Doing Feminist Research in a Masculine Paradigm: an Experiential Perspective.

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Abstract

This paper aims to do three things; firstly the authors will present a case for their argument that marketing can be viewed as a masculine paradigm, secondly a critical perspective of traditional research methodologies within marketing and consumer research will be developed and, finally, the authors will share their own experiences of adopting alternative approaches and engaging in research reflexivity.

Introduction

There were various starting points which prompted the authors to write this paper. One was the work currently being undertaken by one of the authors in the field of consumer research and the challenges and problems which have been faced along the way. Another was the development of an alternative approach to examining the academic texts and discourses of relationship marketing; part of the research being undertaken by the other author. Informal discussions about our separate, but convergent, research activities led us to the idea that our combined experience of doing ‘feminist’ research in what we see as a fundamentally masculine paradigm can make a significant contribution to the development of critical approaches in contemporary marketing.

There has been substantial critical examination of methodological issues in consumer research over the last decade and this is well documented in the literature (see, e.g. Woodruffe, 1996) and the need for marketing academics in other fields to embrace alternative approaches to doing

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research in order to overcome the lack of symmetry between theory and practice has been highlighted (O'Driscoll and Murray, 1998). This points to an increasing awareness of the importance of multi-paradigmatic, pluralistic approaches to doing research in conditions of postmodernity. The feminist literature offers consumer researchers 'new' ways of undertaking research which embrace experiential aspects of consumption and free the researcher from the inadequacy of traditional approaches (Woodruffe, 1996).

We are also bringing these methodological issues to current areas of research outside consumer behaviour. Within the burgeoning relationship marketing paradigm, despite the proliferation of partnership and mutuality rhetoric (Fournier et al 1998), the dominant academic discourses centre on a view of consumer/organisational relationships that emphasises the agency and domination of the marketer in a quasi masculinist binary with the consumer. Within these discourses the consumer is effectively silenced and disenfranchised in a manner analogous with that seen in early sociological (see for example Oakley) and psychological (see for example Kitzinger) enquiry. Concomitantly, use of feminist methodological (Fonow & Cook 1991) and epistemological (Code 1991, Skeggs 1995) thought have been shown to provide as penetrating a transformatory tool in relationship marketing discourse as within these other counter sciences (Long et al 1999).

Accordingly a feminist perspective is proposed which can make a contribution to developing alternative approaches to consumer research methodology and research in marketing generally. This feminist perspective (Woodruffe, 1996) firstly suggests that the researcher must be personally involved with the subject, must experience the subject, if humanly possible, in effect linking 'the ontology of the researcher to the production of their knowledge' (Skeggs 1995:14) and exploring the 'experience of the researcher and researched as discursively understood and located' in the research context (Long et al 1999). Secondly, consumption must be explored experientially, in the context of the interplay and interaction between meanings and social structures. Third, feminist theory and practice should be incorporated into the research; for example, the research must be emancipatory in nature and must take the individual's perspective.
Finally, feminist perspectives can suggest new problematics that focus explicitly on the female and the feminine, when this is appropriate.

1. Marketing as Masculine Paradigm

Links between gender imagery and marketing/consumer relationships can be traced back to the early parts of this century (Frederick, 1928, Woodruffe 1997) and much of this centres on the use of gender-related language in research. Gender-related language in our culture shapes what is viewed as knowledge. This is of particular concern to feminist poststructuralists who criticise the language of consumer research (Bristor and Fischer, 1993) which, for example, includes several terms to describe various types of female consumers, such as 'stay-at-home housewives' or 'just-a-job working women' (e.g. Bartos, 1989). As no corresponding set of terms exists to define male consumers, this illustrates how women are frequently defined in terms of their marital status while men's status is taken for granted.

Bristor and Fischer trace links between gender imagery and marketer/consumer relationships back to some of the earliest marketing texts, such as Frederick's "Selling Mrs Consumer" (1928). As they point out, "such texts explicitly cast the consumer as female and pit the marketing manager (referred to with masculine pronouns) against the consumer, advising him on how to get her to buy something she may not otherwise have purchased".

