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The Feminization of Marketing: An Overview and Research Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the issues that are involved in the feminization of the marketing profession. It identifies two core areas for research, the feminization of the marketing workplace and the feminization of marketing discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist researchers point out that the study of women has been marginalized in academic research across the academy (Campbell, 1992). This is not necessarily the case in marketing where it has been taken for granted that women, as consumers, are an acceptable and profitable focus for academic and practitioner research. However, this emphasis on the female consumer has not been matched by a similar emphasis on females in marketing professions. Few studies focus on the women who work in the profession (Maclaran, Stevens and Catterall, 1998) although there is a small number of studies of women in sales roles (Dawson, 1992), in advertising (Alvesson, 1998) and in public relations (Krider and Ross, 1997). This paper seeks to provoke discussion and future research on the topic of women in marketing and, specifically, on the feminization of marketing work.

The importance of studying this is emphasized by the changing composition of our marketing classrooms and the marketing professions. Females outnumber males on many marketing courses and dominate in marketing roles associated with a strong customer interface, for example, marketing research, public relations and customer care. There is a small body of evidence to suggest that marketing as a program of study (Scott, 2000) and as a profession is feminizing. However, the lack of research on this topic means that we know very little about the nature and impact of feminization on marketing. This contrasts sharply with the position in other management professions where there is a considerable literature on feminization, sex segregation and mobility. These issues have been examined from a range of different disciplinary research perspectives including sociology, economics, women’s studies and psychology. From this literature two core areas emerge for research on the feminization of marketing work. The first relates to the implications of the increasing number and proportion of females to males studying marketing and entering the marketing profession.
Questions here include: are types and levels of marketing positions equally distributed, including opportunities for vertical progression, have there been changes in how academics and practitioners do marketing work, on professional values and ethics, and on professional status? A second and related area is the feminizing of marketing discourse and its implications. Questions here include: what evidence is there, if any, that marketing discourse is becoming more feminized; and what impact, if any, does it have on men and women who practice marketing?

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive base from which other researchers can explore these areas. We are seeking to understand the wide spectrum of issues that are involved in the feminization of the marketing profession. Whilst we acknowledge (and highlight) the importance of studying individual sub-areas such as advertising or marketing research, such focused and contextualized studies are beyond the scope of this present paper. First we offer a few caveats in relation to the use of the term 'feminization' before going on to review recent research that reveals the many complexities within the two broad areas implicated by the concept of feminization, the marketing workplace and the marketing discourse. Finally we suggest how we might approach future research on the marketing professions.

THE CONCEPT OF FEMINIZATION

According to Fondas (1997) the term 'feminization' has several meanings in relation to the workplace: the rising rate of female participation in the paid labor force; women's disproportionate entry into customarily male occupations; and the spread of traits or qualities that are traditionally associated with females. We are concerned with the implications of the last two meanings for the marketing profession.

There is a widespread assumption that the feminization of marketing is a recent phenomenon. Here we need to exercise a note of caution. Just because few women are profiled or mentioned in the various histories of marketing thought it may be tempting to assume that women did not figure in marketing history because they were not present in sufficient numbers, or because their contributions were minimal or irrelevant. Gamber (1998) shows how the history of business can itself be a gendered enterprise. In an analysis of small businesses in the nineteenth century, she demonstrates how the tens of thousands of American women who ran small businesses in the nineteenth century were not acknowledged in the mainstream business literature of the time or in more contemporary historiography.

Similarly, Cooke (1999) showed how in recent years women have been written into the histories of organization development where previously their 'contributions' were unacknowledged, illustrating that history is socially constructed. In this instance history is re-worked and re-presented either to reflect the societal changes in power relations between men and women, or to sustain the legitimacy of the activity amongst those on whose behalf history is written (the women as well as the men who study and practice management).

There is some evidence that the history of marketing will follow suit. Women's influence on marketing theory and practices has only recently
begun to be explored. Waller-Zukerman and Carsky (1990) examined the contribution of home economists (predominantly women) to our understanding of consumer behavior. Scanlon (1995) highlighted the presence of women in advertising pointing out women at J. Walter Thompson were responsible for over 50% of the agency’s billings in 1918. McDonald and King (1996) acknowledged a number of women amongst the founders of the Market Research Society in Britain during the 1940s.

