

2012 ACR Presidential Address

The Elephant Not in The Room: The Need for Useful, Actionable Insights in Behavioral Research

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INTRODUCTION

I am honored and humbled to serve as president of ACR. When I attended my first ACR conference as a doctoral student and didn't know a soul, it never occurred to me that someday I might be standing up here. And I have to tell you that looking out at over 1000 of you is a pretty intimidating sight! Now I wish I had practiced my talk more.

As I considered potential topics for this address, I tried to generate ones that (1) are important, (2) that I am passionate about, and (3) that I know something about. Due in particular to that third objective, finding this combination proved to be a little more difficult than I had hoped, but the epiphany finally struck.

Today, I want to talk to you about a topic that I suspect 1/3 of you will have strong feelings against, 1/3 of you will resonate with, and 1/3 of you may not realize that there was even an issue. I want to talk about the increasing need for useful insights in our work. I've heard many friends and colleagues increasingly lament the lack of contribution of our work to actual problems faced by public policy makers, industry, and consumers. A quick scan of the implications section of a lot of consumer behavior articles reveals that the implications offered there are often rather far removed from the findings.

This brings us to the title of my address, "The Elephant NOT in the Room." Since some of you may not be familiar with the metaphor I used in the title of my talk, I'll briefly define it. My favorite source of metaphorical definitions, Wikipedia, defines this term as "An obvious truth that is either being ignored or going unaddressed. The expression also applies to an obvious problem or risk no one wants to discuss." I think it will soon become clear why I slightly adapted this metaphor for the title of this address.

I'll use the venerable ACR logo to make my point. But first, I want you all to take a pop quiz. Consider the following four options describing what the three characters in the ACR logo stand for. If you didn't know that they represent something, just guess.

- A) Theoretical, Methodological, and Empirical contributions
- B) Academia, Government, and Industry
- C) Ann McGill, Mary Frances Luce, and Laura Peracchio
- D) Consumers, Academics, and Practitioners

The correct answer is B) Academia, government, and industry. I suspect that many of us did not know that.

Over a period of many years, ACR has become increasingly focused on research topics that are of interest primarily to the academic constituency, with lip service often paid to the potential implications to public policy makers and practitioners. To illustrate where this rather insular focus has led, I culled through the registrations for this year's ACR conference. As you know, this year's ACR has set a new record for attendance. Unfortunately, attendance across the three constituencies has grown quite lopsided, with attendance by academics dwarfing those from government and industry. In fact, academics comprise over 99% of this year's conference attendance. I don't know about you, but I find this alarming.

THE LYNCH ET AL. (2012) TYPOLOGY

In the October issue of *JCP*, John Lynch, Joe Alba, Aradhna Krishna, Vicki Morwitz, and Zeynep Gurhan-Canli (when she wasn't busy co-chairing this year's ACR conference) co-authored a very thought-provoking article discussing multiple paths by which consumer research can create knowledge. They present a 2x2 typology broken out by the intended contribution of the research (conceptual vs. substantive) and the focus on concepts vs. findings. They discuss each combination in turn and provide guidelines for reviewers based on the core criterion that the research results in a shift in beliefs about something deemed important. This is a very interesting paper and I encourage you to read it.

My take on the four cells of this typology is that our field has become overly fixated on theory building or nomological network construction, such that the lion's share of research being presented at ACR and being published in the top consumer behavior journals falls in the upper left-hand cell. Regarding the right-hand column (findings-focused research), while there are notable exceptions, including an article in the most recent issue of *JCR*, research of this type tends to face a strong headwind in the review process. Pejorative comments such as "atheoretical," "ad hoc," and "applied" often greet the author who submits such a paper. Given the decidedly daunting task of pursuing findings-focused research in the right-hand column, my hope today is that I can convince you or at least a substantial proportion of you to pursue more research of the bottom left-hand type that seeks to generate theory-based, useful insights.

EVALUATING SUBSTANTIVE CONTRIBUTION: THE US PATENT OFFICE APPROACH

This begs the following question: what qualifies as a substantive contribution? "Substantive" is a rather vague term, so I searched for a more concrete set of criteria for evaluating theory-based substantive research. As is so often the case, the answer came from an unexpected source – in this case the United States government. More specifically, from the US Patent and Trademark Office.

