Gender and Buyer-Seller Relationships: Towards a Feminist Perspective
Andrea Beetles, Cardiff University
Andrew Crane, Cardiff University

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15732/gender/v06/GCB-06

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Gender and Buyer-Seller Relationships:  
Towards a Feminist Perspective

Andrea Beetles, Cardiff University
Andrew Crane, Cardiff University

ABSTRACT

Buyer-seller relationships have long been of intense interest to marketing academics and practitioners, most particularly within the domain of business-to-business markets, but also more recently within the purview of business-to-consumer markets. This paper looks at the role of gender in buyer-seller relationships. Covering the literature from sales and from consumer behaviour, the general lack of a specific gender perspective is identified and weaknesses in the current literature are highlighted. It identifies an opportunity to develop and apply feminist research practice to this increasingly important area. The benefits, opportunities and limitations of the feminist research approach are specified and some initial conclusions presented.

Buyer-seller relationships have long been of intense interest to marketing academics and practitioners, most particularly within the domain of business-to-business markets (Piercy et al., 1998; Cannon and Perreault, 1999), but also more recently within the purview of business-to-consumer markets (Kennedy et al., 2001). With a rapidly escalating number of women entering the sales profession (Dawson, 1992) (and women also, of course, having long been represented by consumer marketers as an important target group), gender has been increasingly identified as an important issue within buyer-seller relationships (Smith, 1998a; 1998b). As yet, however, only a handful of studies have actually sought to investigate the role of gender in buyer-seller relationships, covering issues such as the sellers’ relationship management skills (Sigauw and Honeycutt, 1995; Lane, 1999), salesperson ethics (Dawson, 1992; 1997), actor bonds (Smith, 1998a) and shopping behaviour (Fischer and Arnold, 1990) To date then, this area of the literature remains substantially underdeveloped and there is very little work that has looked at the effect of gender specifically (Palmer and Bejou, 1995). Thus, whilst gender may often crop up as one part of a model of buyer-seller relationships (Smith, 1998a) – usually as a discrete variable within a subset of actor “characteristics” – we are still a long way from developing a full picture of the role (or roles) of gender, and of the implications this might have for buyers and sellers themselves.

In this paper, we seek to develop a more comprehensive examination of gender within buyer-seller relationships, with a view to surfacing critical research questions and setting
out important areas for further investigation. Drawing on literature from marketing and sales, consumer behaviour, and management, we argue that a more insightful understanding of buyer-seller relationships can be developed by going beyond merely examining the impact of the gender of exchange actors on exchange outcomes and processes. Specifically, we argue for more research investigating: the differential experiences of women and men in various exchange situations, and in various cultural settings; the reactions to, and outcomes of, gendered buyer and seller roles; the adoption of particular sex roles within the exchange process; and the emergence of disparate masculine and feminine characteristics both within and between particular genders. The current limitations in our understanding of gender in buyer-seller relationships, we suggest, is largely a result of methodological and epistemological constraints which have limited research perspectives to narrow, objectivist conceptions of gender that are amenable to quantitative methods of data collection and analysis. In pursuing an argument for greater plurality, we set out some initial propositions for a feminist perspective on gender in buyer-seller relationships, identifying the liberating potential such an approach may have, as well as offering some cautions as to its application.

BUYERS, SELLERS AND GENDER: THE EMERGENCE OF THE RELATIONSHIP PARADIGM

Principally within the literature the focus of research on buyer-seller relationships has concentrated on buyers within organisational contexts. Here the buyer can be seen to be the person responsible for the actual purchasing action, as seen in any traditional organisational buying model (Kotler, 2001:243). This interaction has also become more interesting to academics with the emergence of the relationship paradigm in both organisational buyer behaviour and consumer behaviour. The focus had shifted more onto the interaction between the individuals in industrial markets and the subsequent relationships that can be developed (Gronroos, 1996, Ford, 1980). With such a focus on the individuals involved in the exchange, the gender of the people involved clearly is at greater issue. Similarly within consumer markets we see a shift from the mass marketing methods of the 1970s and 1980s to much more focused direct marketing, relationship marketing and loyalty marketing approaches from organisations to their consumers. (O’Malley et al., 1999). Here research focuses on the individual consumer, although to date, this consumer has tended (although not exclusively) to remain non-gender specific (O’Malley and Tynan, 1999) and the literature appears to be more concerned with consumers as a homogenous group.

