

Reframing Perspectives for Consumer Work

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Our world has become very complex, the marketplace being no exception. The nature of products and services, and their production/delivery, assessment, procurement, and disposal, has become very challenging. To address this complexity, those engaged in consumer education, research and advocacy need to augment their approach to their consumer work with new perspectives. Today, I will share a collection of ideas for your consideration, ideas that could lead to perspective shifting and reframing of our approaches to ensuring the consumer interest, defined as situations or circumstances that benefit consumers or give them an advantage (McGregor, 2012b).

Consumer Justice

A recent innovation in the field of consumer advocacy is the notion of consumer justice. *Consumers International* (CI) (2012) now uses this relatively new concept as its anchor for its advocacy work. They are interested in examining the role that consumer groups can play in the struggle for greater justice in an emergent context that has an impact on consumer rights. Instead of infractions on consumer rights, they seem to be reframing their work as consumer injustice. But they do not define justice per se; instead, they use the phrasing *tackling injustices in the consumer marketplace* in conjunction with *strengthening consumer rights*.

A Canadian consumer organization, *Union des consommateurs*, is also interested in consumer justice as a concept (Carreau, 2011). He concluded that “access to justice is a broader issue than simple access to the courts. Justice takes many forms, and... a ‘one size fits all’ approach cannot function adequately. We must take into account the diversity [and complexity] of situations (social, geographic, economic, cultural, etc.)” (pp. 9, 17).

My interest today is in what does the noun *justice* mean when linked with the adjective *consumer*, and can this conceptual coupling help us reframe our consumer work? Consumer protection and access to justice have been historically linked (Rickett & Tefler, 2003), but the term *consumer justice* seems different somehow, a subtle reframing of our work. Is consumer justice different from consumer rights? Rights are something we are entitled to, something we deserve and justice pertains to morally *right* and fair actions (Harper, 2015). All I have are questions right now.

Both CI (2012) and Carreau (2011) claimed that consumers have a *right* to *access* to justice. Would our work look different if we strove for consumer justice (not just *access* to justice)? If someone experiences injustice, they endure an outcome that they did not deserve; they experience a violation of a right against their reasonable will – a wrong against them, another species, the earth, or a wrong against society or humanity. To infringe means to encroach on something, to go beyond the usual limit, leading to feeling violated and threatened. An abuse entails maltreatment, exploitation, and manipulation. It seems that an *injustice* has to occur (i.e., enduring an outcome not deserved) before a consumer *right* can be abused or infringed upon. Is *consumer injustice* a more powerful perspective than infringement or abuse of consumer rights?

Another perspective that merits consideration is the *sense of injustice*. Justice scholars maintain that a sense of injustice leads to action while the notion of justice inspires contemplation (e.g., Cahn, 1975). An infringement or encroachment on consumers’ rights also intimates action to redress. Would our consumer work change if we shifted to a concern for the *sense of consumer injustice* instead of consumer justice or consumer rights? Would a sense of consumer injustice compel consumer practitioners to more immediate action, and less contemplation about the complexity of the marketplace?

Transformative Consumer Research

For nearly a decade, the *Association for Consumer Research* (ACR) has had a special section called *Transformative Consumer Research* (TCR) (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, & Ozanne, 2012), see <http://www.acrwebsite.org/web/tcr/transformative-consumer-research.aspx>. TCR evolved and emerged out of push back to the fallout of neoliberalism, capitalism, top-down globalization, conservatism, fundamentalism, consumerism, and materialism; that is, consumer quality of life and well-being was being compromised by corporate profit and greed, and state disempowerment. TCR assumes that “the life world of the consumer must be kept in clear focus [so that] research can maximize its meaningfulness, relevance, and usefulness” (Mick et al., 2012, pp. 7-8).