It turns out that the US Patent and Trademark Office considers three criteria when evaluating a potential patent: the concept or invention needs to be novel, non-obvious, and USEFUL. Fortunate for me given the time constraints, the criteria of novelty and non-obviousness were the focus of last year's presidential address by Sharon Shavitt, so I will refer you to Sharon's fascinating discussion of those topics and spend my remaining time on the third criteria - usefulness.

Our behavioral colleagues in management and OB are also struggling with the issue of evaluating research. In a recent article in the *Academy of Management Review*, Corley and Gioia (2011) discuss what constitutes a theoretical contribution and argue a similar point: "Our synthesis reveals two dimensions – originality and utility – that currently dominate considerations of theoretical contribution." While I don't think that we in consumer research are ready to claim that useful insights necessarily constitute a theoretical contribution, this is consistent with the notion that useful insights increase the overall contribution of a research manuscript.

The idea of generating useful insights may seem appealing, but how can we judge whether our findings are useful? Let's return to the US Patent and Trademark Office. Its position is that in order to be useful, an invention must work and serve some type of purpose.

More specifically, the US Patent and Trademark Office Manual of Patent Examining Procedure, says that, "The claimed invention as a whole must be useful (emphasis added). The purpose of this requirement is to limit patent protection to inventions that possess a certain level of "real world" value, as opposed to subject matter that represents nothing more than an idea or concept, or is simply a starting point for future investigation or research."

THE GROWING CALL FOR USEFUL INSIGHTS

Lest you think that I am alone in calling for more useful insights in our research, I wanted to cite some examples that suggest there is a growing sense that change is needed.

First, 40% of the respondents to last year's ACR membership survey said that more substantive research is needed. Second, there are several efforts underway in marketing to reconnect academic research with the real world. For example, our modeling colleagues are struggling with their own demons. They have found that the arms race of increasing model complexity has diminished the actionability (and usefulness) of their work. To help counter this trend, they launched the ISMS practice prize a few years ago to recognize and reward research that makes a difference to practice. Of course, our field is fortunate to have MSI to help fund useful research with implications for practice, so I would be remiss not to mention them. The TCR initiative begun by David Mick has motivated researchers to examine important consumer-centric topics such as over-eating and financial decision making. Finally, in 2011, marketing faculty members from Columbia and Harvard held the inaugural Theory and Practice in Marketing conference at Columbia. The deans from Harvard, Columbia, and Wharton participated along with the editors of *JCR*, *JMR*, and *Marketing Science* and academics from several universities. I wasn't able to attend because of a conflict, but I did see the attendance list and I was happy to see that several other behavioral researchers attended, suggesting that others are concerned about this issue.

But how do we translate this notion of usefulness to consumer research? Useful research moves beyond nomological insights that are often the sole focus of theory development research. But I'll come back to that later. The findings should pass the "so what?" or "who cares?" test and offer useful insights to other constituencies: public policy makers, industry, and yes, consumers as well. Importantly, relevance to other constituencies should not be a stretch. We should all think carefully about how our findings offer useful, actionable insights to non-researchers rather than just adding this to the discussion as an afterthought or ignoring it altogether.

WHY CHANGE?

You may be sitting there wondering, this is all well and good, but why should I change what I'm doing? As an associate dean for research and faculty, I've learned that getting faculty to row in a different direction is often a huge undertaking. After all, most of us get into this field because we are attracted by the idea of studying what interests us.

Returning to the Lynch et al (2012) 2x2 typology, there are at least three good reasons that you should consider pursuing more research of the bottom left-hand type. First, there is a growing need for research that provides generalizable explanations for real world phenomena. Witness the conversion of market research departments at many profit and non-profit firms to "consumer insights" depart-

ments. There is growing agreement that an increased understanding of the consumer should be a central focus of the organization.

