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"Theory" into "Knowledge": Operationalizing consumption research into behavioural change with Pragmatism

As a former fair trade marketer and now marketing ethics scholar operating around changing consumption markets and behaviours I find myself increasingly frustrated by the abstract nature of scholarly exploration in consumption research. Schaefer and Crane (2005) highlighted the polarisation of the ethical consumption field into rational information processing approach vs. socio-anthropological approach, highlighting the void between both fields and the reality of changing consumption patterns. A decade on, and despite the emergence of Transformative Consumer Research (Mick, 2006), little has changing in ethical consumption, and disappointingly in consumption research generally.

William James (1842-1910) coined the phrases tender-minded and tough-minded to typify the differing schools of philosophical/scientific thought of his day. Typifying the Tender-minded as intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, free-willist, monistic, and dogmatic; insisting on going by principles. Whereas the tough-minded philosophers are sensationalistic (meaning understand the world through their senses), materialistic, pessimistic, fatalistic, pluralistic, and sceptical; i.e. going by facts. Setting aside the alternative meanings these words have developed of the last century, James goes on over the course of 8 public lectures on philosophy to highlight the biases and misdirection inherent the dogmatic adherence to either of these schools for the scholarship of his day. However as I turn the pages of our hallowed scriptures of leading marketing periodicals I return time and again to James' observation: "You want a system that will combine both things, the scientific loyalty to facts and willingness to take account of them, the spirit of adaptation and accommodation, in short, but also the old confidence in human values and the resultant spontaneity, whether of the religious or of the romantic type" (James, 1907: 8).

As our subject has polarized with the emergence of a global publish or perish mantra we have isolated ourselves into competing schools that do not inter-relate or talk with each other. At the extremes we see the burgeoning dominance of lab-based experimentation seeking abstracted generalizations which would never stand up to contextual reality; and on the other, we have extreme contextual reality (often explicitly operationalized with outliers), masquerading as theory. Both may be producing relevant learning which would benefit the other (and society generally as per Pierce 1878) but neither is producing what Dewey (1938) referred to as "Knowledge".

Knowledge; to a pragmatist, is the ultimate set of truths which lead us to take better action in context. In essence it is what a theorist may refer to as a universal theory, only in practice. However, knowledge must be active; used for a purpose. Therefore information which does not lead a protagonist to achieve a specific goal in its employment is not useful - or knowledge. Yes "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1951: 169), but how do we interpret these words in modern a consumer research space.

Kurt Lewin, as social psychologist, obviously had a certain world view underpinned by these words. I borrow here from Greenwald (2012: 99); another social psychologist's, interpretations of these words: "When a theory is "good" ... its rules of correspondence go beyond assigning conceptual labels to laboratory research procedures. They extend the theory's concepts and principles to the

nonlaboratory world—in other words, to the possibility of useful applications". "Good theory" is nascent "Knowledge".

In this paper I explore what it would mean to operationalize the existing field of ethical / sustainable consumption into a field of Knowledge rather than a field of academic contribution. Taking Pierce's (1878: 300) proposition that "Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion." We explore what we "know" about influencing consumption habits and explore means of investigating the subject more effectively into the future. We explore what it means to conduct pragmatic research in a modern consumer research and publication environment, looking at the steps of the research process and the process of pragmatic inquiry. We go on to explain the pros and cons of taking a pragmatic approach in a discipline and employment environment which does not favour the expansive, mixed-methods, multi-disciplinary, longitudinal approaches required for true Knowledge generation.

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