TCR is focused on improving the well-being of consumers *while* maximizing social justice and the fair allocation of opportunities and resources. Mick et al. (2012) defined well-being as “a state of flourishing that involves health, happiness, and prosperity” (p. 6). TCR embraces the ambitious goal of seeking practical wisdom, which stems from Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis*. They defined practical wisdom as “developing plans and solutions that are well reasoned and capable of action in regard to matters that are good or bad for humanity” (p. 9). Mick et al. then coined the phrase “practical consumer wisdom” (2012, p. xci). Mick and Schwartz (2012) explained that being a wise consumer is more than cost-benefit analysis or knowing one’s preferences. It is “about perceptive, context-specific judgements with a mission to maintain and enhance well-being” (p. 664).

To facilitate this work, they hold *dialogical conferences* wherein people deeply listen to each other while engaging in dialogue on issues of shared concerns. There are no formal presentations, formal luncheons or concurrent sessions. Instead, this new form of engaged scholarship builds strong social networks, provides a venue for sharing practical wisdom, and inspires scholars to engage with social change research. Before the conference, those who will attend share their research and engage with others before arriving in person. During the conference, people engage in dialogue in informal meetings guided by skilled facilitators. After the conference, people have the option to agree to become part of a social network of research relationships for collaborations (Ozanne, 2011). I experienced this type of gathering only four times during a 30-year academic career, and each time was life altering.

Consumer Acumen

Along the same line of thought as consumer wisdom is the new concept of consumer acumen. I published a paper on this in the *Journal of Consumer Affairs* (McGregor, 2011a). I proposed that *consumer literacy* is insufficient in times of such complexity. Consumers need acumen; that is, keen insight, good judgements and the ability to make quick decisions in very complex situations. Acumen means people are able to penetrate deeply into ideas, enabling them to discern the dynamics of changing contexts. With sharper minds and intellectual wit (i.e., the capacity for inventive thought and for quick understandings) - with acumen - people gain confidence. Confident people are adept at seeing the collage of building blocks comprising their complex world and their place within it. This keen, penetrating intelligence better enables them to ensure their well-being and quality of life, while being aware of social justice, ecological integrity, and the moral and ethical dimensions of their behaviour.

Should we choose to embrace the concept of consumer acumen, we could change our consumer education curricula so it is more critical in nature and we could draw different assumptions about what to expect from people in their consumer role. We could assume that with sensitization and education, they can become capable of recognizing the complexity of the marketplace and of their life world and that they are able to penetrate this maze of connections, discerning the power, privilege and dynamics at play. The latter have the ability to compromise their consumer interest, putting them at a disadvantage. Their and our actions would be directed at the complex nuances of the system as it plays out in people’s daily lives, keenly seeking opportunities to enhance the consumers’ interest.

Moral Leadership

Each of consumer justice, consumer wisdom, and consumer acumen reference morality. In

2010, I published a book titled *Consumer Moral Leadership* (McGregor, 2010). I argued that in addition to the *ethical management imperative* of sustainability and environmental integrity, the field needs a *moral leadership imperative*. Being *moral leaders* in the marketplace is a far cry from being ethical consumers. Covey (1992) made a clear distinction between leadership and management. Fundamentally, leaders provide direction for transformation based on principles. They adapt to situations, striving to share power while strengthening people. And, leaders work on changing the system and the infrastructures by looking at the lens and saying it is right for us.

When people *think ethically*, they are giving at least some thought to something beyond themselves. Ethics refers to the goodness and badness of *people* and what it means to live the good life. Morality focuses on right and wrong of *people's actions* (guided by one's personal compass derived from one's conscience) (BBC, 2014; McGregor, 2010). I think consumers can be viewed as moral leaders in the marketplace as well as efficient managers making ethical decisions. To undertake such a reframing of our approach to consumers and related research, I devoted a chapter to developing the new concept called *consumer moral leadership*. I suggested that this concept comprises 12 different dimensions, including but not limited to moral authority and discipline, moral self-transcendence, moral courage, moral authenticity, and moral intensity. I proposed that this concept enables consumer scholars, educators and activists to reframe consumers as moral leaders in the complex global marketplace in concert with ethical managers in their local and micro contexts (McGregor, 2010).

