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Sherry John

What did you do in the Great Paradigm War? Notes from the other side

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the author's involvement in the paradigm wars of the 1980s in marketing and consumer research. In this paper, the author describes his role in the ecological succession of the discipline at a critical juncture between the early efforts of the pioneering scholars and the establishment of a mature climax community of consumer culture theorists.

Design/methodology/approach – The author employs an autobiographical approach.

Findings – Among the many contributions of a host of talented and insightful fellow travelers, the author's penchant for ethnographic research and anthropological analysis helped nudge the discipline into interesting new niches.

Originality/value – This personal reminiscence of the philosophical debates surrounding our interpretive turn may be triangulated with others to construct a synchronic account of a moment in disciplinary evolution.

Keywords Biography, History of marketing theory, History of marketing thought

Paper type Viewpoint

I have written this essay in a virtual vacuum, drawing only from a few published accounts, and those mostly my own, to emphasize the idiosyncratic timbre of reminiscence that issues forth when we pluck the mystic chords of memory. Over the past few years, when the graybeards and grandes dames of Consumer Culture Theory have gathered around the tavern tables, talk inevitably has turned to origin myths and their (lack of) impact on our novices. This fascination with antiquity and its uses has recently been chronicled by Askegaard and Scott (2013), whose call to transcribe oral history forms the nucleus of my account. I have seized Mark's and Brian's invitation to reflect upon the philosophical debates of the 1980s from a participant's vantage point as an opportunity to engage in the kind of introspection our field has alternately condemned and condoned. As long as the reader accepts the premise that I am an unreliable narrator, the introspective exercise may prove amusing.

Background notes: personal thumbnail history

My scholarly career in marketing began with the characteristic disregard for disciplinary boundaries for which my training as an anthropologist prepared me. My dissertation research focus arguably fitted me more appropriately for life within a medical school or management department than in marketing (or anthropology, for that matter), but I thought I saw a match in the services area, as well as in the emerging arena of consumer misbehavior. My early mentors wisely disabused me of this inclination, at

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least as a mode of entry into my new field. I arrived as an initiand, possessed of a novel method and perspective (ethnography and ethnology), a critical view of commerce (a suspicion verging on hostility) and a desire to find a niche that would allow me to feed my family without compromising my (surprisingly unexamined) values. As a professional stranger in a strange land, I felt that this vocational right turn had all the earmarks of a great adventure. Fortunately for me, the terrain was poised to undergo some dramatic changes in shape as I began my journey.

I contributed accidentally to the paradigm wars by wandering into the field at a propitious moment. In the summer of 1982, I was hired as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Florida. Joel Cohen had established a very successful center for consumer research, which was heavily invested in consumer psychology. He was of a mind that other basic social sciences should be involved in the investigation of consumer behavior, and was in the process of helping to move the field beyond the strict purview of marketing proper. Putting his head together with Bill Wilkie, a Senior Member of the University of Florida Marketing Department at the time, and with Russ Bernard and Marvin Harris, Senior Members of the University of Florida Department of Anthropology, Joel decided that anthropology might be a viable discipline with which to continue the broadening agenda. The group also had a useful topical suggestion for where an anthropological beachhead might be established: gift giving. A young Florida cadre of rising stars (including future Association for Consumer Research (ACR) Presidents and Fellows John Lynch and Joe Alba) helped socialize me initially into the field, and Joel pointed me in the direction of colossi Russell Belk and Sidney Levy, who became invaluable friends and mentors.

Under the baleful eye of a Florida Dean who wanted his program to move more directly in the managerial direction of marketing strategy, I migrated from Gainesville to Northwestern University in 1984, to a marketing department that treated the field as an interdisciplinary playground. There was an exhilarating culture of stewardship in place at the time that embraced new perspectives as a requisite infusion for advancing the field that the group felt was its mandate. My Kellogg colleagues (again, including several ACR Presidents and Fellows, as well as the incomparable Phil Kotler) completed my induction into the field, and helped me establish a platform from which I was encouraged to branch out and meet not only the emerging community of North American "alternative" scholars, but the European and Asian ones as well[1]. It was also a period that forced me to reconcile the managerial as well as theoretical implications of my anthropological orientation.