Marketing is depicted as a man's world; the customer is explicitly cast as female and texts advise the marketer (using male pronouns) on how to get her to buy things (Bristor and Fischer, 1993). The idea that marketing is (still) a man's world - something enacted by men - is reinforced in a critique of marketing in Marketing Theory and Practice (Baker et al., 1993), where the author exhorts marketing men to be prepared to stand up and be counted. Hirschman's (1991) content analysis of articles published in the Journal of Marketing shows that descriptions of marketers' relationships to consumers frequently include terms which depict marketers as seeking to wield
power over consumers. Themes such as gaining power and control, competition, instrumentalism and aggression/conflict occur repeatedly and suggest that research agendas are positioned firmly in the marketers' interest. In a separate article in 1993, Hirschman enjoins marketers to "choose collectively to conduct our research in ways that will benefit consumers rather than support the status quo that all too often manipulates, misleads and suppresses them".

Similarly, as Knights et al. (1993) point out, traditional selling practices have largely remained geared to the deeply rooted marketing illusion of the gendered perception of (male) breadwinners with one half of the market being neglected, therefore, as direct (rather than indirect) consumers. What this has meant, in effect, is that although the literature is replete with claims to be seeking to “satisfy women’s product needs”, their study (Knights et al., 1993) showed that “this is dramatically modified to meet the real demands of the profit nexus such that only the ‘needs’ of potentially profitable groups of women are targeted.” The focus of their study was not the exposure of the rhetoric of claims to be satisfying women’s needs, but “in showing how the psychodynamic nature of their construction is inadequate or inconsistent with certain understandings of gender relations”. In other words, assumptions made by marketers about women and consumption – about women’s needs – may be flawed as they are constructed from (masculine) gendered research.

In addition to the phallocentrism of the marketer consumer binary in practice, from an intra academy perspective, the academic marketing paradigm too has been personified and anthropomorphised as masculine by some prolific writers. For example, ‘contemporary marketing scholarship’ is the ‘Sam Malone, the Jack Nicholson, the Dave Lee Roth of scholarship…the Giorgio Armani of the academy’ (Brown 1998:17).
2. Gender Issues and Feminist Approaches

Gender issues attract attention in consumer research as well as other areas of social research, and this is reflected in the literature. The nature of the topics researched in relation to gender is diverse (e.g. Richins 1991, Worth et al., 1992, Elliott et al. 1993) but what is of interest here is not the range of topics but the methodological aspects of such research. For example, research which is undertaken into gender issues is not necessarily based on a feminist perspective. Indeed, treatment of, and assumptions about, sex and gender are the subject of significant debate between the major feminist perspectives of liberal feminism, women's voice/experience feminism and poststructuralist feminism (Bristor and Fischer, 1993). The goal of liberal feminism, for instance, is the application of liberal principles to women and men and a resultant sexual equality. Thus the validity of research into gender issues based on single sex samples for generalised consumer behaviour knowledge without corresponding research involving the other sex would be questioned by liberal feminists.

Gender issues in qualitative research generally have been a focal point for a number of feminist writers (Oakley, 1981; Oleson, 1994), while Bristor and Fischer (1993) have given specific consideration to gender within a feminist perspective in consumer research. They observe that because gender is a social concept referring to the way traits, attitudes and beliefs and behavioural tendencies stem from psychological, sociological and cultural roots, then consumption activities are fundamentally gendered. Hirschman (1993) and Stern (1993) have developed feminist based critiques of current ideologies and thinking in consumer research which examine issues of gender and gendered assumptions very closely. Stern proposes the postmodern feminist perspective as an addition to consumer research on gender, which, to date, according to Stern, has not drawn on feminist or deconstructionist theory.

The authors have sought ways of doing research in the context of heightened sensitivity to gender and sex, in line with the guidelines set down by Bristor and Fischer (1993), which embrace the
personal, the subjective and the experiential (Woodruffe, 1996). Underlying this is our desire to remain true to ourselves as feminists and to create ways of working and of understanding which reject traditional empiricist methodological principles (Gergen, 1988). ‘The project of transforming academia has become a legitimate form of feminist labour (Stacey 1997:54) and as such, as feminists and marketing academics, our aim has been to answer the call of our predecessors and reject the masculinist notions of the marketing paradigm as it stands.

