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Consumer Research in the Age of Neoliberal Discontinuities: Incitements to Intellectual Edgework

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Preface: I owe many thanks to my long-time mentor, friend and partner in crime, Eric J. Arnould for his constructive feedback on an earlier version of this address.

One of my favorite films is the Coen Brothers’ Barton Fink (1991) which tells the story of moderately successful New York City playwright—the titular Fink—who is unexpectedly commissioned to write a screenplay for a major Hollywood production. Though at first uncertain about leaving his local sources of creative inspiration, Fink decides to pursue fame and fortune in Tinseltown, but upon arrival, he is stricken with a paralyzing and unrelenting case of writers block. From that point, the film takes the Coen brothers’ signature surreal turns. However, my own experience of being named an ACR Fellow heightened the personal relevance of Fink’s agonizing plight.

Upon official announcement that I was joining my fellow award recipients Debbie MacInnis and Jagdish Sheth as the newest class of ACR Fellows, I was initially stunned and then elated, and, of course, deeply honored. However, that glowing aura was soon punctured by a nagging question—“what will you say as an ACR Fellow?”—that haunted me with increasing intensity as this imminent day grew ever closer and the magnitude of the task seemed more and more daunting. And every single time I sought to placate this anxiety by making tangible progress on this talk, I had a Barton Fink moment—blank stare meets blank screen.

But as they say, “adversity is the mother of searching the ACR archives to read prior Fellows’ addresses and praying that you can steal some of their ideas without anyone noticing.” During the course of that envisioned archival poaching, however, I noticed that these talks seemed to express a kind of collective consciousness, or perhaps, enacted a tacitly understood cultural script of how one makes such an address. This cultural script involves two discernible narrative motifs, sometimes expressed singularly and sometimes melded into a kind of hybrid form. And this inductive realization provided the elusive catalyst for this address—Barton Fink be gone.

In the first motif, an ACR Fellow articulates a vision of the field and uses the bully pulpit of the address to advocate for a particular research direction or methodological program that might allow our sub-discipline to attain a higher level of theoretical development and societal relevance. This motif, for example, can be found in the inaugural fellows address by James Engel (1981) –“The Discipline of Consumer Research: Permanent Adolescence or Maturity?” (also see Bagozzi 1994; Lynch 2011; Wright 1999).

The second narrative motif is more retrospective, introspective, and autobiographical. In these talks, the ACR Fellow offers a personal reflection on his/her career journey and the life and career lessons learned while acknowledging all those who helped along the way (c.f., Belk 1995; Holbrook 1995; Hirschman 1996).

Of these, the second theme seemed to better capture my feelings on being named an ACR Fellow. I started to write a talk that would recognize the numerous peers, mentors, doctoral students, and co-authors who have so greatly enriched my personal and professional life. But, in was reflecting on all those relationships, discussions, and shared experiences, another more reflexive line of questioning began to crystallize in regard to the ACR Fellows Award and its institutional purpose: “This award, instituted in 1979 recognizes the career contributions of ACR individuals, preferably during their lifetime for “significant impact on scholarly work in consumer behavior” [https://www.acrwebsite.org/web/core-activities/acr-awards.aspx]. This criterion begs a question: why should a consumer researcher, institutionally deemed to have had “significant impact,” be so recognized in the first place? To ask such a question will likely strike you dear reader as a peculiar one. The answer seems to be common-sense knowledge that can “go with saying.” As with many ritualistic practices, this aura of self-evidence masks that the answer to this seemingly unnecessary question is actually contingent on cultural ideals and values that are given institutional credence and, conversely, those placed in a more marginal position. At this juncture, we can begin to articulate the neoliberal discontinuities referenced in the title of this address and the tensions that they create between two contrasting normative models of consumer research. These ideological discontinuities are represented in the Figure below and which also provides a visual template for the ensuing discussion.

Discontinuous Models of Consumer Research

CONSUMER RESEARCH AS A COLLABORATIVE-COLLECTIVE PROJECT

The first cultural model in, in particular times and places, highly valorized in the consumer research field (as well as other spheres of research)—thought it harbors a nexus of meanings and implications that are often incompatible with the bestowment of a career achievement award.

This model cast consumer research as a cooperative and collaborative enterprise. From this perspective, all researchers are participants in a communal project of knowledge generation and working toward a collective goal of attaining a more comprehensive or refined understanding of “consumers,” whether in terms of their choice processes or experiences of the marketplace. This model further highlights that a given consumer researcher, in conducting a given study, draws from a socially co-created body of knowledge and practices, and seeks to add his/her humble contribution to the commons. This collaborative-collectivist model of knowledge production has become an increasingly prominent feature of our cultural land-
scape where knowledge flows across complex peer-to-peer networks and other modes of commons-based production (Bruns 2008). Media studies scholar Pierre Levy (1999) coined the term collective intelligence to describe this dynamic “wikified” web of knowledge generating and sharing relations. Collective intelligence is universally distributed intelligence, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and enjoining a continuous expansion of skills and knowledge. This idea is often summarized by the Web 2.0 aphorism—no one knows everything but everyone knows something (Jenkins 2006).

Analysts of such user-generated networked cultures all too often become intoxicated with a feeling of radical difference and disjunction, suggesting that we have entered into a revolutionary new epoch, that breaks from historical precedents. More often than not, such claims are hyperbolic ones that elide important continuities manifest in these structural changes. And we can say the same pattern holds for social science research. The production of scientific knowledge, has always flowed across information networks, albeit operating at a more turgid pace, constituted by papers, conferences and analogue communication networks. To invoke less technocratic (Kozinets 2008) tropes, we could describe this collaborative process as a system of sharing relationships or a grand game of pay-it-forward. In academic life, we often hear the phrase, “standing on the shoulder of giants” to acknowledge our intellectual debt to the past (and the collaborative precedents of others). To further calibrate this debt, let’s further acknowledge that these “giants” were equally dependent on the shoulders of many, many others. Thus, their lofty heights in the academic pantheon presuppose a community that has lifted and supported their enshrinement in the intellectual canon. Or to paraphrase an ancient Hindu parable used to represent infinite regress, and famously discussed by Clifford Geertz (1973, 28-29), the production of knowledge is “shoulders all the way down.”