To date then, the issue of gender in buyer-seller relationships has primarily arisen from the sales literature, where there is a growing attention being paid to examining the differential abilities of men and women to foster sales relationships. Much of this literature, however, has failed to account adequately for the role of gender in the buyer’s role – an area which has traditionally been the preserve of the consumer behaviour literature. As we shall see then, these are largely atomised literatures, dealing with gender in different ways from different perspectives. Hence, we shall briefly review the extant literature from each area before moving on to assess their combined contribution to our understanding of gender in buyer-seller relationships.
Within the literature on sales and sales management, issues of gender have attracted increasing attention, and a number of studies have focused on gender differences in specific areas such as sales behaviour and job satisfaction (Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995), salesperson mentoring (Fine and Bolman Pullins, 1998), sales management styles (Comer et al., 1995), and ethical issues in sales (Dawson, 1992; 1997). This suggests that the sales literature is becoming increasingly aware of the escalating numbers of women in the sales profession, as well as increasingly attentive to the effects of salespeople of different genders on the exchange process and its outcomes. Indeed, of primary interest to many of these studies is whether women or men make “better” sales managers, are “more effective” or “more committed” salespeople, or are “more ethical” in their sales behaviours.

Traditionally, research into sales culture has suggested that few women have been actively recruited into the field (Fugate et al., 1988) and that business purchasers tend to perceive women as limited in the technical abilities needed to support their sales activities (Swan et al., 1984). Research has long suggested that saleswomen are typically regarded as being too “soft” with customers, at the expense of the assertiveness and “testosterone decision-making” (Maclaren and Catterrall, 2000) needed to close sales (Comer and Jolson, 1991; Palmer and Bejou, 1995:18). Moreover, men have been shown to be widely perceived within industry to possess the so-called ‘rough’ and ‘tough’ characteristics deemed more suitable for industrial selling whereas women have tended to predominate in retail sales and other areas of the service sector (Magretta, 1997). Thus, a growing body of research exists which explores the discrimination and stereotyping faced by women in the sales profession (e.g. Comer and Jolson, 1991; Comer and Drollinger, 1997; Lane and Crane, forthcoming). However, in keeping with the strong managerial thrust within the sales literature, research has also tended to show that buyer-seller relationships improve when similarities between buyers and sellers exist in terms of gender and age (Futrell, 1984; Dwyer et al., 1998; Smith, 1998b), such that same-sex buyer-seller relationships are seen to have “greater relationship investment, more open communication, and greater trust/satisfaction” (Smith, 1998b: 15). Not only would such research appear likely to do little to enhance the current disadvantaged position of women in sales, but it also, as we shall argue, is based on very simplistic understandings of gender.

Interestingly, as relationship selling and relationship marketing have become more prominent within the business environment (e.g. Piercy et al., 1997), studies have increasingly sought to explore the more relational aspects of selling, suggesting that in fact women may be more capable of developing and maintaining sales relationships (Palmer and Bejou, 1995; Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995; Lane, 1999). Similarly, it has been argued that women sales managers may be more adept at adopting the more relational management roles of ‘coach’ and ‘facilitator’ – utilizing behavioural based control - instead of the traditional male management roles of ‘commander’ and ‘scorekeeper’ through reward and punishment based control (Piercy et al., 1998).
One conclusion that could be drawn from such research is that organizations should better acknowledge the skills of women and draw upon the potential female sales force and use it to their advantage (see Lane, 1999 and Sigauw and Honeycutt, 1995). However, Lane and Crane (forthcoming) also warn of the dangers of such stereotypical thinking, suggesting that despite the positive nature of the stereotype, it still obscures individual merit and relies on (and perpetuates) simplistic generalisations and rigid binary oppositions based on gender.

Overall then, whilst the greater attention gradually being afforded to gender issues in the sales literature should be welcomed, there appear to be considerable limitations in the extant literature with regard to how gender has been dealt with. However, before we go on to discuss this more fully, we shall briefly outline the literature dealing with buyer-seller relationships from a consumer behaviour perspective.