This was an exciting era where research possibilities, catalyzed earlier by pioneers like Sid Levy and Jerry Zaltman, were being re-energized by Beth Hirschman and Morris Holbrook, in their inspiring work on hedonic consumption. In addition to being blessed early with the friendship of a motley collection of insightful, good-humored and dedicated colleagues (and students who became colleagues), I was fortunate to launch my work in the era of journal stewards such as Hal Kassarjian, Jim Bettman and Rich Lutz (Rich also being a vital original mentor and friend), who believed that interesting research of any stripe that illuminated consumer behavior belonged in the flagships. This view was a very controversial one at the time; while not currently as volatile an issue, it remains problematic. The rough way for this nontraditional work was also being paved by philosophical firebrand Paul Anderson, and by his protégées Julie Ozanne and Laurie Anderson.

Throwing my lot in with Russ Belk and Melanie Wallendorf, and thence with all the other participants in the Consumer Behavior Odyssey (a project which has been episodically chronicled through the years), was another bit of great fortune. The Odyssey captured and accelerated the alternative *zeitgeist*, and helped grow the critical mass of scholars that gave rise to the invisible colleges and conference corridor conversations that became the incipient structure of the amorphous consumer culture theory enterprise. Tying in early with Northwestern alums Nik Dholakia and Fuat Firat, and their partner in thought crimes Alladi Venkatesh, was yet another great stroke of luck, as their critical evangelizing, which gave rise to the journal *Culture Markets & Consumption* and to the Heretical Consumer Research conference (each precursors of the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium project of today), resonated well with my own deconstructive penchant.

I was a participant in and witness to other disciplinary disruptions, some of which helped give rise to the consumer culture theory movement. The Policy Board and Associate Editor positions of the *Journal of Consumer Research* (*JCR*), and the President, Fellow and Conference Chair positions of ACR have enabled a number of paradigmatic heretics to rotate through the ranks of institutional decision makers, which, in turn, provided valuable experience for the establishment of the Consumer Culture Theory Consortium, the professional society with which I chiefly identify today.

Some critical incidents: creating and recording disruption

As many accounts have now been documented, marketing and consumer research received their formative guidance first from the field of economics, and then from psychology. These mother disciplines still strongly influence, if not determine altogether, the character of our contemporary endeavor as reflected in flagship journals. The early work of pioneers such as Sidney Levy, William “Tom” Tucker, Gerald Zaltman, Everett Rogers and William Wells, among others, help set the stage for the paradigm wars of the 1980s, by alerting the field to the possibility of methods and perspectives not currently in vogue in marketing and consumer research. But awareness did not lead directly to acceptance.

Vanguard work by Morris Holbrook and Beth Hirschman, appearing in our journals at about the same time that consumption was being “discovered” as a “hot” topic in a range of other disciplines, helped prime the pump for nontraditional inquiry, but placement for this kind of work was problematic. Many of my own initial efforts met with either confusion (“This stuff *is* interesting, *but* it isn’t marketing/consumer research”) or open hostility (“This stuff *isn’t* interesting *and* it isn’t marketing/consumer research”) by reviewers and editors operating within the dominant positivist paradigm, even when the papers treated mainstream topics such as branding or advertising. To be fair, I still occasionally receive such comments 30 years later, even as we’ve moved intermittently along the road to paradigm-appropriate review. My own foot in the door, an overview article that modeled gift giving and laid out an unconventional programmatic research regime on offer for adoption, proved to be the ante that got me a seat at the table of the high stakes game that was the nascent interpretive turn in consumer research. Let me quickly describe my participation in three watershed moments of this turn.

Storming the citadel

The Consumer Behavior Odyssey, brainchild of Russ Belk and fruit of so many other laborers, catalyzed a movement that I have come to understand as a reformation. The Odyssey was a vision quest that demonstrated the possibility of remaking the field, if pursued with missionary zeal. The Odyssey was also an effectively marketed experience whose early adopters became brand evangelists. Russ has charted the project's history in several accounts (Belk, 1987, 1991a and 1991b), and I have described its character in several others (Sherry, 1987, 2005, 2013a), none of which I recount in this article. Rather, I reduce the Odyssey's essence to three central dimensions. First, it embodied the ideal of scholarly curiosity, the excitement of revitalizing inquiry into familiar issues and extending inquiry into unexplored areas, through the importation of novel methods and perspectives into what was presumed to be a mature discipline. Second, it embodied the ideal of scholarly commitment, a belief in the promise of a field too significant to be left in the hands of too few stakeholders. Third, it embodied the ideal of scholarly community, the exhilaration born of sharing professional skills and insights in close quarters, in pursuit of a common goal unachievable by an individual. The siege mentality that accompanied this resistance added a palpable feeling of risk that energized the project. It felt like a "bet the farm" kind of proposition that would help make or break (or at least seriously impede) careers.