3. The Research Experience

3.i Helen’s story

Firstly, one of my personal objectives in undertaking this research is to escape from the confines of the subject and object, the researcher and the researched. I seek a way of doing research which is emancipatory in nature (see, e.g. Murray and Ozanne, 1991), which embraces the experiential aspects of consumption (Belk, 1984, Fennel, 1985) and which allows me to be personally involved with the research; to immerse myself in it (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986). I have tried, from the outset, to respond to Firat and Venkatesh’s (1993) call for “a diversity or multiplicity of narratives, a liberation from all conformity”. Underlying this is my desire to remain true to myself as a feminist and to create ways of working and of understanding which draw on feminist scholarship in the broadest, non-political sense, embracing a more individualistic treatment of consumers (Woodruffe 1996) and rejecting traditional empiricist methodological principles (Gergen, 1988).

Mention has already been made of some of the issues which underpin my approach to this research, in particular my need to be personally involved with the subjects (‘subjects’? can anyone propose a better term?), to engage with the people who have shared their lived experiences of consumption with me during the course of my investigations. This research is based on the use of empathy and intuition, the rejection of value-free theory and practice and careful consideration of research problematics and methodological issues from a feminist perspective (Woodruffe, 1996, Bristor and Fischer, 1993). Additionally, I try to explore consumption in the context of the
interplay between meanings and social structures and to adopt an emancipatory approach towards research and consumers (Woodruffe, 1997, Gergen, 1988). In response to calls for methodological pluralism (e.g. Foxall, 1995) and the need to develop "a more pluralistic culture in consumer behaviour research" (Marsden and Littler 1998), the research combines a number of different approaches sequentially, namely; interpretivism, feminism, interactive introspection and co-operative enquiry.

Lest there should be any doubts raised at this point in the minds of marketing traditionalists regarding questions of research objectivity and potential bias, let me make my position clear right now. There is no-one in this world better qualified to undertake research into compensatory consumption. What I don’t know about comfort eating, comfort shopping and the therapeutic value of spending money generally, on anything, isn’t worth knowing. I sometimes think I should just adopt the controversial ‘subjective personal introspection’ procedure, publish an ‘autoethnography’ or extended autobiographical essay and have done with it (for further discussion of such an approach and related criticisms thereof, see Brown and Reid, 1997, pp. 87-91). However, gratifying though that might be at a personal level, such an approach would mean ignoring the rich diversity of experiences and life stories of other consumers – the sum of individual experiences which can build into a unique picture of consumption and the postmodern consumer. It is this insight that I seek; the experience of the individual, the in-depth view.

It is not easy to summarise the research experience from a personal perspective as the whole tends to be, in my view, greater than the sum of the parts. A written description of some of the activities and outcomes merely glosses over the actual research experience (as mere description of consumption activities and outcomes hardly scratches the surface of what consumption means to individuals). However, from my own experience I can try to depict something of the research experience. For example, for part of my research I have developed case studies based on a series of phenomenological interviews which have been carried out adopting the format and context outlined by Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1990) largely, but which could also be considered to
be ‘interactive introspection’ (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993) in that I have shared my own experiences with others during the interview process with the aim of getting deeper insights from them. This works well, I find, as I am encouraging people to speak freely about issues which are frequently emotive, embarrassing and/or confidential. Knowing that I understand how they feel or, at least, have shared similar experiences seems to enable people to ‘open up’ more. Recognition of this aspect of doing research in this way was first (to my knowledge) recorded by Oakley in 1981. Some people have even told me things they say they wouldn’t admit to their partners. Interestingly I have found that both men and women (doesn’t that sound better than ‘male and female subjects’?) appear to appreciate this interactive approach.