This more abstract epistemological argument that scientific knowledge is a collaborative-collective enterprise is also supported by more immediate forms of experiential validation. Our research is routinely enriched by feedback from colleagues, the investments made by reviewers and editors, and last but not least, the co-creative actions of readers who will subsequently expand upon a given set of ideas and findings and integrate them into a broader web of collectively woven knowledge. Placed in this cultural frame, the conventional tendency to lavish accolades on a specific researcher seems to be an odd misconstrual of the knowledge production process.

Some members of the academic community do, in fact, strive to enact this collaborative-commonly found in the feminist studies literature, though it has found some expression in the consumer research sphere:


Such anonymous designations highlight the collaborative/collective aspects of the academic research and, conversely, subtly disavow the ethos of possessive individualism that underlies the social construction of academic celebrity, instead endorsing one of social utilitarianism and its ideals of cooperative sharing, universal access to knowledge, and embeddedness in a collective commons.

The institutional realities of academic life, of course, place significant constraints on how extensively this strategy can be applied or even how fully it can be implemented. In general, consumer researchers are situated in academic settings where individually scaled measures of “productivity”—via publications, presentations, and citation counts, and other activities that “count” in digital measures performance monitoring systems—inform annual evaluations and corresponding administrative decisions about a given consumer researchers’ tenure, promotion, salary, research support, and other institutional incentives that govern our professional activities.

Given this institutional reality, the choice to anonymize and collectivize the published presentation of research—as in the VOICE Group example—is more of a symbolic gesture, which is not to say that it is meaningless or inconsequential. Such unconventional actions can inspire a reflexive assessment of status quo conventions and help to precipitate actions and choices which push the boundaries of established institutional values and norms and the constraints they subtly (and not so subtly) manifest, thereby, testing and potentially expanding the boundaries of an ideological system (c.f., Thompson and Üstüner 2015).

A collective-collaborative framing of the research enterprise also problematizes the ACR Fellows award. If we accept the view that a given researcher is situated in the web of collective intelligence, then such an award arbitrarily designates one node in the network as having been more consequential than all the others that enabled the “designated Fellow” to exert a localized influence that reverberates across some segment of the larger system. For example, an alternative approach would be to bestow fellow status on a concept that has mobilized consumer researchers and shaped our discourses, such as decision heuristics, utility maximization, cultural capital, or ritual action and to celebrate these ideas—not as the expression of a given researchers’ individual brilliance (and whose name may be strongly associated with the salient theory)—but by tracing out its genealogy which in most cases, would lead back to Eastern and Western philosophers of the antiquities.

This collective-collaborative model carries a host of positive connotations that have been well-integrated into our disciplinary self-conceptions, particularly when discussing the normative ideals that should guide the research process, such as an altruistic spirit of discovery; a communal sharing of ideas and knowledge; and a transcendence of egotism and self-interest through the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. While supporting a more virtuous framing of the research enterprise, this model is largely discontinuous with the prevailing institutional conditions that shape the professional lives of many, if not most, consumer researchers situated in academic settings. To negotiate these discontinuities, we apply this model very selectively and tend to ignore its democratizing, “wisdom of crowds” (Jenkins 2006) implications when they overtly contradict institutionalized norms that are premised on assessments of individual accomplishment and that engender a corresponding ideological effect: the production (and reproduction) of academic status hierarchies.

**CONSUMER RESEARCH AS AN ENTREPRENEURIAL PROJECT**

The second prominent cultural model cast the research process as an entrepreneurial project. In this cultural frame, consumer researchers (like other participants in the academic status game) are promoting their respective ideas, methods, papers, and academic “brand” in a competitive marketplace, or stated alternatively, seeking to maximize the market value of their human/intellectual capital (c.f., Becker 1964). In this spirit, for example, ResearchGate—the potentially copyright violating, for profit, academic networking site—promotes its services on the grounds that it can “create exposure for your work: share your work from any stage of the research cycle to gain visibility and citations” [https://www.researchgate.net/].

Such rationales seem completely unremarkable in their common-sense rationales. Of course, we want to promote our work and
gain more citations and recognition for our efforts. However, this sense of self-evident validity is one means through which orthodox understandings and beliefs serve to block further questioning of their ideological functions and channel action in certain directions, rather than others, and thus, constrain horizons of possibility (Bourdieu 1984).

In discussing this entrepreneurial model, I take an analytic cue from the critical historian Michel Foucault who described his approach to analyzing power relations in the following manner: My point is not that everything is bad. My point is that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So, my position leads not to apathy or enervation but to a hyper and active pessimism (Foucault 1983, 231-232).

So, what dangers lurk in this orthodox framing of consumer researchers as intellectual entrepreneurs? One clue to this question is that it so closely aligns with the neoliberal vision of a society organized by market competitions, among decentralized and functionally independent economic actors, and where the market is both the ultimate adjudicator of value and the guiding force that governs decision about how one invest their time and efforts (Peck and Tickell 2007). In this neoliberal Utopia, there are no distortions of the competitive market mechanism, such as regulations that impede flows of capital or that might artificially constrain or subsidize the market value of an entrepreneurial skill or that would reduce competitive incentives—this latter logic is often leveraged by critics of the academic institution of tenure, deeming it to function as a disincentive to continued productivity over the course of one’s career.

Neoliberal doctrines underlie increasingly ubiquitous political demands that institutions of higher learning align their curriculum with the specific “competencies” desired by corporations and corresponding pressures to deliver high levels of customer service to customer-students. This latter neoliberal figuration further entails that these customer-students are empowered to be “informed consumers,” via rankings and more aggressive branding and positioning activities. This responsibility of the student/customer also is encouraged by a shift toward loan-based funding of such educational investments in one’s human capital—which eventually need to be repaid, rather than governmental grants (Ward 2014).

It is perhaps worth noting that this neoliberal, market-competency, customer-driven approach to higher education is a radical transformation of the normative ideals and intellectual orientations that historically guided higher education. For example consider this passage from John Stuart Mill’s inaugural address as Rector of the University of St. Andrews (1867):

Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men [women] for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skillful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings (218).

