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MEANING AND MATTERING THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE CONSUMER RESEARCH

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The Association for Consumer Research was born in 1969 and is now approaching middle age. As with most of us personally, this stage of life often provokes introspection about our past and present, our values, and the extent to which our remaining words and actions can make any worthwhile difference in the world. Today I am asking you to pause with me and consider the meaning and mattering of ACR.¹

But before proceeding, we know as earnest scholars that it is imperative to define our central constructs. In the view of some notorious researchers, middle age is defined as when you no longer care about where you are particularly going, so long as you are back home by nine p.m.

Back to the meaning and mattering at hand, our founders undoubtedly had differing opinions about ACR's objectives and operations. Two of their statements, however, I will draw attention to. Bill Wells (1995, p. 562) has written that the "great hope" for ACR was that "Unlike the older other professional disciplines, *consumer research would solve real problems.*" [emphasis added] Jerry Kernan (1979, p. 1) proclaimed that the association's penultimate goal was to "orchestrate the natural talents of academia, government, and industry so as *to enhance consumer welfare.*" [emphasis added] Accordingly, the earliest ACR conferences often involved not only academics, but also administrators from consumer-oversight

organizations, such as the Consumers Union and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Ideals and expectations were high, that ACR *could* and *should* solve legitimate problems and augment consumer welfare.

How do you feel about that vision? If you agree with it—even if only moderately—how would you grade ACR’s related performance over the last 36 years? Where are we today?

One thing we all know for sure: in the arc of time, consumer behavior and the ideology of consumption have diffused across the world to every corner, to virtually every individual, to such an astonishing scale that living and consuming are more complexly interdependent than at any other time in human history. Both the serious problems and the genuine opportunities of consumption, for billions of people and other living entities, have never needed ACR and our collective talents more than now.

There are many riddles, many stresses, and much suffering in our world. And so many of these conditions are instigated or aggravated by consumer behaviors, or could be alleviated by new and different consumer behaviors. The statistics are numbing, but let’s consider a few to assist us in our middle age, self-analysis of ACR.²

In terms of one particular disease, 19 million people worldwide have died of AIDS, and about 35 million are currently infected. In terms of one particular handicap, internationally over 160 million people are visually impaired, of whom about 37 million are blind. What has our organization done about diseases and handicaps that consumer research could tend to?

On a seemingly more mundane topic—television—the average child in America will have watched 100,000 acts of televised violence, including 8,000 murders, by the time he or she finishes the sixth grade. By the age of 65, the average American will have spent nine years watching television. Television is now the most globalized form of entertainment, and yet how little we understand about the effects of TV. But it doesn’t need to be this way.

And then there is food. Between 1962 and 2000, the percent of obese Americans rose from 13% to 31%, with childhood obesity tripling in the past two decades. The cost of overweight conditions in the U.S., through effects

on health, has been estimated at \$117 billion annually. In the meantime, ACR has been mostly speechless about this tragedy of indulgence.

And, of course, there is tobacco. Diseases from smoking cause an estimated 430,000 deaths per year in the U.S. alone. And, as you all know, the incidence of smoking in developing economies has skyrocketed. Tobacco consumption has been a focus of some consumer researchers over the years, but we need more, following in the footsteps of Pechmann and Knight's (2002) award-winning *JCR* article on advertising, peer influences, and adolescent smoking.

And there are thousands of consumers harmed each year through product use and misuse. For example, in 2003 U. S. children were involved in over 200,000 toy-related injuries treated in hospital emergency rooms. Some of us study children, but rarely about their susceptibility to product injuries, and the related role and responsibility of their caregivers.

And lastly, but perhaps most alarming, there are the widespread environmental concerns. We know almost certainly that this planet cannot reasonably sustain the world population forecasted for mid to late 21st Century if current consumption activities keep mounting. Looking just at the U.S., the Environmental Protection Agency has recently estimated that 40% of U.S. waterways remain too polluted for fishing or swimming. Sadly, in several parts of the world, where consumption levels are rapidly rising, airway pollution and waterway pollution are already worse than in the U.S. But it doesn't need to be this way. These trends, epidemics, and pandemics—and so many more I have overlooked here—are not solely for politicians, engineers, and health specialists to address, to ease, or to remedy. Where is ACR?

