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Exploring Simultaneous Oppressions

Toward the Development of Consumer Research in the Interest of Diverse Women

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In this article, the authors argue that to develop public policies that will work in the interests of diverse female consumers, it is imperative to recognize how sexism intersects with racism, classism, and heterosexism. The multiple simultaneous oppressions faced by diverse women make for vast differences in their consumption problems and the remedies they require. The authors illustrate how even consumer research that may seem to promote the interests of women actually serves privileged interests and ignores the reality of others. To move toward consumer research that will help shape public policy in the interests of diverse women, one needs to identify how research to date has enhanced the privilege of some women while neglecting or reinforcing the oppression of others. New research issues will need to be added to the agenda if the current situation is to improve.

The majority of consumer research to date has been more concerned with enhancing the ability of private sector corporations to make profit than with advancing the interests of consumers in general or female consumers in particular. Even when topics that could produce findings that would benefit certain female consumers have been studied by consumer researchers, a common tendency has been to focus on “women as women.” Although exceptions can be found (e.g., Hill, 1991, who focuses on the particular experiences of homeless women of a variety of races), our own earlier work (Bristor & Fischer, 1993; Fischer & Bristor, 1994) typifies an approach whereby the differences between women are swept aside blithely or ignored altogether.

Although we might expect market-oriented research to focus on privileged segments, it is important for policy-oriented research to recognize multiple

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segments. In this article, we highlight the shortcomings of discussions (our own included) that assume that underneath or beyond the differences between women, there is a shared set of concerns and experiences. We argue that if our work is to inform public policy on consumption-related issues, we must think systematically about the way that sex-based discrimination intersects with (for instance) discrimination based on race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation.

WHY CAN WE NOT SPEAK OF “WOMEN’S” EXPERIENCES AS CONSUMERS?

Many feminist theories (e.g., liberal feminism, social feminism) assume commonality of women’s characteristics, experiences, or both. Although the assumption that women as a group share a very important part of their identity seems central to the political goals of any movement to better the lot of women, a refusal to take seriously the differences between women “lies at the heart of feminism’s politics of domination” (Spelman, 1988, p. 12). This domination means that many women have found little enlightenment about the conditions of their own lives, much less substantive improvements in those conditions, as a result of mainstream feminist thought (Collins, 1991; Glenn, 1991; Hooks, 1981; Ortiz, 1994; Zinn & Dill, 1994). Consider the much-used example of Betty Friedan’s argument that the solution to women’s problems would be for them to get out of the house (Friedan, 1963). Her suggested corrective simply ignored the fact that millions of women have always worked outside their own houses, often as domestic labor for the very women whose concerns Friedan was addressing.

Unwitting neglect of the ways gender intersects with race, class, and sexual orientation in the lives of women has been typical for much feminist thought. This neglect can be traced to an unchallenged assumption that it is possible to consider issues of gender or sex in isolation from issues related to race, class, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Spelman (1988) has referred to the phrase “as a woman” as the “Trojan horse” of feminist ethnocentrism. It ushers in a presupposition that it is possible to speak about a female’s “womanness” in isolation from the other factors that shape her experience. It suggests, misleadingly, that there is a transcendent commonality between the life of a married Asian, middle-class, heterosexual woman living in a metropolitan suburb, the life of a poor, White, lesbian woman living in a rural environment, and the life of a Black single mother living in an inner-city ghetto who relies on welfare.