Mill’s statement reflected his adamant belief that an intellectual culture, which encouraged citizens to think critically and beyond their own immediate self-interests, provided needed societal safeguards from the excesses of mercantilism, what we would now call capitalism, and militarism. Of course, the University of Mill’s time was a decidedly elitist institution that reproduced a gamut of social inequities. However, as Ward (2014, 464), discusses, the humanistic ideals manifest in this vision of higher learning “also contained the political seeds for the larger democratization of the university that would slowly take place in the twentieth century.” This democratization of higher education was also contingent upon Keynesian-oriented welfare state policies that heavily subsidized the cost of secondary education. [As a personal aside, I almost certainly would not be an (entrepreneurially successful) college professor, speaking from the institutional position of an ACR Fellow, without the social safety net assistance afforded by a host of federal and state programs that enabled low income students to have access to higher education.]

In today’s academic environment, Mill’s idealistic pronouncements seem quaint, as much of our pedagogical efforts are institutionally directed toward the instrumental goal of ensuring that our customer-students will be able to quickly and efficiently transition into productive occupations. In the aftermath of disruptive shocks, however, most recently the financial meltdown of 2008, we sometimes do see critical admonishments that business schools should adopt a more socially redemptive pedagogical mission so as to not produce a new legion of greed-driven, selfish mercenaries, as evinced by redemptive statements from leading B-school administrators (quoted in Green 2009):

Wealth creation is about building a better society, and character and integrity are just as important in a manager’s capability. I’ve always had a very strong view that the role of education is not just to give people technical skills: it’s there to give people the context of how to be and how they can contribute, not just to their own gain, but to the gain of everybody else.

– Chris Bones, Dean of Henley Business School

Professor Arnoud De Meyer, director of the University of Cambridge’s Judge Business School, says that 2008 will be seen as a “watershed year” for the MBA. He argues that future curricula will have to prepare students for the inevitable increase in financial regulation, and should also focus more heavily on how business interacts with society. The schools, he says, will have to become “a bit more academic, independent, curious and interdisciplinary” in their approach to teaching.

But such reflective cautions and calls for educational reform tend to be short-lived and soon enough, business schools returned to their pro-corporate, neoliberal proselytizing status quo as the financial crisis of 2008 faded into distant memory.

Neoliberalism is also restructuring higher education in ways that are compatible with its veneration of efficiency and “flexibility” (neoliberal shibboleths that often correspond to a practice of reducing labor costs by avoiding the obligations of extended labor contracts). To illustrate, in 1969, non-tenure track faculty were an institutional exception, constituting about 20% of the total teaching force in higher education; however, this precarious category of academic works is the institutional norms who now make up over 70% of the instructional faculty (Shulman et al. 2016).

Stories about the neoliberalization of academe are now commonplace in outlets such as the Chronicle of Higher Education, Times Higher Education, or, on occasion, the New York Times or other news media that reporting on these disruptive transformations. These stories illuminate a brave new academic world where tenure protections are being rapidly eroded by hostile state legislators (as in my home institution of the UW-Madison); where departments are increasingly reliant upon a legion of adjunct faculty who toil in the class room for relatively low pay and little, if any long term, security and where tenured and tenure track faculty (to the extent that those classifications have any institutional meaning) face increasing demands to work more efficiently. That is, to assume more teaching and administrative responsibilities while maintaining established, and sometimes intensified, standards of research productivity.
These dramatic shifts reflect a generation of neoliberalizing budget cuts and an increasing reliance on private funds to keep academic institutions viable; money that generally comes with various expectations and requirements, few of which serve a University’s research mission (much less practices of critical inquiry). These neoliberalizing forces also ideologically portray public institutions (and tenured faculty who are the functional equivalent of the trade unions so widely condemned in neoliberal doctrine) as a sphere of market-distorting entitlements that need to be reformed through a logic of privatization and the imposition of competitive pressures (and hence incentives for “excellence”).

I am not the first to note that these neoliberal trends pose disconcerting threats to hallowed values such as academic freedom, critical inquiry, and intellectual diversity (Ward 2014). For example, the competitive market may support a plethora of courses in finance and marketing but perhaps not so many in Middle Eastern studies or Slavic languages, leading to a truncation of faculty in fields that do not enjoy high market demand. Such market-driven adjustments create a more intellectually homologous system of higher education that becomes increasingly technocratic in its aims and reciprocally, that produces a student-customer who similarly exhibits an instrumental mindset with few predilections to question the neoliberal status quo.

As academics, it is all too easy to lament this process of neoliberalization as an accursed nexus of demands and constraints that are imposed by extraneous economic forces and political actions beyond our immediate control. Yet, as consumer researchers, we also need to recognize that the neoliberal “skids” have been greased by our own well-worn habits of mind and our naturalized tendency to think and act in ways that are in fact quite continuous with the ideals of efficiency and competitiveness used to justify these neoliberal transformations of the University.

The entrepreneurial model hails each and every one of us to build our academic brand (what right minded marketing academic does not have a personal website and a social media presence?); to maximize the efficiency our workdays so as to be able to produce more papers (our proverbial “widgets”); to manage our production “pipelines”; and to see ourselves as relatively autonomous agents ever ready to transfer our human capital/academic brand to wherever it will be most rewarded by market forces.

The same neoliberalized system which produces a class of adjunct faculty negotiating the stresses of economic precarity (Standing 2011) is also the very one which creates academic celebrities, ACR Fellows, and well-compensated chaired professors. In this winner versus losers neoliberal frame, such outcomes are “optimal” ones that directly reflect different degrees of entrepreneurial acumen. From a more critical standpoint, these outcomes reflect structural inequities which confer competitive advantages to some while creating distortions that need to be reformed through a logic of entitlements that need to be reformed through a logic of.

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As just one example of this subtle conditioning process, I would surmise that nearly every Ph.D. advisor and nearly every Ph.D. candidate has had a mentoring exchange that hinges on the importance of the “elevator talk”—those 60 second distillations of doctoral dissertation research that every prospective job candidate stands ready to deliver to a listener/potential employer. And the “elevator talk” has an undeniable instrumental appeal and no small amount of practical value. On the positive side, to make such a synopsis, a researcher must have a clearly defined research question and contributions that can be represented as a concise set of bullet points on a power point slide. What is not to love?; or stated conversely, what dangers might lurk in training academics to be predisposed to give an elevator talks or on the audience side, to expect that research will be communicated in such efficient and easily comprehended terms?

