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From the Editor The Territory of Consumer Research: Walking the Fences

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# *From the Editor\**

## The Territory of Consumer Research: Walking the Fences

A journal is pulled into the future by its past. It publishes articles that cite articles that the journal published earlier, and it chooses as reviewers and gatekeepers the most published of its earlier authors. The character of a journal risks being less sensitive to change than even the field itself, which has at least the opportunity to launch new journals to accommodate new topics. Over time, unless it engages in vigorous reflection, a journal may start to look like an unkind caricature of its more youthful self.

This editorial is an invitation to readers of *JCR* to contribute to reflections on the scope of consumer research. There has been some private discussion, for example, when I or a reviewer has asked authors whether their submissions have enough to say about consumption to be right for *JCR* or whether they are, perhaps, better suited to a more general journal. Sometimes the response is defensive—hasn't *JCR* published articles in the past that are less linked to consumption than mine—and sometimes the reply is that the work is basic to consumer behavior, and do I not think that readers would find it applicable? These conversations have led me to think that a broader conversation on this theme might be useful.

As a preamble, I want to suggest what *JCR* is, who reads it, why they read it, and where it belongs in the system of journals. I assume, safely I think, that most *JCR* readers work in business schools and that business schools are professional schools whose agendas differ from the agendas of psychology departments and other university social science departments in that they pay more attention to accumulating professionally usable knowledge. The profession that most of our readers relate to is marketing. And yet *JCR* is not a professional journal, and in particular it is not a marketing journal. Nor should it be. It is read by people who are looking for deeper intellectual stimulation on the topic of consumption than is found in the marketing journals. Tension arises because, as a sociological fact, *JCR* owes most of its readership, its sponsorship, and its patronage to the expectation that its consumer insights are useful to marketing and the regulation of marketing.

The resolution, in my view, is that consumer research is foundational to marketing, while in turn the social sciences are foundational to consumer behavior. Consumer research sits in a slightly uncomfortable middle ground, an applied discipline relative to psychology, economics, statistics, sociology, or anthropology but a fundamental discipline relative to marketing or management. This middle ground is home to "pure" scholars, who aspire to the intellectual freedom that comes from never having to explain why a research project is useful, and "applied" scholars, who aspire to the power that comes from doing just the opposite. If there is mutual respect between these two kinds of scholars, the middle ground can be wonderfully plastic, alert to shifts in intellectual fashion in the foundational disciplines and to shifts in the practices of the profession and feeding both. If not, it risks being dry, brittle, and easily fragmented into factions.

This editorial expands on this view of *JCR* as a journal that lives between disciplines and professions and invites debate on some features of research that belong in such a journal. I am writing it because of all the discussions that have followed my last editorial (Deighton 2005); this one seems to have the most left to say. Another reason is that good fences make for good neighbors, and it never hurts to walk the boundaries of a domain from time to

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\*Thank you to the *Journal of Consumer Research* (*JCR*) associate editors for reading and commenting on the first draft of this editorial. No endorsement should be inferred.

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time. If you are inclined to join the discussion, please e-mail [jcr@bus.wisc.edu](mailto:jcr@bus.wisc.edu), and we will create a forum on the topic on our Web site (<http://www.ejcr.org>).

## IS CONSUMER RESEARCH DEFINED BY CAUSES OR EFFECTS?

*JCR* is interdisciplinary, but that does not mean anything goes. It is about consumption, and like it or not that word is restrictive. Should we restrict what kinds of causes we study, arguing that if a factor influences consumption, it is in our territory? Or should we restrict the behaviors we study? Are there some behaviors that are ours to study and others not?

The latter restriction is not attractive. The scope of behaviors that can be called consumer behaviors is wide, and we have found over the years that we like it that way. Being a member of a recreational community, adopting the lifestyle of a meth addict, and choosing among laundry detergents in a supermarket may all be framed as acts of consumption, and what we learn about one may surprise us with its power to illuminate others. The problem is that the broader the scope of the acts we call consumption is, the broader the set of factors that affect consumption becomes, until consumer research starts to look like all of social science. In other words, neither the causes nor the outcomes can be used independently to mark the field.

