Marketing Pragmatism: a Constructive Review of Pragmatic Philosophy and Implications For Consumer Research

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Pragmatism and Consumer Research
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Paper #1: Marketing Pragmatism: A Constructive Review of Pragmatic Philosophy and Implications for Consumer Research
Dan Silcock, University of Bath, UK

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Richard Varey, University of Waikato, New Zealand

Paper #3: “Theory” into “Knowledge”: Operationalizing consumption research into behavioural change with Pragmatism
Iain Davies, University of Bath, UK

Paper #4: Can the pragmatist logic of inquiry inform consumer-led market design?
Ronika Chakrabarti, Lancaster University, UK
Katy Mason, Lancaster University, UK

SESSION OVERVIEW
The objective of this session is to promote the use of pragmatism within consumer research. This topic is particularly important and relevant to the conference theme of ‘Advancing Connections’. Pragmatism maintains the demand for rigor but allows a range of methods and techniques to be employed within research, offering no preference or predetermination in this area. This means that academics are more likely to be interested by, and appreciate of, work taking a different approach to their own, as opposed to vying for credibility with them. Further, pragmatism contains certain similarities with both ends of the methodological spectrum and so would not be completely alien to anyone within the community.

The enhanced emphasis on developing workable solutions to practical problems could also help to strengthen connections with practitioners, public policy makers and consumers. Here the focus on usability of findings and the style of work produced means that impact becomes a natural part of the research process, rather than something to be searched for at the end of a project. The topic therefore speaks to a range of key consumer research context areas that span the methodological divide, for example sustainability, ethical consumption, health, well-being, finance, poverty, as well as inequality reduction more generally.

Each paper in the session is either dedicated to, or strongly influenced by, pragmatic research philosophy. Dan Silcock’s paper reviews pragmatic philosophy and contributes by delineating previous literature into three distinct versions of pragmatism. He also details several advantages to a wider adoption of pragmatic thought, including potential for improving the connection between research camps. Richard Varey’s contribution relates pragmatism to a specific area of consumer research, highlighting problems within the field of sustainability and how pragmatic new science could help solve these issues.

Iain Davies’ article centres on using pragmatism to improve connections between theory and practice, exploring how consumer research theory could be operationalized into ‘knowledge’ given the pragmatic understanding of this term, and illustrates this process with work on ethical consumption. The final paper from Ronika Chakrabarti and Katy Mason provides a concrete case where pragmatic inquiry has advanced knowledge, relating to consumer-led market design, and shows how such an approach could be utilized to inform other socio-politically pertinent areas.

The session raises several challenging questions, for instance, can pragmatism appeal to a wider selection of consumer research scholars? And imperatively given the current research climate, can consumer research afford not to take the pragmatic path?

Marketing Pragmatism: A Constructive Review of Pragmatic Philosophy and Implications for Consumer Research

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This paper promotes pragmatism as a viable middle ground philosophy for consumer research. This is not in itself a novel or new suggestion, indeed numerous leading figures within marketing have either promoted or utilized pragmatist thought (e.g. Brown, 2012; Chakrabarti & Mason, 2014; Firat & Dholakia, 2006; Hatch, 2012; Thompson, Sterni & Arnould, 1998; Varey, 2012), and these ideas are gaining considerable momentum outside of marketing (e.g. Corley & Gioia, 2011, Johnson & Duberley, 2000; Kellemen & Rumens, 2013; Kitcher, 2012; Morgan, 2007, 2014; Saddaby, 2006; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick, 1995, 2001).

However pragmatism remains stricken with internal variation and this has been a major factor in holding back its popularity and uptake. Therefore rather than suggesting another singular vision of pragmatism that should be adopted, this article contributes by delineating previous literature into three distinct versions of pragmatism. These versions are introduced within this abstract, explained in detail in the full paper, and presented in a form that can be taught and applied.

