Leap-frog marketing: the contribution of ecofeminist thought to the world of patriarchal marketing

Pierre McDonagh
Department of Marketing, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK
Andrea Prothero
Department of Marketing, University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

Provides an overview of ecological feminism (ecofeminism) and discusses the implications for marketing. Shows how ecofeminist perspectives demand that we question not only the destruction of the environment but also our fundamental social relations and structures. Illustrates marketing's contribution to ecopatriarchy with examples from the marketing academy and the advertising world. Concludes by asking marketers to rethink certain basic marketing principles.

Introduction

Initially this paper discusses the terms anthropocentrism and ecocentrism and provides an overview of ecological feminism (ecofeminisms). It considers how these various viewpoints impact on marketing. The authors, developing the ideas of Doretta Zemp, argue that progress is no longer made in a linear fashion. Rather, marketing is like a frog in a saucepan of water; in danger of being boiled alive if it does not react swiftly to changing circumstances. Apparently frogs slowly heated in a pan are unable to detect the gradual and deadly trend and sit there until dead (Auerbach et al., 1994). The authors argue for marketing management to take a more ecocentric view of the world. As part of this discussion the authors use Zemp’s characters of Roseanna, typically every woman, to represent ecofeminist perspectives and Egmont to typify conventional male-dominated marketing wisdom in an effort to highlight the various debates. Can ecofeminisms (Roseanna marketing) rescue the frog that we have come to know as marketing (Egmont) or will it continue to boil in the saucepan of contemporary society? The paper concludes with an evaluation of how ecofeminism contributes to the ecocentric challenge facing marketing in the future:

They waited for me to finish
then continued the conversation

Making the initial leap: moving our thinking from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism

Egmont: (condescendingly) “So really what you want, dear, is for us to market and produce products for this new segment of green consumers?”
Roseanna: “No, Egmont, it’s a little bit more complicated than that. You have to change everything. Let me explain.”

Beneath the surface of conformity, ecological criticism has entered all areas of activity, with its characteristic interrelatedness surpassing nationalities, de-stabilizing routines, splitting industrial sectors and leaving parents to deal with their children’s penetrating questions (Beck, 1995). However, more positively, Beck (1995, p. 151) points out, “the question of how to democratically defuse the problem of the industrial system’s production of both wealth and destruction remains completely open.”

Marketers need to consider new theories that have arisen as contemporary responses to the ecological crisis and examine the implications for marketing practitioners and academics. Marketers will encounter new terminology such as ecocentrism, sustainable development and, most recently, sustainable consumption (see International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1996). These terms need to be clarified if discourse in the marketing academy and subsequent action by marketing practitioners are to take on board ecological issues and broaden current debates.

Broadly speaking, there are two opposing world views which become apparent when discussing ecological matters: anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism is an expression of today’s dominant social paradigm (Goulet, 1990; Gudynas, 1990), whereby “humanity perceives itself to be the centre and ultimate goal of the universe, viewing the environment as a mere function existing for its sole convenience” (Pauchant and Fortier, 1990, p. 190).

Anthropocentrism can be traced back to much of early theological and Christian thinking, such as the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Ryder, 1983)[1]. The anthropocentric paradigm gives humans domination over nature. By contrast ecocentrism involves a holistic perspective on the world (see Table I). It acknowledges the tight ecological relationships between all living and non-living elements and recognizes that all living beings and living systems have the right to fulfillment (Gudynas, 1990). The aim of ecofeminism is to maintain synergy in the ecosystem, and to extend it to human social groupings and all human-environment relations (Gudynas, 1990).