Some feminists have explicitly argued that if we want to understand sexism as distinct from, for instance, classism or racism, we must try to focus only on the oppression visited on women because they are women and we must systematically exclude from focus any oppression stemming from other factors. Richards (1980), for example, states: “If, for instance, there are men and women in slavery, it is not the business of feminism to start freeing the women. Feminism is not concerned with a group of people it wants to benefit but with

a type of injustice it wants to eliminate" (p. 5). This assertion suggests an assumption (widely observed in practice) that paradigmatic examples of sexism will be found in the lives of those whose oppression is rooted in their womanness and in nothing else. This means that the "norm" or the model for analysis is the experience of the woman who is privileged on all other counts except for her sex. Accepting White middle-class women as the norm preserves their privilege. To ignore race, class, and sexual orientation is to ignore the "unacknowledged benefits for those who are at the top of these hierarchies—Whites, members of the upper classes, and males. The privileges of those at the top of the hierarchy are dependent on the exploitation of those at the bottom" (Zinn & Dill, 1994, p. 5). For example, Rollins (1985) has pointed out that privileged women are able to escape some consequences of patriarchy by using the labor of other less privileged women.

Even feminists who have attempted to "add on" considerations of race, class, and sexual orientation have often unwittingly preserved the status quo. This is because the "reality" to which considerations are "added on" is the experience of White, middle-class, heterosexual women. Yet to "add on" analyses of the race, class, and sexual orientation of women of color, poor women, or lesbians is to ignore the race, class, and sexual orientation of the White, middle-class heterosexual (Harding, 1991; Palmer, 1983). It is to act as though this latter group's experiences were not a product of their privilege, and as though racism and classism were merely something experienced by some women rather than something contributed to by other women. So long as race, class, and sexual orientation are seen to exist in isolation from gender and can be treated as "special interests," any proposal to include "different" viewpoints will effectively marginalize these viewpoints.

AN ILLUSTRATION

The foregoing discussion indicates that we, as consumer researchers, should be wary of any generalizations concerning women as consumers. In particular, research that is insensitive to these matters will have limited relevance for public policy purposes. As a means of illustrating the deep-seated problems we are addressing, we will examine a concept central to a number of consumer research streams, the household.

THE NONNEUTRALITY OF NOTIONS OF THE HOUSEHOLD

Much of the consumer and marketing research on topics such as household decision making, durables purchasing, gender roles, the family life cycle, and the socialization of children as consumers, and much of the managerial research that assumes the wife is the principal household purchasing agent often directly or indirectly involves certain assumptions about the household. Sometimes, such research even aims at improving the lot of the female members of house-

holds. As we shall see, however, the interests of only a limited few are addressed by research that does not challenge its assumption of what constitutes a household.

The construct of the household may seem a neutral one. In virtually all societies, people live in small domestic groups that are amenable to the label "household." Problems arise, however, when this term is assumed to be a synonym for the term "family." A household is a "group of co-residents, people who live under the same roof and typically share in common consumption" (Kertzer, 1991, p. 156); these co-residents may or may not be the kinship relations that define a family. The problems are compounded when, as is common in consumer research and elsewhere, the family assumed to constitute a household is a nuclear family composed solely of a married man and woman plus their offspring (DeVault, 1991). Further questionable assumptions are imbedded in the common notion that in the typical household, composed of such a nuclear family, the husband works outside the home to earn a wage to support his family, whereas his wife stays in the home and is responsible for household management and child care (Collins, 1991). Nevertheless, the image of households as consisting of a wife, children, and a husband who works outside the home is so ubiquitous as to merit the designation "the received view" of the household.

This received view is highly misleading and is under attack from several quarters: Households composed solely of intact nuclear families comprise less than one half of all U.S. households (Roberts & Wortzel, 1984; Schaninger & Danko, 1993). The distortions in the received view are not merely random historical inaccuracies but are rooted in contemporary White, middle-class, heterosexual and patriarchal ideologies (Collins, 1991; DeVault, 1991). In spite of these inaccuracies, the traditional family norm remains very much intact and serves as the yardstick against which all are measured (Collins, 1991; DeVault, 1991). Thus alternative family forms, for example, single-parent families, homosexual families, extended economically interdependent families, are still both largely viewed as deviant and ignored by family researchers (DeVault, 1991).

