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Fellow’s Address: Substantive Consumer Research
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I’m humbled and honored to be added to the ranks of the Fellows of the Association for Consumer Research. It’s a particular honor and delight to be recognized along with Brian Sternthal and Joe Alba, two of the people I most admire in our profession.

Joe and I were part of Brian’s AE team when Brian was Editor of JCR, and I would say Brian was my favorite boss ever. We share a deep interest in philosophy of science and methodology, and it was a pure pleasure to exchange ideas with Brian about issues raised by manuscripts I handled for him. And I don’t think he ever reversed one of my recommendations -- showing great insight and discernment on his part. Joe was my colleague at University of Florida, lifetime friend, and coauthor on two of my favorite papers on my vita. Joe declining my repeated lunch invitations extended over 15 years as colleagues. So he also showed impeccable discernment and wisdom, and batted 1.000 in his own way. All kidding aside, Joe is the scholar I most often tell my doctoral students to emulate. His simple experiments build on each other to create great insight, and his writing is a model of clarity.

KVETCHING

I want to go negative and talk with you today about what I see as a two unhealthy trends in our field. The first trend is the tendency for our best young scholars and reviewers to think that the goal of every paper must be primarily to make a theoretical contribution – preferably with a mediation analysis. The second is our collective acceptance that our field is made up of multidisciplinary silos. Debbie MacInnis and Valerie Folkes (2010) make a compelling case that the original vision of JCR and ACR as homes for truly interdisciplinary work has long given way to a reality that we are a multi-disciplinary rather than an inter- disciplinary field. We nestle together in the pages of JCR, but we aren’t really informing each other’s work as much as we wish, and it is quite unusual for a given paper to draw strongly from ideas in two or more different disciplines –say psychology and economics.

Some people don’t see either of these as problems, but I do. My thesis is that if we would more often look to the substantive domain as inspiration for our research, three good things would happen. Our work will be of interest to a wider public, we will have more vibrant mutual influence with adjacent social science disciplines, and in our dialogue within our field, consumer researchers of different primary disciplinary orientations will benefit more richly from each other’s work.

BRINBERG AND MCGRATH’S VALIDITY NETWORK SCHEMA

Brinberg and McGrath developed their “Validity Network Schema” in a book and several articles in the 80s, and what I’m going to say in the rest of my remarks uses their foundation. The Figure below is from McGrath and Brinberg (1985, p. 22).

Brinberg and McGrath noted that researchers typically start with an interest in one domain, tie it to a second, and then choose elements from the remaining domain as a matter of convenience.

• In the “theoretical path”, one builds a “set of hypotheses” by first combining elements and relations from the conceptual and substantive domains and then finding some convenient methodology to test them.
• In the “empirical path”, one builds a “set of observations” by combining elements and relations from the substantive and methodological domains and then picks some convenient concepts to explain them.
• In the “experimental path”, one creates a “study design” by first combining elements and relations from the conceptual and methodological domains and then picks some convenient substantive context as a way to operationalize the test of interest.

Brinberg and McGrath take pains to say that each of these paths is equally legitimate. But I was trained as an experimental social psychologist, and I made my reputation in this field in my first 15 years as a rigorous practitioner of the “experimental” path. I didn’t place much value on “applied” research, and I got my ideas for my papers from the pages of journals, as in my work on the accessibility diagnosticity (e.g., Lynch, Marmorstein, and Weigold 1988; Simmons, Bickart, and Lynch 1993), or research explaining contrast effects

1. “Experimental” path may be a misleading term. It is not necessary for the concepts to be tied to experimental methods to be “experimental path” – just that the substantive context for the research remains as a tertiary focus.
The Empirical Path

The “empirical path” is alive and well among our marketing science brethren, but not in consumer research. If one looks at the last 10 O’Dell Award winners, I’d classify half as “empirical path” marketing science -- e.g., Mela, Gupta, and Lehmann (1998) work showing how advertising makes people become less price sensitive in the long run and price promotion makes them more price sensitive. And there’s a rich tradition of “empirical generalizations” papers that carefully show some facts about the marketplace.

In consumer research, reviewers make it tough to publish this kind of “atheoretical” empirical path research. That’s a shame. I’ve found such papers to be particularly useful in my own work. They tell us what neglected topics in consumer research might prove to be truly important.

In the early 80s, I was slaving away with many others on models of multi-attribute combination rules. It was edifying to read primarily descriptive papers like Hoyer (1984). Hoyer showed that consumers engage in very low in-aisle search, and only 9% could give more than one reason for why they bought the brand of detergent they purchased. So much for multi-attribute combination rules. Papers like Wayne’s made me conclude that I should shift my focus to very low-level consumer information processing, including processing below the level of conscious awareness (e.g., Lynch and Srull 1982; Feldman and Lynch 1988; Lynch Marmorstein and Weigold 1988; Alba, Hutchinson, and Lynch 1991).