And yet we can put some bounds on the act of consumption. An act can be performed as a consumer or simply as a person. For example, I can make a bed and be evaluating whether it was worth paying for the fitted sheets, so my evaluation, for example, of the effort required to make the bed enters the consumption judgment. Or I can be making a bed as an employee of a hotel and be forming an evaluation of the effort to decide whether I am fairly paid. There the subjective evaluation of effort is not entering a consumption decision. Imagine we have research showing causes of bias in this evaluation of effort. Is the research worthy of publication in *JCR*? I suggest that if the bias is identical in consumption and nonconsumption acts, there is no news for consumer research. Consumption is just another context in which the bias operates. The finding is quite general and needs the scrutiny of a journal from the appropriate foundational discipline. We at *JCR* have no comparative advantage in reviewing general relationships.

To be sure, someone studying consumption might want to use a general finding about this bias to explain a consumption phenomenon. But that does not oblige us to become a certifier of general findings or a warehouse for these findings in case they should come in handy in the future. To be appropriate for *JCR*, I am contending that we need to show how the process operates differentially in consumption and general settings and therefore uniquely explains a consumption phenomenon. *JCR* reviewers are expert at evaluating consumption context factors. Foundational psychology journals, or journals interested in the factor, are expert at evaluating the unconditioned relationships. Articles should be published where the scrutiny is most expert.

## WHAT MAKES RESEARCH CONSUMER RESEARCH?

The question of who is best qualified to scrutinize a manuscript suggests a roots-up or theory-driven basis for definition. In this view, consumer research is research in which the consumption context plays a prominent role in the theorizing. What does it mean for the consumption context to be part of the theorizing? If research is framed in conventional experimental terms, then we would expect consumption-related variables to enter as independent variables, mediators, moderators or boundary-defining variables, or dependent variables. But not all of these roles make for equally interesting consumer research.

When we test a theory in which only a dependent or independent variable is a consumption-specific variable, the test will establish that the theory applies to consumer research, but it will not have built or extended our understanding of consumption very much at all. For example, if a general psychological theory of choice is applied to choice among brands and is found to hold, there is no new insight. Of course if the regularity does not hold for brands,

then that is a puzzle, but the focus of the research moves to the question of what it is about the consumption context that accounts for the exception to the general theory, which introduces candidates for explanation into the left-hand side of the relationship.

Alternatively there could be a field-down or phenomenon-driven starting point for sharpening the claim that work is consumer research and not general social science. Here the researcher isolates a phenomenon in the world of consumption and accounts for it. A phenomenon is an event or sequence whose cause is in question. I quoted Stephen Toulmin in my first editorial as saying that it is, particularly, an event that is "highly unexpected." The fact that the event is unexpected indicates not that we have neglected or simply failed to predict it but that we had certain prior expectations that made the event unexpected. So Toulmin's tip applied to consumer research is to look for consumption outcomes that are not yet quite intelligible under existing theory but that can become so as a result of some intellectual step that one's research takes.

This focus on explaining a slightly puzzling consumption phenomenon may be a good one to bridge from the realm of general social science abstraction and hypothetical process to more midrange, consumer theory substance. What part of the research has the strongest grounding in a substantive consumer behavior process? What features of the situated consumption context make this uniquely a *JCR* article? What might future research do to supply that grounding?

A third plausible research orientation raises different challenges to defining whether research is consumer research. One popular and productive approach treats research as an act of discovery, not simply an extension of or refutation of prior understanding. This approach has been a starting point for much of our knowledge about how the world works. Whatever the path by which a particular intuition about consumption was arrived at, it is not necessary to present work as if it were testing a theory when it is not. The author will need to make a case that the problem has been defined in a realistic and reasonable way and that the framework and approach adopted is likely to generate useful knowledge. More important, the author has to hope that the discovery is valued by others. Hope is all there is because in this kind of article an author's private sense that "here is something that I did not know" cannot be defended by appeals to theory gaps or disconfirmation of the conventional wisdom.

