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Michael T. Pham's Thoughts:

Fond Memories from My SCP Presidency in 2012-2013

My first SCP conference was in 1994 in Fort Lauderdale—I think at the Tradewinds. I was still a doctoral student at Florida back then, finishing my PhD. The conference was very small, may be 100 participants or so, and if I recall correctly, one single track, perhaps two. Since then, I had been attending SCP conferences regularly but not every year. I always liked the fact that the conferences were smaller, with fewer tracks—I recall the 2001 conference in Scottsdale having only three tracks—yet, the conferences had a strong program; I'd find plenty of good sessions to attend without needing to search as much as I'd have to with the much larger ACR conference.

At some point, however, the SCP conference started becoming much larger. The number of tracks increased to as many as eight. While the conference was becoming more inclusive, the program's selectivity seemed to have declined. As a member, I became concerned that the conference would lose its identity and quality; and that the conference was at risk of gradually becoming a mere lower-profile “dress rehearsal” for the bigger stage of ACR. I also thought that the overall organization—like JCP—could still grow in terms of stature and recognition. These were some of the issues that encouraged me to run for president of the organization in late 2010, to try to see if I could help.

When I was elected in 2011, I was fortunate as president-elect to join a great team that really wanted to make a difference for the organization: LJ Shrum was the immediate Past President, Vicki Morwitz was the incoming President, and Tiffany White was the incoming Secretary-Treasurer. Larry Compeau was the long standing Executive Officer. We really worked well as a team. LJ had recently overseen a revision of the bylaws, which was institutionally important, and was now working with Larry on negotiating the renewal of the JCP publisher contract. Vicki had started working on modernizing the visual branding of the organization (new logo, refreshed website, new cover for JCP, etc.). She also initiated the idea of having high-quality international conferences, which she implemented with great success with the Florence SCP in June 2012—a success that Darren Dahl would later replicate with the Vienna SCP in 2015. In addition, being super-detailed oriented Vicki greatly improved record-keeping processes within the organization, and she and I worked closely on codifying procedures for the organizations (e.g., officer responsibilities, award-selection processes, etc.).

As president-elect at the 2011 Atlanta conference, I was eager to get to work. First, I wanted to get a better pulse of the membership. I suggested that the three of us—LJ, Vicki, and myself—run some focus groups at the conference, which we held with junior members, mid-career members, and senior members one early morning around breakfast. We learned a lot from these focus groups, including the fact that old-time members were very attached to the organization and really wanted it to retain its identity as a more intimate conference and organization. Focus

group members also shared their concern that the conference was becoming too large and that “senior folks” were not attending as much. There was a concern that the conference was gradually being “overrun” by doctoral students (in part due to the success of the doctoral symposium at the opening of the conference). Another insight was that in senior members’ minds, the “science” aspect of consumer psychology was an important differentiating part of the Society’s distinct identity vis-à-vis ACR.

In addition to reinforcing the value of speaking to representative members of the organization on a regular basis, these focus group insights partly shaped our thinking about the direction of the organization. Vicki and I were totally aligned in terms of our belief that the main SCP conference’s program needed to become slightly leaner and more selective, while preserving the inclusiveness of the Society. Starting with her presidential conference in Las Vegas in 2012, and continuing with mine in San Antonio in 2013, we reduced the number of parallel tracks and increased submission selectivity. We also cut down on the number of awards and tried to “raise the bar” to make the awards that the Society gives more meaningful. To preserve the inclusiveness of the conference, acceptance of poster session submissions remained more liberal.