The adoption of an ecocentric paradigm has fundamental implications; in particular, nature is no longer regarded as a resource at...
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Table I

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is ecocentrism?</th>
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<td>Ecocentrics are against scientism, that is the conviction that empirico-analytic science is the only valid way of knowing and that ethnocentrism is anthropocentric optimism.</td>
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<td>The inclusiveness of all beings means that it is far more protective of the Earth’s life-support system than an anthropocentric perspective.</td>
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<td>The recognition that nature is not only more complex than we presently know but also more complex than we can know.</td>
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<td>Ecological tragedy is both human and non-human.</td>
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<td>We are all constituted by our relationships with other humans and our political, economic and cultural institutions.</td>
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<td>Ecocentrics are not seeking to discard the central value of autonomy in Western political thought but to replace it with a revised ecological notion of self that incorporates the individual and social aspects in a more encompassing framework.</td>
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<td>Ecocentrism aims to extend the notion of autonomy to encompass layered interrelationships that extend personal and societal relations to include relations with the rest of the biotic community.</td>
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<td>Source: Adapted from Eckersley, 1992</td>
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the disposal of mankind. In recent years ecocentrism has been examined in the organization studies literature by authors such as Shrivastava (1994, 1995) who emphasizes that nature must be treated and respected as an independent force that casts many influences on organizations. An ecocentric management paradigm means placing nature (and derivatively, human health not wealth) at the centre of management and organization concerns. This has fundamental implications for the structure and, ultimately, the role of marketing as a function and an academic discipline.

This article will concentrate on one form of ecofeminism, namely ecofeminism, and we discuss some of the pertinent issues in ecofeminist thought together with an examination of the implications for marketing academics and practitioners.

Ecofeminism

Egmont: (anxiously) “Aren’t these Greenham Common types a little bit dangerous to deal with? Companies could lose business!”
Roseanna: (reassuringly) “Why not listen to what they have to say and study their argument before discounting it? I know some men who are ecofeminists.”

Therefore ecofeminism is a radical environmentalism which incorporates both ecological and feminist concerns and which emerged from the global feminist movement of the early 1970s. Just as there are many definitions of what “green” or “feminism” means, so various authors highlight the polysemy of ecofeminism and point out various...
interpretations of “ecofeminism” (Cuomo, 1994; Warren and Wells-Howe, 1994). Cuomo (1994) takes ecofeminism to be the position that environmentalism and feminist issues are intrinsically linked and therefore argues that environmental and feminist philosophies should acknowledge and address these connections.

In fact Evans (1995) argues there are six schools of ecofeminist thought, ranging from the liberal, early radical, strong cultural, weak cultural, socialist and postmodernist. All these different perspectives address the problems both women and the natural environment encounter in a patriarchal, anthropocentric society[2]. We have adopted the view of ecofeminism provided by authors such as Agarwal (1992), Merchant (1992) and Seager (1993) as the focus for the remainder of this paper. At the same time we acknowledge that there are other ecofeminisms which could be explored (see for instance, Mies, 1986; Shiva, 1989; and a critique of these by Molyneux and Steinberg, 1995).

Agarwal (1992) argues that human relationships with nature need to be understood as rooted in their material reality, in their specific forms of interaction with the environment. Insights may arise from experiential understanding and knowledge. For example, special perspectives on the processes of environmental regeneration may be given by poor peasants or tribal women who fetch fuel and fodder in hills and tribal communities. Similarly, Seager (1993) highlights the importance of viewing ecofeminist issues in the context and complexities of social relations (see also the novels such as Llewellyn’s How Green Was My Valley and Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath). She says:

My research adds another dimension to making feminist sense of our environmental crisis. I pursue a more materially grounded, structural analysis of our environmental problems; my work here is nested within the feminist genre of deconstructing the workings of institutionalized power. Rather than asking where “we” went wrong, I ask “who are we?” Rather than thinking about women’s relationship to nature, I think about men’s and women’s relationships to the institutions that structure daily life. I feel strongly that to turn the tide of environmentally destructive behaviour, we must understand how and why certain institutional cultures create environmentally untenable ways of being (Seager, 1993, p. 12).

These ecofeminist perspectives demand that we question the social relations and structures which currently exist. This idea is in accord with Beck (1995) and others engaged in ecological discourse (Macnaghten and Urry, 1995; O’Connor, 1994), who see the way to ecological enlightenment as working for change through and within the very structures and institutions that have brought us to this stage of our existence.