FEMINIZATION OF THE MARKETING WORKPLACE

The central importance of gender relations to the functioning of businesses and workplaces has been recognized for some time (Kanter, 1977; Cockburn, 1991; Gherardi, 1995). So too, has the gendered division of labor (Calas and Smirchich, 1991, 1996; Mills and Tancred, 1992), as for example in the tendency for men to reach the higher, more privileged posts while women are often over-represented at the lower organizational levels. A recent survey of marketing professionals in the UK conducted by Winmark Ltd., in association with the Chartered Institute of Marketing, identified that there was still a glass ceiling for women in the profession at around the £50,000 salary mark (Marketing Business, 1999). The highest earners in the profession were males over 40 years of age.

There is a common assumption that with the increasing feminization of the workplace, problems of women reaching higher positions will resolve themselves over time. The available evidence, however, suggests otherwise. Wilson’s (1999) search for data on women’s employment revealed that in 1995 women held only 12.3 per cent of all management positions and 3.3 per cent of directorships in the UK. In the university sector, 10.7 percent of women held senior positions (above lecturer grade) in 1990 compared with 10.9 per cent in 1930-1. Clearly time alone may be insufficient to resolve the glass ceiling issue and we need to examine in more detail the covert as well as the overt barriers to women’s progression.

Maclaran, Stevens and Catterall’s (1998) study of female marketing managers found that gender segregation was as much horizontal as it was vertical: it was a ‘glasshouse’ effect where women felt boxed in on all sides rather than merely a ‘glass ceiling’. The women they spoke to felt that they had become the ‘smiling face of marketing’, lacking any real organizational influence and not privy to the main strategic decision-making. These factors in turn raise questions about sub areas of marketing that may be effectively closed to women as well as other areas that might be constructed especially with women in mind. Currently we cannot answer these questions in relation to the marketing profession because no other studies have been undertaken into gender segregation. We can only draw from research in other business and professional fields and use this to inform future research in the marketing profession.

Two recent studies in the banking sector in Western Europe reveal the significance of the gendered subtext in organizations (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998; Tienari, Quack and Theobald, 1999). This subtext, defined as a set of often concealed, power-based processes or arrangements systematically (re)producing gender
distinctions, explains the persistence of gender inequality in organizations that overtly subscribe to gender equality. Tienari, Quack and Theobald (1999) examined the feminization of local branch management, which coincided with organizational restructuring. The downgrading of decision making authority and narrowing of the scope of the branch management position led to erosion of its status in the internal organizational pecking order. As males sought more prestigious internal positions, or left for other banks, women increasingly filled the vacancies. In the authors’ German research women filled the vacated positions as a ‘second’ choice whilst in Finland they were seen as a ‘natural’ choice since the redefined position required the social skills traditionally associated with females. In both cases branch management became a dead-end position in terms of upward career mobility in the banking structure.

Almost a decade earlier Ciancanelli et al (1990) reported that more able individuals in the accountancy profession were no longer choosing auditing as a career. The authors noted an increasing distinction between the high-powered consultancy specialism and the routinized (facilitated by computer technology) and mundane auditing specialism. This downgrading of auditing was facilitated by feminization in the accountancy profession.

The public relations profession has undergone significant demographic changes in the last 20 years. Although it is estimated that over 60 per cent of the workforce are women, there is still gender segregation. A majority of women fill the technical roles, i.e. those roles that co-ordinate events and ‘keep the customer happy’; while men take those roles that are more powerful and prestigious, with higher earning potential (Krider and Ross, 1997).

These and other examples reveal that despite the increasing feminization of the workplace, little is changing in relation to existing power structures and that, in fact, these may even be reinforced in the face of this increasing feminization. Wilson (1999) suggests that little has changed in organizational life since Simone de Beauvoir (1949) wrote: ‘in the economic sphere men and women can almost said to make up two castes: other things being equal the former hold the better jobs, get higher wages and have more opportunity for success than their new competitors.’ Horizontal gender segregation, often less readily detectable, is in many ways more insidious than its vertical counterpart.