## IS CONSUMER RESEARCH APPLIED RESEARCH?

In science more abstraction means more status, and the observation that physics learned more from the steam engine than the steam engine learned from physics has done little to diminish the status of physicists. *JCR* owes its prestige to its insistence that a *JCR* level of analysis has to rise above the specific context and map onto a broader theoretical issue.

However, the race to abstraction may have been overdone. Authors feel compelled to relegate context to a couple of motivating stories on an article's first page, whose detail, by the time the article reaches the theory section, has been collapsed into a construct or two. Something needs to be said in defense of concreteness.

We take our cue from the root disciplines. Often *JCR* articles are developed incrementally from innovation in foundational theory, drawing distinctions that, while valid in the root discipline, are not necessarily priorities for a concrete application. Consider, for example, that it might not be a crucial issue in a particular marketplace setting whether brand names activate goals nonconsciously or whether they prime preferences, as long as they affect consumer behavior. The issue here is not the particular finding but the question of what we would find if the inquiry continued after it cleared the bar set by the criteria of the underlying science and we began to study the finding in context. The question of what happens to consumer welfare, for example, when competing goals are primed in a crowded supermarket is more likely to be our problem than a social psychologist's.

Lindblom and Cohen (1979) argue for a distinction in the social sciences similar to the distinction between the physical sciences and engineering, in which there is credit given to

engineers when they solve problems that arise when familiar bench or laboratory processes are translated to the larger scale of the field and are given the field's contextual priorities. As an example of an article that seems to me to have its primary contribution in this translational sense, consider the recent *JCR* article by Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004), which seems to me to contribute primarily at the scale of the field, not the abstracted psychological process. Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) reconstitute sociological abstractions on community into results that apply to the contextual priorities of computer-mediated markets. Problems of translation to the scale of the marketplace call for a subtly different notion of theory from the one used by the underlying discipline. Research that proposes and tests general, theoretical solutions to the problems that arise when the underlying social science has to operate at the scale at which the marketing manager or the policy manager or the consumer lives is not code for research with managerial implications. It is legitimate intellectual work.

## JOURNAL DIFFERENTIATION AND SPECIALIZATION

A recent editorial in the *Journal of Marketing Research* (Huber 2007) claimed that there was a "drive toward the center" among the *Journal of Marketing Research*, the *Journal of Marketing*, *Marketing Science*, and the *Journal of Consumer Research*, contending that there has been an "erosion of the partitions that previously rationalized the premier journals." It described an increasingly competitive journalistic environment in which editors poach one another's territories. It identified some positive consequences for authors from this competition among journals.

There are, of course, enormous negative consequences. Specialization among journals leads to refinement of reviewing standards, which enhances the scrutiny that each article receives and, article by article, builds the discipline's integrity. When journals compete, authors win. When authors win as a consequence of a journal's drive to the center, it might just be because criteria other than research quality have weighed in editorial decisions.

My motive in writing this editorial has been to invite discussion about what we publish in *JCR* and what we should publish. One value of doing so is to be sure that the past does not constrain our future, to get beyond the rule that consumer research is what cites *JCR*. Another is to see whether we can agree on the lines between consumer research and marketing research, between pure and applied research, and between consumer research and general social science. And, just possibly, a small part of the motive is to mark our boundaries against predation by the marketing journals. *JCR* is not part of the drive to the center. We have neither mission nor appetite to poach the territories of the marketing journals. We specialize in consumer research and subject it to the highest levels of reviewer scrutiny, confident that when a reviewer reads a paper for *JCR* he or she judges it relative to deep standards that the journal has established over time. It may be correct that the marketing journals want to publish consumer research. The compliment is acknowledged, but there is no cause for concern. We are confident that authors know what it signifies to have their consumer research appear in a consumer research journal.

John Deighton  
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