**Association for Consumer Research**

**2020 Fellow Award Address**

**Callings**

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**Introduction**

Today I am both delighted and disappointed. Delighted to receive the honor of being named a fellow in our collegial and esteemed Association for Consumer Research. When I began attending ACR conferences in the mid-1980s, I could never have foreseen this day in 2020. I thank you all very much.

But I am also disappointed, because the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented us from convening in person, as originally planned to occur in Paris, the City of Light. Paris is surely one of the most historic, beautiful, romantic, gourmet, and intellectual cities anywhere in the world at any time in the course of human settlement. If you have not yet been to Paris, or if you would like to go again and perhaps stay for a long time, keep in mind what the writer Thomas Gold Appleton once confidently proclaimed. He said that “Good Americans, when they die, go to Paris.” Personally, I am equally confident that—regardless of nationality—the same destination is true for all “good consumer researchers” when they pass away.

With Paris and its allure as the backdrop, I want to address today a theme, a yearning, an enigma that we have not before given sufficient attention to. My focus is on Callings. Let me begin by clarifying what I do not mean by Callings. First, I am not pointing to something like a religious conversion or a special leap of religious faith, as when God calls the seeker to a life of spiritual piety. Yet, it is uniquely this sacred kind of Calling that gives the concept its most evocative meanings, even as they apply to something so secular as consumer research. Second, I am not addressing Callings as having to do with vocational choices, such as architecture versus horticulture or education versus business—though it is quite common for people to dedicate themselves to skill development and occupations that reward them greatly. Prior scholarship in management has developed a tripartite model of work orientation that is comprised of jobs, careers, and Callings, in which Callings express our deepest selves in our work (Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski 2010). For our context today, I will use the notion of Callings as it may apply to specific research projects that you and I conduct, which brings in some factors not as highlighted or as relevant to vocational choices as discussed in the management field.

I will address some central questions about Callings in consumer research, especially what they are, what their value seems to be, and why we should care about them in our professional lives. I want to clarify at the start that not all of our consumer research projects should or could be a Calling. And not everyone who considers my remarks here will have had a research Calling as yet. Moreover, Callings in consumer research can involve either solo or collaborative projects, and they can pertain to a single piece or a stream of manuscripts over a prolonged period. In any case, my principal goal is to excavate the meanings and the implications of consumer research Callings so that together we are better prepared to take advantage of opportunities for research Callings, and to be more fully grateful for those we have already been involved in.

In the course of these comments I will also connect the nature of Callings to two examples from my own work, though not because mine are any more special when compared to anyone else’s. They are not. Instead, it is because, in the end, only each of us personally can determine whether any of our own research is a Calling. It is an idiosyncratic, subjective, and private matter. I propose two of my publications as my own Callings in hope that they may offer you some bridges of insights into your own Callings, before-now-or-next.

So, what characterizes consumer research as a Calling? As I enumerate some of the qualities, I will pause momentarily to ask you if a quality that I mention has ever applied to one of your own research projects. Keep also in mind, these qualities I mention need not be all collectively present for a research project to be a Calling. But more is almost always better. In addition, these qualities are like multiple ovals in a Venn diagram, with each quality of a Calling being simultaneously separate, overlapped, and overlapping.

**Qualities of Research Callings**

To begin, it is worth asking how the authoritative Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines a Calling. Naturally, there are many nuances therein, and the religious denotations and connotations of a Calling appear straight-off. Other important meanings of a Calling, for my purposes, include “a meeting,” “a requirement of duty,” and “the strong impulse to any course of action as the right thing to do.”

The strong impulse of a Calling is commonly empowered with passion, but a Calling and a passion are not the same thing. According to the OED, a passion is “an eager outreaching of the mind toward something.” Thus, as implied, a passion involves only the individual who has it, originating strictly from within the person’s own motives and preferences. In contrast, a Calling—by its grammatical structure and semantic foundation—necessarily implies a second being, a person or entity, that does the beckoning to do the right thing. This beckoning typically comes from something somewhere that many would identify as a “higher authority.” In sum, passions are *intra*personal elements that serve to energize and sustain our Callings, whereas Callings involve *extra*-personal elements that draw our attention, direct our priorities, and stimulate our passions.

Moving on now, a Calling is customarily exclusive to each individual, since it often connects to something from one’s past, including childhood experiences. My boyhood home had a bookcase, which my mother filled, and invited me to partake of, with volumes of poetry, literature, sociology, and philosophy, even though she herself had never finished high school during the American depression and World War II. I was also raised in the Roman Catholic church at a time when the liturgical language was ancient Latin, where the candles, stained glass windows, and sculptures adorned the walls and alcoves, and where the priests gazed upwards and downwards as they chanted and genuflected. I have wondered how my consumer research, including any of its Callings, has been a manifestation of my upbringing. So, I ask you, have any of your research projects as Callings actually begun when you were still quite young? How so? Callings in research are a lot about who you were already becoming a long time ago.