Non-violent Consumerism

The idea that consumerism is a form of structural violence is gaining momentum (McGregor, 2003), leading to the idea that our consumer work could be informed by the principles of non-violence (McGregor, 2010, Chapter 10). When they consume, people often end up harming themselves, others, other species, and the earth, but this harm is virtually unintentional. When people are harmed due to the design of societal institutions (especially the global marketplace), they experience structural violence. Consuming in the 21st century is not peaceful; it is rife with violence (a force that hurts, damages or kills) (McGregor, 2004, 2010). What would our consumer work look like if we strove to embrace the idea of non-violent consumerism? This would entail an appreciation for the basic tenets of this approach.

Gandhian non-violence is understood to be “a *positive force* generated by *self-sacrifice* in the cause of the *Truth*” (Nagler, 1999, p. 5; see Sinclair, 2010). This definition contains three fundamental ideas. First, the positive force refers to an *inner force*, not a physical force. As people face and overcome inner struggles and obstacles in life, they gain an inner power and strength that they can store up and draw upon when they encounter conflict. As people learn to control their knee-jerk, negative emotions, they learn to store the energy emanating from this process. This inner power is called *Satyagraha* (*satya* means truth).

Second, self-sacrifice means a willingness to always engage in inner struggles to learn more about oneself and to harness the positive force this self-reflection generates for future, constructive use. Self-sacrifice takes great courage and many years to learn; it is a life journey. *Sacrifice of self* is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others; non-violent actions respect others but cause no harm to others. The intent of sacrificing oneself is to convert the hearts of violent opponents (Nagler, 1999, Sinclair, 2010).

Third, the reserve of positive energy, *Satyagraha*, builds up as people observe the world around them while looking for *Truth*. Because every person sees the world differently, each person observes a different truth, meaning Gandhian truth is incomplete. People listen to and observe everyone, even those they do not like, because that person or situation may have the missing piece of Truth (McGregor, 2010; Nagler, 1999). When people who embrace this philosophy encounter a conflict, they draw upon their inner stockpile of positive strength, and take non-violent action (called *offering the Satyagraha*). While never compromising the principles of non-violence, people practicing non-violence *do* remain open to changing strategies. Examples of such strategies include strikes, boycotts, picketing, marches, sit-ins, and work-to-rule; see Gene Sharp's (1973) list of 198 non-violent actions. Below are some suggested examples of non-violent consumption for your consideration:

- When observing others consuming in the violent infrastructure, people could raise the issue about their violent consuming *actions*, but never judge the ethics or morals of the *person*.
- Northern consumers could try to see Majority World labourers as their friends who need to be liberated from oppression; rather than calling them *others*, try calling them fellow citizens and friends.
- Try not to say the transnational corporation; instead, say the *people* in the transnational corporation, thereby humanizing the situation.
- Northern consumers could strive to work with *the people* in trans-national corporations (rather than calling them the enemy) so all can grow inside and move ahead together - everyone has a piece of the Truth and all are needed in order to find the Truth.
- People could take issue with the neo-liberal *agenda* and not with the CEOs who live by its principles- strive to reveal the truths behind the ideology, the agenda. Try to see the CEO as a person in need of liberation from oppression of the ideology (McGregor, 2010).

When people refuse to consume in way that is repugnant to their conscience, they are using their soul-force (their inner *Satyagraha*). With this Truth-force at work, the consumer world can change. This is a powerful and challenging reframing of our consumer work. When we encounter consumer injustices in the marketplace, we could turn to the principles of non-violence to ensure protection of the consumer interest and of all citizens of the world.