It is important to be balanced, however. There is much contentment and joy, and many marvels and triumphs in our world. Consumer behaviors particularly have the capacity to support and enhance life. These include reading, exercise, many outdoor activities, hobbies of numerous kinds, festivals and celebrations, and an array of artistic endeavors such as music, painting, and sculpting. There are also caring for and maintaining possessions, gift giving, sharing, donating, and recycling. These and many other consumer behaviors, when conducted in sensible amounts, with conscientiousness or flow, can undeniably contribute to well-being, including physical health, authentic personal efficacy and human potential,

social justice and social integration, community networks, family coherence and legacies, child nurturance and growth, ecological stability, and so on. On the whole, there are many affirmative consumer behaviors and related dimensions of life that consumer researchers could not only derive deeper understanding of, but also share the insights with the people who would most benefit from them.

So, am I intimating that our modestly-sized, non-profit association of loosely organized members, who serve mostly as volunteers, can positively impact millions of consumers? Absolutely. Of course, it won't be easy. As E. B. White once confessed, "I get up every morning determined both to change the world and to have one hell of a good time. Sometimes this makes planning the day difficult." This is the sort of difficulty that is good. It is good for the world, good for ACR, good for us and our children.

I feel sheepish, though, standing before you today. My own research has been as inconsequential to consumers' well-being as anyone else's in this field. Yet, when I received the honor of being elected president of ACR, I felt it was time for me and for ACR to revisit the meaning and mattering of our lives' work. As I thought more about the unrealized potential of ACR in the contexts of consumer suffering as well as consumer enrichment, I thought more about our association's great hope. And as I did, an exhortation from Eleanor Roosevelt kept haunting me. She said quite simply, "Do the thing you think you cannot do."

This means, of course, that we must do more than just think or converse about consumer welfare. As one Chinese proverb states matter-of-factly: "Talk doesn't cook rice." We need to take some actions. And another Chinese proverb reminds us, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step."

A first step was actually taken a year ago when Debbie MacInnis and several others worked diligently to redesign the ACR website into a more contemporary, sophisticated, and multi-functional resource. This included planning a subsection titled "For Consumers." Today it includes consumer-friendly summaries of relevant research as well as numerous links to other organizations and publications that can aid consumers. We need more ACR members to assist the website editors in developing this subsection. Please contact the chief editor, Vanessa Patrick, or me if you wish to contribute.

Taking a second vital step, I asked four respected members of ACR—Connie Pechmann, Linda Price, Rick Netemeyer, and Lisa Penaloza—to organize this conference around a theme of consumer welfare. An immediate stumbling block was figuring out what to label this theme. So we generated and reviewed over 50 possibilities. For example, we considered calling it Positive Consumer Research. But that seemed too derivative from the movement of positive psychology (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Besides, positive contrasts with negative, and it wasn't negative consumer research we were up against, but rather that which was ineffectual for social and personal well being. We felt we needed something fresh and stirring.

Ultimately, we all agreed on *Transformative Consumer Research*. By transformative research we mean investigations that are framed by a fundamental problem or opportunity, and that strive to respect, uphold, and improve life in relation to the myriad conditions, demands, potentialities, and effects of consumption. Though transformative consumer research has an immediate practical orientation, it does not forsake scrupulous methodology or perceptive theory. In fact, it is mostly—if not only—through meticulous description and compelling explanation that the findings can lead to constructive, actionable implications. The word ‘transformative’ also carries the additional meaning of an inspired summon to researchers themselves, who might be newly considering this genre of work or who would like to recharge their long-time faith in applied consumer research via ACR.

The organizers of our conference and I have been gratified by the response of ACR members who submitted papers and session proposals around the theme of transformative consumer research. Hopefully, future ACR conferences, including those in Europe, the Asia-Pacific area, and Latin America can build upon these initial efforts. I respectfully urge the program committees and the organizers of these conferences to not only include transformative consumer research as a content code in the submission page of research topics, but also to extend and mature this endeavor in their own ways through the conference plans they make.

