

2014 ACR Presidential Address

Obliquity, Wonderment and The Grand Adventure of Doing Consumer Research

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*Oh, how I envy you not everyone has the chance to face the
unspeakable terrors of the great unknown*

Hoo, hoo

Today's the day

In only a matter of moments

You'll all be on your way

What lurks around the corner

Not a soul can say

But I can guess

More or less

Hidden dangers

Great duress

Ah, the moment of glory

Is close at hand

Hoo, hoo

It's gonna be grand

*OWL, in Pooh's Grand Adventure:
The Search for Christopher Robin*

Leading up to today a lot of people have asked me how the Presidential address was coming along and I have to say that although I kinda, sorta knew what I wanted to talk about over a year ago, there's a big difference between kinda, sorta knowing and actually having something to say. It wasn't until the "best used by" date on the milk carton was well past the ACR conference that I started to panic about what I was **actually** going to say. I ended up with the title you see before you, which itself has about it a *character of misadventure*.

However, before I attempt to coax you along that winding path, I'd like to thank Angela Lee for the lovely introduction. Over the course of this year I have truly come to think of Angela as a goddess who is enormously caring and thoughtful about all things small and large.

Also, I want to thank those of you who are here today for choosing to be here!! At ACR there's a lot of competition for your time, and I'm grateful for a few minutes of your attention. I especially want to thank June Cotte and Stacy Wood for putting together a wonderful, creative, fun conference and also for allowing people to **opt out** of this event, so that I don't have to compete with your best friend over lunch. In addition, I want to thank the Marketing Department at Eller College of Management, University of Arizona for providing a little additional incentive to **opt in**. Celebrating life on a Friday afternoon with family, friends and a glass of champagne is always a good way to spend time.

Finally, I want to thank the membership of ACR for giving me a chance to serve as President. From the time I first joined ACR in 1981 I felt it was my home and extended family. I carried the little blue book of ACR members around with me everywhere, believing that if I were ever somewhere in need, the ACR community would be there for me. In this role, I've had a chance to test that proposition. Working with Angela Lee, Jeff Inman, Sharon Shavitt, Amna Kirmani, Rajiv Vaidyanathan, the ACR Board and many, many others in the ACR community has reaffirmed for me why this is such a special organization.

About the time I was originally trying to figure out what I wanted to talk about Michel Pham did a wonderful Presidential Address at SCP on *The Seven Sins of Consumer Research*—that also went viral in our community, and at that point, and a few times since then, I seriously considered outsourcing my talk to him (2013). You might also be surprised to learn that I briefly flirted with playing the piano, it was suggested I could dance, and a few well-meaning colleagues, who are probably not here today, told me to just cancel it.

In Michel Pham's address he echoed the call of many others, including many past ACR Presidents, for more relevant research (2013; Andreassen, 1993; Mick, 2006; Keller 2008; Inman, 2012). A focus on relevance, very broadly defined, was also the topic of the inaugural editorial by the new *Journal Of Consumer Research* editorial team, and a major organizing theme for the new *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* that Jeff Inman talked about in his Presidential Address, and we'll hear more about this at tomorrow's luncheon (Inman, 2012). The concern over the lack of relevance applies not just to consumer research, but also to the marketing discipline more generally. A recent paper in *Journal of Academy of Marketing Science* documents how little of our research ever gets cited in business disciplines outside of marketing (Clark, Key, Hodis and Rajaratnam 2014), and a preconference event at AMA Winter 2015 will also focus on how we can be more relevant.

Michel went on to talk in detail about some of the things that we do that make us largely irrelevant to ourselves and everyone else. He concluded like others by suggesting that we need changes in how we train doctoral students and in the reward structure. Although not the topic of Michel's talk, we have also seen increased concern about research integrity and how to police it with a general understanding that these problems are also driven by our training and reward structures. His last sentence carries a familiar, and discouraging tone:

"As long as researchers are rewarded mostly for maximizing the number of articles that they publish in A-level journals rather than for the lasting impact of their articles, regardless of the journals where they are published, then narrow scope, narrow lenses, narrow epistemology, disregard for content, overgeneralization, research by convenience, and "theories of studies," will remain prevalent in our field," and the relevance of consumer research will remain a struggle (2013, p. 422).