Integral Thinking

Another suggestion is to bring integral thinking to our consumer work. My approach to integral is based on Ken Wilber's work (2001, 2007). His basic premise is that we too often view the world and our problems from a purely scientific, materialistic, empirical stance, excluding other points of view and ways of being in the world. Because of this, we tend to approach problem posing and solving from the flatlands, devoid of context and deep complexity. To overcome this one dimensional approach, Wilber developed a four quadrant approach, whereby he suggested that people approach problems from each of inner self (I), outer self (IT), the collective (WE), and the complex systems of the world (ITS) (see Figure 1). Said another way, we can best deal with the complexity of the world if we focus on all four dimensions of living: mind, matter, meaning, and the web of life. As an aside, his approach, which he calls AQAL (All Quadrant, All Levels), includes the notions of levels of consciousness and development as well as Spiral Dynamics™, but these are not discussed today (see McGregor (2010, 2011b) for more details).

The two upper quadrants (I and IT) deal with individuals and the two lower quadrants (WE and ITS) deal with the collective. The left side deals with people (individuals and the collective - the subjective) and the right side deals with physical matter and external systems (the objective). I propose that consumer scholars need to consider all four quadrants to solve the complex, emergent problems manifesting in the marketplace, else they miss too much. This approach allows us to totally reframe our consumer work. Bringing all four quadrants to consumer research better ensures a truer representation of existing global marketplace complexities (see McGregor (2010, Chapter 6, 2011b) for a comprehensive overview of Ken Wilber's approach to integral thinking).

