Roundtable    Concepts, Concept Development, and Consumer Research

John D.  Branch, Washington University in Saint Louis

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ROUNDTABLE
Concepts, Concept Development, and Consumer Research
John D. Branch, Washington University in Saint Louis

ABSTRACT
Concepts serve critical functions in science. Indeed, the advancement of human knowledge relies on concepts, both for their descriptive powers and for the role as the building-blocks of theory. Concept development, therefore, plays a similarly critical function in science. Consumer research, however, suffers from a conceptual immaturity—there is a lack of philosophical discussion of concepts in the consumer research literature, and concept development has largely been neglected by consumer researchers. The purpose of this roundtable, therefore, is to provide a forum for consumer researchers to explore concepts and concept development, and their implications for consumer research.

CONCEPTS AND SCIENCE
Science could not exist without concepts, for it is the advancement of all human knowledge—knowledge, perhaps—which is considered the goal of science, and concepts are the basic unit of human knowledge. Any and all science, therefore, depends on its concepts.

Accordingly, scientists have an enormous stake vested in concepts. First, they are interested in concepts for their descriptive powers. Concepts allow scientists to describe the world; they are the link between data and abstraction. In describing the world with concepts, scientists advance Knowledge—they develop concepts which become public entities and which are adopted by scientists in their fields and in other fields.

Second, scientists are interested in the use of concepts for explaining and understanding phenomena. They form systematic linkages between and among concepts, resulting in formal theoretical structures. Scientists also advance Knowledge, therefore, by using concepts as the building-blocks of theories.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AND SCIENCE
It follows, therefore, that when concepts are undeveloped, their functions in science are severely limited. First, their contribution to the advancement of Knowledge, with respect to their descriptive powers, is minimal. The manner in which scientists understand the world becomes a source of difficulty when the meanings of concepts are diverse or when their referents are specified poorly.

Second, the role of concepts as the building-blocks of theories (and consequently their contribution to the advancement of Knowledge) is reduced, if not altogether erased. The value of a theory is derived from the extent to which it connects fruitfully with the world, and concepts are the means, and the only means, of establishing such connections.

Concept development, therefore, also serves a key function in science. Accordingly, scientists, as the agents of science, must be aware of the development of the concepts with which they work, and, additionally, must embrace concept development as a research goal in itself, and as part of theory-building exercises.

CONCEPTS AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT IN CONSUMER RESEARCH
In 1978, when consumer research was still in its infancy, Jacoby voiced concern in his ‘state of the art’ review over its conceptual immaturity. He wrote that...