I think he's right about the things we are doing wrong, and I'm all for us trying to change these things every day in our organizations, and in our relations with students and colleagues, but I think there's something more important at stake here, it's the very essence of why and how we do what we do. And that's what I'd like to talk about today.

Randomly selected like many of the books that inspire me, a couple years ago I picked up a little book titled *Obliquity: Why Our Goals are best Achieved Indirectly*, by John Kay (2011). He wanted to persuade people that the path to success and happiness does not run through the bottom line. He dedicated the book to Sir James Black a Nobel Prize-winning pharmacologist, but also a scientist who accidentally created a lot of shareholder wealth through his discoveries. Sir James Black called it "the Principle of Obliquity:

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Goals are often best achieved without intending them.” John Stuart Mill in his autobiography eloquently writes:

I never, indeed, wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end. Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way (1893; p. 117).

Perhaps all of us have thought about the obliquity principle with regard to our students, our best students are typically not the ones that ask “how do I get an A in this class.” Similarly, I would posit that the most successful academics typically do not have publishing or tenure as their goals. Perhaps, even the quest for relevance is a double-edge sword if sought out the same way that PhD students now quest for “hot topics.” Who would have thought that a cross-country, summer road trip to learn about consumers and their possessions would end up a consumer odyssey that transformed the field of consumer research, and my own research, in profound ways, (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry, 1989)?

Speaking personally, because that’s the misadventures I’m most familiar with, a lot of my most exciting, fun and surprising research was deemed by leaders in the field as irrelevant, no longer interesting, or a project that could never be published in a leading marketing journal—something not to waste my time on. When as a brand new assistant professor I worked with an incoming PhD student Debbie MacInnis on a theoretical paper on Imagery Processing we were assured it would be impossible to publish—one of the reviewers to the very end wrote it off as “highly speculative,” which it was (MacInnis and Price, 1987). Many people told Larry Feick and me not to waste time on the Market Maven project because word-of-mouth is just not interesting to managers (Feick and Price, 1987). Numerous wise scholars told me that my project with Eric Arnould done in the context of white water river rafting (but that tried to solve niggling puzzles about satisfaction and communitas) would never see the light of day in a marketing journal (Arnould and Price, 1993). When I worked with PhD students Carolyn Curasi then at University of South Florida (Curasi, Price and Arnould, 2004), and later Amber Epp then at University of Nebraska to explore Family Identity in all its myriad complexity (Epp and Price, 2008), we were assured family decision-making was dead. Obviously, my own vexing questions, questions that kept me awake at night were not widely recognized as “relevant.” I’m sure many of you in the audience have had this same experience—difficult, troublesome quests that others found irrelevant. So perhaps even relevance is best approached using the Principle of Obliquity.

Lately I’ve been wondering if we do a better job of teaching doctoral students how to publish articles and get tenure than we do of giving our students “the deep principles of science and the love of it, what’s behind it and why it’s worth doing,” (Feynman 1988; p. 14). Richard P. Feynman, a reluctant Nobel Prize-winning physicist, notes this is exactly what his father gave him, and he reflects:

“I’ve been caught, so to speak—like someone who was given something wonderful when he was a child, and he’s always looking for it again. I’m always looking, like a child, for the wonders I know I’m going to find—maybe not every time, but every once in a while,” (1988, p. 14).

Another one of my favorite books, I picked up many years ago on a sale shelf. The book is by Martin Gardner, who has written extensively in math, science and philosophy, but also literary criticism and fiction. The title is *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*, and it’s filled with essays self-described as “What I believe and Why,” (1983). My favorite essay is “Surprise: Why I Cannot Take the World for Granted,” in which Martin Gardner describes the magnificent gift of wonderment. Albert Einstein observes, “The finest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.” The incredible, inexhaustible mystery of everyday life with all its rhythms and lines of flight to unexpected places is a constant inspiration (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). And as consumer researchers we are immersed in it—the mystery is all around us, all the time.