During my president-elect year, the incoming editor of JCP, Connie Pechmann, asked me if I would agree to be the next area editor of JCP’s Research Dialogues. I must say that I have always been reluctant to assume significant editorial responsibilities—being really obsessive, I feared that an editor’s job would really “kill” me. However, knowing how important the RD section was to JCP, I accepted. I had some ideas about what I wanted to do. First, I wanted to have fewer but more substantial commentaries per target article. (If not well cited, commentaries reduce the journal’s Impact Factor.) Second, I wanted to build greater synergy between this section of the journal and the SCP conference. This prompted me to construct some RD around select keynote addresses of the SCP conference. I would attend the conference’s keynote addresses and, if I thought that they could form the basis of a strong dialogue, I would approach the speaker at the conference and convince them to prepare a target article. This is how the Gilovich “happiness” dialogue and a forthcoming dialogue by Hazel Markus on working class culture came about. Third, while previous dialogues would typically bring in a target article from psychologists and commentaries from scholars within our field, I also experimented with the reverse: target articles from scholars within our field and commentaries from scholars outside our field.

It was also my belief that the organization needed to be more “out there” and could do more to celebrate its achievements and value. Members could be and should be prouder of the organization. We also noticed that many members were not renewing their membership every year, likely because they were not planning on attending the next spring conference or simply because they forgot to renew their membership. To address this issue, toward the end of my present-elect year, we sent out a celebratory email around the end of the year to review the organization’s achievements, foster some sense of collective pride and excitement, and remind our members to renew their memberships. Membership renewal increased to record levels in 2012, in part due to the appeal of the 2012 Las Vegas Conference location, which encouraged

many to join, but also due to this simple positive reminder. I'd recommend sending such celebratory-and-membership-renewal email every year.

My next activity as president-elect was to attend the APA Division Leaders' conference in DC, which all SCP president-elects attend, and which I attended in January 2012. In addition to learning a lot about APA and its other divisions, I had two "aha" moments. First, I realized that compared to other APA divisions, SCP, as a division, was actually doing relatively well in terms of governance, finance, membership growth, etc. Its primary weakness, as I saw it, was its very low APA membership (and summer conference representation), which I feared might jeopardize SCP's eventual status within APA. I thought that SCP's association with APA was of strategic importance and needed to be protected. I saw the APA affiliation as a way to reinforce the "science" part of SCP's identity, which members seem to cherish. This led me to subsequently appoint a taskforce, chaired by Peter Darke, to evaluate how SCP might strengthen its APA membership.

My second major insight from attending that APA Leaders' conference—reinforced by issues that I was witnessing within my own academic institution—was the importance for an organization to give a "voice" to its members—even if they do not necessarily vote on every matter. This insight gave me the idea of evolving the ad hoc focus groups that we had done at the Atlanta conference into a more institutionalized "advisory board" for SCP: a forum where representative members would share their insights about the organization with the Society's leadership and have their voice (and the voice of other members at large) heard. The advisory board was instituted in spring 2012, officially starting its function on June 1, 2012, with Shelly Jain as the inaugural chair. The idea was that the board would be composed of a diverse groups of members—junior scholars, midlevel scholars, and senior scholars from a broad range of institutions. Member appointments would be staggered (like the US Congress) so that membership would rotate every two or three years.

Toward the end of my president-elect year (2011), a number of things happened in the field. Shocking news came out that Diederik Stapel—an emerging superstar in social psychology, whose work and professional circle were closely connected to consumer psychology—had fabricated data in dozens of articles (including JCR). Marc Hauser, a prominent evolutionary biologist from Harvard, had also recently stepped down for scientific misconduct. At the same time a group of young social and consumer psychologists—Joe Simmons, Leif Nelson, and Uri Simonsohn (SNS)—published a widely circulated and talked-about paper showing how easy it was to generate false positive results through post-hoc, selective and self-serving practices that are often not disclosed. A parallel paper by John, Loewenstein, and Prelec (2012), who also had close connections to consumer psychology, suggested that such "questionable research practices" (QRP) were in fact very prevalent in psychology. SNS were already following up that work with a method for detecting "p-hacking" through the use of such QRP. There was a lot of buzz surrounding these issues. When my term as president officially started at the 2012 Las Vegas conference (which had drawn a record level of attendance), one of the keynote speakers, Max Bazerman, devoted a big part of his address to issues of ethics in science and the use of QRP. In front of all our conference attendees, he publicly challenged "the new president" to address these

issues. The combination of all these events—though not any one in particular—made me really concerned that unless something serious was done, we ran the risk that public and collective confidence in what we do as consumer psychologists would rapidly erode, thus putting our whole enterprise at risk.