3.ii Shona’s Story

Rather than involving consumer (or subject/respondent/person?) and researcher interaction, my research began with the broadest remit possible, that was, to explore and analyse contemporary feminist research methodologies and epistemologies with the aim of discovering their use within the relationship marketing paradigm. The RM paradigm had been identified by some key writers as fundamentally oxymoronic (Brown 1998), overtly (and overly) rhetorical, unrealistic, and potentially damaging to consumers lives (Fournier et al 1998). The defining moment of my research arrived when I read Fournier et al’s Harvard Business Review article during the week when the bank called in my student overdraft, then sent me a glossy brochure asking me how they could help me live my life and telling me how much they wanted to help me do so. Grasping this opportunity to use ‘the situation at hand’ (Fonow & Cook 1991:4) as part of the research process, I empathised with Fournier’s claim that, despite the partnership and mutuality rhetoric of relationship marketing, ‘when we talk to people about their lives as consumers, we do not hear praise for their so called corporate partners. Instead we hear about the confusing, stressful, insensitive, and manipulative marketplace in which they feel trapped and victimised…loss of
control, vulnerability, stress, victimisation: these are the themes that emerge’ (Fournier et al 1998:43). Despite the foundations of trust, partnership and mutuality of the relationship marketing paradigm, examining the academic literature revealed a dearth of consumer feeling, emotion, opinion or voice.

Given that inceptive feminist endeavour centred on the need to redress the masculinist bias endemic in the academy, fundamental analogies were drawn between the position of the silenced, disenfranchised woman in early counter sciences (Sardar and Van Loon, 1997) and the silenced, disenfranchised consumer within relationship marketing literature. Rather than attempting directly to research the consumer’s thoughts, feelings and experiences as co-partners in relationship marketing efforts, it was felt that a direct assault upon the discourses of relationship marketing could illuminate the extent of these problems. This turn to academic literature is recently evidenced in Brown’s (1999) Journal of Marketing Article, which draws upon Bloom’s anxiety of influence thesis to take two texts and “strike them together to see if they spark”.

The problems of my remit unfolded over the year of my dissertation as I realised that it was impossible to do justice to the feminist literature within such a short space of time. The extent of the work undertaken so far has barely scratched the surface of the research iceberg and has provided a substantial number of areas for intellectual development within the marketing paradigm. However, as a neophyte academic researcher with ‘big plans to change the world’ the extent of the masculine biases within the marketing paradigm worry me. Ellerby and Waxman (1997:216) argue that when trying to establish a real transformation within a discipline, feminist invaders have come across what they call ‘Magister Implicatus…the monster in the male machine’ who, because he ‘inspires critics to compete with one another for awards’ effectively reduces and
controls their transformatory efforts. As my overt aim within the academy is to add to the ‘integrative, synthesising, erudite, boundary crossing, comparative and interrogative problem focused scholarship’ (Allen & Kitch 1998:277) advocated and practiced by feminist interdisciplinary raiders and not to be ‘disciplined by disciplines’ (Ibid.) this could pose a significant problem.

The discussion in this section begins to describe our experiences of undertaking research from a feminist perspective. Our experiences are clearly different, reflecting the differences in our research objectives. However, we note the striking similarities in our endeavours as we try to embrace recent calls within the marketing paradigm for extra paradigmatic expansion and recognise the importance of pulling on the ‘seven league boots’ (Long et al, 1999) of feminist research thought and practice as a transformatory tool. We hope we are allowed to.

Conclusion

Our engagement with research problematics from a feminist perspective has helped shape both the research process and our own understanding. This is in line with characteristics of interpretive research; understanding becomes part of a continuous process of interpreting data as different interpretations are likely to be meaningful for different realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) and our interpretations can become more meaningful as our knowledge grows. However, the interpretivists’ major aim of identifying the meanings that consumers attach to their consumption experiences is at odds with the postmodern perspective which aims to interrogate different representations of consumer behaviour and to celebrate a plurality of views (Marsden and Littler, 1998), so this research cannot be simply labelled ‘interpretive’; nor could it be identified purely as ‘feminist’. Taking this a stage further, the process itself has led us to examine our role in the
gathering and reporting of data and this reflexivity (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993) has, to some extent, led us to challenge our own position as researchers. It is our belief that an experiential perspective has much to offer in the development of critical approaches within marketing.

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