If you are watching the new PBS series or have read the book “How We Got to Now,” then you know that a practical discovery or invention can have wide-reaching consequences—can literally change our world (Johnson, 2014). A printing press that enables people to read books is also the source of demand for eyeglasses, which in turn generates microscopes and telescopes and a revolution in what we see in biology, astronomy, medicine and physics. Everything changes because of this small thing. At the center of health, sustainability, financial wellbeing and happiness, consumer behavior is right up there with brain surgery and rocket science in complexity, scope and potential impact—we can change the world.

Lewis Thomas, another of my favorite scientists, argued that to create scientists we should have courses that teach “informed bewilderment”—he writes “every important scientific advance that has come in looking like an answer has turned, sooner or later—usually sooner—into a question. And the game is just beginning.” (Thomas, 1983). I believe we should engage our students and ourselves with “deep play.” Diane Ackerman writes, “Make-believe is at the heart of play, and also at the heart of much of what passes for work. Let’s make-believe we can shoot a rocket to the moon,” (1999, p. 7). She elaborates, “The spirit of deep play is central to the life of each person and also to society inspiring . . . arts, exploration and discovery.” “Swept up by the deepest states of play, one feels balanced, creative, focused.” “Deep play thrives on a romance with life.” It is “a love affair with the world,” (Ackerman 1999, p. 19).

Science that follows the questions as they tumble out across an unanticipated line of flight can’t be rigidly locked into some formulaic template for how to publish consumer research. By focusing less on publishing templates and more on how to follow a question through cracks and crevices and over walls and up mountains, letting the question itself bounce against our theories and assumptions and with us tell a story—we can instead share findings with all the qualities of a good, trustworthy, prospective and useful story (Weick 1995, cited about 15,000 times). This then would be consumer research as a grand adventure filled with mystery and import rather than a publishing game.

My perspective on research as a grand life adventure is certainly not unique to me. Many people here today are embracing and living this grand life adventure. My dear colleague Sidney Levy is a case in point. At 93, he comes into the office five days a week unless he’s speaking somewhere around the globe. He also tucks in going to the Opera, piano lessons, and is teaching himself Chinese. I remember him sharing with me his thrill at his first experience with M-Turk, bursting with enthusiasm at this new way to reach out to people and understand their lives. He publishes articles all the time, including a recent JCR, but more as a byproduct of his “love affair with the

world.” He’s certainly an anomaly, but he exemplifies research as adventure, delight, persistence; research as community, creation, and self-completion. I may not last as long as Sidney, but if I die collecting data it’s okay with me.

When I am able to pursue research as a grand adventure—a peak experience of ecstasy, rapture, bliss; and awe, mystery, humility and surrender it is a mindset that leaves me thoroughly delighted with all the research I did and didn’t publish, and all the mysteries that await my gaze tomorrow. However, for all of us, including me and everyone in this room, it requires resisting four temptations that are built into things we hear daily about how to be a successful academic researcher.

We all succumb to these temptations some of the time. We succumb because it is the spooky forest we live in—as owl tells pooh and companions “the eye of the skull itself.” It’s easy to lose sight of its illusions, mere shadows and assumptions. We fear for our students, our families, our colleagues and ourselves.

TEMPTATION #1

If you want a grand adventure, resist the temptation to “View Publication as a Significant Part of Your Job.” Instead view each research project as a new road to wander along, driven by the question not the answer. If you look at publishing as a job, then you try to maximize output and minimize input. This frames research in a particular way: research is what you do to get published. A colleague explained to me how this works. He admonished me to pick a substantive topic (preferably one that not many people have published in) and then pick a theory (again, it’s better if there’s not much out there that you have to read). Finally, add a good, robust methodology and crank out publications. The goal is to minimize additional reading and learning in order to generate your next article.