Similarly, it was an eye-opener to read Hauser (1978) document that 78% of the explainable uncertainty in consumer choice outcomes is driven by what brands are considered at all, with only 22% of the explainable uncertainty tied to attribute-based preferences among considered brands. That led me and my colleagues and students to conclude that we should try to understand the workings of consideration sets (e.g., Lynch and Srull 1982; Alba and Chatterpadhyay 1985; Nedungadi 1990; Alba et al. 1991; Hutchinson, Ram, and Mantrala 1994; Mitra and Lynch 1995; Alba et al. 1997; Diehl, Kornish, and Lynch 2003).

The Theoretical Path

A lot of people code research motivated by a problem in the world as “applied” and they think the task of a theorist is to identify construct-to-construct relations in some nomological net. Brinberg and McGrath remind us that the “theoretical path” is not just about construct-to-construct relations. It is also about relations between concepts and substantive phenomena. One can make important theoretical contributions either by starting with concepts and then linking to substantive phenomena or by starting with substantive phenomena then searching for concepts to explain the phenomena.

For readers who want to contribute to theory, I want to recommend this latter path to you – start with the consumer phenomenon and then try to explain it rather than always starting with concepts in the literature and then thinking of where they might apply. Gal Zauberman and I were amused and frustrated by our own foibles – apparently shared by others. We committed the “Yes…Damn!” effect, saying yes to attractive activities in a month that we would say no to tomorrow because we believed we’d have more spare time in a month. At the same time, we persistently fooled ourselves into believing that next week would be the week that we would stop procrastinating on some important but not urgent task. These substantive facts led us to conceptualize those phenomena in terms of our resource slack theory of discounting (Zauberman and Lynch 2005).

Sometimes the theorist’s task is not to conceptualize some individual behavior, but also some more macro consumption system. If the substantive phenomena are themselves really important, it is a real theoretical contribution to put structure on those phenomena. This almost always required combination of concepts from several disciplines. That is what we tried to do in our work on online shopping, first in the Alba et al. (1997) Journal of Marketing paper on interactive home shopping with our Florida colleagues, then with Dan Ariely in our (2000) wine online work, and then in Diehl, Kornish, and Lynch (2003) and Ariely, Lynch, and Aparicio (2004) about the role of screening agents. In all those cases, one of the major substantive questions was whether online shopping would lead to increased price sensitivity and ruinous price competition. My colleagues and I reasoned that retailers provide information similar to information provided by advertising. We used concepts from other literatures on the economic effects of advertising (Mitra and Lynch 1995, 1996) to make novel statements about when online shopping would or would not lead to increased price sensitivity and price competition.
Influence on the Outside World

I would argue that substantive papers are especially likely to get significant press. People are interested in our work that illuminates some real-world substantive phenomenon that can be seen in themselves—more so than our papers that are primarily about constructs or methods.

Influence on Scholars in Adjacent Social Sciences

A more important measure of the success of our field is the degree to which scholars in other fields use our ideas and findings. Just individual scholars are judged less successful if they are the only ones citing their own work, we cannot judge ourselves to be successful as a field if our work is used only by others in our same field. Many have noted that we consumer researchers seem to import from other social sciences more than we export.

I contend that our prospects for export are greater for work that aims to make a contribution to the substantive domain. Substantive topics are inherently interdisciplinary, and that means I perceive that I learn a lot from work on the same topic from a scholar in another field and he or she might have the same perception.

Lately I’ve gotten into the field of consumer financial decision-making. This is a field where we consumer researchers can make important contributions to science and society. It’s also a field that lends itself to learning from our colleagues in allied social sciences. Last year we at CU hosted the First Annual Boulder Summer Conference on Consumer Financial Decision Making. It was a remarkable conference because of the set of people in the room. We had scholars from Finance, Economics, Decision Sciences, Consumer Sciences, Marketing, Neuroscience, Psychology, and Behavioral Economics, learning from each other and from regulators, and consumer advocates in a common conversation. Candidly, I felt that I learned more from the average talk at this financial decision making conference than from the average talk I attend at ACR, where I feel there is more overlap between what I know and what the other attendees know.

The benefit of interdisciplinary interchange is also what motivated Shlomo Benartzi, Stefano Della Vigna, George Loewenstein and me to propose and co-edit the JMR Special Interdisciplinary Issue on Consumer Financial Decision Making. We were very pleased with the 85 submissions we got from leading figures across those fields, and our hope is that this special issue will generate significant cross-field citation.

My conjecture is that interdisciplinary export and import is stronger for work that has a substantive focus than for most of what we do that starts in the conceptual or methodological domains. It’s not just consumer financial decision-making, but other core topics we study. I was pleased to see Pierre Chandon and Brian Wansink (2007) win this year’s JCR Award for their paper on health halos. Brian and then Pierre were pioneers in choosing a substantive topic of food consumption that was not “mainstream” consumer research when they started, though it has become mainstream due to their scholarly leadership. Their paper is the third most cited paper published in the 2007 issue of JCR, and almost 40% of those citations come from outside of consumer research and marketing. That’s no accident; their own references came almost half from outside of consumer research and marketing, drawing from journals in economics, psychology, sociology, dietary science, medicine, judgment and decision-making, and nutrition.