At its core, a research Calling is also a destiny we have with respect to the given project. It is as if the project has found us, rather than the other way around. And that destiny is something that only we can accomplish in our own manner. Our destiny in that research project is a rich encounter with synchronicity, i.e., we are inevitably the precise person (or team) for the precise issue at the precise time. And the syncronicity does not just feel timely; paradoxically, it feels equally urgent and timeless. This may sound rather abstract or even pompous at this moment. But I am fairly certain that if you stop right now and recall your top projects, there will be one or more within which you experienced destiny and synchronicity. Take a moment and think back.

Next, a Calling is something we answer for the transcendence through which we channel something beyond ourselves, not for its ability to fortify our self-esteem or reputation. Maybe it is a hugely significant and imposing problem in business strategy, corporate ethics, or public policy. Maybe it is a gaping hole or misunderstanding in our thinking about consumer behavior. Or maybe it concerns the undeniable suffering of people, society, or earth. Have you experienced such transcendence in a research project? Think about that for a moment.

In addition, when we have a Calling in research we comport ourselves knowing that there are no compromises, no shortcuts. With a Calling there is no room for sluggishness or getting half-way and then halting. Is this a research experience that you have had as well? Callings are rarely safe and easy, or otherwise they would be just a whimsical research question and a daydream of publication.

A research Calling is also often experienced as a blend of eagerness, positive emotions, and plasticity. Together these aspects help us see as many proximal and distal insights as possible that could be pertinent to the given topic. Psychology has shown that excitement and curiosity foster mental flexibility and resourcefulness (see, e.g., Frederickson 2013). By being radically receptive, we animate originality in our thinking, our intuitions, our analyzing, our writing, our collaborations, and so on. A research Calling is a passage into multi-layered creativity.

Furthermore, an authentic Calling in research often gives us a new perspective on who we are and who especially we are growing into be. It magnifies and multiplies us. It expands our self-insights into what we are far more fully capable of, if we will just be courageous and welcome all forms of learning. When were you last nourished by new professional and personal understandings because of a research project? It happens, doesn’t it?

I have reviewed some key qualities of research Callings and also hinted at how they stir us. And there are more. For one, a research Calling feels as if we are drawn by a potent magnet that we cannot escape from. For another, a research Calling is regularly constituted by psychological flow. Most of us know from Czsiksentmihalyi’s (1990) work that flow is characterized by intense concentration on the task, a transformation of time (speeding up and slowing down), a loss of self-conscious rumination, and a purpose of intrinsic reward, among other qualities. Turning now to more specific illustrations, I will share two of my own research Callings, based on what I have experienced.

**Two Research Callings I Have Experienced**

When I was settling in as a newbie doctoral student at Indiana University, I heard a mentioning of its Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies. Given my background in philosophy and literature, it sounded very intriguing to me, even though I hardly knew at the time how to spell semiotics, let alone describe it. For those who may wonder, semiotics focuses on the metaphysics and pragmatics of communication and meaning, using an array of concepts such as signifiers, icons, indices, symbols, interpretants, abductive reasoning, and many others. At that time I was enrolled in my first seminar on consumer behavior and I was tasked with producing a paper as part of the course requirements. In short order I was encouraged by my senior professor—Richard Olshavsky—to go over to the semiotics studies center and check it out. Once I met its academic leaders and began reading about semiotics, I felt remarkably invigorated, but also overwhelmed by its technical verbiage and its scope. One stage of learning catapulted me to another and then another. I lost myself for hours in an enchanting labyrinth of readings, note-takings, re-readings, and more note-takings.

A few weeks later I handed in my exploratory paper on how semiotics might advance consumer research. Fortunate for me, Professor Olshavsky liked the paper. In fact, when I mentioned submitting it for a conference presentation, he roundly objected and told me I should send it to the *Journal of Consumer Research*. I was stunned. How could I ever measure up to this senior professor and to a leading journal at such a neophyte stage of my academic career? But I trusted his judgment, and I spent the next 12 months re-vising the paper over and over.

Eventually, I submitted the paper to *JCR*, and then a few weeks later its co-editor, Hal Kassarjian, sent the reviews and his decision letter—flooring me as well as my professor. The paper was accepted for publication after just the first round of reviews (Mick 1986). Yes, you heard that right, and I still can scarcely believe it. But I must quickly assure you that in the ensuing years of my entire research career I never came close to that rare outcome again. In fact, the very next paper I submitted to *JCR* was summarily rejected on first round. Welcome to the humility club!