A successful elevator talk presupposes a rhetorical continuity between presenters and audiences, taking the form of shared communicative expectations, a common base of knowledge and a shared theoretical vernacular. Those continuities also encourage a more homogenous disciplinary discourse. In other words, a Ph.D. student assumes an additional degree of unwanted systemic risks if his/her theoretical vernacular and questions diverge from orthodox conventions. Translation is a far more complex and time consuming process than speaking in a common vernacular, where communication is further aided by shared body of tacit knowledge.

These neoliberal imperatives also enjoin habits of mind that are conducive to a market-oriented fealty to the established taste of our audience and to operate within those comfortably familiar boundaries. In the elevator talk example, this convention demands that a listener not be pushed too far from his intellectual comfort zone. The “good” elevator talk adds a conceptual or empirical twist upon what the listener already knows and hence, the research story, and its points of theoretical distinction, does not deviate from the tacit assumptions that underlie this state of communicative efficiency and sense of intuitive comprehensibility. An ad campaign from the

1 This description of the increasingly ubiquitous, performance measurement (and governance) tool Digital Measures succinctly summarizes the problems posed by neoliberalism’s reduction of academic life to benchmarking measures: “Digital measures’ document everything and reveal nothing, rendering academic practices as calculable rather than meaningful” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1242).
1980’s offers a relevant analogy. In the ad, a nattily dressed, generically handsome man is in a formal restaurant accompanied by an equally well-dressed, and generically pretty women; after glancing at the menu, he proclaims in astonishment “I didn’t know Michelob made a light!” And here I suggest, we have the commercial personification of the paradoxical state of unremarkable surprise that results from a successful elevator talk.

This neoliberal-entrepreneurial framing of consumer research (and researchers) is manifest in other interactional rituals that are undertaken throughout the course of our professional lives. For example, a standard ice breaking exchange in academic life is the question of “what you are working on?”. If you will allow, I would like to make a slight digression. A few years ago, I was invited (required) to attend a social function to honor a wealthy donor who had made a substantial gift to the school. Upon our initial introduction, the benefactor immediately asks “what are you working on?” I soon realized that this query was not an idle or innocent question. Indeed, this donor really wanted to know what I was working on and as I gave a series of elevator talks, though in this case, “interrogation talks” would be a more fitting description, I could see a cost-benefit calculation going on his head. This wealthy benefactor then repeated this interaction ritual with just about every faculty at the reception as he sought to assess the practical relevance and market value of the research that he was helping to underwrite.

Even when academic peers ask “what are you working on” in a more causal manner at conferences and other like settings, the question is no less fraught with normative expectations and ideological demands. What “are you working on?” is often an invitation to briefly review your “research pipeline,” a peculiar trope when you think about, implying that one should have a steady flow of research output and that a break in this flow is quite problematic: my god, your pipeline has run dry! But, the ideological effect is most clearly revealed by considering what is not normatively expected – perhaps what you are “working on” is not a research project but a book written by another scholar on a topic that you may or may not eventually study but that broadens your perspective or leads to a reflexive questioning of naturalized beliefs (or that you just found interesting). The neoliberal definition of legitimate work discourages such conversations, rendering such non-instrumental uses of one’s work time as taboo. In contrast, the equally relevant question of “what have you read?” (or watched or listened to if we broaden the implied frame-of-reference to include enriching aesthetic experiences) is highly unconventional. The entrepreneurial model frames as legitimate work the ongoing, individuated production of research and all other activities are rendered as suspect (unproductive) uses of one’s time.

There is an emotional complement to the “what are you working on?” question. Passion has become the normatively preferred emotional state of neoliberal entrepreneurs or stated conversely, neoliberal ideologies hail workers to recognize themselves as passionate entrepreneurs (Dilts 2011; McRobbie 2015). Passion is an inducement to efface once sacrosanct boundaries between professional and private life as the career sphere now colonizes time once devoted to leisure and family. Given neoliberalism’s instrumental prescriptions, we can add thinking and reflection to this list of temporally displaced activities. Indeed, in the ideal neoliberal world, even recreation should, in some way, build human capital that will further enhance our entrepreneurial acumen.

In this entrepreneurial-neoliberal frame, we are therefore ideologically predisposed to regard our work as the activity that most fascinates us; the domain we want to incessantly talk about; the nexus of questions and ideas that fully occupies our minds when not forced to attend to other responsibilities and distractions; and as our intellectual sustenance and prime source of self-actualization.

Now, let’s flip this ideological script around. We are embedded in a heteroglossic intellectual world where people from all research disciplines study a diversity of issues and grapple with fundamental philosophical questions, seek solutions to pressing societal problems, and generate innovative ways of thinking about the world. Sometimes, we really should be more interested in what others are doing. So, perhaps what we celebrate and valorize as “being passionate about one’s research” can also betray an institutionalized tendency toward a narcissistic parochialism.

Through an array of institutional norms and conventional practices, neoliberal habits of mind are subtly propagated as the default option for how one should pursue success in the academic game. Consequently, constraints imposed by this orthodoxy can operate in a naturalized and, hence, unquestioned fashion. Like any ideological system, however, the neoliberalized academic game encompasses a range of institutional goals and countervailing discourses that often create internal inconsistencies and disjunctions (i.e., desires for department bonding and collegiality and the normative ideal of being a good departmental citizen—or serving the communal good through service to the field—can conflict with the ethos of entrepreneurial competitiveness). Such structural gaps also create heterodox spaces where the normative constraints of the entrepreneurial-neoliberal model can be contested and unorthodox practices can be enacted, though these challenges may sometimes be more happenstance than strategic. Nonetheless, they can reveal the limitations implicit to naturalized ideological norms.