This interweaving of the scholarly with the political is a theme that has continued down to the present day, and I have more to say about it later. For now, I want to highlight just how tangible the metaphoric chip on our collective shoulder felt back in the day. To borrow the language of my heretical comrades, positivist hegemony controlled the means of production and did not play well with others. Where we identified with Odysseus, most of the field identified us with Don Quixote. Each small victory we won seemed as if it had a moral weight to it, yet none seemed great enough to turn the tide. In retrospect, I (sheepishly) recall a measure of self-righteousness and desperation in my drive to publish in those early days; my attitude bordered on militant. Broadening the field seemed the right thing to do, but it rarely felt collegial beyond the confines of the few. Within those confines, however, the nature of the work and intensity of the fellowship made for great fun. Among the other names dropped (or, lamentably, unretrieved from faulty LTM) throughout this essay, I recall the following cast of characters as being formative in my own thinking during this era: Jerry Kernan, Eric Arnould, Rick Wilk, Barbara Stern, Annamma Joy, Craig Thompson, Jeff Durgee, Grant McCracken, Tom O'Guinn, Jeff Murray, Dennis Rook, Mary Ann McGrath, Deb Heisley, Scott Roberts, Jim McAlexander and John Schouten. Our mission to expand the field also gave rise to a competitive spirit that helped improve everyone's game.

Compiling a canon

Elsewhere (Sherry, 2004) I have described the invitation I received from Hal Kassarjian in the late 1980s to contribute a chapter to his (and Tom Robertson's) landmark *Handbook of Consumer Behavior*, on the topic of the "other stuff" that had been going on in the field at the time. The manuscript circulated in doctoral seminars and presentations for a few years before publication as "Postmodern alternatives: the interpretive turn in consumer research" (Sherry, 1991), more an apologia than a manifesto that sought to consolidate the progress of the emergent area and serve as a platform for its continued advance. I wanted to help move the inquiry from the margins to the mainstream of the discipline. Carefully qualifying the nature of interpretation as a universal practice, and bundling the movement into the postmodern moment that had swept the social sciences, I inventoried the "other" work to date, synthesizing and integrating the insights of my colleagues and fellow travelers while identifying opportunities for disciplinary expansion. This portion of the chapter routinely elicited a common observation across research camps: who knew that *so much* of this alternative work had taken place? The volume of scholarship was undeniable. In addition to the literature review, I ventured a sociopolitical reading of the role of this "other" work in the evolution of the discipline, using Turner's (1974) conception of a social drama to characterize the movement as a way of helping readers imagine the trajectory the field might follow. This prospective trajectory proved as interesting as the inventory across the research camps, as it provided alternative scenarios for which one might root and toward which one might work.

Two benefits emerged from this exercise. The first was a notion that a canon of "interpretive"/"alternative"/"postmodern" scholarship was available, expanding and accessible to skeptics and adepts alike. The second was a public reminder that "science" (and social science in particular) is a cultural practice subject to political shaping of which its practitioners may be earnestly or disingenuously unaware. My hope was to rally doctoral students to the cause, to offer reassurance to unmentored neophytes acting on the courage of their convictions and to encourage mainstream colleagues to make room in their syllabi for creative disruption. Were a juggernaut to be unleashed, so much the better, my dark side mused.

Installing an infrastructure

It became quite evident in the 1980s that scholarship on its own merits, however marketed, would never carry the day. If the revitalization movement were to succeed, it would require a commitment to institution building that would make power sharing possible. The ACR and the flagship *JCR* comprised the beach head on which the earliest bulwarks were breached[2]. These institutions were the most compatible with the interests and goals of this new wave of researchers, and among the most receptive. Past Presidents Jerry Olson, Jerry Zaltman, Russ Belk and Rich Lutz helped incorporate these researchers into the governance structure. Conference Chairs Tom Kinnear, Melanie Wallendorf, Paul Anderson and Tom Srull (as well as the many-hatted Beth, Morris and Rich) helped create tracks and sessions that provided a collective forum for the postmodern moment, and a legacy for their successors. Editors Hal Kassarjian and Jim Bettman encouraged the nascent movement for which Editor Rich Lutz became a champion. A number of my other colleagues were able to use their organizational skills to help grow the franchise as well. I was privileged to serve as a Program Committee Member, Advisory Council Member, Policy Board Member and Advisory Editor during this era. Each of these positions served as a collective stepping stone for larger and more focused contributions later in my career.

