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The Public Face of Marketing and the Private Problems of Women Marketing Managers in Ireland

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In this paper we seek to demonstrate that issues of gender go much deeper than issues of equality in the workplace. Whereas the latter are basically structural and thus more readily adjusted, the former are more often located in our wider social systems. Consequently they are more rigidly embedded in our cultural background, including our organization cultures, and thus they are more difficult to unearth and address. In order to explore this we discuss the dichotomy between the public and private spheres, with specific reference to research undertaken with female marketing managers in Ireland.

INTRODUCTION

A close look at the underpinning concepts of our socio-political theories reveals that they are based around dualisms that have frequently been identified as central to Western thought (Plumwood, 1993). These dualisms are often translated as distinctions between reproduction and production, the family and the state, the private and public domains.

Feminist scholars argue that these dualisms operate in a way that privileges one of each pair. For example, production, the state and the public sphere are associated with man and masculinity and deemed superior to the other side, associated with women and femininity. Not only is one side privileged over the other; it is also defined in terms of the other so that male is defined by what female is not, and vice versa.

The public sphere has historically been an almost exclusively male sphere and has consequently developed in a manner that presumes its occupants have a male body. The Enlightenment philosophers who proposed the social contract and the rights of the citizen within the state did so for male citizens. Quite simply, women were not a party to the social contract and, until relatively recent times, did not have a status in law. Relations between males and females were a private concern, not a public one and even today, many people still argue that the state has no legitimate right to meddle in private concerns. Fahy (1996) illustrates this public/private problematic in Ireland. The social contract, the bedrock on which Western democracies are founded, left women in an anomalous even untenable position. Women were not citizens yet were responsible for the reproduction of citizens and to provide respite for the male citizens who toiled in the public sphere. Thus underlying the social contract was a sexual contract that defined relations between males and females; a contract that was not renegotiated or redefined as women moved into the public world of the citizen and work in organizations.

Women wishing to occupy the public sphere must do so, therefore, on male terms. This sphere concerns itself only with production, not reproduction, and only with social wage labour, not private domestic labour, yet in joining this sphere a woman will not be able to relinquish her association with the private sphere. She may feel, however, that she must suppress this side of her life. In a sense she may pretend she does not have domestic concerns, as bringing her personal life, her private concerns, into the workplace may make
her male colleagues feel uncomfortable. Worse, perhaps, they may feel that she should be
at home, rather than expecting equal footing in a man’s world, if she is incapable of leaving
these domestic concerns at home where they belong. This results in what Thompson
(1996) has described as “juggling lifestyles”, the balancing act that women continually
perform in maintaining their traditional role in the private sphere and their new found
“equality” in the public sphere.

This paper examines issues surrounding this public / private dichotomy which emerged in a
research study to explore how gender effects the marketing role, conducted with female
marketing managers in Northern Ireland.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research involved the use of focus groups with women marketing managers because
we believed that if we interviewed women individually they might not speak of gender as a
issue. We also used the notion of what Padilla (1993) has described as “dialogical
research” which uses group discussions as a means to reveal the ways in which individuals
experience and react to problematic aspects of everyday life. The concept of dialogical
research is based largely on the work of Brazilian educator Freire (1972). Its core tenet is
that, through group discussions, it is possible for individuals to come to recognize that their
personal problems are shared with others, and thus are connected to wider social issues and
located in the wider social sphere. We adopted this research approach on the assumption
that women might be reticent about talking about their “unease”, viewing any confession of
having this “problem” as an admission of failure, of not being up to the challenge of
working in a man’s world. Being part of a group of other women, who worked in similar
roles, might, we believed, encourage women to articulate their concerns in an environment
of support, of community, and of confidentiality.

Secondly, focus groups have radical and emancipatory potential, a potential that remains
largely unused and not discussed in market(ing) research. Generally the market(ing)
researcher co-opts the experiences of group participants to serve the information needs of
the researcher or client but not the group participants. By contrast dialogical research is
intended to benefit those who participate in the research process, where shared information
and experiences empower participants and may even stimulate collective action (Johnson,
1996).

So it was the potential inherent in this type of radical focus group, that is to say, its ability
to locate personal troubles in wider social structures (Freire, 1972) and thereby empower
participants, that guided our choice of research methodology. Traditional research design
and implementation considerations, therefore, take something of a back seat to the more
important emancipatory objectives of the project. Indeed, in contrast to traditional research
projects, where the researcher reaches a point where sufficient data has been collected to
move from the fieldwork to the analysis and interpretation states, this project is perceived
as an ongoing one.