My own career path illustrates how such happenstance divergences from the institutional enforcement of neoliberal demands can occur (not once but three times in fact) and how subtle pressures to conform can be resisted, though not without risk. During my Ph.D. program at the University of Tennessee, I had a very significant change of heart regarding the direction I wanted to take my career—a shift from a psychometric/methodological orientation to one that explored the symbolic, experiential, and cultural aspects of consumption (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986). Fortunately, my faculty advisor was Professor Bill Locander whose career was also in a transitional moment and he afforded me considerable latitude in this exploration which took me deep down the path of Continental philosophy and its more contemporary manifestation in the field of existential-phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 962; Sartre 1956)—a journey greatly assisted by the ever generous Professor of Psychology Howard Pollio. For the next few years in my doctoral program—most particularly around the annual review period—I was consistent-ly put on warning for “spending too much time in the library reading and not enough time doing research.” Though I never discovered the source from which the faculty gained this knowledge about my unrepentant library patronage, it was an accurate description. This presumed wasteful behavior dramatically contrasted with my peer groups who were actively working with faculty on projects and generating conference papers galore. Ironically enough, and please forgive the blatant self-promotion, I became the most “productive” doctoral student (from a journal publication standpoint) my Ph.D. program had ever produced, aided in large part from the knowledge and viewpoint gained through all that “unproductive” library time.

In hindsight, I fully understand the rationales and well-meaned intent behind those orthodox recommendations to become more “productive.” There was a system in place for efficiently learning a particular set of research skills and producing a particular kind of research. But, the horizons of opportunity offered by that model were
constrained. Following the normative conventions of being efficient and “productive” cannot get one out of such a proverbial institutional box, it can only anchor one’s habits of mind to those established conditions and the tacit limitations they impose.

Fast forward a few years more, I am embarking on my career as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I had become reasonably proficient in a research model oriented around existential-phenomenological methods and related analytic constructs. And, not incidentally, it was one that had gained traction in the academic market of ideas—being very well-suited to the study of consumer identity projects and their implications for consumer-market relationships (e.g., Fournier 1998). However, I had begun to expand my conceptual horizons with readings drawing from feminist and poststructural cultural studies, which sparked a pronounced feeling of limitation in my phenomenological research orientation. This dissatisfaction sparked a two and half year process of conceptual re-tooling and a massive reconceptualization and reanalysis of my dissertation. None of these actions were efficient (much less normatively advisable) from a career management standpoint, as this process led to a significant gap in my research pipeline. Fortunately, the institutional cushion of my prior publications afforded me some degree of institutional leeway. But, my annual reviews were fraught with expressions of concern and warnings about my lack of productivity. Under less forgiving institutional circumstance, my fledgling academic career at a top tier research university could have easily met a premature end.

As indicated by my current status as an ACR Fellow, this re-tooling led to a “productive” phase that carried me through the tenure process. Post-tenure, due in large part to the prodding of my colleague Doug Holt, I became increasingly aware of sociological oversights and elisions that were inherent to my culturally-oriented research. Thus, I undertook another phase of re-tooling and synthesizing that, in turn, led to a substantial gap in my research output. Though in a far less tenuous position than in my assistant professor days, this fallow period nonetheless had costs that accrued across my annual reports but, again, this “unproductive” phase, and the new competencies and perspective it afforded, eventually sparked an array publications that investigated a much different and broader range of consumption issues than in my previous work.

My various divergences from orthodox norms of “productivity” were not calculated. In hindsight, the divergent paths I pursued during my doctoral program and early assistant professor days were grounded in a blissful ignorance about the potential risks or perhaps a willful disregard for these consequences. To quote former NBA bad boy Charles Barkley, “I am not a role model” and my desultory intellectual approach is absolutely not a template for how young scholars should manage their careers. But, the broader point is that once you take such risks (and let me add see eventual rewards), it becomes much easier to push against the constraints of normative expectations at a future point. My core message is that the neoliberalized academic system has more flex than you may think and that professional and personal value can be gained from critically reflecting on you what you do, why you do it, how you might do it differently in order to expand your horizons of possibility and, sometimes, taking the risk of following the unconventional paths that those reflections point toward.

GOING SLOW AS A REVITALIZING DISCONTINUITY

To foster such discontinuities with neoliberal demands for efficiency and productivity, consumer researchers need a disciplinary license to proclaim, “Right now, I am more interested in what these other folks are doing;” “the stuff I have been working on just isn’t that interesting to me anymore and I am searching for something else to do or a new way to think.” The orientation manifest in such statements of generalized curiosity or restless intellectual exploration is not an efficient one; it does not directly fill a pipeline with ongoing research; it does not impress administrators charged with monitoring and rewarding annual productivity (and punishing a lack thereof); and it does not confer much immediate value in the academic status game. But, it can make for more interesting thinkers and in the longer run, more innovative researchers.

Let us consider a hypothetical world that would be discontinuous with this neoliberal, entrepreneurial model. For example, what if the guiding trope was not the time constrained elevator talk but the extended dinner conversation. If so, how might academic training change?; what new habits of mind might be formed? Such a conversationalist would need to cultivate a polyvocal fluency, a breadth of intellectual interests, a capacity to see connections among disparate domains and ideas, and a keen interest in learning from others and gaining resources for re-assessing established beliefs and deeply held assumptions (which does not mean that one might necessarily change his/her world-view but would become more critically reflexive toward its contingencies and dangers).

This alternative world scenario is likely to spark a skeptical reaction; it is completely unrealistic; no one has time for such conservational exchanges as a steady-state academic practice because we have “real” work to do; such time-investments in building such polygot skills would offer little in the way of tangible, timely payoffs and so on. And therein lies my point, the entrepreneurial model, as an ideological force, governs behavior by constraining our horizons of possibility and naturalizing contingent states of the world as inevitabilities; and to inculcate a belief that “there is no alternative,” to borrow Margaret Thatcher’s famous rhetorical enshrinement of neoliberal policies as the only credible political solution to Britain’s economic problems (McLean 2001).

And indeed, there can be no alternatives, until we create a space for imaging different worlds and different arrangements of academic life. While this dinner conversation trope may be discontinuous with entrepreneurial/neoliberal frame, it is quite continuous with a collaborative-collective-communal one.