When I look back, even though I did not know it at the time, I think my success with the semiotics paper was due to several qualities of research Callings being present. First, it was a perfectly serendipitous situation how semiotics came upon me and exerted its charisma. Secondly, as the project progressed, I became increasingly determined to dedicate only my strongest effort, including innumerable hours combing through the library stacks. Thirdly, the intensive thinking and writing about such a byzantine topic as meaning were richly nutritive to my intellectual development. Finally, and not to be dismissed, I remember having lots of fun throughout the project.

In another instance—this one recently during the closing years of my career—I took up a research Calling that had been reverberating in me for a long time. It involved a topic that had been profoundly important to me since shortly after I graduated with my undergraduate degree in the mid-1970s. I was in a bookstore one day, perusing the philosophy section as I regularly did, and I came upon some paperback books by an author I had not heard of before, namely, Alan Watts. As some of you may know, Watts was a young man in the 1930s when he became one of the first Westerners to travel to Asia to study Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies. He then returned to the West and began writing accessible and engaging books like *The Spirit of Zen* (1936), *The Meaning of Happiness* (1940), and *The Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951). As for myself, I had been raised in a conservative blue-collar American setting, including my thorough envelopment in Roman Catholicism. As I read several of Watt’s books, I felt as though someone was taking hold of my head and cranking it 180 degrees, and then slapping me in the face a few times for final good measure. I would never be the same again.

Over the next 40-plus years I built up a large personal library on Buddhism, which I continue to revere and seek guidance from. Buddhism’s foundations include the Four Noble Truths and its central concepts in the Pali language include (1) *dukkha* and *samsara* (which are the nature and cycles of unsatisfactoriness in daily life), (2) the cause of unsatisfactoriness, *tanha* (which means clinging and attaching), (3) *annica* (which signifies the impermanence of everything), and (4) *annata* (which means there is no distinct ego or separate self). Such Buddhist precepts have been in the forefront of my life for a long time now.

As I moved through my academic career I kept reading, meditating, thinking, and note-taking about Buddhism. I also kept pondering whether I would ever have the courage, ability, and commitment to write a conceptual paper about Buddhism and consumer behavior, particularly since our field was historically engrained in the modernist paradigm of the Western social sciences. I spent much time asking myself, why do you want to write this paper? The proposition felt quite risky. No one in our field except Steve Gould (e.g., 1991) had written in-depth about Buddhism, and yet too there was so much more to say. Finally, I told myself: if you start this project, do it for the joy as well as the potential spiritual maturation; do not base the effort on how much the field might admire it or you.

In time I submitted the paper, and it was rejected on first round. Then it languished for another few years, until I felt drawn again to do what I knew I had to do—revise and submit to another journal. I did so, with much assistance from several Buddhist scholars I had come to know at the University of Virginia. One of them, David Germano, invited me during that same period to accompany him on a two-week trip to Tibet, including its capital, Lhasa. Needless to say, it was one of the most enthralling, humbling, and eventful trips of my life. I came back with new resolve and resilience for facing the Buddhism paper. Ultimately, I submitted again and eventually it found a home in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (Mick 2017). In this paper I sought to reveal how Buddhism can question, qualify, or extend such familiar topics as materialism, ownership, self-identity, expectations, and judgments.

So, why was this project a research Calling for me? Among other aspects, it felt preordained, inspirational, daring, boundless, and wholly apropos in terms of my personal background. It was a truly opportune and fulfilling challenge for me at that time, as if I had little or no choice but to accept it.

**Can Research Callings Be Cultivated?**

I think the answer is a qualified yes. Most often a research Calling must first approach us. However, there are certainly some things we can do ourselves to potentiate research Callings. Although I speak figuratively, I would say first: listen to what Saint Benedict called “the ear of the heart,” particularly as to what in the realm of consumer behavior matters most to you, and reflect on why. Also, ask yourself: what subject matter in consumer behavior and consumer research can you not stop thinking about? Deliberate on this also: if you had only enough life left for one more audacious research project in your career—and no more—what would it be, and why? Or alternatively: if you had all the time, money, and talent you could ask for, what new research topic would you embrace, and why? And lastly, ask yourself: what topic in consumer research have you avoided so far that actually intimidates the hell out of you, and would force you to grow in astonishing ways, and why? Perhaps one of these suggestions or questions can help you discover your next research Calling.

**Conclusion**

Ralph Waldo Emerson—the American Transcendentalist philosopher—once asserted that “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” I admire many of Emerson’s insights, but in this one he’s told only part of the story. From my perspective, to achieve something that is not only great, but also valiant, enduring, venerable, and awakening, it must be a Calling. I hope my related remarks have convinced you that research Callings are distinctive, real, and worth pursuing.

So, in closing, I could wish you perpetual publications, I could wish you copious citations to your work, and I could wish you noteworthy research awards. Really, what I wish you are research Callings. If together we answer those Callings well, I think we will be emphatically good—probably better—consumer researchers. Then, when we die, we will all go to Paris.

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