In the following discussion we will make reference to the findings from a series of focus
groups of this nature which we are conducting with female marketing managers in
Northern Ireland from a broad range of business sectors. It is well documented that many
women in management roles consciously or unconsciously adapt to the “malestream”
culture in which they find themselves in preference to the often more difficult road of
developing alternative ways of working and thereby opening up the possibilities of change
for others (Newman, 1995; Gummer, 1990). The objective of this dialogical research method is to lift the veil from these “malestream” opinions and encourage participants to reflect more on their experiences of working in marketing.

FINDINGS

A number of themes emerged from our research to illustrate the uncomfortable fit that many marketing women experience within organizations. In the marketing workplace and marketing literature the topic of gender is usually focused on consumers rather than on ourselves and our own working relationships with colleagues and other marketers. As both the internal and external environments are areas of particular importance to the marketing role there are many gender-related complexities that the woman marketing manager must comprehend, accommodate and come to terms with. It is not sufficient for her simply to seek to understand those within her own organization and work to improve her internal communications; she continually faces the challenge of being a woman in a predominantly male working world. For example, learning to adapt to the gender-related culture of customers’ organizations also becomes a critical function in order for her to be able to manage the company/customer interface more successfully. We hope that our findings, therefore, will encourage new perspectives on gender in marketing specifically as they relate to the marketing organization and profession.

Keeping Mum

Most of the women we spoke to indicated that they were careful not to raise private issues with their male colleagues. This included not talking about their family life and avoiding discussing children or domestic matters. By this behaviour they were trying to leave their role as “if” a mother behind when they entered the workplace. In turn, this then sometimes led to feelings that kept some women in a continual state of guilt.

Some women admitted that they did try to establish greater intimacy with colleagues by asking about their families or talking about their own families. Despite their greater propensity to express feelings, to get personal, there was a general recognition on the part of the women who took part in the research that these tendencies should be suppressed. The exception, however, as one woman expressed it, was when they were asked to “play mummy” to a male colleague, namely to offer a sympathetic ear to a colleague who wished to discuss his personal problems. Most of the women marketing managers consciously tried not to discuss their home life and to keep this out of the workplace.

Generally speaking the women felt that any allusion to family life was inappropriate, especially in front of male colleagues. As one marketing manager put it: “men you would confide in would be rare”. Indeed a number of women admitted that they spent their professional life pretending that they did not have a family life. The duck on a pond analogy springs to mind. Women who are of childbearing age but who do not have a family are anxious to demonstrate that having a family is the last thing on their minds, even if they are keen to have children at some stage in the future. Similarly, women who do have a family seek to maintain an outward appearance of calm control, of their family having no claim on their thoughts when they are in their public role.

Of course, men and women both have the same problem in that work increasingly encroaches on their private life. However, because male managers still do not do as much in the home, in either physical or emotional terms, as women managers (Wajeman, 1996,
Duncombe and Marsden, 1995) they experience less difficulty in maintaining a separation between the two domains. They do not suffer from women’s constant sense of responsibility for things running smoothly.

This point was reinforced by a number of the women marketing managers who described their difficulties in separating the public and private spheres when they went home. This was a problem that they believed was not shared by their partners who seemed to have no difficulty “switching off”. Several women routinely took work home with them and referred to trying to improve themselves through this dedication. This illustrates two points: firstly, that articulating concerns is something which men may not be so comfortable doing; and secondly, that women who do find it hard to switch to private mode when they’ve returned home often discover that the world of work follows them into their home environment.

In her discussion of ordinary and institutional language McElhinny (1997) makes a distinction between ordinary language (that situated in the private domain which is characterized by the personal, the familiar, the everyday) and institutional language (that situated in the public domain and associated with institutional identity, goals and tasks). McElhinny regards this as a linguistic manifestation of the public versus private dichotomy. Ordinary language, the personal the familiar, emanating from women’s private roles, inevitably jars with the institutional language of the public sphere. Bringing the private into the public, the institutional, in effect being “personal”, may indeed be political in an organizational context due to the threat it poses to the status quo.