Happily, one such alternative is being proposed and pursued in various quarters of the academy. Modeled on the Slow Food movement which aims to liberate consumers’ foodways from the McDonaldized sphere of fast food and to create a more reflexive, socially conscious global community of eaters (Petrini 2007), Slow Scholarship seeks to break the neoliberalizing cycles that are reshaping academic life. It argues that academic freedom necessitates a “freedom to think” (Hartman and Darab 2012, 53) that can only be attained by reclaiming and reconfiguring the institutional spaces, temporalities, and administrative-governance mechanisms that have been co-opted by the corporatization of the University. The goal is to create an academic setting that encourages and legitimizes a more deliberate and reflexive mode of scholarship where researchers can do “productive work” by reading and listening to colleagues; undertake longer courses of reflection and study before embarking on research projects; enjoy greater autonomy from instrumental publish or perish pressures; and engage in a host of other communal and intellectually enriching activities that currently necessitate finding ways to subvert the prevailing neoliberal system (See Mountz et al. 2015).

The Slow Scholarship movement is not inimical to instrumental justifications, arguing for example, that their alternative practices are ways to engender more effective—rather than efficient—research, teaching, and mentoring (Meyerhoff, Johnson, and Braun 2011).
Proposals for implementing Slow Scholarship include a significant number “the personal-is-political” changes that can be made in one’s daily work routine—such as exiting the email spiral which can consume one’s day with administrative trivialities and aiming for minimum allowable productivity benchmarks. This latter option is an interesting one because it enjoins researchers to become less sensitive to the immediate pressures of the academic status game and to accept, in the shorter run, the consequences of being deemed “less productive” (though still falling within an acceptable institutional range) so as to gain longer term benefits (such as more impactful research and, not to be overlooked, a more rewarding and enjoyable academic life).

Importantly, however, these individuated actions need to be undertaken in support of collective ones whereby academics push their institutions to create work environments and evaluative systems that are more conducive to this alternative model of academic life and a slower and more thoughtful conception of productivity and value (Mountz et al 2015). Such unconventional, orthodoxy-challenging actions constitute forms of ideological edgework, or what in this context could be more specifically characterized as intellectual edgework, that tests the boundaries of an ideological system and seeks to gradually expand its zones of tolerability and legitimacy (c.f., Thompson and Üstüner 2015).

Such modes of intellectual-ideological edgework could also help to redress a concern routinely expressed in ACR Fellows addresses (among many other discursive forums such as ACR Presidential addresses)—the field of consumer research is not generating “new” ideas or having a sufficient impact beyond our disciplinary borders. From my standpoint, however, those concerns—though related to the issues addressed here—are somewhat misplaced. The communal model reminds that no idea or theorization is completely original but, rather, it derives from prior conceptions, perhaps applied in a novel way or blended with other concepts to create an innovative hybrid conception. In regard to the proposed interdisciplinary shortfalls, other disciplines are also embedded in the neoliberal academic game and have their own incentives to be insular, or more accurately, to not readily acknowledge sub-disciplines that are seen as holding a lower status position in the grand academic hierarchy.

Consumer research’s limited impact on base disciplines, has as much, or more to do, with the sociological conditions that reproduce status hierarchies among social factions as it does the relative merits and novelty of our research.

However, the neoliberal-entrepreneurial model fosters an unreflective contentment with what you know (i.e., your stock of existing intellectual capital) rather than a restlessness over what you don’t know and the forms of intellectual capital that could be garnered through exploration of the broader, heteroglossic collective intelligence. This habit-of-mind prefers the comfort of well-rehearsed routines and skills (which allow for ready displays of technical proficiency) to the inefficient struggles of acquiring new ones. And it is a habit-of-mind that is continuous with the neoliberalized institutional structures. In contrast, practices of intellectual-ideological edgework can cultivate habits of mind that are discontinuous with these socializing and normalizing structures.

SUBVERSIVE DISCONTINUITIES

Periodically, we do encounter colleagues who, for any variety of reasons, diverge from this entrepreneurial-neoliberal orthodoxy. They may be situated in an institutional space where the reach of neoliberal doctrines have not yet extended or they may have found (or created) a haven where such unorthodox actions could flourish (at least temporarily).

In this spirit, I suspect (and indeed hope) that over the course of your academic life, you have been (or will be) have a colleague who embodies this collaborative-collective model. In my own professional life, I can think of no better example than my dear departed friend Per Østergaard. Per was a voracious and eclectic reader who loved to discuss ideas with doctoral students, other faculty members, and geographically dispersed colleagues such as myself. In most cases, these discussions did not directly relate to any specific research project that Per might have been working on. More commonly, these discussions concerned broader ideas and theoretical debates that Per wanted to share and discuss with others or they were motivated by Per’s insatiable interest helping others negotiate conceptual or methodological roadblocks.

Per was a quintessential Slow Scholar long before this term entered the academic parlance. And Per’s deliberately-paced, communal orientation also carried an institutional “cost.” He was not a highly productive scholar in terms of the number of papers he published. However, the research he did publish was innovative, provocative, and boundary spanning (Belk, Østergaard, and Groves 1998; Bode and Østergaard 2013; Jantzen, Østergaard, and Vieira 2006; Jantzen, Fitchett, Østergaard, and Vetner 2012; Lindberg Østergaard 2015; Østergaard and Fitchett 2012). And, Per was a great facilitator of research who never hesitated to provide detailed feedback on a colleague’s paper—often pushing the author to think more broadly about the topic and to find a more interesting question lurking within the research context.

Per’s failure to produce published papers on annual basis did create friction with administrators. However, his home institution, Southern Denmark University, had an established, collectivist tradition of assessing research productivity at a unit level and thus, his role as a facilitator of research could be assigned enough institutional value to keep the administrative wolves at bay. And here we can recognize some degrees of freedom that are afforded when at least some institutional credence is given to the logic of the collaborative-collective model. Of course, such an institutional haven is discontinuous with entrepreneurial-neoliberal model and, as we speak, the Scandinavian academic system is also undergoing its own historically contextualized version of neoliberalization (Steensen 2008).