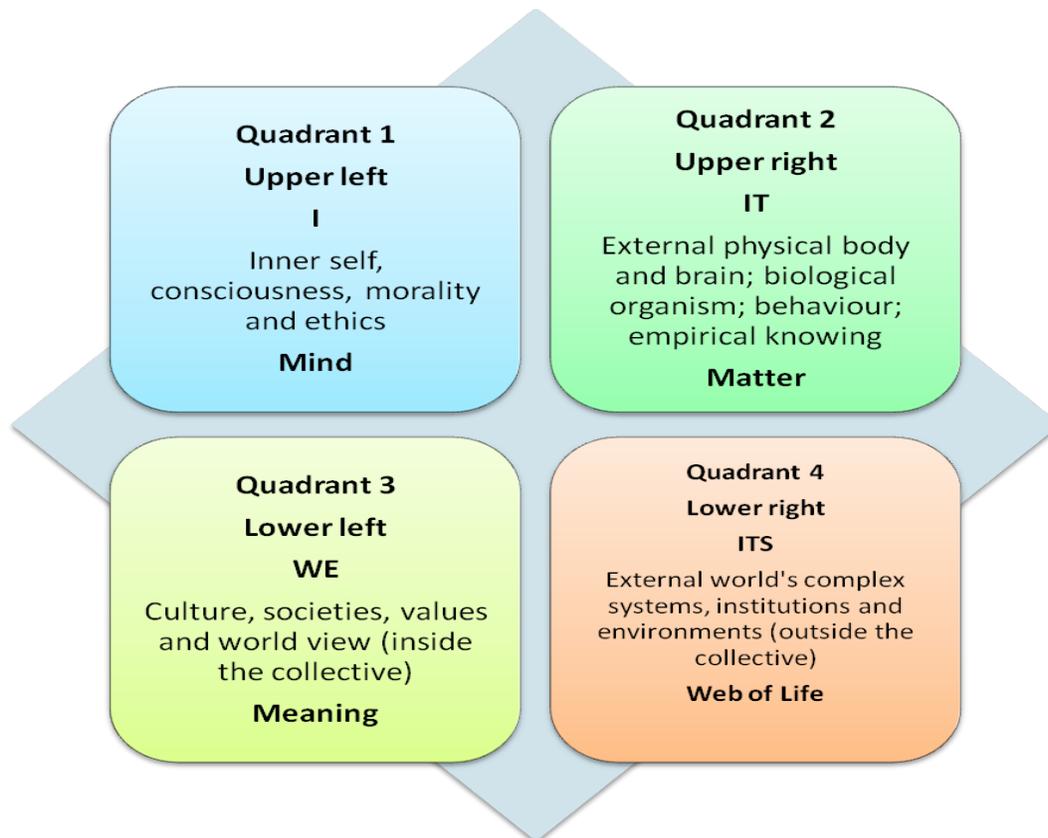


Figure 1 Ken Wilber's Four Quadrant Integral Approach

Transdisciplinary-Informed Consumerism

Another idea for your consideration is transdisciplinary-informed consumerism. I have been developing this idea for several years now (McGregor, 2010, 2013a,b, 2014). In contrast to multi (more than one) and inter (between), *trans* is Latin *trare* for across, to cross over, through, on the other side of, to go beyond (Harper, 2015). I draw on Basarab Nicolescu's (2002, 2008) transdisciplinary methodology with its three axioms. A methodology is concerned with creating new knowledge. Nicolescu's approach is deeply grounded in quantum physics, chaos theory and complexity theory, so I will present a very simplified version today. Nicolescu worked out that (a) there are multiple realities and their interaction is mediated by what he calls the Hidden Third (ontology). (b) The movement between many different views of reality (leading to the integration of disparate points of view) is facilitated by inclusive logic. (c) The resultant knowledge is complex, emergent, cross-fertilized and alive (embodied) (epistemology) (see Figure 2) (Nicolescu, 2002).