The article additionally outlines several advantages to a wider adoption of pragmatism within consumer research, namely the improvement of connections between methodological camps, potential influence on policy, the development of theory, and enhancement of the PhD process. Finally the paper provides a framework for understanding the evaluation of pragmatic research. The remainder of this abstract includes a brief overview of each section.

The history of pragmatism is covered first, from the ‘pragmatic maxim’ (Peirce, 1878) and the popularisation of ‘pragmatism’ by James in 1898, to Dewey’s (1929) ‘warranted assertions’ and ‘practical adequacy’. The central tenets to pragmatism are then explored, and here the rejection of correspondence theory is not unique, but this in combination with an emphasis on the practical nature of knowledge distinguishes pragmatism from other philosophical schools.

The three versions of pragmatism identified share similar epistemological considerations (accepting the socially constructed and practical nature of knowledge); however they are separated by the occupation of varying ontological positions. The first could be described as ontologically neutral, asserting that ontological considerations are not actually that important or useful (in fact suggesting that these become a hindrance), and is most predominantly associated with William James (e.g. 1897, 1907). The second is termed ontologically realist, believing in a single transcendent reality that bounds and limits our social constructions, and is mostly drawn from some of the work of John Dewey (e.g. 1929). The third is named ontologically relativist, where there are as many realities as there are constructions, and this view is most prominently advocated by more modern authors (e.g. Rorty, 1979, 1982). Each version has been followed or pursued by different authors and these are highlighted throughout. It is worth noting here that this paper does not advocate...
any one version over the others, and all share the potential to provide a series of advantages.

Within each version of pragmatism the data collection methods and analytical techniques to be used in a study are not predetermined by the philosophical persuasion, rather the emphasis is simply on what methods and techniques will produce the most useful findings in relation to the particular questions or problems being addressed (Feilzer, 2010; Hanson, 2008; Rescher, 1977). This is not only beneficial for individual projects but has wider positive implications. The freedom offered within pragmatism fosters an environment where academics develop a thorough understanding of a variety of methods and techniques from across the philosophical spectrum. This encourages the ability and desire to read, draw from, and constructively critique contextually relevant work from differing methodological perspectives. Such an environment could therefore facilitate connections that would allow a more combined progress on key managerial, societal and political issues, as opposed to the situation where completely separate streams of research attempt to tackle the same problem.

The practical focus within pragmatism makes it particularly appealing given current trends within research in relation to policy, engagement and impact. With practical outcomes embedded into the whole research process, engagement and impact opportunities are a natural consequence of pragmatic research, not a supplementary consideration. In fact, a situation where a piece of research had no potential for engagement or impact would be very unlikely to occur in the first place. This practical focus would certainly not denigrate marketing’s ability to generate original, novel and influential theory. In contrast, it is argued that this might be more likely, that the applied nature of marketing research makes theory better not worse, and that acknowledging this could actually lead to a more equal theoretical exchange with other disciplines.

Another advantage outlined relates to the experience of new PhD students, who are still often presented with an either/or decision in regards to research philosophy. This is possibly the most difficult and complex scholarly problem that they will ever face, and yet they are expected to make this decision, which has serious and significant connotations for the rest of their career, within the first few months of their studies. Pragmatism provides another option for this decision, which is possibly more palatable, and would leave emerging scholars equipped with enough methodological understanding to be able to either confirm, or change, their persuasion as they go through further intellectual development.

An associated problem for the expansion of pragmatism relates to the evaluation of research findings. While positivism and interpretivism both now offer widely accepted procedures and systems for evaluating research, few middle ground philosophies can boast such a weapon. This paper therefore additionally provides a framework for understanding the evaluation of pragmatic research in an attempt to help rectify this situation.

Pragmatism, New Science and Sustainability

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

For how long and to what extent is consumer culture sustainable? An ethic is needed that provides moral limits on consumption and directs production into a less harmful path, while still allowing consumer experience to nourish and enrich human existence. What is needed is a reconceptualization of the relationship between humans and nature.