Distance Learning

That women managers tend towards a more democratic and participative leadership style is well documented (Freeman and Varey, 1997; Jolson et al, 1997; Ferrario, 1994; Morrison, 1992). It is widely recognized in this literature that women in general have better interpersonal and communication skills. However, this too can be another way that women feel they don’t fit within organizations and it is another aspect which they try to keep under control. Their male colleagues largely do not talk on a personal level. Phrases such as “men don’t talk about their feelings the way women do” were common in each of the focus groups. This further reinforces the potential for misinterpretation of actions and specifically friendliness in this case. A recurring theme throughout our discussions was the amount of time women often spent reading cues from male colleagues or customers in order not to be misinterpreted. Women’s greater propensity to be open and friendly was problematic too in another respect in that women were constantly aware of the danger of male colleagues misinterpreting their friendliness as a sexual overtone.

There was a continual assessing and judging of situations in order to ensure that their behaviour was appropriate and not open to misinterpretation. For example, attendance at trade fairs and exhibitions necessitated the women marketing managers taking considerable care to dress right, that is to say, in such a way as not to send out the wrong signals when confronting the ubiquitous “male gaze”. One marketing manager who traveled frequently to trade fairs confessed that she would put on spectacles in order to look professional, plain and be taken seriously. Several respondents discussed how they deliberately dressed to “fade” or blend into the background so that they would not stand out from the crowd. In other words, they were trying not to draw attention to sexual difference. Certainly they did not see this “difference” in affirmative terms, as something to celebrate rather than conceal. Rather, their effacing attitudes seem more to indicate their attempts to adapt to the maleness
of the public sphere in which they find themselves. This particular finding reinforces Sheppard's (1989) point that women's need to desexualize themselves, whilst still being perceived as feminine, produces deliberate techniques of dressing, speaking and acting aimed at minimizing any potential erotic overtones.

A Professional Approach

“Professional” was the term that was continually used by respondents when describing their quest to be accepted on equal terms by male colleagues. In their efforts to be perceived as professional, women had to be careful that their “normal” friendliness and approachability wasn’t misinterpreted by men as a sexual overture. If women sensed that their openness was being misinterpreted they became more standoffish, impersonal and cold to emphasize their professionalism. Becoming professional is therefore a useful tactic for defusing potentially embarrassing even dangerous situations. It also reinforces the misfit between the terms female and professional. Being female or womanly means being friendly and approachable whereas being professional means being impersonal and distant.

Women marketing managers’ quest to prove themselves in the workplace meant suppressing anything which might be perceived as a weakness and especially anything to do with the private sphere. The professional/personal tension reflects the public/private dichotomy and manifests itself most obviously in women’s efforts to conceal feelings, emotions and problems in front of male colleagues. One respondent indicated that she would never confide in her male colleagues for fear of being considered vulnerable, or as she put it, “second best” because she was a woman.

Being professional means acting and thinking like a man, being rational, detached, tough. This very much reflects the tendency by both males and females to stereotype the managerial role as male (Schein and Mueller, 1992). Women who feel uncomfortable with this role, this masquerade of masculinity, tend to blame themselves if they feel alienated within an organization. They see their discomfort as their problem; many believing that if they emphasize their professionalism and play down their gender that there will be greater likelihood of them being accepted by male colleagues. While they may never be accepted as one of the boys, they may at least be accepted for doing their job well, in spite of being female. This was borne out by several of the women who took part in the focus groups. There was a continual emphasis on the need to be perceived as professional on the one hand and a continual playing down of other, private roles, such as that of housewife and mother on the other.

At the same time women need to be careful not to de-emphasize their sexuality and be too “professional”. Assertiveness and competitiveness is read as being masculine and aggressive. Kendall and Tannen (1997) refer to a number of studies that highlight the “double bind” women face in organizations: assertive “professional” women are less liked by both men and women. Women often have to choose, therefore, between being assertive and professional or being likeable and “feminine”, and by implication less effectual perhaps, in managerial terms. If they are too sexually alluring, they are not taken seriously, and if they mimic masculine behaviour they face being punished for being asexual. This, as Sheppard (1989) points out, is the balancing act that women continually perform in organizations. Being a “professional” woman therefore is clearly a complex issue, even an oxymoronic one; certainly, it is fraught with difficulties at every turn.
Sitting Pretty

The values associated with masculinity (for example being independent, unemotional, objective, forceful and distant) have become synonymous with the managerial role and the public sphere (Wilson, 1995); indeed the very notion of authority denotes maleness, as does the appellation “manager” (Kendall and Tannen, 1997). Women in the workplace are more likely to be associated with the stereotypical feminine values (for example, dependence, being emotional, subjective, submissive and expressive) and the private sphere, and consequently they often find themselves in roles that reinforce these values.