Second, research of this type is often easier to get published. Editors, AEs, and reviewers who are tired of reading the 100th submission seeking to extend a popular theory-of-the-moment that relies exclusively on self-report lab studies to test the authors' hypotheses may well be more positively disposed to a paper that uses theory in a novel, non-obvious way to inform a substantive topic and generate useful insights. Am I arguing that we should abandon research focused on theory-building? NO. In fact, I just had a paper accepted last week that is of this type. I am suggesting, in the theme of this year's ACR conference, that we embrace the need for diversity in terms of the mix of research that we pursue.

Third, as we are all painfully aware, acceptance rates at our top journals are about 10% and are not going up. So even if your manuscript is twice as good as average, you have an 80% chance of having it rejected. If you are in a marketing department at a business school, and my random sample of the ACR registrations indicates that most of us are, then you might be motivated to submit your manuscript to another marketing journal. Based on my experience as an author and as an AE at *JMR* and *JM*, your chances are better if your paper is of the lower left-hand type and generates useful, actionable insights.

DIFFERENCES IN MANUSCRIPTS PURSUING USEFUL INSIGHTS

So, how does the pursuit of useful insights change the way we go about conducting and writing up our research? In my experience, I have noticed three main differences. One is in the way we test our predictions, one is in the topics that we choose for research to begin with, and one is in the way we craft the introduction and discussion sections of our manuscripts. I will briefly discuss each of these.

Consequential Dependent Variables.

The first difference is that total reliance on self-reports just won't cut it anymore for substantive research. In my role as an associate editor at *JMR* and *JM*, I tend to receive mainly consumer behavior manuscripts. I have seen a trend over the past few years by reviewers to ask for at least one study with what I will call a consequential dependent variable. What's that?

A consequential dependent variable is one where the study participant invests a resource and/or experiences a consequence. That is, they put some skin in the game such as Money, Time, Choice, or Effort. The strength of a consequential dependent variable is that it increases confidence in the substantive usefulness of the research by demonstrating generalizability of the findings to a believable context. In short, a consequential dependent variable makes your research more compelling and much more difficult to dismiss.

The most obvious context for a study with a consequential dependent variable is a field test. A field test demonstrates that your thesis obtains in an actual setting. That is, beyond the obvious advantage of increased external validity, it demonstrates generalizability and shows that the effects make a difference. While field tests are great, I feel that a lab or online context is often suitable as well, depending on the particular research focus. I'll also note that field tests are not a panacea for useful insights.

Should every paper include a study with a consequential dependent variable? Of course not. The focal construct may not lend itself to operationalization as a consequential dependent variable. That said, a lot of theory-building research could benefit from the inclusion of at least one study with a consequential dependent variable in order to demonstrate the pertinence of the theory to manifested consumer behavior.

Topic Selection.

A second change in research toward theory-driven useful insights is topic selection. The consumer shouldn't just be a convenient context. I'll briefly overview two examples where I see great opportunity for theory-driven consumer research with potentially game-changing useful insights. The first is Mobile Consumer Research. The second is...Mobile Consumer Research! Actually, this is a double entendre.

One meaning of mobile consumer research is consumer research in the mobile domain. There is already a lot of interesting work underway on digital consumer research, but the increasing penetration of smartphones offers particularly interesting and theoretically rich research problems such as the role of social media in an "always on" environment, the effect of smartphones and apps on consumer choice, and mobile shopping.

The other meaning of mobile consumer research focuses on mobile as the method, either as a data collection medium or as a way to deliver theory-based interventions, such as gamification and consumer self-monitoring. By self-monitoring I mean contexts where consumers are motivated to track their own behavior in pursuit of a goal such as weight loss. For example, there is a consumer movement called "The Quantified Self". This movement began several years ago in the United States but now there are Quantified Self groups throughout the world, including one here in Vancouver. Consumers join clubs in their city and attend monthly meetings to learn about various ways of tracking their behavior. Several apps and stand-alone products such as biometric monitoring equipment and sleep monitors have been developed to assist consumers in this endeavor. The apps run the gamut from mood tracking to calorie burn trackers. This context is hungry for behavioral interventions to aid consumers in achieving their goals. This is just a sampling and I could have devoted my entire address to this topic.