The intransigence in relation to existing power structures makes problematic any real assessment of the contribution that women may make to the workplace. Given that existing power structures are still very much male dominated, any differences in management style or marketing decision-making approaches may be because women in executive roles are perceived to be less powerful than their male colleagues. They may have to work harder, therefore, to gain respect and command attention from their subordinates in the first place. For example, there have been various studies to show that women lead and manage differently to men (Lee, 1994). Whereas men rely on a transactional leadership style, women are more likely to employ transformational leadership and encourage participation (Lipman-Blumen, 1983; Marshall, 1984; Rosener, 1990; Helgesen, 1990). ‘Testosterone decision-making’ has been blamed as the key reason why the average marketing program is
producing disappointing results (Copernicus, 1998). This study shows that male marketing executives take faster decisions, are more apt to take risks and are more short-term oriented that their female counterparts. Women marketing executives, in contrast, are shown in the same study to make more considered decisions, take fewer risks and to be more long-term oriented. However, often women are in ‘showpiece’ positions to function as living proof of gender equality in an organization (Benschop and Doorewaard, 1998). For this reason they attract more attention than their male counterparts and are more vulnerable and open to criticism. Awareness of factors such as these may therefore influence women’s risk-taking propensities and lead to more cautious decision-making.

The gender segregation that operates at a horizontal level and is found even when a profession has ‘feminized’ ensures that the impact of feminization remains negligible. After all if women are excluded in the main from wider-reaching strategic decisions and involvement in the main power relationships, it remains to be seen how much actual influence they can have on organizational ‘norms’ until the power balance shifts. Perhaps for the moment we need to look less at managerial tasks and more at interpersonal relationships and general workplace ‘atmospheres’ for signs of change in the workplace. We may also need to look at females before they become inculcated into what is still a patriarchal workplace i.e. at our students, and at ‘would be scenarios’ rather than the workplace ‘actualities’. For example, in a study of 89 students enrolled in a sales management module, Dawson (1992) builds on Gilligan’s (1982) finding that men and women have a distinctly different moral conception and orientation to investigate the ethical standards and attitudes of male and female salespeople.

We noted earlier that, along with public relations, advertising and market research are becoming female dominated professions yet the issue of feminization in these areas has yet to be examined. Calas and Smirchich (1993, 1996) have pointed out we should not simply observe and examine the feminization of managerial and professional work but should ask why it is happening and why it is happening now. They suggest the feminization of particular managerial positions may be a demand and supply issue. Women, the secondary labor force, are activated when the attractiveness of the position erodes and demand exceeds the male supply (Calas and Smirchich, 1996; Tienari, Quack and Theobald, 1999). Similarly, a number of our (male) colleagues informed us that, based on their observations, women seem to increasingly fill brand management positions in the UK and other West European markets, a position that has lost much of its former authority and glamour in internal labor markets. The fact that these are observations only is revealing; we simply do not have sufficient, or any, research that informs us on the impact of feminization in marketing generally and its sub areas in particular. Yet this is an important issue not only for the women who fill our marketing programs and do marketing work as practitioners, but also for the profession and the academy more generally.

We noted that as specific positions become feminized, they lose status or, more accurately according to current research evidence, that as positions are devalued they become feminized. A
related research issue is the impact of feminization on the profession as a whole. If feminization can be contained within specific positions or sub areas of the profession, then the threat to the status of the profession as a whole can be contained. For example, areas that were once considered central to a profession can become de-professionalized as evidenced by the work of the clerk in commerce and the auditor in accountancy (Roberts and Coutis, 1992). A number of professions have worked hard, therefore, to retain their masculine image including accountancy (Kirkam, 1992), human resource management (Legge, 1987) and psychology (Nicholson, 1992). Legge’s work is of particular note since she suggested a relationship between the knowledge bases of professions, gender and power. As the focus in personnel management shifted from a female ideology of ‘welfare’ to the male ‘efficiency’, the proportion of women in the profession declined, median salaries increased as did the status of personnel management within organizations. Fischer and Bristor (1994) have already gone some way to examine the relationship between the marketing ideology and gender. However, this is an area that merits further attention, particularly in relation to the feminization of management (and marketing) discourse that we now explore.