Consider first the assumption that households are inhabited by families with kinship ties. For homosexual couples who choose to cohabit, marriage is prohibited and thus no kinship tie can exist between the principle adult residents of the household. This point is far from a theoretical issue. In Canada, homosexual couples are currently lobbying intensively for the same benefits (e.g., with respect to taxation) enjoyed by heterosexual couples, but they are facing stiff opposition. In the United States, voters in Austin, Texas, overturned an ordinance that granted health insurance to unmarried "domestic partners" of city employees (Farney, 1994). To require heterosexual relationships for family status falsely assumes that gay people do not form lasting relationships, have children, or maintain their blood and adoptive relationships after their orientation is known. Other households lack kinship ties as well. For instance, children may be raised by other adults because their parents are unwilling and/or unable to care for them. Morganthau (1989) has described Miss Nee, a poor Black woman who first raised her younger brothers and sisters, then raised five children

of her own, and is now raising three kids who are unrelated to her by blood or marriage. In addition, other children frequently stay with her temporarily.

Consider next the assumption that households will be composed of nuclear families—a man, a woman, and their children. This assumption has been shown to be historically inaccurate for many of the European forebears of contemporary North Americans (Hajnal, 1965, 1982). Although it may accurately characterize the patterns in a portion of middle- and upper-class, White, heterosexual, 20th-century households, it certainly does not reflect the experience of many minority households. Historically enslaved African American families had great difficulty maintaining private family households in a society controlled by White slaveowners. Instead, they developed notions of extended families consisting of their “Black ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ ” (Gutman, 1976, cited by Collins, 1991, p. 49). Thus “the line separating the Black community from whites served as a more accurate boundary delineating public and private spheres for African-Americans than that separating Black households from the surrounding Black community” (Collins, 1991, p. 49).

Also consider the assumption that within households, women do the “private” (in home) tasks of child care and household maintenance, whereas men participate in the “public” world of work. This assumption has ceased to characterize many White, middle-class households. More important, it has never represented the reality for many poor and/or minority households. In poor families, women have not been limited to the private sphere because they have always needed to earn wages, not for a little something extra but out of economic necessity (Palmer, 1983). For example, poor women of color have always been forced to work, and married Black women have especially high labor participation rates because many Black men lack sufficient employment opportunities to earn a family wage (Collins, 1991; Davis, 1981; Zinn, 1994). Therefore, whereas many White women have had the “privilege” of remaining in the private sphere and devoting themselves to nurturing and other domestic tasks, poor women, and thus many women of color, have had no choice but to participate in the public sphere. Because many poor women, often from minority racial groups, have never been singularly focused on their homes, neither the perceptions of motherhood and child care as a primary “occupation” nor the valorization of the “cult of motherhood” ever took hold (Collins, 1991; Glenn, 1991).

Consider, finally, the assumption that nuclear family households are economically independent. Poor people often cannot achieve long-term nuclear-family self-sufficiency because of economic insecurity, scarce resources, and economic assault (Glenn, 1991). One result of this is that poor families require various forms of public assistance. Coupled with the fact that many poor women who must work outside their homes earn minimal wages, another result is that they are unable to pay for their own child care. Therefore, poor families frequently develop networks consisting of a broad range of kin and community relations to share the burdens of child care (Glenn, 1991). African American women have a tradition of using communal child care arrangements whereby a few women care for all children and women as a group are accountable for each

other's children, giving rise to family terminology such as "othermothers" (Collins, 1991).

Although there is clearly a gap between our ideas about households and the reality faced by many consumers, not all of the limitations of the notion have been subjected to equal challenge. It is disturbing—but not surprising—to note that the deficiencies that have attracted most attention are those relevant to middle-class, White, heterosexual women. As the incidence of divorce, single parenting, and cohabitation without marriage have arisen among White, middle-class heterosexuals, consumer researchers have drawn attention to the insupportability of the assumption that households normally include a married adult man and woman. As middle-class, White women have entered the workforce in growing numbers, we have challenged the use of the terms *working* and *nonworking wives* to describe women who are and are not employed outside the home, respectively (Bristol & Fischer, 1993). At the same time, we and others have challenged the assumption that housework and child care are naturally a woman's responsibility, even when she is employed outside the home (e.g., Bristol & Fischer, 1993; Hochschild, 1989).