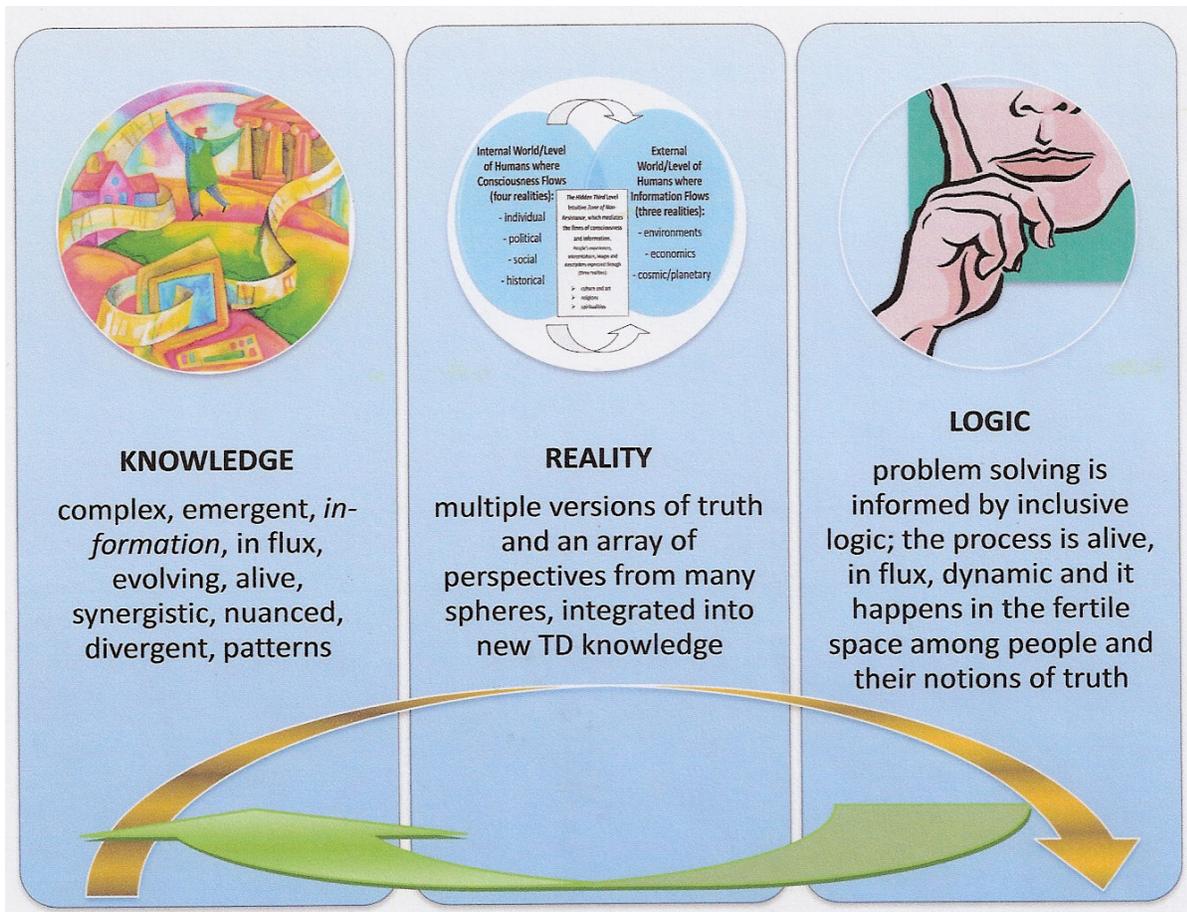


Figure 2 Nicolescuian Transdisciplinary Methodology Axioms

In more detail, mainstream consumerism is couched in one reality - the material, physical, economic reality. There is little room for wisdom, humanity, arts, aesthetics, spirituality, culture, or ecology. From a transdisciplinary perspective, consumer researchers would draw on as many realities (perspectives, truths) as possible to address the meta issues faced by consumers, appreciating that a mediating force is required to ensure a meeting of diverse minds and points of view. They would have to let go of their notion of what is real, opening up to the integration of many points of view. In this process, chaos would be seen as order emerging, just not predictably. Everything happens in the fertile gap between diverse approaches to the world. There is a deep respect for the connections between the academy and the rest of the world (Nicolescu, 2002, 2008).

Second, the exclusionary logic of the market enables people to readily assume there is no link between their consumer behaviour and its impact on the invisible, distanced others. Capitalistic consumerism depends upon people *not making* connections between their conscience and their penchant for accumulating material goods and services. Keeping these two separate (maintaining fragmented, dualistic thinking) is the mainstay of capitalistic consumerism; dissociate consciousness from materialism (McGregor, 2013a). Transdisciplinarity respects inclusive logic. This logic assumes that contradictory things can interact and come to a temporary resolution. "That which appears to be disunited is united, and that which appears to be contradictory is perceived as noncontradictory" (Nicolescu, 2008, p. 7). This means consumer researchers would assume that people can be inclusive during their purchase decisions, ever mindful of others, the larger human condition, and planetary integrity (McGregor, 2010).

Finally, transdisciplinary views knowledge as complex, emergent, embodied, cross-fertilized, and alive. It is always in-formation, co-shaped by the interactions amongst many people solving the wicked problems of the world, exacerbated by consumption and the consumerism ideology. People would value

relationships and look for patterns of like minded or divergent thinking, patterns that can challenge the dominant economic paradigm shaping the world right now (McGregor, 2010, 2013a, b) (see Figure 3).