These neoliberalizing changes to academic life are the consequences of much broader socio-political transformations and, they are quite likely to be the structural conditions academically-oriented consumer researchers will be negotiating (and perhaps resisting at times) for years to come, barring dramatic shifts in the broader political sphere. For this reason, I am not celebrating Per’s communal-collaborative orientation as a normative ideal that other consumer researchers should necessarily emulate or, even, as exemplar of how to resist or defy neoliberal imperatives for efficiency and productivity.

Rather, I want to highlight the synergies that exist when an academic institution is able to find ways to create continuities between the collaborative-collective model and the entrepreneurial-neoliberal one. In the case of Per, his communal orientation could in fact, be legitimately interpreted as enacting a subtle entrepreneurial move but one seeking different rewards than those who play the neoliberal academic game in a more orthodox fashion. Per’s approach to academic life existed in a highly functional, complementary relation to his colleagues who were engaged in the conventional quest to build their research records and external reputations (i.e., academic brands) through passionate productivity.

Looking at this synergy in more general sociological terms, we can say that a communal academic engages in activities (i.e., reading, discussions, participating in seminars, reading groups, etc.) that enrich his/her stock of intellectual capital. However, the goal of such
capitalizing activities is not to gain symbolic capital, or status, in the academic publishing game, but to acquire social capital in an academic field (be it a department or a research community). Reciprocally, whenever such conversions of intellectual capital into social capital aid an entrepreneurially oriented colleague in building his/her publication record, this (collective) achievement enhances the value of the social capital circulating in that particular field.

A related lesson that can be drawn from the career of Per Ostergaard is that neoliberalism is not a unified, hegemonic order, but instead, it is a nexus of ideals and practices that intersect with established institutional conventions and histories to create what political scientists characterize as “actually existing neoliberalisms” (Brenner and Theodore 2002). And these practical adaptations of the neoliberal project often create institutional ambiguities and contradictions. These messy actualities, in turn, also afford greater degrees of freedom than one might realize to engage in intellectual-ideological edgework (c.f., Thompson and Üstün 2015) and to liberate one’s habits-of-mind from the constraining demands of the neoliberal academic status game.

Such intellectual discontinuities make it more likely that one will be able to draw connections, discern interesting and novel relationships, and recognize limitations in orthodox frameworks that would likely elude those whose habits of mind are continuous with the prevailing institutional doxa. In a more political vein, such intellectual discontinuities also sustain a critical-reflexive perspective toward institutional norms and status quo conventions (including those that are naturalized as unquestionable structural givens). While such a critical-reflexive awareness may not necessarily lead to wholesale structural changes (i.e., some power relations may not be easily surmounted), it does create pathways and incentives for subverting or reshaping institutional conditions in ways that mitigate some of the restrictive demands of neoliberalized academic life.

**HOW TO DO “INTELLECTUAL EDGWERK”**

1. **Be less instrumental:** In pushing against the limits of the neoliberal-entrepreneurial model, a first step would be to pursue research projects that afford opportunities for enriching one’s stock of intellectual capital. This guideline, in turn, suggests that the research process would also have to encompass the inefficiencies posed by the acquisition of new knowledge.

As consumer researchers, we can always say that such learning outcomes are attained (efficiently) from empirical results—(e.g., from this study, I learned that this variable exerts a moderating effect on this process, given this set of mediating conditions). While such empirical discoveries are, indeed, a kind of (quite legitimate) learning, this process entails adding a new node to an existing network; it therefore constitutes an extension of one’s established knowledge base but it does not significantly expand one’s stock of intellectual capital. Conversely, one might choose a project because it requires them to expand their methodological horizons, explore an unfamiliar theoretical domain or develop in depth knowledge about previously unfamiliar social contexts or issues, such as by reading historical analyses or literary portrayals. The end game is not the research output per se; rather, research becomes the means to push the constraints of one’s established habits of mind and to gain a reflexive and critical perspective on institutional conditions that otherwise demand fidelity to an instrumental vision of “productivity.”

Lest this suggestion seem Pollyannaish, this boundary expanding orientation can aligned with the demands of neoliberal evaluative standards by producing multiple papers (i.e., products) that draw from this acquisition of new forms of intellectual capital. The key is to gain institutional recognition that such theoretical innovations do not necessarily follow the mandates of annual reporting conventions. Slower scholarship serves a longer run vision of impact and when institutional norms militate against such activities, we can see a place where the neoliberal model can be challenged on the countervailing grounds of research impact and entrepreneurial innovation. In other words, neoliberal standards can be subverted in ways that serve a goal of institutional transformation.

2. **Be more communal:** The process of expanding one’s intellectual horizons affords an outstanding opportunity to attend seminars (hosted by other departments and schools at your University); to attend conferences that might be out of your standard portfolio and to meet and discuss issues with researchers who had, heretofore, not been part of your academic social network. [A much wider gamut of recommendations for incorporating more communal practices into one’s academic life are provided by proponents of Slow Scholarship (see Mountz et al. 2015)].

3. **Don’t let passion become an excuse to avoid critical reflections:** “Loving what you do” does not absolve a consumer researcher from an ethical responsibility to periodically reflect on the reflexive question “is what I do really worth doing?”, “whose interests are being served and to what purpose? Are my actions driven by careerism and instrumentalism or am I doing things that are pushing my habituated intellectual boundaries in ways that allow me to engage in creative intellectual edgework?”

Though I am clearly advocating for this horizon expanding criterion (and its subversion of the entrepreneurial-neoliberal model) as a normative guide, there are other logics of normative justification that could be deployed in this reflexive assessments, such as helping to redress major social problems and providing knowledge that can lead to a more equitable and sustainable society. The subfield of transformative consumer research (Mick et al. 2012) is oriented around this justificatory logic. Whether a justification is grounded in an ideal of theoretical innovation, civic virtue, or some other normative model (see for example Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), however, reflexive justifications are not rationalizations. The aim of such critical self-appraisals is to critically assess the merits of our chosen criteria and the degree to which our research practices and their outcomes realize those normative aims.

**THE INCITEMENTS OF DISCONTINUITY**

The institutional discontinuities that frame consumer research can function as incitements to reflection and reflexive assessment, creating potential for change and growth. Habits of mind that align with the entrepreneurial-neoliberal model are not necessarily bad but they harbor hidden dangers when we presume that there is no alternative to such an orientation. Reflexive questioning should engender unrest and unease with patterns set by institutional norms, habits of mind engrained by years of academic training, and the path dependencies established in the course of building one’s academic brand. And, at least some of the time, I suggest that there is much to be gained, institutionally and personally, in diverging from these neoliberal hailings by adopting a more communal, intellectually curious, and non-instrumental approach to scholarship.