FEMINIZATION OF MARKETING DISCOURSE

The labels masculine and feminine are culturally associated with the categories male and female (cf. Fondas, 1997). Feminine traits include empathy, helpfulness, caring, nurture, interpersonal sensitivity, less hierarchical more co-operative relationships and recognition of community interests. In contrast, masculine traits include: an ability to be impersonal, self-interested, efficient, hierarchical, tough minded, assertive, a capacity to take control and to dominate, to be less emotionally and relationship oriented, and a tendency to rely on standardized or ‘objective’ codes for judging issues.

Fondas (1997) highlights the fact that qualities culturally associated with females are appearing in contemporary management texts. In turn these texts carry a feminine ethos to practising managers. In particular, managers are advised to adopt newer roles of coordinating, facilitating, coaching, supporting and nurturing employees. The new ideal management worker is one who relinquishes control, sharing responsibility and authority (Fondas, 1997). Taking a postructuralist feminist perspective, Fondas shows that this feminization is not acknowledged as such nor is it openly discussed. She surmises that if it was, then this elevation of femininity would place men in an ambiguous relationship to the universal ‘feminine’ manager in a similar way that women up until now have been placed in terms of traditional ‘masculine’ management theory.

An ethnography of a Swedish advertising agency documented by Alvesson (1998) provides a good example of the underlying and unacknowledged ambiguity suggested by new management discourses. Advertising relies on creativity, intuition, flexibility, flattened hierarchy, social interaction and team building. Advertising agencies adopt a ‘feminine’ role in the client relationship, which is often referred to and treated as a type of marriage. Creative advertising professionals
work emotionally rather than analytically or rationally.

Alvesson argues that this discourse presents a threat to masculine identity and triggers a structuring of gender relations and interactions within the agency to restore feelings of masculinity. He concludes that in such contexts masculinities emerge in relationships to female personnel and are used to support a self-identity that is otherwise insecure, rather than a desire to oppress women per se. In other words, to be defined as a man, somebody else needs to be defined as a woman: the more feminine others are, the more masculine you become.

In the advertising agency in question this was manifested by the way in which the men took on the external tasks and had higher visibility to the outside world, whereas the women tended to be tied to the home-based tasks that supported the men in various ways. Moreover, the women in the agency were younger than the men and good-looking, supporting Wolfe's (1991) notion of the multiple roles that a professional woman has to perform. They also had more responsibility for the customer interface. Alvesson makes the point that 'attractive (subordinated) female staff can symbolize power, prestige and success both for the superior who employs and leads the staff as well as for the organization as a whole'. In these ways men may actually exploit and dominate 'femininities' in business contexts.

Indeed, Hopton (1999) argues that despite the feminine rhetoric of co-operative working and flattened hierarchies; organizations are firmly rooted in traditional masculinist discourses of power, authority and elitism. Using the rise of managerialism in the British public sector, he illustrates how managerialism is beginning to replace militarism as a paradigm for socially constructed ideals of masculinity.

Hopton contends that militarism has traditionally played an important role in maintaining the power base of a patriarchal state and yet due to changes in public attitudes, global politics and technology, the military / masculinity link can no longer operate in the same way. It has therefore become necessary to develop alternative models of hyper-masculinity to maintain social control. Hopton draws many parallels between new managerialism and traditional militarism:

1. Teambuilding and team development initiatives share a similar rationale to traditional military basic training. Both types of activity are concerned with socializing people into patterns of behavior wherein the will of the individual is subordinated to the perceived needs of the team and the wider organization.

2. The effect of team briefings can be the stifling of debate about policy and concentrate discussion at a level of operationalizing decisions that have already been made at the top.

3. Concerns with the setting of standards, in particular 'Total Quality Management', serve to legitimate the suppression of dissenting voices. There is little open criticism of such a concept because to criticize it would imply that quality was unimportant.

4. The trends towards corporate management teams replicate the command structure of the armed forces.

5. The development and promotion of a corporate image echoes a form of tribalism, which is also a feature of militarism.
6. Regimental traditions surrounding the regimental identity, the uniform, the loyalty, parallel increased preoccupation with corporate logos, corporate clothing, the cultivation of a corporate identity and ethos and schemes such as ‘Investors in People’.

Thus, very different readings of the new feminized management discourse are possible and contextually dependent. What appears on the surface to reflect feminine values may, in certain circumstances, be really a hyper-masculinity.