Given that I grew up in a forest of books and questions, wishing nothing more than to stay there forever, to treat reading, learning and data collection as costs seems strange. Blind alleys are not a waste of time, they are intriguing, unique adventures with friends, and occasionally I find my way out of them. To be honest, as any one of my co-authors will confirm, I personally have zero sense of direction. I would still be somewhere on the outskirts of Eastern Hungary without Robin Coulter and her maps. But still, for me, new research projects are adventures filled with wonder risk, ordeal and thrill. Would I have published more using my colleague’s wise adage? Possibly, but I doubt I would have had nearly as much fun.

In fact, with honesty as a guide, when Robin Coulter, Larry Feick and I adventured in Central and Eastern Europe right after the fall of the Berlin Wall to learn more about the Origins of Product Involvement and Brand Commitment even we weren’t sure anything we were doing would ever be more than our own field notes and amazing memories. Even we were surprised when it was finally published as a lead article in JCR—thank you David Mick (Coulter, Price and Feick, 2003)! We literally muddled for a decade publishing a little here and a little there, but mostly just trying to figure it out for ourselves. Nevertheless, I’ll never regret all the amazing experiences and frustrations that were part of that.

Last week, instead of working on this address I spent my Friday with Ainslie Schultz, a PhD student at University of Arizona, doing an experiment where students decorated pumpkin cookies with four colors of icing and four different decorating tips (lots of lovely noise). Ainslie and I, already fans of Page Moreau and Darren Dahl, developed a whole new respect as we tried to clean icing tips between sessions (Dahl and Moreau, 2007). And we used already baked cookies! I think the most important take-away for me from watching all these students do this, is not something that will ever

be published! The expression of a young woman in the first session created a song of difference and repetition that continued all day, with many students again and again, and it touched me (Deleuze, 1994). I’ve told the story already a dozen times. She decorated her cookie, and not just that, she decorated the plate it was on. And as she set it on the table so we could take a picture, she crossed her arms across her chest, sighed deeply and said, “My mother would love this cookie.” I venture to say she was engaged in deep, creative and meaningful play. I hope that I can help more people have that feeling more often.

TEMPTATION #2

Resist the temptation to “Pursue a Clear and Consistent Research Program.” Again, let obliquity be your guide. I remember at my consortium when Peter Wright talked about his research program and he revealed that while it looked clear and consistent, that was an unintended consequence of his own burning questions. I never forgot that lesson. Ph.D. students are too often led to believe that the fruit of each research project is another research project that over time composes a clear research program. This is a useful strategy. It minimizes additional inputs, and makes it easy for administrators and tenure review committees to discern a researcher’s identity.

Very early in my career I remember going to an ACR session where Beth Hirschman, then a young mother, was investigating childcare choices, later in her ACR Presidential address she talked about challenges of compulsion and addiction in consumers’ lives (Hirschman 1992). In between, she invited us to explore consumption as a process filled with fantasy, feelings and fun (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). It seems to me that Beth, like many of my favorite researchers, always let her own vexing questions be her research guide. Although, I have followed up on an earlier research project with another one, for me too, my research projects reflect my environment, my alliances, life-stage, and current concerns. I’m always hoping that the answers that come out of my research will be useful for me in my own life.

Even more so, now that I’m old, I believe in holding dear the option to reinvent myself as a researcher. With this perspective, the world is a constant explosion of research questions, and finding answers seems useful to daily life. Some recent research that I’m doing with Ainslie Schultz and Robin Coulter suggests that believing that *you* can change, that *you* can reinvent yourself, that *you* can actively pursue and make a *fresh start* is an important adaptive life strategy that leads us to be more creative, happier, more willing to try new things, more resilient in the face of failure (Schultz, Price and Coulter 2014). Other research by Dweck and her colleagues shows that adolescents that believe that *people* can change, perform better in high school. Moreover, teaching adolescents that *people* can change can help alleviate or prevent depression (Miu and Yeager 2014; Yeager, Johnson, Spitzer, Trzesniewski, Powers, and Dweck 2014).