Pateman (1988) argues that women are employed not as employees but as women and, in this way, the sexual contract is an integral element in the employment contract. Women’s gender based characteristics, including their sexuality, are co-opted by employers. Tancred-Sheriff (1989, p.48) argues that women are employed in sales and customer service jobs precisely because of their “natural” ability to control and appease customers, ensuring that the customer behaves appropriately during transactions; for their “controlling and encouraging presence and soothing demeanor in times of dispute.” Hern and Parkin (1987) suggest that flirting between women and male customers is institutionalized in organizations and is part of the female employment contract in secretarial, receptionist and selling jobs. Hochschild (1983) explains how the job of airline cabin staff is deliberately sexualized to soothe customers.

These points from the literature were amply illustrated by many of the women we spoke to who felt excluded from strategic decision making, and usually found themselves in less valued support roles in marketing, such as customer care, market research, advertising or promotional activities. Significantly, then, there may be a male/female divide within marketing in terms of the roles assigned to men and women. Is this because marketing strategy reverberates with what Gherardi (1995, p.11) describes as “the great male saga of conquest (of new markets) and of campaigns (to launch new products)”? In contrast the service side of marketing “echoes to the language of care, of concern for needs and of relationality” (op cit, p.12) and thus is gendered as marketing’s feminine side.

One woman described the prevailing attitude in her firm as being that “girls are all right for the advertising jobs etc, but when it gets to the commercial stuff, that’s for the boys”. Another women marketing manager actually had to wear a uniform along with all the other female members of staff. Male employees were under no such restrictions in dress. In this way women in marketing are segregated into areas defined as more suitable “women’s work”, repeating patterns found in other professions such as accountancy where women are mainly in auditing (Lehman, 1992). These areas also inevitably have lower status, lower material rewards, less autonomy and fewer opportunities for advancement (Roberts and Coutts, 1992).

The point here is that women on the service side of marketing are undertaking complex public/private reversals in the context of their working lives. They play a traditionally female role in their dealings with the “market”, and are expected to make full use of their feminine charms. Conversely, within the company they have to be one of the boys and compete with them on “malestream” terms. The same even applies to market research, which is rapidly becoming a feminized profession (in the British Isles at least, where the number of women in the Market Research Society exceeds the number of men). Here it is the males that do the more highly regarded “number crunching” work while females are more associated with “softer” qualitative work.
A Question of Timing

Often the sheer difficulty of managing two jobs, one in the private, the other in the public sphere, came through in our discussions as the major challenge for working mothers. Several women admitted that they experienced great difficulties in separating the two domains and that inevitably the two became intermingled, with private concerns “impinging” on their working lives, and vice versa. Far from seeing this as understandable, natural even, it was clearly regarded as “problematic”. Rather that taking a pride in their ability to cope with the complexities of their lives, to manage two very different roles, two very different jobs, successfully, they tended to denigrate themselves on account of their inability to achieve this seemingly impossible separation.

Yet this conflation of the public and private spheres against which women so frequently battle is often the very thing that gives them a competitive edge in the workforce; women’s multiple roles mean that they have plenty of practice at organizing themselves and others both in the public and the private spheres. Management gurus such as Peter Drucker and Charles Handy recognize that women may have a particular role to play, based on their competencies, in transforming organizations (Parkin and Maddock, 1995). Handy (1994) believes that male conditioning over the generations, in both home and workplace, has emphasized singularity of purpose, one thing at a time, rank and formal authority, toughness rather than tenderness, rationality rather than intuition. He observes that women throughout the generations have had to make things happen with or without formal authority. Their greater flexibility and preparedness to negotiate with others ideally equips them for the growing challenges of the global marketplace. If, as is sometimes suggested, our primary image of female authority come from motherhood then women may downplay their authority or draw on the resource of mother, the peacekeeper, the diplomat, in the public domain of professionalism, as a means of making themselves more acceptable in the workplace. However, it seems that certainly for the women to whom we spoke, these negotiating skills went unrecognized, masked by the uneasiness that many felt because they could not adhere to the perceived “male” workplace norm.