Influence on Consumer Researchers with Different Disciplinary Orientations

If substantively motivated research gives stronger motivation for exchange with adjacent disciplines, it also gives us a stronger reason to talk with each other and learn from fellow consumer researchers despite our different disciplinary orientations. I mentioned earlier the Macniss and Folkes (2010) paper on the sociology of science of consumer research. It did a great job of documenting that the original vision of our field as an interdisciplinary social science had long given way to a multidisciplinary reality. Scholars (almost all housed in marketing departments) come from different disciplinary orientations that are rarely combined in a single paper.

This is an excellent and compelling paper, but I found it depressing. I know that there is truth to what Debbie and Valerie say because I see it in my role as ACR’s representative to the JCR Policy Board. Two years ago the American Economic Association decided to drop its sponsorship of JCR, and we regularly have to provide help to the presidents of other sponsoring associations to identify appropriate representatives to that board. We have ceased to be relevant to them.

For my part, I think the original vision of the founders of JCR and ACR was inspiring. I don’t want to let it go. I submit that we can find our way back to that interdisciplinary path with more substantively motivated consumer research. In the process, we can be a more influential field.

CONCLUSION

There is more than one path to contribute to consumer research. We do not always have to follow the “experimental” path of reading the journals to get ideas about construct-to-construct relations, then designing a study to test the ideas in some convenient substantive context. We can also follow Brinberg and McGrath’s (1986) “theoretical” and “empirical” paths that prioritize understanding something new about the substantive domain.

A larger role for substantively motivated research can help our field in three ways. Substantively motivated consumer research can remove our paradigmatic blinders to help us see new topics for research that later scholars will recognize as truly central topics for consumer research. It can increase our influence in the public domain and among other social sciences. And it can increase our ability to learn from each other as an interdisciplinary field.

THANKS

Nobody receives such an honor as we received today without a lot of help. My wife Pat and my parents John and Bobby Gay are in my heart today. I’m the product of great colleagues and doctoral students at Florida, at Duke, and now at Colorado. But I particularly want to thank three people to whom I owe a deep debt of gratitude.

In my PhD program in social psychology at the University of Illinois, Bob Wyer taught me to get in the habit of generating testable research hypotheses. Thanks to Bob, I can’t read a journal article without scribbling ideas in the margins. Bob remains my model for how I aspire to treat my students. I’m always telling them things Bob said to me that have some analogy to their situation—e.g., “word salad” to point out some particularly tortured prose, or Bob’s famous line on the 6th draft of my thesis, “The need for excellence is beginning to be exceeded by the need for closure.” Bob managed to be critical and so enthusiastic at the same time. That’s a winning combination. His attitude about the excitement of research gave me the value system that has carried me through my career. I’ll always be grateful that the Editor of JESP, one of the most productive authors in the history of social psychology and the most hotly sought advisor at the University of Illinois made time for a screw-up of a PhD student whenever I came knocking on his door.

Based on Bob’s recommendation, Joel Cohen hired me at University of Florida when I knew nothing about consumer behavior.
and marketing. Joel has been a lifetime mentor and friend. I wish I were as good a senior colleague to assistant professors at Florida, Duke, and CU as Joel was to me. When I didn’t know anyone in the field, Joel introduced me around at ACR to big names like Jim Bettman, Carol Scott, Alice Tybout, and Peter Wright, and encouraged them to take me seriously. Joel stimulated my thinking. When I first arrived doing work on information integration, Joel needled me about its relevance to consumer decision making when inputs came from memory. I harrumphed, but eventually concluded that Joel’s “irritating” question was a good one, leading me to collaborate with Thom Srull to develop distinctions among stimulus-based, memory-based, and mixed choice. Joel and Bill Wilkie hired five people in my assistant professor cohort went on to become ACR or SCP Presidents, making my early years assistant professor nirvana. I’m proud that along with those guys and others hired later, I was a part of the “Florida School” that produced a large body of research highlighting the role of memory, attention, and basic information processes in consumer decision-making.

When I moved to Duke, I was fortunate to have another set of outstanding colleagues and students whom I truly love. But I want to single out Jim Bettman. Jim has been like a brother to me – a smarter older brother who still has all his hair and great taste in music. Jim is a glue guy who created an exciting and collaborative culture at Duke. He is generous to a fault, and more JCR and JCP authors have thanked him than any other person in the field. He and I had the pleasure of co-chairing doctoral dissertations by many brilliant Duke students over the years, whose reflected glory I’m sure played a role in my receiving this honor today.

REFERENCES