Tacitly, our critiques have implied that they apply equally to the realities of all women. In fact, they tend to center on the concerns of White, heterosexual, middle-class women to the exclusion of others. For instance, our questioning of the assumption that women will bear primary responsibility for child rearing largely arose from the demographic trend in the later part of the 20th century in which White, middle-class women began to continue in or reenter the workforce regardless of their childbearing status. For poor women who have always worked outside the home because of economic necessity, this trend is less news than evidence that they are largely invisible in this critique.

The invisibility of other women's experiences is also evidenced by the notion of the *double workday*, which recognizes that women who are employed actually have two jobs: paid employment and household management. Concerned with exploring ways of alleviating this problem, feminist research has studied the contributions (or lack thereof) of men to household activities (e.g., Chafetz, 1991; Coleman, 1991; Oakley, 1981; Shelton, 1992) and how women who are employed outside the home also cope with their continued household responsibilities by purchasing services such as child care, laundry, housecleaning, and prepared meals (e.g., Hochschild, 1989; Rollins, 1985). Because poor women have always faced a double workday and because it only became a feminist issue when it affected privileged women's experiences, this suggests that the interests of all women are not equally represented in these analyses. For example, much feminist literature is curiously silent about who it is that performs these services that privileged working women are able to purchase. In fact, such reproductive labor has historically been segregated by race and class. Poor minority women have been disproportionately employed as service workers in institutional settings to do "public" reproductive labor because they have been excluded from other jobs and because their male partners have been unable to earn a family wage (Rollins, 1985; Zinn, 1994). Thus what assists many employed women is

the ability to purchase reproductive services from poor women who may not themselves be able to purchase the services they need.

To summarize, assumptions about the household have been shown to lack neutrality and universality once presumed to exist. Not only are various assumptions blind to gender, but, and more significantly, certain assumptions may be simultaneously blind to gender, race, class, and/or sexual orientation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

One consequence of employing limiting versions of the household is that other concepts that incorporate the household are also limiting. In marketing and consumer research, in spite of the recognition of the diversity of contemporary households and of the roles and realities of women within them (for example, see Roberts & Wortzel, 1984), much consumer research knowledge about households has largely come from groups in which women and men have come together in traditional ways. In this section, we illustrate ways in which biased notions of the household affect research in marketing and consumer research.

As one example, one of the authors (Bristor & Qualls, 1984) has critiqued the family life cycle as not being reflective of the variety of U.S. household forms. Although other household forms were introduced (e.g., cohabiting, cooperative) that could incorporate same-sex relationships, heterosexuality was the implied norm. Gilly and Enis's (1981) redefined family life cycle includes same-sex families under the category of married couples. However, the family life-cycle concept is based on the assumption that families will pass through a number of predictable phases involving childbearing and child rearing. Although sexual orientation does not affect one's ability to have children, many homosexual couples do not have children. Because the family life cycle is an important managerial tool for predicting household consumption (for example, see Schaninger & Danko, 1993) and because the "gay market" is now recognized as an important market segment (Miller, 1994), the concept may still need further redefinition if it is to incorporate the life cycles of those who do not fit the norm.

As a second example, in a study by Fischer and Arnold (1990), the Christmas shopping behaviors of a random sample of residents of a Northeastern city were posited to be influenced by the sex-role socialization, gender identity, and gender role attitudes of respondents. Significant positive associations between a person's sex and their involvement in Christmas shopping behaviors were taken as evidence that gift shopping is stereotyped as women's work and is part of the "female culture of consumption" that is socially constructed and that heavily influences the work women feel compelled to do. The principal concern was to further an understanding of why women continue to have principal responsibility for one of the labor-intensive categories of consumer work. Although the research was not intended to serve the interests of any group of women more than another and although it makes a passing nod toward the importance of understanding differences between cultures, it selectively distorts the issues faced by women who are too poor to afford gifts, women of religious and ethnic

groups for whom Christmas is not a gift-giving occasion, and women who live in same-sex couples. Further, by making generalizations based on the experiences of women who are members of dominant groups, it contributes to the marginalization of those who are members of oppressed minorities.