In marketing, the discourses on the oxymoronic ‘relationship marketing’ and ‘mass customization’ seem to substantiate some of Hopton’s (1999) points. Whilst ostensibly representing a more feminized marketing discourse, Fischer (2000) shows that the discourse of mass customization contains themes of stalking, kidnapping and capturing customers. Fournier, Dobseca and Mick (1998) amongst others have highlighted similar themes in relationship marketing discourses and practices. Clearly, we need to recognize that the feminizing of marketing discourse may not necessarily be beneficial to women entering the profession (or to consumers) but may in fact simultaneously provoke and reflect hyper-masculinity.

CONCLUSIONS

We have raised issues about the feminization of marketing for which we currently have no answers. As yet, there is little research on the subject, either in academic research or in professional practice. It seems that there is a serious gap in our knowledge in this area that we believe it is important to address. Our past and current focus as feminists in marketing has been so much on the consumer that we have overlooked our other key constituents, the women in our classrooms and in the marketing professions.

Whilst our preference is for research inspired by feminist theory, we need to take cognizance of the substantial body of theory and research that exists already on feminization, and related issues of sex segregation and mobility. We have reviewed only a fraction of this work, from different disciplines and research perspectives, revealing both the enormity and complexity of undertaking research on the feminization issue. In order to build a holistic picture of the feminization issue in the marketing professions, we will need to consider:

1. The horizontal as well as the vertical mobility of women in marketing.
2. The ways that sub areas and positions within marketing become feminized, exploring the ways feminizing discourses are implicated in the process and its consequences.

Feminist researchers have tended to focus on the experiences of individual women by means of small-scale qualitative studies however, as Oakley (1998) states; the danger is that researchers never move beyond these. Whilst small-scale micro level analyses of women in particular marketing positions and sub-areas are needed, so too are large macro level studies that reveal structural dimensions of feminization. Additionally, Hopton (1999) and Calas and Smirchich (1993) have demonstrated the importance of socio-historical research and poststructuralist deconstructions in revealing the
interplay between feminization, ideology and discourse.

In order to progress research in this area, we suggest some preliminary steps we might take to address the current paucity of work on this issue.

1. We have already noted the difficulties in securing reliable data on women in marketing. Whilst most of the professional associations conduct membership surveys that report some findings on gender, we need to campaign to persuade them of the relevance and importance of the feminization issue in professional work and to collect and release for further analyses data on this issue.

2. Whilst analyses of the feminizing processes in sub areas of the profession are valuable, we need to examine these in the wider professional marketing context. It may be the case that sub areas of marketing work such as market research (and qualitative market research in particular) or customer care contain the growing numbers of women entering marketing whilst males dominate areas such as marketing strategy and global marketing. In this respect we need to undertake more continuous research following the career progression of cohorts of graduates when they enter the marketing profession.

3. Of course continuous research on graduate cohorts may mask the continuing shifts and changes in the relative status of specific positions (brand management) and sub areas of marketing (qualitative market research) in the internal marketing labor market. The works of Legge (1987) in personnel management and Roberts and Coutis (1992) in accountancy discussed earlier provide guidance on how these position shifts and changes might be identified.

4. Following Cooke, (1999), we need to write women in more explicitly in the potted histories of marketing contained in our textbooks or, be more vocal in pointing out their absence other than as consumers. This may appear to be another form of ‘tokenism’ however it is important that would be practitioners in our classrooms see themselves reflected in widely read marketing texts. The recent works of Scanlon (1995) and Scott (2000) provide starting points and models of the importance of history as a subject of academic research.

If feminist scholarship is to have a future in marketing we simply cannot ignore the feminization issue. After all, our work makes claims to either speak for or reflect the interests and concerns of women who work in marketing and who, as consumers, are the subject of marketing practices. If our work is to begin to realize its emancipatory aims (social change as well as social criticism) it needs to be read, studied and critically analyzed and evaluated by our academic and practitioner colleagues, and our students. It will not do this unless we engage with these constituencies on issues that impact directly on their everyday lives as current and would be marketing practitioners and researchers. Indeed it could be argued that we have been complicit in perpetuating the public/private split by focusing our attention on the ‘public’ marketing and consumer theory and ignoring the ‘private’ everyday politics of being a marketing practitioner.

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