WOMEN AND MEN AS BUYERS AND SHOPPERS

As with the sales literature, the consumer behaviour literature has tended to take a rather atomised view of gender in buyer-seller relationships, not unsurprisingly focusing primarily on the gender of the consumer. In contrast to the sales literature, however, there is a long history of research into women as consumers, not least because marketing professionals have typically promoted certain products, brands and services explicitly at either men or women. The extant research has been broad in its scope, covering issues such as gender and buyer decision-making (e.g. Powell and Ansic, 1997), gender purchase roles (e.g. Fischer and Arnold, 1990), gender portrayals in advertising (e.g. Lammers, 1991, Fugate, 2000), and gender and the experience of consumption (e.g. Woodruffe, 1997; Otnes, 2001). Indeed, on the face of it, consumer behaviour appears to have been the primary site of gender research in marketing, revealing a diversity of research perspectives and approaches from positivist (Powell and Ansic, 1997) to feminist (Hogg, Bettany and Long, 2000) and poststructuralist (Holt, 1997). However, as Bristor and Fischer (1993: 518) have contended, the canon of consumer research has to some extent “misrepresented women” due to “gender biases and gendered assumptions [which] are long-standing, pervasive, and subtle aspects of [consumer researchers’] worldviews and research traditions”. Moreover, despite amassing a considerable body of research dealing with gender, little attention has actually been directed to the buyer-seller relationship specifically, and still less to gender in relation to both sides of the exchange dyad.

ASSESSING THE LITERATURE: WHERE DO WE STAND?

Clearly then, whilst we might have expected the increasing attention to individuals within buyer-seller interactions to have thrust gender to the fore, the extant literature on gender in buyer-seller relationships remains extremely limited. Specifically, in our review of this literature, five omissions and problems appear to be particularly serious. Firstly, as we have already indicated, whilst there is some literature on gender in sales and some on gender in consumption, there remains little, or no attention, to gender in terms of the actual interactions between buyers and sellers. Indeed, the two streams of literature appear to have been developed almost completely independently of each other. Even where there has been limited
integration, the sales literature has typically focused on buyer-seller relationships from a business-to-business perspective (within industrial selling) whereas the consumer behaviour literature has typically looked at such relationships within consumer markets. Certainly, it is from industrial marketing that the relationship marketing concept has emerged (Groenroos, 1996, Ford, 1980), perhaps because it is here where “relationships” most often develop and are most appropriate (O’Malley, Patterson and Evans, 1999). Indeed, critical perspectives on “relationship marketing” suggest that business-consumer interactions lack the kind of interpersonal trust and commitment that would even constitute a relationship as we would commonly understand it (O’Malley and Tynan, 1999). Thus, greater attention to the different perspectives of individuals, and of men and women, in exchange situations is called for.

This leads on to the second problem, which is that whilst we have an emerging body of literature dealing with men’s and women’s experiences of shopping and consumption generally, we have little in depth of knowledge regarding their experience of the sales situation itself. This is even more pronounced in the sales literature itself, where almost all of the available research denies the voice of the salesperson, and instead tends to reduce gender to a single survey question. Thus, whilst Palmer and Bejou (1995) offer one of the few direct examinations of gender in buyer-seller relationships, their finding that gender has an effect on the buyer-seller relationship is somewhat limited without being able to ascertain what causes this effect specifically or to explain why it emerges, or even to report if the participants are aware of it. Their comments on the relationship are based on literature reviewed from the field of psychology and not applied to this specific circumstance. Similarly, whilst a number of studies have alluded to gendered buyer and seller roles, and the effects of stereotyping on men’s and women’s entry and progression into particular areas of sales, we have little real insight into the other exchange partner’s experience of such gendered situations.

Third, with only a few exceptions, much of this literature has focused almost exclusively on the American context environment. Clearly however, the gender issue will differ in different cultural and national contexts. For example, the social and legal acceptability of different forms of gender relations (including discrimination within the sales environment, and men and women’s access to particular market contexts) differs quite markedly in the US compared to many parts of Europe, and especially many Asian, African and South American countries.