As a third example, this article implies that research on household consumer decision making could be developed in several ways to more fully serve the public interest. Such studies would likely focus not only on different kinds of households but also on different problematics. First, it would be beneficial to conduct research that explicitly attempts to document and explain consumer behaviors in impoverished households in which the decisions to be made may involve tradeoffs between subsistence needs rather than between different features of major durables; such research could usefully examine how female and male household members interact with the marketing system, and how sex roles constrain or enable various coping strategies. Second, research that explicitly examines the diversity of household forms and the diversity of patterns of decision making within and between types would be useful. Third, further research that, like Webster's (1994), examines the impact of ethnicity, race, or both on decision making would be warranted.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This article has argued that even the best-intentioned research has not been free from bias, whether the bias is sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, or some combination of these plus others. It has also argued that as long as these biases remain unchallenged, marketing and consumer research will make limited contributions to the public interest. Sadly, we doubt that it is possible for any individual piece of research to be as comprehensive in the perspectives included as would be ideal from a public policy perspective. Even this article has made several generalizations that mask a wide diversity of perspectives. For example, in discussing the double oppression of sexism and racism, we have tended to focus on the case of Black women. This selectively ignores the perspectives of Asian, Hispanic, aboriginal, and other minority women. Further, we acknowledge that the term "women of color" encompasses a diverse group of women (Ortiz, 1994). As another example, we are also aware that our discussion selectively ignores other important biases, such as those involving age, religion, and physical ability. Nevertheless, a realistic goal is for researchers to become more aware of, and to articulate, the ways in which the questions asked and the research conducted promote the interests of some and ignore those of others. This would assist our discipline to address the major gaps in our body of knowledge by conducting research that focusses on those perspectives least addressed by current studies.

It is untrue to say that the consumer issues of interest to White, middle-class, heterosexual women have no public policy implications. Yet the very privilege that has led us to focus primarily on the concerns of this empowered group means that many of their concerns that are obviously a matter of public interest

(such as overt sexism in advertising) have already been addressed. Until and unless we recognize unwarranted assumptions that sexism can be separated from other biases, such as racism, classism, and heterosexism, even research that notionally addresses women's concerns is actually likely to address the interests of an already privileged few and to reinforce the disenfranchisement of others. The unaddressed concerns of consumers who face simultaneous oppression based on their sex as well their race, class, or sexual orientation are more likely to warrant redress by makers of public policy.

Perhaps our greatest challenge will be not merely to include additional perspectives to the problematics we have already studied within our discipline (such as consumers' reactions to images of beauty in advertising) but to identify issues previously unaddressed by consumer researchers, including major forms of oppression. For instance, one underresearched topic is how single mothers construct the choice between going on welfare versus leaving their children in questionable care-providing situations so that they may work. Although some of our theories of consumer choice may provide a starting point for such research, the topic is likely to provide a unique set of challenges.

One major barrier stems from the fact that researchers, including the present authors, who, although they face some forms of discrimination as women, are members of highly privileged groups lack the authority to speak for those who are subject to multiple oppressions. Although we may be able to help identify problems, we cannot fully comprehend the solutions that are required. One route to overcoming this barrier is to seek out the input of women who have been marginalized, using a participant observation approach or other interactive qualitative research techniques (e.g., Hill, 1991; Oakley, 1981). Their ideas can be taken into account in shaping the subject matter and the findings of the research. A related idea is to include, whenever possible, a woman who is subject to multiple oppressions as a member of any feminist research team investigating consumer issues.

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