Rogeneity Buchholz, in ‘Reforming Capitalism: The Scientific Worldview and Business’ (2012), urges readers to question the costs to both themselves and society of maintaining the classical scientific worldview of ‘normal science’ in economics. Buchholz argues that the classical scientific worldview brings values into aspects of life – ethics, economics, politics, culture, and our relationship with nature – such that we are deprived of true meaning. The characteristics of classical science are reductionism, atomism, quantification, determinism, and the assumption of mechanism. The meaning of the parts provides meaning of the whole. This science is supposed to be passive and disinterested; there are only facts, and there are no values. The normal scientific worldview objectifies nature as a useful resource for humans to manipulate to their interests; otherwise it is of no value. In terms of use(-up) and waste disposal, the environment simply poses a challenge to continued economic growth.

Buchholz (2012) proposes a ‘new science’, based on Pragmatism, which shows a view of a world that is organic and holistic. The meaning of the whole is the basis for the meaning of parts. There is a fact-value distinction, and both are necessary for understanding the multitude of environments in which business is embedded. The way in which business relates to these multiple environments has profound implications for the society in which businesses operate. Re-thinking science in a holistic, relational philosophy treats ordinary lived experience as a form of knowledge, and does not reject scientific knowledge, but crucially accepts morality as essential in human experience. General characteristics of Pragmatism (originated by Charles Pierce, William James, John Dewey, C I Lewis, and George Herbert Mead) are therefore emergence, holism, continuity, quality, and indeterminism.

In Pragmatism’s understanding of our world, knowledge emerges through intelligent reflection on experience within nature, and is thus fallible and tested by its consequences in experience. The nature of value is not considered real (i.e. objective) knowledge in a scientific worldview – it is no more than a subjective feeling. In Pragmatism, values emerge out of human experience in interaction with the environment in which humans live. Things experienced possess qualities (for example fulfilling or stultifying, appealing or unappealing) that are real emergents in the context of interactions with cultural and natural environments; ‘valuings are experienced but not the experience of evaluating experience from the outside . . . but arise from the immediate “having” of experience’ (Buchholz 2012, p. 142). Further, ‘valuings are turned into the valuable by the organizing activity of the mind in the ongoing course of experience as experimental’ (p. 143).

Recent work on sustainability presents a striking picture: use of natural resources has already surpassed sustainable limits (Heinberg, 2011; Senge Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur & Schley, 2010), marketing theory and practice has contributed to this problem (Lawson, 2009; Smart, 2010), and fundamental shifts are needed (Belz & Peattie, 2009; Ophulus, 2011; Sheth & Sisodia, 2012; Varey, 2012). Changes are beginning to occur, both in practice (Benett & O’Reilly, 2010) and in theory (Martin & Schouten, 2012). Pragmatic thought can help the field inform policy makers who wish to see such change accelerate by providing workable solutions to real-world problems.

The consequences of adopting a ‘New science’ approach have profound implications for business. Industrial capitalism can no longer power prosperity. The mass society worldview is giving way to individualisation. The ‘standard enterprise logic’ is challenged. Marketing has operated as an attention technology for sellers competing to capture customers. However, in an intention economy buyers are a scarce commodity, and it is intentions that drive production for specific needs. Change in marketing is overdue. Despite increased social disharmony and the mounting evidence of looming environmental disasters, progress is stagnant and often negative, as market-
ing exacerbates the problem by misallocating negative value goods. The commonality in the contemporary crises of financial meltdown, humanmade climate change, economic inequality, distrust of government, and the social corrosion of consumerism, is the moral limit of markets in civic society. Sustainable living provides the higher purpose of marketing: well-being and human flourishing. Sustainability is a socio-cultural, inherently ethical, respectful, intellectual construct for a life of careful and equitable resource use within limits and inter-dependencies. It is not the antithesis of competitive business, indeed business can flourish by competing on, and being rewarded for, the accomplishment of enduringly valuable outcomes.

