

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>

McCaughey, Martha.(2012) Partying with a Purpose [Review of] *Women at Work: Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond* by L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011), **Sex Roles**, 67:3-4, pp. 253-255. (ISSN: 0360-0025) [Aug 2012] The version of record is available from <http://www.springer.com> DOI 10.1007/s11199-012-0140-8

## Partying With A Purpose

Women at Work: Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond. By L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller, Boulder, CO, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2011. 273 pp. \$58.50 (hardback). ISBN: 978-1-58826-720-7

Martha McCaughey

**Abstract:** Reviews the book, *Women at Work: Tupperware, Passion Parties, and Beyond* by L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller (2011). *Women at Work* considers the many in-home marketing plans directed at women. Using Dorothy Smith's *The Everyday World as Problematic* as their basis, L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller examine the party plan economy as both a form of work and a form of consumption, and argue that the party plan economy genders us by eliciting our participation in the parties, work, consumption patterns, and lifestyles they generate. The authors frame the party plan economy as a "gender regime" and therefore also call these "gender parties" throughout the book. Some of the aforementioned parties are examined in this book by scholars other than the authors; their brief "case studies" are nested within some of the book's chapters. Bemiller and Williams describe their own experience of a Pampered Chef party (hosted by Bemiller and attended by Williams) to describe the way women get sucked into participating in such gender parties. The book is geared toward an undergraduate audience, one that has not considered gender before and that would have a limited tolerance for sustained arguments about theoretical matters. Williams and Bemiller include several personal anecdotes designed to relate to the focus of the book: why Williams's campus office bookshelves include personal items, and how she left her daughter on the curb as she attempted to juggle work and parental responsibilities; and how Bemiller's students sometimes share their stories of intimate

partner violence. The authors' writing style and the book's layout are designed, I assume, to make the book seem down-to-earth and therefore readable for undergraduate students. Although an interesting and important topic to explore, this book does not put the many gender parties it mentions in an overall comparative perspective, offering only a superficial look at many such parties and ignoring some altogether. As such, its broad-brush coverage might serve as a useful springboard for those considering research on one or more of these parties. While its casual style might work for undergraduates in both marketing and gender courses learning about the variety of in-home party sales and the links between marketing and constructions of gender, the analyses will be seen as too simplistic by those seeking a serious scholarly study of gender and in-home marketing plans. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2012 APA, all rights reserved)

*Women at Work* considers the many in-home marketing plans directed at women. Using Dorothy Smith's *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987) as their basis, L. Susan Williams and Michelle Bemiller examine the party plan economy as both a form of work and a form of consumption, and argue that the party plan economy genders us by eliciting our participation in the parties, work, consumption patterns, and lifestyles they generate. The authors frame the party plan economy as a "gender regime" (p. 27) and therefore also call these "gender parties" throughout the book. As the authors put it, "gender parties [are] gatherings in which products are sold or made, while ideas about culturally appropriate male/female arrangements are constructed. And more" (p. 1). While their chief example is a Pampered Chef party, at which cooking and baking supplies are sold, the gender party can also include parties to sell purses, shoes, cosmetics, Tasers, and sex toys. The gender party also includes feminist consciousness-raising parties, book clubs, drag queen gatherings, and Indian kitty parties, which are monthly in-home, women-only parties where someone wins pooled money but where nothing is sold. Bachelor and bachelorette parties are not mentioned in the book, nor are Botox parties (at which someone without the proper license gets access to Botox and injects party goers who pay a fraction of the usual cost for this wrinkle-reduction treatment). Key to any of these parties is that (usually) women are gathered together partying, without, presumably, thinking that they are purchasing or producing gender.

Some of the aforementioned parties are examined in this book by scholars other than the authors; their brief "case

studies” are nested within some of the book’s chapters. For example, the book includes a case study by Akiko Yoshida of women who sell Mary Kay cosmetics and another on African American women’s book groups by BeEtta Stoney. There is also a case study on the history of Tupperware and its in-home party plan contributed by Sue Zschoche. However, Williams and Bemiller do not cite the excellent book by Alison J. Clarke on Tupperware (2001). This is a curious omission given the rich historical and sociological analysis Clarke’s book offers that is relevant to the overall project of *Women at Work*. Clarke’s book, for instance, not only outlines the contributions of Brownie Wise to Tupperware’s remarkable success but also credits early African American businesswoman, Madame C. J. Walker, for pioneering the in-home sales technique that helped make, in Walker’s case, hair and skin products acceptable to Black women. Clarke (2001) also outlines the various methods by which in-home party sales created intimacy both with other women and with the products being sold, and the methods by which the saleswomen were motivated.

Bemiller and Williams describe their own experience of a Pampered Chef party (hosted by Bemiller and attended by Williams) to describe the way women get sucked into participating in such gender parties. Bemiller, for instance, highlights the ways in which her party preparations involved much invisible work, while Williams admits to ordering \$100 of pie-making accessories even though she did not intend to buy them and already owns everything needed to make pies she does not, in any case, even make. Because a primary purpose of their book is to offer an awareness of the “seduction process” of gender parties, and argue that this becoming conscious of this process is the first step to “wholesale change” (p. 172), I was surprised that there was not further analysis of the apparent failure of the authors’ own critical consciousness to make their Pampered Chef party more, in their own words, purposeful. If the consciousness raising leads to change or at least to “partying with a purpose,” then why did Williams buy all the piemaking tools? These questions do not get answered. Nor do questions readers might have about differences between some of the parties.