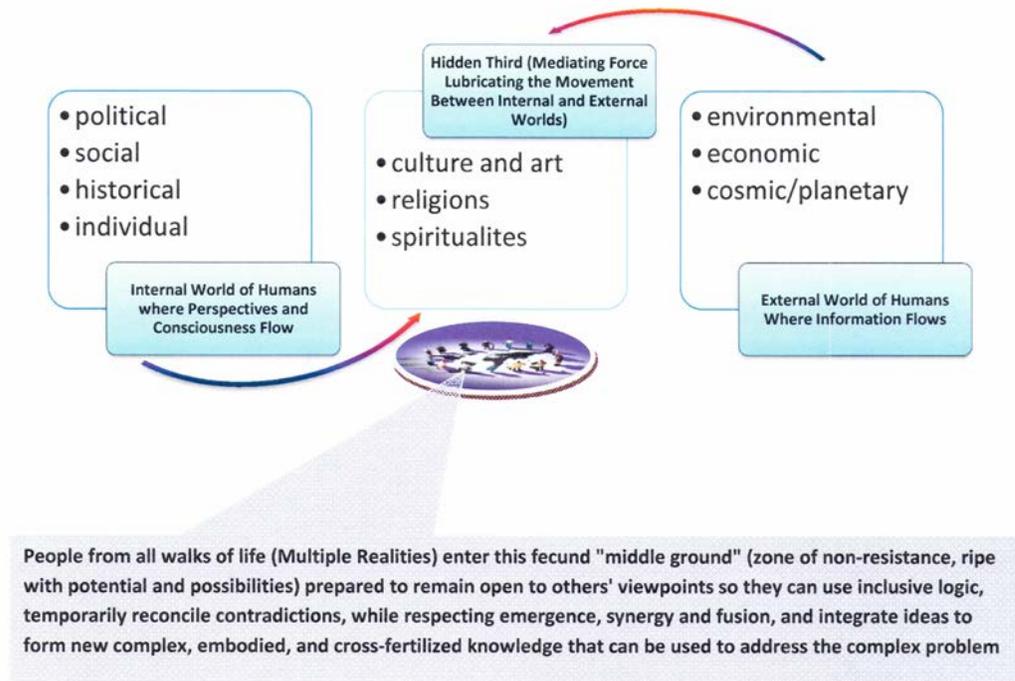


Figure 3 Dynamics of Transdisciplinary Methodology

Complexity Theory

On a final note, one of the most promising new perspectives that can inform our consumer work is complexity thinking. An extension of systems theory, complexity theory assumes a system can comprise living parts (agents) that are intelligent and capable of adapting to their environment through interactions, communication, and coordinated activities. The system within which these agents interact is called an *intelligent complex, adaptive system*. Examples include the ecosystem, the brain, the human immune system, the stock market, political parties, ant colonies, communities, and economic systems (Beinhocker, 2007; Yang & Shan, 2008).

Agents in the system interact and connect with each other in unpredictable and unplanned ways. The overall behaviour of the complex adaptive system is the result of a huge number of decisions made *every moment* by many loosely coupled individual agents acting on local information. From this mass of interactions (i.e., iterations), regularities emerge and start to form a pattern, which feeds back on the system and informs the interactions of the agents. A period of flux occurs in all sectors in the system until a new balance is established (via adaptation and self-(re)organization) (Fryer, ca. 2005). These micro-level interactions lead to the emergence of macro-level patterns of behaviour (Beinhocker, 2007; McGregor, 2012a; Yang & Shan, 2008).

In particular, *complexity thinking* introduces a new set of assumptions that can underpin our consumer work: complexity; change and evolution; adaptation; self-organization; emergence; nonequilibrium; chaos and tensions; patterns and networks; and, holistic, synergistic interconnections and relations between individual and aggregate agents (McGregor, 2012a). From this perspective, consumer scholars can sensitize others about complex marketplace-related problems (e.g., climate change, oppression of offshore labourers and producers, unequal wealth and income distribution, and consumerism as structural violence) and how viewing the marketplace as a complex adaptive system may shed new light on the solution to these problems (McGregor, 2012a, in press).

Conclusion

Several common threads weave their way through this collection: complexity, multiple perspectives and realities, multiple sectors and actors, multiple truths, transformation through collaborative dialogue, inclusiveness, wisdom and discerning judgement, non-violence, moral leadership, justice, integral thinking, and research that transcends disciplinary and university boundaries. I propose that the collection of ideas presented today means we could approach our consumer work with a different set of assumptions, a different set of principles and concepts, and a different range of theories and conceptual frameworks. We could anticipate totally different results from our consumer work, which could be undertaken with a wider range of actors and agents. The complexity of the global marketplace and consumers' daily life worlds challenges us to reconsider and reframe our work on their behalf.

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