Before announcing further steps, I want to stress and clarify two essential issues. First, we have by no means intended for transformative consumer research to become some overarching or predominant orientation for ACR. Our association is characterized by broadminded and mutually respectful

members. ACR will continue to welcome all researchers who have keen interests in consumer behavior, regardless of their topic or research paradigm.

Secondly, transformative consumer research is not something new, nor has it been dormant. More than one past presidential address at ACR has pointed in this direction. Also, occasional articles in the *Journal of Consumer Research* have looked at transformative consumer research topics. The *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, the *Journal of Research for Consumers*, the *Journal of Macro Marketing*, and the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* have also published many related papers, and some special issues are now forthcoming at those journals that fit under the rubric of transformative consumer research as I have outlined it today.

This brings me to my precise point. I am not insinuating that few ACR members care about or have published research that deals with consumer welfare. That would be patently false, though as my remarks intend to advocate today, we categorically could do much, much more. Ten years ago at this conference, the honorable Bill Wells alleged that our field was rife with irrelevance. I agreed then, and I still mostly do. But over the last decade during which I have pondered Bill's indictment, I have come to believe that our irrelevance is ironically most situated in the association itself. ACR has made little systematic effort to draw together the resources and skills of members who wish to work on consumer welfare, little systematic effort to encourage and reward more of this sort of research, and little systematic effort to inform either the public, consumer advisors, or policy administrators who would most gain from learning of the research and its implications.

It is critical, therefore, that additional concrete steps be taken. Otherwise, transformative consumer research via ACR will risk being never more than just kindly thoughts and ambiguous aspirations. With the devoted input of several of you in the audience today, I have worked during this last year to move transformative consumer research beyond our three-day gathering in San Antonio.

As you have probably noted, there was included in your conference registration packet a short report on an ad hoc Task Force. With the support of ACR's Board of Directors, I recruited through email 46 individuals who have strong interests in consumer welfare, to brainstorm ideas on a small set

of key issues that will be crucial to the viability and success of transformative consumer research.

I will not take much time or space here to convey the task force results, since you have already received the summary report. In brief, the task force members identified some of the most pressing research topics, including

- vulnerable consumer groups (such as the poor, children and adolescents, and the illiterate),
- tobacco, alcohol, and drug consumption,
- gambling,
- nutrition and obesity,
- violence in movies and computer games,
- financial and medical decision making,
- product safety,
- environmentally protective behaviors, and
- organ donations.

Among the most mentioned barriers were motivating and valuing transformative consumer research. Other challenges were the need for explicit funding and for increased publication opportunities, especially in the leading outlets. Advice for addressing these crucial issues included:

- enlisting ACR opinion leaders to be decidedly involved,
- obtaining earmarked research funds for ACR members,
- working with journal editors to find new or increased means to publishing related research,
- arranging for ACR to provide outgoing communications that are widely accessible and understandable, both to the public and policy administrators, and, finally,
- developing doctoral seminars that can encourage and train new scholars in conducting, publishing, and publicizing transformative consumer research.

Taking these insights as a springboard, immediately following my remarks today there will be a special session on the task force report that will feature a select panel of the task force members. A sizeable period of this session will be open discussion between the panel and audience members, as moderated by our conference co-chairs, Connie and Linda. I invite all of the

task force members to attend, and I hope that several others of you, who have curiosity or interests in the promise of transformative consumer research, will participate vigorously as well.

I am additionally pleased to announce that the ACR Board of Directors has endorsed a proposal I made to form an ongoing Advisory Committee on Transformative Consumer Research. The committee will report to the Board, and it will work side-by-side as needed with the ACR president, executive director, website editors, and others to invigorate and carry on transformative consumer research. I have volunteered to chair this committee at the beginning, and its membership will rotate on a regular basis. Its first duty will be to review the task force report and underlying data, as well as the feedback during the special session following this luncheon, and to begin to prioritize and implement the best recommendations. I am delighted to name the charter members of this advisory committee. They are:

Steve Burgess, University of Cape Town, South Africa
Marv Goldberg, Penn State University
Ron Hill, University of South Florida at St. Petersburg
Eric Johnson, Columbia University
Punam Keller, Dartmouth College
Connie Pechmann, University of California, Irvine
Simone Pettigrew, University of Western Australia
Joe Plummer, Chief Research Officer, Advertising Research
Foundation
Linda Price, University of Arizona
Brian Wansink, Cornell University
Rick Wilk, Indiana University