For instance, Pampered Chef parties are the one type in which a mixture of men and women could participate (whereas in most places men, by law, cannot be in the home

where a female dealer is selling sex toys). And chef parties need not be built around gender roles, personal insecurity, or dissatisfaction. Some people really enjoy cooking and eating gourmet food, and they enjoy buying the tools for it the way other hobbyists enjoy buying the supplies for their hobbies. Yet the authors make no analytic distinction between the various products marketed at in-home parties. Some of the “gender parties” involve no corporations or product sales, but involve a group of same-sex people who do identity work when together, while others are parties for the purpose of selling a product which ends up being tied to either a desired gender identity or to the gendered dynamics of those to whom the product is being marketed. These parties, including the Indian kitty parties, African American women’s book clubs, and drag queen parties, are presented as potential spaces for progressive social change because they go beyond consumerism. (For more information about the variety of kitty parties in India, see [The Times of India 2003](#)).

Not surprisingly, the authors accept drag queen gatherings and Black women’s book clubs as more feminist and purposeful gender parties (although we could certainly question the former for all the cosmetics its members must purchase and the latter for not always reading pro-feminist and pro-civil rights books). However, they also briefly describe Taser Parties (pp. 180–181)—which use the in-home party plan to sell women electroshock weapons for use in self-defense against attackers—without critical analysis, even though surely such parties first instill fear of certain types of male violence in order to sell women the security for which Taser is then presented. Further, because women tend to be uncomfortable with weapons, selling Tasers in an inhome, all-women party atmosphere would work for the very same reasons the in-home party has worked for selling sex toys and, in an earlier era, Tupperware. The authors do not systematically address either the similarities or differences among the various in-home party sales or products.

As Clarke (2001) explains in her study of Tupperware’s in-home party sales method, such parties are designed to get women to feel comfortable with the products by offering them a highly sensorial experience in a safe, friendly, intimate, women-only environment. In the same way that midcentury

women were told Tupperware technology and design would make them modern homemakers who had it all, women are now told sex toys will make them sexually empowered and solve the problems of their sex lives (McCaughey and French 2001). Although neither I nor the authors have studied Taser parties, and they are mentioned only briefly in a case study by Kimber R. Williams nested in the book's third chapter, I am willing to bet that women at Taser parties are told that the weapon will empower them to feel safer in a world of male violence. This is no different from the other party-plan marketing systems that promise women a better, more empowered life with the product being sold. The authors uncritically accept some in-home sales events or products as "partying with a purpose" and frame others as baiting women to buy things they don't need. (Although the book is not mentioned by the authors, the phrase "party with a purpose" is the title of a book written for those recruiting party plan partners [Pearson 2005]).

The book is geared toward an undergraduate audience, one that has not considered gender before and that would have a limited tolerance for sustained arguments about theoretical matters. Scholars—from Karl Marx to those who have published work on in-home marketing plans directed at women—are mentioned only briefly and superficially. The writing style is casual, which might work better for students (and American students in particular) than for serious academic readers. Its form is somewhat unusual in that it includes nested sections from other authors with uneven writing styles and analytic foci. The authors are American, and one of the nested sections describes in-home kitty parties in India; however, there is too little here for any real global-comparative perspective. Kitties are taken in a number of mix-gender American civic organization and club meetings, allowing one person to walk away the lucky winner of the money pooled at that gathering. And yet they are more ways to ensure members attend the meetings, not ways to ensure gender is accomplished. Further, although some of the nested case studies include parties at which products are not purchased, not enough of these types of parties, and the scholarly literature about them, are included to allow for any systematic comparison with in-home marketing plans.

Williams and Bemiller include several personal anecdotes

designed to relate to the focus of the book: why Williams's campus office bookshelves include personal items, and how she left her daughter on the curb as she attempted to juggle work and parental responsibilities; and how Bemiller's students sometimes share their stories of intimate partner violence. The authors' writing style and the book's layout are designed, I assume, to make the book seem down-to-earth and therefore readable for undergraduate students.

Although an interesting and important topic to explore, this book does not put the many gender parties it mentions in an overall comparative perspective, offering only a superficial look at many such parties and ignoring some altogether. As such, its broad-brush coverage might serve as a useful springboard for those considering research on one or more of these parties. While its casual style might work for undergraduates in both marketing and gender courses learning about the variety of in-home party sales and the links between marketing and constructions of gender, the analyses will be seen as too simplistic by those seeking a serious scholarly study of gender and in-home marketing plans.

## References

- Clarke, A. J. (2001). *Tupperware: The promise of plastic in 1950's America*. New York, NY: Smithsonian Books.
- McCaughey, M., & French, C. (2001). Women's sex-toy parties: Technology, orgasm, and commodification. *Sexuality and Culture*, 5 (3), 77–96. doi:10.1007/s12119-001-1031-2.
- Pearson, P. (2005). *Party with a purpose: The psychological secrets to recruiting and retaining party plan partners*. Tampa, FL: INTI Publishing & Resource Books.
- Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- The Times of India*. (2003, May 31). Fun in their kitty. Retrieved from <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Fun-in-their-kitty/articleshow/478264619.cms>.