“Theory” into “Knowledge”: Operationalizing Consumption Research into Behavioral Change with Pragmatism

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As a former fair trade marketer and now marketing ethics scholar operating around changing consumption markets and behaviors I find myself increasingly frustrated by the abstract nature of scholarly exploration in consumption research. Schaefer and Crane (2005) highlighted the polarisation of the ethical consumption field into rational information processing approach vs. socio-anthropological approach, highlighting the void between both fields and lack of research on the reality of changing consumption patterns. A decade on, and despite the emergence of Transformative Consumer Research (Mick, 2006), little has changing in ethical consumption, and disappointingly in consumption research generally.

The rational approach is underpinned by the assumption that consumers cognitively translate their concerns towards society or the environment into expressed buying behavior (Andorfer and Liebe 2012; Carrington et al. 2010; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Fukukawa and Ennew 2010; Gleim et al. 2013; Shaw, Shiu and Clark 2000), often drawing on linear behavioral models such as The Theory of Reasoned Action / Planned Behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Ajzen 1991). However, the de-contextualization of this stream of research has made it all but irrelevant to our understanding of how and why consumers consume sustainable products (Eckhardt et al. 2010; Foxall 1993).

In contrast, the socio-anthropological school focuses on consumption as a means of self-identity creation and here sustainable consumption is often framed as a mechanism for demonstrating resistance to the mainstream, as a method for gaining in-group membership, or as part of an identity project (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002; Fournier 1998; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Price and Penaloz 1993; Rumbo 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004), with notable examples including voluntary simplicity (Craig-Lees and Hill 2002), political purchasing (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Prothero et al., 2011), economic voting (Gabriel and Lang 1995), and anti-consumption (Zavestoski 2002).

Following this line, resisting one type of consumption often forms the basis for another type of consumption - sustainable consumption (Arnould 2007; Holt 2002; Hollenbeck and Zinkhan 2006; Kozinets 2002). Therefore the socio-anthropological literature frames the ethical consumer as on the fringe (Eckhardt et al. 2010; Shaw and Riach 2011; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007), radical (Bezeno and Bilili 2010; Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler 2010), or anti-corporate (Thompson and Arsel 2004). However, from a pragmatic stand-point, it is hard to envision the consumption of a fair trade KitKat, H&M organic clothing, or Ben and Jerry’s Ice-cream, as resistance to the mainstream.

William James (1842-1910) coined the phrases tender-minded and tough-minded to classify the differing schools of philosophical/scientific thought of his day. He typified the tender-minded as intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, free-willist, monistic, and dogmatic; insisting on going by principles, whereas the tough-minded were sensationalistic (understanding the world through senses), materialistic, pessimistic, fatalistic, pluralistic, and sceptical; insisting on going by facts. Setting aside the alternative meanings these words have developed of the last century, James highlighted, over the course of 8 public lectures on philosophy, the biases and misdirection inherent in rigid adherence to either school. However as I turn the pages of our hallowed scriptures in leading marketing periodicals I return time and again to James’ observation: “You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of the romantic type” (James, 1907: 8).

Our subject has polarized with the emergence of required publication tariffs, making volume more important than quality. We have thus isolated ourselves into competing schools that do not inter-relate or talk with each other. At the extremes we see the burgeoning dominance of lab-based experimentation seeking abstracted generalizations which would never stand up to contextual reality, and on the other we have extreme contextual reality, often explicitly operationalized with outlier samples, masquerading as theory. Both may be producing relevant learning which would benefit the other, but neither is producing what Dewey (1938) referred to as “Knowledge”.

Knowledge, to a pragmatist, is the ultimate set of truths which lead us to take better action in context. In essence, it is what a theorist may refer to as a universal theory. However, knowledge must be active; used for a purpose. Therefore information which does not lead a protagonist to achieve a specific goal in its employment is not useful - or knowledge. Yes “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951: 169), but how do we interpret these words in a modern consumer research space?