The perspective of ecofeminism we have discussed highlights that the domination of men by women and the domination of the environment by humans are interrelated issues (something all ecofeminists agree on). In summary, ecofeminists such as Agarwal and Seager maintain that if we want to change the current dominant social paradigm then we must seek changes to the polity, economy and society in which we live. It is only by doing this that we can eliminate the exploitation of the environment for human needs and the domination of women by men.

With this thought in mind, the remainder of this paper focuses more specifically on trying to engender an ecofeminist critique of marketing by providing examples of marketing’s contribution to what we have referred to as ecopatriarchy.

**Marketing as ecopatriarchy**

Egmont: “Well marketers know humans are of higher intelligence and we must give them what they want.”

Roseanna: “But Egmont, without a sustained, natural environment even higher life forms become extinct.”

Egmont: “What, marketing is a dinosaur?”

Roseanna: “No, Egmont, you are missing the point. Please listen…”

The point is that ecofeminism is about much more than the environment and the destruction of the planet. It is a holistic philosophy about how to live a more balanced life on earth and with the earth. It asserts that nature, women and other minorities or groups disadvantaged in a dominant male culture should not be viewed or treated as resources to be used for the benefit of dominant male ideology (patriarchy). In other words environmentalism and feminism are not separate issues, they are the same issue. Marketing contributes to the patriarchy of society through demonstrating a lack of concern for the natural environment and thereby contributing to the destruction of the natural environment. It also perpetuates patriarchy in our society through reinforcing existing social relations and structures, as for example in the stereotyping of gender, race and class and the encouraging of an overall materialism.

Some specific examples of the patriarchal and/or anthropocentric nature of the marketing discipline are provided as follows:
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The role marketing has played in the domination of different issues: women being “objectified” in the West, sold the “beauty myth” (Wolf, 1990), women treated as “mother machines”, non-human life being turned into food-processing units.

Marketing segmentation: variables such as religion, race, nationality, age and gender used to segment markets can lead to the promotion and reinforcement of stereotypes within marketing communications strategies.

Stereotypes in marketing communications: examples include the gratuitous use of women in adverts as the weaker sex, the “secretarial bimbo”, the “Philadelphia” factor, or the empowered “executive tart”; the “male achiever” whose focus is winning and competition; the sudden celebration of the ethnic “others” as target markets: Hispanics, Blacks, non-heterosexuals, and the elderly, all are more recently catered for in the media because of their increased ability to consume, when previously they were ignored.

Materialism: consumption, identity expression and ownership of cars, homes and land are also promoted by company marketing strategies and indeed political parties as the way to be a successful individual in the market economy.

Packaging: this is increasingly being used as a promotional tool to sell products. As a recent marketing text suggests, “rising consumer affluence means that consumers are willing to pay a little more for the convenience, appearance, dependability and prestige of better packages” (Kotler et al., 1996, p. 570). Such strategies by organizations do not take into consideration the depletion of the Earth’s resources and the destruction of the natural environment.

Consumption: the promotion of goods and services has, in some cases, led to “compulsive” (Engel et al., 1995) and “addictive” consumption (Elliott et al., 1995), which particularly affects women. Marketing managers have contributed to this problem by actively seeking to institutionalize such behaviour in consumers’ lifestyles.

The destruction of the natural environment: as well as the adverse effects of war itself to the environment, the warring nations in the West are fighting to save the world from communism or fundamentalism in order to promote capitalism and consumerism.

The role of marketing in the unequal distribution of wealth: this includes: political marketing, private health care; privatization of utilities; wealth for the minority (see Dixon, 1992) and the issue of wealth distribution.

One of these issues, consumption, is considered in more detail as follows.