Manuscript Construction.

The third difference is in manuscript construction. These differences are most notable in terms of the introduction and the discussion. The introduction lays out the importance of the consumer-related problem being addressed, along with the theory base being brought to bear on it. The discussion then circles back to the theoretical take-aways and the actionable insights from the research.

One drawback of a 2x2 typology like that proposed by Lynch et al. (2012) is that it implies that a given research can only fall into a single cell. I would argue that nomologically-focused research can also generate useful insights and that substantively-focused research can generate theoretical insights. In fact, if you look at the award-winning consumer research articles, you will find that many of them tend to provide a combination of nomological and useful insights. Thus, I urge us to not be confined to one of these cells but, rather, to think about how our research speaks to both theory and substance. I firmly believe that this is not necessarily a case of either-or and that we can often have our cake and eat it too.

So what is ACR doing to help?, you might ask.

AN ACR JOURNAL

As a follow on to the 2011 Task Force on ACR Strategic Direction that was appointed by Sharon Shavitt, I appointed the 2012 ACR Task Force to study the question of whether ACR should launch its own journal. Many people think of JCR as the ACR journal but this is not the case. ACR is only one of 11 organizations that sponsor JCR. I want to thank all of the task force members who donated significant amounts of time to this effort.

The journal task force applied three main principles in generating a recommended positioning for a potential ACR journal. First, it should avoid duplication with existing journals, particularly *JCR*. Second, they sought a positioning that would enable the journal to achieve a premier standing viewed by promotion and tenure committees as comparable to current premier journals such as *JCR*. And third, it should focus on "real problems" and encourage external validity. This is a familiar theme!

The task force also considered several alternative positionings and generated three key recommendations. First, the journal should focus on substance vs. theory or method as the primary contribution. To quote, "These include issues of consumer welfare, public policy, as well as for-profit and not-for-profit businesses." Second, it should encourage thematic work. That is, issues focused on a particular topic. Third, the new journal should encourage the use of field studies and/or secondary data.

Yesterday, the ACR Board discussed the task force's report and unanimously approved their recommendations. The next step is to develop an implementation plan for launching an ACR journal. This work will continue into 2013 and your feedback and suggestions are of course welcome.

ACR'S POSITIONING

Speaking of positioning, I wanted to use a stylized positioning map to make my final point. Over the years, I've heard some ACR opinion leaders caution against research that is too closely tied to practice, lest we become so-called "Handmaidens of Business." I've never been exactly sure what they meant by that, but they make it sound like a really bad thing. Plus, this strikes me as a rather brassy comment if you work in a marketing department in a business school. Besides, based on the statistics I reported earlier in this talk, we aren't at risk of becoming handmaidens of business anytime soon. In fact, if anything, one could argue that much of our work has taken ACR in the opposite direction and moved us toward psychology. My caution is that we need to be careful not to become handmaidens of a different sort.

Actually, it seems to me that ACR is uniquely positioned between the social science disciplines and practice. We have an opportunity and, I would argue, an obligation, to play a critical role in not only contributing to the "mother disciplines" but also to provide useful insights to practice.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, the ACR logo captures the central guiding principle of ACR: the need to form linkages – linkages with other disciplines and sub-disciplines, linkages between these disciplines and practice, and linkages between nomological insights and useful insights. The bad news is that, like Elvis, the elephant of practice has left the building. The good news is that it is not too late to re-engage. However, in order for that to happen, as authors, we need to submit manuscripts that generate useful insights. Especially for those of us in business schools – we fail to heed this call at our peril. Amidst the present environment of state budget cuts for higher education, concerns about research ethics, and growing calls for faculty research accountability by alumni, students, and taxpayers, the ball is in our court to demonstrate the value of our research. Useful insights and implications for practice will go a long way in that regard.

Am I saying that we should shift all our focus to research that generates useful insights? Absolutely not. I AM saying today that we need to achieve a sustainable equilibrium between research that builds theory and research that applies theory to substantive issues to generate useful insights. Through this, we can form touchpoints be-

yond our academic colleagues and truly make a difference to practice and to society. Thank you.

REFERENCES

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