I am also very excited to reveal a new source of ACR research support. To my knowledge, it is the single largest monetary donation to our association in our history, for any purpose. With the assistance of Linda Price, ACR has received a \$30,000 fund of seed support from the Kellogg Foundation to provide for research expenses associated with transformative consumer research. This support has been made most directly possible by Ms. Cynthia Milligan, who is the Dean of the University of Nebraska School of Business and the President of the Board of the Kellogg Foundation. We owe immense gratitude to Cynthia and the Kellogg Foundation for this generous and uplifting support.

The distribution of the Kellogg Foundation funds over the next two to three years will be managed by the ACR Advisory Committee on Transformative Consumer Research. The first call for research proposals will be made soon via the ACR website and the ACR listserv. Proposals will be reviewed by the committee and the recipients will be announced shortly thereafter. The committee will also seek additional funds to replenish and build upon the initial Kellogg Foundation monies.

Among the most emphasized concerns by the task force was the need for research on consumer welfare to be more welcomed at our top academic journals. To this end, I am pleased to acknowledge that John Deighton, the new editor of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, has offered to develop a special issue of *JCR* in the spirit of transformative consumer research. This effort will fit soundly with the philosophy John espoused in his first editorial (Deighton 2005), namely that consumer research should be “useful” by “illuminating a real-world consumption phenomenon” and harboring “implications for practice.” The call for submissions has just recently been posted on the *JCR* website, and will soon appear on the ACR listserv and elsewhere. I thank John and the *JCR* Policy Board for making a higher priority of pragmatic studies of consumer welfare. What is also prospectively satisfying about this special issue is that, over the last two years, *JCR* has had tremendous success in getting the news media to notice and incorporate more of its research into a variety of journalistic articles and stories on consumer behavior. Thus, there is opportunely an increased likelihood that the public at large will be exposed to the insights and implications of this special issue.

I hope these opening steps for developing transformative consumer research will usher in a renaissance of an original mission of ACR, namely, to conduct and impart outstanding research in the service of quality of life.

In closing, I want to go back to 1969. Not to ACR’s genesis, but to another event occurring independently, which surprisingly paralleled the founding dreams for ACR and the re-envisionment I have called for today. That event in 1969 was the presidential speech given before the American Psychological Association by the renowned psycholinguist, George Miller. Here are some of his sentences stitched together from across his address. As you hear the word “psychologist,” think “consumer researcher.” Miller (1969, p. 1063, p. 1074) said:

The most urgent problems of our world today are the problems we have made for ourselves....Our obligations as citizens are broader than our obligations as scientists....If we have something of practical value to contribute, we should make every effort to insure that it is implemented....I recognize that many of you will note these ambitions as little more than empty rhetoric. Psychologists will never be up to it, you will say....On the other hand, difficulty is no excuse for surrender. There is a sense in which the unattainable is the best goal to pursue. So let us continue our struggle to advance psychology as a means of promoting human welfare, each in our own way. For myself, however, I can imagine nothing we could do that would be more relevant to human welfare, and nothing that could pose a greater challenge to the next generation of psychologists, than to discover how best to give psychology away.

Several of our founders intended ACR to be a principal channel for giving consumer research away. Inviting, as I have today, a middle age, self-analysis of ACR, how do you feel about giving consumer research away? If you agree—even if only moderately—how would you grade ACR's performance? Where are we today?

There will be plentiful doubts about transformative consumer research, and more than enough impediments. But we should all feel buoyed by someone who knows a lot about resilience and noble goals. “Our deepest fear,” Nelson Mandela said, “is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us.”

How true of ACR as well! Let's not be deterred. Together we can raise the meaning and mattering of our scholarship in this world. ACR can still become the brighter beacon it was conceived to be.

Endnotes

1. I thank Jim Burroughs, Rich Lutz, Ed McQuarrie, Mary-Ann Twist, and Brian Wansink for commenting helpfully on a prior draft of this address.
2. The statistics reported were gathered from a variety of governmental and non-governmental sources, mostly from associated websites.

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