Consumption

Much has been written in recent years on the increase in consumption and the consequences of this for the natural environment and its rapid destruction. Marketing has a role to play here both as a discipline and as a function because it promotes consumption via the espoused beliefs of the marketing concept[3]. It is important to recognize that the definitions of marketing with which we provide our students are all micro in nature (Dibb et al., 1994; Kotler et al., 1996) and none takes on board macro issues of wider importance to the society in which we live (McDonagh and Prothero, 1996; Tamilia, 1992). Even more importantly they take no account of consequences for the natural environment. As many of the principles of marketing stem from the marketing concept, for instance the marketing mix, marketing segmentation (McDonagh and Prothero, 1997), then changing the anthropocentric, micro view of marketing will have serious implications for the future of the marketing academy.

Marketers have been criticized for helping to create consumption (Brownlie and Saren, 1992; Dickinson et al., 1986). Similarly the strategies of marketing practitioners help to perpetuate the “good life”; thus needs are never satisfied (Alvesson, 1994). It is also suggested that marketers try and promote products by appealing to people’s anxieties, and this is especially true in the case of women. It has been pointed out for example that 70-80 per cent of purchases are made by women, 50 per cent of advertisements are targeted to women and 80 per cent of TV commercials are aimed at women (Dougary, 1994). Wolf (1990) discusses this issue in detail in her excellent text The Beauty Myth. In recent years Wolf comments that this promotion of goods and services has focused on selling products perpetuated by the beauty myth, such as slimming products, cosmetics and fashion accessories. In previous years, highlighting the work of Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique (Wolf, 1990) she suggests similar motives were used in promoting domestic products to working women. Both efforts have the same consequence, namely an increase in consumption and, in turn, “insecure consumption”. As Wolf aptly concludes: Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that they will buy more things if they are kept in the self-hating, ever-failing, hungry, and sexually insecure state of being aspiring “beauties”.

Consequently, it can be argued, the use of marketing by profit-making organizations has helped in the worldwide increase in consumption, and a lot of the time this is based on creating needs and appealing to the
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The UK marketing academy – One only has to look around one’s own institution and/or view an Academy of Marketing conference attendance list to see not only more male academics than female, but also a distinct lack of female academics above the lecturer grade[4]. How many females have had colleagues suggest, “She only got the job because she’s a woman?” Or, when female academics complain about their salaries being less than their male colleagues only to be told “stop whingeing”[5], or hearing on the grapevine a woman didn’t get the job because she was “in child-bearing age”? These are genuine stories which the authors have heard – and we are convinced other marketing academics have similar tales in their closets.

The UK advertising industry – Another example can be taken from the advertising industry, depicted in Dougary’s (1994) excellent text The Executive Tart which discusses the number of women with power positions in the advertising industry. The text provides a number of examples depicting the stranglehold by men on the profession. For instance, with only three exceptions, every major advertising agency is run by a man; only two creative directors in the top 50 agencies are women and 83 per cent of the people who create both the content and style of advertisements are men. Linked to this Dougary (1994) notes that most of the client organizations are represented by men and this, it is suggested, means the females represented in ads are based on the preferences of the client. As one individual informed the author (as a result of a “male creative team, a male account handler, a male client, a male casting director and a male commercials director”) – “The result is that they cast women they fancy, rather than think about the consumer.”

We need to see a fairer depiction of women in advertising. The only way this will happen is if there are more females with power in the advertising industry. The issues also need to be addressed more widely in the marketing academy.

To address these problems not only do we have to examine the need for conspicuous consumption, but we also have to consider who creates this need. We need to see a fairer depiction of women in advertising. The only way this will happen is if there are more females with power in the advertising industry. The issues also need to be addressed more widely in the marketing academy. This requires more female marketing academics generally and specifically more senior female academics. In a Utopian world, the dominant social paradigm needs to be ecocentric and not anthropocentric. This harmonization of humans with nature and women with men can help alleviate current issues of concern in the feminist, ecology and ecofeminist literatures. Marketing does have a role to play in this debate, not least because, as a function within organizations and as an academic discipline, it can be blamed for contributing to many existing patriarchal situations and ecological problems, as some of the examples in this paper have illustrated. The domination and patriarchy which exist will only change and terms such as “the executive tart” will only be eliminated if these issues are addressed.