Immediately after the Las Vegas conference, I set up a “super-committee” chaired by LJ Shrum to evaluate scientific practices within our field and offer recommendations that would be implemented at least within JCP and possibly elsewhere. I called it a “super-committee” because it was effectively composed of representatives of various committees and communities, with the intention of covering a broad range of perspectives. The committee included senior AEs of JCP, senior star researchers, members of the SCP ethics committee, the SCP representative for scientific affairs, and a couple of junior researchers. The mandate of the committee was:

“ to develop a set of guidelines on recommended best scientific practices with respect to (a) the conduct, (b) the reporting, (c) the evaluation, and d) the dissemination of academic research on consumer psychology and consumer behavior....(with) a proper balance between (a) the need to minimize “false positive” results (Type-I errors), which has been the primary focus of recent concerns and (b) the need to promote genuine findings and discoveries (minimization of Type-II errors), which has received much less attention.”

The intent of the initiative, therefore, was not to “crack down” on false-positive results per se, but to strengthen transparency of and faith in our collective research, while achieving a proper balance between type-I and type-II errors.

The committee started working on these issues in spring 2012. I also had conversations with the editors of JCR and JMR, as I thought of these issues as being field-wide rather than journal-specific. I must say that there were some initial push-backs. However, in summer 2012, a couple of new scandals came out, including one involving a former associate editor of JCR. This validated my conviction that something had to be done, and I was glad that we had already started our work on this. The committee continued its work throughout the summer of 2012 and issued a preliminary report in November 2012. The report was circulated within the Executive Board of SCP, and feedback was provided to the committee. The committee’s revised recommendations were presented to the editorial board of JCP for further feedback at the San Antonio conference in February 2013. They were met with some resistance. There was a real tension on how to balance the new pressures for greater transparency imposed on our field with the historically author-friendly positioning of JCP. However, we eventually arrived at a revised set of policies that we thought would be sensible and agreeable to the vast majority of authors and reviewers. The new policies promoting greater transparency were approved by the SCP Executive Board a couple of months later. Over the summer of 2013, I worked with the Elsevier staff to implement the new manuscript submission guidelines, while Connie Pechmann worked with the JCP AEs to reevaluate how manuscript should be reviewed in light of the new submission guidelines.

The new policies were formally set in place starting January 1, 2014. Starting that date, all manuscripts had to respect the new guidelines. When this was announced, Connie Pechmann

and I received an email from a very senior member in the field who had been very skeptical of the overall initiative. The email simply stated: “You just cut JCP’s manuscript submission rate by 50%.” This was indeed a major concern to us at the SCP board. We were very worried when, indeed, we observed a sudden drop in submissions around that time. Luckily, after a few weeks—presumably the time that it took for authors to make their manuscript compliant with the new guidelines—manuscript submissions came back up. Now (in October 2015), 20 months after the implementations of the policies, it seems that the number of manuscript submissions has not been affected, while the transparency and evaluability of the submissions, according to Connie Pechmann, have increased substantially. Despite some initial resistance and concern that the authors would stop submitting to JCP, a new set of norms have been adopted.

