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Research Philosophy

Perhaps a brief note about my research philosophy is in order. I suppose my research agenda places me as a "purist" when it comes to academic research. I firmly believe that primary research, be it interpretive or positivist, must be informed by a theoretical premise, lest research regresses into data-dredging. Perhaps "purist" is a misnomer, since I do not mean to imply a lack of interest in *applied* research. Far from that. But I do believe that unless the research activity is premised in theory, the application of whatever the finding is may well be misguided. In many ways, this line of thinking is similar to the way I see student projects that muddle in actual company operations, that half-baked pies are worse than no pie at all.

I also fully embrace the idea of collaborative research activities. Over the last several years I have had the pleasure to work with many scholars in many disciplines, and I believe this cross-disciplinary perspective has greatly enriched the body of scholarly work that I have produced. I plan to continue this path of collaborative and cross-disciplinary research, with one of the aims being to "break down that wall."

Research Focus

In my CV I have indicated my research agenda being premised on four main "pillar" as repeated below:

Consumer Research, with emphasis on the *consumer* side of the marketing equation.
Current focus on ethnic identity and its relationship with consumption.

Cultural Issues, including intra and inter cultural differences in consumption behavior, as well as the fabrication and maintenance of culture, at the individual, corporate, and societal levels.

Strategic Management, with a *process* orientation. In particular, the role that people play in the development and emergence of strategies.

Philosophy of Science, in particular alternative ontological perspectives that guide the study of marketing and management related disciplines.

These four areas have been the foci of my research activities, and in this section I would like to briefly discuss each of them.

Consumer Research. If I were to choose a specific “discipline” in which to categorize my primary research interest, it would not be marketing. In fact, the much broader discipline of marketing encompasses numerous aspects in which I am not the least bit interested, at least as far as my research goes. More appropriately, I am a consumer researcher. Furthermore, this blend of consumer research undertakes to study consumer behavior from the perspective of the consumer rather than the manufacturer. Consequently, greater emphasis is placed on how and why people consume a particular product, the meaning one derives from a particular consumption practice, rather than how better to market a product to the consumer.

Cultural Issues. Very much related to my consumer research focus is my interest in cross-cultural issues. More specifically, I am interested in intra-cultural differences among consumers. I imagine that this is influenced by the fact that I am a person of multiple cultural backgrounds, having been born in a British Colony, reared in a Chinese family, educated and worked in both Canada and the United States, and early on in my teenage years became Canadian but now living in the US. So fascinated by cross-cultural and international migration studies was I that my doctoral dissertation centered on intra-cultural differences among migrant Chinese consumers in Canada. I have continued this stream of research, and have recently incorporated not only anthropological but also sociological perspectives in my work.

Strategic Management. Having spent some five years of my previous industry experience in the corporate planning department of a large multinational, I logically found strategic management appealing when I was pursuing my doctoral studies. The more I studied and researched the subject matter, however, perhaps as a process of personal change, I began to reflect on the inadequacies of strategic planning. More important, I began to challenge the traditional perspective on strategic management as taught in most business programs. In the literature there has been a movement (though still embryonic) towards more emergent (as opposed to deliberate) strategies, and also a focus on the importance of people in making sense of a strategy. I found these directions personally relevant, and have therefore researched and written on them. I have also conducted an ethnographic study of an advertising agency, once again to study the strategy sense-making that takes place.

Philosophy of Science. What constitutes knowledge? What is truth? If academicians do not ponder the question and challenge received views, then who would? Personally I find the state of affairs in much of academic business research rather disturbing. Primarily, this is because of the almost exclusive subscription to the positivist paradigm. While I do not dispute that positivism has done much to further our understanding of business issues, I am alarmed by the lack of attention (indeed knowledge) paid to the interpretive side of the spectrum. I recall attending the 1995 American Marketing Association Doctoral Consortium, as the representative from York University, when more than half the attendees admitted that they had never been exposed to ontologies and epistemologies other than the objective paradigm and its related methodologies. Consequently, I have undertaken to write about alternative paradigms, and to conduct research studies using alternative methodologies.

Corporate Social Responsibility. I believe that capitalism and social conscience are not mutually exclusive. Businesses, as an integral member of society, earn their right to generate

profits and achieve their financial goals by sharing in the broader obligation of bettering the society in which they operate. More and more there is a push towards greater social accountability, and I try to incorporate this in my research work. One of a company's social responsibility, I believe, is towards the people employed by the company. Traditionally, people are seen as disposable machine parts, and this dehumanization of the workplace has led to numerous social as well as economic problems. I have published several articles dealing with the re-humanization of the workplace, and will continue to do so, if only to push forward the importance of the human spirit in a uniquely human enterprise – the modern business corporation. Furthermore, I see a proclamation of social auditing standards to become widespread, and much research will be geared towards the efficacy and relevance of the various standards. I am beginning work to learn about and investigate into this topic. Related to this is the whole area of social audit that will be becoming increasingly commonplace. I intend to pursue further training and accreditation in this area, to be better informed and to be able to study this from an insider perspective.

Collaborative Research and Other Comments

Much of the scholarly work I can list in my repertoire would not have been possible without the good work of my co-authors. While I do not always work with co-researchers, I have conducted a great many studies with fellow scholars. I would be remiss if I did not briefly introduce those people whose excellence have made me look good.

My most frequent “research partner” has been Dr. Carolan McLarney. We have been doing joint studies since our days as fellow PhD students at York University's Schulich School of Business. Dr. McLarney is a strategic management scholar who taught at Illinois State University and now a faculty member at Canada's Dalhousie University. Dr. McLarney and I share an interest in the process of strategy, and we have also written about the application of value-creation principles in an education setting.

I owe much of my scholarly attributes to my thesis supervisor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Eileen Fischer, who is an Associate Professor in Marketing at York University and also the Director of York's MBA program. We share a common interest in consumer issues, not from the point of view of the marketer, but from that of the consumer. We have pursued a research agenda imbuing consumer research with sociological and anthropological perspectives. Much of our joint work has involved the introduction of Granovetter's concept of embeddedness in the study of consumer behavior.

I have also worked frequently with Stephen Alagaratnam, who is currently a PhD student at York University. We share a common interest in qualitative research, and an exciting topic for us has been the infusion of ethical and social responsibility issues in the conduct of business. Further gratification is derived from being able to lend my support to someone who is going through the turmoil of a doctoral program.

Much closer to St. Norbert, I have also worked quite extensively with colleagues here at

the College. Research studies have been (and continue to be) conducted jointly with Dr. Iris Jenkel, Dr. Kathy Molnar, Ms. Amy Spielbauer, and Dr. Paul Ngo. In addition, I have conducted studies jointly with former St. Norbert students (Ms. Sarah Beggs, Mr. Hiroshi Nakamura, Ms. Nichole Heinecke, and Mr. Jon Gilbertson).