So, to return to the words of our abstract: will marketing boil in the saucepan of contemporary society? The answer from
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ecofeminists generally and ecofeminist perspectives specifically is yes, unless we further explore the structure of our society. An ecofeminist critique of marketing is therefore important and should not only consider the principles of marketing but also consider the way marketing is structured as an academic discipline and as a function within industry. Thus marketers must contribute in addressing these issues if the marketing principles of tomorrow are going to benefit from ecocentric and ecofeminist insights – where we can wave good-bye to Egmont the patriarch forever.

Conclusions

Egmont: “Oh, I see. That’s the impact we have. I didn’t realize that type of thing was so widespread.”
Roseanna: “Yes, once you get the big picture you begin to see we’re all in this together, don’t you?”

The authors conclude by stating what they consider to be the obvious! Yes, there is a significant contribution to be gained from ecofeminist perspectives for marketers trying to understand the complexities of the ecocentric challenge for business and management. The link here is that there is a need for a change in society, organizations and also in marketing (see Fineman, 1996; McDonagh and Prothero, 1997; Shrivastava, 1994) for issues such as sustainable consumption and production to be made possible. New issues or discussion cannot be adjudicated for; they should happen organically! If marketing thought is to become more robust, surely as perspectives develop elsewhere, such as ecofeminism, they must also be sought out, debated and developed (see also McDonagh, 1995)? Cixous, for example, argues (Wilcox et al., 1990, p. 22):

So at least let’s not forget that we have secret authors in our conscious – and try to go to school at night. Writing should dedicate itself to the truth which is violent. What should the truth be, what would violence be, for a woman writer? First of all, there are situations that are common to both sexes and that women writers have exactly the same problems as men. It’s as difficult for a man as for a woman to deal with the truth of our cruelty or of our anger, of our incapacity to be fair or just, or of our general cowardice.

There is much to be gained from a reading of the ecofeminist literature (see Merchant, 1992) especially if marketing wants to bring a greater depth of ecological understanding to its relationship with the earth. This is a point made recently by one of the authors (see McDonagh, 1996) in respect of the flawed notion constituted in the discourse of “relationship marketing” within the academy, better described as marketique relationelle. As an illustration, the authors recommend that much can be drawn from Merchant’s (1992) depiction (see Figure 1) of the ecological revolutions and it’s rich representation of the interconnections between consciousness, human and non-human production and reproduction. What often seems to happen is that marketing and business writers, when discussing ecologicalism or total customer values, reference the notion of “holism”, without ever acknowledging the complexity of the concept. Merchant’s (1992) work goes some way to redress this and could, in our opinions, prove a more useful yardstick for marketers to consult in the future before they start talking about relationships!

The examples in this paper clearly illustrate that marketing in practice has contributed to the continued existence of a patriarchal society and to the destruction of our natural environment. In order to eliminate these the ecofeminist literature suggests the structures of organizations in which marketing practitioners find themselves must change. Consequently we need more women in top marketing positions and women on a par with men in their employment, via the provision of equal pay, for example. Only then can we begin to correct the eco-patriarchy which marketing practitioners, by operating in the dominant social paradigm, have helped to create.

Notes

1 It is interesting that the ideologies of Aquinas have also been criticized by feminists (Catterall et al., 1985) and by those campaigning for animal rights (Ryder, 1983; Singer, 1990; Tester, 1991).
2 The authors do not have the space to discuss all of the ecofeminist perspectives in this paper. Those who are interested in further exploring the issues can find some useful starting-points in the bibliography. Work which the authors found particularly useful include Griffin (1978), Plumwood (1993) and Twine (1995).
3 For an in-depth critique of the marketing concept see McDonagh and Prothero (1997).
4 Universities’ statistical records for 1992-1993 showed employment of females as being – 2.7 per cent professors, 9.6 per cent readers and senior lecturers, 25.1 per cent lecturers and 54.5 per cent research and analogous staff. These figures excluded new universities.
5 In the UK in 1990 the average woman’s earnings were 76.7 per cent of those of men. An AUT study found in 1992 that on average female academics’ earnings were only 83.9 per cent of their male colleagues’.
References

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