TEMPTATION #3

The temptation to “Choose Co-authors Strategically, to Advance One’s Career” is a third temptation. The motley crew that is Winnie the Pooh’s grand adventure would never have been brought together as the most expert team to find Christopher Robin, but they were the team that wanted to find him the most. Again, let obliquity be your guide. Petty and Cacioppo were accidentally a great team who substantially changed our perspectives on how consumers process information with their Elaboration Likelihood Model (1986). They loved arguing so much that they moved in together and put blackboards up so they could battle effectively. Kohli and Jaworski were accidentally a great team. Two recently minted PhD students

who generally took opposite sides of an argument in my marketing theory seminar and often went to the board and took over the class to make their respective points, they created lasting change in our mindset with their paper on market orientation, a paper that has been cited almost 7000 times (Jaworski and Kohli 1990). Barney Glaser who collaborated with Anselm Strauss for 27 years, talked about how Anselm generated in him a “‘high’ for doing sociology that has never left me,” (1991, 103). Another of his co-authors, David Mains wrote, “If you become a working colleague of Anselm’s chances are high you will become a personal friend. Conversations with him tend to be adventures... His curiosity is contagious...” (1991, p. 7)

At first glance it seems like choosing co-authors strategically will insure that you have the skills that are required and you know what each person will bring to the project, but if you want research to be a grand adventure choose co-authors because they are fun, entertaining, passionate, surprising and willing to take risks. Working with my co-authors, side by side, key to key is incredible “deep play.” I have had so much fun with them. We have explored foreign lands and wild places, cuddled up over computers and campfires, cried in our beer and occasionally shared champagne—in fact some of us are doing that right now, here today. We have muddled more and published less than you can imagine, but we have filled hallowed academic halls all over the world with our laughter, speculations, and debates.

We sometimes forget that science is very much collectively produced—it’s potential for morphogenesis, transformation, and change is created by an assemblage of actors, problems, perspectives and, at least in my case, a kitchen table, and an appropriate amount of lovely coffee and later wine. Each research project is a unique combination of differences, craziness, accidents, synergies, and life events. My love and affection for my co-authors has sustained me through births, deaths, divorces, childrearing, and an almost not quite empty nest. Journal rejections are hardly a test for these relationships.

TEMPTATION #4

If on our grand adventure, there is a scary eye of the skull that we must vanquish, it is the temptation to “Chart a Publication Path toward Tenure.” This is truly the worst temptation of all. There’s a charming experiment on embodied creativity that shows, perhaps not too surprisingly, that when people are put in boxes, literally put in boxes, they are not as creative as when they are not (Leung, Kim, Polman, Ong, Qiu, Goncalo, and Sanchez-Burks, 2012). Tenure was intended to promote academic freedom and risk-taking but it has become a horrible, entrapping box. If the goal is to publish in order to get tenure then you minimize time spent in the library, time spent in the field, time spent collecting data. You don’t take on anything too big or too risky or too long term. In short you engage in all of the sins of consumer research that Michel Pham articulated in his SCP presidential address.

Applying the principle of obliquity, if you resist this temptation I think there’s a good chance you will publish lots of amazing and impactful research and you will also get tenure. There are many examples in this room of people who did. I have heard Punam Keller, Jerry Zaltman, Leigh McAlister and many others talk about exactly this on many occasions—the fears loom larger than the realities.

Far, far more importantly, if you resist this temptation, then you can choose to do research that permeates your life, and changes how you think about the world. Whether it’s published or not, whether it appears in a leading journal or not, it will become an intimate and lasting part of your personal history—a period of transformation and growth—something worth having done. To do research that matters begins first and foremost with doing research that matters to you—

that addresses your own mysteries and burning questions! That you would do forever and for free because the people you are working with, the places it takes you and the answers you find are as rewarding and pleasurable as the wonderful party that Stacy Wood and June Cotte have planned for us on Saturday night is also sure to be. See you there!!

Thank you very much!!

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