Women’s “juggling” lifestyle and their sense of responsibility for organizing things in the private sphere, for managing to keep all the balls in the air at one time, meant that some experienced difficulty in delegating work. This difficulty may also be to do with women not being quite as comfortable in a position of dominance over others, of feeling uncomfortable giving orders. This manifested itself as women taking on more work than they needed to. For example, one marketing manager who worked in the hospitality trade said that she did her own typing rather than give it to a secretary. She said this was partly because she is less comfortable delegating work to others than her male colleagues and partly because in doing it herself she could ensure that it was done quickly and to her own satisfaction. None of her male colleagues ever did their own typing. Of course, another possible explanation here might be that secretarial staff were less comfortable taking orders from a woman in power and consequently they may have placed both tangible and intangible barriers to her. Women in subordinate, traditional backup roles in organizations may have difficulty in perceiving other women as anything other than subordinate too.

CONCLUSION

We believe that our research has revealed an unease on the part of women marketing managers with their roles within organizations, an unease which can be understood when we examine it in terms of the public versus private domains. Given that the private domain
is often outlawed in organizations and that most women exist in both of these domains, the pressure is enormous for women to deny a part of themselves. They must pretend that they can function in the public domain with its malestream assumptions and values, perfectly well, perfectly happily. Our research with women marketing managers shows, however, that this may be problematic for many women and that the "problem" is located in the organizations within which they work. Women have adapted themselves to the public domain, the world of work, and have welcomed the opportunities now available to them. Organizations, however, have not adapted, and many women experience this misfit as a sense of being marginalized within their organizations. They are frustrated at being pigeonholed as the smiling faces of marketing, decorative if necessary additions to the marketing "team's" portfolio, and describe their difficulties in gaining access to work which they know to be more highly valued within organizations, such as strategic decision making and long term planning. Yet, this is an unease that is seldom discussed or even questioned. Although women may feel frustrated, there is also an acceptance that these are things that they are good at and, therefore, perhaps should be doing.

The emancipatory potential of the focus group was realized when we saw the growing recognition amongst participants that issues relating to their gender did exist, and that these problems or difficulties were also shared with other women. For example, one participant who initially had declared that gender was not an issue in her organization had, by the end of the discussions, recognized that she could now perceive how social structures within her organization privileged the males. She went on to observe that new male employees were invited to join the football team which allowed them to mix informally across hierarchical structures. New female employees had no similar opportunities.

McElhinny (1997) writes that any dichotomy is a social and cultural classification which serves to reify one side of the dichotomy whilst denigrating the other; an oversimplification used for political ends. If we look at this in the context of the public versus private dichotomy we can see how the public domain increasingly appropriates the ordinary, with its more personal and familiar discourse, for its own organizational ends. A dichotomous way of thinking needs to be superseded by a perspective that recognizes the benefits of both, that they have a more meaningful place in contemporary working life. This change is already underway, particularly in the United States, and the "feminine" values of the private domain are already beginning to radically transform organizational cultures and individuals' roles within them.

As this change gains impetus and hopefully spreads to our own shores, perhaps women's unease, their sense of being discriminated against because of their gender, might be replaced by a sense of pride in their ability to combine the qualities of these two domains, the private and the public, in the world of work, thereby creating a better working environment for everyone within organizations. Bringing the private into the public, the institutional, the organizational, in effect being "personal" may indeed be political in an organizational context for its ability to change the status quo (McElhinny, 1997). The question is, are women going to do it for themselves or are they going to continue to let organizations exploit their talents whilst giving them scant recognition for their contribution to the organization's success?

The issues raised in our focus groups with women marketing managers need to be framed within a cultural context. While Ireland is a country which has undergone considerable social change, Northern Ireland where the research was carried out continues to be quite traditional and conservative in terms of male and female roles. Consequently, it may be
that the problems experienced by women marketing managers in Northern Ireland are more keenly felt than they might be, for example, in other parts of Great Britain such as England, or indeed in other countries. We do not, therefore, attempt to generalize; but nor do we believe that the women who took part in our research are unusual. Their dilemmas are the dilemmas of women in any country undergoing social and cultural change, changes reflected in the increasingly complex interplay between the public and private domains in the workplace.

We believe that our research highlights several interesting areas for further research. Specifically, these include a study of marketing roles in other cultures/countries to examine whether women are experiencing similar problems, and a more detailed investigation of the service side of marketing and the complex public/private reversals that women have to take.

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