

## Reflections on Agency in Consumer Research

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In preparation for this presentation, I scanned my bookshelves and assembled a list of citations, both in and outside JCR. Reflecting upon treatments of *subjectivity* in consumer research, I concluded we don't do a very good job, and wondered why this was so. I prepared notes attempting to answer this question and making suggestions as to how we may do a better job.

Then, as luck might have it, while reading the doctoral consortium program, I realized the topic was *agency*, not subjectivity! I couldn't imagine how I could have read one term for the other, but given their intertwined nature, I decided to remain true to my original course. So, as a result, I expanded my discussion to cover treatments of subjectivity and agency in consumer research. I address two questions: first, what is it about consumer research that more often than not precludes subjectivity and agency, and second, how can we do a better job of incorporating consumers' subjectivity and agency in our research.

First, I set out to define the term subjectivity. There is a fairly prolific and dense literature in philosophy. Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* is foundational, referring to humans' "being in the world," based on his reflections of the nature of human existence and lived experience, with some distinctions between the authentic and inauthentic. Husserl's notion of the life world is also relevant, in that the nature of being is in important ways predicated on one's social circumstances. Yet, I would put to you that these are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for subjectivity. Subjectivity must be taken further

to include how consumers see themselves and understand their position in the world vis a vis others.

Let us now turn to the definition of agency and its relation to subjectivity. By agency, I mean one's capacity for action in their interests. As such, subjectivity is distinct from, but related to agency. Subjectivity is a precondition for agency, in that a person's sense of him or herself as a consumer potentially impacts their ability to act in their interests, although both are often quite intuitive in practice.

Here we gain some insights into difficulties regarding treatments of consumer subjectivity and agency in consumer research. Like many of our key concepts and constructs, they are impacted in dramatic ways by our assumptions about consumers, our ontologies; and our methods, our epistemologies.

Perhaps you can help me out, because I just don't get it. Is it we just don't trust consumers? Is that why experimental researchers routinely conceal the purpose of their studies from consumers? Is it we know consumers better than they know themselves? Is that why modelers aren't concerned that they don't talk to consumers at all, when they do not, content to infer consumers' reasons for doing what they do, based on basic assumptions of greed and self interest that further debase us as human beings who at times display altruism and even sacrifice? Where would you find subjectivity in these examples?

Interpretivists have a longer, stronger legacy for dealing with subjectivity and agency. It has been, after all, a key concern in the bodies of work we draw from. Yet this type of work is far from exempt from limited treatments of consumers' subjectivity and agency. Many of those, like myself who are more anthropologically inclined, have done

our homework, and have learned all too well of the excesses of early work that projected onto others those aspects of our culture we're most uncomfortable with in ourselves. For anthropologists, there are such troublesome entanglements with such world happenings as colonialism, genocide, kinship/family relations, and uneven international development; while for sociologists, the parallels are at the level of society in social stratification, class distinctions, reproduction dynamics, and urbanization. Yet even here, our studies often say more about us than our others! All too often, we interpretivists mistake telling people's stories and situating them socio-historically with allowing consumers space and respecting their rights to tell their own stories and tell us how they see their life situations.

The implications to consumer research are profound. So here I challenge you, the future of our field. We may know a lot about consumer behavior, but we'll never understand consumers until we access them where they are, on their terms, and bring them back to confront our literature, our pedagogy. Otherwise consumer research becomes, sadly, formulaic, detached, which is no less than criminal, given how rich, diverse, disjointed, indeed, how beautiful and at times horrific consumer behavior is and can be in our studies. More importantly, attending to consumers' subjectivity and agency is critical to better understand the power and limitations of consumer behavior as a social force, global in its scope, and impacting as well as influenced by our major social distinctions.

**References available upon request.**