Fourth, the literature has generally failed to deal with the notion of sex roles. Whilst it is obvious that there are separate genders it is also suggested that there are defined sex roles within the exchange situation (Smith 1998a, Collinson and Hearn 1994). A sex role is a construct attributed to the gender, so while a salesperson may biologically be female they may adopt a sex role more commonly attributed to a male salesperson. For example, Smith (1998a) looks at the dyads of male-male, male-female, female-male and female-female buyer-seller dyads as one facet of a buyer-seller model. The conclusions suggest whilst some exchange partners appear to favour certain genders in the opposite role (i.e. matching genders appear to be
preferred), women sellers in particular may also adopt male sex roles in order to appease male buyers. Similarly, Collinson and Hearn (1994) have examined male sex roles, arguing that there are “multiple masculinities” that a man can adopt in an organisational situation (p.8). They further suggest that the literature has taken too narrow a view of gender, delineating men and women as a single homogenous body where there is an assumed “whole”. Thus, sex roles can differ within the genders, and as Smith (1998a:81) suggests: “Saleswomen may adopt more typically masculine traits such as aggressiveness and goal orientation when required, while salesmen may adopt more typically female traits”. Similarly adoption of particular sex-roles by consumers might be expected in different purchase situations (Qualls, 1987). Palmer and Bejou (1995) therefore suggest that the individual’s perception of gender characteristics and the assumed importance of those characteristics is as important as much as the actual gender of buyers and sellers. This may affect the relationship because the buyer or seller may behave in a certain way because they feel that they ought to in order to fulfil a particular sex role and not necessarily because it is how they would normally behave. Clearly this too is an important issue for further investigation.

Finally, it is also interesting to look at the methodologies used by the existing literature on gender in sales and consumer behaviour. What is seen very strongly within the sales literature is a tendency for research to rely almost exclusively on positivist assumptions and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis (Smith 1998a, 1998b). For example, Comer et al. (1995) offer a fascinating study analysing the effect of gender on sales management utilising mailed questionnaires and statistical analysis. Similarly, Fine and Bolman Pullins’ (1998) study of male to female mentoring in the workplace, Sager et al.’s (1998) examination of salespeople’s perceptions of the sales role, and Siguaw and Honeycutt’s (1995) exploration of gender differences in selling behaviours and attitudes all use quantitative methods and rely on survey instruments. Clearly, positivist methods such as these have a place in gender research (Maynard, 1994). However, there are a number of problems with such an approach. Survey instruments are said to be distant and disassociated from those they purport to research, they distort actors' meanings, and produce abstract, fragmented ‘facts’ which obscure the deeper pattern of relational experience in people’s lives (Maynard, 1994). Research in the positivist tradition offers a very singular and rigid perspective of the field and does not allow for deeper understanding of gendered experience. Furthermore, what is also striking in the sales literature is not simply that surveys are so widely used, but that most often researchers elect to survey the managers of the salespeople rather than the salespeople themselves (Comer and Jolson, 1991, Jolson and Comer, 1992). This again reinforces the problem of men and women being denied their own voice in gender-related research.

In the consumer behaviour literature, the interpretive turn has signalled the benefits that a different approach to gender research can bring, notwithstanding the failure as yet to apply this to buyer-seller relationships. For example, Friend and Thompson (2000) have examined women’s use of retail experience memories to enhance personal agency, whilst Eccles and Woodruffe-Burton (2000) have used women’s accounts of shopping to
deepen our understanding of the role of addictive shopping in women’s lives. Thus, we can see that new modes and methods of research into buyer-seller interactions and relationships might be fruitfully explored.