I began this decidedly inefficient reflection on the question of “why award an ACR Fellow?” At this juncture, a distinct but related question arises: what does the ACR Fellows Award represent? From a conventional standpoint, this award celebrates achievement and social distinction. ACR Fellows are celebrated for being thought leaders, innovators, and who think differently from the “masses” of
consumer researchers. And this conventional meaning has a mythic function; that is, it masks contradictions and inconsistencies that would otherwise threaten the normative legitimacy unreflexively granted to naturalized institutional norms and practices (Barthes 1972).

This mythic construction obscures that celebrated ACR Fellows are the ideological exceptions who prove the institutionalized norms. This mythic framing suggests that ACR Fellows’ inherently possessed discontinuous habits of mind (creative aptitude, intellectual curiosity, penchant for unconventional insights) that enabled them to play the academic more effectively, rather than acknowledging that they were beneficiaries of somewhat anomalous institutional conditions that created opportunities for playing the academic game differently. Their distinction hinges on the vast majority of others conforming to the instrumental mandates of the neoliberal-entrepreneurial model. In effect, ACR Fellows have found means to be rewarded for doing parkour while most others are running timed laps around a track.

However, it is possible to subvert the meaning of the ACR Fellows Award and place it in the service of critically assessing the institutional conditions that render these discontinuous habits of mind to be exceptional and in turn, to reconfigure the entrepreneurial-neoliberal status game in ways that would be more conducive to forming habits of mind that are communal, less instrumental in orientation, and predisposed toward critical self-reflection and intellectual edgework. Such institutional shifts would serve to democratize the discontinuous habits of mind, whose currently rarefied distinction now confers distinction in the academic status game.

One could counter this proposal by asking in riposte, “Why make such efforts to diverge from the neoliberal norms that govern our research activities?” Maybe you don’t see these dangers as being all the risky and the neoliberal system is working just fine for you. One response, consistent with the ideals of Slow Scholarship, is that such intellectual edgework can afford long term benefits such as building a more diversified portfolio of intellectual capital; generating collaborative connections and synergies; enhancing creativity and afford experiences of enrichment (both experimentally and intellectually) that render the (reworked) academic game more meaningful than the atomizing, competitive pressures of the neoliberal-entrepreneurial model.

Another level of response to this question circles back to the first narrative motif of ACR Fellows talks—proposing changes that could potentially enhance the theoretical significance and societal relevance of consumer research. To explain this implication, we also need to look beyond the particularities of the academic status game. And here, I turn to the critical journalist George Monbiot’s (2016) discussion of how neoliberal policies— which have helped to generate a radical upward distribution of wealth, rising budget deficits, crisis inducing economic instabilities in global financial markets, and a structural inability to address systemic environmental threats— have retained their hegemonic status in the face of glaring failures:

“When laissez-faire economics led to catastrophe in 1929, Keynes devised a comprehensive economic theory to replace it. When Keynesian demand management hit the buffers in the 70s, there was an alternative ready [neoliberalism]. But when neoliberalism fell apart in 2008 there was … nothing. This is why the zombie walks. The left and center have produced no new general framework of economic thought for 80 years.

While neoliberalism serves the economic interests of those who occupy relatively privileged institutional positions, the destructive and destabilizing costs of neoliberalism’s myriad “externalities” are mounting and becoming more problematic every day. We also stand on the verge of a radical techno-displacement—which is actually well underway—of many conventional occupations as AI and robotic technologies are now becoming capable of performing a wide range of jobs across the blue, pink, and white-collar sectors, encompassing everything from construction work to performing medical diagnoses, legal and financial services, and writing news stories (Keohane 2017). Many technology experts predict that close to 50% of existing jobs will be automated inside of two decades (Morgenstern 2016). The counterbalancing argument is that this in-process technological revolution may generate a surfeit of new jobs whose exact characteristics are difficult to image in the present moment (echoing the historical effects of the industrial revolution) (Whitehouse, Rojanasakul, and Sam 2017). However, the neoliberal political economy, with its commitment to a reduced social safety net, is ill-prepared to cushion the societal shocks posed by this economic transition (assuming the more optimistic projections hold) and it also harbors the potential to, at least for some time, exacerbate economic inequalities as an elite ownership class profits from low labor costs of production, while a displaced workforce is simultaneously plunged into an impoverished state of perpetual underemployment.

Whether in regard to looming threats of ecological collapse or technodisplacements, these conditions point to a pressing need for new frameworks of economic thought that can offer an alternative to the uncontested hegemonic status of neoliberal doctrines in key policy circles. Such an alternative is not likely to arise so long as social science researchers (including consumer researchers’) habits of minds and academic practices mirror these same ideological influences.

Nor can it be piecemeal undertaking from isolated researchers. Neoliberalism arose from a collaborative-communal process of developing an alternative to Keynesian economics, building social capital among policy makers, and diffusing and implementing these ideals through networks of political influence (c.f., Foucault 2008; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Though still in its nascent stages, an interdisciplinary movement is beginning to coalesce that is seeking to create a viable solutions to the systemic problems (like climate change) that neoliberalism exacerbates through its antipathies toward any regulatory interventions on the market or that its policies have helped to create (such as an ever increasing concentration of the wealth; national debt bombs; hyper volatile investment markets) (see Jones and O’Donnell 2017; Schor 2010). As an interdisciplinary field that studies consumer behaviors as they unfold in market contexts, the consumer behavior field possesses a latent potential to contribute to this communal-collaborative conversation but, to do so, many of our institutionally ingrained, neoliberalized habits of mind will need to be changed. I hope this address might be one small step toward such a change.

And to close on a more personal-retrospective note, the receipt of this ACR Fellow afforded me with an opportunity to reflect on roads taken, those not taken, and perhaps less traveled paths that should be explored. Less than an affirmation, this award has provided instigation and, for that, I will be ever grateful.

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