Beyond the seminal clearing of a space for alternative inquiry that these initial forays into infrastructure building afforded, they provided postmodern researchers with the experience in organizational dynamics that would not only allow them to integrate ACR and *JCR* in the 1990s, but also to organize and launch their own brand – Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), per Arnould and Thompson (2005) – and professional association (Consumer Culture Theory Consortium (CCTC)) just over two decades later. If the scholarly society manages to launch its own journal, the effort will be all the more effective for the apprenticeships its leaders served at *JCR*.

Spoils of war: a lesson learned

From my perspective, the paradigm wars were fought over issues having to do with professional integrity and self-determination. As postmodernism rendered disciplinary boundaries increasingly porous and monolithic interpretations increasingly indefensible, the opportunities for academics both to import novel research orientations (including philosophies of inquiry as well as methods, each with the requisite canons of rigor) into their fields and to become valued participants in fields other than their own imbued some scholars with an entrepreneurial spirit that was differentially received. Host disciplines were challenged to recognize insights that cut against the grain of tradition, and incommensurate paradigms were difficult to discern, let alone entertain. What a field collectively thought itself to be, and what individual contenders with unconventional toolkits imagined the field might become, were often at odds, producing a circle-the-wagons siege mentality that thwarted potentially productive partnerships.

The tribes of marketing can be insular and clannish, with hermetic local interests reinforced by tenure and promotion standards as well as by professional society affiliations (themselves often shaped by financial constraints such as travel allowances). Perhaps this is inevitable as a discipline grows, knowledge proliferates and budgets tighten. Today, one hopes, a mature field is always surveying its frontiers with a mind to annexing those areas its pioneers see fit to homestead. This is an important bridging function. In our case, for example, it is wise to explore the hard sciences for insight, but perilous to ignore the humanities, where some fascinating work is also taking place. But we also need to perform an equally important bonding function to help ensure that a field persists over time, so that things do not fall apart prematurely. While fission may be as likely as fusion as a discipline matures and factions individuate, institutional safeguards can be put in place (much like staking a sapling) to help ensure that a field realizes its full potential. Again, one hopes these safeguards err on the side of diversity and inclusion.

Lately, I have wondered whether the ultimate outcome of the paradigm wars wasn't a Pyrrhic victory. Having earlier (Sherry, 1991) tracked the conflict through three acts of Turner's (1974) social drama (escalating crisis, public breach, redressive action), a decade ago (Sherry, 2004) I opined that we were experiencing the final Act 4 a bit differently than Turner might have anticipated. Rather than achieving reintegration *or* irreparable schism, I asserted that we were living through an and/both phase, wherein these irreconcilable outcomes were being enjoyed simultaneously. Today, I believe we're approaching irreparable schism, with mainstream consumer researchers and consumer culture theorists on the verge of parting ways once and for all. Apartheid infrastructures have been established, with the CCT contingent lacking just one final institution: a flagship journal.

The coming paradigm war: tyranny of the flagships

Because my remarks reflect the power relations that shape marketing history (Tadajewski, 2012), I feel compelled to highlight an implication of my position, following Ferguson's (2011) practice of contemporizing historical analysis by considering, however briefly, the consequences of the past for our era. Just as understanding the multi-stranded historical influence of finance on consumer markets can aid regulators in the prevention of future economic meltdowns (Dholakia, 2012), or discovering that the history of branding offers a potent lesson for practitioners who must inevitably find themselves in the meaning management business (Bastos and Levy, 2012), so also does examining the reward flows in a prestige economy enable us to envision a more enlightened distribution system.