Kurt Lewin, as social psychologist, obviously had a certain world view underpinning these words. I borrow here from Greenwald (2012: 99), another social psychologist, who provides this interpretation: “When a theory is ‘good’ ... its rules of correspondence go beyond assigning conceptual labels to laboratory research procedures. They extend the theory’s concepts and principles to the non-laboratory world—in other words, to the possibility of useful applications.” In other words, ‘good theory’ is nascent ‘Knowledge’.

In this paper I explore what it would mean to operationalize the existing field of ethical / sustainable consumption into a field of Knowledge rather than a field of academic contribution. Taking Pierce’s (1878: 300) proposition that “Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion”, I outline what we “know” about influencing consumption habits and explore means of investigating the subject more effectively in the future. I discuss what it means to conduct pragmatic research in a modern consumer research and publication environment, looking at steps in the research process and the process of pragmatic inquiry. I then go on to explain the pros and cons of taking a pragmatic approach in a discipline and employment environment which does not always favour the expansive, mixed-methods, multidisciplinary, longitudinal approaches required for true Knowledge generation.
Can the Pragmatist Logic of Inquiry Inform Consumer Led Market Design?

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We are interested in how the pragmatist notion of inquiry and experimentation proposed by John Dewey can inform consumer led market design. In Dewey’s (1938) vision of political philosophy he advocates logic as a method of inquiry firmly grounded in experience aimed at improving human lives and social progress. As a key concept in pragmatism, experience (or intelligent action) holds both personal and contextual accounts of reality. In order to understand reality (or how to organize things in reality), the pragmatists focus on how reality is experienced. They consider how experiences are used to gain an understanding about what is happening in the world or to envision what ought to be happening (Keulartz et al., 2004). As such, Dewey claims that democracies are forms of organized intelligence and social action from where to pursue socio-political ideals. In a similar vein, markets are also viewed as practical outcomes of organizing efforts (Araujo et al., 2010) that are always ‘in the making’ and being constructed (Latour, 1987).

If reality is an existence verifiable to inquiry then questioning free imagination and intellectual possibilities are necessary to shape it. Since pragmatic philosophy recognizes the contingent and changing elements of livelihoods based on the ‘experiences’, it has important implications for understanding how patterns of inquiry can inform consumer learning and how we can be en-cultured within a consumer environment. By understanding how consumer practices can inform market design through a process of inquiry and experimentation; we can begin to make sense of ‘what matters are’ from a consumer perspective and create space for what markets could be. In Dewey’s logic, methods of inquiry are applicable to real problems, which he calls an “indeterminate situation” (Dewey, 1929; 1938). What constitutes a situation to be undetermined is essentially a state of doubt or a felt difficulty (Dewey, 1910) or imbalance within an ecological environment. For Dewey, a critical difference exists between the state of ‘knowing’ and ‘the known’. If what is known is based on previous inquiries (or facts) then what is to be known (or knowing) is more eventual and in a process of becoming. Knowing is therefore inquiry that is directed to what is indeterminate (or of concern) and also significant within a situation. At the heart of his pragmatist theory is a resolution for an indeterminate situation.

Inquiry can then only really end when an original indeterminate situation becomes more determinate (Dewey, 1938). This ‘in-determination’ offers a unique methodological lens from which to view the nature of inquiry as a series of phases: (1) The Antecedent Conditions of Inquiry: The Indeterminate Situation (i.e. questionability); (2) Institution of a Problem (how a problem is conceived, defined, observed and located); (3) The Determination of a Problem-Solution (as “ideas” or “suggestions”); (4) Reasoning (or the equating of “ideas”) and (5) The Operational Character of Facts-Meanings (or the interaction of facts and ideas and the need for experiments). We proffer that using Dewey’s logic of inquiry could offer unique insights from a consumer research perspective into how inquiry might lead to new and better ways of doing things. We encourage scholars to use a pragmatist logic of inquiry to further explore markets that engage vulnerable consumers (cf. Picentini et al., 2014), those in the arts, social care, war zones, ecological high risk zones (i.e. the need for low-carbon and renewable energy consumption), healthcare etc. that in times of austerity and socio-political insecurities are threatened by the nature of their indeterminate realities.

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