and gender:

- biological or physiological sex
- gender identity
- sexual identity
- gender affiliation
- attitudes on gender and sexuality
- sexual behavior (both "functional" and "hedonic")
- self-definition and self-construction
- individual choice.

I believe that it is the integration and synthesis of these diverse components of sexuality and gender that will inform our consumer behavior research in the coming decades. In a way, it is a whole new frontier for marketing researchers. Our challenge is to look for the trail markers left for us in the social and biological sciences and to incorporate these deeper perspectives on sexuality and gender in our own work.

REFERENCE