Perhaps most significantly, the challenge offered by a feminist research agenda has yet to be adequately taken up by research into gender and buyer-seller relationships. Whilst Lane and Crane (forthcoming) in the sales literature and Bristor and Fischer (1993) in the consumer research literature discuss some of the issues arising from different feminist perspectives, there has yet to be any significant attempt to apply feminist modes of thought to the interactions between buyers and sellers. Hence, in the final part of this paper, we shall attempt to set out some initial thoughts on the development of a feminist perspective, highlighting issues of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

TOWARDS A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Whilst there is a growing body of literature that offers a feminist analysis of aspects of marketing (see Catterall, Maclaren and Stevens, 2000), the issue of buyer-seller relationships has yet to be examined from a feminist perspective. It is our contention, however, that a feminist approach can offer much to this area, not least because it fairly naturally focuses on the relational facets of behaviour, and on the relational self in social experience. However, it must be acknowledged that while there is a general umbrella term “feminism” there are varied perspectives within feminism including liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, postmodern feminism and eco-feminism, each of which offers different assumptions, approaches and research agendas (see Whelehan, 1995; Tong, 1998). Since it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss these in any real depth, we will refer to Bristor and Fischer’s (1993) categorization of feminist positions as being either ‘liberal’, ‘experience’ or ‘poststructuralist’. In so doing, we shall attempt to provide a flavour of the kind of insights and challenges that feminism raises for buyer-seller relationships in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology.

From an ontological perspective, liberal feminists tend to suggest that the same objective knowledge of reality is available equally to men and women, whereas experience feminists believe that men’s and women’s experiences of reality differ. More radical views contest this, arguing that since many such feminists tend to be white middle class researchers they still ignore the realities of black and lesbian women (among others) (Maynard, 1994). These different ontological positions raise different research questions for buyer-seller relationships. Whilst liberal feminists might seek to remove sex biases from the processes of research in order to reveal that women are equally as adept at buying and selling as men, experience feminists might seek to reveal the differential experiences of men, women, lesbians, racial minorities and others in exchange interactions. Poststructuralist feminists, however, take a stronger view, suggesting that all experience is mediated and thus open to interpretation and revision (Weedon, 1987; Whelehan, 1995). Significantly, poststructuralists challenge the binary oppositions typical of much of the literature discussed in this paper. Thus, notions of male and female, masculine and feminine, self and other, buyer and seller, can be viewed as constructions...
that shape experience and understanding. Thus, research according to these ontological assumptions might seek to deconstruct these binary oppositions and explore, for example, the shifting sex roles adopted by individuals, as well as the ways in which salespeople experience reality not as atomised salespeople but through their relationships with customers, and through their own purchasing activity.

In epistemological terms, feminists appear fairly unified in the view that, in contrast to the masculine view of a value-free, objectified, scientific method, the feminist researcher cannot remain separate from the researched (Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard, 1994). Oakley (1981), for example, cites specific examples from her own research where she could not remain apart and objective from her research because her subjects wanted to ask her questions and discuss issues with her on areas that she felt unable to refuse. Feminists also believe that the researched should not be treated as “objects to be worked on” or “a passive giver of information” (Maynard, 1994) but rather should be engaged in genuine rapport. Alternative epistemologies are said to take from the researched, interrupt their lives and leave them with nothing. Feminists disagree with this and look for the researcher to be more open and honest with the research. Feminists also suggest a need for reflexivity: that the researcher should be open and honest about the processes involved in the research when writing it up (Maynard, 1994). For research into buyer-seller relationships, this would suggest the need for a more personal and open approach to research than is currently in evidence, where the voice, experience, and values of the researcher are also made evident.

Finally, in terms of methodology, feminists are generally critical of the theoretical position of positivism and its association with quantitative methods of data collection and analysis (Maynard, 1994). As a result qualitative methods and phenomenological approaches have established a firm dominance, especially in experience feminism (see Stanley and Wise, 1993; Maynard, 1994). For buyer-seller relationships, this could provide a suitable route for allowing the experience of saleswomen and men to be heard as it has begun to do for male and female consumers. However, quantitative methods could still have a role to play, at least in a liberal feminist perspective on buyer-seller relationships, for example in order to establish empirical grounding for claims of men’s and women’s equality, or to identify discrimination. In contrast, methodological approaches to buyer-seller relationships in poststructuralist feminism are likely to rely on deconstruction of dominant discourses of sales scripts, marketing communications and customer-salesperson interactions.