I have long badgered my colleagues to lobby their personnel committees to broaden the scope of intellectual contributions considered in tenure and promotion decisions. Publication in a handful of flagship journals remains the gold standard for professional advancement, with other venues and vehicles being relegated to secondary or tertiary status, or disregarded entirely. This is a practice that the flagship editors themselves have decried from time to time, but the standard remains rigid, despite the proliferation of quality specialty journals. Further, the interdisciplinary appeal of much contemporary consumer research is such that the field itself is poised to make important contributions to areas from which it was previously an idea importer, which I see as strong moral obligation. Further still, many significant contributions are ill-suited to the journal article vessel itself. Books and chapters, poems and novels, films and photographs and a range of other vehicles are perfectly wonderful conduits of scholarly transmission, yet they are discounted, if not disregarded, outright in our intellectual tournaments of value (Appadurai, 1986) that determine the careers of individuals and the destinies of disciplines.

These modes of scholarship alternative to flagship articles have gained a foothold in our field as an avocation of their passionate practitioners, and need to receive a fair evaluation in their own right in tenure and promotion decisions. I agree with Russ Belk (Sherry, 2013b) that the next paradigm wars might well be fought over venues. I often share Clifford Geertz's quip that "reality doesn't have an idiom in which it prefers to be expressed" with colleagues determined to measure everything with a flagship ruler. Intellectual contributions should be evaluated in their own right, and should take the shape of the vessel the author feels best communicates the insight.

Back in the day, a solitary flagship could absorb the work of a few heretics, and play an important legitimizing role in the spread of new ideas. Three decades later, when the heresy has normalized, the "other" franchise has grown on multiple continents, the available page space has grossly lagged the number of talented new entrants across all camps and the grip of consumer psychology has tightened on the channels, the very concept of a flagship seems a harmful cultural survival. When I was coming up the ranks, there was an optimistic sense that good work would always find a valued outlet. I fear this is no longer the case for our junior colleagues, and their fear is palpable. Our obsession with ranking and failure to open a wider umbrella of coverage for younger researchers is hampering the evolution of our field, and the life chances of the next generation of scholars. As a young untenured Assistant Professor, I felt that I could take big risks to reap big rewards (as hopping on an Recreational Vehicle (RV) to explore highways and buyways might suggest). I don't sense that same confidence among my junior colleagues. Their belief in the work is just as strong, but their faith in the channels has withered. Our elders have an obligation to rectify this situation.

Wrapping it up: Déjà vu all over again?

The "othering" enterprise set in motion by the paradigm wars of the 1980s has run a predictable course. Alternative scholarship flourished in succeeding decades, becoming a stable minority venture in-house and a prolific exporter of insight to venues beyond the institutional pale. The contours of the disciplinary landscape have changed, and our garden is a richer plot. For all practical purposes, diversity has been celebrated and contained by the mainstream. The paradigm warriors have been pacified by the flagships, even as these veterans have struck out for newer pastures on their own. The maturation of the interpretive turn, and, especially, its globalization, have resulted in the inevitable founding of a new institution (CCTC), the individuation of the field and faction fighting within the fold. The paradigm warriors are reaping what they've sown, as the battle of the brands continues.

As President of the fledgling CCTC, I have striven to keep the ecumenical orientation and publication principles of the early radicals alive as a guiding principle, to mount a big tent blocking for Act 1 of our own new social drama, as our young (and not so young) Turks chafe at the bit. The field is vibrant, growing and ever ready for the next revolution. It is a global phenomenon whose American members do not comprise a majority. It is a restive movement whose youthful members demand more publication possibilities than sanctioned outlets can provide. It is a visionary enterprise whose pragmatic practitioners will eventually birth a flagship journal of its own, even as their generativity is embraced in other genres of representation.

We've come full circle. May we continue to live in interesting times.

Notes

1. Given the historical moment, my tale is largely, and lamentably, an American one. While vibrant "alternative" traditions were emerging around the world, cross-fertilizing one another in later years, we were an insular bunch back in the 1980s, focused almost exclusively on US business schools and American flagships. There were some Canadian, Scandinavian and other European exceptions, but the publishing venues were invariant. We were forging important international relationships at conferences and campus visits back then that would result in fruitful collaborations across borders, but early on, alternative work was heavily siloed. Thankfully, this is finally starting to change.
2. Participation in annual and specialty conferences of the American Marketing Association afforded some early exposure, but the flagship *Journal of Marketing* took much longer to infiltrate. The *Journal of Retailing*, however, has had a long-standing record of inclusion.

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