Besides the issue of scientific practices, another challenge that the organization faced during my presidency was a suspension by Thompson Reuter’s of JCP’s Impact Factor rating. In 2011, we were informed that due to JCP’s “abnormally high rate of self-citation” in recent years, especially in 2010, the journal would be suspended from Thompson Reuter’s Impact Factor rating for a period of two years, 2012 and 2013, after which the issue would be revisited. This was a big blow to the journal and to the organization. Although well-intentioned, the journal’s encouragement of self-citations—which followed similar practices in other marketing journals—was a mistake. There was little that we could do at that point but correct the problem, which Connie Pechmann did immediately, and try to reassure potential authors, especially junior ones, that the journal would eventually return to being rated. We had to be careful to avoid disproportionate negative publicity. Behind the scene, we worked closely with the people at Elsevier to lobby Thompson Reuters to make sure that JCP would be back on rating in 2014, which it did to our collective relief.

Returning to the beginning of my term as president in 2012, another thing that I tried to do was to raise the profile of the ACP conference, which had experienced mixed success in recent years. I was happy that we were able to get a strong proposal from Bernd Schmitt and Leonard Lee to have this conference held in Singapore, co-hosted by the Institute for Asian Consumer Insight (ACI) on the theme of “The Asian Consumer.” This was a “win-win” opportunity. ACI, which Bernd directed at the time, had a lot of resources but needed to build its brand awareness and legitimacy, whereas I thought of Asia, where JCP’s stature was not commensurate with its recognition in North America, as a strategic priority for SCP. With about 100 attendees not only from all over Asia but also from many leading North American institutions, the conference was a big success. The conference had a balanced program of JCP/JCR-type research and more specifically Asia-oriented research. There was also a solid social and cultural program that participants greatly enjoyed.

Another thing that I was happy with is how well my outgoing presidential address on “The Seven Sins of Consumer Psychology” was received. I had been thinking about this topic ever since I knew I was elected in 2011. Around that time, I had started offering a new MBA course on “Strategic Consumer Insight.” The course is meant to be business-relevant with major companies submitting projects as business clients. Preparing for that course was a real eye-opener for me. I came to fully appreciate the big disconnect between typical psychology-based consumer research

and the type of questions that real businesses are asking. The course also made me realize how narrow theoretical perspectives are within our field. I saw the address, which I had almost two years to prepare for, as a unique opportunity to address our field as a group and try to raise our collective consciousness in order to move the field toward greater relevance. Which “sin” to identify and talk about gradually came to me during those two years. I would talk to various colleagues and friends whose judgment I trusted, and pick their brains and test some ideas on them.

For the address itself, which was given at the San Antonio conference in March 2013, I elected to speak without notes, as if teaching or presenting a paper, rather than reading from a text. My main challenge was that having identified and wanting to discuss seven “sins” (i.e., seven different topics), my address was very long, almost 80% longer than the typical address. I wasn’t sure that people eating their meals would have the patience to sit through its entirety and just listen. To my relief, they actually did. I remember being myself surprised by how quiet the entire room was. People were very kind to me in their feedback about the address. This prompted me to want to share the message further and have as many people as possible be exposed to the message that I was trying to convey. I therefore decided to post a recording of the address—which I had originally intended only as a personal souvenir—on YouTube. Within a few months, the video had been watched hundreds of times. I also decided to prepare a JCP editorial based on this address, which I understand is now widely read in doctoral seminars. I just hope that this address will help gradually move the field in a different direction that will strengthen its relevance.

The last thing that I am happy with is that we were able to identify and name an excellent Editor in Chief of JCP in Amna Kirmani, a full 18 months before the official start of her term in January 2015. The previous editor search had been very difficult, with the editor, Connie Pechmann, being named only three months before the beginning of her term. This time I encouraged the team to start the search almost two years ahead of time, and we were able to complete our search successfully within a few months. I would encourage every subsequent team to start as early.

My three years with SCP from 2011 through 2014, first as president elect, then as standing president, and finally as immediate past president have been enormously enriching and rewarding. Though there were some challenges along the way, I am very happy with what we were able to accomplish as an organization. I am especially impressed by and grateful to the great number of individuals who agreed to help and serve the organization when I asked them during those three years. Whenever, I mentioned that the request was on behalf of SCP, I could sense a great deal of goodwill towards the organization, and this is auspicious for the future of SCP.