**CONCLUSION**

We can see from the review undertaken that the extant literature is very limited in its analysis of gender in buyer-seller relationships in both business-to-business and business-to-consumer contexts. Current studies in business-to-business relationships offer their greatest depth on the gender of the sellers in the relationship and are focussed more strongly on outcomes which will offer management ideas on how to improve the performance of salespeople or of sales management. Current studies in business-to-consumer relationships pay greater attention to the consumer but tend to ignore gender in such studies except where gender is
seen as an important segmentation “variable”. Overall, consideration of gender rarely regards the relational aspects of consumers and sellers.

A further issue with the two literatures is how distant they are. Gender in business-to-business buyer-seller relationships and in business-to-consumer relationships remain very polarised in their existence. There are clearly opportunities to look at the role of gender in the interactions between buyers and sellers in both environments and compare how these exchanges are similar or different. Greater communication between the two areas of study would only benefit our understanding of these relationships. Methodologically, the relationship literature is generally couched in quantitative methods, and studies tend to utilise surveys and statistical analysis to develop and test “models” of relationships. While these methods offer the greatest validity and reliability statistically they do not offer the deeper understanding of interactions and experiences offered by the feminist methodology under discussion in this piece.

As we have suggested, a feminist study would offer considerable liberating potential in the analysis of buyer-seller interactions. Ontologically, feminism could offer a greater understanding of different perspectives in buyer-seller interaction, surfacing deeper insight and novel understandings. Epistemologically, such an approach could also offer something back to the researched, perhaps giving them time to reflect on their situation as buyers or sellers and understand their own behaviours. A study of this nature would offer participants a chance to have their own voices be heard. Methodologically, qualitative techniques would allow for a deeper understanding of the individual interactions under investigation. They would allow such a study to gain a richness of data not seen in survey techniques often administered elsewhere.

As with any research approach, there are limitations associated with feminist research. Common criticisms of feminism are that it does not offer the validity and reliability seen in studies undertaken from a positivist tradition. Researchers are often concerned with the replicability of a study. Naturally, however, a study which is looking for intense depth cannot also offer far-reaching breadth, and feminist approaches are usually unapologetic in their narrow focus, particularly upon the oppressed and under-represented in society. Indeed, a further danger of feminism is that while it fully acknowledges the experiences of women, taking them from the homogenous body of non-gendered participants in research, it is in danger of ignoring the experiences of men. Certainly, a greater and deeper knowledge of the experience of women is called for, but one might question whether it should be at the expense of their male counterparts?

Feminism also makes no apologies for the subjectivity seen within its work and will, indeed, often celebrate this fact. It is unrefutable though that orthodox opinion within marketing academia does not currently offer its favour towards a feminist method. One could almost suggest while feminism is perhaps more “politically correct” that some of its competing paradigms within research, it is not a very political method to use in terms of career prospects as an academic. Such research does not possess the statistical rigour seen as necessary to gain acceptance into the top ranking
(American) marketing journals. If one wants to get on, one has to get in, and such “radical” methods do not often offer these opportunities!

In conclusion it is encouraging that academic research is beginning to recognise that salespeople have gendered experience, and that femininity and masculinity are important aspects of consumption. What is disappointing is the approach being taken by much of the research dealing with buyer and seller interactions. Philosophically and methodologically the existing research doesn’t seek to understand individual experience, and these men’s and women’s voices frequently go unheard, or else are squeezed into existing models which perhaps don’t suit them. A feminist approach would offer the potential to look at least at women in their own right and not simply because their numbers are growing or because women salespeople are currently “en vogue” because of their potentially impressive relationship marketing skills.

REFERENCES


Catterall, M., Maclaren, P. and Stevens, L. (1997), “Marketing and Feminism: a bibliography and suggestions for further research,” Marketing, Intelligence and Planning, 15, 7, 369-376


Lane, N. and Crane, A. (forthcoming) “Revisiting gender role stereotypes in the sales profession,” *Journal of Business Ethics*


Andrea Beetles is a professional tutor at Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, Wales; beetlesac@cardiff.ac.uk.

Andy Crane is a lecturer in marketing and strategy at Cardiff Business School and a founding member of the ESRC Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS) at Cardiff University. His main research and teaching interests are in the area of business and marketing ethics.